

Spirituality and Respect: Study of a Model School-Church-Community Collaboration

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Abstract

This interpretive case study focused upon the outcomes of a 14-year collaboration between a PreK-4 elementary school serving a high percentage of low-income students and a church located in the same urban neighborhood. The purposes of the investigation were to (1) perform a qualitative study that identified central themes underlying this successful collaboration; (2) effectively integrate the themes into a coherent program theory that characterizes the efforts by stakeholders to impact poverty; and (3) use emerging theory to develop a framework to be adapted by other organizations including – but not restricted to – churches, to effectively address issues of poverty within their communities. Results revealed key aspects of an emerging program theory based upon central themes of respect and spirituality. Collaborative leadership, renewed community, and poverty resources grew from those central themes to produce multiple program outcomes, including: moral purpose, catalytic action, sustainability, collaborative relationships, commitment, educational salience, social knowledge, and poverty understanding and advocacy. These outcomes together characterized the emerging program theory that, while unique to this program, was consistent with much of the literature addressing successful community collaborations designed to impact and cope with poverty. Schools and other community organizations are encouraged to look at this successful collaboration for the building blocks for collaborative program foundations, but also cautioned that many essential ingredients will emerge from the culture that is unique within their school community.

Key Words: collaborative education programs, school community, churches, spirituality, case study, spirituality, respect, faith-based organizations, model

Introduction

For the past 14 years, a church congregation located in a mid-sized, Midwest city, population 112,936 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), has maintained a grassroots collaboration with an elementary school located in their urban neighborhood. Housed in a building over 100 years old, the school struggles to provide the necessary resources to students, the majority of whom live in poverty. On any given day, however, a visitor/researcher arriving at the school finds an old building with students, parents, members of the church, and teachers in an atmosphere of cooperation and respect. A member of the congregation put it this way, "We are in a relationship with the school. Our mission is not to save the school but to love and care for the people, improve their lives, and improve the neighborhood."

Student demographics in the school reveal some interesting patterns. Low income/poverty rates are 97.9% for the school, significantly above the district rate (62.4%) and the state rate (39%). The mobility rate in the school is 22.7%, lower than the district mobility rate (31.6%) and slightly above the state rate (16.8%). As reported by the principal, families formally request that their children remain at the school even after the family has moved outside the school boundaries. Student achievement can be considered strong for a high poverty school. The school has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in two out of the past three years (Interactive Illinois Report Card, 2007). In the year that the school did not make AYP, student achievement was five points below target. The picture that emerges about this school is that despite high poverty in families, student achievement is strong and mobility rates are low, thereby defying one of two demographic factors proven to affect student achievement: poverty and high mobility (Duncan, 1999).

The relationship between the school and church congregation has evolved over the years. What began as a relationship-based, letter-writing initiative in second grade expanded exponentially to include a focus on reading, tutoring, and mentoring, as well as enrichment activities not previously available at the school or in the community. Every student in grades two through four has a family from the congregation who sponsors that child. Over the years other programs emerged as members of the congregation saw needs they could meet. Members of the congregation organized and maintained a funded after-school arts enrichment program; a children's choir; a summer soccer league; tutoring; classroom assistance; donations of all kinds; grade level field trips; holiday

parties and birthday celebrations; neighborhood housing and beautification efforts; school facility beautification; and, finally, individual and church support of children, families, and school staff in crisis. The Pals program emphasizes an intentionally relational partnership between the school and church.

This school-church collaboration has been lauded as successful throughout the community, and has achieved statewide recognition for student academic achievement and volunteer commitment. At the beginning of the 2006-07 school year, the school was designated as an Illinois Spotlight School, a high honor for a school with a 97.5% poverty level. Spotlight Schools are recognized by Northern Illinois University as high-poverty, high-performing schools who are beating the “achievement gap.” Criteria for this award include: (1) Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by No Child Left Behind, (2) a minimum of 50% low income students in the current and previous two years, (3) a minimum of 60% of students met or exceeded state standards in the current year, and (4) a minimum of 50% of students met or exceeded state standards in the previous two years (Billman, 2005). However, exploration of what ingredients have contributed to this perceived success and how those ingredients are linked to the overall mission of the program has not been clearly articulated. Therefore, this collaborative effort between an urban elementary school and neighboring church congregation served as an exemplar suitable for instrumental case study research (Stake, 1995).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the key ingredients that contributed to the success of this program, via the interaction and discourse of key players in the program. Specifically, investigators sought to (1) perform a qualitative study that identified central themes underlying this successful collaboration; (2) effectively integrate the themes into a coherent program theory that characterized the efforts by stakeholders to impact poverty; and (3) use emerging theory to develop a framework to be adapted by other organizations including – but not restricted to – churches, to effectively address issues of poverty within their communities.

