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Sheri S. Williams
University of New Mexico

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Moving Forward in the Wake of the Pandemic: Shifting from Schools Acting Alone to Engaged Partnerships with Families and Communities

Sheri S. Williams^a

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Abstract

Workplace shortages are a top concern for schools in times of calm and even more troubling in times of stress. Burnout is especially widespread in stressful situations of disrupted learning, trauma, and discord (e.g., Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022; Thomas et al., 2019). In the wake of the pandemic, educators struggled to deal with the stressors on their own (IES, 2022). It became clear that schools could no longer work in isolation. Moving forward in the wake of the pandemic required an intentional shift in purpose from isolated classrooms to interconnected partnerships with families and communities. In the path to recovery, educators rediscovered the value of shifting beyond the schoolhouse to engage in partnerships with the greater community. Lessons learned indicate that schools were more likely to make the shift to partnerships happen when they welcomed the wisdom of families, embraced external supports, and collaborated to expand local community resources for healing and recovery.

Keywords: *pandemic, school disruption, paradigm shifts, engaged partnerships*

The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of the ways in which educators moved forward in the wake of the pandemic and reimagined their roles as partners with the community in co-designing solutions for healing and recovery. A literature review of empirical research and reports from the field reveals the ways in which schools shifted from acting alone to engaged partnerships with families and communities. Findings from the literature reviewed herein highlight important learnings that can advance the work of schools and the community in times of both challenge and stability. Working in collaboration with diverse stakeholders, educators can move past school disruption, adapt to change, persist in the workplace, and restore the public's trust in education.

Theoretical and Conceptual Base

This review utilizes two framework. The theoretical base (Figure 1) for this study is

^aUniversity of New Mexico

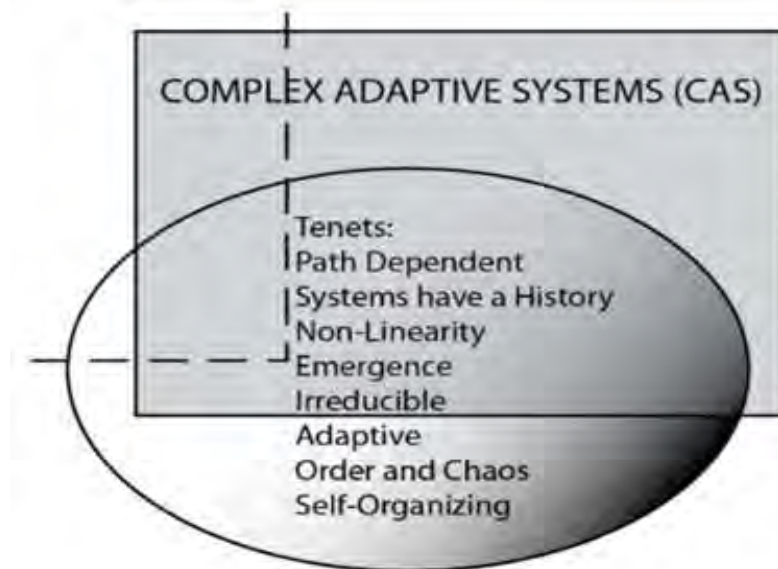
founded in complexity theory and the conceptual framework (Figure 2) builds upon collective impact.

Theoretical Framework

Complexity theory offers a reflexive lens to interpret the dynamic work of partners who move across complex levels of relationships to generate change in education (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Turner & Baker, 2019). Heifetz et al. (2009) refer to these complexities as adaptive problems in which there is no known answer for the problem at hand and require collective approaches for impact. Research indicates that collective work is most successful when partners, representing diverse constituents, work together to anticipate and resolve complex problems in an intentional, rigorous, and flexible way (Kania & Kramer, 2013).

