

Community Schools: A Transformational Dialectic of Empowerment and Peace

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The purpose of this study is to describe and explain the concept of community schools from a critical theory perspective. It addresses the social, cultural and linguistic as well as the educational needs of the student-family rather than the student apart from the family. Guiding this qualitative study are critical questions with regard to dispositionality, disenfranchisement and the role empowerment theory plays in the community of a sample school, California's Hanshaw Middle School.

To understand the contextual, ecological and social dialectic positionally at work in the school, the surrounding barrio, the district and county, this paper examined the role of collaboration, empowerment, parent involvement and school-linked services. Through action research, based on grounded theory, data were gathered through personal interviews and participant observation.

Alone schools cannot adapt to nor ameliorate the academic and nonacademic barriers presented by the changes in demographics, economics, politics and social welfare. The stark reality of today's youth is that young people are surrounded and imperiled by drugs, gangs, violence, family dissolution and stress, financial hardship and social, racial and linguistic discrepancy which compromise them for academic and social success. A pro-family, community-oriented system of providing education and human services shapes and strengthens the links mandatory to address these needs.

Key Words: community schools, poverty, empowerment

Introduction

The Problem Positioned

Despite all the educational initiatives outlined in programs similar to and in the America 2000 plan and the No Child Left Behind Legislation, conspicuously absent is any discussion regarding racial and cultural diversity and growing poverty among youth—a poverty which has been called the progenitor of school failure, job failure, emotional imbalance, and social rejection. It is a poverty that engulfed one in seven youth in 1970, one in six in 1980, one in five in 1990 and one in four in 2000. Today there are thirteen million young people living in the below-poverty bracket. Likewise, 32 million Americans may lose or do not have health insurance.

Neither did the proposed plans address the differences in levels of family income or community capacity to exert aggressive measures on behalf of their children. Unacknowledged were the layers of choices, of opportunities, of abilities to move in the system, indeed to cause the system to work in their children's behalf. Equal opportunity means far more than equal access.

Acknowledging the presence of the tools that drive the disenfranchisement of the poor and the discourses in language which continue to subjugate them, while asserting no amenable solutions, leaves such families and communities to fend for themselves, without the cultural-linguistic tools to engage in the dominant culture's discourse, and without a map to guide their journey.

Are the political initiatives of state-mandated tests, new models of reform, new content standards, new choices, new high qualifications and skepticism of teacher qualifications wise enough to even address the needs of the poor, the culturally-deprived, youth from neighborhoods infested with destruction, defeatism and damaging physical and social health? Is this a social phenomenon unparalleled by any other comparable current industrialized country? Or is it a decolonization of non-dominant groups of people and an abrogation of authentic social responsibility?

The United States is addressing discrimination regarding race, gender, and disability but has continued to alienate linguistically-different people of color by failing to offer substantive measures beyond remediation and meals, beyond deficiency-oriented rather than school-discriminatory programs. Cultural and racially-linguistic minorities and the plight of the poor demand that schools embrace a revised and enlightened view of the commonality of true community, while recognizing their abandonment and abdication of teaching the tools that lift groups of people, i.e., the poor out of the underclass. To achieve unity of opportunity, engaging in critical discourse and in the dialectic of difference negates conformity and establishes an inevitable pursuit of peace.

Methods

Study Design-Research Strategy

This study is seated in the arena of ethnographic inquiry, is based on grounded theory as understood from an inductive methodological perspective, and it has gathered data from a single-case perspective in Hanshaw Middle School, Modesto, California.

Because of the rich layering of contextual information and artifact at work in any given site, ethnography describes and explains a given culture as it exists within specified time (Janesick, 1991; Spradley, 1980). Ethnography investigates human behavior as it is understood and experienced within that particular subtext, given reality as it is created by the people of concern. Janesick (1991) fluently articulates the identity of ethnographic work to realize the larger picture or to present itself in holistic terms. It is the personal work of scrutinizing relationships within a given definition and solution of problems. It is a work compelled to service the human need. Of the three types of ethnography—comprehensive, topic-oriented and hypothesis-oriented—it is the latter with which this study is concerned.

The research strategy is also referred to as action research which is built on grounded theory. Bogdan & Biklen (1992) define action research as the “systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change” (p. 223). Given one of the basic suppositions upon which this study is built, namely, that research should be transformative for the people of concern as well as for the researcher, action research captures the active role of the researcher directly involved in the cause for which the research is being conducted. Further as Short (1991) explicates the self-reflective stance of action research addresses improvement in three areas: improvement of practice, of the understanding of practice by its practitioners, and of the situation in which the practice occurs.