Identifying program theory, while very valuable in understanding why programs work, cannot overcome all of the challenges inherent in the evaluation of social and educational programs (Cook, 1997; Patton, 1997; Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999; Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991; Torres, Piontek, & Preskill, 1996). Hacsí (2000) noted that “some programs work because of idiosyncratic factors...which cannot be easily replicated or adapted no matter how well we understand them. Political, financial, and other factors will always

complicate the spread of any program” (p. 76). The interpretive case study approach provided “an accurate but limited understanding” (Stake, 1995, p. 134) of the relationship between this particular congregation and the children and families from this urban school. Researchers investigated the program through the following research questions:

1. How do different stakeholders within and external to the program describe the intended outcomes?
2. How do the different components (activities) link to one another to approach or produce these outcomes?
3. How do key stakeholders characterize the effectiveness of the program?
4. How are the programs experienced by those involved in their implementation?

Methods

Participants

Participants in the study included teachers from the second, third, and fourth grades, church congregation members (including Sunday School class members and members of the program’s task force), four parents, and the three program leaders – two female volunteers from the church and the school principal. Researchers selected participants who had significant involvement in the program; nearly all church volunteers had multiple years of participation, and each of the parents had more than one child who had participated in the program. While a few of the teachers were new to the school (and the collaborative program), the vast majority had several years experience interacting and collaborating with members of the church.

Participation in the study was completely voluntary and required the informed consent of each individual. All aspects of the study conformed to the rules and guidelines established by the university Committee for Use of Human Subjects in Research, and had the committee’s approval prior to and throughout data collection. Participants were either identified by role or assigned pseudonyms, and the program was assigned a pseudonym (Pals program), as well.

Procedures

Researchers gained entry to the program through the program leaders (two volunteers and school principal) and through those in positions of formal authority within the school district and church. The two principal investigators met with the two women from the church who spearheaded the program, as well as with the school principal to describe the nature and intent of the study. The two principal investigators also conducted separate meetings to explain the

research study to the church's senior minister and to the school district superintendent prior to gathering any data from the school or church congregation.

The school principal served as the liaison for researchers in the school. He assisted in scheduling an informational meeting with teachers prior to scheduled interviews or focus groups. The women leaders served as the liaisons to the church and alerted researchers to upcoming program activities at the school, introducing participating volunteers and teachers. They also assisted researchers in scheduling focus group meetings with members of the congregation who volunteered in the program and with the program task force at the church.

Data Sources

Researchers employed multiple strategies to collect qualitative data from program stakeholders, including interviews with key informants (church volunteer leaders, school principal, church volunteer activity coordinator), a series of focus groups (parents, teachers, congregation members), ongoing observations of children during program events, and a comprehensive review of archival documents concerning the establishment and implementation of the collaborative program.

The emergent design of the study allowed questions to follow and flow from participant responses. It also allowed participants to suggest individuals for interviews, upcoming Pal events, or critical documentation which researchers should review to further understand the program. At the conclusion of interviews and focus groups, researchers requested that participants agree to follow-up member checking to confirm researcher accuracy in the summary and interpretation of interview content.

Researchers complemented the observation, interview, and program document data with researcher journals, which included observational notes, methodological notes, theoretical notes, and personal notes (Richardson, 1994, p. 306.) Observational notes included nonverbal communication and/or aspects of the environment, while methodological notes served as cues or reminders to follow-up with a particular individual or certain theme. Theoretical notes represented the constructs or initial concepts observed, and personal notes reflected our individual feelings within the research setting and any connection to our own social history and personal biases.

