

Youth Perspectives on Community Collaboration in Education: Are Students Innovative Developers, Active Participants, or Passive Observers of Collaborative Activities?

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Abstract

This study builds on existing research on school–community partnerships in middle and secondary schools by examining the roles of the students and the impact of social influences on their school–community liaising practices. Documents, observations, and 20 interviews with students, school leaders, teachers, and support staff from one urban, southern Californian, K–12 school were analyzed for themes. Students valued school–community partnerships and identified collaborative activities they would like developed based on school and community needs. The research highlights the perspectives and contexts that must be considered to establish school–community collaboration that meets students’ academic, social, physical, and emotional needs.

Key Words: school–community partnerships, students, perspectives, collaboration, middle, high, secondary, schools, adolescents

Introduction

“Education is too important to be left solely to the educators” (Keppel, as cited in Bolander, 1987, p. 91).

At first glance, this quotation from Francis Keppel appears to put down those dedicated to the education of others. As an educator himself, a former dean of Harvard's Graduate School of Education, and a supporter of educational innovation, Keppel's words take on a potentially different meaning. Cast another way, it is an observation that education is everyone's responsibility and not solely the purview of teachers (Hands, 2005a). For some time, the education literature has echoed the same sentiment, and educational researchers have been touting the benefits of partnerships among schools, families, and communities as a means for supporting student achievement and well-being (see, e.g., Epstein, 1995, 2001; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Schools are finding it increasingly difficult to create educational programs to address the diverse needs of the students (Merz & Furman, 1997) with the finances and the resources available to them. School–community collaboration is one possible means for schools to garner financial and material resources, as well as social support and educational experiences, to supplement students' in-school learning opportunities (Hands, 2005a).

Initiating Community Involvement, and Students' Voice in the Process

The onus for the establishment of school–community collaboration falls to the schools (Davies, 2002; Epstein, 1995, 2001; Henderson et al., 2007; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Some scholars have noted the need for both principals and teachers to reach out to parents and communities (Epstein, 1995, 2001; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Sheldon, 2005). By extension, existing research typically addresses the educators' interpretation of their students' needs, and it is this interpretation that drives the partnership development (see, e.g., Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Yet, scholars outline the importance of having all stakeholders at the table (Davies, 2002; Epstein, 1995, 2001) to maximize buy-in and the likelihood that all parties will benefit from the partnerships (Hands, 2005a). There is the potential for resistance among stakeholders who are not involved in decision-making capacities (Datnow, 2000; Fullan, 1991; Gitlin & Margonis, 1995). For students, this may mean disengagement from education and the very activities that were developed with them in mind (Mitra, 2007, 2009; Smyth, 2007). The question then arises: If the partnerships are based on student needs, and students should be included in their development, what role do students play in determining the nature of the partnership activities, developing the partnerships, or even determining the existence of partnerships at their school?

There are few studies involving students' perspectives within educational contexts (Seidman, 1998, as cited in McMahan, 2012). While there is a

growing body of research on student agency in taking leadership roles in school reform (see, e.g., Mitra, 2007; Pekrul & Levin, 2006), literature on student involvement in school–community relationship development is limited. Large-scale, national studies of school–community partnerships have been conducted (see, e.g., Epstein, 2001; Sanders, 1999, 2001); however, partnership research is often carried out from the perspectives of school personnel and does not examine the nature of the relationships among individuals in the partnerships. In some of the projects conducted on a smaller scale, the community partners' viewpoints are solicited (see, e.g., Sanders & Harvey, 2002; Shea, 2001), but as in the larger research studies, students' viewpoints are not present. Hence, community involvement research from the students' perspectives, specifically examining their views on school–community relationships as well as their partnering practices, is needed.

This research contributes to the community involvement literature by examining the collaborative experience from the students' perspectives to determine how they view their involvement with community members and to gain insight into their partnering practices and the social contexts that necessitate collaboration. The experiences of the students contribute to academic and practitioner understanding of the school–community collaborative process.

In order to examine students' perceptions and involvement in collaborative relationships, the following question guided the research: *What is the nature of the interaction between students and community members in the development of partnerships?* The following subquestions were addressed to further clarify the students' perceptions of school–community partnerships:

1. How do adolescent students understand the role of school–community partnerships in education?
2. What conditions influence students' interest and involvement in school–community partnerships?
3. In what ways are students involved in school–community partnerships?

An overview of the literature is followed by a discussion of the research methodology prior to the presentation of the findings that address these research questions.

Literature Review

Several bodies of literature inform the study of students' involvement with school–community partnerships. In the first section, the nature of school–community collaboration is described, and the article outlines the sociocultural contexts that influence partnerships. The parties involved and the rationale for

their participation in reform initiatives such as partnership establishment are discussed in the second section, and issues of student voice come to the fore.

School–Community Relations

Partnering relationships are characterized by the efforts of all involved parties toward mutually desirable goals that are unattainable in the absence of cooperation (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Keith, 1999). The nature of these relationships can be described as the “connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, and businesses that are forged to promote students’ social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development” (Sanders, 2001, p. 20) through a bidirectional “flow of information and products across mutual boundaries” (Campbell, Steenbarger, Smith, & Stucky, 1980, p. 2). Noting the vagueness of the term *partnership*, the variability in the extent of the collaboration, and potential power differentials among participants (Auerbach, 2011), terms such as *community involvement*, *collaborative activities*, *liaisons*, and *interactions* may be used instead of *partnerships* to acknowledge the variability across school–community relations while still observing that these interactions are based on relationships among individuals. Similarly, the notion of community is complex (Beck, 1999; Merz & Furman, 1997); however, *community* can be characterized by the social interactions and the geographic distance between populations (Steiner, 2002). As such, community encompasses social processes within a geographic region. These relationships, therefore, may include individuals in organizations such as educational institutions, businesses, government and military organizations, cultural organizations, and recreational facilities (see Epstein, 1995; Sanders, 2001; Wohlstetter, Malloy, Smith, & Hentschke, 2003).

