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Understanding the development of community within schools, while critical, has always been problematic. The recent focus on high-stakes standardized testing has only exacerbated this phenomenon and further promoted the dehumanization of students in our schools. An urgent need in research today is to study what strategies are most effective in developing relationships between the school and the home. This qualitative case study examined how one "highly-impacted" elementary school is finding success in developing community relationships.

This study seeks to understand the practical approaches utilized to cultivate connections between the school and its participants and constituents. The intent of the study was also to uncover how strategies are employed to overcome the obstacles that preclude such connections. The findings of the study illuminate how a school community can overcome the obstacles that get in the way of creating meaningful connections with all school constituents. This research has the potential to lend valuable insight into policies and practices educational leaders use to sustain connected learning communities, thereby enhancing the engagement and learning of all school stakeholders.

EDUCATIONAL LEADERS AS CATALYST FOR CONNECTING SCHOOL AND

COMMUNITY: UNCOVERING LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES FOR

FORGING SCHOOL, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

PARTNERSHIPS

by

Aaron Michael Woody

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_____
Committee Chair

<u>To the teachers who have made this dream a reality.</u>

Childhood: Mike & Debbie Woody

My parents cultivated a home that fostered honesty, transparency, and a willingness to set big goals. The best lesson you taught me was in providing the *freedom* to take risks, make mistakes, and keep moving forward. Your many sacrifices and steadfast love have made all the difference.

Community: George & Dorma Lilly

My grandparents taught me the value of *commitment*, honor, and seeing things through to the end. Thank you for all of your enthusiasm even in times that didn't make sense.

School: Carolyn Helbert

Mrs. Helbert taught me that believing in a person's *potential* is far more rewarding than looking only at their performance. The passion you displayed in your teaching, coaching, and counseling inspired me to think I could be like you someday.

The Lean Years: Charles Hylton

My father-in-law has taught me that the glass is *always* half full. I have never known a more optimistic person and a more faithful supporter. Thank you for your countless hours of counsel, your unwavering faith, and for providing the many writing retreats at your mountain home. I couldn't have done this without you.

Adulthood: Kelly Woody

Kelly has taught me the most important lesson of all, that self-sacrificing love is a gift from God. Your willingness and patience to see me through *our* goal has been priceless. You are the quintessential encourager and your love continually renews fresh hope in my soul. I love you!

And to Kyla and Kloe

You are where I find hope in my purpose on this earth; earn any ounce of credibility; and ultimately where I will leave my legacy. I am thankful already for the lessons you *will* teach me! I am so happy to be your dad. I love you!

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.
Psalms 19:14

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of

The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It has become more and more obvious in recent years that our American public education system is struggling to connect with the specific communities, families, and more importantly, the children it serves. This phenomenon is not unique in isolation, or prevalent only in certain geographic locations. Instead, it impacts our urban schools, our affluent neighborhoods, and our rural districts. The approach to solving this challenge must be addressed immediately, or we will see detrimental and irreversible consequences in the not-so-distant future.

In my educational experience as both a student researcher and a professional, I have seen a growing disconnect between schools and the families they serve. As a result, uninvolved constituents and an "us versus them" mentality have become parts of student learning and the overall landscape of public education. With mounting economic challenges compounding almost daily, our neighborhoods are becoming more fragmented and less secure. The American dream of personal peace and affluence is dwindling before our eyes, while the hope of progress through education is being debated in the streets.

While our schools appear to embrace globalization and technological advancements, we continue to struggle to connect all students, parents, and community members to the mission of the school. As a result, individual needs are not addressed, voices are not heard, and ideas are not considered. Educational research clearly indicates

the importance of school, family, and community partnerships in relation to student success. However, there are gaps in understanding how to actually go about making connections with all school stakeholders.

Through this study my hope and intention has been to uncover strategies educational leaders employ to facilitate a change in our current approach to the problem of community disconnect. I wanted to know what specific strategies or programs are employed to help schools bring people together. How might we better understand educational leadership from schools that are finding success in making connections with the community?

I am deeply concerned about the levels to which educators are listening to, and communicating with, families and school stakeholders. The response, often the norm from the educational establishment, is more focus on outcomes like standardized tests, behavior modification, and students operating within the bureaucracy of the system. At the same time, there appear to be growing pockets of schools and school leaders who are making strides in reaching out to the community, and despite the odds perceived against them, making great strides in student progress and community connectedness.

As a principal in a rural, elementary school, I like to think that I have been committed to equity and equality both in speech and behavior. I also hope that I have modeled a passion for connecting students, parents, and school stakeholders to the mission of the school. As a researcher and practitioner, I have been hungry to find out what can be done in a school that is led by educators who are committed to making connections between the school, the family, and the community.

I believe the work of connecting school to the community is critical to my own professional development and scholarly interest. It is my utmost belief that this research could provide an understanding of the strategies used as well as lend a critical awareness of the shortcomings and obstacles leaders face in attempting to develop school, community, and family connections.

Why is the cultivation of community connectedness in schools so important? As the world becomes more transient and the market place becomes more global our students need to understand the value of interdependence, communal awareness, and mutual respect. Unless our students have this paradigm modeled in their school experiences, there is little chance they will uncover the skills necessary to thrive in future endeavors. The quest for understanding and the hope of communicating this concept drives me as an academic and a professional to make meaning of the attached data and to provide strategies for changing the deficient course we are on.

In the coming pages I will outline in detail the problems that led to this investigation as well as the gaps between what exists in the research and what I hoped to uncover. In addition, I will cite the methodological techniques I used to approach the topic and list my research questions and format for conducting the study. As a conclusion, I will describe why I believe this work is relevant and significant to the field of education and who I hope will find it most useful.

Problem Statement

Understanding and developing a framework for community within schools, while critical, has always been problematic. Recent attempts to improve schools through

standardized testing have only exacerbated this phenomenon and further promoted the dehumanization of students in our schools (Nichols & Berliner, 2008). It is my belief that the development of community connections within schools is the most important element in achieving student success.

Before I outline the perspectives of what I believe to be the problems surrounding community disconnect, I want to share how I define an "authentic school community." An authentic school community is a nurturing, supportive, and caring institution that thrives upon the development and continual improvement of student learning. It is a place where honesty, critique, and collaboration are present and free-flowing from all members of the school. The collective interest of these participants is manifested through the positive experiences of each student. This is what ultimately bonds the group to form their community.

Given this definition and the emphasis on collective collaboration, it is obvious that the work of the school cannot be done alone. Instead, educators must have connections with the students and their families and a commitment to include stakeholders from the community in the processes of the school.

While this definition of authenticity as it relates to schooling is based in theory, (Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2007; Schaps, 2003) I have seen it in various forms of practice over the years. I do not believe I am alone in promoting this type of schooling, but I do think few have ever experienced it. Students, parents, and school staff are hungry to be part of such a school. In 2006, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation released a report on the reasons students drop out of school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). In this survey

of students who had already dropped out, 47% reported that school was "uninteresting."

About 70% commented that they didn't feel "inspired" at school.

A special issue of *The Journal of School Health* (September 2004) was devoted to

the findings of the Wingspread Group, a group of 23 researchers, educators and

government leaders who convened at the invitation of Dr. Robert Blum at Johns Hopkins

Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore. Dr. Blum concluded:

> What we have found from our research is that kids who felt connected to school
> . . . smoked less, drank alcohol less, had a later age of sexual debut and attempted
> suicide less. On top of this, from the educational literature, they do better across
> every academic measure we have. As our research expanded we learned that there
> is something in a connection to school that changes the life trajectory. (Blum,
> 2004, p. 4)

This same journal further noted the research emphasized that all school staff,

administrators, teachers, coaches, para-professionals, support personnel, and bus drivers

play an important role in making students feel that they belong in school. It also noted

that the positive effects of school connectedness cut across racial, ethnic, and income

groups.

In a 1997 comprehensive study designed to trace the factors that most influenced

academic achievement, educational researchers Foster W. Cline and Charles Fay of the

Love and Logic Institute found that 6% was attributed to teaching techniques, 16% to

factors out of school control, and 78% to the quality of human interaction in the school.

The study found overwhelming evidence that achievement is directly related to the extent

to which students feel connected to their fellow students, their teachers, and other adults

in the school (Cline & Fay, 1997).

The rush to keep everyone accountable in our schools (primarily in the form of high-stakes testing) has had a variety of effects upon our students. Many believe this narrow approach to basic knowledge and skills has resulted in academic mediocrity and a lack of inspiration (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Stipek, 2006).

This problem has been studied nationally by many researchers and care agents (Goodlad, 1984; Millikan, 2007; Wolk, 2007) as they look at the effects high stakes testing has on our kids. At its core, the research indicates that the philosophy behind these tests limits the purpose and value of schools.

For instance, six years after federal legislation (NCLB) was enacted, "there is not convincing evidence that student learning has increased in any significant ways" (Nichols & Berliner, 2008, p. 14). In contrast, a wealth of documentation indicates that the negative effect of these tests are pervasive and a cause of concern (Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003; Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001). One district teacher went so far as to say, "We are so focused on reading, writing, and mathematics assessments, we don't do any community outreach like visiting the nursing home, or cleaning up a park we had adopted" (Taylor, Shepard, Kinner, & Rosenthal, 2003, p. 51).

To be fair, teachers and administrators naturally focus on teaching skills and attributes that they can readily measure. The current ritualized focus on test scores only exacerbates that tendency. No one asks whether a school makes adequate yearly progress in increasing students' proficiency at caring for others or in giving a project their all. Likewise, multiple-choice tests can't measure such components as caring, tenacity, integrity, and creativity. Yet we know that if educational leaders continue to ignore these

essential skills necessary for success in life, we will find a sea of young people ill-prepared for lives of caring, compassion, and democratic citizenship.

Educators must promote and build meaningful relationships for all students and stakeholders in the community. Starting in elementary school, the quality of student's relationships with their teachers can strongly influence their behavior and their perceptions of school. Researchers have found that all students need caring and competent teachers (Nichols & Berliner, 2008; Stipek, 2006) and that positive relationships between teachers and students can improve individual student achievement (Wimberly, 2002). A belief from students that they can trust, depend upon, and count on the adults in their life in all situations is a key element in community building (Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2007).

I will further develop these points in the next chapter, but the studies cited above are a small sample of the existing research on the critical importance of school in relation to community. They represent the growing body of analysis toward community building and the power of connectedness through relationships. While they all reach the same general conclusion that supports a need for connectedness in schools, there is little practical application to bridge the gap. Hence, we continue to have a difficult time improving our current educational reality in America.

The data are clear that the development of meaningful relationships and a critical voice for students is essential for schools to move forward. Unfortunately, given current practices and trends, educational leaders are often so inundated with test scores, teacher

attrition issues, and day-to-day administrative responsibilities that they overlook the development of such relational themes in schools.

The challenges and demands of school leaders make this topic a significant study within educational leadership. Pipher (2002) states, "Embedded in the word 'community' is the concept of a shared place" (p. 321). Themes of diversity, tolerance, acceptance, justice, and morality are ideas that provide greater awareness and build value of individuality. Fine (2004) states,

> A great deal of research, particularly within the past 30 years, has shown explicitly how schools, despite intentions to the contrary, serve to sort children along social class, race, and gender lines, contributing to massive inequities in educational and, later, health, income, housing, and criminal justice outcomes. (p. viii)

Given the past research, it is practical to say that educators need to look more deeply at the relationships and conscious interactions we are promoting with others.

American public schools (and communities) continue to be fragmented, (arguably more now than in any time in recent history) and disengaged among lines of socio-economics, race, and class (Delpit, 2002). This is the great challenge of the local school as we attempt to instill in children a love of learning and an authentic academic experience while also affirming their individual perspectives and histories.

There is no doubt that existing school improvement efforts are well intentioned and more often than not lead to some enhancement, but they fall short of fundamentally embracing the central issues shown to differentiate successful schools from less successful schools. These issues consist of the nature of relationships between (and

among) students, adults, and all stakeholders in the school, as well as how these voices

intersect with the broad focus of democratic learning.

Prior research on *"professional learning communities"* (Dufour, Eaker, &

Dufour, 2005)*"community building"* (Putnam, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1994) and *"school*

culture" (Kruse & Seashore Lewis, 2009) has identified problems and assumed solutions,

but few meaningful strategies for building level leaders have been developed to overcome

student isolation and parent/stakeholder disconnect.

In the spring of 2008, the Harvard Family Research Project asked the nation's

leading family involvement researchers about the most important research questions

facing the field today and what the future holds for schools and communities. Nancy

Chavkin, Concha Delgado-Gaitan, Nancy Hill, and Anne Henderson all commented that

the most urgent need in research today is to look at what strategies are most effective in

developing relationships between the school and the home. Furthermore, what are

schools "actually doing to engage families" and what can we learn from them (Evaluation

Exchange, 2008). It is my contention that schooling is first and foremost about

relationships between and among students, teachers, and the families it serves, and that

community building must be the basis for school reform that seek to improve teaching

and learning.

My aim in this study is to understand the practical approaches effective teachers

and administrators are using to promote and cultivate connections between the school and

their communities. In addition, I hoped to uncover how these strategies are employed to

overcome the obstacles that preclude such connections. I believe the outcomes of this

study will lend valuable insight into the policies and practices educational leaders use to

sustain connected learning communities, thereby enhancing the engagement and learning

of all school stakeholders.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

Related Research Overview

In the past few years, much emphasis has been placed on making our community aware that our nation is becoming more and more fragmented. Robert Putnam (2000), in *Bowling Alone*, expresses alarm over the loss of community in American culture. He attributes much of it to the emphasis on diversity—people "hunkering down" in their grievance groups and losing a sense of the common good. According to Putnam, to be part of a community, individuality must be downplayed at the expense of what is "just" for everyone. In a deeper sense developing a true community involves a commitment to real *koinonia,* a "deep communion with one another".

Putnam (2000) vividly illustrates our nation's failure to adequately connect in society. We no longer bowl in leagues or commit to teams, choosing instead to withdraw from community and bowl alone. (I share this at the outset because I believe before we approach how to connect in schools, we must recognize that democratic principles and community participation in general are desperately missing). Additionally, in his literature review, Murphy (2001) suggested that educational leaders need new blueprints to become community builders who steward moral visions for school improvement.

In the next few pages, I will outline the terms I am using, how I define them, and what past research has indicated about their importance. Further, I will demonstrate in

both broad and specific terms what challenges hinder schools from engaging the community and what we need to know to begin addressing them. I will use substantive subheadings to organize and emphasize the logical progression of my argument. I will conclude this section with research questions, a conceptual graphic framework, and an explanation of how I see the problem.

What is Meant by "Community"?

Political scientists, sociologists, psychologists and theologians all use the word "community" but mean different things by it. The concept of community has existed since people chose to live together for the mutual benefit of all. Aristotle described community in his work, *Nichomachoean Ethics*, as a place of harmony. The Plymouth, Quaker, and Shaker settlements of our nation's youth described it in democratic ideals such as shared decision-making and equality of voice (Brown & Issacs, 1995, p. 64). John Gardner (1991) describes community as a place where independent individuals engaged in influencing one another within a learning process. Peck (1987) describes another common definition used to define a community as a "social group of organisms sharing an environment, typically with shared interests."

Peter Senge (2000) defines community in this way:

> The term community finds its origin from two Indo-European toots (*kom,* meaning "everyone," and *moin,* meaning "exchange") that came together before recorded history to mean "shared by all." This word evolved into the Latin *communis* meaning "a source" (of water used by many). The French adapted this to *communer*, meaning "to make available to everyone". The ordinal meaning of community in other words, is not a placed defined by boundaries but by the sharing of life. (p. 461)

Looking deeper at the concept, one can better understand what guiding factors make the community connect. One such factor is the culture of an organization. Deal and Peterson (1999) point to the beginnings of the concept of culture and community as first developed by anthropologists to explain differences among tribes, groups, or organizations. Deal and Kennedy (1982) studied corporate culture and found it to be "a system of informal rules that spells out how people are to behave most of the time" (p. 15).

If community exists, both freedom and security are present as well. The community then takes on a life of its own as citizens become free enough to share and secure enough to get along. Research also indicates the shared benefits of inclusion within community. Robert Putnam (2000) states, "The sense of connectedness and formation of social networks comprise what has become known as social capital" (p. 19). He defines social capital as "the collective value of all social networks (who people know) and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other (norms of reciprocity)" (p. 27). Social capital in action can be seen in groups of varying formality including neighborhoods, shops and marketplaces, and any given social institution.

Thomas Sergiovanni (1993) gives further insight into the term. He states, "Communities are collections of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together binded to a set of shared ideas and ideals" (p. 8). He argues that changing the metaphor for schools from "organizations" to "community" can lead to important changes in how schools are run.

Sergiovanni's central argument for community is that relationships become the core focus in schools when they are thought of as communities rather than organizations. Within this framework is the German concept of community. Ferdinand Tonnies ([1887]; 1957) outlines a distinction between *gemeinschaft* (loosely translated as 'community') and *gesellshaft* ('society' in the formal, contractual sense). The idea is that gemeinshchaft is defined as a living organism and as applied to creating a community of learners is not simply "doing something," but instead is "becoming something" (Tonnie, 1957, p. 42).

This argument for relationship building and cultivation of community within our nation's schools has been raised by other researchers who care about democracy and community in our schools. This has been argued critically as Delpit (2002) states,

> What does the country lose when it loses individuals who are comfortable with themselves, cultures that are authentic to themselves, the capacity to pursue sensitivity and some kind of recognition that one has a purpose in life? What is lost to a country that encourages a people to lose their direction in life. (p. 2)

Clearly, we must respect the perspectives of families and children if we are to encourage the individual dignity and strength that comes with freedom.

Barth (1990) argued that schools should be seen as "communities of learners" and that they need to be perceived as "committed above all to discovering conditions that elicit and support human learning and to provide these conditions" (p. 45). While committed to finding support and action educational leaders must welcome a conversation regarding how the school fits with the community. The relationship between the school and the term "community" must be unpacked before moving forward.

How Do the Concepts of School and Community Relate to Each Other?

It is clear that there are many perspectives of and definitions for the term "school community" and while it is challenging to define, it remains the context in which children, school stakeholders, and educators can join together to accomplish greatness. There also appears to be some overlap between what we see as "democratic" and what is seen in the connections between schools and community.

John Dewey (1938) wrote poignantly in his book, *Experience and Education,* "what avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win the ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul?" (p. 49). His assertion and mine is that the greater good of "education" is often sacrificed for the sake of "standardization." A commitment to community partnerships in teaching and learning is what provides richness in accountability.

Reitzug (2007) says this about democracy:

> Democracy is not so much a condition that we achieve, as an ideal toward which we strive. It is more than a form of governance; indeed, it is a way of life. For me, democracy has to do with inquiry, discourse, equity in participation and outcomes, and determining the common good . . . it is a way of living that requires open and widespread flow and critique of ideas, with an overarching commitment to determining and pursuing the common good. (Gause, Reitzug, & Villaverde, 2007, p. 218)

A school community that is connected with its stakeholders is consciously concerned with one individual's or group's interests not being pursued at the expense of other individuals' or groups' interests (Dewey, 1916; Strike, 1993). These school communities require a continual balancing and connecting of the concerns of individuals

with larger community interests (Beane & Apple, 1995). Goodman (1992) notes that democracy and democratic communities must have at their core a "connectionist perspective" that "places one's connection to the lives of all human beings at the center of the educational process" (p. 28).

Many leading scholars in education have advocated for democratic change built on social justice values and against reductionist approaches to schooling (Goodlad, 2004; Kincheloe & Weil, 2004; Murphy, 2005;). They have argued that high-stakes testing is an affront to authentic community building because in reality it only exalts a means-end outcome that marginalizes race, class, and potential (Caputo-Pearl, 2001).

Conversely, schools committed to community partnerships emphasize the worth and value in all stakeholders, regardless of intelligence, position, or power. This belief ultimately encompasses the organizational value that "everyone is responsible for accountability and for school improvement" (Tacheny, 1999, p. 65). Thomas Sergiovanni (1994) stated eloquently,

> Though most principals, superintendents, and teachers have a desire to do better and are working as hard as they can to provide a quality education to every student they serve, the road is rough and the going is slow. The lead villain in this frustrating drama is the loss of community in our schools and in society itself . . . Community building must become the heart of any school improvement effort. (p. xi)

Because the waters become murky when attempting to describe school in relationship to community every school in every town in America believes they work in relation to community. However, not every school works explicitly for the sake of or in

partnership with the community. It is here I want to further develop the concepts of school as they relate to community.

School AS a Community

School *"AS"* a community refers to a school that functions as a community within the confines of the school property. The principal, teachers, school staff, and students operate according to set norms, values, rules, and guidelines that apply only within the school itself. Every school has spoken or assumed variables that define its culture. However, schools that find success *"AS"* a community are those that work within a democratic framework.

Glickman (1998) writes that educational leaders can develop this environment through a commitment to participatory democracy and community democracy. Participatory democracy involves stakeholders taking part in decision-making at the district level while community democracy refers to improving the school through self-regulation and self-evaluation of possible problem areas.

Schaps (2003) states,

> Students in schools with a strong sense of community are more likely to be academically motivated; to act ethically and altruistically; to develop social and emotional competencies; and to avoid a number of problem behaviors, including drug use and violence. (p. 31)

Working toward this kind of school takes focus and discipline on the part of all school personnel, [It is this area of behavioral research in which so much emphasis has recently been placed on the Professional Learning Community model of school improvement (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).] School *"As"* a Community is characterized by a shared

mission, vision, values, and goals (Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000)

and must be lived out daily in the educator's work. These communities value a

collaborative work culture (Barth, 1990; Hargreaves, 2003; Harris, 2002) in which

teachers and staff work together to develop a collective knowledge base.

Within the paradigm of school as community, the student interacts with the

teacher in a high trust role. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) state,

> Trust is a critical factor in bringing about profound improvements to schools as it
> relates primarily to student experience. Without trust, people divert their energy to
> into self-protection and away from learning. Where trust is lacking, people will
> not take the risks necessary to move the school and student achievement forward.
> (p. 49)

To work for the sake of school as community and ultimately for student success,

educators must possess a deep sense of optimism and a passion for the individual dignity

of every child if there is to be any progress.

These educators do not simply teach, control, or run classrooms, they nurture

classroom communities. Nell Noddings' (1995) model of caring describes a nurturing

community that is "safe and supportive, and consists of a close-knit group of people who

have built the capacity to respect each other, even in the midst of profound disagreement"

(as cited in Caine & Caine, 1997, p. 160). But respect must be modeled and developed as

the school progresses as a community because while schools give lip service to

democratic practices and shared decision-making, students and teachers are often

"rewarded for conforming to the norm instead of challenging it" (Giroux, 1988, p. xxxii).

A school that is developing as a community is one that helps encourage risk-taking, tolerance, and an appreciation of diversity and democracy.

School IN the Community

The second form of school community is defined with the term: School *"In"* the community. This refers to an environment in which students are given opportunities to leave the walls of the school building and interact with the larger community. In this scenario, the community acts as a learning lab for teachable experiences.

No school is an island. In fact, schools are the reflection of the social, economic, and political communities in which they exist. "The more that schools can expand their curriculum and instruction outside the school walls, the more students become engaged in learning, the more relevance they see in learning, and the more motivated they become" (Barr & Parrett, 2008, p. 336). From a community perspective, school personnel can help students see the world in a deeper way. They can help students critique social issues, respect and value all members of society, and see others as equals.

By overlooking the concept of school *"In"* the community, schools are missing opportunities to nurture the attributes that are essential to an authentic learning experience. Instead, we as educational practitioners engage in on-going discussions about data and academic achievement while rarely considering how our students will engage in the world after they leave our building.

Hodgkinson (1991) writes that recognizing the importance of the community in relevant student learning began to emerge in the late 1960's, and as a result, students today are learning in banks, museums, courtrooms, zoos, forests, and urban areas of their

communities. A significant amount of research over the past thirty years has

demonstrated how powerful these experiences can be for understanding academic

concepts and for building positive self-esteem and responsibility (Herman, 1999;

Ulichny, 2000). These are the tenets many believe should determine our success or

failure as an educational institution.

School WITH the Community

The third concept of school as it relates to community is school *"With"* the

community. In this model, the school engages in a *partnership* [the core idea and

difference from the other models] with families, community groups, or school

stakeholders to attain better services and learning opportunities for students. This model

is hard to assess because it is rarely seen today as a model of schooling.

How then does the research quantify this kind of school as it relates to

community? Johnson and Mullen (2006) suggest that schools which reflect a

commitment to community connections are those:

> Where the voices of teachers, practitioners, parents, and students are heard. They
> all are active in decision-making and are concerned with diversity and equality.
> There is a strong ethic of care and an importance placed on creating and
> sustaining the community. (p. 86)

Noguera and Wing (2006) state,

> Public schools occupy a special place in American society. They are the only
> institutions that have an obligation to serve all children, regardless of race,
> gender, ability, national origin, religion, or status. Increasingly, our public schools
> are all that remains of the nation's safety net for the poor. (p. ix)

Additional education research is saturated with resources indicating the need for developing community and culture within the local school and district. There is a growing body of research that confirms the direct benefits of building a sense of school based on a partnership with community.

