From Implication to Naming: Reconceptualizing School–Community Partnership Literature Using a Framework Nested in Social Justice

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Abstract

Given the current political context in the United States, the increased explicit and implicit othering of marginalized communities, and the related societal fracturing—often along ideological lines—this article calls for educators to support and participate in school–community partnerships explicitly framed through a lens of social justice to address inequalities and injustice in education and beyond. In making this call, we provide a framework for the explicit naming of social justice within the formation and implementation of school–community partnerships. We do so based on a literature review of extant literature on school–community partnerships illustrating that partnership research, specifically in education, often implicitly suggests social justice ends as opposed to explicitly naming them. Based on this literature review and our framing of partnerships, we encourage researchers and practitioners alike to adopt the regular, explicit naming of social justice in school–community partnership work to ensure that our efforts strive toward justice for all, and especially for those communities and students who are systemically marginalized.

Key Words: school–community partnerships, school–university partnerships, collaboration, community, social justice, researchers, practitioners

Introduction

Given the divided nature of the body politic in the United States (Doherty & Kiley, 2016) and the fear-driven othering of marginalized peoples (NC-TE's Standing Committee Against Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English, 2017), we call on educators to support and nurture local innovations centering on increasing the presence of school–community partnerships that focus on improving learning for all children and that address inequalities existing within schools and across communities. In order to work towards social justice in an uncertain time, relationship-building across schools and communities must be a central vehicle for change. As we move into a new era of educational change, one which gives new opportunities for school–community partnerships, it is useful to reflect upon and analyze previous conceptualizations of these partnerships focused on social justice. We also find it helpful to highlight new ways of conceptualization that can benefit all school–community partnership stakeholders in order to seize opportunities and collectively work to improve student learning and broaden educational outcomes that bring about a more just society.

This article presents operational definitions for the terms *school–community partnerships* and *social justice*. It also reviews the literature on school–community partnerships emphasizing social justice. In addition, the article proposes a conceptual framework for categorizing school–community partnerships and their contributions to the school–community partnership discourse. We believe that this framework will help facilitate reformers' understanding of previous school–community partnership literature and function as a tool for highlighting areas for future inquiry, especially in this time of fear, othering, and division.

Defining School–Community Partnership Terms

School–community partnership language is used for multiple purposes and often can have multiple meanings, so it is necessary to operationalize this term. It is important to acknowledge that, as evidenced by extant literature and use, this term is complex, ambiguous, and used in varied ways. In this article, a *school–community partnership* refers to a case of educational partnership involving interactions and relationships between a school personnel member (typically a teacher, administrator, or staff member) and/or students in a school setting and a community member or organization working towards academic or nonacademic outcomes. The community member may include, but is not limited to, a community-based organization (CBO), nonprofit organization, civic organization, religious institution, local business, health care professional or group, or an institution of higher education. It should be noted that

regardless of the specific type of community entity, our operationalization of school–community partnership is founded on the belief that resources within the community can be harnessed to improve student learning. *Academic outcomes* refer to desired goals for student learning, often tied to the development of academic knowledge or skills in a content area, which the given partnership works to enhance. *Nonacademic outcomes* refer to indirect, though not less important, learning or other developmental factors, such as health, nutrition, and student absenteeism. In this article, nonacademic outcomes are included when viewed as factors that influence or are related to student learning. Both types of outcomes can be addressed either through direct partner–student interaction or by partners working with school personnel members associated with the given outcome (e.g., the teacher, if working toward an academic outcome). *Partnerships* refer to individual or the collective sum of interactions and relationships between school and community partners. Partnership activities can include the donation or procuring of material resources, direct interaction with students for an academic learning task, training of or support for a teacher or other school personnel member, or provision of a given service. Although the school–community partnership term may embody many of these elements across research studies, our use of the term will emphasize those partnerships that directly or indirectly work to address and enhance student learning in K–12 school settings in the U.S. Further, partnerships in this article often refer to those in urban settings where a critical mass of individuals and community members exist to serve as potential partners. School–community partnerships in other contexts, though having some overlapping similarities with urban school–community partnerships, involve characteristics, issues, and challenges beyond the scope of this article, require additional consideration, and will not be directly addressed.