Figure 1

Complexity Theory: Tenets of Complex Adaptive Systems



Note. Image from Turner & Baker (2019)

Conceptual Framework

Collective impact provides a conceptual map (see Figure 2) to close the gap between theory and practice. The practice of collective impact uses a five-fold process to respond to ever-expanding complexities. The approach includes a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone organization (Kania & Kramer, 2011). The process is centered on equity-focused outcomes grounded in solutions for systemic change, via shifting power, listening to and acting with community, and building aligned relationships and accountability for results (Kania et al., 2022). As Bryk (2015) noted, achieving desired outcomes in complex educational systems

entails coordinated and disciplined efforts involving the collective activity of many different partners who work together in networked communities.

Figure 2

A Conceptual Map: Five Conditions for Collective Impact



Note. Image reproduced from a public presentation by Allan Jefferson, Collective Impact Fall (2017)

Why Partnerships Matter

Relationships with schools, families, and community members are especially important in complex periods of heightened disruption and discord. During the first wave of school closures, daily routines were interrupted, leaving many educators feeling anxious, insecure about their practices, worn out, disconnected from their students and communities, and dissatisfied with their careers. The fear of an unknown future intensified the emotional toil of anxiety, guilt and frustration experienced by educators (Brooks et al., 2022). Relationships with families splintered with a record spike in home-schooling and charter school enrollment (Newberry, 2022). Student absenteeism skyrocketed (Blad, 2022). Trust in school leadership declined sharply as the pandemic continued (Kennedy et al., 2022). A surge of families and community members no longer saw professional educators as experts in their children's learning and development.

Amidst the distress, local communities stepped up to relieve the pressures. They supported educators' motivation to remain in their jobs and provided assistance to help restore and revitalize the schools (e.g., Moore-Johnson, 2022; Surr et al., 2022). Community support renewed teachers' efficacy to respond to the complexity of the challenges facing

them with restored confidence, adaptability, and resilience (Daniilidou et al., 2020). As evidenced in a series of case studies, collaboration among teachers and communities created opportunities for out of the ordinary innovations to restore educational continuity (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2022). The positive relationships with community members served as a powerful lever to reenergize weary educators, revive the whole school culture and climate, and revive the field of education as a shared responsibility of the school, home, and greater community (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Ishimaru, 2019).

While the importance of engaged partnerships with families and communities has been recognized for decades, meaningful and equitable engagements have yet to evolve as a priority of schools. Too many educators enter the profession burdened with a paradigm that asks them to resolve all the problems facing schools from behind the closed doors of the school. Given the grave consequences of the pandemic and its ever-evolving challenges, it becomes even more essential for educators to move beyond the isolation of the schoolhouse and make the paradigm shift to what Kuhn (1962) called an open exploration of problems of practice for the wider community to resolve together. Community trust in schools is an essential ingredient in times of strife. As Bryk and Schneider (2002) found in their research, schools with high relational trust are more likely to embrace new ways of working together in partnership with families and community members.

Making the Shifts Happen: Lessons from Scholars and Practitioners

Researchers continue to unravel the traumatic impacts of the social, educational, and economic disruptions of global pandemics (Sherwood et al., 2021). The unceasing strife of the long-term pandemic leaves deep wounds on the health, safety, well-being, and livelihoods of educators, students, families and communities. It may take years to work through the disruptions. But there are things educators can do now to rebuild the community's trust in public education and restore the conditions for students, families and their communities to survive and thrive. Lessons learned from the research and practitioner experiences reviewed herein reveal that schools are more likely to make the shift to partnerships happen when they welcome the wisdom of families, embrace external supports, and collaborate to expand local community resources.

Shift 1 - Welcome the Wisdom of Families

When the demands of the pandemic grew, school and family relationships strained in what appeared to be an endless cycle of blame and shame (Ujifusa, 2022). Remote learning thrust parents and caregivers into the role of supervising lessons zoomed into their homes while their children coped with the isolation of distance learning (Sensharma, 2018). Many families felt the decision to close schools was misguided; they believed the closures and associated trauma were having a detrimental impact on their children's overall well-being (Thomas et al., 2019).

