The Challenge of Identifying Representatives from the Wider Community
John Settlage, University of Connecticut

Vexation

As a consequence of the legendary Coleman Report of the 1960s, educators began to despair about whether enough could be done within schools to overcome negative external influences. If family concerns and neighborhood conditions were so highly influential on a child’s education, how much could a school be reasonably expected to accomplish? One response was school desegregation, a reasoned policy response to evidence that separate but equal education was a myth. Other forces have conspired to cause schools to become even more segregated than ever before. Despite this turmoil, the expansion of magnet and charter schools in urban centers, as well as reinventing schools as the nucleus for wrap-around services within the Harlem Children’s Zone (Tough, 2009), suggests that the challenge of educating all children should necessarily extend beyond what occurs within the physical building during regular school hours. Instead, given the considerable impact the community has on education, there is a growing awareness that the contexts of science education ought be expanded and deepened. In particular, if we are sincere in our desire to reduce achievement gaps in elementary school science then a continued fixation on curricular and instructional reforms is shortsighted. Furthermore, before I feel ready to propose action my challenge is deepening my understanding about the relationships between a school and the surrounding community.

In general, school/community ties are described by teacher knowledge about the community and the quality of parental involvement (Bryk, et al. 2009). Joyce Epstein (2005) expands such structural links with more substantive collaborative relationships. These include giving parents strategies so they can support school learning at home, engaging parents in school decision-making, and engaging members of the community in instructional delivery and other types of support. What frustrates me is that often when researchers reference community, for example How to Harness Family and Community Energy (Gordon & Louis, 2012), the population they describe is almost exclusively parents. Time and again, indications about the need to incorporate stakeholders’ perspectives and powers on school programs are rarely incorporated into the context under study. This represents the first part of my vexation: talking about community but never doing much to investigate its impacts.

The second part of my vexation is that neighborhood and communities tend to be represented as problems that compromise the quality of educational opportunities. Commonly reported factors associated with drains on student performance include crime, unemployment, under-educated adults, weak housing stock, impoverished household income and so on. What I feel is neglected is an attempt to account for community factors that bolster the neighborhood school’s efforts. My research has uncovered many metropolitan elementary schools that defy statistical projections based on student demographics. Rather than emphasize community characteristics that suppress student achievement, what I have undertaken is a systemic effort to uncover factors that appear to enhance the school’s efforts. In a nutshell, instead of identifying what brings a school’s science performance down, I am focusing on positive outlier schools with an eye toward extracting positive contributions to student scores on the annual statewide science test. There is a considerable body of research that has proven useful to me in conceptualizing how to capture leadership styles, school climate, and bonding relationships within the school. Where I am seeking suggestions and insights is within the realm of community forces that elevate science learning and achievement.

The accompanying visual sketches the variety of constituents who I believe might need to be considered a part of the community. To be honest, I am not certain how to label the relationships between the school and its surroundings. Sometimes I think we should call these “partnerships” or “collaborations.” What I want to capture are not simply those organizations who pass through the school. Instead, I hope to surface the varying types of partnerships and their relative impact on students. In addition, it probably comes as no surprise that I am particularly interested in the community connections specific to science. I recognize it may be hard to tease science from other subjects in an elementary school. In truth, I think that’s an interesting thing to consider: are collaborations specific to science unique from other collaborations?
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In visiting with elementary school principals, we heard about partnerships between other schools, projects with local universities, and even volunteers for local businesses engaging in the school. Initially, it appeared that the more positive outlier schools had more collaborators although we realized that the quantity of connections did not always relate to the quality and duration. This is all to say that I intend to study the structures and the practices of school/community partnerships with the goal of identifying factors distinguishing high performing urban schools from peer institutions that have difficulties providing equitable science learning opportunities to all students. While it might be possible to generate a questionnaire for tabulating the number of connections, this would not capture the nature of those relationships. In short, I wish to document school/community partnerships in both form and function.

I am very much in need of your insights about who and how to investigate school/community partnerships. My core question is “Beyond school employees and students’ families, who is invested in the school’s science program?” This year, I am targeting schools with a proven record of equitable excellence on the statewide fifth grade science test. Investigating these select schools will provide a solid baseline. In subsequent year, I will deploy research assistants to schools, both over- and under-performing, to see if we can differentiate between partnerships that are beneficial versus benign. My challenge is to develop a strategy to respectfully investigate outside stakeholder influences on academic programs inside a school. Moving forward presents me with a combination of ambiguities – logistical and methodological. These are the areas where I would appreciate your perspectives, ranging from intellectual insights to the wisdom borne of experience.

In terms of the logistical dimension, I have been puzzling over who to recruit as representatives of partnerships. I am not confident I can define in advance what is contained within school/community ties. I anticipate that this will emerge during this pilot phase of data gathering. If I could otherwise demonstrate having tapped into the perspectives of elementary school faculty, the perspectives of administrators within that building, the views of parents and families of the school’s students, then who else should I approach about sharing their insights about the school? Asked another way, if you were a future consumer of my research what would be a compelling way to identify, nominate and recruit informants about school/community ties? As implied in the illustration, I could approach the owners of local business in close proximity to the school. I might also ask the most savvy among the faculty to name some key partners. There are ways to identify representatives from religious organizations who are invested in the school and its students. In addition, it would be valuable to locate people whose sense of school/community ties might reveal such features as historical decay, superficial links, and so on. I don’t want to catch schools in a lie. But I also don’t want to only hear from boosters. What might I do to ensure that I tap into people whose views of partnerships are authentic and informative?

Methodologically, I anticipate conducting focus groups as a supplement to individual interviews of school administrators and focus groups of key teachers. There are plenty of challenges associated with taking on this research, not the least of which is talking with people whose backgrounds and perspectives differ from mine. I don’t want to be perceived as if I am diminishing those issues because ignoring those dynamics would be foolish. However, during this Incubator session, the group will not have the time to repair my inadequacies associated with my privileged filters. I accept my flaws and trust you won’t treat those as deficits (Lowenstein, 2009). I have plenty of confidantes skilled at rebuking me, providing me more to read, and supplying ongoing critiques – I am incredibly fortunate in that regard. Instead of worrying whether I will defer to the perspectives of the focus group participants (Tillman, 2006), I am respectfully asking for your input how I to best structure the focus groups. Especially given the possibility that those who participate may not know each other (e.g., the local college’s service learning coordinator and the person who runs the convenience store across the street), I want to avoid discomfort that might preclude an honest discussion. Also, what might I do to reduce the worry that they shouldn’t share anything negative? How might I incentivize participation without coming across like a politician who is buying votes? And given the challenge of finding time and space to bring together all the stakeholders, I expect I might only be able to hold one focus group per school – how do I work around the shortcomings this may create?