Our definition of *social justice* builds upon that of Auerbach (2012) and Cochran-Smith's (1999) teaching for social justice. Auerbach (2012) states that *authentic partnerships* founded on social justice are central to equitable, responsible, and effective school–community partnerships. Auerbach (2012) describes authentic partnerships as "respectful alliances among educators, families, and community groups that value relationship building, dialogue across difference, and sharing power in pursuit of common purpose in socially just, democratic schools" (p. 5). Cochran-Smith (1999) reiterates the importance of the community when conceptualizing social justice by stating that the work of social change extends beyond methods-based "best practices" to include six principles of practice. These principles include: "build[ing] on what students bring to school with them: knowledge and interests, cultural and linguistic resources" and "work[ing] with (not against) individuals, families, and communities"

(Cochran-Smith, 1999, p. 118). Informed by these two perspectives, social justice is integral to the work of school–community partnerships, speaking to the mutual relationships, complex power dynamics, and necessary asset- and community-based beliefs which must undergird school–community partnership work.

In conceptualizing social justice in this article, we recognize that there are other conceptualizations related to social justice, such as *critical race theory* (Yosso, 2005), *funds of knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), and *culturally sustaining pedagogies* (Paris & Alim, 2017), that are equally of value in school–community partnership research and practice. However, as described by Auerbach (2012) and Cochran-Smith (1999), we believe that *social justice* is an essential concept to explicitly articulate the intentional building of partnerships that respect the diverse communities, cultures, and contexts in which partnerships are situated.

Conceptual Framework: Centering Students and Social Justice

Drawing from Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems model, we propose a three-level framework that is student-centered, similar to past work by leading school–community partnership researchers like Epstein (2011) and her overlapping spheres model. Importantly, though, the student is nested within multiple levels and contexts. The first level, entitled the *micro-level*, represents school–community partnership literature centered on schooling and classroom learning (e.g., Carlisle, 2011; Epstein, 2011; Soto, 2009). The second level, called the *exo-level*, captures research focused on community and CBOs (e.g., Shirley, 2002; Su, 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011). The third and final level, entitled the *macro-level*, represents literature centered on civil and political factors influencing the student and other nested spheres (e.g., Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001). This framework (Figure 1) should not be perceived as fixed or linear, illustrated as such by the dual-facing, curved arrows, because elements of school–community partnerships (and their respective literature) describe multiple, changing partners and levels of impact.

Though students and learning are rightly at the center of Epstein's (2011) conceptual model, the levels of school–community partnerships in our framework are situated within a broader goal of working towards equity and social justice. This broader goal emphasizes that all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, language, or other identifying characteristic, as well as their respective communities, deserve the educational benefits of school–community partnerships. It also recognizes that issues of inequity and injustice often happen systemically or structurally within one or more of these levels, affecting students. Our framing of social justice, as described above,

