# (Re)Imagining School as Community: Lessons Learned From Teachers

*Terri N. Watson and Ira Bogotch*

## Abstract

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed methods study was to utilize teacher perceptions to identify best practices for school leaders who seek to transform their school into a *school as community*. First, a large urban high school was purposefully selected based on data obtained from the Department of Education. After examining the quantitative data, teacher interviews were conducted to explore their perceptions of the principal's efforts to transform the school into a *school as community*. Based on the quantitative and qualitative findings, four practices emerged as lessons learned from teachers in (re)imagining *school as community*: learning to lead, trusting in time, making the connections, and managing change.

Key Words: school as community, teachers' perspectives, change management, leadership, urban high school, principal, academy

## Introduction

*Community* is a complex phenomenon. On the one hand, the notion of community evokes feelings of trust, safety, love, and fellowship. In other contexts, a community may be depicted as irreparable and pathological when its members are wrought by racism, violence, and continuous cycles of poverty (Limperopulos, 2014). As an ideological concept, the term community is fundamental to fields such as sociology and ecology. Interestingly, as we explore

the meaning of community, what is clear not only in relation to education, but in sociology and ecology, is that the word "community" has no distinct definition (Bender, 1978).

Community varies by context and purpose. In regards to schools, much of the ambiguity surrounding the word community comes from the fact that the term is often used in two distinct ways: in the first, the school itself is a community; in the second, the school's engagement with its surrounding neighborhood is deemed the practice of community. With respect to the first definition of community, there is a need to distinguish between community as measured by climate relationships and community as measured by professional practices (Merz & Furman, 1997). The following quote by Bauer and Brazer (2012) illustrates this frustration: "We cringe when someone tells us that their school 'does professional learning community'—a professional learning community is something your school becomes, not something you or a few people on a team do" (p. 280).

With respect to the second definition of community, external relationships, it is unfortunate and factual that through structural and programmatic designs many public schools have severed ties with outside members (Merz & Furman, 1997). In addition, today's reform efforts, which include school closure and the expansion of citywide, magnet, and charter schools serve to further broaden the gap between public schools and surrounding neighborhoods (Orfield, 2013; Ravitch, 2013).

Dewey (1938) repeatedly argued that schooling must be the practice of community for it is within schools where one learns how to participate in the larger society. Sergiovanni (1996) observed that if schools were to function as communities, then school leaders must also serve as moral agents and should adapt their practices and theories to meet the needs of their respective school sites. Hence, his argument was to replace "school as an organization" with "school as community."

Interestingly, while the literature has validated the merits of school as community generically, there continues to be a need for more studies that (a) explain the dynamics of school as community in terms of teacher–principal perspectives and actions, and (b) highlight how unique contexts (in this case an urban high school) determine one of the many meanings of schools as community. This study is an effort to fill this void.

In order to explain the dynamics of school as community we employed a sequential mixed methods approach, grounded in teacher perspectives (of principal behaviors) to identify best practices for urban high school principals who seek to transform their school into a *school as community*. The central research question we asked was: *How does an urban high school principal transform a school into a school as community?*

The next section, the literature review, explored schools as communities historically as well as in the context of post-*Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) reform efforts. Unlike previous reviews of literature on schools as communities which adhere to the internal–external dichotomy, we offer a holistic and contextual view on this topic.

## Literature Review

### Public Schools

When first conceived, public schools were deemed change agents and charged with raising the collective aspirations of the masses to foster social, economic, and political shifts (Gilbert, 1904). Paradoxically, for many people of color, public schools became tools for subjugation and marginalization (Greer, 1972). Kozol's (2005) five-year study of 60 public schools in 11 states affirmed the latter findings. In the opening lines of his keynote address delivered at the 2013 Annual Brown Lecture in Research Education, professor and civil rights activist Gary Orfield noted that despite the promise of *Brown* and overarching federal legislation (see Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965; Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), the nation's public schools proffer disparate student outcomes as they remain inherently separate and unequal.

The inequity that Orfield (2013) spoke of is predicated, in part, by racist and economically motivated housing patterns that have caused the nation's public schools to become increasingly segregated (Reardon, Grewal, Kalogrides, & Greenberg, 2012). Most distressing, an overwhelming majority of students of color were found to attend schools staffed by less qualified teachers who utilize inadequate teaching materials (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012). Relatedly, in a report issued by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, racial isolation and poverty were found to "redline" Black and Hispanic students who attend New York City's public schools; Holzman found most of the city's 1.1 million children "languish in schools that lack the resources and capacity to meet their academic or social needs" (2012, p. vii).

