

**Opening the Black Box: Transformative Potential of School/community
Relationships in a Collaborative Urban Change Initiative**

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Introduction

This paper examines how school, achievement, and curriculum, particularly regarding literacy and numeracy, were conceptualized during the planning phases of a major urban community change initiative, and considers how those conceptualizations have positioned schools in the effort to shape positive educational and social outcomes in collaboration with the larger community. The Rochester Children's Zone (RCZ) is a citywide commitment to an area of Rochester that has a history of intergenerational poverty, student under-achievement, mental and physical health problems, under-employment, and violence. The RCZ coordinates efforts of residents, schools, school district, community service organizations, not-for-profit organizations, social service agencies, the business community, area universities, and local government around transforming the area. Our larger ethnography examines the processes, meanings, and outcomes of the RCZ by asking: *How is learning and capacity building of individuals, groups, community/ies, and institutions mediated by the network of influences brought to bear in comprehensive community development efforts?* For this paper, we focus specifically on how local definitions of school, achievement, and curriculum are under-specified and on the consequences of this "black-boxing" on the process and content of the developing community plan and on the positioning of residents of the zone.

Further, we note a paradox here when considering this finding through an asset-based lens that identifies a community's "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez et al., 1995) as

important resources for schooling. The paradox is this: community members were involved in a process rich in practices needed to sustain a ‘living democracy’ (Lappe, 19xx; Shannon, 2007), that is, “active listening and reading, creative and sensitive speaking and writing, negotiation, mediation, conflict use and resolution, and mentoring.” These “arts of democracy” can be taken to be essential practices for organizing efforts that can make a community sustainable. Nevertheless, while these practices could have been drawn upon as part of the community’s funds of knowledge in order to transform schooling practices, this possibility was rarely considered.

Many reform efforts have been directed toward improving the lives of children in this community. The RCZ represents another such effort and has the specific aim of producing more positive developmental and learning outcomes for children and youth. It is unique in its asset-based approach to engaging residents, so that rather than attempting to “fix” them, they are recognized and engaged as necessary partners and leaders. We seek to understand how this effort is attempting not only to support learning and development for youth and families, but also how it is purposefully organizing futures for children and youth within the zone. While many authors have argued for the importance of transforming schooling practices, particularly in communities with populations that are predominantly comprised of racial and language minorities, our analyses have revealed that schooling, achievement, and curriculum (literacy and mathematics, for example) have not been closely examined and are largely not addressed in documents and discourse beyond such phrases as “increase achievement and graduation rates.” Such phrases have the effect of “black-boxing” the processes involved, and therefore might

potentially lead to a failure to address them in a transformational way. We challenge “business as usual” in the kinds of curricula and reforms adopted in urban community-school change initiatives to facilitate the process of opening the black box of school. Without such an investigation of the processes of school, curriculum, and pedagogy, and their contribution to societal inequities, change efforts such as this have little chance of achieving the desired outcomes.

For this paper, we locate the black boxing of school in the context of the community organizing efforts as an unacknowledged site of powerful teaching and learning. Even though this is a rich process by which residents, together with powerful others, are attempting to produce a sustainable community future, schooling practices are not touched (for various reasons, e.g., fossilized practices in the city school district, broader discourses of schooling, standardization, etc.). We argue that the funds of knowledge represented in the RCZ process could be used by schools to involve youth in the transformation and sustainability of the community. Thus the research questions driving the research reported in this paper were: 1) *How have the discursive constructions of schools, curriculum and pedagogy conceived of (or not) the connections between school, community, and society in the RCZ change initiative?* 2) *How have these ways of conceptualizing these connections become embodied in the construction of the RCZ’s planning documents?*

Organization of the RCZ

The RCZ is made up of three levels of organization. The Strategy Team includes ~120 people, 51% of whom are residents of the area (the percentage was agreed to through lengthy negotiations aimed at ensuring resident control of the initiative). Over the last two years, this group had been meeting monthly to develop the Community Plan, a document containing 40 multi-year objectives and 186 strategies aimed at community transformation. Also involved in that process were eight Work Teams that concentrated on focus areas the Strategy Team identified as critical to the initiative – adult education, training and jobs; community safety; early development and care of children; education, preK-16; health and wellness; housing and community development; youth support; and supports for parents/guardians. Finally, a subset of ~15 people, the Subcommittee, supported the work of the Strategy Team, gathering all the input and documents created by the Strategy and Work Teams, compiling information and documents to give back to the Teams, and guiding the process toward development of the final Community Plan. Most recently, control of the RCZ has moved out of the City School District to an incorporated board, RCZ, Inc., comprised of residents, social service providers, not-for-profit personnel, and local politicians. The Work Teams are now Action Teams that are seeking to implement strategies identified in the Plan. This paper reports analyses of the development of the Community Plan document, video tapes of Subcommittee meetings, and field notes of Subcommittee and Strategy Team meetings leading up to the public release of the Plan.