builds from the recent work in school–community partnership literature high-lighting social justice as central to partnership work (Auerbach, 2012; Thomas, 2012), as well as the idea of teaching for social justice (Cochran-Smith, 1999).
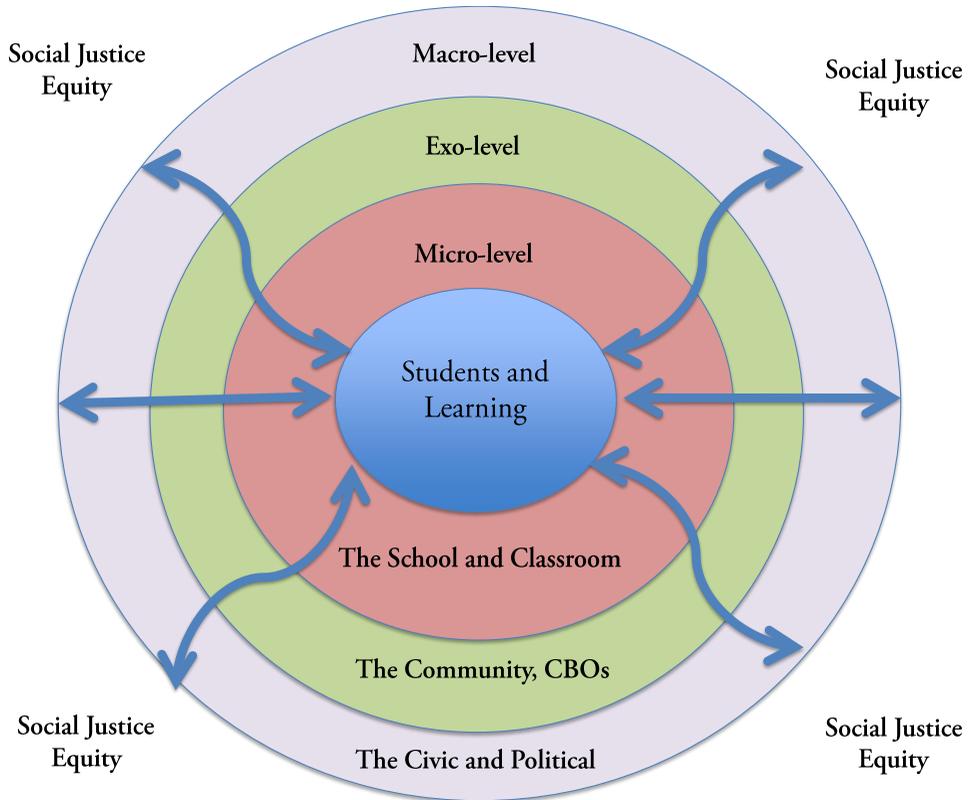
Figure 1. School–Community Partnership Conceptual Framework Model

Review of School–Community Partnership and Social Justice Literature

To date, there have been limited studies on school–community partnerships that explicitly emphasize social justice. Additionally, there have been fewer studies within this field that have an explicit focus on student learning. While the overall quantity of studies in the field of education on this topic may be lacking, studies across disciplines—including health care, counseling, and social work—have highlighted, described, and articulated the effectiveness of school–community partnerships and often, though not always, incorporated language or frameworks of social justice. These studies often target nonacademic outcomes (as defined above), which are necessarily important factors in student learning. The review below illustrates how the research literature

has framed school–community partnerships and social justice, while illustrating gaps in the research and suggesting how school–community partnerships could adopt more explicit approaches to emphasize social justice as they work to serve students, schools, and communities.

Method

Our review of the literature involved nine searches in two databases: Education Research Complete (ERC) and Educational Research Information Center (ERIC). These two databases were chosen because of their breadth and ability to provide general representation of relevant peer-reviewed literature, particularly ERIC, housed at the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) of the U.S. Department of Education. The authors completed a general search in other databases, including Google Scholar, and found that most relevant results were duplicates of the original searches. Though it is possible to do an archive search on the *School Community Journal* webpage, the authors chose to maintain consistency by searching by journal publication title within the two selected research databases. Though this may present a limitation, it provides a useful representation of the research literature as gathered by two broad education research databases. All nine searches investigated the peer-reviewed literature on school–community partnerships and social justice. Each search slightly modified search criteria or was conducted in a different research database to ensure that a sufficiently broad review was completed. Table 1 presents the research databases, search terms, overall yield, and selected relevant yield from the review.

All searches were limited to studies in the U.S., a decision made because the review was conducted to inform school–community partnerships emerging in a specific U.S. policy context. It should be noted, though, that even with the search limit, the search results yielded studies from several international contexts including, but not limited to, Australia, Canada, Ireland, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. Further, all searches were limited to those articles written in English, written in peer-reviewed scholarly journals, and published between 2000 and 2016. The year range was chosen to capture research in the era of contemporary U.S. education policy.

Each article was thoroughly read to ensure relevance to the review topic. After reading for relevance, the article was read again using concept coding (Saldaña, 2016) to identify the "big picture" (p. 97) or macro-view of each article. Analytic memos (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016) were used to track concepts within and across articles until articles were grouped by the macro-concepts or themes. Additionally, the studies were analyzed in relation to the conceptual framework model presented in Figure 1 and particularly the presence, if applicable, of a conceptualization of social justice.

