

Unlocking the Schoolhouse Doors: Institutional Constraints on Parent and Community Involvement in a School Improvement Initiative

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Introduction

Educational change often reflects shifts in social, political, and economic conditions. The launch of Sputnik in 1957 for example, has been cited as pivotal in amplifying the dialogue on educational reform in the United States (Ogawa, Crowson & Goldring, 1999; Young & Levin, 2002). Similarly, the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 led to a proliferation of research on characteristics of effective schools (Owens, 2001). Waves of innovation have characterized North American schools since at least then, with Canadian schools echoing many of the American concerns and adopting their approaches (Young & Levin, 2002). Despite this and other developments in scholarship and practice, there is a growing recognition of the immutability of schools (Ogawa, Crowson & Goldring, 1999; Rowan, 2002; Thomas, 2002; Young & Levin, 2002).

One particular area that has enjoyed increasing consideration within schools and among researchers is collaborative, or participative, decision making which aims to engage educational stakeholders including teachers, students, parents, and community members. School improvement literature emphasizes parent involvement as a key strategy to achieving school effectiveness and increasing student performance. This challenges schools to involve parents and others in their organizational structures and processes. The purpose of this paper is to investigate through the lens of institutional theory the organizational resistance to including parents and others in one Alberta jurisdiction involved in the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS I) project.

Research Questions and Method

Robert Evans aptly states, "school improvement is embedded in an ethos of empowerment and collegiality" (Evans, 1996, p. 229). Specifically, as schools are redefined as open systems (Owens, 2001), more attention is paid to the role of, and interaction with, parents and community members as influential educational partners. This trend comes from literature that claims parent and community involvement in schools both strengthens schools and helps to improve student success (Epstein, 1995; Finn, 1998; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Young & Levin, 2002). Such research supports schools' including these groups in their school improvement endeavors. Evidence, however, suggests that attempts to change schools through collaborative groups suffer from the same inertia as other innovations (Comer, 1980; Eulina & de Carvalho, 2001; Fine, 1993; Smrekar & Mawhinney, 1999; Waggoner & Griffith, 1998).

This paper explores this phenomenon by applying concepts of institutional theory to a single case study (Stake, 2000) of a rural Alberta school jurisdiction that implemented Joyce Epstein's (2001) school-home-community partnership model as an instrument to improve student success from 2000 until 2003 as part of the AIS I program. As the District AIS I Coordinator of School District A (pseudonym) during this time, my reflections mirror the literature on parent and community involvement in schools, which points to a challenge. Those experiences inspire the pursuit of these questions: (1) Why do parents and community have limited influence to change and/or improve schools? (2) How do institutional structures and processes impact collaborative groups involving parents, community members and school personnel when trying to affect change in schools? My analysis draws largely on the new institutionalism as conceptualized by Powell and DiMaggio (1991) and Rowan and Miskel (1999) to examine the extent to which norms and taken-for-granted practices create schools as loosely coupled systems (Meyer & Rowan, 1991). Additionally, I consider culture, as constituted by institutionalized practices, as a potential barrier to groups that are not within the dominant school culture.

My analysis focuses on the K-12 public educational sector, and is confined to a subsystem of a particular school organization – schools' "AIS I Action Teams." Admittedly, this micro-level analysis departs from typical institutional theorists' macro-level studies; however, it is also my understanding that the reliance on macro-level approaches points to an area of omission in institutional theory (Palmer & Woolsey-Biggart, 2002). By examining institutionalized norms and behaviors at the micro-level of the educational institution, I hope to shed light on the broader question of parent-school relations, and point to possibilities for the application of institutional theory in educational administration.

