It's Who You Know *and* What You Know: The Process of Creating Partnerships Between Schools and Communities

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Abstract

Based on qualitative research, this article aims to clarify the process of creating school-community partnerships. Two secondary schools with numerous partnerships were selected within a southern Ontario school board characterized by economic and cultural diversity. Drawing on the within- and cross-case analyses of documents, observations, and 25 semi-structured interviews with 2 principals, 1 office manager, 8 teachers and 19 community partners, the process of creating partnerships is discussed from educational and ecological perspectives. The findings indicated that the majority of the partnerships were teacher-initiated, and the liaison types sought were based on their determination of their students' and programs' needs. The most effective partnering strategy was to promote the benefits of liaising from the initial contact. Meetings in person and the negotiation of partnership activities created "win-win" relationships. The influence of school and community contexts on partnership development is also discussed. The principals' support created school cultures that built staff capacity and were conducive to partnerships. The nature of the community influenced the types of partners available for collaborating. Issues of partner proximity, limited time and money, and personal capacities were potential challenges to partnering, while networking facilitated the process. The article aims to assist both educators and researchers to better understand the partnership process and to enable educators to effectively establish partnerships with community members.

Key Words: school-community relations, partnerships, high school, community involvement, partnership development, human ecology, systems theory

Introduction

For several decades, educational researchers have been advocating the benefits of partnerships between schools, families, and communities as a means for promoting student achievement (Davies & Johnson, 1996; Epstein & Sanders, 1998; Henderson, 1987; Swap, 1993). With frequent interactions between the partners, it is more likely that common sentiments regarding the importance of school, of exerting academic effort, of assisting others, and of staying in school will be reiterated and subsequently reinforced by a variety of influences on the students (Epstein, 1995). Conversely, researchers demonstrate that a lack of attention and support from the adults in the students' lives, an absence of discipline, and not "staying on them" or prodding the students are considered the most important barriers to educational success by educators, community mentors, and students (Shapiro, Ginsberg & Brown, 2002).

A number of schools and their boards are arriving at the same conclusion—that collaboration is an avenue through which students' needs may be met and achievement promoted. In our economically and culturally diverse society, the gap in student achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged groups is widening (Davies, 2002). Schools are finding it increasingly difficult to create educational programs to address the diverse needs of the students (Merz & Furman, 1997) with the finances and the resources available to them. Consequently, some school personnel are seeking to garner financial and material resources, as well as social support and educational experiences, to supplement students' in-school learning opportunities.

These principals and teachers view partnerships as a way to provide a support network for each student. For secondary school students, it may be particularly important to cultivate partnerships with community organizations and citizens, along with parents, to address the students' needs. Adolescents who are transitioning from school to work or post-secondary educational institutions may learn to anticipate variations in the occupational and social practices and the values systems beyond the school walls, in comparison to those of their families and those within the school. The advantage to community involvement in their present schooling is two-fold, enhancing students' learning opportunities and easing the transition from high school.

Recognizing the valuable role that partnerships can play in schooling and the potential they hold to meet secondary students' needs, questions arise as to how these school-community partnerships may be developed. Existing

research has provided insight into effective partnership practices by providing lists of the types of organizations that are involved in school-community partnerships and examples of collaborative activities established in some schools (Epstein, 1995; Sanders, 2001; Sanders & Harvey, 2002; Wohlstetter, Malloy, Smith & Hentschke, 2003). Further, reference has been made to the role that school-level context has in facilitating school-community partnerships and maintaining them (Sanders & Harvey, 2002). The onus for the establishment of school-community partnerships falls to the schools (Davies, 2002; Epstein, 1995, 2001; Sanders & Harvey, 2002), yet educators do not necessarily know how to use this information to create partnerships with the various organizations and individuals in the community. As Crowson and Boyd (2001) and Sanders (2001) note, there is a lack of information regarding the procedures of identification, development, and maintenance of partnerships used by schools that are successful at creating these connections.

The study on which this article is based sought to yield insight into the process of initiating communication with potential partners and establishing school-community partnerships. In doing so, I address the following question: How do educators in secondary schools develop school-community partnerships? Specifically, I ask, "What is the nature of the interaction between educators and community members in the development of partnerships?" This article focuses on the role of networking, the promotion of partnerships, the nature of the communication following the initial contact between partners, the flexibility of the partners and the liaison activities, as well as the challenges to and facilitators of partnering. I begin with an overview of existing sociologically based education and ecology literature to provide a framework for the concepts of community and partnering as well as the interaction between individuals establishing liaisons.