Excellence, access, and equity were thought to be the function of *Brown* and are at the heart of today's school reform measures. Ironically, many reformers have attempted to redress public schools while ignoring their external communities. Warren (2005) noted how the two are inextricably bound, and Riley (2009) explained, "How schools and communities work together is unique to each context and based on intensively personal relationships, which need to be developed" (p. 60). On a larger scale, Ravitch (2013) found public education

to be symbiotic with society and urged readers not to be swayed by manufactured crises aimed at removing schooling from the civic realm.

What is clear from Warren (2005), Riley (2009), and Ravitch (2013) is that schools alone are inadequate means to meet the needs of all students. Meaningful connections with external communities are essential to the efficacy of public schools. Yet as Warren (2005) pointed out, public schools lost the connections—both family and familiar—they established with neighborhoods at the beginning of the 20th century when Progressive Era reforms centralized control of schooling by adopting professionally run district administrations (Reese, 2002). Subsequently, educators, mayors, and community developers have operated in separate spheres, both institutionally and professionally (Bogotch, Nesmith, Smith, & Gaines, 2014).

### Schools as Communities

Despite the aforementioned findings, much of the literature on schools as communities rings positive. Furman (2004) and Warren (2005) build on the works of Sergiovanni (1994, 1996) and Starratt (1994, 2003) who framed the schoolhouse as an ethical and moral community poised for transformation. Royal and Rossi (1997) noted that a school community flourishes when faculty and students establish a clear vision, a sense of purpose, and a values system. Redding (2001) examined the literature on school community and characterized the term as "inclusive of families of students and some elements of the community beyond the school doors" (p. 1) and as exemplifying attributes such as "shared values, trust, expectations, and obligations rather than tasks, rules, and hierarchies" (p. 1).

Ironically, many of the concepts of schools as communities ignore the politics involved, such as what happened in the late 1960s in Ocean Hill–Brownsville, Brooklyn, when parents and community activists rallied for better schools and community services. They demanded "social reform as well as school reform" (Lewis, 2013, p. 5). To explain, on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, Black community members were attempting to participate in the governance of their local schools. In doing so they clashed with progressive labor forces who were bidding to organize teachers for better working conditions across the city. In the end, the collision of these two progressive forces altered history in the sense that both sides came to distrust one another. Going forward, we as a nation have not been able to forge a post-progressive national urban education agenda.

At the start of the 21st century, notwithstanding the recession and its effects on teacher pensions and municipal budgets, collective bargaining and teacher unions have been prominent agenda issues in urban education. Similarly, as

labor issues conflated with notions of teacher specialization and teacher professionalism expanded, the role of the external community and, more specifically, parental involvement in schools has diminished, making local and parent governance pedagogically questionable and practically more difficult (Jeynes, 2014; Watson & Bogotch, 2015). In sum, the concept of school as community has become an urban legend.

## (Re)Imagining Public Schools as Communities

In the book *Schools as Imagined Communities: The Creation of Identity, Meaning, and Conflict in U. S. History,* the authors challenge the purpose of schools and the notion of school as community. Specifically, Cobb-Roberts, Dorn, and Shircliffe (2006) posit, "As we look beyond the superficial nature of what we believe schools to be and delve into the many purposes schooling has served and the many practices that schools have used, a different portrait emerges" (p. 2). The authors go on to explain how schools are exclusive by design and serve to maintain the status quo as they, by and large, are restricted populaces based on class, location, and student characteristics. As such, the concept of school as community extends a reality that never truly existed.

Boske's (2012) research contradicts Cobb-Roberts et al.'s (2006) conclusions. Through a series of case studies she demonstrated how, within a school's unique context, it was necessary to tailor projects to build internal and external relationships for community. Similarly, Tooms, Lugg, and Bogotch (2010) defined community as a process and equated successful communities to those spaces and places that establish meaningful relationships and what the researchers refer to as "fit" between individuals and organizations. Boske (2012) echoed Dewey (1938) who maintained that schools must be places where democracy and citizenship are shaped and communities thrive.

