Leadership in School-Community Partnerships

Linda VALLIa*, Amanda STEFANSKIB, Reuben JACOBSONc

a, bUniversity of Maryland, 2311 Benjamin Bldg, College Park, MD, 20742, USA
bCoalition for Community Schools, 4455 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 310, Washington DC 20008, USA

Abstract

Over the decades, a wide variety of educational reforms have attempted to improve schools and student outcomes. School-community partnerships are among the currently popular reform initiatives. In these initiatives, schools expand the traditional educational mission of the school to include health and social services for children and families and to involve the broader community. Such partnerships have been found to support student learning, strengthen schools and families, and help neighbourhoods flourish. Although the research on these partnerships indicates a variety of models, strategies, and purposes, it is clear about one thing: the vital role of leadership. Through a close review of the literature, we developed a typology of four types of partnerships, ranging from least to most comprehensive in purpose and design: Family and Interagency Collaboration, Full-Service Schools, Full-Service Community Schools, and a Community Development Model. These categories provided the framework necessary to comparatively analyse the role of leadership in each of these models. Our analysis indicates the importance of leadership, across all four models, at all levels of the organization. The more comprehensive the model, the more important “cross-boundary” leadership became.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of WCLTA 2013.

Keywords: leadership, school improvement, school-community partnerships

Main text

School-community partnerships have captured the attention of policy-makers, educators, and community leaders as a way to strengthen families, schools, and neighbourhoods. The driving assumption behind these partnerships is that expanding the traditional mission of the school to include health and social services for children and families and involving the broader community will benefit individuals and society. Indeed, such partnerships have been found to support student learning, improve schools, and assist families (Valli, Stefanski, & Jacobson, 2013). But

* Corresponding Author: Linda Valli. Tel.: 301 405-7924; fax: 301 314-9055.
E-mail address: LRV@umd.edu
school-community partnerships vary in purpose and design. During our analysis of the literature, we developed four categories of partnerships, ranging from least to most comprehensive, that helped us determine factors that were critical for success. One strong theme across these four types of partnerships was the vital role of leadership. In this paper, we describe the aspects and type of leadership that support the success of each model, analyse the conditions for that success, and examine barriers to that success. Our goals are to contribute to theoretical understandings of these new forms of leaderships and to promote the conditions for successful partnerships.

1. Theoretical Framework

We differentiate models of school-community partnerships through differences in purpose and organizational implications. The Family and Interagency Collaboration model is the most basic form of partnership. Its purpose is to better coordinate education, social, and health services for students and families and requires organizational commitment. The Full-Service School model aims to do this and more: to coordinate a comprehensive array of services and, as much as possible, offer them at the school site. Full-Service Community Schools continue this model, but add a critical element: family and community input. This is a democratic model, where families and community members are viewed as partners, not simply recipients of services. As such, Full-Service Community Schools require both organizational and cultural change. The Community Development Model is the most comprehensive of the four, aiming not only to assist students and families, but to transform whole neighbourhoods. The breadth of this goal requires inter-organizational and cultural change.

The general theory of action behind these partnership models is that students’ educational prospects will improve if family and community members are more involved in the life of the school and if the school can attend to an array of student and family needs. This reform approach generally involves partnering with community and social service organizations and is supported by both developmental and sociological research. Main developmental theorists, such as Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Comer (Comer, Haynes, Joyner & Ben-Avie, 1996), emphasize the multiple and inter-related dimensions of human development. They also argue for an ecological perspective: examining the environmental contexts that support or impede healthy development and learning. This orientation intersects with sociological perspectives that point to the persistent impact of social and cultural capital on student achievement (Bourdieu, 1986) and argue that good health, family and community support, and employment prospects are key factors in students’ academic success (Jencks, 1992; Rothstein, 2004; Wilson, 1999). Both perspectives lead to the conclusion that schools should not be organized to function as separate institutions, isolated from the community context, which is currently the norm in U.S. public schools, especially those situated in high-poverty neighbourhoods.