Theoretical framework

Our grounding commitment is to work that focuses on the resource-richness of marginalized communities, rather than on deficit-based views that highlight challenges such communities face. Thus, connecting community revitalization with school change requires that purposes of schooling and definitions of curriculum and achievement be directly linked to existing practices that sustain productive family and community activity, as well as the kinds of broader networks of practices in out-of-school contexts envisioned as central to the future of the revitalized community. In order to understand such practices of the RCZ, we draw on several theoretical frameworks, all of which are grounded in a social practice view of human learning and development and knowledge construction.

We use these frameworks to understand learning broadly in terms of the organization of social futures (O'Connor, 2007). We contrast our approach with others, both cognitive and situated, that narrowly conceive of learning in terms of “given” forms of knowledge or practice. The broader approach to learning that we advocate has been characteristic of much recent work in sociocultural theory. For example, one of the crucial features of the various apprenticeships examined by Lave and Wenger (1991) was that trajectories toward successful futures were clearly not taken for granted, but were actively *organized* on an ongoing basis by old-timers. Similar emphases can be seen in work on funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, & Gonzalez, 2005), on third spaces (Gutiérrez, 2002; Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995), and more generally in work that views schools as “collective change agent[s] that [work] in partnership with local community

organizations ... workplaces,” and other institutions that are overtly involved in the futures of students (Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003). This work shares a common focus on preparation for the “consequential transitions” (Beach, 1999) that learners must make between learning contexts and the various settings within which they live their non-school lives, such as families, workplaces, and communities. Learning thus involves not only epistemological change, but also ontological change (Packer & Goicoachea, 2000), *both* at the individual level and at the level of broader forms of social organization—that is, learning entails reorganization of relations among persons and the institutions and other systems within which one lives.

Part of this framework draws on communities’ funds of knowledge, or “those historically developed and accumulated strategies (skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household’s functioning and well-being” (Gonzalez et al., 1995, p. 446). Such an approach is grounded in the notion that families and communities often thought to be lacking in resources to support youths’ learning and community health/development are in reality very rich contexts for learning, and are thus important sources of insights and information (cf., Greenberg, 1989; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Velez- Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). This interdisciplinary theoretical approach facilitates our examination of the role of cultural practices in the learning and development of children and communities as they interact with peers, family, school, community and other social institutions. We extend the important focus of this approach on household practices to also include broader practices through which community members engage, along with others including those from “outside,” in efforts to organize

the present and future social and economic life of the community.

This “sociocultural turn” (Gee, 1996) has been prominent in research in such curriculum areas as literacy and math. For example, New Literacy Studies assumes that literacy is a set of social practices that are historically situated, highly dependent on shared cultural understandings, and inextricably linked to power relations in any setting (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1996; Irvine & Larson, 2007; Larson & Marsh, 2005; Street, 1995). Literacy is intimately tied to contexts of use or what people *do* with literacy in formal and informal settings, both inside and outside of school. In this view, literacy is not just reading and writing English text (in English dominant settings), but is a multimodal social practice with specific affordances in different contexts (Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Thus, social and linguistic practices are mutually constituted within past and present power relations among people who write and read to accomplish social goals.

Similarly for numeracy, we pursue a “culturally sensitive view of [numeracy] practices as they vary from one context to another. ... [They are] always embedded in social practices, such as those of a particular job market or a particular educational context and the effects of learning that particular [numeracy] will be dependent on those particular contexts” (Street, 2003, p. 2). Numeracy is not simply cognitive accomplishments or processes; it involves, as with literacy, social practices that involve both individual and community goals, purposes, and audiences (Ares, Evans, & Schademan, 2007).