School and Community Contexts That Influence Collaboration

The research on school and community contexts highlights the importance of and possibilities for possessing and sharing resources through collaboration. The concepts of social capital and Lin’s (1999) network theory are useful to examine the reasons for developing school–community collaboration and the potential benefits to be gained. Social capital is developed when individuals cultivate social relations which give them access to other individuals and resources or help them preserve the resources they already have (Lin, 1999).

In his model, Lin (1999) combines the elements of social capital delineated by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and other scholars. Lin identifies three components of social capital: collective or group assets such as trust and norms; accessible social resources; and the mobilization of resources through the use of contacts in the network and the contacts’ resources. For the purposes of this

paper, group assets like trust and norms are best illustrated in the partnership literature at the school community level. These assets—school characteristics or resources—set the stage for the creation and facilitation of collaborative activities. In Sanders and Harvey's (2002) study, the school's commitment to promoting an academically challenging and supportive learning environment for the students was one of the main factors that influenced the community partners to become involved with the school. Toward this end, a principal's support for community involvement enables the establishment of collaboration and assists in maintaining it, and his/her ability to build capacity among school personnel to develop collaborative activities (Hands, 2005a) and maintain these relationships (Sanders & Harvey, 2002) is important. Here, the school's openness and receptivity to community involvement is crucial to the success of partnerships with families (Davies, 2002) and with community members (Sanders & Harvey, 2002). From the perspective of the community partners, collaborating with schools is severely impaired and often impossible without this kind of support for community involvement (Hands, 2005a), and ongoing, two-way communication is a key to articulating a welcoming environment (Hiatt-Michael, 2010) and determining what the school and potential community partners need and are able to offer (Auerbach, 2011; Hands, 2005a; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). These features of school communities illustrate the importance of school context on community involvement, making collaboration possible.

The remaining two social capital components—accessible resources and resource mobilization—can be linked with the actual partnership process (see Hands, 2005b). Features of the school community and surrounding geographic community influence resource accessibility and mobilization. Acknowledging that individuals have unequal access to the resources in the network (Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 1992), Lin (1999) proposes that both structural and positional variations among individuals account for the disparity, in accordance with existing sociological literature. In terms of structural variations characterizing different collectives or geographic locales, features such as cultural diversity, level of education, amount of physical and natural resources present, and level of industrialization and technology (Lin, 1999) are considered.

In a school community, the features and resources are assessed first to see if they meet the students' and school's programming needs and, if not, collaboration with the broader community is sought (Hands, 2005b). Further, resources specific to community involvement need to be in place within the school. Sanders (1999) highlights the five most important ingredients or structures in the successful development of partnerships: The establishment of a team to actively coordinate and support the partnerships (Epstein, 1995), appropriate

funding, time to develop the partnerships, guidance, and leadership are considered important components or resources for successful school–community collaboration (Sanders, 1999).

While school contexts can impact whether collaborative activities can be developed as well as the types needed, community contexts can influence the nature and quantity of the school–community relationships that are possible to develop. As Lin (1999) notes, every community is different. The social, cultural, and economic resources available in the geographic community influence not only the students', families', and community members' needs and educational goals, but what community members can and will contribute to school–community collaborative activities (Hands, 2005a). The relationships in existence and the ones sought by the schools differ depending on the communities in which they are located (Bascia, 1996). What the students and community members require of the school and what they contribute in terms of resources can shape the types of partnerships developed (Hands, 2005a).

Within the geographic community, individuals occupy different social, cultural, political, and economic positions (Lin, 1999) that affect their ability to access resources. Individuals are able to access social capital by using their network contacts to acquire the resources. The returns, or manifestations of the social capital, are reflected in gains in wealth, power, or reputation (instrumental action), or the maintenance of existing capital such as physical and mental health and life satisfaction (expressive action; Lin, 1999). Principals and teachers use their networks and those of their colleagues and friends to develop school–community relations that enable them to build the reputation of their school and to gain access to resources such as money, transportation for students, expertise in curriculum content, and out-of-school experiences for their students (Hands, 2005b). Through this process, they have the opportunity to build their networks for increased access to community resources (Hands, 2005b). The same could be true for students. Opportunities to develop collaborative activities may serve to increase their social capital based on what they want and need, beyond what is made available by their teachers and schools. What role, then, do students play in collaborative activity development?

Who Is Involved in Developing School–Community Relationships?

Having everyone who might become involved in the potential relationships contributing to the establishment of collaborative activities is necessary (Davies, 2002; Epstein, 1995). The parent and community involvement literature highlights the principals' (Hands, 2005a; Sanders & Harvey, 2002) and teachers' responsibility for establishing collaborative activities with parents (Davies, Burch, & Johnson, 1992; Epstein, 1995) and community members (Hands,

2005a). Other literature in the area calls for authentic partnerships in which parents participate in fundamental ways, such as educational decision-making and teaching and learning with educators in schools (cf., Jeynes, 2005; Pushor, 2007). Yet, participation needs to extend beyond the adults who are involved.

Possibilities for Student Voice and Educational Engagement

Prior to discussing student roles in the partnership process, it is helpful to examine the notion of student voice and opportunities for students' involvement in their education. Armstrong and McMahon (2004) note that *voice* entails a discourse that includes thoughts, beliefs, values, speech, actions, and attitudes. For students, voice may include identifying conditions or issues that impact their academic achievement and well-being and that of their peers, sharing their opinions about education-related problems and possible solutions, or contributing to decision-making processes and reform at the implementation level of the school or at a policymaking level (Bland & Alweh, 2007; Cervone, 2010; Mitra, 2007; Yonezawa & Jones, 2011). McMahon (2012) notes the legitimized voices are typically those of individuals with formal power (e.g., principals and teachers). Similar to Mitra (2007) and Yonezawa and Jones (2011), McMahon states that school leaders should provide space and opportunity for student voice in important educational issues related to curriculum, policies, and school procedures that impact students. In order to cultivate student voice, support needs to be in place to facilitate a "whole range of daily opportunities in which young people can listen and be listened to, make decisions and take a shared responsibility for both the here-and-now of daily encounter and for the creation of a better future" (Fielding, 2012, p. 15).