The Partnership Paradigm

Prior to describing the characteristics of partnerships between school personnel and community members, it is helpful to define community. The concept of community is multifaceted, with many possible meanings (Beck, 1999; Merz & Furman, 1997). Steiner (2002) points out that communities are characterized and limited by the human interactions and geographic distance between populations, and are therefore both physical phenomena and social processes.[1] It is this depiction of community which is useful for this article. For the purposes of school-community liaising, the community is made up of the school personnel and all of the individuals and organizations external to the school with a common interest in education (National Network of

Partnership Schools, n.d.). As such, the boundaries vary from community to community and across schools within a geographic region. They may include the for-profit sector such as businesses, the public sector such as educational institutions, government and military organizations, and health care facilities, as well as the non-profit sector such as faith organizations, cultural groups, and recreational facilities, in addition to other community-based organizations and individuals in the community (see Epstein, 1995; Sanders, 2001; Wohlstetter et al., 2003).

The Components and Mechanics of Partnerships

A working definition of school-community partnerships can be described as the "connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, and businesses that are forged to promote students' social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development" (Sanders, 2001, p. 20). Thus, the collaborative activities between individuals in schools and the surrounding communities constitute partnerships. They are characterized by efforts of all parties toward mutually desirable goals that are unattainable in the absence of cooperation (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998).

An ecologically based theoretical framework provides an interpretation of liaising that draws out certain elements of the partnering process. In particular, the interpersonal interaction required for initiating partnerships, the flexibility of the partnership and its activities, and the challenges as well as the facilitators of partnerships are highlighted. Ecology is the study of the interrelationships between organisms, and the links between them and all living and non-living elements of their environment (Allaby, 1998). Human ecology, in particular, addresses the relationships between people and their environment (Kormondy, 1974; Marten, 2001; Steiner, 2002).

An examination of the ecological literature addresses issues of human interaction such as cooperation and partnership. "In the self-organization of ecosystems cooperation is actually much more important than competition.… Partnership is a key characteristic of life," according to Capra (1994, p. 8). The nature of the partnerships and partnership establishment process are consistent with systems[2] theory, which describes the relationship between systems such as schools and communities. The theory posits that there is a flow of information and resources across the permeable borders of open systems in a way that is not hierarchical; this flow is bi-directional across the borders (Banathy, 1992, 1993). The cooperation stemming from partnerships is defined by the presence of interdependence between people, and the existence of network relationships with feedback loops resulting from communication within the networks and resultant maintenance or changes made to the relationships (Capra, 1999).

This perspective of human interaction is supported in the school reform literature. Banathy's (1992, 1993) systems view of education and educational phenomenon necessitates an understanding of the relationships in educational human activity systems such as schools within their surrounding contexts, as well as an understanding of these systems as they change over time in relation to the environment external to them. The relationships between people in schools and those in peer systems such as the community's businesses, government agencies, and religious institutions are egalitarian in nature (Banathy, 1992). Through dialogue between individuals whereby conversation and deep listening takes place, participants foster the "social creativity" (Jenlink & Banathy, 2005, p. 7) necessary for the establishment of novel ways of interacting with others, such as partnership development.

In order to cultivate the communication and cooperation essential for establishing partnerships (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 1993; Epstein, 2001; Sanders & Harvey, 2002) and the practical realization of school-community liaisons, several scholars have provided insight into implementation strategies and resources. In her discussion of effective implementation, Sanders (2001) notes that identifying goals, defining the focus of the partnerships, and selecting potential community partners are key steps for building successful collaborations. Epstein provides a description of the areas of possible interaction between educators and members of the community with her six-part typology of activities (2001) and examples of partnership activities (1995). While Epstein targets parent involvement activities as her primary focus for interaction between schools and their external environments, Sanders (2001) provides further categorization of activities established between individuals in the schools and members of their communities. Activities reported in her survey of schools had a focus on student support, family support, school improvement, or community development (Sanders, 2001). This categorization may be broadened. Wohlstetter and colleagues (2003) found activities centered around curriculum, facilities, financial assistance, business and management expertise, and to a lesser degree, liaisons with community, assistance with administrative procedures, and enhancing schools' legitimacy. Once collaborative activities are established, they are monitored and evaluated, and success stories from the partnerships are shared (Sanders, 2001).