This theory of action, however, tells us little about the leadership required to make such partnerships work. The school leadership literature emphasizes the importance of school leaders establishing trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), negotiating consensus and managing crises (Achinstein, 2002), cultivating shared commitments (Newmann et al., 2000), promoting shared decision-making (Marks & Louis, 1999; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004), and being the driver for organizational change (Bryk et al., 2010). We also know that school leaders with these capacities are relatively rare and often hard to keep (Bryk et al., 2010). But partnering with different types of agencies and across organizations, and expanding the mission of the school while protecting the core teaching and learning mission of the school requires a whole new set of skills. While we have descriptions and nascent theories to draw on, we do not yet have a comprehensive picture of these requirements. Through our review of the literature, we begin the process of compiling this picture.

2. Methodology

We initially identified studies related to school-community partnerships by searching through ERIC and EBSCO, using descriptors such as school-community partnerships, full-service schools, community school, wrap around services, and community-school linked services. We then conducted ancestral searches using the articles initially identified for inclusion. Additionally, when articles appeared in themed journal issues, we searched through those in order to identify other sources of information. We used a similar process when particular journals consistently appeared in our search, scanning through several issues manually searching for relevant keywords. A total of 43 articles were identified through these searches. Finally, we contacted several community school agencies to identify relevant studies and documents that had been published for the organization and therefore might not
appear in peer-reviewed journals. We identified 12 additional sources through this process. Once we had compiled the list of articles, we sorted them along two dimensions: (a) the four categories in our typology, and (b) whether they were conceptual articles, empirical studies, or research syntheses. As we searched and reviewed the literature, we tracked similarities and differences in the reform efforts, focusing especially on the concept of leadership.

3. Findings

Moving from the least to the most comprehensive partnership (from the Family/Interagency Collaboration to the Community Development Model) our findings indicate some strong commonalities about leadership across the four models. One similarity is the importance of leadership at several levels of the organization. For example, both school and school district leadership were frequently found to be key factors in the quality and sustainability of partnerships. Another is that the principal was the key person to set a welcoming tone, develops positive working relations, and opens up a shared leadership style of partnership oversight. We also found that demands on school leadership and the need to transform that leadership became more pressing as the partnership models became more comprehensive and complex. In the following paragraphs, we briefly review some of those key findings across the four models.

A study of participants in the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) provided the most thorough data on leadership in the Family and Interagency model. This comparative study of 24 districts and hundreds of schools used HLM and gap analysis to determine the independent and simultaneous contributions of school and district leadership (Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011). The authors found leadership at both the school and school district levels to be key factors in the quality and sustainability of NNPS partnership programs. Melaville (1998) similarly concluded that leadership was a key ingredient to sustaining interagency partnerships: “Initiatives that last are led by people who know where they want to go and have the position, personality and power to make others want to come along” (p. 96). And from their external comparison and case studies, CIS (2010) reports a strong link between leadership and desirable outcomes: “When site coordinators receive strong leadership and strategic direction from their local affiliates the effects on dropout, graduation, and attendance for schools are positive” (p. 20).

Comer’s School Development Program (SDP) is an example of the Full-Service model. From their study of the 11 SDP Detroit schools, Millsap and colleagues (2000) argue that, in addition to developing a shared understanding, three other conditions facilitated efforts of the schools that were full SDP implementers: small school size, school staff that welcomed the reform effort, and the principal’s facilitative leadership and positive working relations within the leadership team. The principal was also a key factor in working with the staff to create an open, inclusive climate. Representative of these findings is the description of one principal: “The principal does play a key leadership role….However, this role does not seem to be one of dominance….the principal allows [the school improvement team] to come to consensus and doesn’t dictate her point of view….It slows down the decision-making process…but you need everyone’s input—and once the decision is made, it’s theirs” (p. 5-3). Moreover, the researchers found that principals could grow into their roles, improve their facilitative skill, and successfully enter into the model after the program had been implemented. Given the transitory nature of educational leadership, this is a specially welcomed finding.