In her text, *School as Community: From Promise to Practice*, Furman (2002) presents the practice of community in schools from various perspectives. Based on her research, Furman noted that while researchers endeavor to assess community in schools, they oftentimes only focus on its attributes, "e.g., shared values, common work goals, and level of communication and collaboration" (p. 12), not its existence. Interestingly, she defined "community" in schools as an "affective experience or psychological state" (p. 11) that must be experienced by students and teachers in order for it to subsist. Based on our experiences as teachers, school leaders, and researchers, we concur with Furman's definition of community in schools. We believe that schooling serves a moral purpose that can be found in the practices of school leaders who foster an ethic of community (Sergiovanni, 1994, 1996). In the next section, this study's methodology is presented. We utilized this approach to answer the following question: *How does an urban high school principal transform a school into a school as community?*

## Methods

### Setting

This study is situated in a large urban city in the U.S. The school district serves a primarily Hispanic and Black student populace. These demographics are reflected in the student body of Lucille Campbell Green High School (LCG; a pseudonym). More than 60% of the students are Hispanic, 33% are Black, 4% are Asian, and 1% are White. According to the most recent school data, 75% of the student body (approximately 1,300 students) are eligible for free and/or reduced lunch. The school's demographics, however, are not reflective of its surrounding community. As with many historically Black neighborhoods throughout the Northeast and Midwest, gentrification is causing property values to significantly increase while simultaneously changing the face of its residents.

LCG is an anomaly of sorts, as it is one of the city's few remaining large-scale high schools. To explain, when the mayor was given control of the city's schools, a great majority of high schools were deemed "dropout factories"[1] (Balfanz et al., 2013). Hence, they were restructured and, instead of one large high school consisting of 1,000 or more students, several small high schools, each consisting of several hundred students, were created in an effort to increase teacher efficacy and, ultimately, graduation rates. LCG, due to its influential alumni and strong legacy, remained intact; it was the first collaborative effort between the city's university and the city's board of education. And, in the 1980s, despite the fact that the crack cocaine epidemic nearly decimated the surrounding neighborhood, hundreds of students applied each year for admission to LCG as it provided a trajectory to postsecondary education and improved life outcomes.

Unfortunately, nearly two decades after it opened, LCG began to decline. While the high school continued to carefully screen students for admissions (reviewing student transcripts, attendance records, and standardized test scores), its waning reputation no longer made it a school of "first" choice.[2] Students who once would have applied to the "school on the top of the hill" now chose to attend the city's "test-only"[3] high schools. Moreover, LCG's academic programs no longer provided the curricula and learning outcomes that helped to establish its once strong reputation. While the school continued to advertise specific curricula and state certifications, it no longer possessed the appropriate faculty and/or resources and so could provide neither the academic outcomes nor the experiences required for state accreditation. In sum, LCG, while once known for its strong curriculum and stellar graduates, was now plagued by a weak curriculum sanctioned by a succession of unexceptional school leaders.

### Scandal

From 2006–2011, LCG's principal was dogged by charges of incompetence, harassment, and—most pressing—academic negligence. To explain the latter claim, one need only review the school's 2010 data: four-year graduation rates catapulted by 30 points, ranking amongst the highest in the city, only to plummet the next academic year. Then, during the summer of 2011, several of the school's teachers contacted the superintendent of schools to report the principal's abuse of the district's Credit Recovery Policy (CRP). This policy and related programs were implemented to afford students the opportunity to recover credit for a course that should have been earned during the school year in a traditional classroom setting. However, for whatever reasons (i.e., truancy, no motivation, lack of skills), the credit/s were not earned, and the student's credit accumulation was not where it should have been, and, more often than not, timely graduation was at stake. Thus, in an effort to improve 4-year graduation rates and to assist students who found themselves overage and undercredited, many districts instituted CRP. LCG is part of one such school district.

While LCG's principal was cleared of any wrongdoings regarding the school's policies and practices related to CRP, the damage was done. Morale plummeted, and many veteran teachers resigned at the start of the next school year. With this said, the 2011 academic year would prove to be a challenge for the now infamous high school. LCG was in need of a new school leader and several key faculty members to replace those who submitted resignation letters in the fall. In addition, the school's letter grade and other evaluation metrics continued to decline. LCG was nowhere near the top of the choice schools. Also, the school's relationship with the city's university seemed to stall. Many precollege programs housed in the university's colleges seemed to no longer want to work with the students and teachers at the high school despite the fact that they shared a campus. Moreover, internal and external community members wondered if LCG would close its doors, as many high schools in the city had been closed over the previous decade due to dismal student performance and low graduation rates.

### A New Day

In the fall of 2013, LCG was met with good news. The school was poised for a comeback based on its 2012–13 Learning Environment Survey. The school's grade increased by one letter, and several of the teachers who left in the summer of 2011 returned to their former positions. District officials and faculty members attributed the noted changes to the novice interim principal who was officially named LCG's principal in the spring of 2013. In the next section, this study's quantitative and qualitative findings are explicated.