Table 1. Literature Review Search Method

	Research Database	Search Terms	Overall Yield	Selected Yield†
Search 1	ERC	"school" AND "community" / partnership* / "relationship*" OR "culture" OR "process" / "social justice"	35	20
Search 2	ERIC	"school" AND "community" / partnership* / "relationship*" OR "culture" OR "process" / "social justice"	39	18**
Search 3	ERC	"school" AND "community" / partnership* / "social justice"	67	17
Search 4	ERC	"school" AND "community" / partnership* / "relationship*" OR "culture" OR "process" / "social justice" / "student*" OR "learning"	28	0
Search 5	ERIC	"school" AND "community" / partnership* / "relationship*" OR "culture" OR "process" / "social justice" / "student*" OR "learning"	37	0
Search 6	ERC	"school" AND "community" / partnership* / "social justice" / "*School Community Journal*"	1	0
Search 7	ERIC	"school" AND "community" / partnership* / "social justice" / "*School Community Journal*"	1	0
Search 8	ERC	"school" AND "community" / partnership* / "*School Community Journal*"	74	22
Search 9	ERIC	"school" AND "community" / partnership* / "*School Community Journal*"	62	3

Notes. *indicates a search for variable endings of the root word. For example, "partnership*" will yield results for "partnership" and "partnerships" to increase/ensure relevancy of results. **Duplicates from Search 1 were not included. Subsequent numbers in this column do not include duplicates from previous searches. †Selected Relevant Yield for Review.
ERC = Education Research Complete; ERIC = Educational Research Information Center.

The findings are presented under four central themes found across all nine searches: (a) conceptual framings; (b) education: K–12 school–community focus; (c) education: university–community focus; and (d) health care and counseling. Additionally, findings specifically related to social justice and to the *School Community Journal*, the journal to which this article has been submitted because of its commitment to school–community partnership research, are

discussed. While this review does not intend to encapsulate all such partnership literature, especially school–community partnership literature published as books or book chapters, it provides an important focus on those studies that include social justice as a means of framing or as a critical factor in the work of school–community partnerships. Further, while this review does isolate the *School Community Journal*, we recognize that our search limits and the utilization of two research databases as opposed to the journal archive webpage may have resulted in some relevant articles being omitted from the review findings.

Findings

The four themes from the review illustrate the broader patterns of disciplinary focus and study type that highlight school–community partnerships and social justice. Below, representative clusters of articles are used to highlight the content patterns within the overall theme. After discussing the four themes, we offer an analysis of those articles on school–community partnerships and social justice.

Conceptual Framings

The searches yielded two conceptual articles (Mulroy & Austin, 2004; Thomas, 2012). Though this is a small number compared to the other categories and overall yield, it is important to highlight the conceptual thinking on school–community partnerships and social justice found in the review. Further, this small yield illustrates the need for more explicit articulation (and potential conceptual thinking and theorizing) of the connections between school–community partnerships and social justice to ultimately inform practice. Of the two studies, Mulroy and Austin (2004) offered a conceptual framework to name and organize elements of the social environment. This framework was built from and is intended to inform the area of social work. This article named social justice, along with social problems, social policy, and the political economy, as macro-societal forces that inform micro-system interactions at the community and individual levels. Though drawing from and positioned within social work, this framework supports the school–community partnership framing of Auerbach's (2012) book and the emphasis on social justice. The second article (Thomas, 2012) is a review of Auerbach (2012). We include this review because of Thomas's commentary on the importance of the work as a contribution to school–community partnership literature. As Thomas (2012) reflects, one of Auerbach's (2012) major contributions is defining *authentic partnerships* and situating partnerships within the broader aim of social justice. This contribution extends beyond a student-centered model to elevate issues

of power, relationship, and dialogue in the necessary and dynamic interactions of school–community partnerships. Elements of this conceptualization can be found in our proposed model (Figure 1), situated within an emphasis on social justice and equity. Although this extension has gained new visibility in recent years, broader research studies on school–community partnerships directly emphasizing social justice have been lacking, as indicated by these findings.

Education: K–12 School–Community Focus

Twenty studies examined or described school–community partnerships and social justice with a partnership between a K–12 school and a community partner. Thirteen of these studies were published in the *School Community Journal*, and seven were published in other education journals. Of these 20, eight studies explicitly utilized social justice language or framings. Interestingly, seven of those eight studies were those from journals other than the *School Community Journal*.