In the Full-Service Community School (FSCS) model, community and parental engagement replace the more traditional ideas of service provision and parental involvement, which typify the previous models. These concepts shift power away from providers and regard families not just as recipients of services but as key players whose leadership is to be cultivated. School administrators provide active support for parents and community members to take on leadership roles and work at cultivating leadership skills among parents and community members (Williams, 2010). As noted by Adams (2010), “An active and diverse community site team and a full-time community school coordinator are structural features of cross-boundary leadership; whereas, a culture of shared influence and responsibility is a normative condition that facilitates effective interactions across role boundaries” (p. 12). Williams’ (2010) study of rural school partnerships found that effective leadership fostered collective responsibility and that the site team structure legitimated shared leadership. Principals were able to work within this model to bring the FSCS vision to life.

In the Community Development model, both the importance and complexity of leadership is captured by the variety of levels and dimensions discussed in the articles. Researchers see the need for both a seasoned school-based leader and a “catalytic” partnership leader who can anticipate opposition and build consensus around viable,
research-based theories of change (Proscio, 2004). They discuss the importance of developing leadership within the community (Gold et al., 2004; Warren et al., 2009) and helping communities become more self-reliant through this leadership development (Oppenheim, 1999). Findings indicate that leadership is both an individual and a collective investment that “bridges the gap in culture and power between parents and educators” (Warren et al., 2009, p. 2211). In their theory of change, Gold and colleagues (2002, 2004) view leadership development, community power, and social capital as the essential components of a community’s capacity to effect school reform. A collective vision is obviously connected to leadership capacity to build consensus and is dependent on providing the space for shared dialogue. Connecting his findings to Senge’s concept of learning organizations, Oppenheim (1999) talks about the importance of “collective ownership over an organization,” noting that a shared vision “attracts commitment, reinforcing and supporting individual vision that is united under a common purpose” (p. 153). McKoy et al. (2011) similarly view shared vision as essential in cultivating leadership and building capacity. Authors of both articles attribute this change to concerted efforts to develop the leadership skills of community members and engage them in exercising that leadership in their local schools and community.

Although the research on these four models does not give a blueprint for leadership development, it does provide descriptive cases as guides and problems to avoid. Calling parent and community engagement is essential to FSCS success, Williams (2010) cautions that schools too frequently reduce involvement to superficial levels and urges a more robust partnership. Authority structures need to be transparent and negotiated. Numerous problems across partnerships were created by unclear authority structures and frequent turnover of leadership. Even a strong full-time coordinator cannot overcome problems created by unclear authority structures and the frequent turnover of staff and leadership. Challenges to implementation can occur across numerous aspects of the partnerships: communication, leadership, organization, and resources.

As Abrams and Gibbs report (2010) report, shared or cross boundary leadership is not easy to put into place. In their study of one FSCS’s planning year, the authors describe some of the conflicts that arose, especially around leadership and authority, which they called the most complex and divisive issue among participants. Although the school had a diverse, site-based board, perceptions about barriers to student achievement, parental participation, and leadership differed markedly between community members and school staff. About leadership, in particular, community members felt that their work wasn’t respected by the principal who, in turn, judged community members as unwilling to give up power. This conflict led to the principal being reassigned. Echoing others, Abrams and Gibbs (2010) emphasize the importance of both community members and school staff receiving training about the new roles these schools require. In addition to training, the authors mention taking time to set specific, realistic goals; acknowledge the challenge; and clarify power sharing boundaries and responsibilities.

4. Conclusion

This paper furthers theoretical and practical understandings of types and dimensions of school-community partnerships, especially implications for leadership. Too often, work in this genre is grouped together under generic headings of “partnerships,” full-service schools,” or “community schools”. Our more carefully delineated analysis allowed us to determine how and why leadership might differ across different models. Through this analysis we were able to fine descriptions of successful efforts, cautionary tales, and recommendations for developing leadership so that the various types of quality school-community partnerships are sustainable. Key to partnership building is clarifying power sharing boundaries and responsibilities as well as recognizing that more comprehensive forms of partnership require a quite radical transformation of traditional school structures and norms.

References