## Study Design

This study utilized quantitative and qualitative data to shed light on the perspectives of teachers in response to the research question: *How does an urban high school principal transform a school into a school as community?* Mixed methodologies were found to be particularly useful as quantitative and qualitative data combined provide a rich context in which to understand a complex social phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, this study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. As such, quantitative data—teachers' responses to questions centered on the actions of the principal—were first analyzed. Then, using a semi-structured questionnaire (Drever, 1995) adapted from the International Successful Schools' Principals Project (ISSPP; Day, 2010), qualitative data were gathered to explain the quantitative findings. Thus, while the quantitative data provided an outline, the qualitative findings provided essential details to answer the research question.

## Sample

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to select the school site and individuals for this study. To explain, this case study (Creswell, 2012) is drawn from our research that examined the practices of a successful school principal (see Watson & Bogotch, 2015). We reviewed the 2011–13 School Survey Reports found on the city's Department of Education (DOE) website to identify the principal. The evaluation tool is often referred to as the Learning Environment Survey (LES); it is one of the largest national school-based assessments. The DOE administers the LES annually to students, parents, and teachers in Grades 6–12 to ascertain their perceptions of their respective school site and its leadership.

The LES has four components: Academic Expectations, Communication, Engagement, and Safety and Respect. These practices are fundamental to school leaders who operationalize "community in school" (Furman, 2002). Based on 2011–13 LES growth data (see Table 1), Dr. John Brown (a pseudonym) was identified as a successful school principal. Dr. Brown serves as the principal of LCG, one of the few comprehensive high schools in a sizeable urban school district in the northeastern U.S.

Based on data contained in the LES for the 2011–12 and 2012–13 academic years, while all high schools citywide made gains (right column) as well as LCG's peer schools (middle column), LCG made the greatest gains (left column). In other words, LCG bested the city's high schools (overall) and its 39 peer schools[4] in making the most growth during the 2012–13 academic year.

Table 1. 2011–13 LES Growth Comparisons

| LES Categories | LCG | Peer Schools (39) | Citywide |
|---|---|---|---|
| Academic Expectations | 1.8 | .8 | .5 |
| Communication | 2.3 | 1.1 | 1.0 |
| Engagement | 2.1 | .6 | .3 |
| Safety & Respect | 1.7 | 0 | .3 |

*Note*. Adapted from data obtained from the DOE's website.

## Quantitative Phase

For the 2012–13 LES, 303 (25%) students, 192 (15%) parents, and 61 (94%) of LCG's teachers were assigned confidential access codes by the DOE and participated in the survey. This study was centered on those teachers in the first, quantitative phase ($n$ = 61). In the second, qualitative phase, participants ($n$ = 5) were given pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

### Data Collection

LCG's teachers responded to a total of 57 items on the 2012–13 LES; 11 questions centered on their perception of the principal, Dr. Brown. Possible responses included: "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Disagree," "Strongly Disagree," and "Does Not Apply." Responses were converted to percentages and reported as a number ranging from 0–10; the highest possible score was 10. These questions and responses are reported in the findings.

### Data Analysis

The LES framework and the teachers' responses to the 11 items were utilized to quantitatively answer this study's research question. The discussion section integrates the quantitative and qualitative results.

## Qualitative Phase

After the Institutional Review Board at the primary author's university and the city's DOE approved this study, flyers were placed in the teachers' mailboxes at LCG. The flyers advertised this study and invited the participation of teachers who taught at LCG for at least three years and took part in the 2012–13 LES. Five teachers voluntarily agreed to participate in this phase of the study and were interviewed as described below. The interviewees consisted of three females and two males. Three were White, speaking English as their primary language, while one was a Hispanic whose primary language was Spanish, and one was from the Middle East and spoke Arabic as well as English.

Along with teacher interviews, descriptive field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) were gathered during monthly School Leadership Team meetings. Archived documents and data obtained from the school's website were also included as part of the qualitative data for this study. These data provided the thick, rich details essential to describing phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### The International Successful School Principals' Project (ISSPP)

Adding to the validity of this study, the ISSPP interview protocol was followed. The ISSPP began in 2001 in Nottingham, England and was developed by a team of educational researchers from across the globe. It is the most comprehensive study of successful school principals (Day, 2010). The project proffers new empirical research on effective school leadership and seeks to improve student achievement and school communities. The primary aim of the project is to collect data from multiple perspectives to better understand "personal qualities and professional competencies" (Day, 2010, p. 8) of successful school leaders.

This study, in particular, serves to identify the knowledge base, skills, and dispositions a principal utilizes in implementing successful leadership practices at a large, urban high school in the U.S. This study may also inform LCG's leadership while serving as a resource for other school leaders in similar policy and social contexts.