My research questions were addressed by analyzing with a colleague raw field notes (Hatch, 2002) collected during my position as AIS I District Coordinator in School District A. An additional data source included individual

semi-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000) with three parents who participated in their schools' AISI projects between 2000 and 2003. The three parents were mothers between the ages of 35 and 50, belonging to two-parent households characterized as non-minority culture and middle income status. Their children ranged from grades three to eleven and attended different schools within different communities in District A. Each parent was invited to participate on her school's AISI Action Team at the commencement of the project, and remained on the same Action Team for the duration of the project. One exception was a parent who withdrew participation from her school's Action Team for a six-month period, but returned for the culmination of the project. My primary objective was to confirm or disconfirm my own impressions and gain a non-professional's understanding of the organizational impact on collaborative approaches to school improvement; therefore, I considered parents who had long-term, continual involvement with their schools' AISI projects to be key informants, regardless of their homogeneity. To interpret the data, I organized the interview data into key themes that reflected concepts central to institutional theory.

Conceptual Framework: Definition of the New Institutionalism

The study of institutions helps to explain how institutional arrangements shape and channel decisions made within an organization. According to Powell and DiMaggio (1991) institutional theory has itself undergone changes in emphasis. The old institutionalism saw all actions in an organization as purposive responses to the need for efficiency (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). The late 1970s, however, marked the beginnings of the 'new institutionalism' which rejects the rational-actor model of the old institutionalism, and views institutions as the result of human activity that is not necessarily consciously designed. According to Powell and DiMaggio (1991), the new institutionalism "locates the persistence of practices in both their taken-for-granted quality and their reproduction in structures" (p.9), and "stresses the unreflective...nature of most human behavior and views interests and actors as themselves constituted by institutions" (p.14). It is these taken-for-granted norms and behaviors that make it difficult for new groups or structures to gain influence or effect change within an educational institution.

Schools are unique in that they tend toward similarity regardless of time period or place. The institutionalization of practices, structures, and norms is relatively easy to identify when one looks at schools under this light. The case of parent and community involvement bears the same resemblance. A brief review of parents' changing roles in education in Alberta will help to place the dilemma within its necessary context.

Describing the Context: Parent and Community Involvement in Alberta

Comer (1980) suggests that the interest in parents' roles in schools can be traced to the 1950's, and efforts to "involve parents directly in the life of schools [has been] a major change in educational practice...as recent as the 1960's" (p.125). In Canada, a shift in authority away from community control of schools toward professional control has come full circle with more recent attempts to reestablish local control and strengthen the voice of the public – parents in particular. With the exception of Saskatchewan, Canadian provinces and territories have formalized the voice of parents through legislation (Young & Levin, 2002). The legal status of parent groups in Alberta has led to an increased interest in both parents' perceptions of education, as well as how parents' participation in schooling impacts student achievement.

In 1978 the Alberta Federation of Home and School Associations conducted a survey of parents' perceptions about basic education (Alberta Education, 1978). Renamed in 1991, the Alberta Home and School Councils Association continues to advocate for parental rights, and increase parents' awareness of educational issues (<http://www.ahsca.ab.ca>). Modification of Section 17 of the *School Act* in 1995 mandated in Alberta the establishment of School Councils assigned with specific responsibilities that differed from the then existing Parent Advisory Councils. An important distinction of the School Council is the inclusion of community members (Alberta Education, 1995).

In varying degrees, parents have gained prominence as educational stakeholders beyond School Council. For example, Edmonton Public School Board's Key Communicators (<http://www.epsb.edmonton.ab.ca>) publishes a parent newsletter to inform and engage parents in district and provincial matters. Parent representation on committees such as the Alberta Coalition for Healthy School Communities (<http://www.achsc.org>) is further testimony to the increasing acknowledgement of parents. Most recently, Alberta's Commission on Learning recommended that schools "support the role of parents" (Alberta Learning, 2003, p.8). As a composite these moves exemplify a shift toward collaboration with those having a stake in the Alberta educational system.

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement project introduced by Alberta Learning in 1999 (Alberta Learning, 1999) embodies the partnership ideal. Both the development and implementation of AISI is premised on the idea that education is a responsibility of schools, parents, and community. The Alberta Home and School Councils

Association was among the six partners that designed AISI. The overarching goal of AISI is to improve "student learning by encouraging teachers, parents and the community to work collaboratively to identify local areas where improvements are needed and to review current literature in order to develop and implement action research projects" (Alberta Learning, 2003, p.1). By establishing parent involvement as one of the criteria for approval and evaluation of AISI projects, Alberta Learning attempted to bring parents to the fore in educational organizations. Reviewing the AISI projects through the AISI Clearinghouse (<http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/>), however, shows a relative lack of projects that utilized parents at the grassroots level, or in ways beyond an advisory capacity. This raises the question of authentic partnership. A review of district AISI Project Final Reports (APFR) throughout the province indicates that parents were often perfunctorily involved as members of School Councils rubber stamping approval of AISI projects. School District A seemed to be an exception to this because parents as members of AISI Action Teams were instrumental in the implementation of the project.