Data Collection and Analysis

Consistent with Glaser & Strauss (1967), data collection and data analysis occurred almost simultaneously. Researchers collected, transcribed, and reviewed interview and focus group data, generating narrative summaries. Recurring themes were noted and conceptualized early in the data collection

process, and subsequent data and themes were compared to these concepts and recorded on the web-based course management program (Blackboard) site dedicated to the research. Data collection and analysis was an interactive process, rather than linear, but did include completing and revisiting the steps listed below:

1. Audiotaped interviews and focus groups with participants' consent.
2. Documented observational and methodological notes (Richardson, 1994) during observations, interviews, and focus groups.
3. Documented personal and theoretical notes (Richardson, 1994) during observations, interviews, and focus groups.
4. Transcribed interviews and focus groups, and condensed transcripts into brief summaries, noting emerging themes.
5. Continuously compared emerging themes from each interview and focus group to one another.
6. Continuously compared emerging themes to archived documents, noting similar themes.
7. Acknowledged researcher positionality from researcher journals and utilized this information in interpretation.
8. Created a matrix illustrating recurring themes within the context of the four research questions (See Table 1).

No theoretical framework was imposed upon the study in order that the espoused program theory could emerge and would not be constrained by existing theoretical frameworks.

Assumptions and Limitations

The results of this case study deepen our understanding of the components of a successful school-church collaboration. It is important to note that researchers began with the assumption that this was a successful collaboration, and did not seek to either prove or invalidate this success, but rather to learn about the ingredients or components that contribute to this success.

Another assumption integral to the research is that the school-church collaboration is structured as a program. Though it involves volunteers and has expanded to address many needs inherent in the school and within the community, it is not a social service or governmental intervention, but a mediating influence (Glenn, 2000). Review of the archival documents confirms the development, implementation, and evaluation phases of the collaboration; therefore, researchers have described this collaboration as a "program."

While the findings from this case study deepen our understanding of a successful school-church collaboration, the findings are not intended to be generalized to other schools, programs, or communities, any of which exhibit

varied approaches to outreach programming. However, the findings may be used to better understand the nature of effective collaboration and the components integral to its success.

Results

The interview, focus group, and observation data was initially organized within the context of the four research questions. Archival data from program documents supported, and in some cases, further clarified the themes that emerged. Summaries of the findings in response to each research question are listed on the subsequent pages within a results matrix that depicts the themes and outcomes.

Themes and Outcomes

Data analysis revealed many interrelated themes. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, researchers sought to first conceptualize themes, then to explore the relationship of the themes to one another in an effort to illustrate the program theory for this unique collaboration. The themes as they were conceptualized in the data collection appear in Table 1.

Table 1. Results Matrix and Emerging Themes

Key Informant Group	Question 1: Intended Outcomes	Question 2: Components Linkage	Question 3: Effectiveness	Question 4: Informant Experience
Program Leaders	Educational salience Respect Advocacy Spirituality Relationships	Collaborative leadership Sustainability	Renewed community Respect Sustainability	Spirituality Moral purpose
Church Volunteers	Spirituality Relationships Poverty resources Understanding/advocacy	Respect Spirituality Commitment Catalytic action	Spirituality Respect Renewed community Understanding/advocacy	Spirituality Understanding/advocacy
Parents	Educational salience Renewed community Relationships	Commitment Relationships	Respect Sustainability Commitment	Spirituality Respect Renewed community
Teachers	Social knowledge Commitment Relationships	Collaborative leadership Social knowledge	Respect Sustainability	Spirituality Educational salience

Data generated in response to the four research questions revealed two central themes and three program level outcomes. Respect and spirituality represent the central, core themes of the study because every subsequent program outcome was based in some part on these two qualities. Respect, as it was illustrated in this collaborative program, goes beyond simple acknowledgement to characterize the sustained interaction between and among program participants. Best described as affirming, the theme of respect is consistent with Isaacs' (1999) characterization:

At its core, the act of respect invites us to see others as legitimate. Respect means honoring boundaries to the point of protecting them. If you respect someone, you do not withhold yourself or distance yourself from them. Treating people around us with extraordinary respect means seeing them for the potential that they carry within them. (p. 116)

Volunteer leaders expressed and modeled respect toward the children and maintained mutual respect with the families, the principal, and teaching staff. Parents confirmed that the volunteers and parents respected one another and learned from each other. Observations at the school confirmed such an atmosphere. Parents and visitors are greeted immediately when they walk into the office, even if the secretary is juggling many details. Students sitting in the office waiting for resolution of discipline issues are respectfully told what they need to do. Students typically comply, and even though they may need a reminder just a few minutes later, that direction is given in the same manner.