Hence, the existing literature addresses the nature of partnerships and provides examples of the variety of collaborative activities currently pursued by schools and their community partners. Further, the initial steps toward identifying and selecting the desired potential partners are outlined, as are the steps following partnership establishment that are necessary to maintain the relationships. Yet there is room for investigation regarding the processes entailed in cultivating liaisons.

Methodology

Noting the need for a deeper understanding of participants' experiences of the phenomenon, I chose a research design to allow for cross-site analyses of how school-community partnerships are established within differing real-life contexts (Yin, 1994). With this goal in mind, this article draws on data collected in a qualitative case study of two secondary schools within a southern Ontario school board. In order to examine the techniques by which educators and community members successfully established school-community liaisons, the primary criterion for sample selection was the presence of numerous and strong school-community partnerships. The schools were identified through the school board as schools that had a reputation for establishing many collaborative activities with community members. The two schools selected were Grassmere High School, which was located in a rural, low socioeconomic, culturally homogeneous community, and Wicklow Secondary School, which was situated within a multicultural, suburban, low- to middle-income community, each serving students in grades 9-12. (Note: all names of people, towns, and schools given in this article are pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of the study participants.)

Preliminary conversations with the principals of the schools ensued to confirm the presence of numerous strong community links. Both schools had between 75 and 80 school-community liaisons that were individually cultivated to meet the specific needs of the students, school, and community partners. Educators in several departments at each school had developed these partnerships, which provided financial and material resources, social support, opportunities for skills development, and workplace experience and support, according to the principals.

During the data collection process, 25 interviews were conducted with the principals, teachers, and school support staff during three site visits at Wicklow and four site visits at Grassmere, as well as with members of the community who were involved in partnership activities with the schools (e.g., individual community citizens and contact people for businesses, government offices, senior citizens' organizations, and health care institutions). Due to the demands of their occupational responsibilities and time utilized outside of the work day to cultivate and nurture their partnerships, the participants had limited time available for study involvement. Consequently, the 30 individuals participating in the study were involved in one semi-structured, open-ended interview of approximately 45 minutes in length. While the majority of the interviews were individually conducted, three focus group interviews were also conducted. In order to accommodate the schedules of one group of teachers at each

school and one group of community members, the participants in each of these groups were interviewed simultaneously. Additionally, observations were conducted at the schools, and documents that were pertinent to the partnership activities, including the schools' mission statements, memos, school plans, and meeting minutes, were gathered from school staff and community partners.

A snowball technique (Merriam, 1998) was used to obtain community participants for the study. During interviews with school personnel, the names and contact information of their community partners were requested. The community partners were then contacted by the researcher, and interviews were conducted and documents were collected. Multiple sources of data were sought to establish construct validity through the triangulation of the data (Merriam, 1998; Rothe, 2000; Yin, 1994).

Once the interviews were transcribed verbatim, they were sent to the participants for review and clarification. The collected data were coded and analyzed for emerging categories and themes. The constant comparative method was utilized, in which the data obtained from each participant were continuously examined and incidents were compared across the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Merriam, 1998). In this way, new categories and themes were developed and existing ones were evaluated and modified. When the within-case analysis was completed, the cross-case analysis (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994) was conducted to yield the categories which emerged across the data from Wicklow Secondary School and Grassmere High School. Copies of the analyses were sent to the participants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Thus, an examination of the partnership practices of the school administrator, teacher, support staff, and community member participants at both schools enabled an investigation of similarities and differences between the partnership-initiating techniques used and the influences on their successful partnership development.

It's What You Know: Creating the Partnerships

Owing to the differing nature and dynamics of their various relationships with community members, the participants in this study were not able to identify a formula for successfully establishing partnerships. Yet, there were commonalities among the descriptions of their creation and the steps involved from educators and community partners alike at both schools. The cycles of activity and the feedback loops between the people involved in the partnering relationships revealed in the data were reminiscent of ecological lifecycles (see Figure 1). As such, both education and ecology literature deepen an understanding and interpretation of the participants' experiences.
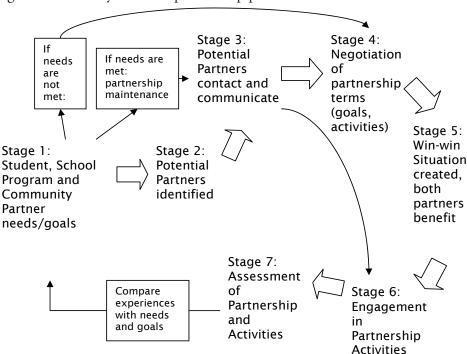
Figure 1. The lifecycle of the partnership process.

