

The Development of Academic Identity in Community Schools

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Abstract

This article explores the development of academic identity in community schools. It highlights examples of program and services in different school districts in the United States. It also describes different components of effective community schools and how the community is integrated in the life of the school. It uses a case study approach of John Spry Community School in Chicago. Community schools provide on-going learning for all members of the school community. They provide an alignment of systems that foster a productive, collaborative and culturally responsive culture with high academic growth for all learners. All educational stakeholders including parents and community members accept and follow-up with shared accountability standards. This article substantiates effective practices which promote the full participation of the school community in programs and activities.

Keywords: Academic identity, community schools, expand boundaries

Introduction

Academic Identity is developed by how students perceive their school and the connection they feel to their education. Higher student achievement requires strong academic identities and strong academic skills. It connects to the way students perceive themselves as learners. Therefore, it is a critical factor in school achievement, motivation and success. Academic identities are also constructed by social interactions and schools are the primary source for social interactions. Frequently the lack of attainment in academics can be attributed to the difficulty of attempting to develop a positive academic identity when students are inundated with messages about their own labeling.

Academic identity is also influenced by cognitive and non-cognitive factors. These non-cognitive factors include persistence, drive, curiosity, self-control, resilience and self worth. It is also influenced by a strong

understanding of cultural heritage. Students receive significant comfort and support from others who share similar experiences. There are also social variables that affect academic identities. Parents, peers, teachers, community members and other individuals influence students' academic development.

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Community schools attend to the engagement of students regarding their performance so all members of the school community need to understand how best to help students become effective learners. Perseverance and academic behaviors reflect the level of student engagement doing challenging work and completing tasks. Students develop mindsets that in turn influence the degree to which students engage in learning strategies and academic behaviors. Developing students' academic mindsets and teaching them learning strategies improve academic identities. Students' sense of belonging, motivation and self-efficacy will be shaped by the experiences they encounter in their community school. Their interactions in the school community driven by a strong belief about what they can accomplish can have a positive impact in their academic identities. Students' ability and effort will be guided by a growth mindset based on learning opportunities and messages from the school community. Community schools create contexts to support academic success and develop the attitudes necessary. They can also sustain positive impacts in student learning across different contexts as they move from the school to their homes and other community settings.

School culture and environment play a key role in students' performance. Community schools can transform schools from just testable academic skills into the full development of students as learners. The major strength of a community school has to do with collective impact, which begins with the quality of the classroom and extends itself to the community. Community schools change the way community challenges are defined and how resources and assets are integrated to support students. The complimentary skills of community partnerships enhance the critical work of educators in the community schools. The integration of school, family and community fosters the development of student leaders and builds social capital in communities. Community schools can create bonds of reciprocal accountability and grow social capital. They also expand boundaries beyond the school walls to strengthen neighborhoods.

By expanding their boundaries, schools become stronger and engage parents and the community (Chadwick, 2003). Schools have the power to become the focus of the community, connected to daily lives and experiences and thus can share the educational responsibilities with other partners. When the school sees itself as the hub of its community – and perhaps the most

important institution – it sets itself up as a node in a complex web of critical relationships within a community; it also acknowledges its power and uses that power to mobilize groups, provide services, and educate citizens (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002). The list of attributes is nearly endless, but here are a few specific things comprehensive community schools do to serve their neighborhoods:

- *Extended School Days.* When designed in meaningful ways, an extended school day can help at-risk children capitalize on their strengths so they grow up to be competent, caring and responsible. Opportunities can include a variety of academic, social, and recreational activities to accommodate different learning needs and styles.
- *Parent Education.* With a seamless connection between what classroom teachers do during traditional school hours and what happens after school, family engagement can occur through English language courses, parenting courses, voter drives, high school equivalency tutoring, and so forth. Schools can also offer childcare services, and they can tie such classes into extended day activities so that all members of a family can be at school at once. In many cases, schools assume that junior colleges can take care of such needs; however, many parents do not see it as feasible to drive across town or to pay large fees for tuition or childcare. When schools provide these resources, they do so with stronger understandings of local needs.
- *Clinical Partnerships.* Partnerships with health agencies allow schools to offer health fairs, conferences, and physician or dental services to families. By offering space to a physician or dentist, schools can help shape unique healthcare options for their neighborhoods with special attention to the local landscape of insurance, regulations, and costs.
- *Community-building Support.* Family support can be provided through counseling sessions and initiatives on financial education, neighborhood improvement, community safety and immigration rights.
- *Immigration Support.* Especially in neighborhoods populated by immigrants, community schools serve a special function in welcoming diverse cultures and unique talents to our society. In too many communities, as well as the schools within them, new immigrants arrive to the United States only to face an uphill battle in achieving the American dream. Due to current economic pressures, immigration remains in the public eye – and the other schools prefer to hire people who lived in their communities as teachers or staff. Community schools take this sentiment one step further: they are intentional about serving their communities and making their communities desirable places to live. Local residents assist in the hiring of teachers; classes are offered to parents to meet their unique needs; and banks can be brought in to discuss money management.