### Data Collection

Using a semi-structured questionnaire (Drever, 1995) adapted from the ISSPP (Day, 2010), five teachers were interviewed one-on-one for one to two hours each. Semi-structured interviews, based upon a series of open-ended questions, are the most effective means of reconciling the aim of encouraging respondents to talk freely about what they perceive to be significant (Drever, 1995). The questionnaire is included in Appendix B. This interview data were collected to help explain this study's quantitative results.

### Data Analysis

Several steps were taken to analyze the qualitative data. First, the transcripts were audiorecorded and professionally transcribed. Then the data were read and reread employing a constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify how, based on the LES framework ("Academic Expectations," "Communication," "Engagement," and "Safety and Respect"), Dr. Brown operationalized school as community. Finally, findings and understandings were discussed throughout this process to insure consistency and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### Limitations and Trustworthiness

This case study was limited as it focused solely on the perception of teachers. While the views of teachers are crucial for leadership development, the voices of students, parents, staff, and of course, school leaders, should not be ignored. Next, this study focused on the opinions of teachers in a large, urban high school. As such, the findings should not be generalized as context matters and differs based on the school environment and the school community. Last, it must be noted that the intent of this study was to shed light on the perceptions of teachers at LCG and to inform the practices of the school's leader and others in similar social and political contexts.

In an effort to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, member checks were conducted (Creswell, 2012). Participants reviewed their transcripts and were given the opportunity to provide clarity and feedback. Finally, before this manuscript was sent to the publishers of this journal, participants were offered the opportunity to review this document to ensure that their perspectives were accurately portrayed. The next section presents the qualitative and quantitative findings for this study.

## Findings

### Quantitative Phase

Most (94%; *n* = 61) of LCG's teachers participated in the 2012–13 LES. They responded to 57 multiple-choice questions; 11 questions focused on their perceptions of Dr. Brown and are included in this phase of the study. Possible scores for each question range from 0–10 with 10 serving as the highest. The questions and average scores are presented in Table 2.

### Qualitative Phase

Based on teacher interview data, descriptive field notes, and archived documents obtained from the school's website, the following narrative was gathered and framed by the four components of the LES.

#### *Academic Expectations*

As discussed, LCG's once highly lauded academies began to falter at the start of the new millennium. Students who hoped to graduate with transcripts that delineated specific curricula and certifications were often disappointed when they learned that their chosen academy was in name only. Accordingly, at the start of the 2012–13 academic year, Dr. Brown restored the Engineering Academy by dedicating several classrooms, teachers, and technology to this initiative. As a result, all of the teachers interviewed for this study were proud

Table 2. Quantative Results From the LES

| Survey Sections and Relevant Questions | Score |
|---|---|
| **Academic Expectations** | |
| *Do teachers feel that the school develops rigorous and meaningful academic goals that encourage students to do their best?* | |
| The principal at my school… | |
|    Places the learning needs of children ahead of personal and political interests. | 9.0 |
| **Communication** | |
| *Do teachers feel that the school provides them with information about the school's educational goals and offers appropriate feedback on each student's learning outcomes?* | |
| The principal at my school… | |
|    Communicates a clear vision for our school. | 8.8 |
|    Encourages open communication on important school issues. | 8.9 |
|    Makes clear to the staff his or her expectations for meeting instructional goals. | 9.0 |
|    Is an effective manager who makes the school run smoothly. | 8.6 |
| *How much do you agree with the following statement?* | |
| I trust the principal at his or her word. | 8.8 |
| **Engagement** | |
| *Do teachers feel engaged in an active and vibrant partnership to promote learning?* | |
| The principal at my school… | |
|    Understands how children learn. | 9.0 |
|    Knows what's going on in my classroom. | 8.5 |
|    Participates in instructional planning with teachers. | 8.3 |
| *To what extent do you feel supported by the following people?* | |
| Your principal. | 8.0 |
| **Safety and Respect** | |
| *Do teachers feel that the school creates a physically and emotionally secure environment in which everyone can focus on student learning?* | |
| *How much do you agree with the following statement?* | |
| I feel respected by the principal at my school. | 9.0 |

to boast of LCG's new Engineering Academy and improved school culture. One teacher observed, "It's a noticeable change in the environment and culture of the school since [Dr. Brown] arrived." Another teacher attributed the new "tone" in the building to Dr. Brown and spoke of his foresight. She ascertained, "He knew what he was walking into. I think that made the difference.…He went in and did his homework."