Figure 1. Partnerships are based primarily on the students' needs, and potential partners at the school and in the community are sought and contacted based on the needs. During face-to-face meetings, school personnel and the community members discuss possibilities for partnering and establish partnership activities in which both parties benefit. Feedback between the partners is provided when they assess the success of the activities in meeting their goals. Partners communicate their evaluations to one another in an ongoing manner and, if necessary, modify the partnership or the activities to suit their needs over time.

Initial Communication Between Potential Partners

In accordance with Epstein's (1995, 2001) findings, for any partnership to be initiated, the goals and needs of the school were first assessed by the principals and teachers; however, the teachers noted that the needs of the students were the focus and the basis for all partnership efforts. Consistent with Harvey and Sanders' (2001) findings, the activities which met the needs of the students, or had the potential to do so, were those which were considered by the educators in the present study to be appropriate, valuable, and worth investing the time and energy to develop.

Promoting The Benefits of Partnering to Community Members

Although some differing partnership establishment strategies were noted between teachers, the most pronounced differences in partnering techniques were found between schools. When approaching potential community partners,

most Grassmere educators did not tell prospective partners what the school or the partnership could offer them, for they stated that it was not necessary. These Grassmere educators framed their initial communication as a request for student support rather than clearly outlining the nature of the partnership and promoting the benefits of partnership from the beginning.

Conversely, the Wicklow principal and teachers, as well as two Grassmere educators, all noted the need for promoting the benefits of the partnership in the early stages of the relationship. The benefits were presented by the educators in the negotiation process. For others, the first contact with a potential partner was often not in person, rather, the teachers left voice or electronic mail messages. Consequently, Wicklow's Physical Education head noted that any partnership proposal should include the benefits for the potential partners and those benefits should be made clear from the initial contact. In her words,

> I think in the society we live in, people are very busy, and the first question is going to be, "Well, what's in this for me?" So, rather than waste people's time, you have to present it like, "This is a situation which will benefit us both." So, yeah, I think there has to be some reciprocation. And it has to be obvious.

This finding builds on existing research on school-community partnership-building. Educators found that limited time to meet, identify, and contact community members and to engage in partnership activities is a shortcoming that constitutes a challenge to developing liaisons (Sanders, 1999, 2001). In this study, it was found that community members, as well as the teachers, have limited time for partnering. Thus, several of the educators saw the need to clearly outline the nature of the partnership from the initial contact.

The Need for Clear, Concise Partnership Plans and Approaches

Several community members who were interviewed for the study were in agreement. It was noted by Wicklow and Grassmere community partners that schools did indeed need to clearly advertise their schools' needs and goals and the partnership benefits prior to partnership development, as they themselves did. According to a local grocery store owner and Grassmere partner, the schools needed to establish clearer communication and to create a presentation for the partners. Referring to his participation in partnerships involving students,

> It's being able to put together a package, or something. It has to be marketing, again, that makes a business owner want to take on an extra responsibility to assist that student…I think somehow that experience has to be probably better presented. It's a matter of the school putting together maybe a committee or something, two or three teachers, they

come and sit down and talk to the businesses, and tell them what they're trying to do, and have some guidelines set, what they're looking for. What the student, they feel, can do. And what the benefits are. What the benefits are for the student of getting an opportunity to do this.

Interestingly, this community partner's suggestion for a committee is reminiscent of the presence of action teams to steer successful partnership programs in National Network of Partnership Schools (Epstein, 2001; Sanders, 1999; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). In calling for clearly defined proposals and communication, the community partner highlighted the importance of the first communication. Further, he indicated that failure to address the benefits and potential positive outcomes of partnerships might impede further contact and partnership development.

Crafting the Partnerships

Regardless of the nature of the partnerships, the school personnel and the community members engaged in negotiations to give shape to the collaborative activities once initial communication was established. Towards this end, meetings in person, communication, and a willingness to collaborate were deemed key elements in the partnership process by the participants in this study. The educators acknowledged that they met with the community members a number of times to define the parameters of their partnerships. During these meetings, the teachers engaged in discussions with the potential partners with the essential aim of establishing clear expectations for partnerships and coming to an agreement that was mutually satisfying or beneficial.