The seven non-*School Community Journal* studies emphasized social justice, the reciprocal nature of partnerships, and the importance of community partner perspectives. For example, Jocson (2009) examined literacy instruction in urban schools and found the impact that a culturally responsive pedagogy approach had in constructing and presenting writing that connected to the local community. Other studies (e.g., Carter, 2012; Catania, 2009) utilized partnerships in local contexts to discuss civic engagement and activism or to enhance learning opportunities in arts and media. Interviewing those in partnership with the school, including those partners involved with service learning (Swaminathan, 2007) or parents, guardians, and other community members (Shiffman, 2013) identified the challenges of partnership. These challenges include the relationship between the school and community members which can affect learning, complex and dynamic student needs, and complicated parent schedules which may hinder involvement. One study in particular (Connors & Perkins, 2009) explored how a school's enacted mission of social justice and inquiry-based learning via science learning in nature impacted student outcomes. By attending to student diversity and active partnership with families and communities, the school found authentic learning experiences increased student curiosity and inquiry in science while also improving student test scores and broader academic skills in science, such as critical thinking. As illustrated, many of these studies saw these various experiences of or perspectives on partnership as intricately connected to social justice, manifested in issues of representation, interaction, or awareness.

The 13 studies from *School Community Journal* clustered around two main areas: descriptive accounts of school–community partnership examples and

their positive impacts, and school–community partnership stakeholder responses to the partnerships (or lack thereof) available. The descriptive accounts include examples from school leadership (Auerbach, 2009), the preparation of community members to serve as paraeducators (Manz, Power, Ginsburg-Block, & Dowrick, 2010), and how interventions increasing partnership with students' parents and families, especially those from impoverished or marginalized backgrounds, can lead to improvement in student attendance, performance in mathematics, and overall academic achievement (Cousins, Mickelson, Williams, & Velasco, 2008; Nelson, McMahan, & Torres, 2012; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). While some studies (e.g., Auerbach, 2009) explicitly utilize social justice as a means to frame family or community engagement, particularly to achieve educational equity for marginalized families and communities, other studies did not utilize an explicit social justice framing to describe the purpose and implementation of school–community partnerships.

School–community partnership stakeholder responses represented different stakeholder groups, including community partners (Gross et al., 2015), students (Hands, 2014), teachers (Willems & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2012), librarians (Martinez, 2008), principals (Beabout, 2010), and parents (Quezada, 2004). Findings ranged from describing partnerships and pedagogical practices emerging from school–community partnerships as positive (e.g., Gross et al., 2015; Hands, 2014; Willems & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2012) to empowering parents and communities (Quezada, 2004) to classifying the different kinds of partnerships present in their schools (Beabout, 2010). Beabout (2010), in particular, helped to extend the framing of relationships and power in partnerships by interviewing principals in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, finding that partnerships often took the form of charitable relationships, technical support relationships, and feedback relationships. Similarly, a study by Hoff (2002) examined the nature of business–school partnerships but was more critical of the frequently problematic nature of these relationships. Hoff found that business–school partnerships may place greater attention on the potential benefit for the partnering business, as opposed to striving for mutual and reciprocal benefits and an ultimate goal of educational improvement. Similar to the descriptive studies, use of an explicit social justice framing was mixed. However, implicit discussions of social justice were included as demonstrated by Hoff's (2002) study focusing on potentially problematic relationships in school–community partnerships.

Education: University–Community Focus

In the extant school–community partnership research, many more studies focusing on university–community partnerships (43) were found when

compared to K–12 school–community partnerships. Of these 43, 31 studies explicitly utilized social justice language or framing, illustrating that this area of school–community partnership literature appears to be more intentional in using such a framework. Though perhaps more explicit, research within this theme was similar to K–12 school–community partnerships, placing an emphasis on respect, responsibility, and awareness. For example, Banks et al. (2014) described the importance of reflection in partnership work via their term "collaborative reflexivity," while Terlecki et al. (2010) discussed necessary factors when developing collaboration in school–community partnerships: trust, mutual design, shared implementation, joint ownership, and the dissemination of knowledge. These studies also stressed the centrality of ethical partnership design and implication with an awareness of power and social dynamic, elements crucial to an understanding of social justice.