Part of Dr. Brown's "homework" may be attributed to the fact that he is a former teacher and is considered by many of LCG's teachers to be an instructional leader. Moreover, he makes it a point to observe every teacher at LCG at least twice a year. This practice is greatly appreciated by the teachers under his charge. For example, a teacher with nearly 20 years of experience at varying high schools in the district, when asked, "How do you describe the kind of leadership in the school?" compared Dr. Brown to her previous principals and responded as follows:

> Sometimes people [school leaders] will come and observe you, and they don't know what they're looking for, and they don't know how to help. I've had the pleasure of having [Dr. Brown] come to my class, observe my class, and then sit down with me and have a constructive conversation giving me really fantastic examples of how I could have improved certain aspects of that lesson. For me, as a teacher, that really makes me respect him more because he knows strategies. He knows teaching. He's a teacher. He's a teacher first. That is very helpful.

Another teacher with less than five years of experience noted how Dr. Brown sets the tone for high academic expectations. She said, "He wants us to become better teachers, and he wants our students to be successful in their learning, and that is very obvious." Similarly, one of the science teachers interviewed for this study noted how the newly designed schedule made it possible for him to collaborate with other members of his department, an essential component in aligning academic expectations. He remarked, "This is the first school in all of my years with the Department of Education where we actually meet as a department to collaborate within subject areas. [Dr. Brown] set it up…." In each interview with LCG teachers, it was clear that Dr. Brown set the tone and processes for high academic expectations.

### Safety and Respect

LCG is one of the few remaining comprehensive high schools in the district, and the majority of its peer schools require students and visitors to pass through metal detectors upon entry. While this safety measure is an option for LCG and is mandated by district officials intermittently, the school's leadership team has never considered the full-time use of metal detectors. It was reasoned

that the majority of LCG's students live in the surrounding community and are childhood friends. Furthermore, while there is an issue with student attendance, particularly lateness, the school's Incident Report is not alarming. The report is a compilation of violent and disruptive incidents that occur in the school building. All public schools in the state must file a report with the district each time an incident occurs at the respective school site. In turn, the district reports this data to the state in order to comply with federal safety law, specifically, the *Safe Schools Against Violence in Education (SAVE) Act*.

In an effort to address student lateness (and to increase students' time on task), Dr. Brown instituted floor monitors in the middle of the fall semester. Several teachers mentioned this during our conversations, and one teacher posited, "I will say that since [Dr. Brown] arrived, I believe that this school has become much safer." When I asked her to unpack this statement, she explained that before Dr. Brown arrived, tens of students would wander around the school building, cutting classes and looking to cause havoc. Once Dr. Brown arrived, he assigned monitors (usually a teacher) to each of the school's seven floors and equipped them with a walkie-talkie and clipboard to monitor and report students who were not authorized to be outside of their respective classrooms. This remedy has proven to be effective and is the primary reason why the teachers we interviewed described LCG as a "safe school" where learning takes place.

In regards to respect, many teachers appreciate the fact that Dr. Brown treats them as professionals and is transparent in his words and actions. A veteran teacher shared the following description of Dr. Brown:

> He's pretty straightforward with us. I think that's part of the culture change, too; like the previous principal was very evasive; he would use this language that wasn't direct with us. But [Dr. Brown] has spoken to us like we're actually colleagues and that we kind of could contribute to the conversation, which is nice.

Contrarily, based on my field notes, respect between the principal and teachers at LCG is not always reciprocated. This finding (or lack thereof) was most evident at the second School Leadership Team meeting (a monthly meeting held with the principal's leadership team, lead teachers, and student representatives) when several key members of the faculty either walked in late or were reticent when discussing the school's Comprehensive Educational Plan, an annual document produced by the team and intended to drive the direction of the school's leadership practices.

### Engagement

Principals play a vital role in creating conditions conducive to student achievement: engagement is an important component in this effort. As noted,

LCG is located on the campus of a university. Unfortunately, the school's relationship with the university was compromised due to a scandal involving the previous school leader. Nonetheless, Dr. Brown is working in earnest to mend this rift, and many of the teachers we spoke with acknowledged his efforts. Further, one teacher cited his resourcefulness in bringing much needed community-based organizations and pedagogical resources to the school (i.e., Catholic Charities Community Services, Education for a Better America, Inc.) to improve teacher efficacy, noting:

> He [Dr. Brown] is very effective in doing his best to support us with what resources he has.…He always encourages our professional development. Whenever I am interested in attending a professional development and bring it to his attention, he will, nine out of ten times, give me the green light.

Based on our conversations with LCG's teachers, it is obvious that Dr. Brown is vested in helping teachers build their capacity. A participant shared the following to explain Dr. Brown's efforts to engage LCG's teachers: "He [Dr. Brown] makes you feel like he really actually wants to help you succeed because he wants to build up his community." One of the teachers we interviewed explained how this practice has impacted the teachers at LCG. He explicated, "For example, if I say to someone in my department, 'Hey, can I come observe you today because I am having a hard time with this?' The response is always, 'Of course' and/or 'Tell me about it.'"