Unlike schools that are managed from district offices in distant neighborhoods or Education Management Organizations half-way across the country, comprehensive community schools are familiar with the economic climate of their neighborhoods and work to enhance their overall economic vitality. Elementary schools in the Parliament Unified School District in the South Central Los Angeles region provide community-based English tutoring to non-native English speaking parents and other community members; however, instead of teaching English the standard way, teachers – some of whom are also local parents – seek to build parenting and job skills. In one lesson, a group of parents will likely learn tips for checking their children’s homework, as well as strategies for obtaining a job in a tough economic climate. The result, along with many other school-city partnerships, has been a community that is comparatively safe and increasingly attractive for families in the south Los Angeles area.

- *Community Empowerment.* Community schools want to see local residents effectively involved in the life of city and state politics. They don’t just encourage voting; they work to create leadership within and beyond their own neighborhoods. They do not expect their communities to provide them with resources; instead, they work in partnership with families, business, local officials, and agencies to collectively make decisions about the role of the school within the community. Ultimately, they want to give residents in their neighborhoods a voice so that they are full participants in local policies and local institutions. For instance, Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), a community-based organization in Chicago which partners with several schools, empowers families to participate in developing policies to enhance educational opportunities for students such as effective and fair discipline programs and student recess. Another example is the Mikva Challenge: Students who participate in this program in Chicago learn about local and national politics by participating in multiple political campaigns and becoming aware of the needs of residents and communities. Several high schools in Chicago develop partnerships with the Mikva Challenge program in order to provide political empowerment strategies for its students and families.

- *Well-rounded Education:* All publicly-funded schools must adhere to state (and now possibly national) academic standards; they must all work to achieve stringent benchmarks. This does not mean, however, that schools should not listen to the educational needs of their neighborhoods. By seeking to understand – and the implement – the essential aspects of local community life within the school’s curriculum, community schools deliberately seek community reinforcement for the academic agenda of the school. Community schools aim to build trust within their neighborhoods so that they can get a better handle on attendance concerns, post secondary culture,

and safety. They do not consider themselves as coming into the curriculum from outside to “save” or “fix” their children or neighborhoods; instead, they seek to be as much a part of the inside of the community as possible. The Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative (TACSI) operates multiple community schools with comprehensive programs for students, parents and community members. Results demonstrate advances in achievement scores as well as other measures in participating schools. As another example, Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) in Multnomah County, Oregon, developed community learning centers to support youth and increased achievement scores and other positive results such as attendance and discipline.

With much attention paid to successful community-based projects, it is easy for most schools to think that the only way to develop powerful community wrap-around services is through external funding. Community schools, however, know that to sit around and wait for substantial sums of money is both unwise and disempowering. They believe, instead, that genuine partnerships with local businesses, social services, and politicians is ultimately more empowering to residents and families. And they also realize that doing so may be an essential missing piece in the puzzle on student achievement.

A Case Study of a Progressive School Model

John Spry/Community Links High School is a Pre-K-12 community school in Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood serving a majority of immigrant families (Axelroth, 2009; Azcoitia, 2006). Students have flourished with excellent attendance, above average achievement growth and aiming for 100% graduation rate and post-secondary enrollment. It is a school that is open six days a week with a year-round schedule and longer school day. It is a school where families learn together to improve the quality of life in their communities, city, and country.

The school developed with some very unique practices to better accommodate children and families from the local community. Classes begin later in the day for high school students, as they have tended to respond better to a shift in the school schedule. Students participate in a junior ROTC/physical education program that promotes teamwork and self-discipline and fosters respect and leadership.

In traditional high schools, if students are caught in syndromes of failure, summer school is often used to make up failed classes. The Spry/Community Links model allows students to attend school year-round and complete college entrance requirements in three years and three summers of rigorous work.

Partnerships with post-secondary institutions committed to social justice and high expectations for all students provide dual enrollment classes for advanced college credit. A partnership with Chicago's National-Louis University, as well as other colleges and universities, exemplifies this effort. All students are also expected to complete virtual high school classes. A healthy lifestyle for families is promoted with Alivio Medical Center with a clinic located inside the school.

Spry's students are advocates of issues they regard as vital concerns and become involved in planning what they will be doing. Whenever they are involved with applying ideals such as fairness, equity, and justice to their world, their engagement is more powerful. Therefore, service learning opportunities enrich the curriculum and provide leadership development in order to address community needs. For instance, all high school students serve as tutors in the primary grades. They participate in workshops to enhance their skills as reading buddies and increase their knowledge in the teaching of reading. This experience also conveys the message that they are role models within the community. Internships in agencies surrounding the school expand their experiences to serve other members of the community. And their involvement in other local institutions has included advocacy for a neighborhood public library, a play-lot for preschool children, and peace marches. The students realize that their engagement makes a difference, and they are connected to others through mutual work on common goals.

Conclusion

A community school is not just an additional program. It is a way of thinking, acting, and working together so that students can achieve and families and communities are strengthened for the common good. Spry's particular model is influencing the practices of other schools as they launch efforts to create four additional Pre-K through secondary community schools.

A neighborly community which is inclusive and practices self-determination, localization and integration of delivery services makes all people, institutions and organizations co-determinants of learning and achievement. Academic growth integrated with social and emotional development can be the pillars of a productive life as adults.

As Elizabeth Harrison, a foremost organizer of the American kindergarten movement and the founder of National-Louis University, claimed, "True democracy that will give to every person life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness can be attained when the rights of childhood have been established and the guardians of childhood are consecrated to their work."

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