The majority of studies (e.g., Brown & Howard, 2005; DePaola, 2014; Lewis, 2004; Mitschke & Petrovich, 2011; Porter, Summers, Toton, & Aisenstein, 2008; Rosner-Salazar, 2003; Sabo et al., 2015; Sawyer, 2009; Stokamer, 2013; Tilley-Lubbs, 2009) explored partnerships via a university service learning class, attending to similar issues as those above, but within a particular course context. Last, university-based preservice teacher classes and groups partnered with schools, parents, and students, often in an effort to both support students, schools, and communities, while also enhancing the learning of those university-based preservice students. For example, Cooper and Christie (2005) described a class that partnered with parents in an urban, culturally diverse community to help preservice education students better understand cultural practices and the idea of parent and community empowerment. In this case, partnerships were used to prepare those students in training at the university who often were from communities different from where they were to serve. Findings suggested that developing a deeper awareness of social justice encouraged students to move beyond their own normative views and experiences.

As mentioned, many of these studies take up a critical stance of social justice to inform their work. For example, Sawyer (2009) moved beyond mere description of a university-based service learning course to critical reflection on the means and ends of his writing service learning course, wondering to what end it actually challenged injustice and served members of the community. Additionally, Campano, Ghiso, and Welch (2015) explored the importance of context, culture, power, and systemic and structural factors which influence and inform community-based research in higher education. By directly using the language of social justice, these represent a substantial number of studies under this theme which intentionally use social justice framings to challenge and inform their school–community partnership work at the university level.

Health Care and Counseling

Though we originally hypothesized that searching for literature on school–community partnerships would yield results predominantly in the educational field, the review yielded 16 studies on health care and counseling involving community partners with an emphasis on social justice. While not directly related to K–12 schooling, we include these articles here because they formed a critical mass in each search and because they echo important insights on partnership and social justice found in other school–community partnership studies. Although these studies often address nonacademic outcomes—issues like poverty, hunger, or other physical, mental, or emotional issues—these factors can and should be considered in the school–community partnership dialogue as they impact students' school and learning experiences. No studies on health care and counseling came from *School Community Journal*, but all were found when including "social justice" in the search terms.

Some studies in this literature were conducted in a school setting. For example, Bryan and Henry (2012) built from the extant literature on school counselors to propose a model for building partnerships between the school and students' families and communities. This model, characterized by collaboration, empowerment, and partnering relationships, is inspired and informed by social justice. Similar elements of partnerships were emphasized in Schoon, Champlin, and Hunt (2012), though their study explored partnerships formed between university-based nursing students and marginalized populations in the local community. Two studies extended these matters to address methodological concerns in social work research and practice. For example, Malone, Verger, McGruder, and Froelicher (2006) described participatory action research as a means to actively and intentionally involve the community partners in the research process, both valuing their knowledge and affirming their participation in the partnership and research process. Mulroy (2008) also supported this idea of forming collaborative partnerships with community members when engaged in evidence-based social work practices, while also acknowledging the complex and power-laden relationships when introducing university-based researchers and students to marginalized populations.

Within this broader theme of health care and counseling, some studies (e.g., Subica, Grills, Douglas, & Villanueva, 2016) described community organizing as a means to increase community empowerment and to address unique community-based health issues. Other studies (e.g., Forster & Rehner, 2009; O'Brien, Risco, Castro, & Goodman, 2014; Price, Kready, Mogul, Cohen-Filipic, & Davey, 2013) discussed efforts through a university-based class, outreach program, or service learning component, to partner with the community to address issues of health care, mental health, or counseling. We considered this

literature as a separate category, though they were involved in a university–community partnership, because of the lack of focus on education or schools. Similar to service learning and other university–community partnerships, though, these studies explored how partnerships helped to increase higher education students' awareness of social justice issues. Further, there was often attention to action and change with an emphasis on ground-up empowerment framed through a lens of social justice to improve nonacademic outcomes.