The dissatisfaction spread in vocal outbursts at school board meetings and heated posts on social media sites. When schools reopened, scores of discontented families openly criticized their school's vaccine requirements, mask mandates, contact tracing, lack of trans-

parency in what schools teach, and even the contents of the books in the school library (Hlywak, 2022). The discord challenged the abilities of even the most resilient educators to navigate the demands and manage the stress (Thacker & Freeman, 2020).

Despite the fray, relationships with countless other families strengthened. Instead of using public spaces and social networks to air their grievances, supportive families brought their issues directly to the school and worked diligently to bridge the differences and restore calm (S. Grout, personal communication, March 26, 2022). In the offshoot of the conflict, educators rediscovered the wisdom of families. Through phone calls, text messages, and drive by visits to children's homes, educators gleaned new understandings of families as the experts of their children's learning, histories, and cultural wealth (Ishimura, 2022). Instead of viewing families as antagonists, educators rediscovered the necessity of listening respectfully to the insights and aspirations of families, both discontents and supporters alike (Safir, 2017). They put aside their fears about family engagement and began to see families as natural allies with the schools (Hong, 2019).

The lines that divided schools and families blurred. Schools reimagined family engagement and opened new avenues for communication (Davis, 2022). Educators took positive measures in the wake of the pandemic to gain a better understanding of how collective action works to support student learning and well-being in complex times. They recognized that their prior beliefs and assumptions about family and community engagement were influencing their relationships with families and how new knowledge about the demographic characteristics of the families in their schools might better support family engagement with the schools (Garcia et al., 2016). They worked with parents to identify the assets within the community that could provide support, resources, and insights into the lived experiences of students and their families (James & DeMatthews, 2022).

Educators invited families to share their concerns about how their children were doing and what they saw as needed action for change. The effort paid off. The act of listening helped rebuild trust in schools. In the process, schools uncovered the benefits of reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships with families for whole school transformation (Safir, 2017). They shifted the paradigm from isolation to inclusion and welcomed families as co-designers of educational decisions. This was no easy task. It involved constructing respectful and culturally-responsive interactions, communicating effectively on complex dilemmas, and balancing the needs of diverse families, children, and the communities in which they lived (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010).

A more holistic and meaningful form of family engagement was clearly needed to restore the role of families in their children's education (Dugan, 2022; Sensharma, 2018). Research indicates that authentic relationships with families must involve disrupting power dynamics and building the capacity for co-designed and collaborative processes (Ishimura et al., 2018). In an investigation of school-based parent networks in Latinx communities, analysts revealed that deeper relationships evolved via trust, shared values, and mutual expectations for student learning (Rangel et al., 2020). Likewise, in a case study of the collec-

tive impact of school-family partnerships, researchers found when educators and parents actively worked to empower diverse parents and create regular opportunities for parents to interact and build solidarity, they were more likely to help build equitable schools (Murray et al., 2020).

Welcoming the wisdom of families did not happen by chance. Educators worked intentionally to move their schools from isolated places of exhaustion to places of high energy and engagement. As a result, educators grew new relationships with families and took partnerships to the next level. Engaging the wisdom of families became a priority. Researchers found that partnering with families provided the assistance and structures needed to support the social and emotional health and academic achievement of school children (Merlin et al., 2013). Finally, when educators committed to fully engage families in a culture of equitable collaboration, their stressors were reduced, their satisfaction in the workplace grew, and they found a renewed sense of hope and joy in their daily work (Williams, 2018).

Shift 2 - Embrace External Supports

To buffer the impacts of educator burnout and dissatisfaction with the profession, it became clear that external support systems needed to be created to revive the whole school culture and promote student and staff safety and well-being. Instead of resigning under the pressure of multiple disruptions, educators redefined their purpose and reinvented a more intentional and meaningful future by embracing external supports (Coleman, 2022). Researchers found that external partners can help build a climate of trust and provide the foundation for deeper and broader engagement (Marsh & Hall, 2018).

