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BEYOND THE LONE HERO: PROVIDING SUPPORTS FOR NEW TEACHERS IN HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS

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In this essay we discuss the activities and challenges encountered in a partnership between a faculty of education at a university in southern Ontario and a local school board. The focus of the partnership was increasing student achievement in high-needs schools. We suspect that many teacher educators harbor the idea that the students in high-needs schools will be effectively served if those schools are gradually populated with new teachers who have the skills to engage with school communities and school administrators in a politically savvy way. The belief is that these appropriately skilled lone heroes will initiate programs in every classroom that will eventually lead to increased student engagement and achievement. The graduates of our faculty of education are specifically expected to be those lone heroes. Yet, as teacher educators, we are aware that they will be faced with a system that appears to be at cross-purposes with their good intentions. Perhaps this is the reason why many new teachers in high-needs schools get burned out and leave either a particular school or the school system altogether. However, teacher burnout is a structural problem, not an individual one (Apple, 1990). Thus, effective and sustained change at the classroom level requires support at the systemic level. We will be describing our experiences in providing this systemic support at one school. After describing the context of our research project, we will outline its original aims and some of the lessons learned—namely, that building relationships is the key to a successful school-university partnership.

We come to this research from three related but different experiences. Sarah is a retired high school teacher who is now an assistant professor in the faculty of education. Donna is an elementary school principal, currently on leave from that position while on a three-year teaching assignment with our faculty. Carl is a long time professor at the faculty. We are all of African-Caribbean backgrounds. We approach our research recognizing that society is inequitable and unjust, and that this can only be changed through active, conscientious transformative strategies (Freire, 1998). We also assume that a democratic classroom envi-

ronment cannot function as it should without an education system that prioritizes equality of outcomes through equitable accessibility and social justice practices at all levels of the educational system (Niesz, 2008). Our assumptions are framed by critical theory which proposes that: (1) it is important to acknowledge individuals' everyday experiences and practices and the interlocking relationships of socioeconomic, ethnic, gender, racial, and other factors in their lives; and (2) perceptions of physical appearance and roles contribute to individuals' life circumstances, perspectives and outcomes (Hinchey, 2008; Yosso, 2005). We recognize that schools, as part of an inequitable society, are sites of power and struggle and accordingly influence the ways in which different teachers and students are able to fully participate in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, all stakeholders in the educational system need to be consulted about their experiences, and alternative strategies for addressing issues must be carefully considered (Mitra, 2008; Portelli, Solomon, Barrett & Mujawamariya, 2005).

The study we will be describing arises out of concerns about the 40% dropout rate of Black¹ students in the Toronto District School Board's attempt to put in place an educational program that contributes to improving students' academic performance and achievements. We focus on students who live in a working class, racially diverse immigrant community where the largest proportion of the residents are people of color. It is a densely populated neighborhood with high-rise apartment buildings and town houses that were built in the 1960s. It remains a "reception area" for the increasing number of immigrants and refugees arriving in the city. Under other circumstances, the area would be considered a suburb of Toronto, but given its characteristics, it is referred to as an inner-city neighborhood with urban schools. This collaborative research project also emerges from the 17 years we have spent working in the neighborhood's schools to improve student academic performance, as well as from concerns about how few of the area residents attend our nearby university (James, 2005). In addition, to support efforts to improve those schools, we wanted to do more than just place our candidates in them as student teachers. (These opportunities to work in urban schools [Solomon, Levine-Rasky & Singer, 2003] were also intended to enhance the candidates' training and professional development [Lefever-Davis, Johnson & Pearman, 2007].)

1 In Toronto, this population is largely made up two distinct groups: African-Caribbean immigrants and their descendents, and African immigrants and their descendents.

Envisaging a participatory action research approach, our team included school teachers and principals on temporary assignment at the faculty of education, graduate students (as research assistants), and the classroom teachers who participated in the project, as well as children in the schools, parents, and other community members. The study reported here is part of an ongoing multilayered program of qualitative research in four schools. This article focuses on our activities in one school over the first year of the project. We wanted the research to address program, curriculum, and pedagogical issues as they arose and developed over time. We specifically looked for ways to build and maintain links with the community in an effort to counter the high dropout rates and student disengagement in the schools with which we worked; parent and community engagement is key to improving student outcomes in high-needs schools (Warren, 2005).