Findings on Social Justice

Social justice is indeed a frequent framing utilized in school–community partnerships research. However, social justice is more commonly used in studies investigating university–community partnerships or partnerships attending to health, mental health, or counseling. Social justice is less commonly used as an explicit framing for studies investigating K–12 school–community partnerships. While these points are evident from the themes of the literature review, the yield numbers per search are the clearest indicator. For example, in the *School Community Journal*, 74 studies are found when using the following search terms: "school" AND "community" / partnership*. However, when "social justice" is added to that search, the yield decreases to just one study (Auerbach, 2009). As noted above, education researchers, including those studying school–community partnerships, draw on multiple concepts and theories to address issues of justice. The low yield when searching for explicit use of the term "social justice" should not suggest that researchers ignore the importance of social justice nor that the *School Community Journal* lacks a commitment to social justice. In fact, representative articles from the *School Community Journal* prove just the opposite. For example, K–12 school–community partnership research often intentionally involves different school–community partnership stakeholders, including community partners, to learn more about partnership dynamics and relationships (e.g., Gross et al., 2015). Other studies consider how school–community partnership-based pedagogies can best support students, including those from impoverished or marginalized backgrounds (Willems & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2012). Other *School Community Journal* studies explore the ways in which school counselor studies support linguistically diverse families (Aydın, Bryan, & Duys, 2012) or foundational elements, including establishing relationships, that underpin school–community partnerships (Brooks, 2009; Hands, 2005). Though there are different reasons for why these studies did not appear in the literature review search (e.g., Hands, 2005 is situated in Ontario, Canada), clearly there are numerous articles in the *School Community Journal* that address themes of social justice. Why then is it necessary for K–12 school–community partnership research studies to explicitly name social justice as a lens?

Discussion

Auerbach's (2012) discussion of authentic partnerships through a social justice lens illustrates the potential for school–community partnerships to embody the necessary attention to process, power, and relationship through partnerships. Studies (e.g., Hoff, 2002) have indicated that partnerships can be characterized by a lack of mutual reciprocity or that partners, particularly those in positions of power like universities or businesses, can lack an awareness of complex issues of power and privilege. Thomas (2012) recognized the importance of Auerbach's contribution to address this concern and asserted why intentionally utilizing and naming a social justice framework is significant in school–community partnership research.

Additionally, it is interesting to note that there were many more studies on university–community partnerships or partnerships that address health and counseling that explicitly name social justice in their framing. A salient question from this review that requires future investigation is: Why does the research on K–12 school–community partnerships in the U.S. not utilize consistent conceptual terminology as related to social justice? It is clear that those who research school–community partnerships care deeply about issues of equity and justice, but the language utilized in studies more commonly centers in on a specific conceptual or theoretical perspective, perhaps related to race, class, language, gender, or other characteristics. This is not to say that these perspectives are not worthwhile in research on school–community partnerships. However, having inconsistent language yields a seemingly more disparate research body. This can result in researchers engaging in multiple and different dialogues when most are working towards a key element of authentic partnership-building: social justice.

As stated, only one empirical study in *School Community Journal* has explicitly focused on school–community partnerships and social justice (by name) since 2000. As noted, this can be misleading, but it is also telling about the research dialogue in the school–community partnerships field. This finding has two substantive implications. First, K–12 school–community partnerships, and those researching such partnerships, can and should learn from the ways in which higher education, social work, health care, and counseling address partnerships and the complex relational and process-oriented elements of school–community partnerships. Though their partnerships are also imperfect, the research literature in these areas illustrates an intentionality and reflexivity towards using the language of social justice and partnerships that is ever important in this work towards effective and equitable learning. Second, K–12 school–community partnership researchers would benefit from utilizing an

explicit social justice lens in their research. This lens can intersect with existing conceptualizations utilized in school–community partnership research, but adopting a broader lens to situate research will help to unify a research agenda in our current historical–political context. Thomas (2012) praised the work of Auerbach (2012) for her explicit use of a critical and social justice lens as she explored K–12 school–community partnerships. Though other researchers use this lens implicitly, it is necessary to explicitly name and adopt this stance, as it can guide the focus of K–12 school–community partnership work to the complex and power-laden nature of partnerships. The findings from this literature review also present the urgent need to continue to extend conceptual and theoretical work on K–12 school–community partnerships. Descriptive cases and surveys of partnership stakeholders are well-represented in the literature and help to provide readers with a sense for the number, nature, and substance of partnerships being utilized in K–12 education, but fewer studies take the steps to conceptualize and theorize what researchers and practitioners can learn across partnerships, contexts, and cultures. While avoiding overly generalized "best practices," this work can unpack the complexities of the processes and relationships within partnerships to consider how these nuanced elements impact student learning and development and partner experiences.