In many school systems, integrative student support systems were rediscovered as a way to help heal from the harms of the pandemic and enable educators and students to flourish. These holistic supports held the promise of connecting everyone's hearts, minds, and bodies to the school experience and their future well-being (Tucker, 2021). When schools embraced their external allies, they were more likely to bond with their communities and create safe and supportive places and spaces for student well-being and learning.

As schools grappled with the continuing discord, allies called for doubling the number of school counselors, psychologists, and social workers who could provide needed in-school mental health supports for educators and students. During the pandemic, social workers switched from home visits to porch visits to allow for fresh air; they connected with parents of absent students online and held virtual meetings with parents (Blad, 2022). But still more comprehensive supports were needed. In a survey conducted by the RAND Corporation, the mental health of teachers and students topped the concerns of district leaders; they said integrated mental health supports as well as extended learning time were needed to address the complex demands of their school communities (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022).

When school principals were asked what was learned during the pandemic, they said they needed policymakers to explore measures other than standardized tests in order to track the social and emotional development of students (Comer & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Many principals said their roles had changed, from providing positive support sys-

tems for the overall climate of the schools, to crisis management in communicating policy decisions with vocal and ardent groups on contentious issues that intensified in the wake of the pandemic (Clifford & Cogshall, 2021).

In the midst of the disruption, resources were provided from the nation's emergency relief funds (Maher, 2022). Schools could use the funds in ways that best met their unique needs; e.g., to support flexible learning time or summer school, extend school days, provide intensive tutoring, or to enlarge the bandwidth for hybrid and distance learning. While all of these approaches were worthy of consideration, the evidence pointed most strongly to the value of targeted-intensive tutoring to ensure every child who fell behind was supported by a mentor who could provide consistent support to catch students up (Hill, 2021). A mentoring approach, such as those used in the business world, served to distribute support systems and give educators the help they needed to safeguard student well-being, safety, belonging, and academic success (Williams & Williams, 2014). Schools became hubs of integrated community services to support and sustain the health and livelihoods of teachers, students, and their families (Lake & Weisberg, 2021).

External supports and shared resources helped buffer the effects of disrupted learning. It took a collective approach to restore schools as hopeful places of learning through relationships, shared information, and safety for stakeholders of all identities (Safir & Dugan, 2021; Wheatley, 2009). Supporting the social and emotional needs of educators, students and communities became more important than ever (Zalaznick, 2022). As Gomperts and Cantor (2020) observed, learning environments designed with the whole school culture in mind serve as “an ecological vaccine. . . against the effects of adversity while promoting and accelerating healthy development and learning” (p. 15).

Shift 3 - Collaborate to Expand Local Community Resources

School-based remedies weren't enough to address the disparate needs of educators and students in the wake of the pandemic. Instead of working in isolation, schools realized they needed to bridge the gaps by collaborating with the local community to expand human and fiscal resources. Schools turned to an array of government and nongovernment organizations in their communities to procure and coordinate essential resources (Spillane et al., 2022). In a study of decision making during the chaotic period of the pandemic, researchers observed that some educators temporarily abandoned their role as instructional leaders to focus on socioemotional needs; others put most of their effort into recreating the school experience online; and still others responded with determination to co-create a consistent quality of teaching and learning in collaboration with their communities (Davis & Galligan, 2022).

During the shutdown, the national media was filled with disturbing accounts of loss of life, loss of learning time, and loss of economic security. As schools reopened, local media outlets began to feature stories of community efforts to address the disruptions that were so pervasive in the wake of the pandemic. Stories appeared across the country with the many ways local residents and community organizations were engaging in pro-

ductive partnerships with the schools (Vegas & Winthrop, 2020). Local community members, businesses, and non-profit groups bridged with their schools to provide practical tools and strategies to re-energize schools. Some community partners donated funds to restore needed services. Others released their employees to create a pool of volunteers to help support the skills needed to manage through the disruptions.