The AISI Project in School District "A"

School District A's AISI project is an appropriate case for examining the institutional constraints faced by parents and community because it employed a school-home-community partnership model as a vehicle for improving students' academic and social success. Championed by Joyce Epstein (1995) of Johns Hopkins University, this model embraces families, schools, and communities as "overlapping spheres of influence" in the educational system. A necessary part of the infrastructure in this model is the development of a school Action Team composed of parents, teachers, community members, students, and school administration (Epstein, 2001). Accordingly, each school in District A developed these teams, whose role was to develop a three-year action plan consisting of goals, strategies, and methods for evaluation. Essentially, this group operated as a school improvement team, and the Action Team members were intended to reach out to their respective stakeholder groups.

The specific goals of the project targeted student achievement through meaningful involvement of parents and community, but increasing the participation of these publics could be understood as a subsidiary project goal. With these intentions in mind, District A's expectation was not only to increase student achievement, but also to make a dramatic difference in the frequency and manner in which parents and community engaged with the school. Throughout District A, Action Teams sponsored parent-student study skills workshops, lunch hour reading sessions, curriculum sharing nights, and other strategies tailored to meet school improvement goals. Despite the fact that many parent-focused strategies were implemented at various schools, by the end of the third year there was not a noticeable difference in student achievement, according to APFR and District A's summative evaluations of the project. There were no discernible changes in measurements such as Provincial Achievement Tests or school-awarded grades that could be attributed to the AISI project. Furthermore, summative evaluations of teachers and parents indicated a negligible change in parent involvement. Organizational analysis of this project may offer some explanation for these results.

Action Teams as Loosely Coupled Structures

My experiences working with the schools' Action Teams left me with an impression of disjunction between the activities of the Action Team and the work of teachers in classrooms. The Action Teams' strategies, though supportive of the work of schools in general, were removed from instructional strategies. Furthermore, the teacher members of the Action Teams advised others about what AISI project decisions the rest of the faculty were likely to accept or reject; the operating assumption was that the Action Team work was not to interfere with classroom operations, or impose expectations on teachers. This points to a contradiction between the Action Teams' purpose of meeting student achievement goals, and the strategies that were actually implemented.

Weick's (1976) seminal piece, *Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems*, gives language to my impressions. He defines loose coupling as a situation in which "organization's structure is not coterminous with its activity" (p.5). In other words, the existence of a particular structure in an organization does not reflect the practices of the members of that organization. The Action Teams in the schools were established for academic purposes, but their actual work indirectly related to its student improvement goals and the academic goals of teaching. Action Team strategies had several parts, including these among others:

- o personal invitations to parents for awards ceremonies;
- o designated days for parents to enjoy lunch and a book with their children;
- o a parent volunteer database;
- o community members and parents as guest speakers regarding careers;
- o a full-day parent convention on topics such as parenting, wellness, and educational issues; and
- o collecting donations of books for the school library. These strategies supported teachers' work and

created a more welcoming atmosphere for parent and community members; however, the strategies themselves are loosely coupled from the educational goals of the action plan and the school. Consequently, the AISI activities did not translate into student achievement.