Attention should also be given to the lack of studies that intentionally address the complexities of negotiating multiple partnerships and relationships (e.g., the university students partnering with the community to enhance elementary students' literacy learning). Returning to the conceptual framework (Figure 1), the greatest concentration of research found in our review is at the exo-level, with research examining the community and CBOs. At this level, the community is primarily addressed through partnerships with universities and other institutions that provide health or counseling services. While some universities directly partner with schools (potentially affecting the micro-level in classrooms and schools), the partnership is often intended for the benefit of university students through service learning or preservice teaching experiences that engage them more broadly with new and diverse cultures and communities. The conceptual framework, then, highlights a gap in the literature and illustrates the need for a more nuanced viewing of school–community partnerships, particularly at the K–12 level. More research should be conducted at the micro-level of the school and classroom to unpack the manner in which students are being served and impacted, related to academic and nonacademic outcomes, through select partnerships.

The idea of utilizing school–community partnerships to improve student learning and other outcomes is not new. Proponents for school–community partnerships have argued that:

schools need additional resources to successfully educate all students and that these resources, both human and material, are housed in students' communities. They contend that the traditional isolated way that many schools have functioned is anachronistic in a time of changing family demographics, an increasingly demanding workplace, and growing student diversity. (Sanders, 2006, p. 2)

Schools are nested in the context of their communities and the sphere of the school context overlaps with that of the home and community (Epstein, 2011). Further, schools and their communities should be perceived as symbiotic organisms. The health and vitality of one is dependent on the other. For example, if social injustice and inequity plague the social fabric of a community, these social issues will affect student learning within neighborhood schools. Student learning should be the goal for school–community partnerships, illustrated as such by Epstein's (2011) overlapping spheres model of school–community partnerships which intentionally places students at the center of the school, family, and community spheres. Auerbach's (2012) extension of this conceptualization through authentic partnerships and social justice illustrates how these elements can and should guide K–12 school–community partnerships to serve all students and communities, including those traditionally underserved and marginalized, in an equitable manner. The language of social justice is significant as it emphasizes a deeper conceptual understanding of partnership, so effectively articulated by Auerbach, while also serving to unify the cause for school–community partnerships.

Finally, research should examine the intricate relationships and dynamics that occur as researchers and practitioners negotiate the complex space among and between the levels of distinct partnerships. As Figure 1 demonstrates, each level is necessarily influenced by the other levels. But K–12 school–community partnership literature rarely investigates a partnership using a multilevel lens. Again, a social justice framework could be utilized to highlight the multiple and complex factors that influence a given partnership to increase substantive analysis across levels.

Conclusion

As fear, bigotry, and hatred continue to exist, schools can and should consider how school–community partnerships rooted in social justice can enhance their community's learning, especially to better serve all students. However, as indicated in this article, the field—both researchers and practitioners—must continue to examine how school–community partnerships can best serve schools and students equitably and effectively and how a social justice

lens can ensure that these efforts center students and their communities and unify dialogues and efforts in research, policy, and practice. Though K–12 school–community partnership literature often addresses differing partnership stakeholder voices or descriptively examines partnership cases serving low-income or racially, ethnically, and/or linguistically diverse students, adopting an explicit and consistent social justice lens—following the work of those in higher education, social work, health, and counseling—can help practitioners and administrators be attuned to the partnerships that will be most effective and empowering for all partners involved. School–community partnerships can be a means to an end to improve academic or nonacademic outcomes, but the means, particularly when they involve being in close and complex relationship with potentially vulnerable community populations, must be weighed and intentionally framed. By attending to these relationships and processes with an intentional social justice approach, both those undertaking the partnerships and those researching the partnerships can do their best to ensure that all students and community members are being served effectively and equitably.

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*indicates a study included in the review; note that all *School Community Journal* articles are open access, available at http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/SCJ.aspx

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