Methods

This is a long-term ethnography, which has required that the methods used develop as the study proceeds. We began almost two years ago by using participant observation in various settings to get to know members of the community, schools, and other organizations. Concurrently, we gathered historical and demographic data and other documents to describe Northeast Rochester and the process of the RCZ project thus far. Data sources include the following: 1) audio and videotaped **interviews**; 2) videotaped or audio taped **observations**; 3) **field notes** taken during participant observations; and 4) **documents**. For the analyses reported here we used a grounded theory process (Charmaz, 2006) to develop patterns, themes, and claims that are representative of the meaning-perspectives of participants. Once these initial themes and patterns were identified, we used discourse analysis to consider how language, both spoken and written, constructs and is constructed by social, cultural, historical, and political identities (Duranti, 1997; Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 2004). We align our work with the four criteria for high-quality qualitative research: trustworthiness; transferability; confirmability; and theory- or model-building (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) in order to be able to translate this work to RCZ community members, other urban transformation initiatives, and researchers. Figure 1 represents our approximate data corpus at this time. Because data collection is ongoing, we can only take a snapshot in time.

Data Source	Approximate Corpus (Data collection on going)
Interviews	21; 54 files (audio and transcription, 3.3 GB)
Observations (video)	170 hours

Observations (field notes)	40 sets
Documents (including newspaper, meeting minutes, handouts, historical, plan drafts)	226 files

Figure 1: Data Corpus

Analysis

At several points in the research, initiative leadership asked us for feedback about what we have been seeing. It was our commitment at the beginning of the study to offer ongoing analytic insights into the process so as to inform the work. Thus far, we have identified themes as described below.

- Deep commitment to resident involvement among leadership teams
- Personal and professional identities back grounded in planning process
 - They are clear that who they are impacts the impressions the community has of them and their work, including their jobs, their race/ethnicity, and class. Issues of race, culture, language, and position among the team are explicit, and named and discussed when conflict or concern arises
- Not politics or business as usual; deep commitment to community transformation
- Conflict seen as opportunity for growth
- Social and cultural capital of team members explicitly used to further initiative goals
- Parallel silos concern around multiple initiatives and lack of communication or collaboration among them
- Resident definition and positioning (repositioning)
- Control around process/content in the development of community plan

Specific to this paper about schooling, achievement and curriculum, our analysis of the RCZ's Community Plan document -- the culmination of a yearlong community-based process -- indicates that, by and large, curriculum is not addressed beyond word level mention. Literacy is most often referred to as something that needs attention, but definitions of what literacy is are left unexamined. Our analysis of the final plan revealed 14 references to literacy, but only as a noun (literacy summit, cultural literacy, literacy); there was one reference to literacy development as a skill-building activity. Similarly, the 108 references to school were all as nouns (city schools, low-performing schools, school

district, school and community). Finally, for mathematics and other disciplines, there is a deafening silence.

Implications for this relative silence about definitions and pedagogical practices are especially important in relation to the asset-based approach the RCZ has embraced. An extensive literature points out that literacy and numeracy practices that residents, families, youth and children engage in to negotiate everyday life outside of school are numerous, varied and rich (c.f., Street, Baker & Tomlin, 2006; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Civil, 2002; Moje, 2000; Alverman & Hagood, 2000). These practices represent important resources that can support the learning and development of children, as well as many objectives of the RCZ, including those other than prek-16 education. Furthermore, teachers are often left out as central actors in these efforts, which suggest a deficit perspective of teachers (Irvine & Larson, 2007).

While most of the discourse of the project reflects these kinds of black-boxing moves, preliminary analysis of interview data with some key participants involved in conceptualizing the RCZ from the beginning show that some want to open schools to examination and transformation. During the bus ride to visit the Harlem Children's Zone, we interviewed two members of the subcommittee. When discussing education specifically, Terrence, an African American male member of the subcommittee and resident talked about teaching:

[if] students can't learn the way you teach, they should teach the way that they can learn ... there's the difference ... they don't adapt, they continue on persisting and just demanding that the child learns in the manner in

which they're conveying information, but that doesn't always come into place ... whereas if they looked at how the child is absorbing information, they might actually see a bright moment throughout the course of a day, just try to ... I mean change or alter the lesson plan to fit their need ... don't always do that. (Interview, 12/18/06)

Moses, another African American male member of the subcommittee addressed curriculum specifically when discussing a possible program at the elementary school where is served as principal:

Alright ... now I told you about the video, I told you about the printing ... but we could put together a magazine about the area that will rival Ebony or anything else, alright. Our young people could be doing that. We can put together ... now you've got businesses ... Xerox funds the recording studio, Time Warner funds the video studio, okay ... Bausch & Lomb funds the photograph studio. (Interview, 12/18/06)

Both interviewees pointed to transformation of pedagogical practices that would make education meaningful and culturally relevant (Terrence) and make schools spaces that would facilitate community transformation through authentic problem solving around locally identified issues (Moses). Still, these two people are in the minority across all participants and most contexts in which this work is getting done.