Schools *"With"* community fosters a higher level of trust and positive partnerships between school staff and parents that is much more likely to produce higher student achievement than are schools with poor parent-staff relationships. In one study, researchers analyzed 100 schools that saw large gains in standardized math and reading tests over a five year period and 100 schools that did not make many gains. One out of two schools with high trust levels made significant improvements while only one out of seven schools with low trust levels made such gains. Schools without a trusting community had virtually no chance of making academic gains (Byrk & Schneider, 2002).

When schools work *"With"* the community and build on the strengths of staff-parent partnerships, many positive outcomes become a reality. A recent synthesis of 51 studies on parent involvement found that, "Student achievement increased directly with the extent to which parents were engaged in the school program" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Student test scores increased 40% more in schools with high levels of outreach to the community (including in-person meetings, materials displayed and distributed, and communication process developed by the school) than in schools with low levels of outreach (Westat and Policy Study Associates, 2001).

The quality of the partnership among school, family and community significantly boosts attendance and also contributes to a small but significant improvement in third

graders' reading and writing standardized test scores (Epstein, Clark, Salinas, & Sanders, 1997). Research also finds that when schools engage parents in a way that focuses on their collective wisdom in comprehensive and integrated school programs, the result is stronger relationships between families and schools (Lopez, 2001; Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999; Wang, Oates, & Weishew, 1995).

One of the ways schools and more importantly, teachers, can garner respect and participation from parents is to capitalize on essential learning experiences in the classroom. Oakes and Rogers (2006) present the most effective model I have seen surrounding this concept in their book, *Learning Power: Organizing for Education and Justice.* Throughout this text, the authors present a narrative about the students at Roosevelt High School in California. Due to the instructional practices of many wonderful teachers, these students became engaged and excited about power dynamics in our nation. Through projects and critical reflections exercises, the students not only learned important lessons about democracy, but they became active in the democratic process. In order for the model espoused by Oakes and Rogers (2006) to be a common practice, schools must be committed to their student's academic and cultural needs. This is done by utilizing what many researchers have called "culturally relevant pedagogy."

According to Thompson (2004), a "culturally relevant pedagogy involves educating and empowering students holistically" (p. 206). Rather than experiencing the alienating effects of education upon students' culture of origin, children can celebrate their history within the context of social justice. This helps parents (primarily of color) to also gain an appreciation of the curriculum and instruction.

Teachers and educational leaders can also build stronger connections between home and school by "listening" to student suggestions. This not only creates a more engaging populous, it also improves the content and culture of the school. Pedro Noguera (2008) reflects this position in his book: *The Trouble with Black Boys*. He writes,

> How can schools influence student attitudes and behavior so that they reinforce the importance of learning and positive social development rather than undermining it? One part of the answer is finding ways to include students, on a regular basis, and to listen to their discussions on potential solutions. (p. 70)

Noguera (2008) goes on to say that throughout his many years of research he has consistently experienced the truth that students not only understand the problems but they have tangible solutions. The solutions to many of our "unreachable problems" may not be as out of reach "particularly if we have the courage to listen to those who bear the brunt of our schools' failures" (p. 63). In the school *"With"* the community model these kinds of give and take interactions greatly enhance student learning.

In recent years, social scientists have been actively engaged in showing the many benefits of trusting relationships particularly in what they refer to as "social capital" (Putnam, 2000). Like financial capital, or human capital, social capital can be used as a resource to help individuals or groups achieve their goals. Teachers can be effective "cultural brokers" in helping students and families navigate the troubled waters of our nation's bureaucracies (Pipher, 2002). However, before any of this is possible, trust must be established, proven, and cultivated. Teaching, communicating, and acting in a culturally relevant way can set the foundation for this trust.

Another aspect of schools working *"With"* the community centers on the ability to make meaningful change in the school and the local politics of the system. Hatch (1998) found after studying community engagement, in 32 cities, that the work of partnerships led to more positive attitudes, expectations, and participation among parents, teachers, and students. It also showed a higher-quality learning experience for students, an improved focus on physical conditions within schools, and the collection of more resources for student learning.

In addition, a study of 66 community groups in eight cities organizing to support schools, found that through these partnerships the public and their schools have been able to work together in upgrading facilities, improving school leadership, and bringing in additional resources and programs that improve student learning (Mediratta et al., 2001). Including others in an authentic way creates a give-and-take that can truly benefit schools and communities.

As previously stated, the school identified as working *"With"* the community is a place in which students are encouraged to take risks and build the capacity to face the unknown with confidence. By engaging in relationships with the larger community, schools create opportunities for students to see potential beyond the walls of their classroom. The direct result is an emphasis on how their (the student's) interests, abilities, and goals might contribute to the global landscape.

In essence, schools that work with the community have the potential to generate outcomes related to social growth and experiences full of meaning. They are places where students are taught that all the little things they do each day to provide joy to

others matters. They are places that cultivate the courage to go against the norm and to be satisfied with who you are and what you have done in life. Lastly, they are places that help connect a person to something that is much larger than themselves.

How Do We Define Community Engagement?

Parent involvement and community engagement programs have been assumed to be important contributors to the educational success of all students. As just shown through a variety of research articles and resources, the results are powerful when parents and educational stakeholders work together for the sake of kids. However, not all partnerships are equal and not all levels of engagement are of equal value. In this section I will outline how I see a school *"As," "In,"* and *"With"* a community, working through three levels of community engagement. (I define "engagement" as a conscious choice to be a variable in the organization as opposed to the term "Parent Involvement" because of the various perceptions of what this concept means.)

In her work *School, Family, and Community Partnerships*, Joyce Epstein (2001) says the term "school, family, and community partnerships" is a better term than "parental involvement" because it recognizes that parents, educators, and others in the community share responsibility for student learning and development. The theory of "overlapping spheres of influence" (Epstein, 2001) provides insight into how home, school, and community affect children's education and development. While this is a multi-dimensional concept, research shows that when these forces work together powerful results take place.

For instance, the levels to which parents are involved with a child's education are consistently found to be associated with a child's academic performance (Bogenschneider, 1997; Hara & Burke, 1998; Hill & Craft, 2003; Marcon, 1999; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). Children whose parents are involved in their education have higher levels of academic performance than children whose parents are involved in a lesser degree.

Because research has provided evidence that there is a link between parent involvement and academic achievement, decreases in parent involvement are of particular concern (Ascher, 1988; Baker & Soden, 1998; Chavkin, 1993; Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Epstein, 1996; Floyd, 1998; Petersen, 1989). As stated by Inger (1992),

> There is considerable evidence that parent involvement leads to improved student achievement, better school attendance, and reduced dropout rates, and that these improvements occur regardless of the economic, racial, or cultural background of the family. (p. 1)

Epstein (1996, 2001) proposed six types of parent involvement mainly focusing on the collaboration between the home and the school environments. These six types are the most widely recognized and cited in the literature (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Epstein's (1996, 2001) framework allows for a broad view of parent involvement and serves as the basis for several other conceptualizations of involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

Within this framework, there is special emphasis given to school programming, communication, volunteering, and shared decision making. Epstein (1996) explains that this type of involvement is more indirect as it encourages parents to model civic-minded

and leadership behavior for children and illustrates the important role of the school in the community (Epstein, 1996, 2001). She also shares that involvement should include collaboration between the school and the surrounding community including local businesses, colleges, and agencies to strengthen student learning. Although many research studies continue to use this framework, competing perspectives have emerged to account for other dimensions of parent involvement (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005).

Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) used both parent and teacher reporting to define parent involvement as the dedication of parent resources at home and at school in three domains: (a) behavioral, (b) cognitive-intellectual, and (c) personal involvement (Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991). Unfortunately, none of the listed research models compare the perceptions, attitudes, and emotions of parents to their level of physical involvement. Their attitudes may have a greater impact than their actual participation, but it is almost impossible to gauge this variable.

A parent's socio-economic background, however, does play a decisive role in the formation of student attitudes and habits toward school (Epstein, Clark, Salina, & Sanders, 1997; Lareau, 2000). This variable highlights the critical importance of educational leaders to do whatever it takes to connect with parents for the sake of democracy in the school.

Considering the research above, regarding links between parent involvement and academic achievement, it is important that schools look for ways to engage parents in their child's education. How can schools increase parent involvement, and what are the obstacles that they must overcome to get parents involved? This is the critical piece in

establishing meaningful connections with the community for the sake of students and the

school.

Because "parent involvement" is difficult to define, there is a discrepancy

between how teachers and parents describe it. People have different views of exactly

what parent involvement is (Scribner et al., 1999) and these views are culturally variable

(Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). According to Ascher (1988),

> Parent involvement may easily mean quite different things to people. It can mean
> advocacy: parents sitting on councils and committees, participating in the
> decisions and operation of schools. It can mean parents serving as classroom
> aides, accompanying a class on an outing, or assisting teachers in a variety of
> other ways, either as volunteers or for wages. It can also conjure up images of
> teachers sending home notes to parents, or of parents working on bake sales and
> other projects that bring schools much needed support. Increasingly, parent
> involvement means parents initiating learning activities at home to improve their
> children's performance in school: reading to them, helping them with homework,
> playing educational games, discussing current events, and so on. (p. 109)

Considering that schools and parents may have different views about what

"involvement" entails, it is not unusual that they might have different goals regarding

their involvement.

A third barrier to parental involvement is one that is created by differences

between school culture and home culture. Gibson (2002) states, "there is a disconnect

between school culture and home culture, and schools do not always seem to value the

home culture" (p. 22). Because this is the reality to schools including parents, positive

relationships must be established, cultivated, and maintained for all school constituents to

stay connected. This work must be initiated by school personnel as they strive to find

common interests as it relates to student learning.

How Do Culture, Power, and Equity Impact Community Engagement?

Because past research has indicated that school, family, and community partnerships is a multidimensional concept, the level to which parents get involved raises key challenges to educators desiring a partnership. Each type of involvement requires focused and strategic measures of partnership practices. To do this, educational leaders need to understand the issues related to power and inequity as well as cultural relevancy.

Parent engagement has been hailed as vital to promoting academic success, especially for poor and minority students. However, race and class seem to be the determining factors in how parents at most American schools are treated. Disparities in power and privilege contribute to disparate treatment of parents which in turn contributes to patterns of disparate achievement among students. Parents who do not understand how the system works, who have trouble speaking English, or who are not familiar with the educational vernacular used in schools, can be easily confused, dismissed, or marginalized.

Lightfoot (2004) addresses this as he talks about the so-called logic behind home-school relations:

> Language always creates some possibilities (in this case, parents who are encouraged to give, or volunteer, and parents who are offered help) and constrains or closes off others—such as perceiving low-income or linguistically or culturally diverse families as having valuable resources to give. (p. 105)

In addition to Epstein's work (1996, 2001) other researchers have indicated frameworks that outline the inequalities and cultural challenges that impact parent involvement. These researchers have characterized true parent empowerment in schools

as being that which enables parents to help implement systemic school reform (Cochran,

1987; Cooper, 2007; Fine, 1993; Vincent, 1996). This is actualized through parent

empowerment and what Cochran (1987) calls "power relationships that promote equal

distribution of power in the community as a whole" (p. 108).

Cooper and Christie (2005) outline the challenges schools have in delineating

between parent "power" verses perceptions of parent "involvement." Through an

investigation of social justice components in a parent partnership program, they find that

"educators must work toward recognizing the values, attitudes, and norms that

stakeholders express because they are often culturally relevant, and gender specific"

(Cooper & Christie, 2005, p. 2261).

Cooper (2005) contends that this is particularly important when working with

diverse groups because the cultural and gender differences can enhance or impede the

interpersonal dynamics that make the operation of the program successful. Fine (1993)

stated that "parents enter the contested public sphere of public education typically with

neither resources nor power. They are usually not welcomed, by schools, to the critical

and serious work of rethinking educational structures and practices" (pp. 682-683).

The resistance of educational leaders to bridge these relationships or to empower

stakeholders can increase particularly if they equate parents' disadvantaged economic

status and racial, cultural, or linguistic background with an inability to offer valid and

meaningful input (Cooper & Christie, 2005; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Fine, 1993; Lopez,

2001; Noguera, 2001). It is my belief that the programs schools use to make meaningful

connections with the community must be studied in order to determine who is benefiting

the most from the partnership and how the benefits might be spread more equally to

further benefit the entire community. Without first identifying the real and perceived

challenges of culture, race, gender, equity and power, a school will not fully be able to

bridge relationships with the community.

What are the Obstacles to Community Engagement?

While it is virtually impossible to identify all of the obstacles that keep parents

and other stakeholders from connecting with the school community, research indicates

several key variables that need to be addressed (Amanti, Gonzalez, & Moll, 2005;

Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Duckworth, Feinstein, & Sabates, 2008). The reasons families do

not participate in the business of school range from financial stress and negative

experiences in the past to misunderstandings of the bureaucracy. Few make a choice not

to participate out of sheer apathy (Chavkin, 1993).

In the 2002 research review, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School,*

Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement, Henderson and Mapp

(2002) conclude that there is a positive and convincing relationship between family

involvement and student success regardless of race/ethnicity, class, or parent's level of

education. However, they identify that the school itself is often the impediment to these

connections (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Before looking at external obstacles, schools

and their leadership must be willing to look internally for ways they can better connect

with parents and community members.

The National Parent Teacher Association identifies seven primary obstacles that

prevent parents from better connecting with the school. They include the following:

1. Not knowing how to contribute—some parents believe they have talents but don't know whether they are needed or how to contribute them to the school.

2. Not understanding the school system—Many parents are unfamiliar with the system and therefore do know how they can become involved.

3. Parents in need—Parents without adequate resources often feel overwhelmed, and are working to address their own needs for food, shelter, and clothing before they can see clear to become more involved in their child's education.

4. Child Care—Most schools do not consider childcare needs for meetings or school functions.

5. Language Barriers—Parents who don't speak English may not understand newsletters, fliers, or speakers at meetings.

6. Special Needs—Parents with disabilities find it difficult or feel uncomfortable attending or contributing at meetings.

7. Transportation—Lack of transportation or access to parking at the school keeps parents from visiting or attending school activities (National PTA, 2008).

<div align="center">**Relationships are the Conduit to Building Connections**</div>

If we know anything from research on school, family, and community partnerships it is that relationships definitely matter. When we attempt to enter our child's or their family's world to provide help or seek assistance without first connecting with them relationally, we will most likely find resistance.

Kathleen Cushman (2003) asked high school students questions about how teachers can better connect with them. In her moving work: *Fires in the Bathroom,* one student mused:

> Students recognize that a strong relationship between home and school is meaningful to my learning. To make this relationship successful, a teacher must

first clearly understand the student's home situation to know how, and when to include family in the dialogue about a student's development. (p. 56)

One of the greatest tools an educator can use is the ability to reach out with genuine empathy toward students and families.

In the article, *"Leadership in the Twenty-First Century,"* Kathleen Allen (1998) defines the purpose of organizational leadership as threefold:

To create a supportive environment where people can thrive, grow, and live in peace with one another; to promote harmony with nature and there by provide sustainability for future generations; and to create communities of reciprocal care and shared responsibility. A place where every person matters and each person's role and dignity is respected and supported. (p. 1)

A leader then must see all individuals as important to the overall success of the organization and its purpose. Relationships are a key variable in this equation. School systems derive their effectiveness from the interaction of their elements rather than from what the elements do independent of the system. Therefore, efforts to improve the individual, as if it were not part of the whole, are futile. Instead, as Acoff (1999) said, "the entire system must be taken into account so that the performance of the system is not significantly weakened" (p. 134).

In a report completed in June 2002, the *Institute for American Values* sponsored a study on the impact of authoritative community. The subsequent report titled *"Hardwired to Connect"* lends compelling arguments. The key finding of the study was that within each person is a deep and meaningful desire for authentic relationship. In fact, it is so strong that our values, beliefs, and actions are ultimately birthed out of the relationships

to which we cling. Figure 1 was borne out of this research, and illustrates the foundation

and effect that relationships have upon our beliefs and actions.
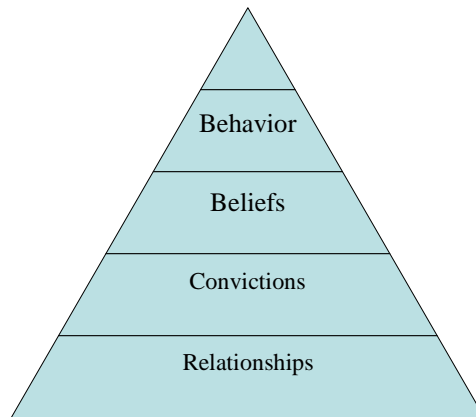
Figure 1. *How Relationships Shape Behavior (Commission on Children at Risk, 2002)*

Given this information and summation of research, it is clear that in order to make

education more of a pilgrimage to reality, adults must cultivate and sustain personal

connections with children and their parents. Teachers and principals must relate to both

of these groups as human beings worthy of dignity and respect regardless of the

circumstances. Concha Delgado-Gaitan (2001) states,

> No simple formula for exist for becoming an empowered individual, family, or
> community. But what is true is that strength and power reside in everyone
> regardless of color, religion, socioeconomic standing, place of residence,
> ethnicity, or educational attainment. (p. 53)

In an era of accountability and "No Child Left Behind" Legislation, test scores

cannot be "all that matter." Establishing a commitment to community connection requires

effort, time, and the cultivation of civil values. Just as the best predictor of students'

effort and engagement in school is the relationship they have with their teachers, so

should administrators gauge the effectiveness of the school in its relationship with parents and community members. To promote high academic standards, educational leaders need to create supportive social contexts and develop positive relationships with all stakeholders.

How the Research Shapes My Perspective

I use the previous frameworks to develop my personal understanding of parent/ community partnerships and to demonstrate how I see the levels of engagement. These frameworks help move the related research from a broad scope to a specific one and help clarify the variables I have studied. They include the following:

1. Cursory Involvement or partnership—In this level of engagement, the school and the parent / community stakeholder agree to share information or resources for the sake of students. This is the base level of engagement as individuals move from a required status of being included to some form of voluntary participation.

2. Meaningful Relationship—between the partners of the school. In this stage, mutual respect and dependence upon one another exist as it pertains to student participation and learning.

3. Quality Connections—exist when individuals move from a basic partnership to a meaningful relationship wherein a deeper connection is found. This quality of relationship is profoundly caring and is filled with acceptance and belonging.

I will return to this framework as I conceptualize my study in the coming pages.

Research Review Summary

Our kids live in a complex and sometimes confusing world. They often live under extreme pressure and demanding expectations—many times self-imposed—to try to compete in our consumer-driven world. Despite our most noble attempts at the contrary, our children are put to the test daily by a variety of external forces. Effective educational leadership requires open eyes and the courage to confront truths we cannot defend. As active administrators and district systems leaders reflect on practice, there should be a greater emphasis on developing meaningful connections with the community in our public schools.

These connections can develop as educators' model the freedom to celebrate dignity, relevance, individual sanctity, and collective respect, a way to ultimately revolutionize the way we look at our world. Rosenberg (2004) states,

> Part of our responsibility as teachers and teacher educators is to stay in the dance, finding ways to become critical of our own educations so that one day we can be creators of caring classrooms for those who may not be like us in terms of race, class, or culture. (p. 259)

This idea must include creative strategies, practices, and procedures that effective leaders can employ.

Unfortunately, educators sacrifice connections with community in an attempt to manufacture achievement through high-stakes testing (Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003; Nichols & Berliner, 2007, 2008; Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001). The growing tendency is to view the purpose of schooling as promoting academic achievement and holding schools "accountable" via annual high-stakes tests. If educators are going to be agents of change,

they must begin to see the reality in which our students exist. They must engage that reality and use their power to be a force of justice.

Educational leaders wield great influence, and this influence must be used to model morality, authenticity, and excellence. Todd Whitaker (2003) believes that when the principal sneezes, the entire school gets a cold. This is also true for the superintendent and the classroom teacher. Everyone engaged in schooling must set a priority to develop communities of care and an ethic of justice in order for our communities to come together and move forward.

In the previous pages I have shared the definitions of terms and the variables that are considered important steps to establishing community connections. Given this information, an educational leader may know what needs to be done but the gaps to completing the process exist because the current research does not indicate how to do it.

Conceptual Framework

The accompanying pages outline a flow chart that demonstrates how the ideas for this study have developed. According to Joseph Maxwell (2005) "the conceptual framework for your study—the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, and theories—is a key part of the design and direction you will go" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 33).

In Figure 2, I have drafted a diagram of what I believe is the best way to describe the complexity of school as it relates to community and how important the process of establishing community connections are to the life of a school. I will outline and define my terms as I walk through the concept map that follows.

The different aspects of School in relation to "Community"

School "AS" a community

School "IN" the community

School "WITH" the community

By *"Engagement"* I mean a conscious choice to be a variable in the organization

Levels of "Engagement"

In a spirit of cooperation parties agree to share information or resources for the sake of students.

Cursory Involvement
Or
Partnerships

A mutual respect and dependence upon each other.

Relationships

A quality of relationship that is profoundly caring, is filled with meaning, and includes acceptance and belonging. Being truly seen and known.

Connections

Concatenative
Connections

The Family

SCHOOL

Focus of the study – "How are these connections formed?"

COMMUNITY

Figure 2. *Conceptual Framework: "Understanding the Complexity of School Community Building"*

The first box on the left of the page includes a diagram of the three different concepts of school in relation to community. To some degree I believe this is the way schools evolve into institutions where sustained success becomes an owned expectation.

The first category looks at school *"As"* a community. In this sense, school community is a term that describes the processes, customs, and rituals that cause people to work together within the school building. This is more often than not described through the relationships between staff and their colleagues as well as students and staff. An example might include the *Professional Learning Community* instructional model currently presented in many districts throughout the United States. A primary description of this (aspect) of school community includes the school staff working interdependently and collaboratively to better the learning environment for students.

The next category outlines school *"In"* the community. I define this form of school community as a place where students and staff bring the context of the broader community into the language and . . . behavior of the school. In this model, the city, neighborhood, or village becomes a learning lab to spark students' interests and develop understanding of broader instructional concepts. An example might include students working with service projects or a civic group sponsoring a school event. Field trips, community incentives, or visits for both instructional and non-instructional activities would also fall under this category of school community.

The third circle is titled, school *"With"* the community. This is where the norms, values, language and vision are collectively shared through partnerships with the community. With these levels of engagement we find a free flow of benefits for students,

parents, teachers, and community stakeholders. This relationship creates commitment to achievement, action, and success. This is the variable or aspect of school community that I want to study more deeply.

To depict this relationship, two lines radiate out from the concept school *"With"* a community. The bottom line leads to further connections needed between the "school" and the "community." I will return to this portion of the map in a moment to further explain how I hope to find the strategies that connect the variables.

The top line leads from school "WITH" community to a description of the term "engagement." Because we hear this term used so frequently in school, family, and community partnership research, I felt it necessary to define my understanding of this idea. I define engagement as "a conscious choice to be a variable in the life of the organization." I use the term "engagement" as opposed to "inclusion" because I want to emphasize that all parents, staff, students and stakeholders are included in schools, but they either choose not to participate or are neglected and unwelcome to participate in the school community.

Because I do not believe the term "engagement" is an all encompassing term, I see levels of growth and mutual respect as steps that schools and the "engaged" make in bonding together. This is based on personal experience but also critical research on social justice and democracy as it relates to education (Epstein, 2001; Knight & Pearl, 2000; Rieg & Marcoline, 2008; Shields, 2006).

The first level of engagement I define as a partnership or cursory involvement. In this form of engagement, staff, parents, and school stakeholders enter into an agreement

out of a spirit of cooperation. For the sake of students, individual parties agree to share information and/or resources on behalf of students. In this model, one might find individuals who are deeply passionate about helping the school or helping the family but who interact only on a surface level.

The second level of engagement moves from basic perfunctory tasks for the benefit of children and the school to a mutual respect and dependence upon one another. I call this aspect of engagement the cultivation of "relationship." Through relationships, school officials, students, and stakeholders from the community engage in dialogue, conversation, critique, and action. These relationships cultivate the educational soil for growth and sustainability. Parker Palmer (1998) observes that relationships made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts.

The third dimension of engagement is what I define as "connections." While there are many ideas of what personal connections entail, I believe they include profoundly caring, meaningful relationships, acceptance and a sense of belonging. This changes the landscape of a partnership or a relationship into being truly seen, heard, and known. Much like electrical currents, when schools and families, stakeholders and educators, teachers and students "connect" there is power! Furthermore, a connection becomes stronger when it balances tensions, twists, and turns that pull its bonds together.

After defining my terminology and the evolving steps of engagement that school communities must encounter, I now return to the diagram at the bottom of the concept map. Because schools are physically located within a larger community but operate somewhat distinctly from the community, there is a separation between the two entities. I

identify the "family" as a part of the community but also as a separate variable as they too struggle to make connections within the areas in which they reside.