The importance of involvement in decision-making is highlighted here. Scholars note that students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can enhance school improvement initiatives, and since they are the producers of the initiative outcomes, their participation is essential to the success of any initiative (Mitra, 2007; Pekrul & Levin, 2006; Yonezawa & Jones, 2011). If the collaborative activities are cultivated primarily with students' needs and interests as the focus (Epstein, 1995, 2001; Hands, 2005a; Sanders, 2001), and if their active participation in collaborative activities is required, it seems prudent if not essential to involve students in the partnership development process from the beginning of the relationship.

Participating in decision-making around issues that directly affect students and their peers can provide opportunities for them to engage—and in some cases re-engage—in the school community (Pekrul & Levin, 2006; Mitra, 2007, 2009). For example, high school students who perceive that their school experiences are meaningful and worthwhile are engaged in school and remain

so regardless of school program demands (Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Gaydos, 2009). As a consequence, there are calls to examine how school personnel are helping to prepare students to meet their goals (Gaydos, 2009). Collaborative activity development is one way of soliciting the perspectives of students and making space for their voice, co-constructing their educational experiences to meet their needs, and involving them in decision-making.

Currently, there is some evidence that students are involved in their schools' partnering practices in only a superficial manner. In a previous study, the students' role in partnerships was primarily as a participant with limited influence on the partnership activities (Hands, 2005a). At two secondary school sites with a reputation for numerous and strong partnerships, students were consulted to ensure that they were in favor of the partnership activities in which they would be engaged in only three out of approximately 150 to 160 partnerships. The students had a more influential role in only one of those partnerships; they actively shaped the activities that defined it, although they did not initiate the relationship (Hands, 2005a). That said, these are the findings of one comparative case study. While compelling, the findings are not broadly generalizable, and the research examined the partnering process from the perspectives of school personnel and community members but not the students involved in the activities. More research in this area of investigation is needed to examine the extent of students' participation in the development of partnerships at their school. With this theoretical foundation laid, I begin with an overview of the study I conducted. I then discuss the findings in light of the existing research.

Methodology

In order to investigate how community involvement is perceived by students and the nature of their involvement in these relationships, it is necessary to uncover and describe the experiences and perspectives of those individuals (Marshall & Rossman, 1995) who are involved. Noting the importance of context and setting on partnership establishment and the need for a deeper understanding of participants' experiences of the phenomenon, the research questions were exploratory and descriptive; consequently, a qualitative mode of enquiry was used for the research (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Rothe, 2000).

Sample

As with most qualitative studies, the sample selection was nonrandom, purposeful, and small (Merriam, 1998). One school was sought to allow for a thorough examination of students' perspectives on school–community collaboration. School districts and charter schools in a southern Californian county

were canvassed for schools with a reputation for being supportive of school–community partnerships through conversations with current and former principals and superintendents associated with a university principal preparation program, discussions with university faculty members with contacts in local school districts, and reviews of district and school websites. When potential schools were identified, their administrators were contacted to ascertain their school’s suitability for the study and their interest in participating.

The school that was selected was a K–12 magnet school with a focus on global citizenship in the largest of the county’s school districts. Once the school was selected, the principal and a member of the leadership team (the magnet school coordinator¹) were asked to participate in a focus group in order to gather information on the aspects of school culture that were conducive to community involvement and to ascertain the general breadth of collaborative practices at the school. At that time, the names of teachers and support staff who had a reputation for developing school–community relationships or working with students in collaborative activities were solicited, as were the names of any students involved in establishing liaisons. Using this snowball technique (Merriam, 1998), teacher participants were selected and asked to participate in an individual or focus group interview. During this interview, the teachers were asked for the names of any students who helped to develop school–community partnerships.

Parent consent and student assent forms were distributed to 246 families of the 333 students enrolled at the school, and consent forms were delivered to the teachers. Reminder notices were sent following the submission deadline to ensure the maximum number of participants for the study. The completed forms were collected at the site by the magnet coordinator and returned to the researcher. Interviews were then arranged through the magnet coordinator for 51 students in Grades 2–12, three support staff (the school nurse, the school counselor, and an administrative assistant), the principal, and seven teachers. In total, 10 individual interviews—with the support staff, the high school History and Science teachers, a Grade 4 teacher, the librarian, and three students in Grades 2, 4, and 8—and 10 focus group interviews with the students, teachers, and the leadership team were conducted to accommodate the schedules and availability of these school community members.

Research Methods

Interviewing, observation, and document analysis were used as the techniques of data collection. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes in length. The interview protocols were semi-structured with open-ended questions. They addressed the participants’ understanding of and views on

partnering, partnership selection criteria, and techniques for creating collaborative relationships, in accordance with the research questions outlined in the introduction. Noting the developmental differences among the participants, different protocols were created for the youths and adults. As an experienced classroom teacher, I ensured that I used age-appropriate language with opportunities for the participants to share their ideas in the absence of leading questions or praise for responses, which might influence the students in particular to respond for approval. My background as a classroom teacher also enabled me to develop a rapport prior to and during the interviews with the teachers, support staff, and administration as we compared experiences teaching and working with children. I digitally audiorecorded the interviews, which were transcribed verbatim, and took notes during the sessions. The transcripts were then made available to participants to review for content accuracy.