The after-school choir program exemplifies respect. A retired couple active in the Pals program realized the children needed activities during the winter months, so they initiated the choir. This collaboration also involves the park district, principal, and the director of fine arts in the local school district as the board of directors for the choir. Thirty-nine children were involved in the choir when we interviewed this couple, and there is a waiting list to join the choir. The choir performs for local nursing homes, other schools, and community events. The couple takes care of permission slips, washing choir robes, and all the myriad details of getting a group of children to a performance.

This couple visits every family prior to enrolling a child in choir to explain the program, the rules, and expectations. "We go to every family so they know who these people are, and we explain procedures because they are putting their second grader on a van with a bunch of people they don't know, and they go away someplace, where they don't know, and they are supposed to bring them back at a certain time. There is a lot of trust there." Families have responded to the couple with gratitude and support because relationships are formed based upon the assumption that poor parents have the same interests in their children as middle-class parents. The parents are seen as legitimate by the volunteers.

Spirituality was the second central theme touching all program participants. Moore (1992) notes that spirituality is not specifically religious, but rather includes creativity as well as care and compassion for self and others. This definition is consistent with the spirituality described and observed within the program. This breadth and depth reflects a broad perspective of spirituality, in which individuals long to be connected with something larger than life (Palmer, 2000). Moffett calls for “‘spiritualizing education’...as a rallying cry for reform” (1994; p. 19) of American schools, meaning that everyone should be included in efforts to improve conditions for American children of all races, economic conditions, and religious backgrounds. Within the Pals program, spirituality “included expressions based on religious practice, creativity, intuition, wisdom, beliefs, appreciation for others, and compassion” (Lyman, Ashby, & Tripses, 2005, p. 136).

Taken at surface value, the support provided to students by members of the church could be perceived as a means to “make up” in small or large ways for the harsh experiences of students due to poverty. Closer scrutiny revealed a different picture. Moffett (1994) claims spirituality as all-inclusive, meaning not only inclusion of everyone, but also inclusion of the value of total human development. Spirituality, as multiple pathways to develop the body, heart, mind, and spirit at all levels of being for students and members of the congregation, was evident. Because members of the congregation developed relationships with the students, they were transformed beyond simple positive feelings about their charitable acts. Moffett claims that spirituality is the means by which all of us are compelled to focus on ways to improve the world and our relationships within it, the meaning of life, and connections between people of all backgrounds. “Most social problems stem in some way from inequalities, which can be solved by sharing” (p. 26). The poverty experienced by the students in this school certainly fits this assertion. Through their stories, members of the congregation revealed both experience with and an understanding of their spiritual growth through service to these schoolchildren.

Volunteer leaders and congregation members characterized their involvement with the school as a ministry and as expressing their faith within the neighborhood. The principal noted that his involvement in this collaborative program has deepened his faith. He put it this way: “I think that it has deepened my faith, and I found that I kind of look forward to speaking to the church members from the heart about how faith works in our lives.” He described relationships between members of the congregation and students this way: “Some are still maintaining contact with buddies after they are out of high school, incarcerated, and they are still trying to help them get on with their lives.” Members of the Sunday School class that originated the program

14 years ago said they willingly accept the ambivalence of joy and pain in entering into relationships with children whose lives characterized by poverty are too often chaotic and lived in a “survival mode.” One woman described, “We are joyfully burdened.”

A task force member characterized her involvement as a “spiritual calling.” When describing the success of the program, the volunteer leaders acknowledged a strong component that was “intangible,” which they attributed to faith. One volunteer put it this way:

It has been a gift! The relationship with us. We get a lot more out of it than anyone else. I think people who are not involved in things like that are really missing out. Each one of these children is a gift. I would not trade them for anything.

Program parents, too, recognized that church volunteers were “spiritual people.” The parents appreciated that members of the congregation were open to all faiths. They said volunteers model healthy respect rather than imposing their religious beliefs upon others. From the parents’ perspective, they believed the program helped dispel the stigma formerly associated with the neighborhood.

From the two central core themes emerged three program level outcomes: collaborative leadership, renewed community, and poverty resources. Through the juxtaposition of the program level and their associated themes, the program theory began to take form.