To bridge the divide between the school steps and the community doors, "connections" must be forged. I have adopted a term from the engineering world to define the powerful connections between these groups, concatenation. "Concatenation" is a mathematical term that describes a process of bringing two independent lines, chords, themes, or variables together. It is most closely associated with joining isolated objects seamlessly. In the field of mechanical engineering, designers concatenate lines by using computer software to determine the most *effective strategy* for bringing independent lines together. When these lines are joined, they are interwoven so strongly that their bonds are virtually impossible to break. I believe these type connections exist in some schools, and this research sought to better understanding them.

An aspect of this study was to investigate and uncover how these concatenative connections are formed. What are the strategies, procedures, behaviors, rituals, or practices that lead to this kind of active community engagement? The process of this qualitative case study set out to analyze an elementary school that is working hard at developing these kinds of connections "with" the community. In the process, I discovered the interdependence and connectivity between all three variables (As, In, and With) as they relate to each other.

Research Questions

Throughout this study, I will address the following questions:

1. What are the practices and strategies of the school that shape a commitment to
   school, family, and community partnerships?

   a. What are the obstacles that get in the way?

   b. How can they be overcome?

   c. Which methods work best for whom?

2. What is the principal's role in this process?

3. What can be learned from this elementary schools recent evolution from
   where it was to where it is now in relation to community connections? What
   are the plans for the future of this school?

4. How does this schools experience of partnership development inform the
   conceptual framework of "as," "in," and "with" the community?

Significance of the Study

Whatever an authentic education is, it should make the student a unique

individual, not a conformist. It should equip a person with an original perspective with

which to tackle the big challenges and a curiosity to problem solve. It should allow you to

find values which will be your road map through life, and it should enrich you not only

vocationally but also socially, emotionally, and spiritually (how to find happiness in what

you are doing, how to live, and how to die).

The federal report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in

Education, 1983) included multiple suggestions and recommendations made from the

commission. William Glasser (1998) shares, "The report claimed that what we needed was a longer school day and year, stiffer graduation requirements, and more homework, all coercive practices" (p. 9). Yet nothing in the report spoke to a need to establish firm relationships or foster a positive learning community.

Although many schools are struggling to create learning communities, there are current success stories that need to be emphasized and reproduced. While these strategies, practices, and successes are often hidden, it was my hope as a researcher to uncover and adopt the wonderful ways communities are being impacted by effective community-centered educators.

Teachers who care about their students and model authentic behavior make students feel respected, trusted, and worthwhile. As a result, students tend to be more motivated to participate and show interest in the subject matter knowing that their participation will be recognized and appreciated. According to Vygotsky (1978) if learning is a social and cultural process, establishing a caring learning community in the school will enable learning to occur more fluidly.

Mike Schmoker (2006) shares in his book, *Results Now*, that the enemy of improvement is isolation. He writes this in the context of teachers, individuals, or groups within the school who refuse to see beyond their personal scope. While this point relates to teacher behavior, I believe it can be applied to a local school working within a community.

We are making progress in developing school *"As"* a community (i.e. PLC's, democratic decision-making and value added analysis), but we are struggling to find meaningful connections to our broader contexts of the school *"With"* the community. Unless we re-establish a commitment to forming faithful communities of care within our schools we will run the risk of never really establishing it anywhere else. In order to commit ourselves to this endeavor we need to ask three important questions: Can we teach this? Can we model it? Can we instill it? Many researchers and cultural leaders believe that we can. In fact, Martin Luther King Jr. thought this was possible and told us, "Agape is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action. Agape is a willingness to go to any level to restore community" (Washington, 1986, p. 20). Is it possible that schools and school leaders can lead this charge and restore the most critical aspect of our schools? I believe it is possible, and it is essential.

This study is significant because educators and researchers need to close the gap between theory and practice when it comes to how schools work with the community for the sake of student learning. While the research supports this practice, few have identified legitimate strategies for accomplishing these goals. Furthermore, while there is speculation about the obstacles to forming greater levels of school, family, and community partnerships, few have identified the factors that prevent/deter educational leaders from fulfilling this goal.

It is my hope and belief that this work can shed important light on the both the obstacles and the strategies for overcoming them in an attempt to develop school connections with the broader learning community. In Chapter III, I will reveal how the

research was conducted to include a triangulation of research data with observations, interviews, and hard statistics from a real school, real teachers, staff members, parents and administrators who are working to develop as a school committed to community connections.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter, I utilize the insights afforded by the earlier literature review (see Chapter II) to guide the construction of the accompanied study. More directly, in this section a discussion of the study's research design, population/sample to be used, and process of data collection will take place. In addition, a rationale for choosing a qualitative study will be outlined, and detailed emphasis on the researcher's positionality and ethics will be shared. I have chosen to approach this study from the perspective of a critical researcher and as a result must be willing to listen to and learn from the participants of the study. Hytten (2004) states, "this means that critical researchers need to give up the implicit assumption that they know how the world works and power operates, and the researched don't" (p. 96). In my data collection and analysis, I worked to give meaning to the voices I heard.

Description of Key Concepts and Variables

When conducting a study on the development of connections within school communities, it is necessary to establish a definition of what a school community is all about. It is also necessary to understand the different roles and responsibilities each stakeholder brings to the relationship within the school community. This study was

designed to look deeply at what an elementary school principal and teacher leaders were actually doing to forge strong connections with school stakeholders.

Furthermore, based on concepts from past research (see Chapter II), much emphasis was placed on the enhancement of critical pedagogy in the classroom, the level of authentic relationships that exist between the school and the larger community, and a critique of the levels that parents are actually involved in the school.

Qualitative Research Design

To address the research questions outlined in this study, I chose to employ a qualitative approach because this method is suited for analyzing a particular social situation, event, or interaction (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2004; Mullen, 2004). Given the nature of this study, a qualitative approach offered certain advantages over a quantitative design. Qualitative research attempts to explain how events occur and the meanings people ascribe to them (Merriam, 1998; Silverman, 2004). Unlike the quantitative tradition that employs formulas and statistical calculations to draw broad conclusions, qualitative studies are highly descriptive in nature, and are reported through words and observed experiences rather than numbers (Creswell, 2003).

The qualitative researcher is interested in studying a person's view of reality thereby approximating the truth behind the story. By studying multiple points of views the qualitative researcher brings clarity to the problem and works to find a consensus among the voices shared. This type study is manifested through observations, focus groups, and interviews. As the researcher I focused on understanding the theories and

actions behind the strategies designed to cultivate connections between the elementary school and the community.

Type of Qualitative Study

Given the multiple research traditions utilized in academic research, I believe that a qualitative approach best fits the study I conducted. Because this study sought to learn specific strategies that help to establish community connections in schools, this study to some degree falls within the field of phenomenology. Creswell (2007) defines phenomenology as a form of study that describes "the meaning of the lived experiences . . . about a concept we don't understand" (Creswell, 2007).

Tied to phenomenology is case study research. Therefore a case study, is an in-depth examination of a single instance or event. The objective is for the researcher to gain a sharpened understanding of why the issue or phenomenon being investigated is happening or happened (Creswell, 2007). This form of research investigates an issue in its real life context. It is bound by time, location/site, process, or event.

Barritt (1986) and Tesch (1990) sub-classify phenomenologies into one of five camps: reflective/transcendental, dialogical, empirical, existential, hermeneutic, and social phenomenology. It was my intention to utilize phenomenological case study and the research questions as an approach to social/psychological design. As Chase (2003) notes, ". . . all forms of narrative share the fundamental interest in making sense of experience, the interest in constructing and communicating meaning" (p. 273). This was the research goal as I wanted to connect the experience and narrative of educational

leaders with the thoughts and ideas of literature and policy to see if there was evidence of alignment.

Creswell (2007) believes that case study research involves the study of issues explored through one or more cases within a bounded system. He goes on to propose that he "chooses to view it as a methodology, a type of design study, as well as the product of the inquiry" (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). Some additional researchers identify case study as being an important research design as it utilizes in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (i.e. observations, interviews, documents, and reports) as well as an investigative case bounded by time (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003).

The choice of qualitative case study enabled me to use a variety of data sources (e.g., qualitative data such as interviews and observations; quantitative "outcome-based" data available in artifacts such as student achievement scores; school policies and procedures; or parent questionnaires) to illuminate the understanding of the phenomenon behind developing community connections within a particular urban elementary school over the course of a year.

Furthermore, Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert,

> The case study is a fitting capstone to the continuous reporting process that characterizes naturalistic inquiry . . . virtually everything that the inquirer says or does during the inquiry becomes an occasion for informing the respondents and the audiences from which they are drawn. (p. 358)

This practice of research (case study) was used to identify emerging themes, questions, biases, and patterns for future research opportunities (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Elementary School (K-5) as Case Study

The study setting was a single elementary school in North Carolina. The research was collected in a purposeful manner as I set out to interview, observe, and analyze the behaviors, procedures, policies, and practices of the school staff. In addition, I was able to interact with and interview parents to hear their perspectives and ideas on the topic. Patton (1990) describes the importance of a researcher selecting each case purposefully: "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research . . ." (Patton, 1990, p. 169). My experiences in this school provided a rich data base from which to draw.

Approval from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and permission from the school district's research and evaluation office was obtained prior to data collection. After all necessary approvals were confirmed I contacted the school's principal and the teachers involved to request their participation. The school was selected based on prior identification that involved discussions with district officials, and examination of general school data available to the public. As with any research, participation was voluntary and all participants were given the opportunity to withdraw at any time throughout the course of the study.

Research Setting

The study setting was Bob Feller Elementary School serving approximately 600 K-5 students in an urban North Carolina school district. Feller Elementary has been identified prior to this study as a place where meaningful connections have been forged between students and the broader community. The demographic makeup of the elementary school selected for this study is 39% Hispanic, 34% African American, 20% White, with the remaining population of 7% multi-racial or other. In addition, this school serves a majority of lower socioeconomic status families as 73% of students receive free or reduced meal prices. The school has the following AYP subgroups: Free and reduced, African American, White, Hispanic, and Students with Disabilities. Within this case study the research was collected by interviews, observations, and an analysis of the behaviors, procedures, policies, and practices of the school staff.

As a whole, the school has shown improvement the past few years and has consistently grown in terms of the number of students scoring at or above proficiency. The school has not met the expected state growth standard in the last two school years but continues to make outstanding academic progress.

The principal of the school is an African American male with an advanced degree in educational leadership. He has served at the school for four years and is respected among his peers and supervisors as a person who works diligently to engage the community and who listens to stakeholders.

The case study research included participation over a nine-month period. In that time interviews with the principal, classroom teachers, other school administrators,

parents, and volunteers took place. In addition, special events, campus activities, and meetings were observed by the researcher to make more meaning of the school's story. The data were collected, analyzed, and coded to find emerging themes and eventual insights into the research questions.

Research Participants

Because the research was conducted as a qualitative case study, the only site analyzed was the above mentioned elementary school. The principal agreed to engage in three hour-long interviews over the course of the study. During these sessions, questions were asked (see Appendixes A, B, C, and D) regarding definitions, expectations, and reality of community involvement and community building within the school. As the interviews took place I would reflect on specific themes, probe for deeper understanding and then follow up with additional questions.

Additional teachers and staff members were selected to participate in interviews based upon their desire to participate. They were initially recruited at the first faculty meeting of the school year. After meeting with the principal (a primary participant) a few times at the beginning of the study, I was invited to present some background information to the larger school community. I used this meeting to introduce myself, outline why I was working with this school, and to invite participation from school staff. From this meeting, multiple staff members from across the school (i.e. assistants, teachers, administrators, etc.) volunteered to contribute to the study. Through the initial interactions and interviews over the course of several months I was able to garner more access to volunteers and parent participants.

Based on the responses and initial analysis, I held subsequent interviews with research participants to follow up and clarify particular points brought out in these discussions. These interviews attempted to gauge the level of involvement, relevant background information pertinent to the study, and specific strategies employed to develop connections between the school and the community.

Observation analysis of school events, conferences, staff meetings, and special activities also shed important light on what this school was doing differently than other schools in engaging the community. All of the participants in this study were selected based upon the school location and their involvement with the study.

Data Collection

The data collection consisted of initial meetings with the principal and the office staff as well as observations at the school to gain comfort in the research site and to create more transparency in the free flow of information between myself and the research participants. For the first four weeks of the study, no interviews were conducted. Instead, careful observation notes were taken and informal interactions made to lay the groundwork for the study.

An initial hour-long interview was conducted with the principal of the school as well as an analysis of school documents such as the staff handbook, school improvement and safe schools plan, title-one plan, and essential staff documents (curriculum notebooks, parent newsletters, school policies, school website, etc.). These informal meetings created space for deeper questioning, more comfortable disclosure, and an environment of trust.

I was invited to recruit staff participation at the opening staff meeting of the year. My attendance proved valuable as many staff members agreed to participate in taped interviews. This meeting did have one caveat as the principal introduced me as "a good friend." I was fearful that this would dramatically deter some participants and ultimately skew some validity in the study. However, the length and breadth of the interviews over the course of the next three months proved that this was primarily an empty concern on my part.

Not only was I able to interview multiple staff members from across the school I also found unique opportunities to connect with parents willing to participate. This was a true joy as I was able to listen to alternate perspectives within the same educational context. Coming into this study I was unclear how I could effectively garner the trust of parent participants but by being visible at events and school activities some community members were willing to participate in my research.

As taped interviews were conducted I would listen, take notes, and transcribe responses as soon as I could to keep the information fresh in my mind. I conducted eighteen 30-60 minute interviews during the course of the study. All interview responses were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to discover emerging themes that spoke to the study. Each research participant was asked the same set of questions to help facilitate validity and organization in the data collection process. In addition, I made careful considerations to triangulate the variables compatible with participant responses to data (i.e. student outcomes—attendance, test data, school records, etc.).

Each interview was scheduled and organized by the researcher (see Appendix A, B, C, and D for clarity in protocols and interviewee consent) with the help of the school staff to find alternative sites for conducting the meetings. This way, the principal, school staff, teachers, and parents were able to relax and focus on the questions at hand without fear of interruptions or anxieties regarding daily responsibilities.

The purpose of interviewing was to give respondents the opportunity to critically reflect about their practice/participation while also sharing their experiences, techniques, and strategies in approaching community connections in their classroom or school.

Examination of School Records

Individual school discipline and attendance records were examined to determine the level of success or achievement of students who are connecting to a community member or advocate. Data from external agencies (i.e., PTA, or volunteer programs) were also evaluated to find any meaningful connections to the study. School documents and procedures as outlined in the school improvement plan, staff handbook, and guidelines for operations were perused to find common variables (determining if what is written and said is in fact reality). In addition, district policies, expectations, and data were reviewed to determine effectiveness of school partnership programs.

Data Analysis

Organizing and analyzing data was an on-going process throughout the research study with an end goal of reducing the data into a compelling, authentic, and meaningful narrative. The data were analyzed using transcribed audiotapes, notes, and coding of themes, patterns, and gaps from the data. In his book, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research*

Design: Choosing among Five Traditions, Creswell (2007) suggests 6 stages for phenomenological studies. They are:

1. Organizational system—the researcher creates a system of organization for the data. In the case of my study, I organized the responses of interviews and observation data and compared them to school and district (test and attendance) data.

2. Reading and memoing—the researcher reads over interview transcripts and other data while coding and making initial notes. I coded interview responses by attaching basic marks to describe potential themes.

3. Making meaning—the researcher examines the notes and codes looking for meaning and themes in the data.

4. Connecting the dots—the researcher examines the meaning and forms a classification system for the individual meaning.

5. Interpretation—after the individual meanings have been grouped into a collective classification system, the researcher attempts to form a collective meaning capturing the essence of the data collected.

6. Representation—the last stage of data analysis requires the researcher to translate his/her interpretation into something understandable. Examples include a flow chart, a table, a figure, a narrative text, or any other type of representation which captures the essence of that interpretation.

The system shared is the approach the researcher took in analyzing the data accurately and effectively. This will become evident as Chapters IV and V are concluded.

Tape-recorded interviews, and copious observation field notes, allowed the researcher to listen to the tapes and peruse notes repeatedly to identify themes and seek patterns. The nature of this study and the multiple data collection methods required the researcher to continuously organize and reflect on the data collected while applying a basic coding system to reflect emerging patterns and themes evolving from the data. Continuous analyses of the data throughout the research will ensure that data collected is in line with the focus of the research questions (Merriam, 1998).

Researcher Subjectivity

I would be fooling myself if I were to ignore my subjectivity in this study as I knew it would certainly play a role in my research. Glesne (2006) states, "subjectivity, once recognized, can be monitored for more trustworthy research and subjectivity, in itself, can contribute to research" (p. 119). It is through continuous self examination and reflection that I will attempt to use my subjectivity to my advantage. However, Glesne also warns against narrowing your topic and making it so personal in nature that it becomes of little interest to others; "you must be able to distinguish between your passion to understand some phenomenon and your over involvement in very personal issues that need resolution" (p. 23).

The subjectivity I brought to this study has a dual nature. First, I am an education professional who is currently serving as an elementary principal. My natural tendency would be to protect my fellow practitioners as I analyze and interpret data. It was critical that I avoided interpreting the research data in a way that alleviates blame or

accountability from my peers. A second point of subjectivity was that I see myself as someone who has benefited greatly from a close-nit school community as a student.

With personal interests in this study, it might have been more natural for me to see areas of need or weakness within organizational leadership. This could have led me to seek blame or side with one perspective over another. An analysis of self was on-going as the data unfolded and I constantly had to check myself as a balanced researcher. This is where reflexivity helped as I conducted data collection and analysis of this study.

Reflexivity

Because of the previously noted researcher subjectivity, conducting a qualitative research study required a level of continuous, conscious monitoring of myself and the data collection process. Reflexivity became an important part of my research.

Glesne (2006) defines reflexivity as being "as concerned with the research process as you are with the data you are obtaining. You ask questions of the process all along the way, from creating your research statement to writing up your report" (p. 125). While I believe this is important, I also believe it is equally important to ask questions of oneself.

Lincoln and Guba (2000) claim that reflexivity "is conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as researcher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of research itself" (p. 183). "Participant observation often places researchers in the lives of others in a self-consciously instrumental way" (Glesne, 2006, p. 74). Throughout the process of data collection I had to continuously reflect on

how I was potentially influencing, guiding, or engaging myself in the information presented from all participants.

Positionality and Ethics

I came to this study as a person who is passionate about democracy and community and the connections with school stakeholders. In my current position as an elementary principal, I sympathize with the struggles administrators face in connecting all members of the community together for the sake of learning and for democratic understanding. Glesne (2006) states, "typically, qualitative research is not explicitly driven by theory, but it is situated within theoretical perspectives" (p. 29). I find this particularly true of my positionality and how it relates to the various theories of qualitative research.

Throughout the research process, I have come to appreciate the stories, experiences, and perspectives others bring to the table of ideas. The beauty found in the qualitative perspective is that it reveals the truth behind personal narratives. Even if only expressed by one respondent, the perspective of that person is their truth and perceived reality.

Work from Hatch (2002) states, "While traditional, quantitative methods generate data through the use of instruments such as questionnaires, checklists, scale tests, and other measuring devices, the principal data for qualitative researchers are gathered directly by the researchers themselves" (p. 7). Because of this important variable, I found that a researcher must first critically analyze their own personal narrative, perspectives, limitations, and ultimately positionality in the larger guiding perspectives of the universe.

As I embarked upon the steps in drafting, charting, and developing my research in this study, I further reflected upon who I am and the framework from which I come. Throughout this process, I have reflected upon the themes of wholeness, complexity, subjectivity, meaning and how each weave in and out of the research process. I have come to realize how important it is as the researcher to have a critical eye and an acute personal awareness in approaching data collection. This part of the entire dissertation experience was possibly the most rewarding for me.

Qualitative research is often called naturalistic inquiry. This type of research methodology is also referred to as ethnographic, phenomenological, subjective, hermeneutic, and humanistic. Lincoln and Guba (1985) examine qualitative inquiry utilizing the definition espoused by Willems in *Naturalistic Viewpoints in Psychological Research*:

> In behavioral research, naturalness or naturalism . . . is a function of what the investigator does . . . the set of activities an investigator actually engaged in while conducting his research . . . hence the degree to which units are imposed by the investigator upon the behavior studied (Willems & Rausch, 1969, p. 46). (p. 8)

Hatch (2002) outlines the landmark studies of Thomas Kuhn who developed the modern research paradigms. "These models consist of: positivist, postpositivist, constructivist, critical/feminist, and poststructuralist" (p. 11). In addition, there are important aspects of positioning within an epistemological framework. This is what gives a researcher perspective on ethics, voice, social change, and action. This idea speaks to a research of blending the intersections between what Lincoln & Denzin (2003) described as a positional framework, and what Bettie (2003) outlined as "axiology."

Within the research role, there is also an enormous amount of thought regarding the positioning of myself given the context of my study. In chapter three of Glesne's (2006) work, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*, there is instruction on the importance of being honest with yourself before actively pursuing the research. "Where on this continuum should you place yourself? Your answer depends on the question you are investigating, the context of your study, and your theoretical perspective" (p. 50).

Within this discussion it became critical to define these terms and outline the characteristics of each framework. I took this aspect of positionality serious because I knew that qualitative research had the potential to stretch my thinking and behaviors. Before revealing where I saw myself as a researcher, I had to outline the fundamental differences between the series of paradigms shared. These paradigms are important as they speak to the nature of self-reflection within the research frame.

1. The positivist and postpositivist are foundational and believe that the truth is out there and is knowable. However, to adequately encounter it one must eliminate bias and circumstantial evidence. Positivism comes out of modernism and seeks to find objectivity within social contexts.

2. The constructivists are foundational within social critique in that they see truth as a social construction. Everyone has a story and a perspective. Because of this, there are no real biases only different viewpoints. Furthermore, constructivists contend that truth and knowledge are not "out there," but instead are located in historical, economic, racial and social infrastructures of oppression, injustice, and marginalization.

3. The critical/feminist and poststructuralist are anti-foundational as they seek to encounter reality through dialogue and discussion. They refuse to adopt any standards by which truth can be universally known. The belief is that there is nothing you can ask to reach some sort of universal objective truth. Instead, truth arises from relationships between members of the community. The audience matters, and the communal test of validity is found in dialogue and discourse.

These paradigms continued to challenge me as I knew they were important not only for collecting data through research, but also for validating results.

In terms of validity, and affirming the data collected in the qualitative experience I looked at multiple approaches to finding truth and reality, and making sense of the collection process. Yvonne Lincoln and Egon Guba (2000) share:

> For the modernist (i.e. enlightenment, scientific method, conventional, positivist) researchers, most assuredly there is a "real reality" out there, apart from the flawed human apprehension of it. Further, that reality can be approached (approximated) only through the utilization of methods that prevent human contamination of its apprehension or comprehension. (p. 176)

They offer the following description of constructivists:

> Constructivists, on the other hand, tend toward the anti-foundational. Anti-foundational is the term used to denote a refusal to adopt any permanent, unwavering standards by which truth can be universally known. (p. 177)

After evaluating each paradigm, I recognized that I most identify as a researcher within the postpositivist paradigm because I continue to believe the existence of absolute

truth is self-evident. Very simply, one must use an absolute truth in order to deny that it exists. If we assume that no absolute moral truth exists, then what is the point of research and discovery? On what foundation are our proposed solutions based?

I recognize that perhaps many of our solutions are based, at best, on partial truths, which is why we only approximate partial solutions. Were these results whole solutions, we would have inevitably solved all the problems of schools and education already. This does not change the perspective that absolute truth is worthy of pursuit. This position specifically impacted my research as I sought to understand the reality behind the stories of those interviewed and observed.

Regarding postpositivism, Hatch (2002) says,

Postpositivists agree with the positivists that reality exists, but they operate from the assumption that, because of the limitations of human inquiry, the inherent order of the universe can never be known completely. Reality can be approximated, but never fully apprehended. (p. 14)

Although we may not be able to know the entire truth about some aspects of reality, we nonetheless must make decisions about those aspects for which we have accumulated evidence. Social and educational systems are dynamic and complicated because people are dynamic and complicated. I have discovered that heeding objective truth does not mean adopting legalistic principles while disregarding grace, understanding, and adaptive techniques.

Appreciating the human element in situations is as much or more important to an educator than considering protocol. However, if the solutions we offer for our schools do

not have some basis in objective truth, then they will have no positive effect on the reality of the situations we face.

I recognize that my positionality is based primarily on how I was brought up in a white, Christian, middle-class rural family. My parents were not wealthy, but my brother, sister, and I seldom needed anything that wasn't readily available. As an adult I have been able to see (through a variety of experiences and relationships) that there are always two sides to a story and seldom does one person hold the corner on the market place of ideas. With these viewpoints in mind, I struggled initially in engaging in the research. I knew it was going to be of critical importance to build some sense of relationship with the participants for there to be trust and openness. Because of possible misunderstandings or misinterpretations, I acknowledged my viewpoints (even if only to myself) before investing myself in the research process.

In encountered this reality I have worked to grow as an individual and an academic researcher. I have taken stock of my own perspectives, challenged my thinking and developed my own attitudes on the gray area problems within our schools. Instead of seeing everything as a black and white objective truth that must be defended or espoused, I seek to understand the adaptive aspects of our social problems. By adaptive, I mean that certain problems do not have known solutions, and thereby must be approached with discipline, maturity, and rational logic (based on objective truth).