I conducted observations and took fieldnotes on the school's grounds during school events, parent drop-in sessions, and community events, as well as during visits to classrooms. I obtained descriptive background on the school and documented my observations and reflections from seven site visits (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Kirby & McKenna, 1989). This enabled me to question my beliefs and identify assumptions as well as to establish role distance (Woods, 1986). I was also able to establish a rapport with students, educators, support staff, and parents during observations. For instance, I had opportunities to socialize with students and faculty members during lunch periods and during assemblies. Participation in informal parent socials for coffee and conversation during the school day and a weekend open house—which featured a community garden tour, art show, and school displays on the school grounds—also enabled me to get to know the administration, faculty, parents, and students socially prior to engaging in interviews.

I also collected archival data, such as the school mission statement and school handbook, as well as documentation such as school plans for continuous improvement. At the time of the research, a district-level template for formal partnerships was viewed; however, there was no available documentation for the school's informal partnerships. I accessed the school's web site to obtain further demographic information and background details of the school's history, as well as community and national organizations' websites to collect information on the partnerships in which the students participated.

The collection of data from different sources was intended to enhance construct validity and reliability of the case study and yielded findings that could be corroborated through converging lines of inquiry, the process of triangulation (Merriam, 1998; Rothe, 2000; Yin, 1994). The corroborating evidence from interviews with different members of the school community, diverse types of

data, and multiple strategies for data collection enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 2012).

Analysis

In my study, the collected data were analyzed based on the concepts delineated in the literature review and conceptual framework (Merriam, 1998). After reading through each transcript and accompanying fieldnotes, observations, and archival data, I coded all of the data in terms of text that specifically addressed the subquestions in the research. For instance, codes included “shared goals” and “collaborative activities” for the first subquestion, “school resources” and “community networks” for the second, and “observer,” “participant,” and “initiator” for the third. Also, I coded all of the spontaneous categories (e.g., “impact of school renovations”) that emerged from the data and the content of what the participants said (e.g., opinions, observations, views) in terms of the categories to enable me to extract themes.

I then generated a listing of all of the categories and themes and made notes regarding which participants’ interview transcripts addressed these issues. This gave me an overview of the prevalence of the issues, as well as a master list of the transcripts that contributed to the various categories and themes. This master list was then used to sort the data. After I coded all of the data, I sorted it on the computer according to the codes using a word processing package. I included complete quotes from the interviews and referenced them to the participants. In this way, I could compare specific participants’ views in each category or theme.

Findings and Discussion

The Global Village K–12 Magnet School,² with its focus on global citizenship and internationalization, was chosen for this research. At the time of the study, Global Village teachers and students had established relationships with school communities in other nations and were engaged in online curricular and social activities with students from around the world. The students were involved in civic initiatives such as recycling programs, local beach clean-up, cancer treatment center fundraising, and community events at a university’s school of peace studies. They also actively sought out information on current events in the world and shared it with their peers at assemblies, and they engaged in international community development activities with their teachers. For instance, the school community was raising awareness of Ugandan children’s search for safety during civil war through GuluWalk participation and raising money for families and organizations in countries such as Uganda

as well as for student travel abroad to assist in international community development initiatives. Because of the school's focus, all of the students had an awareness of communities beyond their own. As the principal noted, "We need to be knowledgeable, and we need to know what's going on in the world if we're going to understand it." A teacher observed that "by understanding ourselves, our students can place themselves better in the world" to participate and contribute to their society.

As a magnet school since 2003 in the southern Californian county's largest school district, the school's student population was drawn proportionally from most of the county. Located in a primarily working- and middle-class neighborhood in the north end of the county's large, urban center, the school itself was a sprawling campus with classrooms and office space spread across a collection of separate buildings. The grounds were well cared for with attractive floral landscaping that earned the school a position as a destination for a county garden society tour in the spring of 2009. Prior to its current designation, Global Village had been an elementary school. Once the school began accommodating students in Kindergarten through Grade 12, Global Village required refurbishing to meet the needs of the high school in particular. At the time of the research, Global Village's buildings were still under construction, and the campus had a new resource center and library, as well as new computer facilities and classrooms.

Regardless of the ongoing construction, the school had a welcoming and open ethos. The administrative assistants and the principal in the main office greeted visitors in a friendly manner, and the students and faculty were courteous to the visitors and members of the school community alike. At any given time of day, students of all ages could be seen walking from building to building, from class to class, and congregating outdoors in the common areas, talking enthusiastically among themselves and with their teachers. Close relationships among teachers and their students were evident. During lunch hours, some high school students and teachers could be found playing popular music together outside a classroom or talking about current issues while eating together in a classroom, for example.

In addition to fostering a socially supportive environment for the students, Global Village was enhancing student achievement, and the school had earned California Distinguished Schools status for its high school as a result. Becoming a Paideia school³ connected school personnel with a network of other Paideia schools (Paideia, n.d.). Opportunities for the teachers and administration to visit other schools and to share pedagogical knowledge with other educators contributed to the school's success. These feedback relationships created across the educators enabled them to evaluate their practices and make any needed

adjustments (Beabout, 2010). Global Village enjoyed a good reputation in the county, and the students and their families chose Global Village because of its focus and academic programming.

In the sections that follow, I address how the students interpreted the role of community involvement in education, the school and community contexts that influenced students' interest and involvement in the partnerships, and the extent to which they were involved in the development of the partnerships. To do so, I focus primarily on the data from the middle and secondary school students, as well as that of the educators and support staff.

Partnerships: What's the Point?

The students recognized the possibilities for the mutually beneficial sharing of resources across school–community borders (cf., Campbell et al., 1980). All of the students interviewed had a clear understanding that partnerships involved individuals or groups of people in organizations and that all parties benefited. For one 7th grade student, “associates working together to get a goal, the same kind of goal” encapsulated the partnership concept. One group of 9th grade students, in particular, noted that partnering enabled the people involved “to achieve something more than individuals can.” Collaborative activities make it possible to satisfy the needs of the participants that would not otherwise be met (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Keith, 1996).