Program Theory

Figure 1. Program Theory as Central Themes and Outcomes



The graphic depiction of the program theory (Figure 1) provides a visual representation of the collaboration. While aspects of this program are supported by the literature, the specific configuration of the program and experience of key informants appears to be unique. Respect and spirituality are at the core; program participants agree that without these qualities, the program would not be successful. Emerging from the core themes are the program outcomes: collaborative leadership, renewed community, and poverty resources. These outcomes are not unusual for a school collaboration with a community-based or faith-based organization; however, it is the grounding of these outcomes in spirituality and respect that make this collaboration unique.

Imagine that instead of a static diagram, that the visual depiction of the theory included movement. The core, respect and spirituality, remain fixed, while the inner circle (containing the program outcomes) and outer circle (containing the secondary outcomes) can rotate and assume new positions. In this way, one is able to see that while collaborative leadership is characterized by the secondary outcomes of moral purpose, catalytic action, and sustainability, it is not limited to those outcomes. A clockwise turn of 90 degrees also depicts commitment and relationships as outcomes of collaborative leadership, and represents the inter-relationship and the fluidity of the themes that make up this theory. Discussion of collaborative leadership, renewed community, and poverty resources, and their associated secondary outcomes will correspond to the fixed depiction of the themes as they appear in print, but the reader is encouraged to see this as a fluid representation.

Collaborative leadership revealed moral purpose, catalytic action, and sustainability. *Moral purpose* was exemplified by school and volunteer leaders in the study as not only recognizing right from wrong, but also serving the common good (Fullan, 2003), developing a common sense of purpose (Fullan; Furman, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1992), and developing leadership potential in others (Fullan; Lambert et al., 1995).

The moral purpose of teachers, volunteers, volunteer leaders, and the principal were clearly demonstrated (although not stated in those terms) through all means of data gathering. Particularly evident was the desire to serve the common good, meaning the welfare of students. For members of the congregation, their understanding of social injustices inflicted upon children they came to know and care about created new and often disturbing realities about right and wrong. The principal has created means by which the leadership potential of others is part of the culture. During observations at the school, the principal was in and out of activities, always encouraging and reminding others of the purposes of the school. Teachers and other personnel in the school clearly understood their roles in ways that contributed to the well being of all.

What we have termed “catalytic action” represented efforts to move beyond the bureaucracy and its inherent boundaries to effect action and to challenge the status quo when needed (Fullan, 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Sergiovanni, 1992). Leaders who have the capacity to see beyond the prescriptions of constraints in the environment stemming from bureaucratic policies, scarce resources, oppression, and societal issues reflected in the lives of students to focus clearly on their defined moral purpose can effect dramatic change through catalytic action (Lyman et al., 2005; Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005). The school principal, as well as the volunteer leaders, represent such change agents who know how to work with others to get the job done and have the capacity to work through complex issues with others in ways that energize rather than deplete the commitment of organizational members.

Sustainability referred to program founders’ attention to leadership succession and continued service as community application of their faith. Leaders of the collaboration, particularly the volunteer leaders, expressed concern about sustainability of the program. To some degree their concerns stemmed from maintaining energy to coordinate so many volunteers to fill the needs of children of poverty. But other changes for the school are in store in the future (from the perspective of the time of the study). The principal will retire at the end of the 2006-07 school year. Recently, one of the volunteer leaders announced that she and her husband are leaving the area. The school and program will then have new leadership at the beginning of the 2007-08 school year. The 100+ year old building will be in use for the foreseeable future as the school board and community determine how to best remedy situations created by financial difficulties and very old buildings in the district. So for the time, the old school will remain open. [Note: At the time of publication, the new principal is finishing his second year. The superintendent announced that the school will close at the end of the 2009-10 school year; however, the church intends to continue Pals in an area school (M. Illuzzi, personal communication, April 3, 2009).]

Renewed community applied to both the school community or culture and to the urban community in which it is located. The social and geographic environment of this school/church community is permeated by poverty. Students and their families are predominantly poor and minority (African American and Hispanic). There is little commerce or business evident in the surrounding neighborhood. Typical of the jobless ghettos characteristic of poor urban neighborhoods (Wilson, 1996), the neighborhood surrounding the school has many formerly grand homes now split into apartments.