A strategy which offers our study broader contextual understanding of the people of concern is called ‘grounded theory’. It is the development of theories grounded in empirical data of cultural description, well suited to the arena of ethnography (Spradley, 1980). Empirical evidence produces the actual theory, which is illustrated by characteristic examples of data, rather than using data to prove a priori assumptions.

Case study research is used in order to offer a framework which provides a detailed examination of one setting, a single depository of documents and in this case a single school. The major data-gathering technique is participant observation.

Conduct of the Study

Qualitative research is an interdisciplinary, Trans disciplinary field which uses a multi method approach to research. Its perspective is naturalistic and interpretive with regard to the understanding of human experience. It stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the research and the researcher. Through the inductive method of data analysis, thematic meaning emerges from within the context of the case which is itself the extent of generalization. The use of multiple data gathering strategies finds the case for qualitative research. The paper uses participant observations in-depth and elite interviewing, field notes, an annotated log, detailed description using direct quotes and narrative vignettes with reflective accounts of participants.

Research Analysis

Symbolic interactionism. According to Blumer (1969) an empirical science must respect the nature of the empirical world that is its object of study and the methodological perspective which does so is symbolic interactionism. Through this view meaning arises in the process of interaction between people. The paper also

Interpretive Design and Research Questions

The purpose of the study is to describe and explain the concept of community schools from a critical theory perspective which, in short, asks:

1. Whose voice is left out of the conversation?
2. How did the Great Recession affect young people?
3. What was the school's response to the subsequent nonacademic barriers students experienced?

Demographics of the Disadvantaged

The loosely defined culture of poverty, possesses no democratic mandate, and places the poor in a micro culture that frames its own values and dimensions and expresses itself in non-dominant language. The young become the socially disadvantaged for they are not only imperiled materially but emotionally, linguistically and psychologically. Likewise they are the educationally disadvantaged for neither can they take full advantage of available educational opportunities nor are resources afforded them in an equitable fashion. There is a construction of a world that in many ways wars against them, for like Klees (2009:109) they clearly see the subterfuge of the words spoken of human equality and the reality of systematic discrimination.

Because America has had few institutions to which socio-cultural problems could be addressed, the school has become the major institution that assembles many cultures, languages, heritages, and faiths. Many facets of moral training, historically assumed by the family and the church, are now under the auspices of the school.

When the family does not or cannot feed its children, the schools offer breakfast programs. When families and communities cannot monitor its children, the schools offer after-school programs. Just as the school is the fortress of all that should be, it becomes the forum for everything that isn't. It becomes the arena for potential conflict, because not only are schools expected to do what society refuses, they are expected to espouse all the social and cultural values society itself does not even respect much less practice.

Yet unique to us as a nation and as a collective immigrant peoples is the persistence of the notion of the caring community as played out by teachers and administrators in the local public school. Despite what may well be divisive political polemics as witnessed in the larger social context, particularly given the recent presidential election, it is the school which becomes the catalyst for binding wounds and for propagating health for a people driven by hope and social agency. For neoliberal policies have created a poverty of divisive inequality, prejudice, discrimination and open hostility.

Pluralistic America no longer has a dominant nuclear family. People on welfare are increasingly black, female and young. Parental engagement with young people has been altered by work schedules, salary problems and family strictures. The moral implications of such for public schools are commanding. Alone

schools cannot adapt to the aggressive change—demands in the demographic, economic, political and social welfare arenas, and artificial legislative mandates. Alone, no single institution has the resources or the capacity to address such.

It would seem the very social fabric of the United States as it is woven into our schools has been unraveling since pre-industrial World War II. Alienation and its progeny—children living in poverty, those who are homeless or inadequately housed, kids disconnected and dispossessed born of the environmental genetics which breed and perpetuate disenfranchisement and dissolution—charge contemporary society to forge new connections, collaborative links within the overlapping communities of caring and counsel. By recognizing these contextual interconnections resonant in the whole student-family, by understanding the student from a relational standpoint, one which represents a student-family from a holistic perspective, the structuring of linked-services begins to alter what otherwise would have been poor outcomes on behalf of the nation's low-income students. They begin to reweave the tapestry of promise and of hope.