The reasons given by the students for participating in school–community collaborative activities were varied. The 8th and 9th grade students noted that sometimes it was mandatory to get involved in school–community activities, and they stated that rewards were often given. For the most part, though, the rationale given for participation in these interactions was intrinsically motivated. Personal enrichment was gained through participation. The students reported that it made them feel good to help other people, and it was fun to be with their friends. Students in the middle school observed that partnership activities involving community members helped students learn. It was important for students to learn from others, and they felt that they did better in school as a result of the partnerships because it was “exciting to learn different things from different people” and a good idea to learn about their own school, the geographic community, partner schools, and different countries.

The relationships were beneficial for others as well. The 10th and 12th grade students noted that it was important to reach out and give back to the community, as other people need assistance. These students were looking beyond their needs and those of their school and could see that they could and should make a positive contribution to other individuals and the community as a whole. Just as individuals and circumstances in the community can impact the school,

individuals at the school have an effect on the environments beyond the walls of the school as active agents (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002).

School and Community Contextual Influences on Collaboration

The notion of a network of associations outlined in Lin's (1999) network theory offers an explanation of the school- and community-level conditions or factors that impacted students' positive views of partnerships and the specific ways in which community members could become involved with them and their school. The material, human, social, and financial resources in a collective such as a school or geographic community influence the amount of social capital available (Lin, 1999), and the number of partnerships and the types of partnerships needed and available to be developed are functions of sociocultural context (Hands, 2005a).

School-Level Conditions as Opportunities for Instrumental Action, Enhancing the Curriculum With Community Involvement

Global Village K–12 Magnet School was a small school with 21 faculty members and a student body of 333 students from Kindergarten through Grade 12. Due to the construction to accommodate the students' age range, Global Village did not have playing fields, and the students noted that the available space on the grounds did not have sod laid. Moreover, most of the students were bused in from all over the county to a primarily residential area. These factors were major influences on the school's needs as perceived by the students and the types of partnerships desired by the students in the middle and high school divisions. Students felt that the school's size combined with district budget cuts during the national economic recession resulted in the elimination or lack of programs and threatened to impact the students' transportation to the school. The possible cancellation of buses was a major concern for many of the students who participated in the research, as many of them would not be able to attend Global Village without busing. At the very least, a lack of funding and transportation and the school's location and facilities limited the resources available to them on campus and their ability to participate in activities. Consequently, students wanted to mobilize resources from the broader community in response to a perceived lack of accessible resources in the school community, and the way to do that was through collaboration with a network of community members (cf., Hands, 2005b; Lin, 1999). Beabout (2010) calls this type of collaboration a technical support relationship, in which community individuals or organizations support and enhance the school's curriculum and extracurricular activities with material and human resources.

Some collaboration ideas entailed community members' involvement in teaching or participation in curricular activities on campus. Several Grade 9 students suggested that community members could develop and participate in a music program for middle and high school students involving instruments. At the time of the interview, there was no music program in place, nor many opportunities at the school for students to learn how to play instruments. For other subjects such as science and math, the Grade 7 students suggested that community members could come into the school and talk about the occupations or pastimes available to students through studies in various disciplines.

The creation of a sports program that entailed school–community collaboration would also be an avenue for student engagement and was identified as a need by all middle and secondary student participants. There were a number of limitations of which the students were aware. While they stated that the school's small size meant that there were not many students to make up the teams and transportation would be needed for games with other schools, the students felt that it was important to develop a program with any sports that could be accommodated at the school given the construction. They observed that money from the community would help get the program off the ground and community members could participate in coaching the students on the teams, noting that the teachers may not want or be able to do so.

Collaboration with more organizations outside the immediate neighborhood was also suggested. With few businesses and organizations in walking distance, the students noted that a partnership with the local planetarium would be valuable and might involve more trips there, depending on the curriculum being studied. The development of a drama program in conjunction with a local professional theatre was another suggestion.

Here, students suggested collaborative activities with organizations that had a relationship to social capital acquisition through a direct curricular link. This is in keeping with calls in the literature for partnerships to be based on the schools' and students' needs (see, e.g., Epstein, 1995, 2001). Yet, the opportunities for partnerships are shaped by resource accessibility: resources and community collaborators, and the availability and nature of their resources (Dika & Singh, 2002; Hands, 2005a, 2005b; Lin, 1999; Portes, 1998). Regardless, the students did not feel that they would have difficulty accessing social capital in the community in the form of money and citizens' time and expertise because their school community possessed social capital as well: a strong reputation in the community for academic excellence and community involvement—all examples of instrumental action (cf., Lin, 1999). The school community's social capital would pave the way for community members' interest in collaborating (cf., Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

The Promotion of Expressive Action: Community Involvement and Its Influence on Students' Well-Being

In addition to collaborative activities involving the curriculum, the students saw the potential social impact of partnerships. The students' families were representative of all areas of the county. As such, there was a full range in terms of family socioeconomic status. Some students reported that their parents were unemployed as a result of the recent and ongoing economic recession and were living with relatives. Other students' families were employed in several jobs and living in modest accommodations within neighborhoods characterized by poverty to make ends meet, and still other students' families were living and working in affluent neighborhoods. In order to promote an awareness of others in the community, an 8th grade student made the following observations:

I think it would be good for the younger kids and older ones as well to allow, like maybe sometime during the week, while we have PE, to maybe go with a coach out and walk around the community and help pick up trash, and at the same time, maybe say "hi" to the neighbors and ask them what they do for a living and stuff, and see what people in our community do and how they are dealing with the economy. I think that would be sort of an eye-opening situation for us kids.

Interviewer: You have mentioned the economy a few times. Is this a real concern for you?

Student: Yes, it is. My mom is a single parent, and it is me, my brother, and my sister. We are currently living with my grandma in her house. With the economy, . . . and having to pay so much in taxes and everything, it is hard to get everything that we need. . . . It is devastating to families that aren't as well off as we are. If it's hard for us, it has to be much more difficult for them. . . . I think it is so much harder for everybody, especially single parents. It was hard before, supporting us as a single parent, and now it's even harder with everything that's going on. There's so much pressure on everybody to do well and to get jobs, and everybody is being laid off. . . . It seems like some of the communities are unaware that there is this stress. I think if maybe there were more meetings with community members where they could talk about what the community could do together to raise the money that they need, I think that would help so much—everybody in that one community. . . . It is just a start, and it is up to the individual to do what they do.