Our aim in the project was to: (1) document the development of a neighborhood-centered curriculum designed to increase student and community engagement; and (2) produce a model of university-school collaboration that could then be used in high-needs schools in other communities. We believed that through our partnership we would be able to establish a relationship based on reciprocity and engage with teachers in research that was specific and relevant to the school and community (Crawford, Roberts, & Hickman, 2008; Geiselman, 2008). We began with the assumption that the teachers already had the necessary skills and that the community already had the necessary knowledge, and that all we had to do was facilitate their coming together and pooling their talents.

We were naïve.

The project soon became bogged down in political and cultural differences between the theory-based world of the university and the pragmatic environment of schools (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2008). We believe those differences result from the university faculty's commitment to reflexivity and evidentiary approaches to teaching, on the one hand; and the teachers' and administrators' understanding of their situation in an Ontario school system²; on the other. This system demands that teachers develop individualized approaches to students based on their needs, while imposing standardized testing³ in grades 3, 6, 9, and 10. The result for

2 Each publicly funded school in Ontario is managed by a District School Board which receives 100% of its funding from the Ontario Ministry of Education. The Ministry also dictates curriculum expectations and mandates various initiatives such as standardized testing in literacy and numeracy.

3 Standardized test scores are published on the Ontario Ministry of Education Web site for each grade and school in order to make this information accessible to parents and any other interested person.

teachers and administrators is a sense of surveillance and constraint (Barrett & Pedretti 2006) that outsiders, such as university faculty members, may fail to recognize and accommodate.

The Project

In order to illustrate the effect of those different perspectives, we will be describing the experiences of the research team and participants at Cedarbrook Middle School⁴; chosen because it best exemplified the ways our methodology evolved in response to the school community's particular context. Cedarbrook has 659 students (53% female and 47% male) of the following backgrounds: 30% Caribbean, 30% Southeast Asian, 15% South American, and 25% a variety of others. Fifty-three percent of them are English Language Learners; however, 89% of the students have been living in Canada for more than five years. The students at Cedarbrook Middle School do poorly on standardized tests; less than half perform at grade level.

The school board had allowed the principals to decide which teachers would participate in the project. In order to minimize the disruption that the study might cause, the principal of Cedarbrook had chosen the seventh-grade teachers because (unlike the sixth grade) the seventh grade is not subject to standardized testing, nor (unlike the eighth grade) is it the crucial year before high school. Donna was given primary responsibility for working with the school's administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community members. She elected to attend the seventh-grade team's weekly meetings, which took place during the instructional day and represented the school's attempt to establish job-embedded professional development for the teaching staff. We saw this as a golden opportunity to both facilitate a discussion about student needs and ways to address them and to create opportunities for the university to assist in those endeavors.

The grade-level team had ten members: the teacher-librarian; the literacy coach for the team; the team leader; and teachers of literacy, mathematics, French language, social science, science, arts, and physical education and health. The school leader attended the meetings intermittently. Five females and four males had taught for from a minimum of three to more than fifteen years. The ethno-racial backgrounds of the teachers (five of African-Caribbean descent, two of Italian descent, and one each of Ghanaian, Russian, and South Asian descent)

4 All names of schools and participants are pseudonyms.

reflected the diversity of the student population.

In addition to attending the weekly meetings, members of the seventh-grade team also participated in three professional development institutes on the university campus—two each for a full day during the school year, and one for three days in the summer. During these institutes, the team (which came to be known as the professional learning community) participated in focus groups. During the three-day summer institute, parents and community members were also part of the focus group. A graduate assistant, assigned to work at Cedarbrook with Donna, kept records of all of the meetings and focus groups. She also took field notes while observing activities in the library, hallways, and classrooms.

The research team met periodically to discuss the progress of the project and to compare and contrast emerging themes from audio tapes and classroom observations.⁵ The quotes that follow come from the analysis of field notes from school visits and two focus groups that occurred at the summer institute. The first focus group involved two Cedarbrook teachers in conversation with teachers from another middle school. All the members of the second focus group—three teachers, two community members, the principal, and a vice principal—were from Cedarbrook.

Findings: Silos of Experiences and Meanings

The objective of this school-university partnership was to work with teachers to develop inclusive practices. At Cedarbrook, we had assumed that the seventh-grade team meeting would become a site for critical discussion and analysis of the underlying causes for the student disengagement that had been the impetus for creating the partnership. Through these discussions, this emerging professional learning community could then identify priorities and implement a plan of action. At the meetings, the seventh-grade team discussed student progress, reviewing students' report cards, classroom assessments, and other data sources. However, the conversations often strayed to other topics, such as field trips, the lack of time to complete tasks, and student conduct.