The socioeconomic status (SES) of families, as well as the socioeconomic landscape of the neighborhood, have been revisited and shown to impact academic achievement (Sirin, 2005). According to Sirin, the SES of parents

reflects the amount and nature of both the resources at home that can be applied toward education and the “social capital” (p. 420) that the students and families can draw upon. The poverty rate within the school district in the current study reflects these findings. Parents have fewer resources and limited social capital to utilize within the school environment.

However, the social environment has changed over the 14 years of the collaboration as members of the congregation have advocated for the families of children attending the school. Two Habitat for Humanity homes have been built for families, largely through the efforts of the congregation. Prior perceptions of some community members that the school’s children could not perform well have been changed as a direct result of the school’s academic success and acknowledgement by the state.

Members of the church have developed new understandings about people living in poverty. Church members stated an appreciation for the cross-cultural relationships developed with the students and their families through their involvement with the school:

You learn to appreciate the struggles they go through. There is only one word for it and that is “survival.”...You can hear about it, but until you experience it, you don’t understand how limiting these obstacles really are. It just reinforces your desire to do this kind of ministry. Whatever you can do to give them a level playing field, to give them a chance to be successful.

Relationships depicted the importance of connection between school personnel, families, and congregation members, as well as the process to develop those connections. This sense of connection and program process is essential to move beyond bureaucratic structures to a more fluid and inclusive approach (Bolman & Deal, 2001; Wheatley, 1999). Producing such relationships is not without challenge. The families within the study have fewer resources and less social capital to apply toward the school, a situation which has been shown to adversely impact families’ relationships with school staff (Sirin, 2005).

However, the relationships are truly the vehicle that makes community renewal possible. Church volunteers saw the power in the relationships and how it changed their views of those living in poverty. Parents commended the relationships within the Pals program and involvement of the church in the school. One parent said “I want my kids to do more than I did as a child.”

Commitment was made to the school and to the neighborhood on the part of the families, coinciding with a commitment to, or renewal of, faith among the congregation members and program and school leaders. This differential experience of commitment and renewal illustrates the spirit that calls individuals to a common purpose (Fullan, 2003; Bolman & Deal, 2001; Sergiovanni,

1992). Teachers noted that the day-in, day-out commitment of the volunteers offers both stability and continuity for the students. Church volunteers identify their commitment to the program as a priority. Though they maintain busy lives, one volunteer noted, "I make time." Parents, likewise, described in detail the different components of the collaboration and reported their gratitude that the programs were consistent year after year.

Poverty resources yielded an understanding of the importance of education and of the school, termed educational salience, as well as social knowledge, understanding of and advocacy for those in poverty. Research on community-based programs in schools confirmed the contributions of such programs (McLaughlin, 2001). Children in poverty, especially children of color, involved in community-based organizations gained in both academic and life skills that continued into adulthood. McLaughlin suggested that schools could do more to strengthen such collaborations, moving beyond merely "shared space."

The collaboration in this study goes far beyond shared space to provide poverty resources. Every child in grades two through four has a one-on-one relationship with a volunteer Pal. Payne and Krabill (2002) suggested that both individuals and organizations bring resources, connections, and hidden rules (of class) together in any collaboration. How these mesh determine how successful that experience will be. Over the years, members of the church have identified needs of the high poverty children and have worked diligently to provide programs and experiences to mediate the effects of poverty in such a way that they do mesh.

One outcome, *social knowledge*, came from the enrichment activities offered through the expanded programming (art, soccer, choir, field trips). Teachers attributed students' increased motivation to their participation in the program and appreciated that activities were age appropriate and clearly grounded in child development principles. These enrichment activities provided a space for parents to interact with the school, the school staff, and with one another in a way that facilitated, rather than hindered, parental involvement. The more traditional parental involvement initiatives in schools (e.g., PTA) have not always facilitated minority parents' voices and power as effectively (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Fine, 1993).

Educational salience referred to viewing education or the school itself in high regard as a part of the community. Payne & Krabill (2002) suggested that education, when viewed by families in poverty, is "valued and revered as abstract, but not as reality" (p. 62). Efforts to bring parents to the school through the Pals program have helped to attack that premise. The school principal described strengthened relationships between families and the school as a result of the program. Parents similarly commented that they believed school can

make a difference for their children. Teachers felt the program contributed to a more positive school culture, increasing the salience of education for all.

