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SCHOOL-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION: AN APPROACH TO INTEGRATING AND DEMOCRATIZING KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract:
In this article, I weave practice and theory into a framework for distinguishing between school-community*engagement* and school-community *collaboration*, by considering if and how each approach integrates school- and community-based knowledge. I argue that, while school-community engagement efforts build students' knowledge *of* or *for* their communities, school-community collaboration happens when students co-construct knowledge *with* their communities. Drawing from my own experience as an educator and the academic literature describing school-community partnerships, I offer a brief sketch of each of these three approaches to knowledge-building, in order to spark conversation around the question: How might schools and teachers create more opportunities that transcend school-community engagement and represent true collaboration?

Key Words: school-community collaboration, school-community engagement, school-community partnerships

If viewing students as empty vessels is an act of oppression (Freire, 1968/2015), then failing to see, and failing to help students see, the rich educational resources embedded in their homes and communities is an equally egregious act of epistemological violence. Indeed, even the best-intentioned schools and teachers may overlook the full range of implications of prioritizing school-based, academic knowledge over community-based knowledge: While doing so may help students from marginalized communities access the cultural capital that they will need to "succeed" in society (Bourdieu, 1986), it may also teach them to take a deficit orientation towards their communities by devaluing the funds of knowledge stored in their own lived experiences, and those of their families, neighbors, and ancestors (Moll, 2000). It is therefore imperative that schools and teachers committed to social justice cultivate in students the values, mindsets, and skills required for authentic school-community collaboration.

I use the term *school-community collaboration* to refer to experiences in which (1) school- and community-based knowledge is equally valued and actively integrated, and (2) power is evenly distributed among school and community members (Schutz, 2006). In this essay, I reflect on the first criterion—namely, the knowledge-building process—as a way of shedding light on the second—the distribution of power. Indeed, participation in formal social institutions and processes, like schools and knowledge generation, is the very foundation of power (Arnstein, 1969). School-community collaboration overlaps with but is distinct from *school-community engagement,* which, though more popular in academic literature, tends to denote a less critical and equitable approach to knowledge-building and power-sharing. While school-based community engagement strategies might aim to build students' knowledge *of* or *for* their communities, school-community collaboration strategies push students to co-construct knowledge *with* their communities. This distinction matters because, as Schutz (2006) explains,

improved school-community engagement [or, school-community collaboration] has the potential to contribute not only to academic achievement, but also to an alteration, over time, of schools' [and students'] core understandings of their role in promoting a more equal and more democratic society. (p. 693)

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My interest in school-community collaboration stems from my previous work with a school that I will refer to as Neta Academy[1]. Neta Academy is an all-girls secondary school situated in the outskirts of a large city in West India. According to its mission statement, the school aims to support the educational and economic development of India by cultivating a cadre of empowered female leaders to drive development in the country's most under-resourced areas. To this end, Neta Academy was designed to serve 500 6^{th}–12^{th} grade students, who are recruited by the school and its partner non-governmental organizations from municipal schools across the city. Candidates participate in an application process that evaluates not only their English language and arithmetic skills, but also their vision for themselves, their families, and their communities. Selected students participate in a rigorous curriculum that includes a signature leadership development program.

From 2015–2017, I served as the founding Instructional Lead of Neta Academy's leadership program. In this role, I was

responsible for effectively translating the school's mission statement into a curriculum for the school's Leadership[2] course, which students in every grade level were required to attend twice each week. With this goal in mind, I decided to center the course around a yearly Community Engagement Project (CEP), which aimed to develop students' leadership mindset and skills. I was hoping that, through this project, students would come to understand that leadership is essentially about creating positive change, and that changemaking is a complex and collective endeavor.

To this end, the CEP began with an exploration of the challenges facing students' communities alongside students' individual interests as they intersected with those challenges. After each student had identified a socially and personally important issue (e.g., gender discrimination or water wastage), her first task was to write and conduct surveys and interviews to gather more information about the focal issue from community members. Students then used the data generated by the surveys and interviews to construct root cause maps, in an effort to identify specific underlying problems that they could more directly target. From there, students crafted a vision for and set goals around what they wanted to accomplish, before designing and implementing small-scale, strategic interventions. In class, students participated in a series of workshops in which they were introduced to a variety of changemaking strategies (e.g., looking for positive outliers, articulating a compelling vision), and then asked to apply those strategies to their own projects. Additional class time was used to participate in peer feedback circles, in which students collectively discussed and brainstormed solutions to common obstacles, reflected on what they were learning from the process, and created and maintained portfolios documenting their work.

At the end of the first year, students presented their projects and learnings in a schoolwide showcase. Listening to these presentations, I was impressed by what my students had accomplished over the course of eight months: They had led community classes, written and directed street plays, circulated petitions, arranged meetings with local leaders and, in two unique cases, planted a community garden and dug a community compost pit. Yet, while it was clear to me that they had come to see leadership as changemaking, I was not convinced that the structure of the CEP had pushed students to engage with the collective nature of this process. Indeed, I realized that many students had come to view their interactions with their neighbors in transactional terms, as either a means to obtain important information (e.g., conducting interviews to collect data) or an attempt to gain "followers" (e.g., recruiting participants for a community class). Both cases reinforced the view of students as the sole purveyors of knowledge. In the first case, students extracted information from community members without engaging them in making sense of that information. In the second, students regarded community members as empty vessels to be filled with information about social issues and possible solutions. I saw how this one-sided approach to knowledge-building created a power asymmetry between students and community members, and thereby undermined authentic collaboration. I was left wondering if and how I could support students to take more of a resource orientation towards their communities, and community members to assume the mantle of civic participation—a crucial ingredient in large-scale, sustainable social reform. More actively engaging community members in the CEP seemed to be a promising path to this goal.