As a result, Donna did not feel that she was making progress with respect to the project's objectives. Our analysis of the situation seemed to show that the

5 We used a constant comparative method of analysis done in four stages: first, themes were identified independently by the graduate assistant assigned to each school; second, themes were shared with the rest of the research team for discussion; third, the original graduate assistant reexamined the transcripts in light of the discussion; and fourth, a second researcher verified and/or critiqued the analysis.

problem was rooted in our failure to account for three aspects of the systems in which we all worked and for our roles within them: (1) time for reflection, (2) competing demands, and (3) isolated and isolating work.

Time for Reflection

The project was designed to give teachers in the school a chance to identify areas of concern and to use university resources to investigate and improve their work with students (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2002). We believed that teachers would accordingly develop theoretical knowledge of education in high-needs schools and urban environments to supplement their practical experience. As researchers have done in other studies (for example, Copeland, 2003; Hawley & Sykes, 2007), we assumed that teachers already possessed a great deal of knowledge and expertise. The university's role was to support their work rather than to provide expert advice and ready-made solutions. However, we failed to take into account the effects that day-to-day concerns could have on the teachers' thinking (Firestone & Louis, 1999).

The weekly meetings at Cedarbrook served as an opportunity to develop a professional learning community (Dufour, 2004). However, there was tension between staff and administrators about approaches to student discipline. As a result, teachers focused on dealing with students' disruptive behavior, leaving very little time for discussion of other issues, such as creating a unified approach to curriculum that addressed the student disengagement that was leading to their disruptive behavior. In other words, the meetings focused on reactions to student behavior rather than discussion of underlying causes and development of proactive solutions.

In discussions about these weekly meetings, we came to realize that, in our enthusiasm to acknowledge the expertise and skills of teachers, parents, and other community members, we had ignored the ways in which the school environment elicited behaviors and habits of mind that had more to do with managing day-to-day than critically examining the bigger picture (Firestone & Louis, 1999; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). As one participant said:

Just being a teacher and the way our job is structured, just having to be somewhere at x time or y time is difficult and everything we do extra has to be in our own personal times but, like, other jobs, like business jobs, companies, people go off for months at a time to be workshopped and refreshed...so that they can sustain their profession. There needs to be some room for that in teaching as well. [Aisha]

This teacher recognized that the ways the system was structured undermined her ability to think and reflect on her work.

It is easy for those of us in the university to assume that teachers are unable to understand the underlying causes of problems because of their lack of theoretical background. However the school system is designed more for efficiency than for contemplation or reflection. In the university environment we enjoy privileges—the freedom to plan our own schedules, learning environments, and areas of intellectual focus—which are not readily available to classroom teachers. Further, classroom management and discipline issues are not significant problems in our work with our students. In contrast, the immediacy of such concerns significantly shaped working relationships between teachers and administrators and within the seventh-grade team.

Competing Demands

At the seventh-grade team meetings, Donna immediately became aware of the tension between teachers and administrators with respect to student discipline. The principal, a veteran of over 25 years, adhered strictly to legislation governing school safety, thus limiting opportunities for the investigation of mitigating circumstances surrounding behavior problems.⁶ Even when vice principals said that they were inclined to take such factors into account, they also noted that the sheer number of incidents limited the time available to do so. Theirs was a strategy of reacting swiftly and consistently rather than proactively and conscientiously. They also said that they often simply didn't have time to inform teachers of what disciplinary action had been taken with a given student. As a result, teachers were frustrated and felt that they were not being taken seriously. As we became more familiar with the dynamic between the school administrators and the staff, we also noticed contradictions related to the project itself.

On the one hand, the administrators understood the value and necessity of the project. On the other, they had developed a model of school management in which maintaining order was the highest priority. In this context, there was the opportunity neither to look at underlying causes of student underachievement nor to be innovative in working together to help increase students' academic success. In other words, classroom teachers and administrators struggled to understand the

6 Ontario legislation pertaining to school safety is explicit but does allow for the principal's and vice principal's discretion when disciplining students.

impact of the discourses of race and poverty on their students because these sorts of considerations were not a priority in the school context.