This student highlighted the influence of the community context on the desire to collaborate and the importance of cultivating social relations in the community for physical and mental well-being. Other middle school students

noted that they needed to learn life skills like cooking. Their families could not necessarily teach them these life skills because they had jobs and numerous responsibilities. Therefore, the students wanted community members to teach some of the skills traditionally taught at home. In this way, they could gain practical knowledge and skills through their relationships with adult volunteers (social capital) in order to promote their physical health and life satisfaction (expressive action; cf., Lin, 1999). As noted by Lin (1999), individuals have unequal access to resources. Social relationships create networks that enable individuals to claim resources possessed by a collectivity such as a community or an organization (Dika & Singh, 2002; Portes, 2000).

Some students acknowledged the pressures of school work and other responsibilities as impediments and to their efforts and their education. The 10th and 12th grade students noted that their peers needed assistance from the community both at the school and in the geographic community to keep students engaged in school. The following exchange highlights both the experiences of the students and the contexts in which they were living:

Student 1: If you're overwhelmed and struggling and you think you can't make it, you will get like, "maybe I should drop out."

Student 2: Because school—if you tell the truth, it is not that encouraging to keep going to school.

Interviewer: How so? Tell me about that.

Student 2: It really isn't. It is so easy to drop out. My circumstance is that I am pregnant. I hate to leave this school, so it easy for me [to stay]. I could just be like, "I'm not going to finish school." That would be the rest of my future. Some of us choose to stay, and we need a little bit of encouragement to stay, because it gets hard, and some of [the students] don't want to do it anymore.

Interviewer: Do you have support?

Student 2: Yes, of course, this school is all about support. All of the teachers want you to continue on with school.

Interviewer: What could community do for you? How could they help you in general?

Student 2: I think the community could come into the school and talk, have seminars. [They] can come to the school and talk to the kids about what they do. Different people from the community to come in and tell kids, "Stay committed in school." And [let us know] what the community is doing to help out with everything, because it is not just in school, it is out-of-school things, too.

Interviewer: Like what?

Student 2: You know. There is gang involvement. There is just not wanting to come to school anymore. There is, "I can't pay rent, so how do you stay in school?" It is how every community struggles and we struggle....

Student 1: Employment and everything.

Student 2: Yes, that could very well keep you from school, too. Some of us have to work.

The students suggested that counseling teams made up of community members were needed at the school and in the broader community to work with students. They noted that students needed "a strong mind and a straight head." Consequently, social support was also more broadly needed by youth, in these students' opinions. They recommended technical support relationships to supplement the school's counseling services and to provide additional support to the students (cf., Beabout, 2010). Community members could play a key role in providing that support and fostering a sense of hope for the students' futures (cf., Hands, 2005a). Thus, collaborating could help students mobilize resources to maintain their social capital—both their mental well-being and life satisfaction (cf., Lin, 1999).

The participants highlighted the value of students hearing about the importance of school, of exerting effort in their studies, and of staying in school from multiple sources such as parents, school personnel, and community members (cf., Epstein, 1995). Indeed, a lack of attention and support from the adults around them and the absence of consistent discipline and continuous focus on their education-related activities are considered by educators, community mentors, and students alike to be the most important barriers to educational success (Shapiro, Ginsberg, & Brown, 2002). This kind of verbal support may promote students' engagement and minimize disengagement from educational pursuits (see, e.g., Cervone, 2010; Gaydos, 2009; Mitra, 2007, 2009).

Of interest, most of the students' suggestions for community involvement were one-sided, although they realized that partnerships benefited all of the parties involved. The ideas for collaborative activities at this point represented the first stage of the partnership process (Hands, 2005a), for they were based on the students' and school's program needs and goals (cf., Epstein, 1995, 2001). The students understood their school's curricular and extracurricular challenges and articulated ways in which they could be addressed. As their ideas were in the beginning phases, they had not yet identified potential partners nor determined the possible benefits for the community citizens of partnering with them and Global Village (Hands, 2005a). At the time of the study, there was no evidence of the relationship-building, two-way communication, and power

sharing necessary to establish authentic partnerships (cf., Auerbach, 2011) from the students' perspectives. As such, the students were sharing their ideas for community involvement, not for school–community partnerships.

Regardless, the findings highlight that human, social, and material resources in a geographic community influence the amount of social capital available (Lin, 1999); that is, the number of school–community liaisons and the types of collaboration needed, the available resources, and individuals' ability to access the resources are functions of sociocultural context (Hands, 2005a; Dika & Singh, 2002; Portes, 1998).

Limitations to School Community Resources That Support Partnerships

The students were realistic with their suggestions for collaborative activities. They recognized they needed transportation for sporting events and some club activities, and they knew they needed to generate money for the transportation as well as provisions such as musical instruments, turf for the playing fields, and materials for some clubs. This is consistent with existing literature. Sanders (1999) found that sufficient funding was an essential component of successful partnership programs. A lack of funding influenced the need to develop collaborative activities and motivated school personnel to reach out to community members; however, financial shortfalls could also impede the developers' ability to create the relationships (Hands, 2005a). Without financial support for collaborative activities, they were unlikely to be developed or sustained over time.