The Role of Reciprocity: The Creation of a "Win-Win Situation"

While the students' interests were of primary concern to all partners, one of the major goals common to all of the partnerships was to satisfy needs that could not be addressed by the organizations individually. All of the teachers understood the importance of reciprocity. Each partnership was beneficial to both collaborators, enabling them to achieve their particular goals. Without mutual benefits, partnerships were unlikely to be cultivated. In reflecting on her partnership with a college, Wicklow's Guidance Department head commented, "Would I have asked them to come in if I didn't think our student body would benefit from that? No....It's mutual needs and mutual benefits. That's all part of the planning process." Her community partner agreed. "The fact that we can get something out of this, they can get something out of it, both parties are happy, it's a win-win situation, so why not [put] the time in to get it happening?" As another community partner observed, a partnership is "two-way, it's not just one-way." This view of partnerships is consistent with

some scholars' assertions that relationships between schools and community organizations and agencies require reciprocity through a two-way exchange for the realization of effective partnerships (see, e.g., Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 1993; Davies, 2002; Epstein, 2001; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Consistent with ecological theory and the notions of interdependence and interactive network relationships (see, e.g., Worster, 1995), there was two-way communication and an exchange of resources between the school and the community members.

The school- and community-based partners' experiences indicated that there are elements of compromise and personal flexibility during this negotiation phase. The study participants reported that during the initial stages of the partnerships they were in frequent contact with their partners in order to communicate their goals for the relationship and to negotiate agreeable terms and appropriate activities for the liaisons. Similarly, in her study on the social capital yielded from partnerships, Mawhinney (2002) observed that establishing partnerships required flexibility and capacity within the education environment for the educators' responsiveness to community members' needs. As Sanders and Harvey (2002) found, dialogue without dictating the terms of the relationship was important to partnership development for both the school personnel and community members in this study.

Partnership Activity Flexibility

In addition to a willingness to compromise and a mutual understanding of the partnerships' terms, teachers and community partners noted the need for flexibility in the terms of a partnership. Those partnerships directly involving students needed to be adaptable to their growing skill sets and to accommodate the changing needs of the students. In other cases, there was flexibility in the partnership activities to address individual school program requirements.

From Wicklow's college partner's perspective:

> I think by just keeping it as an open document…and discussing things, leaving some things vague and some things open, I think that's the best way to do it, as long as the people involved understand the rules of the game, if you will, that it is open, that we can make modifications if we have to.

The notion that a partnership needs to incorporate flexibility into its structures so that it can evolve or avoid stagnation is reflected in the concepts of ecology, as is the notion of personal flexibility discussed in the previous section. Capra (1994) argues that in the natural world, ecological communities remain resilient, surviving disturbances and adapting to changing conditions around them, in part due to their flexibility. He and Marten (2001) posit that

all elements within the environment are in a constant state of flux that allows organisms or entities to adapt to disturbances or environmental changes. Correspondingly, this flexibility was noted as necessary in partnerships to ensure success in their development. According to ecological principles, failure to incorporate this level of flexibility could result in the demise of the partnership over time as a result of becoming obsolete and irrelevant to the partners in a continually changing environment.

"It's Not What You Know, It's Who You Know:" The Role of Networking in Establishing a Connection

The basis for ecological metaphors of human interaction (Capra, 1994; Marten, 2001; Morgan, 1997; Steiner, 2002) is an interconnected web or network of associations for the creation of relationships. Interestingly, this is also the core element of partnership establishment.

For all of those interviewed for this study, their interpersonal networks created from social and professional associations were also noted to facilitate the initiation of communication and development of links between schools and community members or organizations. In describing her techniques for identifying work opportunities for her students and establishing partnerships, the Grassmere Life Skills teacher had this to say:

> We use everything from cold calls, just dropping right in and saying, "Hi, this is who we are, we'd like to do this." That's not as effective. What's very effective is…networking.…It really helps to have some kind of network; it really is more effective when you know that person. They find it hard to just say no, I think.

These were common sentiments at both schools. Partnerships were most easily established with individuals with whom there was an existing relationship or through colleagues' networks of associates. Consequently, participants reported establishing most of their partnerships though people with whom they or their colleagues were already associated.

The Personal Connections That Form Networks

Partnerships were often the result of social relationships. Informal, personal connections paved the way for establishing initial contact and structured relationships based on partnership activities. Some of the community partners had links with the school through their family members. Thus, the school staff was comfortable approaching them to partner. For example, the Grassmere community partner and costume-maker described how she became involved with several partnerships through her husband's involvement with the school

as a supply teacher, and through her own network of acquaintances. Hence, the costume-maker partnered with the school by engaging Grassmere students in costume-making for two theatres as a result of her community connections.