In Donna's attempts to get school leaders to identify and support inclusive practices responsive to the school-community culture, it became evident that there was no ideological alignment between the school and the project mandate. For example, Cedarbrook administrators seemed to view the project as an intrusion. With regard to members of his staff attending the institutes at the university during school time, one administrator noted:

But the threat of [professional development] is instability in the school. Looking at Cedarbrook this past year and the amount of PD that was allowed by the Ministry and [the university] and this and that created instability for the school...two schools that I worked at where there was a lot of PD [it] created a lot of chaos.

This comment is remarkable for two reasons. First, it describes the university's work in the school with the teachers not just as an inconvenience but as a "threat"—a threat to stability and order. The focus is not on the purpose (student engagement) of these PD sessions (Reeves, 2005) but rather on the (perceived) effect they have on the administrator's ability to maintain order within the school. The administrator faced the problem of having to replace absent teachers with substitute teachers which, in turn, might prove disruptive to (classroom) program consistency. The relationship between substitute teachers and students could indeed be challenging at times. With the homeroom teacher absent from class and involved in PD, student conduct often deteriorated, leading to more disruptive behaviour that he then had to manage. He continued:

We're talking about the threat of PD that is introduced into the school from outside of the school, outside of the principal's management. Where the Ministry is saying it is mandated literacy. [The university] program is mandated.

This administrator was concerned with the programs that were "outside the principal's management" and took teachers away from the classroom, while the school still had to meet the Ministry of Education's expectations for higher literacy scores, which he felt required less disruption to the school day. As much as he wanted to encourage his staff to engage in the professional development in this school board-university project, he also needed to be mindful of pressure from the

school board to live up to the Ministry of Education's projects⁷. The school administrator's struggle to balance competing demands is understandable. As the role of the school leader shifts from principal as instructional leader to principal as manager—responsible for student conduct, filing teacher performance appraisals, organizing classrooms, and monitoring the teaching and nonteaching staff—maintaining order within the school becomes a major preoccupation. In order to cope, the staff and administrative team at Cedarbrook tended to focus on the areas which they felt they could control. This led to the administrative team addressing discipline issues without consulting the teachers, and to teachers simply closing their classroom doors and doing their best.

Isolated and Isolating Work

Why can't teachers step up? Why are you waiting for administration to say, "Do you want to do this?" [Aisha]

Aisha functioned both as an informal leader within the staff and as the official seventh-grade team chair. She was effective in implementing responsive and culturally relevant pedagogy in her classroom. However, her leadership style often sabotaged her efforts to encourage colleagues to follow her example and to reconsider their instructional approaches. For example, at one meeting, once it was clear that the team was reaching consensus regarding the integration of Afrocentric content in history and English, she raised objections about the fact that mathematics was not to receive the same treatment. While her concerns may have been valid, insistence on this matter stalled the team for weeks.

We focus on Aisha not only because she was very vocal about her concerns but also because she was typical in her orientation to teaching. Like many teachers, she did the best she could with her students but teaching can be isolating (LaBoskey, 2006), with few opportunities for teachers to see what their colleagues are doing. Such sharing would be particularly helpful in environments where students live in poverty and resources are scarce. However, in the absence of these opportunities, teachers may wonder if they are the only ones coping. As Aisha put it:

What I find demotivating is the fact that there are a lot of people who

7 The District School Board is responsible for ensuring that the school administrators implement the Ministry's priorities. While school boards have the right to implement locally developed initiatives, because the funding comes from the province, there is always pressure to give provincial initiatives the priority.

should be here who are not here... There needs to be a way that all staff, especially [those] that are attached to [the project], [are] getting this same kind of PD. Because, for me, in order for a school to move forward, in order for a school to be strong, we have to be on the same page... You can't just take the grade 7 team and say, "This is it." It has to be from grade 6, grade 7, grade 8, so that when these kids leave grade 7 for grade 8, it's the same thing...

Aisha was clearly looking for a community of like-minded teachers, but she also wanted more than that. She wanted a systemic shift in focus that recognized the ways in which all parts of the system were interconnected.

She was also impatient:

I think I'm still stuck because after a year with [the university], you come in, you're listening, that's great. But kids are failing right now... I feel a sense of urgency to action... When are we going to implement some hard things to get this moving? It's a frustrating place to be and I guess I am at that place, right now, this morning.

Aisha's concerns about what others were apparently not doing became a barrier to working cooperatively with colleagues and to fully participate in the project. She grew disheartened with the lack of progress and seemed to have come to the conclusion that greater participation and the inclusion of more teachers was the solution. While this was a logical assumption, it ultimately meant that she resisted participating fully in the project herself.