Finally, *understanding and advocacy* reflected the new understanding on the part of all participants and new advocacy roles assumed by church members. Families participating in the program experienced aspects of the “social tool-kit” (Duncan, 1999), learning skills and habits and understanding the symbols characteristic of entry into a middle class-designed world (Duncan; Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi Smith, 2001). Congregation members learned the cyclical nature of generational poverty and replaced blame with understanding (Payne et al.; Payne & Ehlig, 1999; Payne & Krabill, 2002). The advocacy role was a new role for many congregation members, and they advocated not only for the students, but for their families, for the struggling school system, and for the faculty and staff within the school.

The emerging program theory emphasized the very necessary and effective outcomes, including collaborative leadership, renewed community, and poverty resources. In addition were the more specific secondary yet interrelated outcomes that characterized these three. However, the true core of this program theory – the central themes – are the qualities of respect and spirituality. The central themes, together with the program level and secondary outcomes, provide a framework for an effective collaboration, as described in the literature.

Discussion and Implications

Components of Collaboration

This program illustrated many of the vital ingredients that contribute to an effective collaboration. In their review of research on collaboration, Mattesich and Monsey (1992) define collaboration as a “mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals...[including] a definition of mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards” (p. 7). They identified 19 factors of collaboration grouped into six categories: environment, membership, process, structure, purpose, and resources. Effective collaborations attend to all factors as they relate to mutually desired outcomes.

The membership of this collaboration has many skills that are used to the benefit of the children of the school. Teachers, obviously, have professional skills that they have used in non-traditional ways to plan with and support volunteers coming into the building frequently to work or visit with children. Volunteers have employed their varied skills to benefit the children. As expressed by the volunteers, their faith is the driving force behind their work in

the school. The school district, park district, community, vocal group, and area nursing homes have expanded “business as usual” to accommodate and work with the volunteers and principal to provide the many experiences for the children. The attitudes of trust exhibited by parents contributed to the success of the collaboration.

The processes and structure of the program have evolved over time. The principal manages the complexities of schedules. The volunteer coordinators manage and coordinate a volunteer pool of over 250 people. The three primary leaders continuously evaluate and refine the program. Over and over we heard, “We used to do it this way, but we learned to do it better.” Teachers, volunteers, and the principal continuously appraise all aspects of the Pals program based upon what works best for the needs of students.

Communication is continuous and is in all ways characterized by respect. When we were gathering data, we contacted the principal to make arrangements to conduct focus groups with the teachers. We intended to hold the groups in the teachers’ lounge during the time when some teachers would typically eat lunch there. The principal stressed the commitment of the teachers to the research project, but said he wanted to check with them first to make sure no one would be inconvenienced by our use of the teachers’ lounge. He e-mailed back a day later to say all was fine. The principal and volunteer leaders are conscientious about getting all events on calendars that are distributed to all involved. Procedures for Pal visits are clearly communicated to Pals at the beginning of the year orientation. Relationships and trust are central to all communications.

The shared purpose of the collaboration is the well being of the students. For members of the congregation, their faith is the foundation for the purpose of the program. The purpose as defined by the principal is constructed more in professional than in spiritual or religious terms. The shared vision for the program has evolved over time. The principal articulated goals in more concrete, attainable ways (increased academic achievement, more parent involvement, improved student behavior) than the volunteer leaders did.

The primary resources are human resources in the form of many people working together for the benefit of the students. Volunteers – in the forms of a Pal for each student, leaders of enrichment experiences, and coordinators to pull this together – make a difference in the school. The teachers’ willingness to participate in planning, program activities, and flexibility that allows volunteers to visit with their Pals during the school day is essential for the success of the program. The principal uses Title I human resources (personnel, advisory board) in conjunction with the program. Funding is provided through generous donations by members of the congregation (each Pal pays \$25 to participate).