Thus, in the second year and iteration of the course, I built a new element into the Leadership curriculum—namely, the Community Action Group (CAG). At the beginning of the CEP, each student was responsible for assembling a CAG of at least three community members representing a range of social locations and perspectives, who she then collaborated with over the course of the project. Students were required to meet with their CAGs at least once a month, in order to teach group members about the changemaking strategies that they had studied in class, to create space for community members to share their tacit knowledge of local issues, and to facilitate a discussion about how to meld formal leadership theory with local wisdom and thus design a more effective social intervention. In this way, I aimed to build a more collaborative learning experience that positioned community members as co-constructors, rather than passive benefactors, of students' leadership education in particular, and local development efforts more broadly (Arnstein, 1969). Indeed, at the end of the second year, many students' presentations featured photos of Neta and non-Neta students, younger siblings, parents, and even grandparents sitting in circles, brainstorming ideas, exchanging perspectives, and planning their interventions. This experience showed me that embedding community collaboration into school-based curriculum can be a powerful tool for personal and social transformation.

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The potential academic, ethical, and social benefits of embedding school-community collaboration into academic curriculum are significant. For one, such collaboration stands to improve student learning outcomes. According to sociocultural learning theory, learning is a deeply contextualized process; therefore, the work of teaching must involve identifying funds of knowledge in students' families and communities to leverage in the classroom (Moll, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Integrating these funds of knowledge into curriculum is one way in which teachers can create more contextually relevant and authentic school-based learning experiences, leading to greater student investment (Cranton, 2012) and, in turn, greater learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975). Yet excavating such cultural wealth is not merely a teacher's professional responsibility; it is their ethical duty. Freire (1998) argues that integrating school- and community-based knowledge is especially crucial for teachers working with marginalized populations, asking: "Why not establish an 'intimate' connection between knowledge considered basic to any school curriculum and knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experience of [...] students as individuals?" (p. 36) By bringing academic knowledge into conversation with the wisdom of lived experience, school-community collaboration challenges

traditional ideas about what/whose knowledge is important, democratizes the knowledge-building process, and thus operates as a mechanism for social transformation.

Despite the many potential benefits of integrating school- and community-based knowledge, the majority of school-community engagement efforts that I have encountered in academic literature serve to build students' knowledge *of* or *for* their communities, rather than to create opportunities for students to co-construct knowledge *with* their communities. Because the active integration of school- and community-based knowledge is a key element of school-community collaboration (Schutz, 2006), such efforts, though important and valuable in other ways, do not represent true collaboration. Drawing from my own experience as a teacher and teacher educator, and from the academic literature describing school-community engagement/collaboration initiatives, I provide a brief description and example of each approach below:

- *Knowledge* of *community:* Community members are seen as a valuable source of information that students can and should learn from. Having students conduct interviews with community members or inviting locally-based guest speakers to school to discuss a given topic are two strategies that align with this approach. The survey distribution and analysis phase of the first iteration of the Community Engagement Project (or CEP, as described above) aimed to build students' knowledge *of* their communities.
- *Knowledge* for *community:* Community members are positioned as passive benefactors of students' learning. Service-learning and youth participatory action research (YPAR) initiatives that support students in tackling local issues on behalf of their communities (e.g., Mirra et al., 2015) exemplify this approach. Teaching students changemaking strategies and having them work independently as they figure out how to apply those strategies—as I did in the first version of the CEP—is a specific example of building students' knowledge *for* their communities.
- *Knowledge* with *community:* Community members serve as co-generators of knowledge. While Felten and Clayton (2011) assert that service-learning has the potential to support such reciprocal learning, there is a lack of illustrative examples of this approach in the literature. Having students assemble and work with Community Action Groups (or CAGs) may be one way of pushing students to create knowledge *with* their communities.

I would classify the first two approaches, which represent a lesser degree of knowledge integration, as school-community engagement, and the third approach, which demands a higher degree of integration, as school-community collaboration. Two characteristics distinguish these three approaches: (1) the directionality of knowledge flow (or who is giving and receiving information), and (2) the purpose of the knowledge-building process. Figure 1 captures the differences among these three approaches along these two salient dimensions. The directionality and purpose of knowledge-building both have important implications for power distribution. Indeed, if "knowledge is power," then examining who is seen as the source of information (directionality) and who benefits from knowledge-building efforts (purpose) is essential for understanding how power is distributed between students and community members. In my view, it is only when knowledge exchange is bidirectional and learning is bilateral that power is evenly shared and school-community partnerships are truly democratic.

Figure 1: Directionality and purpose of knowledge exchange

		Engagement		Collaboration
		Knowledge *of* community	**Knowledge *for* community**	**Knowledge *with* community**
Directionality	**Who is giving information?**	Community members	Student	Student and community members
	Who is receiving information?	Student	Community members	Student and community members
Purpose	**What is the purpose?**	Students' learning	Community's learning	Mutual learning

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In the end, school-community engagement and school-community collaboration are not one and the same. It is important to consider what different partnership efforts and structures explicitly or implicitly communicate about the relationship between school- and community-based knowledge. When we ask ourselves if and how school-community partnerships work to build students' knowledge of, for, or with their communities, I predict that we will begin to see many more instances of school-community engagement. While having students collaborate with community members to co-construct small-scale social interventions represents one humble attempt at facilitating authentic collaboration, I am left wondering: How else might schools and teachers create opportunities that transcend school-community engagement and represent true school-community collaboration?

[1] I have used a pseudonym to protect the school's identity.

[2] I have modified the name of this course to protect the school's identity.

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