It must be noted that in relation to the principal's efforts to encourage the practice of *school as community*, one of the teachers we met with disagreed with her colleagues, as she felt Dr. Brown was so interested in developing the internal school community that he was ignoring the external school community. She stated, "We're so focused on working on the inside, like internally, to get the structure right in here, that we're not really focusing on how to get the community involved as much as we should." This finding was an anomaly as the other four teachers we interviewed spoke of Dr. Brown's effort to engage external stakeholders.

### Communication

Interestingly, while Dr. Brown appears to be well regarded by many of the teachers at LCG, many are hesitant to converse with him, especially one-on-one. One of the teachers surmised the feelings of many of her colleagues when she stated:

> I think people are still in a culture shock.…There is [sic] a lot of people in the building that have been through all the different transitions of leadership. This new guy, I think they like what's going on, but I think they think it's a temporary thing right now. I think maybe another

couple of years, it will be like "Okay, this is the way; it's going to be like this; it's going to be good." Hopefully it won't change.

One teacher who has worked with Dr. Brown on several district initiatives found him to be a "straight shooter." He remarked,

> He [Dr. Brown] is very open; he's very transparent about what his goals are and where he needs to bring us. His expectation is that we're equally as transparent with him so that he really gets [to] the bottom of, like, what's happening with us and what's happening with our students. I'd say one of his [Dr. Brown's] strongest assets is the fact that he's very transparent.

Hopefully, LCG's teachers will continue to embrace the new leadership at the school site, and Dr. Brown will continue to be transparent. In the next section, the findings are extrapolated and lessons learned are proffered to Dr. Brown and school leaders who seek to transform their school into a school as community.

## Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative data for this study revealed that *school as community* for LCG is in, as one teacher said, "its infancy stage." Teachers indicated that by doing his homework and building the components to each academic program mindfully, Dr. Brown is on the right path. He knew who LCG once was, where they were headed, and, more importantly, who they could be. During the data collection and analyses for this study we found that schools, like communities, are complex. We also realized that if schools as communities are to be efficient and meet the needs of their members, school leaders must (re)imagine *school as community*. The following paragraphs posit the lessons learned from LCG's teachers.

### Learning to Lead

History is oftentimes the best teacher, and communities both whole and healthy as well as those in need all have histories. Therefore, in reimagining school as community, school leaders must learn the history of their school community and then learn from it (Stack, 2004). Stack described in his 2004 book, *Elsie Ripley Clapp (1879-1965): Her Life and the Community School*, how she as a principal and her urban school faculty studied the community—Ballard, Kentucky—before beginning the school year. They constructed a curriculum based on the experiences and interests of the students, not just to meet academic needs, but also to "bond learning with living" (Stack, 2004, p.174). Ms. Clapp's work in community schools caught the attention of Eleanor Roosevelt

who invited her to consider designing a new school in West Virginia; Ms. Clapp agreed, but with one stipulation—that she could bring most of her experienced staff with her.

Today, the conditions for learning to lead in large urban school districts are quite different. That is, Dr. Brown inherited a faculty and staff, and so the learning and living had to take place concurrently. Notwithstanding, Dr. Brown met the challenge by studying LCG's record of academic achievement and then meeting with teachers individually and in small groups to ascertain where and how LCG could grow. Based on these conversations, he was able to begin the process of collaborating with the teachers to set and attain new academic and community-oriented goals. These small steps also served to raise the levels of positive climate and culture at LCG.

In addition, Dr. Brown's decision to first rebuild the Engineering Academy further enhanced the reimagining of school as community internally and externally. The redesigned initiative allowed the school to partner with a national organization and enhanced its reputation and collaborative efforts amongst faculty and administrators at the neighboring university.

### Trusting in Time

When Dr. Brown arrived at LCG, morale was low, and scores of community members wondered whether the mayor would close the school. Additionally, while some teachers welcomed Dr. Brown's arrival as he came from an "A" rated "test only" school, some questioned his appointment at LCG. They wondered if he would stay at LCG to help rebuild the school or if was he part of the DOE's plan to dismantle one of the last large comprehensive high schools in the city. With this said, in reimagining school as community, school leaders must foster an environment where members—in this case, teachers—feel safe, physically as well as professionally (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2012). Dr. Brown is making progress in this regard.