For the senior citizens' club and Grassmere school council member,

> I taught [for] years at the high school.…The principal, Monica Kenny, was in [my] department that we had in the 70s and 80s.…With the school council, Monica asked me if I would sit on it. Because she felt that I had a few things that I could perhaps contribute, because I know the building and I know the people.…[T]hey'll sometimes ask me if I know of anybody who can help with an item, you know, somebody from the community because I have contacts with people in the community.

Previously established personal or collegial connections, then, played a role in partnership initiation. In many circumstances, the participants effectively constructed their networks from personal associations; however, they reported that they utilized others' networks as well, to expand their own associations and to make the necessary personal connections to enable the procurement of contact persons at the desired partner organizations.

Although Grassmere was characterized by more social links with the surrounding community than Wicklow, professional interpersonal associations reported by both Wicklow and Grassmere teachers also enabled the cultivation of contact people and facilitated partnership development. In the Wicklow Community-Based Education head's experiences of interacting with businesses and non-profit organizations, "that kind of networking, that one-on-one human networking, is fundamental to building that broad base." Wicklow's Physical Education head observed of her professional relationships with community members,

> as you develop partnerships, then you develop that networking. That's how you learn more about what's available to you, because there is so much opportunity out there, in ways that our school and program could be supported, but teachers just aren't aware of them…for free. There's no cost involved in many of the partnerships that could be established.

In this way, networking was seen as an essential component to partnering even before a partnership idea was formulated and a contact person was sought. For educators, it was necessary for those desirous of partnerships to go to conferences, workshops, and the like to learn about resources and programs available to them in the community. Similarly, community partners noted that through meeting people in the same field or professional community, there was a greater chance of encountering others with connections who could provide useful contact information to assist in future networking. Whether social

or professional, the connections described by the educators and community members in this study were varied and numerous.

In depicting the process of networking and its role in partnership development, parallels may be drawn with principles of ecology. In networks, the multiple connections among members of an ecological community or social system form an extensive, interdependent, and complex web of relationships (Capra, 1994, 1999; Center for Ecoliteracy, n.d.; Kormondy, 1974; Marten, 2001; Morgan, 1997; Steiner, 2002) which are nonlinear (Capra, 1994). In the same manner as in an ecological community, the observations made by the study participants illustrate the multiple and diverse connections between people in a community. In addition to facilitating partnership-building, networking expanded the participants' associations, their knowledge of available resources, as well as the diversity and number of links between the schools and their surrounding communities. This, in turn, increased the opportunities for establishing new relationships through partnering.

Discussion

Initially, I undertook this study in an effort to assist researchers and educators to better understand the processes by which partnerships between schools and their geographic communities were developed, and to enable educators who are desirous of cultivating partnerships overcome difficulties in doing so. The insights gained from the research address these issues. Once the teachers assessed the needs of the students and the goals were determined, they examined the internal capacity of the school to meet their needs, then sought assistance and support out in the community for their students and the school if these needs could not be met within the school. The community members who were deemed able to assist the educators in meeting the identified needs were then approached to participate in collaborative activities. In so doing, the participants reported the importance of networking and networking skills in identifying and obtaining suitable partners.

An effective strategy to garner community support for partnering is to outline the benefits clearly when first approaching the potential partner. Whether the teachers—or on occasion, the community members—initiated the partnerships, many of the initiators reported that they promoted the benefits of the collaboration to potential partners from the first contact with them. A clear vision for the partnership is essential to encourage the commitment of those individuals who are amenable to partnering, but who may have limited time to either extrapolate the benefits for themselves from what the initiators present or to participate in partnership activities. Indeed, the community partners'

own approaches were consistent with this view, for they provided greater detail in their initial presentations than their educator counterparts. In the process, they ensured that they clarified the intended outcomes for the school partner.

Although initial contact could be made over the telephone, through written correspondence, or via electronic mail, I found that the negotiations of the partnership terms and activities were conducted in personal, face-to-face meetings with open, two-way communication. The school and the community members created a "win-win situation" through discussions. This is consistent with Epstein's (1995) claims and Mawhinney's (2002) findings that schools need to develop two-way forms of collaboration in which the schools not only receive resources, but they provide useful services or resources to the community. Yet the terms of the partnerships were flexible, allowing for changes to be made in the collaborative activities over time in response to partners' continuous communication with each other and the evaluation of the liaisons' abilities to meet the agreed-upon partnership goals.

