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. 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 6th-12th 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
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By bringing marginalized populations, asking: "Why not establish an 'intimate' connection between knowledge considered basic to any (1998) argues that integrating school- and community-based knowledge is especially crucial for teachers working with 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 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.
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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References:


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