My rationale for choosing the topic at hand (The facilitation of school connections with the community) was born out of this critique. I chose to use this as a springboard to greater research because I wanted to understand why some schools succeed at

establishing connections with community while other similar schools are alienating more and more stakeholders each and every day. To answer this, strategies must be identified, critiqued, and shared.

Recognizing my own limitations and the researcher paradigm with which I identify allowed me to take an honest approach to how I conducted this study. Peshkin (1988) purports that subjectivity on the part of the researcher is not only inevitable but a critical tool that should be utilized throughout the investigation creating an awareness of how one's subjectivity may be influencing the investigation and its subsequent outcomes. He explains,

> By monitoring myself, I can create an illuminating, empowering personal statement that attunes me to where self and subject are intertwined. I do not thereby exorcise my subjectivity. I do, rather, enable myself to manage it . . . to preclude it from being unwittingly burdensome . . . as I progress through collecting, analyzing, and writing up my data. (p. 20)

Coming to grips with my postpositivist "tendencies" helped me keep a check on myself and my approach to data collection.

In drafting my dissertation proposal and the plan for conducting my research I embraced many of the perspectives within "critical ethnography." Within this model, the commitment to social justice in research leads to action and purpose. Hytten (2004) states, "historically, critical ethnography emerges in part as a consequence of the interplay between existent social structures and the possibilities of human agency" (p. 97). She goes on to say that this study in education is a result of the dissatisfaction with

social structures like class, patriarchy, and race, as well as the dissatisfaction with the

cultural accounts of human actors where these problems never appear.

The essence of my topic and my hope in completing the inquiry was to analyze

practice and spark a change in the way we do business in our schools. Even as this study

concluded I remain passionate that schools should be places where children (and parents)

are not simply seen as members of the organization, but as active participants in the

"shared community."

Having this understanding I wanted to explore the similarities and differences in

behavior between the school principal, staff, parents, and the teachers. In addition, by

recognizing my positionality I knew that I needed to listen to and observe research

participants as an outsider as much as possible. I wanted to guard myself from my limited

perspectives while also gaining the trust and vulnerability of those participating in the

study. Glesne (2006) believes that the questioning, processing, and analyzing of

interviewing can be arduous but essential if the researcher is to find meaning in the

process. She says,

> Researchers ask questions in the context of purposes generally important
> primarily to themselves. Respondents answer questions in the context of
> dispositions (motives, values, concerns, needs) that researchers need to unravel in
> order to make sense out of the words that their questions generate. (p. 79)

Hence, the development of interview questions and the interpretation or clarification of

the responses helped me understand the data and myself.

My positionality was a critical aspect of the study as I consistently understood

that I would be expected to defend my analysis and the conclusions from this critical

inquiry. I recognize that my disposition within the postpositivist framework represents my approach to the qualitative research.

Trustworthiness

A number of steps were taken to ensure that the study appraises what the researcher claims. Many researchers suggest the use of at least two procedures or safeguards to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2007). I have employed three measures. Clarifying my own personal bias as a researcher is one measure. The second measure is the use of triangulation. I used prior literature research, participant interviews, observations, and district statistics as means of gathering data. I also examined individual school documents (i.e. the school improvement plan, the title one plan, and student/staff handbooks) as a viable data source.

In addition to this variety of data collection methods, I used a wide demographic range of research subjects. I did this to help provide a broad cross-section of school stakeholders, their individual stories, experiences, and cultural realities into the research process. To illustrate this balance of perspectives I have included an outline of participants in Table 1.

The third measure was the use of member checks. Since the primary mode of data collection was interview data, member checks were helpful to ensure I accurately transcribed and coded the conversations correctly. I conducted a variety of these checks with participants who worked with me throughout the study.

Table 1

List of Participants

Participants (pseudonyms)	Position within the school	Race	Gender	Yrs
Dr. Hargrove	Principal	African American	Male	4
Mrs. Score	Lead Teacher	White	Female	8
Mrs. Lofton	Curriculum Fac.	African American	Female	13
Mrs. Seizmore	Social Worker	African American	Female	7
Mrs. Hall	Fourth Grade Tch.	White	Female	3
Mrs. Tabler	Third Grade Tch.	White	Female	2
Ms. Jacoby	Kindergarten Tch.	White	Female	4
Mr. Carter	Third Grade Tch.	White	Male	2
Ms. Doby	Second Grade Asst.	African American	Female	17
Mr. Bierga	ESL Teacher	Latino	Male	3
Mr. Snider	Parent / Volunteer	African American	Male	4
Mrs. Belle	Receptionist	White	Female	18
Ms. Nagy	Fifth Grade Tch	Asian	Female	6
Mrs. Martinez	Parent	Latino	Female	2
Mr. Barker	Parent	White	Male	5
Mr. Ramirez	Parent	Latino	Male	4
Mrs. Thome	Parent	White	Female	3
Ms. Thorton	Parent	African American	Female	3

Member checks gave each participant the opportunity to review interview transcripts, verifying that the data collected were accurate reflections of their thoughts, feelings, and ideas (Glesne, 2005). Respondents were asked to view, reflect, and re-submit interview transcripts to verify that their perspectives were accurately reflected as

well as to help the researcher develop new ideas and interpretations of the data. In many cases this helped me to revisit an idea or variable with the research participants.

One of the most meaningful member checks I conducted was in a meeting with the principal after all data collection and post-analysis. I scheduled an appointment with the principal to present my analysis and my findings. Based on the material presented, I asked the principal to reflect upon the data and my interpretations. His insights were documented and shared in Chapter VI of this study.

To minimize the effect of researcher bias, the selection of participants within the school district were chosen based on specific criteria (outlined in prior sections of this chapter) which coexist with the goals of this study. Because the researcher is removed from the school and district studied, the impact of researcher credibility, and/or trustworthiness was greatly enhanced.

Summary of Methods

The primary focus of this qualitative study was to examine the level to which this elementary school is building connections with the community it serves, and what specific strategies are used to develop these relationships. Perspectives came from the principal, teachers, and parents of this school as well as an evaluation of the programs, policies, behaviors, and student outcomes of the school. Specifically, the researcher was interested in learning what strategies are employed by school leaders to foster and cultivate community connections within elementary schools. The results from this study (presented in Chapters IV and V) will hopefully provide educators with insights that

could have a direct impact on the development of relationships, strategic planning, and the community building components of schools in similar districts.

More importantly, it is the hope of the researcher that this study will help turn the tide of disconnection and reveal ways in which educators locally and nationally can better make meaning in their schools. Chapter IV presents the descriptive story of the school and speaks to how this school is working to connect parents and outside organizations in a way that promotes success for all students.

CHAPTER IV

THE STORY OF THE SCHOOL

Introduction

This qualitative case study examined the level to which an identified elementary school established a culture of collective collaboration with the community it serves and the specific strategies used to develop these relationships. This chapter contains three distinct sections that present the findings from the fieldwork conducted. The first section presents a description and *story* of the school—its history, demographic shifts, and geographical context. Section two shows how the school has arrived at its current reality and the steps taken to get there. I have titled this section, *the evolution of change*. Section three reveals responses from participants on how their perspectives have shaped the success of the partnership program. This section is titled *voices from the field*.

The Story of the School

Bob Feller Elementary School is located within a large urban North Carolina school district. However, unless you knew where it was located you might miss it altogether. The school is tucked away in the shadow of an intersection between country roads and the interstate. What once was a hub for farming and textile activity, the small village that gave birth to the school is now characterized by gas stations, churches, and run-down factories.

Feller Elementary is over sixty years old and was originally designed as a high school. However, population growth, realignment of district lines, and the consolidation of city and county schools almost twenty years ago made the school shift from a high school, to a middle school, to a Pre-K and eventually a K-5 elementary school. The building is not particularly attractive and shows signs of multiple updates over the years to keep it operational.

Yet, in spite of the cosmetic challenges many continue to view this facility with pride. The school secretary (and local historian) Mrs. Belle described it this way:

> The school is definitely a community school. Many people attended the school here themselves: parents, grandparents, volunteers, and staff. The people in this community genuinely take pride in the school and want to see good things happen. And while a lot of them have moved away and don't live right here, they still want to make it a great place. (Mrs. Belle)

While only six miles from the center of one of North Carolina's largest cities, many children in this community are deemed to be living in households facing multiple social risks that have potential to affect their growth and development. Included here are risks such as unemployment, a large proportion of single parent homes, mental health issues, and a growing percentage of non-English speakers. Because of the shifting economic changes, this historically moderate affluent white community has become a bastion for new immigrants, families in poverty, and those struggling to make ends meet.

In our first meeting the African American principal of the school, Dr. Hargrove explained the challenge this way:

> Many people believe that low-income children cannot be expected to do well in school. Inner-city and rural children raised by parents who themselves struggled in school are thought to be largely doomed to low performance, poor test scores, menial jobs, and hard lives. But this is simply not acceptable. We are not only going to curse the darkness, we are going to light a candle. (Dr. Hargrove)

During the past ten years, Feller elementary has experienced a true metamorphosis. Not only have the demographics and socio-economics of the school community changed, but the performance of its students has as well. Following the first year of state testing in 1997, the percentage of students passing the state EOG tests was a discouraging 54.6%. With that realization and the awareness that the affluent families in the school were shifting to other parts of the county, the school had to work on making changes instructionally. During the following nine years three principals lead the school and worked with a transitional staff (plagued by turnover) to try to build a culture of academic excellence.

In 2006 the district hired Dr. Hargrove to take the helm of the school and almost immediately the school began to experience the success for which it strived. That year the school met AYP goals, showed unprecedented growth in student achievement, made North Carolina ABC expected growth in all areas, and increased their overall proficiency by 12 percentage points. This was the first year that Feller Elementary had a Hispanic subgroup and they made their AYP and ABC goals. Quite possibly the most interesting statistic was that the school had the highest level of outside volunteers of any school in its district.

The last three years have shown that these results were not a fluke. Instead, the school continues to make progress academically and gain positive notoriety through

awards and recognitions. In 2008 and 2009 the school was awarded *"a school of excellence status"* as deemed by its local school district. This award is given to the top 16 performing schools as they relate to the overall performance of the over 100 schools in the district.

On a typical weekday at Feller Elementary, there is a hive of activity. Parents, children, and community residents fill the halls and classrooms. Some adults are working with teachers inside classrooms while others are running copies, making posters or helping with a planning event. Periodically on weeknights and weekends there are classes for parents offered by school administration to enhance personal parenting or vocational skills.

This is the great shock of the story of Bob Feller Elementary School. Through concerted efforts the school has provided a place for parents and other school stakeholders to meet and support kids. The curriculum facilitator, Mrs. Lofton put it this way:

> I have been here through five different administrators. When I came here the school was known as an o.k. school. The climate hasn't changed that much in terms of the people and the dedication to the children. But I think the leadership plays an important part in how we are able to get the stakeholders involved. It depends upon how the leader sees the community and I think a big push from ten years ago to now is that we realize now how much more we need our community to help. We have lost man-power, the commitment aspect; it has been a huge jump. And what I mean by that is the attitude, the pride in the school, the desire to be successful. (Mrs. Lofton)

The school has also become a place to build relationships and get to know each other's children. It has become a place where parents can discuss common issues they face in

raising their children or trying to get their GED's or advanced degrees. The connections that have been made with parents and community stakeholders have helped create a culture that supports all students and the test data shows the positive academic impact.

The Evolution of Change

Bob Feller Elementary School faces many of the same challenges as other urban communities around the country—working poor families, single mothers, few college-educated parents and a high unemployment rate. The poverty and instability in the community affects the school and has caused frustration for many parents and teachers.

In response, the Feller school community launched partnerships with many outside organizations, churches and businesses. For four years now the successes at Bob Feller Elementary have caught the attention of many and I was very interested in understanding how this school was able to make such strides given the variables of the school and the obstacles in their way. What caused this change and who was responsible? A series of interviews were conducted to try to establish a pattern of understanding to explain this phenomenon.

Identifying Collective Goals

Interviews of the school's teaching staff revealed that many academic goals were identified before Dr. Hargrove came on as principal. In fact, the school was making strides academically, but still struggled to find cohesion. For instance, having been granted Title I status by the school district as meeting federal requirements for free and reduced lunch status, the school leadership team had decided to implement some instructional programs and utilize additional monies to better serve struggling students.

Some of these initiatives involved: (a) flexible grouping to allow students 40 minutes per day to work on their own reading levels while the teacher provided additional support and structure; (b) hiring 9 daytime tutors to work with students identified as low performing; (c) hiring 7 teachers to provide additional tutoring after school two days per week; (d) utilizing an assessment system via the computer to help provide data-driven instruction in all 3-5 grade classes; and (e) requiring that all parents were given the opportunity to review individual student data two times a year. These strategies led to a more focused approach to classroom instruction and ultimately student learning.

However, with Dr. Hargrove's arrival as principal, a new set of eyes investigated potential steps for progress and student performance. Teachers who were interviewed all agreed that the staff were working hard to create a positive learning environment while incorporating rigor into every aspect of the curriculum. Yet the school was still showing weaknesses as it related to parental support and meeting the need of all student subgroups.

Mrs. Jacoby, an experienced kindergarten teacher who was part of the leadership team during Dr. Hargrove's transition as principal explained:

> We were working as hard as we could, and we felt equipped instructionally, but we couldn't bridge the gap and do all that was asked of us to do. Dr. Hargrove immediately challenged us to think of ways we could be more inclusive to work smarter not harder. We had to become just as strategic in our approach to our parents as we were in relation to our instruction. This was very challenging, but exciting! (Mrs. Jacoby)

Although the strategizing and implementation did not happen over night, the staff displayed an eagerness to find solutions to their classroom problems. A discussion ensued

over how the school could better reach parents as partners, volunteers as support, and

advocates in the community who could celebrate the school. Dr. Hargrove described the

process this way:

> Most schools are not doing this type of strategic planning in terms of parental
> support. Because this school had not been part of this, the staff was not
> accustomed to this process. My job was simply to tell the staff our number one
> responsibility from here on out was to build positive relationships with everyone.
> We did not start immediately as I walked in the door in August. In fact, we
> probably did not start our first event until October. After getting to know my staff,
> I simply told them how we needed our whole community to be successful. I told
> them that we are going to have people in and out of our building all the time. You
> are going to need to be aware that people will be here on campus, you are going to
> need to be here and understand that people will be watching. I want you to get
> used to people coming in and out of your classroom and I want you to bridge
> partnerships. (Dr. Hargrove)

The school leadership team, and subsequently the entire staff, spent the better part of the

first semester putting together an organizational system that would facilitate school

partnerships.

Outreach to the Community

The administrative team was reorganized to reflect a more central focus on

teacher support and the coordination of community resources. This was done by shifting

money to accommodate positions out of traditional allotments. Instead of an assistant

principal, the principal hired a lead teacher and a curriculum facilitator. These two

positions could help provide support for instructional issues but also serve as community

liaisons and assistant administrators. The school social worker and school counselor also

became connected to the administrative team in helping to alleviate disciplinary

constraints of the principal and further coordinate community efforts.

With this new structure in place, Dr. Hargrove created availability for himself and others to meet with parents, school constituents, and community stakeholders. Furthermore, by developing this administrative system, the team was better equipped to work with public relations, support struggling teachers, and recruit volunteers. He explained,

> One of the things we did was when I got here we looked at what we were already doing. While we were doing some things well I did not see anything that the school was doing to reach out to the broader community. So I made this my goal, my initiative, to put this school on the map, to get the attention of others around us. (Dr. Hargrove)

The administrative team took ownership of this call and made a concerted effort to reach out to the larger community.

Their first step was inviting parents to principal breakfasts where they could meet the principal and hear his plans. At those meetings the principal talked about how important it was to be involved in their child's life and how much he needed their support at school. "Dr. Hargrove spelled out to each parent how much he needed them personally, and how much he wanted them to be a part of what was going on" (Mrs. Seizmore, October 2009). The entire focus of these meetings was simply to make a connection and encourage involvement beyond just dropping off their kids.

There was a recognition by the school staff that it was going to take everyone working together to move the school forward. Mrs. Score, a lead teacher at the school, commented that:

> We did muffins for mom and donuts for dad simply to get them in, to get them exposed to the school, to have them see what was going on and how we could use them. Sometimes people are willing but don't know how they can connect. We wanted to show them that they were needed. (Mrs. Score)

As the attendance at these meetings improved more conversations began to take place at the school level. Teachers and administrators were reflecting and talking more about what the possibilities could be and what kinds of support were really needed.

Communication between the school and the home was also enhanced during this time. In addition to bi-weekly newsletters, weekly phone messages were made, and monthly meetings were scheduled. Parent participation was growing and the attendance at meetings was a reflection of the enthusiasm the community was beginning to embrace.

The school leadership team again convened to draft more plans on how they would further develop their partnership program. It was clear that more was needed to support the struggling students and in order to support them more effectively, concise plans had to be put in place. The School Improvement Plan and Title One plans both reflected new implementation goals. They included the following:

- A contract between parents and students pledging to give 100% to learning.
- Each identified student is assigned a mentor who will check on them daily (behavior, academics, etc.).
- The recruitment of 52 interns to work with teachers so that classes are split into small groups giving students individual attention.
- EOG words for parents to practice are sent home for all students.
- Hosting a minimum of 2 curriculum nights per year with parents (these events will have hands-on activities for parents).
- Saturday writing academies are offered for parents each semester.
- Saturday tutorials for students are offered each month.
- Several math and reading trainings are offered for parents (some workshops targeted to Hispanic students).

- Meetings at community centers are scheduled to reach out to parents with alternate work schedules or transportation problems.
- Each member of the leadership team paired with a classroom and responsible for checking report cards, interim reports, behavior, making phone calls to parents in addition to the calls teachers are making, meeting with their students and keeping a notebook on them. (Source: 2008-09 School Improvement Plan)

Building upon these new goals established in addition to the team's previous academically focused goals, the organizational plan took shape.

Dr. Hargrove explained that the next part of the process involved getting outside the school walls and reaching organizations that could help.

> We looked around our school (in an approximate 10 mile radius) and began coordinating lists of who might help. I had a member of the leadership team identify these groups of people. They included churches, organizations, and businesses. I sought to find if they had ever been a part of the school community before. What I found was that they primarily had not been part of our school. (Dr. Hargrove)

Dr. Hargrove then had invitations printed up to invite them to a school breakfast in their honor. He hand delivered their card and introduced himself as a representative of the Bob Feller School Community.

> I took time to go to each business, introduce myself, and invite them to our community day breakfast. It was amazing! We had over one hundred different organizations represented on that first day. Out of that meeting, some brief talking points, we were able to get a huge number of volunteers, financial supporters, and mentors for kids. (Dr. Hargrove)

Interviewees further explained that the initial contacts made to outside agencies were important, but getting them to contribute was even more critical. This exercise formed the building blocks to a future partnership with community stakeholders.

Using the media as a venue to connect. As the partnerships between the school, the home, and the community were developing, the school leadership used the media as a way to promote their successes and recruit more help. One parent mentioned that this venue was a way he became more encouraged about his child's school and more convicted about how he could be a better participant. When I asked him to explain he responded:

> Our principal is very TV savvy and he has a way of showcasing our school by using the newspapers and the television. When I go places and hear my friends and family talk about an article or a clip on TV it brings me such pride in our school. A year ago after seeing a segment on community day, I decided that I was going to make a commitment to come at least once a week and help out with my son's teacher. It has been a great experience. (Mr. Barker)

Mrs. Score, the lead teacher shared this as it relates to the use of media:

> Distance is a factor for our school. One of our challenges was our location, so we connected with the media, sometimes contacting them and asking them to do a story; we worked to show them that we were trying our best to help children. As a result of some of the early news segments, many people came in and said, we saw you on TV and believe in what you are doing, how can we help. (Mrs. Score)

From her perspective this is one of the most important aspects that enhanced the partnership programs at Feller elementary. Mrs. Seizmore, the school social worker, echoed these sentiments as she shared how the media helped to bring awareness to the breakfast buddy program she had coordinated in that first year of implementation.

> When I first started the breakfast buddies we did a big public relations push. We had the media in and talked about what a breakfast buddy was and what the expectations were. We had several people call, volunteer, and come in because of this story. (Mrs. Seizmore)

The general sentiment from all interviews reflects the belief that when people see the school on television or read about its success in the newspaper, their interests are piqued, and if communicated well, will become a part of the learning process.

Mrs. Lofton provided a perspective on how the media has had an important impact on the larger school community. She shared how the level of excitement in the school has been greatly enhanced with the media exposure.

> It is really exciting because we all want to be a part of a positive place. I want to feel a part of an excellent school and we want to be connected for our students to shine. It is really exciting because we want to be a positive place. We have awesome kids here and fantastic teachers and we are proud of them a lot of people didn't know that before. Our kids are no different than they were ten years or fifteen years ago, they are not any better, kids are great no matter where they are, but their goodness is really beginning to shine. And it is beginning to leak out into the community including all of the good things they are doing. (Mrs. Lofton)

She went on to say that the kids have become proud to be Feller "superstars." They see themselves on television and hear good things about their school. "I have been to a large function and a lady said to me, hey I saw you on TV last night. Wow what are you doing that is so special there at this school?"

In essence, the school has worked to establish a positive relationship with the media that provides an almost "advertising" flair. Dr. Hargrove explained that the partnership with the media has been an investment of sorts. "By doing that, it brought us more exposure, got us more included in the affairs of the businesses, and organizations,

and brought about a greater sense of pride to those organizations to the extent that they were much more likely to continue contributing to our efforts." (Dr. Hargrove)

Perspectives of Success . . . Voices from the Field

As I continued my observations and interviews I was very interested in hearing how each participant talked about their work, and their individual perspectives of community. One of the questions asked early in each interview was how the school operates *As* a community, *In* the community, and *With* the community? Hearing the responses helped bring clarity to my perceptions and further explain the evolution of change within the school.

Leadership and Commitment to Teamwork

Throughout the data collection process I spent a great deal of time interacting and interviewing Dr. Hargrove. Throughout these interactions I was able to learn an incredible amount of personal information about his career path, education, and family, but also about his personal perspectives on leadership and management. Dr. Hargrove has spent his entire adult life as an educator beginning as teacher, curriculum facilitator, assistant principal and then principal. He earned his education specialist and doctorate degrees from a large public institution in North Carolina and has served in both rural and urban settings. He is the father of two children and active in many civic organizations.

Our first interaction took place in his small, hidden, austere school office filled with book cases, filing cabinets, and a metal desk with a simulated wood top. While decorated with African American artwork and a variety of awards, this room, like its occupant, was free from pretension. Dr. Hargrove is best described as a no-nonsense

visionary who holds high expectations for himself and his staff and students. He carries himself with charisma while holding everyone accountable to their tasks.

"I believe in what I'm doing and I love this work," he exclaimed as he made his way around his desk to sit next to me in one of his two guest chairs. He spoke in animated and enthusiastic tones each time we met to discuss his school and its leadership. Dr. Hargrove's highly organized mind works so systematically that he seems to effortlessly construct his points without wasting words or extraneous thoughts. "If anything I've done well in my personal leadership style it has been to learn how to delegate, and delegate to the right people."

After eight months of observing and studying Dr. Hargrove it became obvious that relationships and teamwork are what he perceives to be the most important aspect of his leadership. He communicated on multiple occasions that in order for a school to be successful it must have everyone's involvement, everyone's support, and everyone's input. "It is one thing to tell people we want them to be involved, but it is another thing to allow them, invite them, and embrace them as a part of what is going on." He continued:

> As the leader I am constantly working to build positive relationships that reflect a commitment to our collective goals. I expect the same from my staff, parents, and students. I think this is the key to everything that we do. This has been my primary focus, to try and help everyone understand we are a team and we are in this together. (Dr. Hargrove)

From Dr. Hargrove's perspective teamwork reflects an idea that everyone is on the same page and connected. When asked about the role of community in the school I received varying responses that led me to categorize them in terms of the *As, In*, and *With*

community frame. Mrs. Hall, a fourth grade teacher agreed that there is a common

language in the school and that for now the staff is working together for the sake of

students. She stated,

> Within our school we have become stronger these past few years and we have
> grown to appreciate and depend upon each other in better ways. We have
> embraced a focus on the reality that all students are our kids and we have no
> choice but to share all our resources for their sake. (Mrs. Hall)

Another fourth grade teacher, Mr. Carter, identified the importance of rapport

between the immediate members of the school. He expressed an emphasis on working

together as a staff, in partnership with parents, and ultimately with the students.

> The school community has to be a community before you can ask anybody else to
> come in. We had to build our essence at the building level before we could ask for
> help from someone else. We needed to make sure we knew who we were before
> we asked anyone else to be a part of our family. (Mr. Carter)

According to Mrs. Lofton, "your attitude and actions speak louder than your intentions."

She reiterated how critical it is for the school to operate as a community before it tries to

get anyone else inside the walls of the building.