Newswires publicized the ways communities were sharing their talents and resources to help students, educators, and families recover. For example, the Washington Post launched a series of stories on the collective efforts of communities to improve children's education, restore joy, and bring back hope to people's livelihoods (WashPostPR, 2020). Many of these remarkable stories were adapted by other newswires as strong models of recovery from school disruption. The stories featured the positive ways partners engaged in a path forward:

- Local food banks dropped off meals at school sites.
- Chefs volunteered to serve nutritious dinners for families and their children at homework diners where students were given help with their classwork.
- Patrons delivered laptops and other digital tools to students' homes so they could continue learning at a distance.
- Clubs opened their assembly halls to provide temporary shelters for children and families who were displaced by multiple disruptions.
- Community groups mobilized to bring absent students back to school.
- City and county agencies sponsored new full-service community schools with wraparound services for students and families.
- Businesses supported expansion of school-based health centers and wellness programs for teachers and students.
- Non-profit associations coordinated after-school programs and summer day camps.

Efforts like these were not the exception. They reflected the commitment of the local community to work together with their schools using community-based relational approaches for authentic partnerships in the pursuit of shared goals (Warren et al., 2009; see also Duggan, 2022). A bright spot in the power of community engagement was recounted by Starr (2022) in his commentary on how school leaders worked to build a trusted team with deep ties to the community and leverage their relationships to support an agenda for equity-focused change.

Conclusion

This study uncovered important lessons about why partnerships matter and how educators can make engagement with families and communities a priority in their work. In the wake of the pandemic, it was no longer enough for educators to rely on the district's public-relations officers to rebuild trust in schools. Instead, the multiple disruptions to learning called for a seismic shift in caring, consistent communications, and flexibility in the ways

schools operate (e.g. Alexander, 2022; Boudreau, 2020; Kennedy & Walls, 2022). Hanley-brown et al., 2012) found the work of collective impact increased the capacity of partners to use data to solve complex issues, build commitment among stakeholders, and tackle unrelenting inequities in policies and practices.

Lessons learned from the research, policies, and practices cited herein provide evidence that engaged partnerships with families and communities can be a powerful lever to reenergize schools, contribute to workplace stability, reignite social and emotional learning, revive the school culture and climate, and restore the field of education as a shared responsibility of the school, home, and community. While recovery from periods of discord and disruption has been uneven for many schools, educators who were able to shift course and move beyond the schoolhouse were better equipped to respond to the complexity of the challenges facing them and move forward in the wake of ever-expanding challenges.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have implications for evidence-based and practical approaches to problems of practice in K-12 education. Engaged partnerships with families and communities can help schools create a more comprehensive approach to the supports needed for educators, students, and communities to survive and thrive. Energies recharge when educators shift their stance from working in isolation to viewing partnerships with stakeholders as a ready network of support. Schools which are surrounded by a community of supportive families and community members can do much to reduce educator stress, boost morale, attract aspiring educators to the profession, and retain experienced and skilled educators in the school workforce (Laugaa et al., 2008). Engaged partners can make a positive impact on the educational system and bring back hope and joy to schools. When educators intentionally and effectively shift from schools alone to engaged partnerships with stakeholders, they can move their schools and communities forward with restored confidence, adaptability, and resilience.

Significance

Lessons learned may appeal to scholars, policymakers and practitioners who are invested in fostering the meaningful and equitable engagement of families and communities in the work of the schools. In the wake of multiple pandemics, it became even more important for educators to pay attention to persistent inequities in education. This required educators to center their efforts on disrupting the harms of the disruptions and shift their work with partners to a focus on equitable policies, practices, and conditions that shape the everyday realities of students, their families, and the communities in which they live (Mitchell, 2022).

The literature reviewed herein has broad implications for the field of education. The study provides insight into how partnerships can shape the ways schools and external partners interact to improve student learning and well-being in times of both disruption and calm. Through the collective action of engaged actors, partners can make a significant contribution in response to global pandemics and other complex disruptions in the lives of educators, students, and the greater community.

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