During the negotiation process, the participants acknowledged that the possibility of cultivating partnerships or ensuring the survival of existing liaisons is based upon enabling all stakeholders to have a level of involvement in shaping the potential partnership. In this way, potential misunderstandings or attempts to co-opt the partnerships for purposes other than those agreed upon by the partners (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996) is stemmed, and all partners foster a vested interest in the success of the partnership. Interestingly, with the exception of two liaisons, students were not involved in the planning processes. Several community partners observed that it is not only essential for the school personnel and the community members to reach an understanding, but that the students also must appreciate the expectations of any partnership activities in which they are involved.

Having all stakeholders involved in the decision-making process from the first conversations regarding a partnership is advocated in education literature as being essential to the development of successful partnerships (Davies, 2002; Epstein, 2001; Sanders, 1999). Indeed, those partnerships in this study that had everyone involved who had a stake in whether or not the partnership was developed were considered among the strongest and most satisfying that participants had cultivated.

Challenges to Liaising

Although school personnel at both Wicklow Secondary School and Grassmere High School and their community collaborators had successfully established numerous partnerships, there were challenges to the development of these liaisons. Practical issues such as time, money, and transportation were

considerations and potential hindrances for both schools despite their differing community contexts. Further, personal capacities, such as prospective partners' lack of appreciation of partnership benefits, were viewed by the participants in this study to have the potential to impede partnership efforts.

Proximity and Transportation

As Sanders (2001) found, financial shortfalls and school and community members' lack of time limited the possibilities for partnership development. In this study, temporal and financial considerations also interplayed with the issue of proximity. As indicated in ecological literature, transportation was an element to consider, whether it was within Grassmere's rural environment or Wicklow's suburban locale. In their ecological analyses of how ecosystems and social systems work, Gayden (1974) and Steiner (2002) provide insights into the similarities found in this study regarding proximity. Steiner argues that the interrelationships that comprise social systems are a result of connectivity. Gayden observes that these interrelationships "take place in space, and in most human cultures…their separation in space is significant" (p. 242). Like Gayden, Steiner states that "Interactive processes such as communication and transportation facilities provide the glue that holds the parts with an interacting whole into a system, a community, or a region" (p. 26).

Due to costly, and as a result limited, transportation for the students at both schools, the educators had difficulty establishing any interrelationships and resultant connectivity with distant schools and organizations in the community. Teachers and community partners alike expressed a reluctance to liaise with individuals and organizations located beyond a 10- or 15-minute drive. In addition to concerns about the travel time, they noted that partners needed to be readily accessible for participation in collaborative activities as well as face-to-face meetings.

As proximity narrows the field of potential partners for schools, schools that are not close to their community's organizations may have difficulty establishing partnerships that involve students, in particular. Unless they have access to funding that enables them to provide the transportation to meet the partners at their organizations, it may not be possible to develop these types of partnerships. By extension, it is likely to be more costly for rural and suburban schools to establish partnerships than for more urban schools. In urban centers, with a greater density of businesses, social services, cultural organizations, and the like, school personnel are more likely to have a greater choice among the organizations they can reach without automotive transportation. Further, community partners are possibly more willing to meet at schools in close proximity, and consequently, schools in urban settings would be able to eliminate

or reduce the cost of transportation for partnering.

This is not to say that school personnel at rural and suburban schools will not be able to establish partnerships; this study has demonstrated that it is possible to develop numerous and diverse collaborative activities with community members in those settings. Regardless of the breadth of the geographic community or concentration of potential partners in the community, the findings from this study indicate that there are opportunities to partner. Partnering is part of the personal or organizational philosophies of some community members, and with perseverance on the parts of the educators to establish links, it is likely that partnering is possible in most communities.

A Lack of Vision:
Potential Partners Need to Appreciate the Value of Partnering

For the most part, the school personnel and their community collaborators understood the value of the partnerships and were receptive to either approaching potential partners or being approached by others. It was essential for the community partners to have a vision of the benefits of partnering in order to enable the partnerships and their activities to be successfully established and maintained. A number of the community members who were directly involved in partnership development and participation were the individuals who ultimately made the decision as to whether they and/or their organization would liaise with the schools. If they did not see the value in partnering with the schools, it was likely that they would put up "road blocks" to partnering.