> We are a hugging group but it wasn't always that way. These are our children and
> we take it serious when someone is not performing, or trying, or succeeding. This
> closeness was fostered and it took time. But it comes from leadership. He (Dr.
> Hargrove) requires us to make positive contacts. Our principal is always positive,
> his favorite saying is "Be Nice." We all have our personal issues, but you have to
> get past your concerns and see the bigger picture . . . the fact you are shaping kids.

An important part of this rapport was an emphasis placed upon the perceptions of the students. The leadership team and school staff identifies this concept in multiple parts of school documentation.

The Student is the Common Denominator between the Home and the School

I investigated how students are considered a key variable to the community connections through observation data and additional interviews. It appeared that students have good relationships with their teachers, the school support staff, and the principal. When I asked about this I had interesting responses. One teacher, Mrs. Hall, shared the importance of understanding the two way communication between home and school. She explained that we often overlook the essence of our success in our community partnerships and we need to be reminded that this involves our students. She said,

> Just as kids come to school and tell us about what is happening at home, they also go home and report on what has taken place in the classroom, the bathroom, the gym and the cafeteria. It is so important that our students have positive experiences here at school, it starts with me, and they (my students) are my most important outlet to their parents. (Mrs. Hall)

Ms. Nagy, a fifth grade teacher, further explained this part of school operating *as* a community when she shared the power of influence the teachers have on the students, and the students on their parents.

> Regardless of what we think goes on when they get home, these kids have an influence on their parents or those at home. Because we see it. The parents are proud of them, they want them to do right by them. Anytime we have a music program it is packed, food helps, but when their kids are performing they want to come out, they want to take pride. As we motivate kids we are motivating the parents. The kids have been key to the parent involvement success in our school. (Ms. Nagy)

He continued by saying,

> If the kids go home and don't say anything about school, then the parents go on as
> well, but if the fire is lit with the kids to talk about the great experiences of
> school, then the parents follow suit. It's about getting the kids excited about
> school. We try to build a culture in our school that makes kids want to be a part
> and want to be a member of the school. For that matter we do the same thing with
> our staff, and when this is done right it quickly translates to the parents. (Mr.
> Nagy)

Student Experiences Create Meaningful Connections

According to interview responses, the students and staff make it a priority at Bob
Feller Elementary to coordinate outside field trips, special events during the school day,
and volunteer activities where the kids can be exposed to unique experiences. These
experiences take place often times away from campus, but given financial constraints at
Feller, many are actually brought into the classroom.

Mrs. Lofton explained that many times it is a both/and relationship. We are more
than willing to get outside the school walls and expose our kids to things out in the world,
but we also welcome those outside experiences in. By appealing to the broad experiences
our students can engage in, the school can further create connections. In this way, the
partnerships move from *As* to *In* to an alliance *With* the broader community.

> We are always inviting, one thing that we do is that they (the students) need that
> background knowledge. The more people we bring in from the community, the
> more exposure kids get to some of the special talents and abilities of others the
> better our students will be. You would be amazed how much people love to come
> in and talk about their own personal interests, ideas, etc. The more opportunities
> for experiencing life the better! (Mrs. Lofton)

In addition to these opportunities, many of the staff members I talked with suggested that a way to be a better contributor *in* the community was to make those quality connections with all parents. Mrs. Doby, a second grade assistant at Feller, shared the following:

> Another thing is that we have made a better effort to connect with all parents. To bring them in, a lot of times you think, Oh the parents are naturally a part of the community, but often times they are not. They are outside the walls of the school for a variety of reasons. (Mrs. Doby)

As an assistant for many years at the school, Mrs. Doby was able to tell me a great deal about the nature of parent involvement in the school. She described the families traditionally (the last eight or nine years) as transient. As an example she shared a story of a family who had moved twice since school had started and that the child had been taken out of class, put back in, taken out again and had now returned again. Mrs. Doby explained that it takes a special kind of person to work at Feller and that person must be committed to reaching out to all parents.

Mrs. Score, the lead teacher and parent coordinator, discussed how the school leadership continues to look for ways to empower teachers with skills and strategies to better understand parent needs. In addition, the school has offered staff development meetings for parents to help explain homework assignments, instructional strategies, and curriculum topics that can aid in the support of their kids.

> Sometimes they are afraid to come to school, or embarrassed to come in, or don't connect with what is being taught (authors purpose, writing, etc.). So we have made a concerted effort to bring the parents in and have staff developments for parents. (Mrs. Score)

The principal and staff invited me to attend an example of this kind of meeting as the school hosted "Math Night" on campus. The event took place at school on a Thursday night. The parents had a hot dog dinner, refreshments, and a meet and greet with the principal before they attended two instructional sessions. Basically, this event provided an overview of the nine weeks math instruction. Parents and teachers were provided the time and space to connect and unite around instructional strategies. The meeting was well attended and the teachers appeared very encouraged by the parent interactions.

Dr. Hargrove described the additional motive behind this meeting as helping parents gain confidence in being a partner in the learning process.

> As the parents feel more comfortable, more open about what is gone on, they have this exposure, it makes them feel more comfortable about coming in, or calling if they have a question, or even coming in and volunteering. All of this has helped. (Dr. Hargrove)

After attending a few of these after school meetings I was interested in understanding how the school made accommodations for those who could not attend, or reached out *in* the community to those who are on the fringe. Mrs. Score indicated that when school-wide functions are offered they try "sometimes" to vary the times for working families. She continued:

> Feed them . . . I think food helps. I think being sensitive to their busy schedules. Making your activity a part of their schedule, something they really need. For working families we need to have the buy in for them to feel a need to actually participate. We have to have this buy in from them, a partnership takes two parts and we all need to make sacrifices. Affirming the sacrifice they make to be a part of any activity. (Mrs. Score)

I continued to ask questions regarding class and color to additional participants throughout the study. The more I observed and interacted at the school, the more I came to understand that the Feller Elementary Hispanic population had begun exceeding the population of other families of color. I wanted to know how these stakeholders were invited to participate. Mrs. Seizmore, the school social worker described the effort of the school in this way,

> We have certain events from time to time to celebrate cultures. We did something unique recently in that we had our first ever Hispanic achievement night. This event was well planned, it was well organized, and it was well attended. It was an overwhelming experience to see all of our Hispanic parents come out. They said we do care about our kids, we want to be a part, how can we help you help them? The parents opened up, it was a call to arms. We want to help them, we can't on some ends, please tell us what to do and we will make it happen. A lot of them don't speak English . . . Our translator Mr. Bierga was there and he will tell you that it was simply amazing. (Mrs. Seizmore)

Taking her advice I scheduled an appointment to interview Mr. Bierga and learn more about the approach to marginalized families.

Mr. Bierga grew up in Venezuela and is the full-time English as second language teacher at Feller. After coming to the United States, he settled in the school district with the hopes of teaching. For two years now he has served in this school and has built meaningful relationships with the school staff and the families it serves. He is paid with a mix of district monies and Title I funds. Not only does he teach classes, he serves as a tutor and translator when parents and students have needs that extend outside of his classroom.

Mr. Bierga is greatly appreciated by the administrative team and the teachers at

Feller Elementary. He has a glowing reputation as a student advocate. Many staff

members outlined in great detail how he has been an anchor to the success of the

instructional program at Feller. He contributed the following perspective regarding how

the school has grown academically and in terms of community as it has reached out to

this subgroup.

> Oftentimes people see our Hispanic students as uninterested, quiet, uninvolved. The parents appear to be unsupportive, but it is the language barrier and the lack of focus on our part that keeps these individuals, students, and families at bay. We have had parents to come in who could not speak a word, or very few words of English, but said I want to help. Let me do something. It says, I want to help, let me do something. We had one who wanted to come in and be a translator . . . and we utilized that as well. (Mr. Bierga)

He continued:

> We had a lady two years ago who had just come from Mexico, spoke almost no English and she wanted to volunteer. She did not have great language skills but she could run a copier. She came in, she felt so good about her service, and she continues to work with the school. We tried to make her feel valuable and welcome. Not only has she helped us, she has gained greater appreciation for what she brings to the school, and her communication skills have improved to the point that she is an advocate between the school and our Spanish speaking students. This has been a wonderful connection and a great partnership. (Mr. Bierga)

Mr. Bierga additionally explained that the school had many others who want to

plug in and be a part but the nature of disconnect is often a lack of trust and a fear of

being embarrassed. He stated,

You have to bridge that gap, to include others, you have to meet parents where they are, and make a connection between what they need and how we can apply and help their needs. This is what my goal has been about and it has greatly enhanced the success in my classroom. (Mr. Bierga)

Mrs. Tabler, an experienced third grade teacher at Feller, addressed the problems associated with marginalized families and students and believes that teachers should take it personally when their students and parents don't connect with her.

Parents not feeling connected, this is part of my job and I expect myself and my colleagues to make these contacts. With the expectation that the teachers will make calls, that they will reach out, that they will contact with positives not only negative behavior issues. One of the best ways to connect is through your daily duties in the school. I get so much accomplished during the car rider line and being a part of the activities just of having students dropped off and on their way. I can open up the door and talk about students specifically, parents see this aspect, they see the building of trust. You have to build that trust with the family and it starts with the small things. (Mrs. Tabler)

As the school's focus on community development has grown, more and more partnerships have been established. The administrative team (Lead teachers, curriculum facilitator, social worker, and principal) share the responsibilities in serving as a liaison between the school and outside organizations. Dr. Hargrove explains, "We try to bring the community in, in partnership to support kids." He continues,

There are levels to this as it is done by donating money, providing resources, coming in and actually physically working with a student, or perhaps freeing up employees to come and be a part of the learning process. Get a few more tutors, a few more materials that we need. Kids who need another adult who they can connect with who can find support, love, and structure to provide the necessary avenue for success. (Dr. Hargrove)

With additional probing, Dr. Hargrove was able to clarify his thinking as he approached

the answer to the question, how does your school serve marginalized families?

> Honestly I think it goes back to those relationships. Those ones who are hardest to reach, you must be the one who reaches out; you must be creative in your approach. You can't just tell them you appreciate them and want them, you have to show them. You must be the model for this process. Specifically, we found businesses, or local churches, which have helped to pay for bills, cars getting repaired, groceries, buying Christmas gifts, (150 kids were adopted last year with our Christmas gift programs) or providing a professional development program for parents. It's these kinds of things that we have to be conscious of, you can say all day, oh, you're welcome here, all day long but when these parents see that we are here and we are doing all that we can to support you, that we must have your connections. We go overboard when we get them here! We want to show them in ways, even over the top, that they are appreciated welcome, and excited. (Dr. Hargrove)

The overarching attitude from among staff interviewed reflected a perspective that there

continues to be more "current" involvement from people who are familiar with the

school, (i.e. majority families and stakeholders) and who have an outside desire to help

because they want to make a difference. This is not necessarily because they attended the

school or have children in attendance.

Parent Voices

I was able to connect with several parents while I conducted my research at Feller

Elementary. Over the duration of the data collection I was invited to many school

activities and events and became a bit of a regular participant within the school

community. Being included gave me an opportunity to interact with the chairperson of

the PTA, other members of the board, and a few other parents who are involved within

the school community. I conducted six interviews with parents and their perspectives

brought light to some comments from staff, but it also showed some glowing

inconsistencies between what is perceived between school personnel and the families

they serve.

Mr. Snider is a parent volunteer who comes to school each week to work with

students and to contribute in any other ways needed. He is a retired insurance salesman,

and a grandfather to a fourth grade student. He is an African American male and lives

just outside of the Feller community. Mr. Snider is known as a student advocate who

carries himself with enthusiasm and builds positive relationships with the young men on

campus. Because of this I was surprised with his initial response to my questions

regarding obstacles to connection. He stated,

> Not to be disrespectful, but I'm kind of like, what are these teachers being taught
> in college. My whole thing is, when I went to school teachers were standing up
> and teaching and smiling, and trying to work with everybody. But today you can't
> just teach one way anymore, you have to have different strategies for different
> behaviors. There needs to be a class on that! How to teach kids from different
> walks and different behaviors. (Mr. Snider)

Mr. Snider shared with me that he loves working in the school and enjoys the interactions

he has with his students, but feels like many in the school are still struggling to connect

with individual families.

Mrs. Thome, the PTA president, shared similar comments as she compared the

growth of the school to that of other schools with which she has been involved. She

explained that Dr. Hargrove and the teachers are working hard to make instructional

improvements but there are still barriers to making connections. In her experiences she

has noticed that the staff turnover is troubling because,

> You are always trying to catch the teachers up with the population being served. Regardless of the kind of school (Title I or High Performing) they need to understand these ideas. Because the kids, parents, and teachers WILL shut down if they can't work as a team, and they will not work as a team unless there is trust and understanding about their circumstances. (Mrs. Thome)

Having said that, Mrs. Thome was quick to point out that the administration and staff work very hard to make connections with everyone and to be action oriented with all members of the school. She describes the Feller community as a place that is growing in development because of the leadership not in spite of it.

> I know there are schools in the county where principals are not as open and welcoming to parents. Dr. Hargrove has an open door policy for parents, you can come in anytime, he does a shadowing event later in the year where parents can come in and follow their children to see what they encounter each day. You don't feel like you are a distraction here, you feel like you actually are welcomed and wanted here. (Mrs. Thome)

She continued,

> Also if you have a question, you don't feel like there is a barrage of people standing in the way. You can go right to the principal and get answers. He is very accessible. (Mrs. Thome)

Mrs. Thome described the challenge that all parents must face when they are invited to participate in the activities of the school. She explained that it's not always easy or comfortable. In fact, "in many ways I have to take total responsibility of the learning that happens in the life of my child."

Mrs. Thome, along with her husband, spends many hours each week working within the school and communicating with the principal and the teaching staff. While she

knows things need to be better, she feels that strong steps have been taken in the short

time Dr. Hargrove has been principal.

> We can't blame and point fingers. How can you as a parent not help but look at yourself when you keep getting calls about your child's behavior. This is where the teaching staff can make such a difference, by being involved in the lives of the families. I can see how someone would feel like this is a direct relation to me in how I am raising my child. I wouldn't blame the school but I see how they might feel like they probably don't trust the way I am working with my kids. (Mrs. Thome)

Hearing these perspectives led me to think in deeper ways about how other

parents might perceive the performance of the school staff. Through my observations of

evening events, PTA meetings, and the day-to-day interactions on campus, the attendance

and participation by parents appeared to be incredible. I sought to find additional ideas

and opinions from those who have chosen to participate in these school events.

Ms. Thorton is a single parent who works closely with the PTA and has a

reputation for being a solid advocate for her second grade daughter. I met her at one of

the evening events and asked if we could sit down for an interview. One of my first

questions centered on the role of community in the school and how the contributions of

parents have impacted the Feller program. She had this to say:

> I think the role and participation of parents is getting better. When we first started here, we did not have much parent involvement. Like with the PTA, volunteer activities . . . but parents are realizing ways they can get involved, and other parents are doing it, you don't want to be the first one to start, but you want to be included. I think what we are seeing lately is a trend among parents who want to get involved because other parents are involved. They don't want to be left out. (Ms. Thorton)

As I probed for more understanding Ms. Thorton explained that the ideal relationship

between the parent organizations and the teachers should include a constant flow of

information. Yet, in her experiences, few (parents and staff) are interested in making a

commitment long-term.

> It should be a teacher and parent partnership. Right now what we are afraid of is that so much of the work we have done will go away unless more teachers and parents are becoming a part of the activities. To me you have to make time for your children. To make time for them it can't just be in the evenings (as a parent) or just in the day (as a teacher) it has to extend outside of the time you are expected to be with the kids. (Ms. Thorton)

Mr. Ramirez, a Latino father of three Feller students, loves his school and is eager

to see it become an even better place. From his experience his children have had

wonderful teachers and have learned so much more than they could have at another

location. He described his involvement this way,

> I love this school and all of the things they do here. The after school activities we do, Hispanic night, multicultural arts night, math night, Saturday classes, trunk or treat, etc.

In response to questions about the role of the school as a community he described his

perspective this way:

> It makes you feel like you are part of something bigger than just a classroom. It lets everyone know, kids, parents, and teachers, that what takes place in this school is important. Not just about academics, but about depending upon each other. The more stuff you know, the more experiences, the more we come together, the better you will do in the world. (Mr. Ramirez)

In addition to these opinions, Mr. Ramirez outlined his concerns with getting more staff involved in the activities at school. He explained to me that the school is doing so much to reach out to parents and to the larger community, but they continue to fall short in making lasting partnerships because of the time that is involved. Parents are working hard to provide for their family and teachers are doing all they can in the day to push their students academically. In final analysis he had this to say regarding the role of teachers in serving families.

> Teachers? The struggle here seems like teachers don't want to be here longer than they have to be unless they are getting paid. We have tried to do Saturday activities and teachers rarely attend. We have a lot of young teachers, who appear to not know that they can do this, or should do it. What is the majority doing type thing, a real struggle with commitment. Now this has changed a lot, we have had more teacher involvement, but we are far from where we need to be. (Mr. Ramirez)

Mr. Barker, a white parent of a fourth grade student, agreed with the sentiments of Mr. Ramirez. He explained that the principal needs to push the teachers toward a better understanding of connecting with parents and students outside of the classroom. These interactions, he said, "will only build or enhance what takes place inside." From his perspectives, "If you have more teachers involved, you will get more parents involved, they will see that it is not just a job."

I continued to question Mr. Barker to explain how he has been able to connect given some of the perceived shortcomings. He explained,

> The curriculum has changed so much; it is hard for me to fully understand the math aspects of individual lessons. It is so important for me to get in and meet with teachers to hear about how I can help with the math homework. I want to

stay on top of things but need to be connected to do so. It is intimidating, but a relationship with the teacher is important. (Mr. Barker)

Mrs. Martinez is a Latino parents who volunteers throughout the week at Feller elementary. Her children are both students at the school and she has been very impressed with the accessibility of the teachers and leadership. She recognizes that there are areas the school needs to improve in as it seeks to reach more parents, but overall (from her perspective) the staff goes above and beyond to establish relationships with parents.

> I know things are not always this way in other parts of the district. I have dinners and family events with nieces and nephews who are at other schools, they don't allow as much exposure as we do here at Feller. When I talk about my school I feel pride because I know that the staff has worked hard to get my support and I want to do more to help them. (Mrs. Martinez)

Inspired by what Mrs. Martinez shared, I asked for specific examples of programs and activities that accommodated her as a parent, or reached out to her family?

> Game nights . . . activities here at school. One of things recently the school did was great . . . they had a dance for the students and the ticket was free if their parents attended. While students were dancing, parents were meeting with teachers and talking about instruction, curriculum, and community issues. This was a great activity and event. (Mrs. Martinez)

Mrs. Thome had this to say about the ways parents can better be included in the processes on campus. She quipped,

> Community day is a good example of a way to be involved. Or volunteering within the classroom . . . you can come in and read a book, you can be a lunch buddy, you can volunteer in other ways, you can connect. It's just a matter of taking the steps toward the school. (Mrs. Thome)

As I heard the perspectives from the teachers and staff of the school, as well as, the parents, it appeared that there is a divergence of opinion on some of the ways the school is performing. At the same time, all participants echo the success of the school.

Summary

In this chapter, I told the descriptive story of the school. In chapter five I will discuss my findings and interpretations from the interactions and interviews of the study. I will also return to the framework and research questions developed in chapter two to make sense of the lessons I have learned from observation, documentation, and interview data.

CHAPTER V

CONCEPTS, PRACTICES, AND STRATEGIES

In Chapter IV, I told the descriptive story of Feller Elementary School. This chapter presents an analysis of the data presented in the previous chapter by first looking at the research questions posed in Chapter II. After analyzing this data I identify concepts each participant discussed during their interviews. I list these variables in descriptive tables and use this information to inform the practices and strategies employed by the school to birth and cultivate their program. In addition, I reveal the results of what interviewees perceive as *obstacles, ideas, and suggestions* to enhancing positive relationships between the school and the community. At the conclusion of this chapter I return to my conceptual framework to discuss new insights I have gained as a result of conducting this study.

A Return to the Research Questions

In this section, I review the study's research questions and provide some insight into the analysis of the data collected. Three research questions were considered in this research study and the answers to these questions were addressed in the raw responses of Chapter IV. To succinctly approach the answers to these questions, a brief summary is provided under each bulleted question. The questions themselves include the following:

1. What are the practices and strategies of the school that shape a commitment to school, family, and community partnerships?

a. What are the obstacles that get in the way?

b. How can they be overcome?

c. Which methods work best for whom?

2. What is the principal's role in this process?

3. What can be learned from this elementary schools recent evolution from where it was to where it is now in relation to community connections? What are the plans for the future of this school?

4. How does this schools experience of partnership development inform the conceptual framework of "as," "in," and "with" the community?

Question 1

What are the practices of the school that shape a commitment to school, family, and community partnerships?

The community partnership practices of Feller Elementary School are vast as one looks at classroom instruction, communication from the school, the inclusion of outside agencies and the alternative times provided by the school for relationship building. As interview participants' opinions and my observation data were analyzed, I came to realize that this school has worked hard to thrive as a school devoted to student success. The driving force behind what is being accomplished is an internal focus on student achievement and meeting the goals outlined from the state and federal instructional standards. That said, the principal along with the school leadership team (a cross-section of school staff) developed a strategic plan to incorporate outside agencies as a way to help support the instructional efforts of the school.

Dr. Hargrove and his staff have worked over the course of four years to develop and execute a strategic plan that connects with outside organizations, churches, businesses, and parent groups. By hosting community-wide breakfasts, assemblies, guest visits, and volunteer initiatives, the school has been able to garner media attention, financial support, and a culture of collaboration and partnership. These efforts accent an evolving focus on academic improvement and classroom instruction.

Table 2 provides a snapshot of what interviewees shared in response to the practices of the school. By collecting this data and organizing it in this way I was able to better analyze the regularity of the responses and connect them to the observation and documentation evidence.

Table 2 lists the *practices* the school employed to make connections and build partnerships and the frequency with which they were discussed during the interviews. In addition, because the respondents spoke specifically to the importance of each practice, this information became useful in helping me craft a narrative that descriptively tells the (Chapter IV) school's story.

After each interview was conducted and reviewed, it became obvious that obstacles and suggestions for future success needed to be discussed to better understand the experiences at this school. Within the interviews each participant was asked to identify some of the steps the school took to cultivate their partnership program.

Table 2

Data Collection Matrix: Practices Listed by Source

Practices	Interview	Number of Responses	Observation	Documents
Focus on instructional best practices	Yes	13/18	Yes	Yes
Setting high expectations for students and staff	Yes	11/18	Yes	Yes
Developing school pride with incentives, assemblies, posters, messages	Yes	18/18	Yes	Yes
Ensuring principal accessibility	Yes	18/18	Yes	No
Organized planning for partnership programs	Yes	15/18	Yes	Yes
Showcasing the school in the media	Yes	13/18	Yes	Yes
Teamwork as a driving force in the school	Yes	12/18	Yes	Yes
Two-way communication	Yes	14/18	Yes	Yes
Alternative meeting times and locations	Yes	6/18	N/A	Yes
Employ strategies to reach non-English speaking parents	Yes	15/18	Yes	Yes
The principal effectively delegates responsibilities	Yes	11/18	Yes	Yes
Purposeful outreach—open the school to all stakeholders	Yes	18/18	Yes	Yes
Build an effective "Guided Reading" program	Yes	9/18	Yes	Yes
Expect the staff to collaborate to meet goals	Yes	11/18	Yes	Yes
Host after-hour parent meetings (Sat.)	Yes	16/18	Yes	Yes
Emphasize the School Improvement Plan – "partnership contract"	Yes	7/18	Yes	Yes
Engage in staff development on cultural differences	Yes	10/18	N/A	No
Make sure that all school language as inclusive not exclusive	Yes	6/18	N/A	No
Parent perspectives should be considered in everything	Yes	4/18	N/A	No

Table 3 provides an analysis of what the observation data, interview data, and school document data described as *strategies* necessary to consider when developing a partnership program. This table also shares a description of the specific examples of implementation that were taken at Feller to make their program a reality and their order of chronological and logical implementation (to the extent possible). By systematically listing each strategy, I was able to make connections between the practices employed (Table 2) and the strategies implemented (Table 3) to grow the partnership program.

Table 3

Evidence from the Case Study/Participant Suggestions for Partnership Planning

Strategy	Example of implementation at Feller Elementary
Develop a shared vision	The school staff has worked (under the direction of the principal) to develop a collective vision for partnerships. The next step is to conduct this process with parents.
Build an atmosphere of respect for the school and everyone in it.	Starts with the principal and is communicated to all staff. This includes a culture of high expectations for students and staff, diverse approaches to learning, and behavior from all adults that matches the language used.
Model the community you want to have	The school staff has grown into a family and works collaboratively on instructional and non-instructional duties.
Organize a strategic plan—have as many details established up front before asking for help	The school leadership team developed concise plans before asking for help. This sustained a success rate and kept everyone on task.
Establish two-way communication	Monthly newsletters, classroom notes, phone calls, and school-wide events are avenues to communicate with parents and outside organizations.
Open the school for families and visitors	Open houses, classroom observations, shadowing days, class parities, dances, and school-wide activities. Feller has consistently done this to showcase student success but also to continue recruiting help.