American public schools face increasing pressure for collaboration with outside organizations. Collaboration is presented as a means to address many of the perceived or real ills of public education (Johnson, 1998). While this may have benefits, factors that may impede effective collaboration within schools and between other organizations must also be considered. Four structural features of school organization – the stimulus-overload work environment, teacher autonomy norm, control-orientation structures, and level of public vulnerability of schools – are factors that should be considered when planning collaborations (Johnson). Working together, teachers, parents, volunteers, and the principal have committed to find ways to create a collaborative environment where the gains exceed the costs of collaboration and shared influence or leadership is coupled with shared accountability. Based upon shared understandings of the needs of the students, teachers have expanded their professional autonomy to include others who can also help the children (Pounder, 1998).

Based upon our research, the collaboration has been very successful from multiple vantage points. Student achievement, school climate, congregational support and commitment, and teacher engagement are all focused on the well being of students. However, because relational themes of respect and spirituality depend heavily upon the individuals involved, the future of the relationship between the school and the congregation is uncertain. Fullan (2005) identifies eight elements of sustainability: public service with a moral purpose, commitment to changing context at all levels, lateral capacity building through networks, intelligent accountability and vertical relationships, deep learning, dual commitment to short-term and long-term results, cyclical energizing, and finally leadership. We believe all eight elements of sustainability were evident in the program.

The issue here relates to the future. With two of the three key leaders moving on, how will the school and congregation maintain a program that has deep meaning for all stakeholders? Fullan (2005) points to individual leadership based on clear moral purpose and system transformation. District level leadership will be critical. Fullan provides a list of rather complex lessons learned about district work that include some overlap with the building sustainability elements stated previously. The primary lesson we propose to the district is to look carefully at what has worked well in this building serving children whose needs are many. Carefully select the new leader, provide ample support and encouragement coupled with high expectations, and allow time for new relationships characterized by respect and spirituality to grow.

Fullan's ninth lesson deals with external partners (2005). The church is such a partner for this district. Our study clearly reveals that members of the congregation feel strongly about their advocacy roles for their Pals. Through an

adaptive process (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), members of the congregation came to understand poverty very differently. Stereotypes vanished as volunteers got to know their Pals and came to care deeply about the conditions of life experienced by the children. Members of the congregation will likely be invited to participate in planning and implementation for the future. The congregation is advised to understand deeper meanings of plans for the future based upon their 14-year relationship with the school.

Summary

America needs a new and balanced vision for how poverty might be overcome. Instead of just rehashing old ideas, we must seek a comprehensive plan for change, involving every sector of society – not just the government, not just the “market,” not just churches and charities, as the various competing ideological options often suggest. Rather, we should focus on the stories on the ground from the most successful and inspiring projects around the country that are truly making a difference, and listen to new approaches they suggest. (Wallis, 2005, p. 226)

We set out to understand what we believed to be a successful collaboration between a high poverty school and the congregation of a church. All evidence we gathered supports our original assumption that the collaboration enhanced the lives of the students. What we did not anticipate, but came to appreciate, was the benefit of the collaboration to all stakeholders – students, parents, teachers, volunteers from the congregation, and program leaders. Based upon shared values of working together to improve the well being of the students, as well as extraordinary leadership coupled with exquisite attention to detail, this collaboration has resulted in performance beyond all expectations.

The central themes of respect and spirituality, although more difficult to pinpoint than more technical descriptions of an endeavor such as the one in this study, were clearly revealed. Without the trust developed over the years between the school, church members, and families, this collaboration would not be out of the ordinary, and would be indistinguishable from so many other programs imposed upon poor children and families. The collaboration in this study instead was a relationship that emanated from profound respect for all concerned and allowed the spirituality of all to flourish.

The American public has to devise new ways of doing school. The old factory model created over a century ago as society shifted from an agrarian to industrial model no longer works. America exists within a world that is changing more rapidly than most of us can possibly understand. Our mental model

of schools as efficient factories capable of efficiently producing graduates prepared for democratic citizenship and the workplace is not working (Senge, 1990). This outdated model works moderately well for children with middle class support systems and values that align reasonably well with school bureaucracies. The model miserably fails both society and poor children born into a world with neither support nor connections to succeed in American schools as they are currently designed.

“An organization, like a temple, can be seen as a sacred place, an expression of human aspiration, a monument to faith in human possibility” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 405). The story of this school and church provides hope that other communities and schools can come together to “spiritualize education” (Moffett, 1994, p. 19). What has come to pass between this congregation and school transcends gloom and moves forward into new hope for children of poverty, conregants of affluence, and society at risk.

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