Further, the students noted the importance of time to participate in collaborative activities. As one 8th grade student pointed out, there is a “John Muir saying that a walk in the mountains is worth a mountain of books. Like, I believe we're looking at the mountain of books, but we're not getting the walk in the mountains.” The students felt they would learn more if they participated in activities including those with community members. Currently, the students' daily schedules made participation difficult. As one student stated, “I have to get out of the house at 6:30. I am on the bus, and we get here at 8:30, and then we have a couple of minutes to eat breakfast; we have to run to our class.” Projects and homework took up the students' time after school, and many of them were faced with a lengthy bus ride back home at the end of the day. Because most of the students were bused, there were not many extracurricular activities offered. Nevertheless, the students recommended the creation of more clubs. Time was also an issue that arose with the faculty and school administration. There was no time set aside to develop school–community partnerships, and according to the principal, “everyone here wears many hats.” The realities of the students' schooling and the educators' schedules highlight not only

the importance of making the time needed to develop partnerships (Sanders, 1999), but also time to engage in collaborative activities during the school day.

The guidance necessary to develop partnerships (cf., Sanders, 1999) also played a role in the students' potential for developing activities. The students frequently identified the teachers as the initiators of the partnerships. The magnet coordinator, the 9th grade teacher, the science teacher, the librarian, and the school counselor were most commonly named as the teachers and support staff who created the partnerships and the activities for all of the grades. They were also cited as the ones who helped to get the students interested in collaborative activities by building awareness of the issues being addressed by the partnerships. Therefore, the main role of the students was as participant rather than as developer. This is consistent with previous research, which found that teachers were most often the partnership initiators, and collaborative activities were developed based on their understanding of their students' and program's needs (Hands, 2005a). Further, Mitra's work (2007, 2009) stresses the importance of adult mentors at the school and in the community via strong affiliations with community partner organizations to develop and sustain student voice. Yet as McMahan (2012) observes, those with a voice in educational institutions are often individuals in respected positions of power. Student voice, then, seems contingent on adults' support of it, at least to some degree.

Apart from student voice, attributions of responsibility played a role in student involvement. The students considered partnership development the responsibility of the aforementioned teachers or principal, rather than a student role. That said, there was a greater awareness of the potential role of students in partnership development in the upper grades than in the elementary grades. When asked who should develop a partnership, one 7th grade student asked the researcher, "Can students do this?" It had not occurred to her or her peers in the focus group that she or the other students could organize the activities. Another student in the focus group offered, "Well, the ASB [student council], kind of...but also they can't do it alone...some staff members should also help because the ASB can only do so much, and they have classes and [activities]." One 9th grade student observed that "anyone who's willing and dedicated can start partnerships up." After some discussion in their focus groups, the middle and high school participants noted that students, teachers, and anyone who wished to do so could create collaborative activities. Regardless, student participation in school–community relationship development was not an activity that the school personnel talked about with them. This was not intentional; rather, it stemmed from a shared understanding that partnership development was within the purview of school personnel, not that of students. Consequently, the teachers and principal established collaborative activities with their

potential community partners without student input. The principal and the magnet coordinator considered this study's research process itself as the way to solicit students' opinions about community involvement; it had not been previously done.

Global Village promoted community engagement *for* students; however, it was implemented within the top-down hierarchical structure characteristic of the broader education system (Anyon, 2005; Hands & Hubbard, 2011) that privileges traditional roles and responsibilities. This created a tension that had not been resolved at the time of the study, and community engagement *with* students was an untapped strategy. There was no school community norm to assist students in accessing and mobilizing resources (cf., Lin, 1999), such as encouragement from the principal or teachers to participate in school–community collaboration development. There were also no resources such as guidance to assist students (or the educators) in developing school–community relationships (cf., Sanders, 1999). At most, students had limited voice in terms of the quantity and type of community involvement at Global Village as well as in their role in collaboration. Once the students were aware that they could participate in developing collaborative activities, they expressed an interest in creating school–community partnerships.

The students were aware of the challenges facing the school, they were hopeful that their school would meet those challenges, and they did not feel precluded from expressing their opinions. Yet, students' suggested school–community liaisons had not been developed, nor had they been considered by school administration and teachers. An environment where their inclusion in decision-making is not sought could put them at risk of disengagement. Students who feel the school is not responsive to their needs and who perceive that they have no voice and cannot impact their education may become disengaged (Cervone, 2010; Gaydos, 2009). This highlights the importance of revisiting traditional school community norms that limit the input of constituents such as parents, community members, and students (Auerbach, 2011; Hubbard & Hands, 2011; Pushor, 2007; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). School-level resources to support any efforts, as well as the solicitation of students' input in meaningful ways would encourage them that they can influence change (Mitra, 2007; Yonezawa & Jones, 2011) in their school through partnership development. At the least, students' involvement in creating collaborative activities among the school and the broader community puts them in a position where they build their networks, more resources are accessible to them, and they are better able to mobilize the resources they need and want (cf., Lin, 1999).

Implications and Conclusions

In this study, I examined how students interpret the purpose of school–community relationships and what types of community involvement the students perceived to be important or relevant to them. I looked at the school- and community-level conditions or factors that motivated the students to partner and enabled or impeded students’ participation in collaborative activities. I also investigated how students were engaged with partnership establishment.

The characteristics of the school and geographic community shaped students’ awareness and interest in partnering and working with people in the community surrounding the school as well as a more broadly determined community: the world. Students understood they were global citizens and were open to community involvement, and many had a desire to engage in collaborative activities as a result. In all cases, the students who were interviewed could see the value in school–community partnerships. The middle and secondary school students in particular readily identified collaborative activities they would like to see developed at Global Village K-12 Magnet School, and they articulated specific benefits for themselves and other students as well as for the school. Suggestions for community involvement arose from students’ perceptions of challenges or limitations to the resources in the school community and beyond. The sociocultural issues in the geographic community influenced the needs of the community members including the students themselves and the collaborative activities they identified as needed and important (cf., Hands, 2005a).