Table 3—Continued

Expose children to other cultures and groups	Community day at the school, field trips, guest speakers and assemblies. Continual conversations with students and staff on the importance of interdependence.
Present opportunities for community involvement	Feller has provided multiple ways parents and community members can volunteer: i.e. lunch buddies, guided reading tutor, office assistant, classroom helper, PTA committees.
Reach out to engage community groups (service organizations, cultural groups, and churches)	Feller has leaned upon local colleges, churches, social service agencies, and businesses to integrate community services for young children and their families.
Acquire funding	The school leadership with the assistance of outside help found creative ways to fund programs and provide needed resources for students.
Don't start too big, look at one small initiative first then grow upon it.	Feller began their partnership program by incorporating volunteer help with their guided reading program. By doing this it created a sample program to showcase and highlight. Initial success carried the enthusiasm for additional programs.
Revisit and refine your guiding principles	Feller Elementary continues to critique and modify their programs through leadership team meetings and staff interactions. The hope is to solicit parent opinions as they move forward.

In addition, when I looked at these tables in their collective state, I was able to push the analysis of these variables and make some initial interpretations. The relationship between the practices and implementation strategies listed in these two tables ultimately developed a culture that allowed community connections to grow, flourish, and thrive within the school.

As these tables were developed and analyzed I not only had a better perspective on the data but I continued to question exactly how all of this information coalesced to form community. Believing that these threads of practice form a community tapestry, I

began to further analyze how these practices and strategies were utilized to create connections.

As described in Chapter IV, the principal and leadership team invested time and energy into developing specific protocols for outside participation. This included developing a shared statement of belief and a commitment contract so that communication was open and two-way. The principal hosted multiple breakfasts, after-school meetings, and collaboration sessions away from campus. These strategic activities cleared the way for community members to plug into the school by volunteering as a lunch buddy, a classroom tutor, a financial contributor, or a support person.

The school has opened the building to after-school hours and outside groups. They have engaged the larger community by soliciting volunteer help and necessary funds to support academic programs. The primary strategy in building the partnership program at Feller was developing a strategic plan to reach out to the stakeholders neighboring the school.

Feller Elementary also made efforts to include the school community by providing opportunities for families and outsiders to visit the school. Open houses, classroom observations, class incentive parties, and social activities became normal routines at Feller Elementary and these opportunities were developed in the hopes of outreach. In addition, Dr. Hargrove made it an expectation that he and his staff would develop personal contacts with parents and families through parent-teacher conferences, home visits, and principal liaison meetings.

Instructional development work sessions were held with the school staff to reiterate the importance of language used in addressing students and parents. A genuine attempt to avoid alienation of parents was made through all written communication from the school. Teachers are expected to acknowledge the diverse cultures in the school setting by teaching with a multicultural perspective and integrating multicultural content.

An interesting strategy the school has employed to reach out to families is the development of Saturday workshops. In hosting these sessions, the school has provided reinforcement to parents and families in school-related issues such as homework support, increased student motivation, and descriptions of curricular items like the new math textbook, the writing process, and effective reading strategies. The development of these sessions were drafted in the hopes that by better informing parents and providing feasible strategies, more families could monitor and interact with their children on schoolwork. Over the three years since their inception these sessions have been very positive in supporting outside interest and developing deeper relationships between the home and school.

A general concept I found throughout the data collection process at Feller elementary was a simple commitment to affirmative interactions. This was explained on numerous occasions by an attempt to simply being "nice." The programs, personal enrichment activities, and inclusion of parents and outside community members were always bathed in an attitude of encouragement. Assuming that many stakeholders had past negative experiences with schooling further promoted awareness in the teaching staff to work for connectedness and cohesion with parents.

The most detailed strategy noted in the data is the measures the school has taken to develop a program that provides information to parents and caregivers whose first language is not English. This program includes staff members and school volunteers from diverse backgrounds so that families feel comfortable asking questions or reaching out to a contact person. The primary contact person for this program was the ESL teacher, Mr. Bierga. He has been a valuable asset to the success of the school in reaching out to Latino families (large subgroup in the school) and their children.

Lastly, the school has established a strong relationship with the media to highlight positive experiences and results in the school. This has worked to bring additional positive notoriety and attention on the school. It has also painted a picture of community commitment and the desire for greater involvement to the larger neighborhood of the school.

What are the Obstacles that Get in the Way? How Can They Be Overcome?

As I continued gathering data from the different interviews conducted, I began to see similar responses from participants on what are perceived as obstacles keeping this school from finding even greater success in their community partnership programs. The following is a list of the obstacles that emerged from the participant perspectives. They are included here to display what "staff" believe preclude school partnership programs from moving forward. They include the following:

1. Lack of focus or no clear plan.
2. Getting all staff on the same page.
3. Communicating effectively in spite of the language barrier.
4. Educating the public in the importance of partnerships.
5. Overcoming negative parent perceptions.
6. Broad district initiatives—too much focus on assessments.

Having a lack of focus or no clear plan. Dr. Hargrove was quick to outline the difference his school has made from others because they took the time to develop a clear plan of how volunteers would be utilized. From his perspective it is absolutely paramount that visitors are given clear directives and an accurate description of how they will be utilized before committing to participate.

> It is important to, if we are inviting people to come in, that they are aware of why they are here, they value the time they are here, and that the school staff shows that they appreciate the time that was taken for them to be here. Staff should not be scrambling to find things to do for kids and for volunteers, it looks bad, we need to always be organized and show that we are on top of what is going on. That we appreciate what they are doing for us. (Dr. Hargrove)

According to Dr. Hargrove, when you have a plan in place and your staff understands the importance of how all school stakeholders can contribute, the sky will open up with help. He shared the example of community day (which I observed first hand) and how the school was able to tap resources they would not have thought of otherwise.

When you have a plan you will not waste the time of those seeking to be involved. "They also understand from the start what our expectation will be in relation to their commitment level." Dr. Hargrove went on to tell a story of a local company just down the road from the school. They had been invited to come to a community breakfast and they sent two women. The ladies were so impressed with the school and its organization for participation they signed up six people from their office to volunteer for the remainder of the school year. They adopted third grade classes, volunteered, and provided necessarily resources for the students.

Anyway you can outreach with the community, asking for help, asking for resources, and then being welcoming when they get here. Having a real purpose for their participation. Not just show up and say, yeah, yeah, we are glad your here, but helping them to feel welcomed and needed helps this process along. (Dr. Hargrove)

Mrs. Score, the lead teacher, explained another dynamic in the importance of planning as she discussed a powerful example of outside participation. As I listened she outlined a unique obstacle the school has faced time and time again. A critical part of planning and organizing is learning how to "sell your school" and to use clear expressions of how a particular partnership will help both parties.

Mrs. Score said,

Take the Rotary for example. They come and work with us now, but it was not easy. If we are recruiting volunteers we have learning that we need to help them see that we are trying to grow children, nothing more. (Mrs. Score)

She continued:

We want them to question how we might work together to help grow children. When the Rotary organization contacted us . . . and they contacted us . . . they wanted to know what our demographics were, what was our AYP, what were our scores, and what we were currently doing. So we actually had to pitch a proposal as to how we could use them to help us. The obstacle we had to overcome there was this mentality, "are we on a sinking ship"? We can come in and help you, but are you going to be receptive to our help and utilize us, because we are not here to file papers, or do crafts, we want to use you to come in and help educate children. An extra set of eyes, ears, and hands. (Mrs. Score)

I could see as I spoke with the principal and the school leadership team throughout the study, that the established partnerships are important in practical terms to the school, but more importantly in personal philosophical ways.

We are willing to use groups to move our school forward, but we want them doing it for the right reasons. This is tricky and takes a level of charisma and political savvy-ness to accomplish because not only do you want to solicit help, you also want to make sure you are going to get sustained help, not just a blurb on a billboard somewhere. (Dr. Hargrove)

Mrs. Lofton helped to clarify this aspect of organization and coordination by explaining some of the push-back by businesses and outside agencies. She explained that there is an attitude of "what's in it for me" (from businesses primarily) as they want notoriety. Yet, it is essential to help our partners understand that it is not about them. If you don't do that you create a big mess. She continued,

This relationship is a win-win situation, but it's about kids growing and performing well. The role of the leadership, and the school, is to paint a good picture, an authentic picture, and then have a strategic plan to connect the right participants to the right students to make the program a success. PR is essential, communication is critical, and strategic organizing of the utmost importance. (Mrs. Lofton)

When I asked how the school leadership utilized a plan to overcome this obstacle Mrs. Lofton provided the following explanation and analysis.

We can always get help, but the right help is critical. Building these partnerships is essential because a lot of people don't always have time. If you ask a lot, you will get a lot, but it takes leg work to get out and advocate, then recruit for your school . . . Advocate first, educate the public, have a plan, then recruit . . . it can't be done the other way around. (Mrs. Lofton)

Some additional examples were provided by Dr. Hargrove as he stated,

It is important to, if we are inviting people to come in, that they are aware of why they are here, they value the time they are here, and that the school staff shows that they appreciate the time that was taken for them to be here. Staff should not

be scrambling to find things to do for kids and for volunteers, it looks bad, we need to always be organized and show that we are on top of what is going on. (Dr. Hargrove)

Getting all staff on board. A second obstacle that was noted throughout the study was the importance of getting all staff speaking the same language and communicating the same values as it relates to students. Each interview participant indicated that this is not easy and that the work continues at Feller, but they all agreed that a community partnership program would be an immediate failure if the school is communicating a particular theme and the teachers are not "living it" out in the classroom.

This was expressed eloquently by a young teacher, Mrs. Hall as she said,

We can't change the home environment; we have to shape our focus within the school environment to create a culture of support, love, and trust. Because out of these ideas joy and hope are born. A future plan or story. (Mrs. Hall)

When I asked interview participants about how they had grown into these roles the following descriptions were given.

I think at first it was this attitude of "who is this that is coming in now" because it is nerve racking sometimes to have visitors in a culture of testing and evaluation. But at this point the teachers and the students are so comfortable having visitors into their classrooms, or filling in for an activity, or collaborating with us that they hardly bat an eye. An unspoken goal is to be in classrooms each and every day, to be a part of all the activities. (Mrs. Score)

It was expressed time and time again throughout the interviews that the teaching staff has had to develop a new approach to visitors in their classroom and help that is provided. In addition, the school support staff (i.e. lead teacher, curriculum facilitator, and

administration) has worked with teachers to enforce best practices and an accurate utilization of all resources available at the school.

An example of this included the partnership with a church group called "Hand-in-Hand. This group comes each day of each week to provide support in the school's guided reading literacy program. At first, the school staff had to do quite a bit of training to bring these volunteers up to speed on literacy practices, but once there was a comfort level with the individuals coming into the school and the teaching staff, each student was able to benefit greatly from the partnership.

The language barrier. Another obstacle that emerged through interviews and observations is the language barrier. Because the Hispanic population within the school has grown exponentially in the past few years, the school is continuing to develop new ideas and strategies to reaching these families. The school has a full-time ESL teacher who interprets and works with all students, and multiple parents have volunteered to come in as translators and interpreters.

Those interviewed in this study indicated a strong concern with connecting to those who do not speak English as a first language.

> We have a growing and large Hispanic population that has become a part of this school community. We have had meetings, activities, and events that reach out to these parents. In fact we have had some success with our Hispanic / ESL night where we had materials and resources to present including a translator that was here to work with parents, answer questions, and phrase statements they may have had to our school leadership (the principal and the teachers). As simple as this sounds it was eye opening as we heard the heartbeat of many parents as they were able to express their feelings about the school, their high expectations for students, and their desire to be a part of the learning process. (Mr. Carter)

Another teacher noted,

> This Fall with our title one money we purchased bilingual stories so that the child could be reading in English and the parent reading in Spanish this way the parent could read along with their child, work on comprehension skills, and grow bonds with the each other. (Ms. Nagy)

Mrs. Score outlined the importance of these books as she related a story to me about a Hispanic mother who was able to take these resources and read to all the students in her community. Not only were the books a valuable resource to enhance reading levels, but they also served as a bridge between the school and a particular group being served.

> We had a mother (kind of the mother hen of the trailer park) who shared her appreciation in saying "I have never felt as much a part of a school as I do here at Sumner." Every day she gets to read to her kids and the children in her neighborhood. She can talk about their interactions at school, and build bridges that help her student make connections between what is happening in their homes and in the school. This simple partnership has helped our school community flourish. (Mrs. Score)

Mrs. Score continued,

> Everything that goes home is in English and in Spanish. This is one of best practices. Because it is inclusive to our Spanish-speaking families. Granted every child does not need this, but it ends up being invaluable as it shows we are taking the time to value them, their language and customs, etc . . . We don't expect them to struggle with the communication coming from school. We want to show that we are sensitive to their needs and we value them as parents. (Mrs. Score)

Educating the public in the importance of partnerships. The school principal and administrative staff all outlined that the focus of their work in relation to a

partnership program centered on the theme to do what is best and in the best interest of all kids. A frustration seemed apparent in these interviews as staff responses outlined a concern with human nature to blame others instead of making meaningful change. As leaders, the school staff is expected to take steps toward moving forward with trusting relationships in spite of the temptation to blame. This is an apparent philosophy as you make your way around the school campus. The halls and classrooms are literally littered with enthusiastic banners and signs that speak to teamwork and supporting students.

Interestingly, the most unique analysis provided to describe the dynamic of public apathy came from a parent volunteer instead of a school employee. During my interview with Mr. Snider he shared a unique story:

> My church is down the street and as a member of a small group we wanted to get involved in a school to help make a difference in the lives of kids. We have a retired educator who is part of our Sunday school class and he created this whole 'village connections program' as a way to work with a school. For over four months our church reached out to local schools and tried to plug in. While it has been a blessing working with Feller it was also sad because this was the only school that accepted our offer. This program was developed around the senior adults of the church, we are talking about retired teachers, principals, older folks, people who want to get in and help. I was shocked that other schools did not want the help. (Mr. Snider)

I asked Dr. Hargrove if he was aware of this and why he thought others might not have wanted to utilize this church as a resource.

> I don't know if schools are weary of having faith-based people in the schools. There are a lot of examples of faith based strategies. They are not pushing religious issues, or pushing anything but helping you with the kids. Giving that time to the students whether it is emotional or academic. I just think to overcome that (perceived obstacle) you can't be afraid to ask. If you reach out, most are more than willing to help and we are willing to take the help. (Dr. Hargrove)

Parent Perceptions. An additional perceived obstacle that is viewed as a struggle from school staff includes overcoming the negative perceptions of the parents. One teacher communicated her frustrations this way,

> To get that buy in we must work hard with the parents. One big thing, a lot of parents whatever their experiences were in school they carry over to their children. They are not trusting of the school system. Specifically as it relates to issues of their child, learning difficulties, behavioral issues, they are not receiving what we have to tell them. They are either in denial about something, or upset given their perceptions. That is a big obstacle . . . to build the trust of the parent. (Ms. Jacoby)

She continued to explain her perspective by saying,

> My dealings with parents could always be positive or negative, but our motto here is make a great day, go out of your way to make it good. Expect great things. (Ms. Jacoby)

Mrs. Carter continued this line of thinking in her interview as she expressed her struggles with connecting to students and their parents. When I asked her about the word resistance (she had used this many times during the interview) she explained:

> The resistance is coming from the parents . . . primarily . . . parents who have had bad experiences in their educational setting. Maybe not here, but in their lives. They may be somewhat resistant in coming on campus and spending time here, but don't necessarily want us in their home. We don't get a lot of questions about the things we are doing, in fact parents are primarily passively supportive, but they just don't go against the grain even if they are not participating. There are not a lot of questions, they just choose to check out. This is a harder way to operate then if parents were asking hard questions. This is where trust comes in; we must show trust, show energy, smiles and enthusiasm. (Mr. Carter)

Mrs. Hall's comments added to this commentary.

Well parental involvement is sometimes hard. Because parents here are I would say are not as connected, they don't appear to be as interested, and its not because they are not interested. There are reasons they are not here, sometimes it is money, they are working hard and doing the best they can, trying to pay their bills, lots of single parent homes, many with multiple children. They are dealing with a lot of other issues, so it is hard to be overly involved in elementary school child's education. So I think this is one of the biggest hurdles as we connect with parents on a level that works with parents to make connections with students, parents, and the teachers. (Mrs. Hall)

Hearing these responses I was eager to understand (again) how this school was able to develop partnerships given some of these attitudes? A discussion with Dr. Hargrove revealed his perspective on the approach to difficult parents.

Really, we have to make time for parents. When they are working we must be flexible. We have a man that works from 12:00 to 12:00, mom can only come in at 8:00. We don't normally allow parents to meet with staff during the school day, but when parents are trying, we do what needs to be done, we get coverage, and we find flexible avenues to meet with parents. (Dr. Hargrove)

Why is this important?

These meetings are important because it is about building trust up from year to year and through "all of the interactions" we have. We want our parents to know that we exist (our jobs, this building, and our organization) for one purpose . . . to educate children and to serve their family. We can't do this if we are rigid in our scheduling. (Dr. Hargrove)

Mrs. Seizmore, the school social worker had explained in an earlier interview how the school worked to find alternative meeting places to try to reach out to parents that would normally not come to the school.

Not only have we looked at different times of the day to hold meetings. We have also looked for other areas and spaces to meet. Like a community center, an

apartment complex, a church, doing things at lunches, at dinner time, on weekends. A chat with the principal first thing in the morning, trying to meet the needs of working parents, parents with smaller children, doing things at various times. We have also gone out into the community to provided needs and services they could not normally get. (Mrs. Seizmore)

She continued to explain that these approaches have been very successful over the years and the school has benefited by picking up necessary support from parents. She also described the level of student success because the parents have developed trust with school staff.

"Unfortunately," Mrs. Seizmore noted, "the district has begun to frown upon neighborhood and home visits." Until recently this practice has been encouraged, but a new wave of district level leadership has expressed concern about the potential to enable parents instead of adequately serving their students.

What I find interesting is that for a long time, we were expected to go out into the homes and make these visits. But now there is a shift to get them to the school, (The district pushed to stop making home visits) try to get them here on campus to make them more comfortable. Parents, I guess, have somewhere noted that this practice is intrusive coming to the homes, primarily because they felt like the meetings themselves were intrusive. (Mrs. Seizmore)

Mrs. Lofton contributed her perspective on parent perceptions by describing the problem individual staff members have with communicating effectively with stakeholders.

I know I touched on this . . . communication issue: we will send you a note, we have a website, a volunteer link, a calendar, a lot of ways to keep in the loop But if the classroom teacher is not actively working with the child and keeping parents included on what is happening, nothing else we do matters. (Mrs. Lofton)

Which methods work best for whom? The school has placed special emphasis on students and families who do not speak English as a first language. The strategies outlined from all interview participants speak to this reality as volunteers, teachers, and administrative staff members are working hard to connect with these students and their families.

The lunch buddy initiative, classroom volunteer tutors, and the guided reading program have enhanced advocacy for students identified as lacking academic support outside the walls of the school. Furthermore, the financial resources given to the school have helped to provide gifts, supplies, and support for students who are economically needy and struggling to have basic materials.

Question 2

What is the Principal's Role in this Process?

Dr. Hargrove has been a critical variable in the successes at Feller Elementary. Based on our many conversations, observations, and feedback from interview respondents, Dr. Hargrove identified early in his tenure as principal that community partnerships were needed before the school could move forward.

He worked to develop these partnerships by first defining the school's mission and developing clear goals with the help of his leadership team. As these goals became a solid aspect of the instructional program, Dr. Hargrove emphasized their importance through all classroom visits and communication. In re-organizing his administrative team, a delineation of responsibilities were delegated and leaders were held accountable to promote the mission of the school.

Dr. Hargrove not only serves as the organizational leader, the direction setter, and the person who keeps staff accountable, he also has been the face of the school. Through his visibility and communication, Dr. Hargrove has been a charismatic face of enthusiasm toward partnership opportunities. Parents interviewed all expressed their appreciation of his availability and transparency as it relates to school issues and student concerns. Through this aspect of his leadership, Dr. Hargrove has been able to grow people and to enhance the programs in place.

Question 3

What can be learned from this elementary schools recent evolution from where it was to where it is now in relation to community connections? What are the plans for the future of this school?

In order to appropriately answer this question it must be stated that the school continues on their journey toward being an institution committed to community connections. While there are many positive aspects that became evident in the study, there are also a few areas that need additional attention.

Feller Elementary has experienced a variety of changes in its sixty year history, more specifically in the last ten years. The societal changes and complexity of student needs has increased the demands on the performance of the school. The partnerships developed the past four years have helped to create an atmosphere of collective responsibility and communal commitment. The work of the principal and his staff to coordinate opportunities for connections has been commendable. Examples include:

- o The volunteer tutoring partnerships in cooperation with the literacy program.

- o Lunch buddy program with outside volunteers to connect with students.

- o Mentor programs to support student performance.

- o Community day activities and assemblies that expose children to unique learning opportunities.

- o Saturday training sessions offered for parents.

- o Alternate meeting times and locations to bridge parent obstacles of connection.

- o Using the media as a conduit to showcase success.

- o A commitment to cultural sensitivity.

These examples are only a sampling of the ways Feller has worked to develop a program committed to community partnerships.

Instead of viewing working with parents and community members as an addition to their already long list of responsibilities, the school staff has worked to better understand the needs and perspectives of their constituents. The administration has provided staff development activities (in addition to curricular needs) that enhance teacher efficiency and sensitivity as it relates to family connections.

In addition, the school culture has shifted to de-marginalize the role of parents and families and create an environment that encourages participation. The school has recognized the importance of having convenient hours, programs, communication, and welcoming procedures that eliminate barriers to parent and community involvement. The

results of this approach have not only provided students with much needed advocacy, but it has also enhanced the academic performance of the school.

One of the most interesting things I learned from my time in this school was the importance of planning, empathy, and patience as a school works on its own perceptions and the perspectives of others. While trust is such an important variable in the success of any organizational program, it is only exacerbated when applied to the partnerships designed to support children. An obvious reality, but a reality none-the-less, is that before trust can be actualized, a relationship must be established. It is of critical importance that principals and teachers understand the social dynamics behind partnerships and the role that effective relationships play in this process.

In future planning, this school and others will find meaningful data as it seeks to get an accurate picture of parent perspectives through questionnaires, opinion polls, and inventories. Every school has some level of activity within its parent ranks, but this can create a dependency on only certain parent representatives. Special efforts need to be made to broaden the list of parents who represent the school. I will return to this idea as I expound upon the findings and interpretations of the study in the next chapter.

Question 4

How does this schools experience of partnership development inform the conceptual framework of "as", "in", and "with" the community?

Theoretical Perspectives

As I continued to make connections between what I had observed and experienced in the study of this school, I referred back to Chapter II (Conceptual

Framework) and reflected upon the ways that this school functioned *as, in*, and *with* the

community. Furthermore, I questioned myself and my abilities to adequately provide

examples of each variable in context to the strategies and practices of this school.

To accomplish this task and to take my research to a deeper level I pushed myself

to critique the school's practice. I again reviewed the field notes, interview transcriptions,

and the various perspectives that I experienced during my study. What developed is the

following table (see Table 4) that emphasizes the practices and strategies the school

employs and lists them under my theoretical headings (As, In, With).

Table 4

Strategies and Practices in Relation to the Conceptual Framework: As/In/With the Community

AS	Year	IN	Year	WITH	Year
Develop a shared vision with staff	1	Establish two-way communication	1	Create a school-parent compact	1
Focus on instructional best practices	1	Outreach to community organizations	1 & 2	Open the school for families and visitors	1 & 2
Build a sense of school pride	1 & 2	Host principal breakfasts and meetings	1	Present opportunities for community involvement	2
Embrace a culture of collaboration among grade levels and staff	1	Incorporate local colleges as an assistance to the program	2	Acquire funding for necessary student-centered programs	2 & 3
Critique and draft systematic school improvement planning	1	Expose children to other cultures and groups	2	Host homework clinics for parents and tutors	2
Emphasize the importance of positive language in the school – inclusive	1	Invite special guests as part of the instructional program – i.e. community day	2	Open the building to community use and social service support	2
Engage in staff development that incorporates cultural differences	1 & 2	Begin "lunch buddy" program	1 & 2	Employ translators / use books and materials to link family culture to the school	2

Table 4—Continued

Model the school community you want to see	1 / 2 / 3	Create alternate meeting times and locations to accommodate families	2	Provide opportunities for parents and teachers to look at student data together	2 & 3
Have a strategic plan	1	Make home visits and community centers	2	School staff work with local organizers to improve the school and the neighborhood	3 & 4
Find extra support for struggling students	1	Hold workshops for parents	2	Parent / community coordinator is available to answer questions and link needs	2
Maintain a safe, orderly school with clear and consistent guidelines for student and staff behavior	1	Link community programs and activities to what students are learning	2	Multicultural nights are held periodically throughout the school year to celebrate family and educate the public	3 & 4

By looking at this table you will find that each column is distinctly individual but closely connected to the others. For instance, the *As* section, identifies strategies and practices that speak directly to the behavior of the participants within the walls of the school. The *In* column, recognizes the learning interactions outside the walls of the school. While the *With* categories depict the approaches this school took to build connections and form compacts with partners.