Simply, teachers recognize that poor students carry with them and present more than educational needs to the classroom, needs which left unmet leave little room for learning. Similarly, health care practitioners acknowledge more than medical needs as they tend a young, pregnant teenage mother. Employment officials see more than job concerns from a family who walks into the welfare office. School-linked services, health and human service agencies as well as the greater community, collaboratively address the entire family and although not a panacea for all that is flawed in our society, they assist the student-family in developing its own strengths, skills and resources and thereby guide the student in the successful process of school and that which follows. It is the building of a countervailing force to oppose oppression and to regain the voice and rights that belong to peoples otherwise socially differenced out of the mainstream dialogue.

The stark reality of today's youth is that young people are surrounded and imperiled by drugs gangs violence, family dissolution and stress, financial hardship and social and linguistic discrepancy, all of which compromise them for academic success. Poor education, health and social outcomes for young people result in part from the inability of current services systems to respond in a timely, coordinated and comprehensive fashion to the multiple and interconnected needs of a child and of her family. They result from the disaffected way in which the capitalistic, dominant culture has rejected their language, their culture, their differences and their families and in turn has denied them full participation in their own pursuit of liberty. A pro-family, community-oriented system of providing education and human services—predicated on a systems change found in re-culturing and rethinking—shapes and strengthens the links mandatory to address these needs.

A Single Case: Hanshaw Middle School

The 51% mobility rate from a school population of 96% Spanish-speaking, low socio-economic students, poses challenges with regard to the continuity of services. Driven by the belief that the most rigorous way in which to affect students' academic performance while addressing their healthy development is to embrace the entire family, and recognizing the fragmented, overlapping and largely ineffective system of meeting the multiple needs of a neighborhood circumscribed by drugs, gang violence and social discrepancy, the school became part of a Comprehensive School-Linked Services initiative.

Through authentic partnerships and creative funding, county agencies sought to become involved in the work of the school. Out stationed social service workers, physicians, dentists, probation officers, family and mental health workers, and various support groups came to be a daily part of the school canvas. Case management teams through the campus family resource center linked the student-family with otherwise inaccessible services. Finding adequate housing and addressing basic daily needs as well as challenging young people to continue in higher education through university partnerships were as much a part of the staff-student-

parent support program as was the insistence on culturally and linguistically competent as well as stimulating curricula.

Positional Relationships

Given that it is not in systems or in process or in position where authentic change lays but in relationships and the language of peace, ethnographic study of Hanshaw Middle School questioned the difference in the full-service paradigm made in the lives of students, parents, faculty, providers and in the general community.

On the county level linked services—built on common need, shared vision, communal hope and the language and action of critical theory empowerment as well as the anticipation of a more just ecological experience for the citizenry—demonstrated the dynamic of people collaborating and enabling students and families to empower themselves.

Locally the full-service paradigm is demonstrative of the belief that authentic change for young people cannot happen without their families, a change which moves parents from being a passive observer, divorced from the conversation of equality and equity as well as from the community of their children, to the role of re-emancipated participatory advocate.

On the building level teachers felt linked-services enabled them to concentrate on their teaching. “I can get down to teaching math. My students will not be in pain They will be fed. The parents will have a new sense of hope. We’ll have parent involvement.” (Interview, October 29, 2015). A 1994 California survey found 95% of the teachers in full-service schools held similar positions. Today there are five national models of community schools and hundreds of schools across the United States.

Students enthusiastically spoke of belonging, being safe, being cared for, being treated in a way which encouraged them to experience themselves in a unique light, to assume position, an identity based on the best of who they were and hoped to become. And while quantitative data are as yet unavailable, statewide students’ grades, their attendance and social responsibility have improved according to the schools’ administrators, teachers and health and human service workers on campus.

For parents who have no transportation, those who are skeptical of institutionalized care-givers, those who only access services given established relational trust, a full-service school is the one place where they enjoy nonthreatening care, where the language of peace and participation are authentic. Here the student-family’s advocate helps them access campus services they need and assists them in negotiating through the complex maze of institutional bureaucracy whose language and operation are left to the dominant culture. Here, linguistic exchanges and descriptions about their worlds function to construct it. Kincheloe notes, “language is not a mirror of society. It is an unstable social practice whose meaning shifts, depending upon the context in which it is used” (2007:23).

Support personnel contend the probability of families accessing services is far greater when they are on a campus to which they already send their children. The on-site school psychologist witnessed a significant increase in the number of families seeking intense counseling services for factors which have placed their children in jeopardy for failing both in school and in securing their rightful place in society. The social worker pointed to the connectedness of familiar issues to classroom success.

The basic apologia undergirding full-service schools’ sense of community was frequently articulated by the program coordinators in terms of school as a shelter, a place of comfort for families which could be manifested in varied ways beyond the academic, a place where families could address and remove the barriers they experienced, a ‘family-healing institution’ where families regained their voice.