Another important instance of loose coupling is demonstrated by the existence of the action plan and the school's three-year education plan. Both documents essentially outline goals and strategies for school improvement. Because the schools' AISI action plan was created in isolation from the schools' education plans, rather than in a complementary fashion, these plans had a competitive relationship. There was a tendency to view the work of the Action Team as a separate project; the loose coupling of the action plan from the education plan put the school in pursuit of multiple goals. Ironically, in some cases the Action Teams' goals paralleled goals stated in the education plan; however, the plans were rarely consulted together to reveal this convergence. Although both the AISI plan and the education plan were directives from Alberta Learning, it was clear that they were not perceived in the same way. The perception of these plans was such that the education plan would take care of curricular objectives, and the AISI action plan would take care of 'other' elements of school improvement. Moreover, the education plan seemed to have more clout with regards to School District A's accountability to Alberta Learning, possibly because teachers and administrators created it. For example, much time during District A's administrators' meetings was dedicated to discussing results from Provincial Achievement Tests and Diploma Exams, as well as education plan goal setting around these measures. Discussions around the AISI project during these meetings revolved around updates of provincial AISI directives and reporting, rather than discussions regarding the curriculum impact of AISI. Similarly, at Action Team meetings, the agenda focused on the implementation, rather than the evaluation of their impact on student learning. The existence of an education and AISI plan, and the different attention they commanded, contributed to loose coupling by further separating the Action Team from the technical work of the teachers.

Rowan and Miskel (1999) express this characteristic more strongly and describe it as "a process of decoupling" (p.363). They stress "the multiple and loosely coordinated programs that are present within educational organizations, [and] the frequently loose connection of program goals to program activities" (p.370). Their definition accurately describes what was happening with the AISI project in School District A. AISI was juxtaposed with a variety of other programs already in operation within the schools: homework clubs, Very Important Parent clubs, student groups organized around similar goals, etc. It was difficult to attribute AISI to any changes in the school because of the plethora of programs. The schools were satisfied with the amount of activity that AISI generated, and it was generally agreed that AISI was resulting in good things for the school. In fact, impact on achievement was largely overlooked; AISI project success was explained in rather symbolic terms. One parent's comment that AISI "left a good legacy behind" demonstrates the perception that as long as strategies that were implemented during the project had life beyond the three-year AISI project, AISI succeeded. Another parent interviewed in this research echoed this sentiment with, "The nice thing is that some of it continues to be in place."

An underlying assumption was that the Action Team's work was important to the school in a general way, but peripheral to the classroom. Significantly, the role of the Action Team was understood as a contribution to the school in areas that teachers had limited time and resources, and the goal of students achieving academic success was delimited to teachers. When asked about parents' role in school improvement, for example, one parent in this study suggested that "the educational part [of school improvement] has to be mainly with the teachers." The same mother commented, "You hear so many kids that graduate that are illiterate...so the schools are failing there, the teachers are failing badly." This perpetuates a clear distinction between the kind of improvement the Action Team was expected to facilitate compared to the teachers; student learning was understood as the teachers' responsibility.

The common thread between Weick's (1976) and Rowan and Miskel's (1999) conceptualizations is that there is a weak connection between structure and practice, or intention and action. Loose coupling and decoupling point to the same problem in School District A: the difficulty that parents and community members have when trying to engage in work that both groups traditionally view as professionals' responsibility. Thus, an institutional constraint is exposed, but how does this process work, and what reasons can be given for the incongruence between the Action Teams' plans, and their resulting actions? For the answers to these questions, I turn to the concept of buffering offered by Meyer and Rowan (1991), and Rowan and Miskel (1999).

Incidents of Buffering in the AISI Project

Schools are often described as technocracies; professional expertise and specialized knowledge rule the educational organization (Hall, 1999). Institutional theory is useful in pointing to institutionalized practices and rules in schools that make it difficult for parents and community to bring about change. Teachers and administrators are traditionally viewed by parents and others as the professional experts in schools. Because

parents and community members lack the professional training and experience involved in teaching, it is difficult for them to access this technical core; parents and community are perceived as external to teaching. The technical core is essentially an institutional rule. Meyer and Rowan (1991) suggest that

organizations that reflect institutional rules tend to buffer their formal structures from...technical activities by becoming loosely coupled, building gaps between their formal structures and actual work activities (p. 41).