While we continued to analyze the data on the black-boxing process, we found that we needed to address two key themes that emerged before we could fully make sense of the larger process of understanding the role of schooling in this initiative. The two themes we identified were:

- Control of content and processes of the initiative in general and the developing community plan document in particular
- The definition, positioning, and repositioning of “resident”

To illustrate these themes, we present two representative samples from video data of subcommittee meetings with transcript excerpts.

Defining residents

“Resident” means people who live in the RCZ area or people who operate small community-based businesses or organizations in the RCZ area.

Rochester Children’s Zone Community Plan, March 2007, p. 11

Though seemingly simple, this definition emerged out of numerous meetings and intense negotiations. The complexity lay in including business and other organizations. What was meant by “small,” what the role of landlords could or should be, and what ‘hat’ a person who both lived and worked in the Zone would wear in making decisions are examples of the details of the negotiations. Also, once the definition was settled on, its use in decision-making was also complicated, as shown in the next section that presents the next major theme, positioning of residents.

Positioning/repositioning residents

The following excerpt is from a Subcommittee meeting. The group was working out details of determining membership of a subset, what they called a “teamlet” of the Strategy Team that was charged with making decisions when consensus couldn’t be reached. ST refers to Strategy Team and SC refers to the Subcommittee. Who gets to decide or choose as well as existing tensions about African American and Latino/a ownership of the initiative are clear here.

Excerpt 2: Identifying Resident Strategy Team members

- Jana: What I would like to say, is there anybody who cannot live with okay, the compromise, which is we get the name--we vet names with the ST, but the SC decides. Is there anybody who can't live with that variation?
- ...
- Reginald: I think that first nomination process is not really the issue. I think the issue is the latter part, and that's the part I'm having trouble with, is that if we, if essentially we've gotten that far, why not just let the people--let somebody from that group pick randomly from a jar?
- Jana: Only the names that go into the jar are people who meet the criteria ... so we may have to take people out. Even if Reginald was nominated by somebody, Reginald, I'm sorry, you work for Community Place. We can't have you in there
- ...
- Carina: Ok, just not to change the thought. Um, I understand what everybody's saying, picking, but who is to decide the person that's going to do the picking and then if it's an African American, then I got a problem with it, you know, because then the subject is, 'how did you pick that African American?' You know, and that question's gonna come up, or if its a Latino person, then people are gonna have--you understand what I'm saying—
- ...
- Jana: What about if I do it? No, I don't care. Everybody already knows I'm white, they already know I'm in a diff-I don't live in the neighborhood, and they already know I work for the school district, and I have a high education level. So I'm already damned. You know, no matter what, I'm shot at. So would it help you all if I took the risk and said I'm gonna pick 'em? I'm gonna use the criteria

Resident participation and positioning as central actors was being managed in ways that addressed both the technical and political dimensions of the process. Having the Strategy Team nominate people was a move to ensure their voices being included in key decisions, but it became complicated when Carina pointed out that race, language and culture were contentious aspects affecting people's perceptions of the RCZ. Jana's offer

to ‘sacrifice’ herself (she accompanied her talk with a gesture imitating a guillotine cutting her head off), with explicit reference to her ethnicity, education, and position as an outsider also highlights how the power to decide was a core source of concern. The immense distrust on the parts of residents of the Zone of people coming from outside their communities to ‘fix’ them, evident throughout the video and audio data of meetings and interviews, was something the Subcommittee grappled with as they sought to construct a process by which resident control of the content of the initiative was protected and supported.

The next section examines the tensions that accompanied the work to build a process and to create content while maintaining resident participation as necessary and central to the RCZ.