Challenges to Student Development of School–Community Activities

Global Village had an environment that was conducive to developing an interest in school–community collaboration and partnership development, but it lacked resources to support school–community partnerships (cf., Sanders, 1999). Teachers developed the collaborative activities on their own, with no steering committee to identify potential partners and guide the partnership development process (cf., Hands, 2005a; Sanders, 1999). There was no money or time allocated in the school plan for partnership development and participation (cf., Sanders, 1999). The school had partners due to the teachers’ initiative and interest in liaising. This not only impacted the number and nature of the collaborative activities, but students’ participation. Many students were constricted in their participation due to their daily schedules and limited time. Time in the school schedule set aside for partnership development and participation, as well as resources such as money and guidance dedicated to

operationalizing collaborative activities, might facilitate more engagement in partnering.

Overall, the students participated in collaborative activities that were developed by others. There were no resources in place to support student-initiated community involvement, and they had no evident voice in developing the relationships. That said, although creating school–community collaborative activities was not within their understanding of their role as students, there was a desire to do so after they came to understand that they could establish their own, and they readily articulated possibilities for them. It is possible that their interpretation of student roles played a part in their motivation to become involved in this capacity.

Accessible resources such as time, money, and guidance in the school community set the stage for collaboration (cf., Sanders, 1999); they influence whether community involvement will be sought and what types of collaborative activities will be pursued, as well as whether they have a chance of actually being developed and sustained. Without guidance, in particular, it seems unlikely that students will be involved in the process. Authentic partnerships are “respectful alliances among educators, families, and community groups” (Auerbach, 2011, p. 5), especially needed in economically and culturally diverse communities (Auerbach, 2010, 2011) such as Global Village and its surrounding area. This description might be elaborated to specifically include students’ roles in the process. It was not evident at the time of the study that inclusive conversations based on shared power were taking place (cf., Munns, 2012) with regard to partnering. There were no partnerships, authentic or otherwise, developed by the students or including their voices.

It is noted that Global Village was a school with a reputation for being supportive of community involvement in education. This is not the case for all schools, and it is likely that the challenges documented in this study are underestimated. This highlights the critical importance of confronting the traditional school community norms at Global Village and at many other institutions (cf., McMahon, 2012) that preclude students’ involvement in collaborative activity development. There are increasing opportunities for learning to occur anywhere and anytime through initiatives such as service learning, community-based education (Hands, 2005a), and other school–community partnerships (Sanders, 1999, 2001; Wohlstetter et al., 2003). Moreover,

what is needed for sustained improvement are external relationships that foster the trust and professional collaboration which are requisite to improving classroom teaching, too often deemed a private affair in many American schools (Cuban, 1993; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Tye, 2000). (Beabout, 2010, p. 22)

Currently, school personnel need to initiate efforts to enhance parent and community involvement (Davies, 2002; Epstein, 1995, 2001; Sheldon, 2005). While they were not opposed to students' participation, the educators in this study did not view partnership development as part of the students' responsibility; rather, students were considered participants in the collaborative activities. This is potentially problematic. Smyth (2007) cautions that if students are treated as passive recipients of education, the activities designed by school personnel—regardless of their purpose and intent—may reinforce students' alienation and lack of agency and disengagement from their education. In this study, the students could see challenging issues for the school community and where partnerships could support them and the school. If school personnel choose to ignore their voices, it could lead to their disengagement. As with parent engagement in education (cf., Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005), it is likely that school personnel need to foster an understanding among students—and possibly their colleagues—that students can and should be involved in partnership development at their schools.

School leaders, faculty, and support staff can broaden students' roles beyond that of participant by engaging students in the collaboration development phase and involving them in decisions around the relationships to be developed. This might also serve to enhance buy-in among the students who the participants noted were not involved and did not want to be, thus increasing engagement in school–community partnerships among all of the students. It is possible that Global Village would meet with greater success in developing the partnerships that faculty, administration, students, and their families need with the active participation of diverse members of the school community. Toward that end, it would be advisable to create a committee, similar to an action team (Epstein, 1995, 2001; Sanders, 1999), that includes students in a decision-making capacity as well as faculty, parents, or community members (cf., Hands, 2005a). The school currently has a student council with representatives from 7th through 12th grades. It may be prudent to initially include several council members in decision-making capacities beyond the typical fundraising or planning for special celebrations, dances, and other social events (McMahon, 2012). The committee could then be extended to include members of the student body, beyond those on the student council, who are interested in participating in partnership development.

This is not likely to come to pass while educators at Global Village view decision-making and partnership development as solely their responsibility. For school–community collaboration involving all constituents to take place, it is necessary for the educators to have a pedagogical philosophy that education is

everyone's responsibility—not just the teachers' (Hands, 2005a). It is hoped that this study provides some insight to the Global Village educators in this area. The educators were interested in collaboration and issues of inclusion and were willing to engage with diverse groups of people both nationally and internationally. It is anticipated that including students in the formative stages of partnership development could become a reality once considered a possibility. In collaboration, the adults and youth would work alongside one another in making decisions for their school around partnership development (cf., Hands, 2005a; Mitra, 2005, 2007).

Future education leaders would benefit from a research investigation of how to develop the students' understanding of their roles as active agents in the development of partnerships. Space needs to be made for students to develop their abilities in this area, and guidance from school leaders and staff to do so is essential. Investigations of how schools that are successful in engaging students in partnership development build students' capacity in this area would be valuable. Students' conceptions of themselves as active agents, not only participating in collaborative activities but developing ones that are meaningful to them and to others, may serve to assist them in building social capital. This is a substantial benefit of partnering; however, the consequences of enabling students to develop partnerships may carry additional value. Involvement with community in ways that shape their destinies and those of others has the potential to empower youth to productively engage in both the community and the broader society as citizens. Isn't that the essential purpose of education? Education is indeed too important to be left entirely in the hands of educators in schools.

Endnotes

¹The magnet school coordinator was a teacher with the responsibility of liaising with the school board. She was also responsible for implementing programs for the staff and students that were consistent with the school's focus.

²Any school and participant names contained in the manuscript are pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities.

³Paideia schools are characterized by a pedagogical approach that includes didactic teaching of subject content, coaching students to develop their learning skills, and Socratic questioning during seminar discussions (Paideia, n.d.).

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