By the end of the first year, Aisha left Cedarbrook to pursue leadership endeavors. We felt that we may have missed an opportunity to collaborate with a teacher who was already working effectively with her own students as she learned to lead her colleagues more productively. The irony is that, in the absence of systemic supports, the strong-willed and independent style that thwarted Aisha's ability to lead may have been necessary to sustain her efforts at serving the needs of her students.

Clearly, the postsecondary and K-12 systems in which the research team and participants functioned had influenced us in ways that needed to be acknowledged if we were to build relationships and realize the objectives of the school-university partnership.

Conclusions

We began the project with the intention of supporting teachers as they developed programs to address the underachievement of their students. We anticipated that given the stated needs and interests of teachers to respond to the expectations of the parents and students, the school would have welcomed us and willingly entered into a collaboration.

Evidently, we had not paid enough attention to the perspective that we, as university faculty, were bringing to the process—a perspective shaped by cultural differences such as our collegial relationships, commitment to research, and attitudes toward pedagogy, the change process, and rewards (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2008). We had failed to recognize the ways in which the lack of time for reflection, competing demands, and isolated and isolating work shaped the day-to-day lives of teachers. To move forward, we have had to accept that, at its core, this project needed to be about relationship building. We now understand that promoting reform within a school means, as Murphy and Hallinger (1993) note, “a growing recognition that change is a process, a quest for improvement rather than a search for a final resting place” (p. 255).

Once relationship and communication became central to our thinking, we changed our strategies. First, we made sure that our priorities shifted from research to providing opportunities for dialogue. Given that the larger project had always been about improving teaching practice, this was a subtle shift, but an important one because it meant that our conception of what constituted success could grow more naturally out of the particular circumstances at each school. For example, at some of the project schools, improving test scores might be a focus. However, at Cedarbrook, parents, community members, and staff agreed that better communication between stakeholders should be the primary goal.

Second, we brought parents and community members into the mix by hosting the summer institute mentioned above. Teachers, students, parents, and community members ate, worked, and chatted together for three days, occasionally breaking into small groups divided by role and school. In response to the teachers' desire to access the university's theoretical expertise, we developed a format whereby a researcher, school board consultant, student group, or community leader would address the whole group, followed by smaller group discussions. At other times, participants would watch a movie produced by community members and/or students, again followed by discussion. In all cases, group members identified which areas to focus on and developed a plan of action. This format provided safe

spaces for both dialogue and community building. Indeed, the small groups offered much of the insight about what needed to be done next in the project. For instance, after the summer institute the school decided to set up an equity committee to collect and identify different inclusive teaching strategies so that the staff would have a common language about best practices. It also decided to develop opportunities for parents to visit the school and created a parent resource center to help families learn how to navigate the school system.

Thus, our focus in the second year of the project continues to be on community building among teachers, parents, and others in the school's neighborhood. We are continuously modifying the plans developed in the summer institute. We have also introduced learning-community sessions every other month, which have dealt with topics such as student resilience, the province's equity policy, and the impact of poverty on health and, by extension, on student engagement. With each learning-community session, more people join the project. The next step is to incorporate students' voices into the project to further enrich the change process.

In the beginning the university faculty had a particular view of the ways in which various aspects of the project might unfold. Having teachers and school administrators as members of the project team provided the range of experiences necessary to respond effectively to the realities of school life. The project mandate evolved over time as the research team adjusted to the issues confronting students, families, teachers, and school leaders working on their own ideas for reform. Thus, although school and university differences complicated our work, we see these complications as contact points for change both within the school and in the project as it responds to and supports the work of change (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2002).

We end this paper recognizing the lone heroes who currently work in high-needs schools under difficult circumstances. We do not seek to dismiss their efforts out of hand; there is no doubt that students benefit from their work. However, as instructors at a faculty of education, we are not only in a position to prepare our graduates to navigate the school system but are also able to begin to address the systemic problems that undermine student achievement. This means developing relationships with schools and school boards, institution to institution, to provide the necessary supports for teachers' inclusive practices. In our view, this two-pronged approach has the potential to increase student engagement and achievement in high-needs schools. Further, it can help prevent those talented teachers who are already doing so much on their own from eventually giving up

and leaving the system. The goal of all the stakeholders in our project is to improve student engagement and achievement in high needs schools. What we have learned, however, is that getting beyond the lone hero scenario requires not only systemic interventions but also acknowledgement of different participants' positions within the system, and respect for the perspectives that they bring to our collective efforts.

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