The close connection between the strategies and practices and the theoretical perspectives yielded an interesting critique as I began to see how much these items were interconnected. To better test my assumptions and insights, I returned to Feller Elementary in late January 2010. At that time I met with the principal to review this information, garner his reaction, and share with him a description of the year of

implementation (noted in the column immediately right of the theoretical heading) as well as further explain how this program evolved under each category. This analysis helped me not only to get additional feedback on the theory behind the study, but to identify a sequence or pattern of implementation.

Dr. Hargrove, in reviewing the above information and contributing to its content, explained to me that Feller had to develop as a community first, but the other two variables (in and with) were a close second. He also helped me understand that the task of building a school, family, community partnership had to be strategic but it also had to happen quickly. From his perspective, time is always of the essence because students need support and help immediately.

When you look at Table 4 you quickly recognize that many of the steps were developed and implemented in years one and two. The evolving stages at years three and four constitute an exercise of modification and adjustment given particular results. The principal again emphasized that the task of effective partnership planning takes an enormous amount of time, but unfortunately time is of the essence. Because of the urgency presented in an environment of poor academic performance, a collective approach to all three variables (As, In, With) had to take place mutually.

What Does it All Mean?

It is evident from this study that school-community partnerships make a difference in student achievement as well as the interactions between all school stakeholders. Not only did the data from this case-study reveal this reality, but past research has shown this true. Synthesizing 35 years of research to provide insight into

"what works in schools," Robert Marzano (2003) concluded that community involvement is the most critical factor to school-wide success. In addition, the PTA's (1997) National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs identified "outreach to the community for resources to strengthen schools" as essential for any school or program involving parents and families.

John Wes-Burhham (2009) suggests that the future role of school leadership is likely to undergo a radical change from being inwardly focused on school improvement initiatives, to recognizing the need and potential for schools to become more involved with their communities. To achieve this, he argues that school principals will begin to shift their focus away from the "institutional improvement" that characterized school leadership initiatives of the 1990's and towards "community transformation" through the building of social capital. He suggests that taking a role in the building of social capital, will have positive spin-offs for schools and create "rich networks of interdependence" between schools and their local communities.

> School improvement leads to bonding, introspection and detachment. While this creates institutional integrity, it compromises engagement and networking—the basis of the creation of social capital. If academic standards are to be raised in a sustainable way and broader educational aspirations achieved, then educationists will have to see their role in terms of creating social capital, rather than just improving classroom practice. (p. 137)

The principal and his administrative team at Feller appear to know how important building and sustaining good community relationships is to the well-being and culture of their school. Building these relationships has prepared the ground for effective consultation and for sustaining partnerships. Building relationships with school

stakeholders has not been without its challenges. Michael Fullan (2000) speaks to this as

he says:

> schools need the outside to get the job done. These external forces, however, do
> not come in helpful packages; they are an amalgam of complex and uncoordinated
> phenomena. The work of the school is to figure out how to make its relationship
> with them a productive one. (Fullan, 2000)

By reflecting on the experiences at Feller Elementary, a school leader could find

important themes necessary for replicating success. It is extremely important to survey

the complex map of potentially rewarding relationships and understand how to manage

them before entering into a partnership program. Otherwise, the benefits may be

nonexistent for the life of the school and its students.

Revisiting Theory and Practice

As I conducted this qualitative case study, I understood that the concepts

surrounding community partnerships were broad and vague. In order to maintain focus I

needed to simplify the variables as much as possible. My problem statement and research

questions created an opportunity to provide descriptive analysis to support an

understanding of the steps needed to find success in creating community connections. My

conceptual framework also worked to explain the independent variables to consider as

members of the community come together and work *with* each other.

However, as I tried to understand all that could be interpreted from this study it

became evident that the scope of this study could not be limited to schools working

"with" the community. Instead, the three themes (As, In, and With) while existing

independently in theory, must work collectively in union.

Figure 3 is a post-analysis iteration of my theoretical framework with the emphasis on school "With" the community. What I present here is a graphic to illustrate how I have come to understand the nature of school in relation to community building.
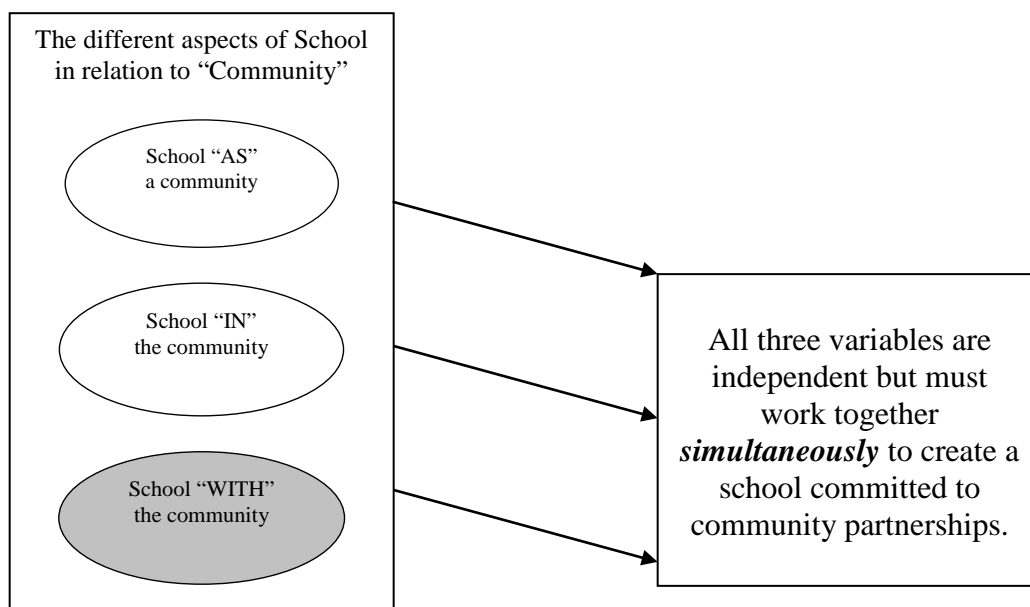
Figure 3. *Interpretive Perspectives on School Community Relationships*

As mentioned, I initially wanted to focus on the *with* aspect of school community partnerships, but I began to realize that the three ideas (*As, In*, and *With*) work in tandem and can never be completely separated. The principal intimated this reality in our final interview. After discussing my findings, and critiquing his own perceptions, he concluded that his school is still struggling to meet the needs of all constituents because it is laborious to fully understand and accommodate the perspectives of everyone.

My observations and analysis led me to understand that future approaches to community partnerships must include a trilateral commitment to the three aspects of

school in relation to community. This manifested itself from the stories of staff who explained that in the early years of implementation the teachers and staff were not working as a family and they had to come together. They were not sharing resources or operating as a team. Upon arrival the principal quickly realized that in order to make the kind of progress needed for success the school staff had to come together as a community. This meant they had to talk the same language, discuss student performance, and embrace the benefits of working together.

When this occurred, the parents were less resistant to come into the school, observe it, and hear it. The outside organizations at the fringe of the school caught wind of the changes and became interested in providing their participation. The process had to start in the school, *as* a community, *in* relation to others, so they could work *with* all stakeholders. By coming together as a unified team, the opportunities became endless.

I came to understand that what set this school apart from others of its type, were the specific behaviors and actions of the principal. Often principals come into schools with personal agendas and they do not listen to others. They do not identify the concerns, goals, and ideas of those already in the school community. As a result individuals are alienated and they do not contribute.

However, when a principal considers the perspectives of staff, students, and parents, the ideas of partnership move from a belief that more work is necessary to a common commitment to responsibility. In this school the partnerships and strategic community structures are not viewed as something additional but as something that just comes naturally.

In terms of my framework on "Levels of Engagement" (See Chapter I—conceptual Framework, Figure 2), I came to realize that in spite of all the good the school is doing to bring people together, it continues to struggle forming concatenative connections. When I presented my findings to the principal of the school in late January, he provided additional reflections on this problem. Together we revisited my conceptual framework and discussed the progress of Feller Elementary. Dr. Hargrove recognized that the school is not at the stage of connection due to the inability to adequately gauge parent perspectives. With the limitations of the school in mind he provided an analysis that helped bring clarity to the shortcomings.

Dr. Hargrove believes that the reason the school has not formed deeper connections with the parents is primarily because of time and communication. According to Dr. Hargrove, the school is continuing to establish more meaningful relationships but this work is slow and takes deeper levels of commitment from everyone. "The leadership team had decided at the beginning to start small and grow from our successes" (Dr. Hargrove, January, 2010). As a result the school built their program on the increased involvements of school partnerships.

The principal also admitted that the school needs to do more to adequately find out what parents need, what they expect, and what the school can do to better assist their efforts at home. It is his hope that by conducting surveys, parent inventories, and additional dialogue sessions, the school will more fully develop to create deeper connections. In final analysis, Dr. Hargrove did not find the conceptual framework faulty,

instead, noted that the school is simply failing to adequately move with the continuum from a place of cursory relationships to quality connections.

Figure 4 illustrates a visual explanation to reflect what I have learned about the concatenative connections from my original conceptual framework. Through additional post-data analysis, the summarizing interview with the principal, and my interpretive reflections, I outline the variables that limit the formation of these connections.

Time and Communication		*Concatenative* **Connections**		Time and Communication
SCHOOL				COMMUNITY
The Staff		The gap exists because "accurate" parent and staff perspectives are needed to build concatenative bonds		The Family
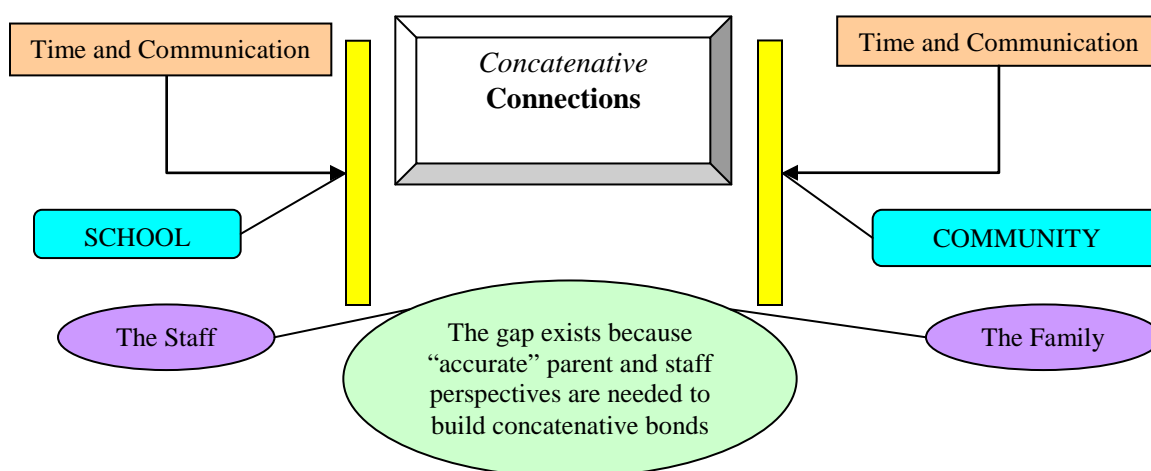
Figure 4. *Why Gaps Exist and Limit Concatenative Connections*

The variables that have kept the school and community from connecting in deeper ways include the limitations of time and communication. Both of these factors became evident as I analyzed data and participant perspectives. In Chapter VI, I will expound upon the ways that schools can close the gaps keeping stakeholders from shaping concatenative partnerships.

Summarizing Thoughts

This chapter has provided further analysis of the data collected during this study, as well as some clarifying points that needed to be noted before adequate interpretations could take place. The various strategies, practices, and behaviors of the school worked in tune with my conceptual framework to yield powerful interpretations and findings.

In Chapter VI, I provide concluding comments to this study, share a summary of what I learned from this school, and provide implications and recommendations for those schools seeking to promote similar community partnership programs.

CHAPTER VI

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In 1980 David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot explored the historic changes of

public school principals in their work, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in*

America, 1820-1980. They present incredible studies to support how some schools even

in tough neighborhoods work well and promote interdependence. They write,

> It has become apparent that what counts most in the academic and social learning of children is what happens in their classrooms and in their particular schools. The principal, the students, the teachers, and the parents and others must share a sense of being a community of instructors and learners. This is what will foster positive ethos and high expectations. (p. 255)

It is fascinating that this quote, now thirty years old, reminds readers that the most critical

aspect of success in schooling is the level to which all stakeholders are connected.

Troubling, however, is that we continue to wrestle with how to make this type of school a

reality.

In Chapter I, an explanation was given about why I believe the lack of

commitment to community connections is problematic to our American educational

landscape. I presented a position that promoted critical awareness on relationships and

engagement. In Chapter II literature was reviewed that showed support to students

profiting from schools functioning *as*, *in*, and *with* the community. This background

information revealed that the most important segment of a school's culture is the degree

to which all its inhabitants see themselves as one collaborative group experiencing a sense of community.

As a result, I explained through my conceptual framework and research questions the importance of using this study to identify the practices school leaders employ to shape community connections. Chapter III served as an outline of the methodology used in this qualitative case study. Chapters IV and V presented the raw responses and observations from the study as well as demonstrated the steps taken to adequately analyze the data.

In this final chapter, I provide a discussion of my findings. I organize the discussion around two difference questions: (a) Why this study is important to the landscape of education, and (b) What others can learn from the experiences in this school. The final section of this chapter provides a list of six recommendations for future practice as well as concluding comments to summarize the results of the study.

Why This Study is Important

This study brings attention to the perspectives and perceptions of staff and parents at one elementary school working to build community partnerships. I recognize that the results of this study are not necessarily transferable because it is an isolated story of one school. However, the conclusions, strategies, recommendations, and potential pitfalls drawn can be applied to multiple locations.

There is a long history in the American educational system of seeing schools as vital institutions for community and democracy. John Dewey (1938) believed that schools played a critical role in preparing children to become citizens capable of working together to solve society's problems. He believed that schooling had public value beyond

imparting knowledge to individual students. Over the years, public schools have become progressively disconnected from the communities they serve, particularly in low-income urban neighborhoods. However, there are examples of schools, such as Feller Elementary, who are working hard to change this reality.

A strong, shared identity established in a school encourages people to work together and make the institution more than a collection of separate classrooms and programs. This kind of school works hard to live as a community, to integrate community into the school, and to collaborate with the larger body of stakeholders. Moreover, when parents, teachers, and school stakeholders build relationships and work together, they start to forge a shared and positive identity, thereby offering people an opportunity to move from "I" to "We" as they contribute to school and community life.

What Others Can Learn

Scholars of human communities believe that in order to fully experience connection we must be completely inclusive, open to all on the basis of our common humanity. Proponents of this view point out that many urban neighborhoods contain residents of different races and religious beliefs who nonetheless live and work together. All that is required for such community life is that each person respects the privacy and rights of others, and works for equal access to education, jobs, and political decision making for all. However, this view is based on many assumptions that are hard to pinpoint and embrace. Western society is based on shared commitments to reason, rights, and justice, even though there is no universally recognized definition of any of these. The idea of a totally inclusive community is, therefore, an illusion. Every human community

holds in common some beliefs that necessarily create boundaries, including some people and excluding others.

The reason I present this distinction is because each school will have its own unique set of circumstances, obstacles, and approaches that will hinder or enhance their partnership program. Because of this reality, all schools must take time to reflect upon what they want to accomplish as a community before they reach out in, and with, the larger community.

It is my belief that all schools can transcend the various distinctions of universal community by recognizing that the child in the building is the unifying variable that brings together all stakeholders and constituents. As elementary as this point is, it is critical that schools work to serve the needs of the student first.

This point became evident during my final interactions with the principal and the staff at Feller Elementary when it was noted that small and large issues continue to divide people and their perspectives. By using race as a context to explore this point, the principal provided a few examples of how parents have shown discriminating behaviors toward himself and some teachers. Dr. Hargrove explained to me that "we can't agree on everything, but the common interest between us (parents, staff, outside organizations) is a desire to see their/our child succeed." If school's can help the larger community understand this aspect of education, then learning can happen more fluidly.

The Six Recommendations

For schools and leaders who desire to develop meaningful community partnerships in their buildings and districts, they must recognize that there are real

challenges that need to be addressed. If I learned anything in this study it is that the work of bringing people together to form a collaborative community centered on collective partnerships, is very difficult and takes time.

For schools wishing to build community, the data from Feller Elementary School suggest the following six recommendations.

Strategic Planning and Intentionality

The partnership program at Feller Elementary is fascinating because it is relatively young in its inception. However, in spite of its youth the data supporting the program shows its success rates are attributed to the clear planning and collaborative approach from the school leadership and staff. Prior research in the literature review (Chapter II) suggested that as schools enter into partnerships they should take time to develop a shared vision with clear expectations spelled out for each participant.

By organizing the steps of the program, the school staff promoted a shared sense of mission and vision. This created a system of collective ownership and accountability. In order to engineer their partnership programs, Feller's staff brainstormed activities and developed a specific program that could be built upon (The staff chose Guided Reading due to the low success in their K-5 literacy levels). This gave the school a clear focus and an individual "academic" program to work within.

A second aspect of strategic planning was the division of leadership duties among traditionally non-administrative positions. The principal divided responsibilities between the school social worker, three lead teachers, and the school counselor. This required a shift to a model of leadership where individuals share equally in planning, decision

making, and the pursuit of agreed upon goals. The success of the partnership program became everyone's work. This division of labor also freed the principal up from many cursory disciplinary issues, minor instructional concerns, and district level minutia such as reporting and clerical paperwork. As a result, Dr. Hargrove was observed being an ambassador for the school by attending business socials, connecting with school visitors, and being the face of the school.

The literature has shown that schools who successfully work as, in, and with the community have positive effects on students, families, and their larger community. When a school works to integrate a comprehensive strategy focused on collective cooperation the benefits for student learning are multiplied (Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Murphy, 2001).

Based on the case study research at Feller Elementary, it became clear that the program is continuing to evolve. Part of that evolutionary process included a systematic action plan where the leadership team could assess the progress and modify the practices of the school to meet the needs of the community. The following flow chart (Figure 5) was created to demonstrate what this model looks like and the steps that were taken by the action team at Feller to see the program off the ground.

This chart shows the step by step process the school leadership engaged in to initially get their program off the ground. Pulling data from Chapter IV of the study, the teachers and staff responses during interviews suggested this nature of evolution. As you notice from Figure 5, three different levels of staff development took place to provide continual support for school personnel. The model also suggests a commitment to starting small, and working methodically before moving forward.
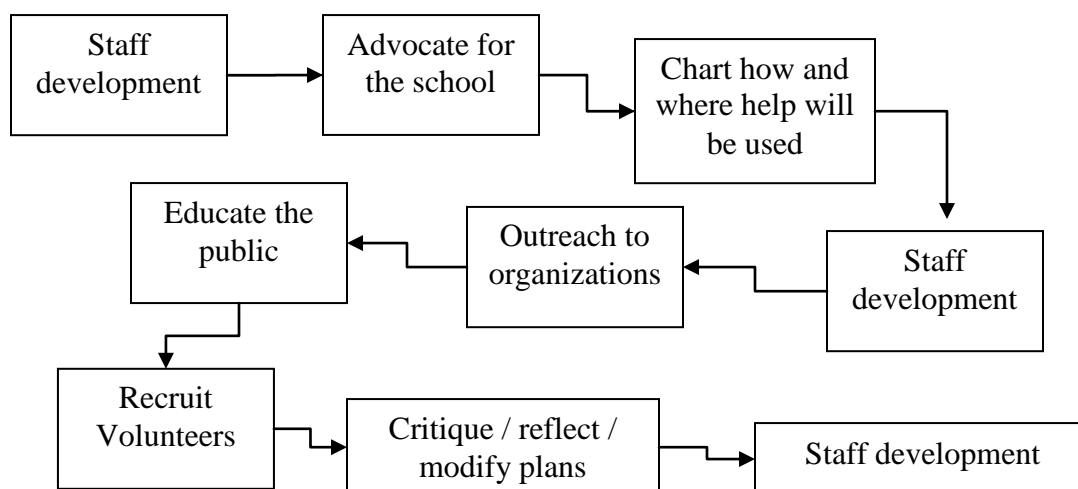
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┌──────────────┐     ┌──────────────┐     ┌──────────────┐
│    Staff     │────▶│ Advocate for │     │ Chart how and│
│ development  │     │  the school  │────▶│where help will│
│              │     │              │     │   be used    │
└──────────────┘     └──────────────┘     └──────────────┘
                                                  │
        ┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐      ▼
        │ Educate the  │◀───│  Outreach to │◀───┌──────────────┐
        │    public    │    │ organizations│    │    Staff     │
        │              │    │              │    │ development  │
        └──────────────┘    └──────────────┘    └──────────────┘
              │
              ▼
        ┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐
        │   Recruit    │───▶│Critique / reflect /│──▶│Staff development│
        │  Volunteers  │    │  modify plans │    │              │
        └──────────────┘    └──────────────┘    └──────────────┘
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Figure 5. *Flow Chart Illustrating Strategic Planning and Implementation*

As displayed the school has worked hard to develop a successful methodology for involving parents in the life of the school. The first step included looking at the governing body that connected teachers, administrators and parents (PTA) so that everyone felt they had a voice in decision and an equal partnership in educating children. The next step was to involve all parents more fully in the life of the school. This took place with open communication, social events and meetings that were non-threatening. Over time, the school came to be seen as a true community center and parents have more readily moved toward volunteering their input.

The Principal's Behavior Must Match the Talk

In order for a partnership program to work it is imperative that the actions and words of the principal must match. I was impressed throughout my time at the study site to see an unwavering focus from the principal of the school. All respondents during interviews (teachers, administrative assistants, and parents) spoke to the skills and support of Dr. Hargrove. As a strategic planner, he continues to modify the program to

support student learning. This was done by shifting responsibilities among leadership team members and delegating effectively.

Dr. Hargrove is respected as a no-nonsense leader who is unafraid to confront anyone in the school community. His vision for the school is clear: "To expect success" and he states this everywhere he goes. Furthermore, he clarifies the mission by printing this theme on the walls of the school, in the classrooms, the marquee in front of the building and on all printed materials. Four years after taking the helm of principal, this emphasis on nurturing has evolved into a creed that simply means he will not settle for anything less than everyone's best.

The organization of the school is well-managed as expectations are spelled out clearly for all staff to follow. This is evident when you enter the building or attempt to observe an activity. While Dr. Hargrove has an open door policy, there are clear steps one must follow to see him. It appeared as a researcher that there is a balance among all staff between respect, fear, and relational commitment to Dr. Hargrove. Impressive as some of the achievements Feller Elementary has been able to gain under Dr. Hargrove's leadership are, they don't convey the warm, happy, and purposeful atmosphere of the school. The school secretary probably said it best, "Dr. Hargrove is a doer; he never waits for someone else to take responsibility of doing what is best for students."

Lastly, I was very interested in the high level of personal charisma and energy Dr. Hargrove displayed while constantly having a finger on the needed results his students must attain. Because partnership programs tend to alter their shape as they grow, it is

crucial that strong leaders guide them day by day so that the program continues to adhere to the espoused goals (Epstein, 2001).

It was obvious during my time in the school that Dr. Hargrove appears jovial in his interactions and seeks to get student attendance, academic achievement, and teacher performance raised to his standards. He makes it a point to get into classrooms as much as possible, promoting diverse approaches to learning while communicating a clear focus on the standards students are expected to master. It was not uncommon (even during my interactions) to see him confront staff or students when his plans were not carried out with fidelity.

Looking at the behaviors and communication of Dr. Hargrove, I was able to understand the increasing significance of the principal in raising the instructional achievement levels of students, the performance of staff, and the connectedness of the community. The strategic planning that was exercised by Dr. Hargrove and his administrative team provided further evidence to support the need for collective decision making.

This finding is important because it helps make sense of the processes behind school decisions and how their results impact the entire school community. In their work, *Conceptualizing Instructional Leadership*, Reitzug, West, and Angel (2008) report that many of our current educational administrators are sacrificing the long-term gains of community building at the expense of short-term goals found in inspect and direct decision-making.

The leaders who are able to understand, conceptualize, and represent the "common voice" of the school community, not only navigate the organizational impediments, but they develop a collective vision for what is essential in authentic learning experiences. As evidenced by the interactions and experiences of the study, Dr. Hargrove's behaviors provided further affirmation of important the principal is to the success of a school's partnership program.

Teacher Performance and Behavior is Critical to Success

To create a climate and culture that supports partnerships with parents and others, strong leadership is essential from both the principal and teachers. The principal plays a key role, but the teachers also have to step up as advocates for family involvement. Leadership from both groups sets the tone for all interactions between the school and the stakeholders it serves.