Process/content

The following excerpt is from a meeting in which the Subcommittee was preparing to present the Plan to the Strategy Team for final approval. Tensions around control of the *process* of building the Plan and the actual *content* of the Plan surfaced, including anticipation of negative reactions from Strategy Team members, given the distrust residents have built over years of failed reform efforts and of reformers in this part of Rochester.

Excerpt 1: Strategic Control

David: To agree, to support, and embrace the plan as a community. That’s different from, and it’s still about the content of the plan. It’s different, however, from saying, do you agree to the content of the plan because, it’s maybe not this word, so I

don't agree with it, or this word ... And, it is this team who will have consider all those things to synthesize and look across. It's not the strategy team that's doing that. So to ask for an agreement in that way wouldn't be strategic.

Karen: From a practical standpoint, I agree that that's the only way we're going to get there in this time frame. I just want to ask whether anybody here thinks that we are opening ourselves up, again, to the question which I think we put to bed a while ago when we said the strategy team was the decision-making body, that who the heck are we to do this? ... I'm just asking everybody for your sensitivity and your read on whether we're vulnerable by doing it this way.

Alicia: They're [the community] talking about people making decisions for people They're talking about politics, everybody... It's bigger than this, but that's the kind of stuff they're saying: 'Who are you, that's not helping our community, we need help right now at this moment...'

David's push to be 'strategic' and Karen's concern for where control lies, or where residents will perceive control to be ("who the heck are we do to this?"), exist in tension here. Alicia's comment about "people making decisions for people" corroborates Karen's concerns. There is also a push to get the process moving according to deadlines established with the Strategy Team ("we need help right now"), which is linked to resident fears that this effort will suffer the same fate of numerous other initiatives that have raised hopes but then failed. Analysis of video tapes and field notes reveal that this tension between controlling and supporting resident control of content permeates the RCZ, with some of the Subcommittee members, in the words of one of the service providers, were "holding the torch for residents," calling the Subcommittee to task when it appeared that they were working on actual content rather than process-oriented decisions. Thus, while the Subcommittee was trying to construct a process by which the Strategy Team could build trajectories toward successful futures for the children and

families in the Zone, resident and other participants remained on guard to try to ensure that they were in control of the active, ongoing construction of the content of those efforts. Further, change for individuals was nested in change in organizations and in relations of power among residents, service providers, and social institutions.

Conclusions

We began the analysis for this paper with examining what we saw as the black boxing of school using a sociocultural, practice oriented theoretical framework. Consistent with an interpretive, ethnographic methodology, we found that the data were pointing us to themes of resident positioning and control of the process/content in Plan development that needed to be understood before we could dig deeper into the black boxing process. That the two themes we examined here over-powered or seemed to have had to precede work focused directly on schooling, achievement, and literacy and numeracy learning speaks to the importance of the politics of community transformation in settings characterized by repeated, failed attempts at reform. At the same time, the processes behind these themes are excellent examples of processes of ‘living democracy,’ and might have been drawn upon to transform discussions about and practices within schooling.

Resident suspicion and lack of trust in “fix them” reform efforts led to ongoing tensions between the “us” of residents and the “them” of the subcommittee, even though the subcommittee had resident members. Defining and positioning residents and “strategically” controlling the process/content relationship as the plan developed were

deeply connected to historical mistrust and ongoing struggles between racial and cultural groups in the zone. These complex processes overshadowed the work of problematizing schools, curriculum, and pedagogy that we saw as essential to authentic and sustainable community transformation. Furthermore, as state funding has arrived, ongoing revisions of the plan are now focused on an external audience who wants “measurable outcomes”, further delaying the potential transformation of the instantiated “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Not questioning these now hegemonic assumptions about what counts as school, literacy, numeracy, and learning may have adverse consequences on goals of transformation and not doing “business as usual”.

Significance

The implications that follow from our analyses include a continuation of differential access to powerful discourses, practices and learning, as narrowed curricula and pedagogy (e.g., scripted lessons, ‘basics,’ focus on drill and practice) that are found in most urban school-community revitalization efforts continue to prevent schools and teachers from engaging students and families in rich, authentic learning and activity (Ares & Buendía, 2006). While there is good work in transforming schools (Meier, 1995) and in transforming communities (Benson, 2003), there is most often no connection among them. We worry that not engaging in opening the black box of schools will ensure this innovative initiative will follow the path of failure residents fear.

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