Through the district’s generative, reflective and authentically collaborative molding of services, this barrio-neighborhood school is seen by its students, parents and community as a harbinger of safety, of possibility, of hope and of peace. Where we have become a country of the dispossessed and displaced, one which prizes individuality above justice for all, the school district has begun to refashion communities based on

the premises of common moral and ethical values, shared belief and trust, creating interdependence as well as independence, voiced in the language of emancipatory peace, a dialectic of transformation. It is a community of mind, of place and of language forged on the ethos of change and based on the politics of reclamation.

Community Schools and Empowerment

Community schools' philosophy contends if a school could collaboratively offer quality, equitable education at the same site in which access to requisite health, social, cultural and linguistic services for children and families are provided, both educational and psycho-social outcomes would be enhanced. Hanshaw Middle School is a picture of the work of collaboration and of investment, of parochialism, of communal ownership and of empowerment. It serves to advance the discussion of the differential spheres of power inherent in a capitalist democracy and played out in the neighborhood school.

As well, it offers substantive voice to those disenfranchised and marginalized by the social institutions of a majority culture. It challenges the current inefficient and relatively ineffective ways in which services are delivered to marginalized families. It fosters debate within a predominantly white, middle-class dominant culture teaching population with regard to the disparity of shared cultural norms with a growing lower socioeconomic, racially and linguistically diverse student population.

In a neighborhood which breeds disconnectedness, despair and denial, the school has created a community of empowerment, a process of critical thinking that persistently frames questions of people who are not part of the dominant culture (Williams-Boyd, 2004, 209). Empowerment is the language of possibility and peace that attempts to ameliorate inequality through the strength of critical thought and collective struggle. Families become the makers and perpetrators of a new history, one apart from the environment in which they live and yet a history which entitles them to join the larger society on less disproportional terms.

Investing in community schools is compelling only if one believes that across time, changing how services are delivered will improve not only equitable access to services, but the behavior, knowledge and attitudes of students (Packard, 1992). Embracing community schools is convincing if one believes in the progenitive connection between communities and their schools; for just as the Progressive Era attempted to remove schools from politics, thus divorcing them from the communities they were designed to serve (Curcio & Young, 1994), the movement to community schools is a systematic attempt to reconnect both. Recognizedly, it is a re-association born of the travail of reform, reconstruction, reshaping and critical rethinking and repositioning. Much more, it is the dialectical discourse in which all peoples are entitled to engage, that right for which they have struggled.

Conclusion

We can no longer choose to ignore those whom we have marginalized from our society through our conflicted language of difference, for their distress screams across the front pages of our nation's newspapers and crashes pell-mell into the experiences of our everyday lives. For too long society has focused on the family to address and explain away its responsibility for poverty by using a language that lacks peace. Over time, with changing social values and mores, major economic depressions and recessions, and the experience of trying to intervene with families, causal analyses have become less moralistic and simplistic and more sensitive to the contextual obstacles.

If schools are the last hope in accommodating the overlapping and interwoven needs that young people bring with them to the classroom, then we must look for new ways to understand and assist the student-family. We must rethink our relational position within the culture of school. We must reshape our practices and purposes to reflect a philosophical repositioning. We must do more than involve parents, more than refer kids.

Perhaps we must become multiple service brokers for our students and for their families, for the social, emotional, physical and academic growth and development of the nation's young are inextricably linked.

The praxis of collaboration and empowerment as witnessed in the full-services community schools model is a willing yielding of power, a relinquishing of the artificial position of silencing which schools have exercised with regard to parents and to the general community. It is integration rather than alienation, coalition rather than polarization, interdependence rather than dependence, emancipation rather than submission. Where we have become a country of the dispossessed and displaced one which prizes individuality above justice for all, Modesto and schools like it have begun to refashion communities based on the premises of common moral and ethical values, shared belief and trust, creating interdependence and peace. It is a community of mind and of place forged on the Ethos of Change and based on the Politics of Reclamation.

As I left my first visit to a community school, situated in a barrio neighborhood and encircled with barbed wire intended to keep drug dealers out, I heard the students singing the school's song which captured the hope of a generation, caught up in the vision and belief born of possibility and of promise: "Come, young citizens of the world, we are one, we are one... Peace, give us peace, prosperity and love for all mankind. I have but a small dream to smile upon the sun, be free to dance and sing, be free to sing my song to everyone." I felt I had witnessed the dance song of freedom and of peace.

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