Dr. Brown is gradually earning the respect of the faculty and is not using positional power alone to do so. Gregory et al. (2012) noted how both support and structure are needed for safety. Throughout our conversations with the teachers, many noted his prior classroom experience and appeared to trust his judgment on matters that pertain to the curriculum and classroom management. However, many of the teachers, senior faculty members in particular, have yet to align themselves with Dr. Brown as the school's leader. By not adding a metal detector (as the school never had one and doesn't feel it needs one) and establishing an open door policy (a safety issue in terms of speaking honestly), Dr. Brown is slowly gaining the faculty's trust. Hence, trust, in life and in reimagining schools as communities, happens over time.

### Making the Connections

Student success must be the overall function and goal of a *school as community*. In order to be successful, students need all members of the school community (both internally and externally) to work together in meaningful ways (Ikemoto, Taliaferro, & Adams, 2012). One of the functions of a principal is to be a steward of this praxis: the connecting of ideas to actions within an educative conceptual framework. In reimagining school as community, principals must collaborate in and outside of the school community (Stack, 2004). Dr. Brown is working diligently to reestablish relationships with the local university. In fact, throughout the spring semester, in addition to meeting with Dean of the College of Engineering, he met with several university officials to discuss collaborative initiatives. Dr. Brown should continue these efforts and seek to partner with a greater number of community-based organizations.

### Managing Change

It must have come as a refreshing surprise to the faculty of LCG when Dr. Brown consulted with them on a wide range of issues, from curriculum and academics to safety to parent and student engagement. While the literature supports such efforts as effective best practices for school leaders (Frazier, 2015; Whitaker, 2013), it does not explain how faculty should respond to changes in leadership and how long it might take for behavioral changes to become the norms of the school community. In this light, and in reimagining school as community, school leaders must be change agents.

Based on teacher interviews and field notes from the school site, many of LCG's teachers feel as if they are treading on uncertain waters, and while they are pleased with Dr. Brown thus far, they are not quite sure of his leadership practices. Hence, as a change agent, Dr. Brown must continue to collaborate and encourage internal and external members of the school's community to work together for the best interests of the children charged to their care.

## Conclusions

(Re)Imagining schools as communities requires new rules and new job boundary-spanning activities. As researchers, we translated the four Learning Environment Survey categories into four leadership processes: Learning to Lead, Trusting in Time, Making the Connections, and Managing Change. Thus, reimagining *school as community* is a long-term and deliberate strategy that recognizes demographic statistics and trends, geographic spaces (propinquity), living and housing conditions, and the cultural heritage of students and

families. This requires new and different policies redefining the roles and work of educators.

(Re)Imagining school as community is in and of itself a communal process involving members of the school community embracing best practices beyond textbook adoptions and prescribed curricula. This cannot be done overnight or by fiat. The practices of school as community must be sewed back into the fabric of public education. It is not enough to know that such work was more common 100 years ago. We need to (re)imagine school as community based on our current realities and the lived experiences of teachers and administrators working with students, families, industry, colleges, and universities.

## Endnotes

[1]A dropout factory is a high school in which twelfth grade enrollment is 60% or less of the ninth grade enrollment three years earlier.

[2]In this district, while students attend elementary and middle schools based on their locale, they may apply to attend any of the high schools in the district.

[3]State law sanctions "test only" high schools. The sole criterion for admission to these select schools is a test given to the city's students in the fall of their eighth grade year.

[4]Peer schools are created using a "nearest neighbor" matching methodology, which examines the mathematical difference between a school and its potential peers based on a prescribed set of benchmarks; schools with the least difference across all characteristics are "peered together."

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Terri N. Watson is an assistant professor in the Department of Leadership and Special Education at The City College of New York. As an activist scholar, her research examines the effective practices of urban school leaders and the impact of school reform initiatives on communities of color. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Terri N. Watson, The City College of New York, School of Education, NAC 4/218B, 160 Convent Avenue, New York, NY 10031, or email twatson@ccny.cuny.edu

Ira Bogotch is a professor of educational leadership at Florida Atlantic University, previously on faculty at the University of New Orleans. His research focuses on explaining why social justice is an educational construct, not a social theory defined by non-educators—whether social scientists or philosophers.

**Appendix A. Teacher Interview Questions**

1. When did you arrive at this school?
2. What is your current position in the school now?
3. Describe the policy and social contexts of your school.
4. Identify the key aspects/characteristics of the school.
5. Identify the key aspects of success in the school.
6. Identify the role of the principal in the success of the school.
7. What do you think is the principal's vision for the school?
8. How do you describe the kind of leadership in the school?
9. What do you think drives the principal in his job?
10. Identify/define the strategies of the principal at various levels.