Similarly, partnership opportunities are limited or unavailable for schools if the principals do not see the value of the liaisons. The principals take on the role of contact person for community organizations or at least function in the capacity of decision-maker and gatekeeper for partnerships. Thus, even if there is support for partnering among the school staff, the principals play a crucial role in paving the way for partnership development. Community partners for both schools noted that Wicklow and Grassmere were supportive of suggestions for partnerships from the community. Thus, the school personnel's willingness to collaborate with external organizations and members of the community was a key component to successful partnership development, consistent with Sanders and Harvey's (2002) findings. Taken together, these findings highlight the necessity for all partners to share a vision of the partnership and to value the collaboration. Failure of one or more involved parties to do so may impede the possibility for partnership establishment or the realization of mutually beneficial, effective partnership activities.

Unintended Benefits of Partnering

For the partnerships cultivated in this study, the benefits of collaborating with the community extended beyond the intended goals of the partnerships for broadened student learning and programming opportunities. Both schools raised the profiles of their institutions due to their links with the surrounding geographic community. The principal of Wicklow was conscious of the positive publicity for public education yielded by community links. Similarly, Grassmere's principal was aware that partnering gave the staff the opportunity to showcase the school in a positive light within the community. Wicklow and Grassmere were threatened with student flight to other schools in the area; however, through their close ties with the community, student transfers had not become a reality. Additionally, both Wicklow and Grassmere had access to resources from the school board that other schools might not have. Wicklow's principal was able to obtain technological equipment as well as extra money from the board to match external funding he procured from a media company, while Grassmere's principal garnered costly extra transportation for her students so they could participate in extracurricular activities. It seems likely that these occurrences were an indirect result of the existence of school-community partnerships and the prominent profiles these schools were developing in their communities.

I found that partnerships not only provided students with academic resources and learning opportunities, but they expanded the students' networks and increased their social capital, consistent with Mawhinney's (2002) findings. By meeting and interacting with citizens in their community, the students developed relationships with others in the environment and subsequently had access to information, learning, occupational experiences, and opportunities to establish trustworthiness (Coleman, 1988). As a result, a number of community partners and several teachers noted that the students successfully gained employment with the community partners following the students' involvement in the collaborative activities. Moreover, partnerships promoted a renewed focus on civics and citizenship among the students. Many of the liaisons in this study encouraged the students to adopt outward-looking perspectives. Thus the partnering practices of the teachers, schools, and the board in this study promoted students' acquisition of "the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to function effectively as citizens in a democracy" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2002, p. 14).

In sum, the findings in this study indicate that there are possible unintended benefits of partnering. In addition to being able to provide resources to enrich their programs and to directly address their students' needs, educators'

partnering efforts may serve to expand the social networks of the youth, to garner public support for the school from the board and the community beyond the collaborative activities, and to promote an awareness of the need for community participation among the students.

Conclusions

The findings reported in this article have implications for further research, policy, and practice. I examined the partnership process and the contextual issues that facilitate and impede educators' and community members' efforts toward collaboration in a case study of partnership-building. I pursued these avenues of investigation in two schools and their geographic communities. Future studies may benefit from an examination of students' perspectives, as well as researching urban schools and their practices for successful liaison establishment. In this way, comparisons of the partnership cultivation process across different community types could be investigated, and a greater understanding of the contextual influences on partnering practices could be derived.

In terms of policy and practice, successful partnership establishment is voluntarily initiated most often by educators based on their perceptions of their students' and school's needs and in the absence of legislation or mandates for liaising. Yet from the literature, it is clear that not all educators who want to develop partnerships have been able to do so effectively. Certainly, developing partnerships is not an easy task, given the many contextual influences and the time and energy needed to get them off the ground. Partnering with community members is an avenue through which school personnel may gain access to resources in the community that they do not have within the school. Therefore, the most valuable findings from the research for practitioners are the techniques utilized by the study participants in establishing links. Toward that end, universities would do well to promote partnering as an integral aspect of the teaching profession through preservice courses on the philosophies and approaches to partnering. It is possible that if partnership-building is presented as a core element of education provision and a fundamental means of community involvement in schooling, it is more likely that all children in our communities will have access to what they need, not only within the school but outside of it, in order to grow intellectually, emotionally, socially, and spiritually as people.

Endnotes

[1]For a detailed examination of communities as social creations, see Beck (1999) and Strike (1999, 2002). Ecologists Marten (2001) and Gayden (1974) both describe communities as geographic locales which present opportunities for human interaction via communication and transportation.

[2]In ecological terms, a system is made up of integrated parts that cannot be reduced to smaller entities. The structure and nature of each system are dependent on the interactions and interdependence of the system's parts. Every organism (plants, animals, microorganisms, etc.), and communities of organisms (social systems like schools, families, towns) and ecosystems (the living and non-living environment) are examples of systems.

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