Interview perspectives exposed that the behavior of the teachers has the greatest impact on the success or failure of the program. The parents, principal, and staff all intimated that the teachers are the first line of influence to the parents. As the case-study data were extrapolated it became clear that the interaction between the student and teacher (i.e. the ways students are valued, listened to, and supported in the classroom) is the primary focus of parents. Time and time again it was emphasized from both teachers and parents that the students carry with them their personal perspectives and they do not keep it to themselves.

The behavior aspect of the teacher is also not limited to personal interactions. Instead, it includes the content taught, and the methods of delivery. When schools align

curriculum with what it is intended that they teach, and when they produce the student engagement, persistence, and satisfaction that lead to learning, they are engaging in their true craft. Everyone can appreciate these efforts as they translate directly to the success of the child. These activities are measurable and schools can be held accountable for them.

Based upon the observable data and the interview responses, teachers should first and foremost establish a community within the walls of their class. They should acknowledge the families' diverse cultures in the school setting by teaching with a multicultural perspective and using multicultural content integration in various subject areas. In addition, the data provided in Chapter IV provided the reality that teacher attendance at extracurricular activities and after hour events goes a long way in creating and sustaining positive perceptions that lead to strengthened partnerships.

Cultural Diversity Should Be Championed at Every Level

To find success in community partnerships schools must work to incorporate diverse perspectives in all areas of the school. I noticed this commitment time and time again in my experiences at Feller as the school provided venues to bring awareness of differing cultures and to celebrate diversity. In my observations of programs and strategies, I noticed a number of these examples: frequent attempts to acknowledge diverse cultures in school-wide assemblies, numerous posters and displays throughout the school which highlight the achievements of minorities, and the various evening meetings and celebrations that gave the entire community an opportunity to learn more about cultures of the world.

Nurturing a sense of pride and respect for different contributions of minorities is a precondition for establishing a culture of general respect. Students and parents (particularly minorities) must believe that they have a fair shot at succeeding within the schoolhouse and what goes on in classes must be related in some way to their own lives.

An important finding of the study was the length at which this school has worked to recognize and celebrate the cultural differences and diversity of the students and their families. Broadly viewed, the school has focused on helping students find success through a construct composed of behaviors such as the delivery of instruction, the blending of multicultural themes throughout the curriculum, and celebrating particular cultural values.

Not only has this been accomplished through the work of the English as a second language program, but it has also stemmed from the school communication practices, and the meetings hosted by the school. In addition, the school has coordinated programs and services that have traditionally been viewed as secondary to academic achievement. Such programs include health care and parent education programs that reinforce the need for caregivers to help students with their school work.

Seek to Understand the Unspoken Realities

As often happens in qualitative research, unexpected findings that move beyond the original scope of an investigation become evident during analysis of the data (Evans, 1998; Anzul, Evans, King, & Tellier-Robinson, 2001). This last theme, "the unspoken realities," is listed as an example of this kind of finding.

As teachers, parents, and the principal engaged in interviews, some interesting comments and behaviors made mention that not everything is as it seems regarding the overall perspectives of the school community. When I looked at these variables in light of my own personal observations, two additional aspects emerged from the data. I include them here to provide the realities of this research and to bring awareness to issues that might normally be overlooked.

Identify and resolve the perception gaps between teachers and parents. All schools who work to establish, cultivate, and grow their community partnership program must seek to fill the gaps that exist between what is perceived between parents and teachers. The reason this is so critical is rather obvious in that a school cannot overcome the realities of its constituents if it does not seek to understand them.

During the data collection process I was surprised to find glaring differences between how parents perceived teacher performance, and how the teachers perceived parents' interest levels. While both groups worked to build community, they each had trouble overcoming their specific realities. For instance, the teachers seemed to assume that parents were not interested in connecting so it was important to invest additional energy in the outside organizations agreeing to work with the school. The parents, on the other hand, expressed frustration in the instructional techniques and the lack of teacher interest in attending after-hour activities.

When I asked the principal about this discrepancy, he acknowledged the shortcomings and explained that the school must continue working to bridge these perception gaps. Unfortunately, I could not find evidence of a parent inventory apart from

the basic initial discussions and research performed by the school leadership team in charting a course for partnership.

This led me to believe that the emphasis of the programming (the actual perspectives of the school leadership) from its inception bought into an idea that parents simply did not care to be a part of the process, thereby shifting all attention to outside agencies (i.e. lunch buddies, community day, volunteers, financial support). While not entirely a negative aspect, the school would do well to consider the actual realities of the parents who are members of the school community.

One way to do this is to develop a needs assessment to determine the "specific" perspectives of the parents and the families of the school. This could take the form of a questionnaire or a parent involvement inventory to survey families regarding the school's current promotion of family and community involvement. Given this study, it is my recommendation that an inventory of current efforts by parents within the school should be done before new programs are undertaken. Although parent and community members do not expect to get paid a salary, they rarely stay involved if their efforts are not appreciated. A successful partnership program finds ways to show appreciation.

My research gave evidence that many parents are not only interested in participating, but they are frustrated with the current progress. Their contribution could be used as a powerful recruiting agency to others if given a voice. Every school has several activist parents and it becomes easy to call on them whenever a parent representative is needed. Special efforts need to be made to broaden the list of parents who represent the school, perhaps using more active parents to recruit others.

Recognize that every member of the school is responsible to educate the community. A fascinating finding that emerged from this study was the degree to which a leader must advocate and educate the larger community in order to engage the public in the goals of the school. While many organizations are willing to provide financial and structural support, they are not entirely ready to contribute to student learning or take collective responsibility of the results.

Because of this reality, an enormous amount of time and energy is exhausted by the principal and his administrative team as they seek to fully educate the organizations and businesses who are willing to help. A paradigm change must be breeched as the educational professionals must help these agencies understand that this partnership is about kids and their academic, emotional, social, and physical wellness instead of a tag line on a company portfolio.

The political charisma and sensitivity of the school staff is important as the program incorporates financial and human capital with the larger goals of the school. It will be critical to garner the right kind of help with the right motives for success and the school staff must understand this dynamic. The principal at Feller modeled this kind of behavior as he worked with many outside organizations to help them better understand exactly how they were going to be utilized by agreeing to enter into a partnership.

Recognize the Limitations of the Principal

The work of the principal as the organizer, motivator, manager, and ambassador of the school requires an incredible amount of energy. If a leader is not careful as they approach the tasks of building community connections the risks associated with burnout

can quickly become a reality. This topic continued to emerge time and time again during each visit with Dr. Hargrove, and after some reflection I decided that this reality must be noted for others to consider before engaging in the work of community building.

Today's superintendents, principals and assistant principals are already responsible for everything in schools from the quality of instruction to the quality of cleaning services. They are expected to manage such diverse problems as those involving public relations, student and staff health and safety, transportation, fund-raising, and budget management. It is no surprise then, that they have little time or energy to personally develop the "community" in and around their school. While this is understandable, it is also unacceptable.

As I looked at the various programs, initiatives, and activities Feller Elementary has employed over the past four years, it is clear that this work has taken a toll on the school leadership. The principal intimated that he has found renewed strength in the attention he has received from parents, the media and his district superiors, but he is still left feeling empty most days. In general, the principal's responses have helped me to consider some factors that may directly impinge on the development of a sense of community in a school.

Here I choose to discuss three suggestions that might help principals and district officials support the work of the school leadership. These suggestions include: a) understanding the art of delegating and shifting responsibility, b) leading democratically with an emphasis on shared decision-making, and c) investing the time in seeing initiatives to fidelity.

Understanding the art of delegating. Because principals must accept the responsibility of helping create an appropriate school climate, they must know their staff and their students. Furthermore, they must recognize that the cultivation of interpersonal relationships and an emphasis on academic achievement are the dual purposes of schooling. In understanding this, it becomes critical that a principal delegates tasks and responsibilities effectively. Not only does this serve the organization of the school more efficiently, it secures that the right work is being done by the right people.

Marzano, Walters, & McNulty (2005) have stated that no one questions the amount of work that takes place within a school. The question ultimately comes down to who is doing the "right" work within the building.

> These falsehoods include believing that schools fail because the people in them – administrators, teachers, and students—don't work hard enough and that they are lazy, unmotivated, and self serving. However, as we have seen, the problem in low-performing schools is not getting people to work, it is getting people to do the 'right work.' (p. 76)

All educational leaders must devote a great deal of thought, and critical analysis, in order to protect the most important aspect of teaching and learning . . . *the students* . . . and the type of instruction and connections they are encountering. Principals who can delegate effectively free their plates of daily minutia to focus on administrative best practices.

The examples of delegation as an organizational strategy provided earlier in this chapter spoke to the efficiency of the programming, but under the umbrella of principal longevity and effectiveness I revisit it here. The traditional model of school leadership

places the principal at the front of the room disseminating all information to the pawns throughout the community. Innovative school leadership removes the emphasis of the principal as the head authority and shifts their role as lead facilitator in the learning process. This aspect of support is necessary for a principal to find continued renewal and satisfaction in their local school community.

Leading democratically. Delegating is a critical aspect of shared decision-making but the nature of leading democratically is far more consuming. The creation of a meaningful learning community is not an easy endeavor because it takes considerable amounts of reflection, communication, planning, and ultimately energy. As mentioned throughout this study, the notion of the school as community engaged in partnership represents a fundamental shift in the ideology that shapes the understanding of schools and of professional practice. Because of this paradigm principals must look toward their staff and find collective goals, values, and plans to support students.

To find collective success and personal fulfillment, principals should practice leadership that is neither passive nor hierarchical, but rather that is proactively democratic. In addition to leadership decisions, power and authority should be shared with all members of the school community.

Michael Fullan (2008) describes this process of capacity building as essential for leadership and school success. He believes that leaders who embrace this model hire talented people then go out of their way to lead them toward developing cultures of purposeful collaboration. When done effectively, according to Fullan (2008), "principals

regain the instructional leadership role and members of the community (the staff) become system strong as opposed to individually strong" (p. 71).

Theoretically, a principal who can develop this type system could again be freed to work on the cultivation of relationships and positive partnerships that enhance the school's programming. This aspect of leadership could lead to greater fulfillment and less chances of cynicism, emotional disconnection, and burnout.

Investing the time into seeing initiatives to fidelity. Working to establish community partnerships, particularly in schools identified as at-risk of failure, take an enormous amount of time and energy. The principal and staff at Feller Elementary conveyed this point throughout their various interviews. Because the efforts are based on organizational strategy and relationship building the work is often slow. It takes place in the larger activities of the school but more importantly in the individual interactions of the principal and teachers. Word of mouth from parents and community members become the primary avenue for transferring this information and reputation. Because of this aspect, the energy level, awareness, and behavior of the principal and staff must be on point at all times.

This requires everyone on staff (particularly the principal) to model enthusiasm and transparency. These are two variables of an individual's personality that typically require extra amounts of energy. In order to alleviate the risk of derailment, a principal must work to provide a pace that pushes the community forward, but also eliminates risks of internal distress.

In discussing his work, Dr. Hargrove intimated that the level of "long-term" conditioning needed to adequately see these programs through is unrealistic. When he mentioned this reality, I began thinking about the typical tenure districts apply to principals in one school setting. Drawing from interviews and observation data I also recognized that in our age of educator accountability additional pressures from school districts emphasize immediate results and specific target gains.

I did some additional research to find out what the current tenure rate is among elementary principals in the country. Debra Viadero (2009) cites in a research report for *Education Week* a recent Texas study that turnover in the principalship has detrimental effects across the country. In the study of employment data from 1995 to 2008, which looked at more than 16,500 public school principals, the average tenure was about five years for elementary school principals, four and a half for middle school, and slightly less than three and a half years for high school principals.

In response to this national data, I surveyed the years of service among the elementary principals in the district of my case study research. By totaling the number of years of experience each administrator had at their specific school and dividing by the sixty-six elementary schools represented, I found that the average years of experience in each school was slightly less than 3.6 years.

What this information implies is that few of these leaders are actually staying long enough to see effective implementation of programs. Coupled with top-down district mandates and political pressures from the larger community, the task of leading a school toward community collaboration is almost unattainable.

In the best of all worlds, a new principal would spend their first year learning the landscape of the school, understanding the culture, and building relationships. They would take this data and use it to figure out what needs to change, and what can be done to further develop the organization. In year two, having completed a full cycle of the school's functioning, the principal could have ideas for making additional changes and including new initiatives. Years three and four could provide evidence of success and provide results that lead to fine tuning and transformative change.

By carefully tending to this work, year five and on would include enhanced levels of trust from the staff and the stakeholders to increase substantive reform for the future. But the data tells us that few administrators will stick around long enough to make this kind of difference. In addition to the principal's departure, the teachers and parents are left with another reform that has not been fully carried out. This creates additional levels of skepticism and disconnection.

So why do principals leave? Researcher Ed. J. Fuller (2009), who conducted the national study at the University of Texas, shares this sentiment in relation to principal tenure as he states,

> Current research points out that the job of the principal has outgrown the ability of one person to handle it . . . nobody is staying long enough to make connections or shepherd a reform through. (Fuller, 2009 as quoted in Viadro, 2009)

When our school administrators are scrutinized, challenged, and pushed to exceed the results from previous years, an environment of manipulation is created as opposed to authentic intentionality. The emotional and physical strain a principal faces become more

than one person can stomach. This has been well documented in a variety of recent research studies (Peck, 2009; Pounder & Merrill, 2001; West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010).

It appears that few schools take seriously the substantial capacity associated with shared and distributive leadership. In fact, most principals continue to avoid discussing their personal strengths, weakness, and preferences with administrative partners. Instead of having the principal and their administrative team complement each other's strengths, they each fulfill the traditional roles associated with the positions.

School districts would do well to explore its potential by using a template of leadership that looks at the school through managerial leadership, instructional leadership, and school culture leadership. To do this kind of exploration participants must be willing to be open, vulnerable, and trusting. By working to facilitate these type activities, a district may find examples of long-term success and sustainability at it relates to community focus within each building. It would also alleviate the external pressures precluding effective community-centered principals from staying stimulated and fulfilled.

Conclusion

In some ways, the ideas presented here are not earth shattering but they will require careful consideration, planning, and strategizing to execute effectively. It will take courageous leaders, primarily at the school level, to move these ideas forward and create communities of care.

The assumption that citizens are apathetic to education no longer holds water. In fact the public appears to be ready to help educators move our schools forward. The 2009 annual poll conducted by the Phi Beta Kappa Society and Gallup showed that support for

public education is continuing to rise. Parents and constituents are concerned about the achievement gap between white students and minorities; they understand the challenges posed by low funding and they see how critical better teachers and more parental support are to student success (PDK/Gallup Poll, 2009).

By fostering caring relationships, connecting families and outside organizations to the experiences of our students, and forming strong partnerships with all stakeholders we can make sure historical abuses are not repeated. This is the uniqueness of educational leadership; we have the power to make an impact. I echo the words of Donna San Antonio (2008) as she states, "As educators we have a daily opportunity to build relationships that foster educational aspirations and performance" (San Antonio, 2008, p. 75).

I have written at length in the beginning of this study (Chapter I) on how frustrated we all should be with our current reality in American public schools. Our students and their parents risk marginalization more and more each day and they deserve better. Those of us who work in schools have a tremendous chance to change the future like never before.

I am a hopeful person. My experiences as an educator, a citizen, and an academic researcher have helped me see the potential we have to improve our schools and our far-reaching communities. From knowing history, I know that there were deliberate steps that led us to where we are today. If we want to reshape the topography of our educational reality, we can and will do so.

Over the past few years we have witnessed a troubling trend in educational leadership and behavior. Engaging in discussions away from the school house you might find a growing hostility against public education. In an effort to respond with results educational leaders face the temptation of being diverted from our mission to become involved in doing what is *expected* while bypassing what is *best*.

A significant discovery I uncovered after reflecting on the study was the conflicting forces that pull at the philosophical frame in educational decision making. In a school leaders desperate efforts to enact positive change they face two distinct dangers. The first is to say that we must retreat from our emphasis on community building, democracy, and cultural relevancy in order to be true to the supremacy of student achievement. This viewpoint is correct in emphasizing that one of our primary missions is to enhance the instructional techniques of our teachers and cultivate academic proficiency of our students. However, this perspective fails in adequately providing authentic learning opportunities for all school participants, thereby developing truly educated human beings.

The push by teachers to cover a curriculum unconnected to real competencies or to students' interests and needs is part of the educational problem. It is wrong to believe that we can push a commitment to learning when we dehumanize the curriculum. Furthermore, when educators focus only on rote memorization and standardized assessments, they fail to adequately expose students to the larger realities of our world.

The second danger is that we can become so overburdened with social and political "community" agendas that student achievement is underemphasized and lost to

broader skirmishes. For instance, a leader can engage in rich discussions and supportive programs but neglect the academic aspects of schooling. This is challenging because every neighborhood school has the potential to display distrust and skepticism toward school leadership. This anger is real because of the distress caused by our financial markets, because of crime, because of perceived betrayal by those in power and because their children deserve a better world.

As educational leaders, we have an opportunity to blend the aspects of communal participation with academic achievement. We have an opportunity to heal rather than hurt, to unite rather than divide. We have to model reconciliation in our schools so that the world will see what a redeemed community looks like. To do this we must recognize that our public effectiveness is largely based on our private interactions with children, parents, organizers, and the citizens we serve.

As I reflect on the experiences of this study I recognize how important it is that all schools serve as an example of connectivity. A school cannot be considered a successful institution unless it is committed to parental and community involvement. Great schools beg parents to give as much time and energy as they can to their children's education, and when the school staff models this philosophy, parents respond. A critical attribute of this type school is the ethos or the positive climate that is experienced by all participants.

The Greek word *ethos* originally meant "the habits of the animals in place." In the context of Feller Elementary this translates to the character or the spirit the school embodies. It is the configuration of values and goals that students, teachers,

administrators, and parents share. The ethos of a school is, in a way, the sum of everything I have shared in this dissertation, and it is not easy to describe.

When you walk into a school like Feller you will find a place committed to quality connections with the community. They know what their school should be about, and they have a real, substantive vision of what each child should be like when they leave the building for the last time. My time in this school was a wonderful experience because it stretched me to think not only about how I approach leadership in my building, but also how other schools might serve as a catalyst to enrich our larger community landscape.

The positive aspects of this study can be replicated elsewhere in spite of any school's unique and specific obstacles keeping it from connecting with its members. The limitations Feller Elementary experienced can also be overcome with additional planning and intentionality.

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Appendix A

Principal Consent

IRB STUDY: (PRINCIPAL) Consent to Act as a Human Participant: Long Form

Project Title: "Educational leaders as the catalyst to connecting the community: Uncovering leadership strategies used to forge school, family, and community partnerships."

Student Researcher: Aaron Woody

Principal Investigator: Dr. Rick Reitzug

Participant's Name: _____

The purpose of this research study will be to investigate the effective strategies employed to develop community connections within your school that lead to a learning community.

Participants of the study were selected by the following criteria: Currently serving as an elementary school principal in a school known as a place that has been successful in establishing and maintaining a school partnership with the community.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to participate in three interviews. The interviews will take no more than an hour a piece. The total commitment for participating in this research will be no more than three hours. Your responses may be used to analyze collective data regarding this study. While your participation is greatly appreciated it is voluntary.

I plan to ask you a variety of questions to gain important knowledge about community building. I want to get your honest opinions regarding the questions, and I want to encourage you not to be afraid to share your knowledge. I will be the only person who documents your responses, and any written reflection of the interview will provide you with confidentiality. When the project is completed I will make sure to share the results with you.

I would like to have your permission to tape-record the interview and make notes of your responses (so I can remember what was said later). I will be the only one who listens to the tapes. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below.

There is only a minimal risk to you as a participant in this study. The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses a minimal risk as there is a slight risk of a breach of confidentiality since identifiable information will be collected in this study. To keep this from happening, I will assign a pseudonym to you and code your responses in a way that keeps anyone from attaching them to you.

If you have any concerns about your rights or how you are being treated please contact Eric Allen in the Office of Research and Compliance at UNCG at (336)256-1482. Questions about this project or your benefits or risks associated with being in this study can be answered by Dr. Rick Reitzug who may be contacted at (336) 334-3460 or by e-mail at ucreitzu@uncg.edu.

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study. However, I believe you may see some areas where you can continue to improve and impact your school in positive ways. Additionally, by sharing your perspectives with the researcher, you may help impact future leadership and instruction within schools across the country. There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

Confidentiality will be maintained at all times. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Interview responses will be compiled and participant identities will be removed when the raw data is transcribed. All data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at the student researcher's home, off campus at 1509 Groveland Tr. Greensboro, North Carolina. The data will be stored for three years from the closure of the project, then shredded and incinerated by the student researcher. Any electronic files will be deleted, and any information stored on electronic media will be destroyed.

You should also know that you can decide not to participate in this study, or stop doing it at any time after we have started. You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Your school district is not conducting or sponsoring this research project.

By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are

agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Aaron Woody.

_____   _____

   (Signature of Research Participant)   (Date)

Appendix B

Informed Consent Forms for All Participants

IRB STUDY: Consent To Act As a Human Participant: Long Form

Project Title:	"Educational leaders as the catalyst to connecting the community: Uncovering leadership strategies used to forge school, family, and community partnerships."
Student Researcher:	Aaron Woody
Principal Investigator:	Dr. Rick Reitzug

Participant's Name: _____

The purpose of this research study will be to investigate the effective strategies employed to develop community connections within your school that lead to a learning community.

Participants of the study were selected by the following criteria: Currently serving as an elementary school principal, teacher, staff member, or parent within a school known as a place that has been successful in establishing and maintaining a school partnership with the community.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview. The interview should take between 30 and 60 minutes. It will not take longer than one hour. Your responses may be used to analyze collective data regarding this study. While your participation is greatly appreciated it is voluntary.

I plan to ask you a variety of questions to gain important knowledge about community building. I want to get your honest opinions regarding the questions, and I want to encourage you not to be afraid to share your knowledge. I will be the only person who documents your responses, and any written reflection of the interview will provide you with confidentiality. When the project is completed I will make sure to share the results with you.

I would like to have your permission to tape-record the interview and make notes of your responses (so I can remember what was said later). I will be the only one who listens to the tapes. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below.

There is only a minimal risk to you as a participant in this study. The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses a minimal risk as there is a slight risk of a breach of confidentiality since identifiable information will be collected in this study. To keep this from happening, I will assign a pseudonym to you and code your responses in a way that keeps anyone from attaching them to you.

If you have any concerns about your rights or how you are being treated please contact Eric Allen in the Office of Research and Compliance at UNCG at (336)256-1482. Questions about this project or your benefits or risks associated with being in this study can be answered by Dr. Rick Reitzug who may be contacted at (336) 334-3460 or by e-mail at ucreitzu@uncg.edu.

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Confidentiality will be maintained at all times. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Interview responses will be compiled and participant identities will be removed when the raw data is transcribed. All data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at the student researcher's home, off campus at 1509 Groveland Tr. Greensboro, North Carolina. The data will be stored for three years from the closure of the project, then shredded and incinerated by the student researcher. Any electronic files will be deleted, and any information stored on electronic media will be destroyed.

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If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Your school district is not conducting or sponsoring this research project.

By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are

agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Aaron Woody.

_____   _____

(Signature of Research Participant)   (Date)

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Interview Questions:

Sample interview questions for all participants will include:

1. What can you tell me about the school's history?

2. Tell me about the school currently.

3. What are you trying to accomplish in your role at the school?

4. What is the role of community in the school? [I will be looking to hear whether this is described as "in," "with," or "as."]

5. How do you foster "community" at the elementary school level?

6. What is the role of parents in the school community?

7. What strategies have you employed to facilitate parents becoming part of the school community?

8. What other partners are working with the school community?

9. What strategies have you employed to facilitate partners becoming part of the school community?

10. How is parent-community participation viewed by parents, teachers, and students? Is there any resistance to these relationships, and if so, by whom?

11. How accessible is the school to parents and community officials?

12. What voice do they have in the school?

13. What communication occurs between home and school? How often, what is the nature of the communication?

14. What communication occurs between other partners and the school? How often, what is the nature of the communication?

15. How are parents involved in the financial, curricular, personnel, and other policy decisions, or operations of the school?

16. How might parents be more meaningfully included in the process of educating elementary school students?

17. How can your school better serve working families, families of color, and those who may not feel connected?

18. What have you learned about moving a school from a place of little stakeholder involvement, to a place where the school is working closely with parents and the community?

19. What kind of strategies do you employ to help students succeed?

20. How do you build rapport with students, and families?

21. What is the most effective parent / community stakeholder partnership experience that you have witnessed for students at your school?

22. Describe an integration obstacle you have experienced in building community partnerships within the school. Describe how you overcame it.

23. Provide suggestions for schools considering implementing a community partnership program.

24. What can be learned from your experiences in this school as it relates specifically to engaging community members with the school?

Appendix D

Observation Guide

Observation Guide: *Points of emphasis during school observations*

- **What did the teacher/principal do?**

- **How did the teacher interact with others?**

- **What did the teacher/principal say to others?**

- **What are the teacher's/principal's body language, facial expressions, and demeanor?**

- **What does the principal do?**

- **How does the principal interact with others?**

- **What are the responses of others?**

- **How do staff members interact with each other? With the principal? With community members?**