Loose coupling, then, was achieved in District A's AISI project through a buffering process whereby school administrators and teachers distanced the work of the Action Team from the technical activities of teaching and learning. In one sense this process was covert, but the fact that the teacher members of the Action Teams often served to evaluate the impact of certain strategies on teachers' work suggests that buffering was at the same time intentional. Teachers and principals were gatekeepers. Many strategies were not implemented because the Action Team predicted a negative teacher response. For example, one of the elements of the Epstein model was to engage parents in their children's learning at home. To operationalize this meant that teachers would have to create interactive homework assignments (Epstein, 2001). The Action Team avoided this strategy, despite its potential effectiveness, because the perception was that it was inappropriate for parents and community members to dictate teachers' methods. Furthermore, the principals and teachers on the Action Teams voiced concern over the additional work that would unnecessarily be created.

That teachers were also part of the composition of the Action Team did not seem to give the team much import, suggesting that the group was primarily viewed as a parent and community member group. This further institutionalized the view that parents and community are outside the technical core. Although the teachers' evaluation of certain strategies appeared to be an intention to buffer the Action Teams from this technical core, responses from the parents I interviewed suggest that parents had a prior understanding of this separation. One mother commented, "I felt that we were just putting more and more work on administrators and all the teachers." This points to parents' sensing their role is not to interfere with, or add to what practitioners do.

Buffering occurs for reasons of legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1991). The AISI mandate that parents and community be involved in the school improvement process was fulfilled through the establishment of Action Teams in School District A. The Action Teams were considered legitimate formal structures because they reflected the ideological shift toward collaboration. The fact that the Action Teams were buffered from the technical core contributed to their legitimacy among teachers because they created the impression that collaboration was operating within the school, but it did not interfere with the technical activities of teaching and learning. Parents' lack of professional expertise, together with their acceptance of traditional roles, legitimated teachers' role in making serious educational decisions, thus maintaining the professional norm.

An irony exists in that Action Teams were not only unsuccessful at breaking through this barrier, but were involved in the reproduction of the institutional constraint. This reflects Powell and DiMaggio's (1991) claim that "institutionalized arrangements are reproduced because individuals cannot even conceive of appropriate alternatives (or because they regard as unrealistic the alternatives they can imagine)" (p.11). Parents and community members seemed content with the institutional arrangement, and were perhaps conscious of the limitations on the type and degree of involvement they could have in school operations and decisions. For example, one parent interviewed in this study remarked, "I hate to keep throwing it on the teachers, but it is them." Other said, "this may sound like a contradiction after what I said about the whole school system and needing to change...but to me that's the teachers' job." The institutional constraint that ascribes to teachers and parents particular roles accounts for the inability of the Action Team to make a significant difference to the school.

Citing Meyer and Scott, Rowan and Miskel (1999) suggest that schools have strong institutional environments, but weak technical environments. Schools establish formal structures or administrative mechanisms to create a favorable public impression. Variations in teaching and student learning are camouflaged by the existence of a strong institutional environment. The Action Teams contributed to this; as long as strategies were implemented, there was no question about the AISI project. Because the strategies did not try to change what teachers did in the classroom, the weak technical, but strong institutional environment was reinforced. Action Team activity may have been mistaken for achievement; many things were happening in the school environment that was relatively peripheral to classroom learning. Essentially, schools are loosely coupled systems, created and maintained through processes of buffering which upholds an institutionalized understanding of the purpose and place of parents and community members vis-à-vis teachers and school administrators.

School Culture as an Institutional Constraint

Taken-for-granted norms and institutionalized practices that make it difficult to bring about meaningful change in schools are elements of culture. Taken from Schein (1992) culture can be defined as

a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (p. 12).

Culture is manifested through concrete objects and structures, as well as through values and assumptions (Schein, 1992). It is not only shared, but also deeply rooted in the practices of an organization. Culture has stability and a pervasiveness that makes the members of an organization impervious to it.

An analysis of the institutional constraints regarding parent and community involvement in school improvement initiatives critically involves this discussion of culture. Insofar as the practices and norms of educational institutions restrain parent and community participation in schools, culture is implicated because it is both constituted by, and constitutive of, those practices and values. In this section, I hope to demonstrate how culture acts as an institutional constraint in school improvement in two ways. First, I will explicate commonly held beliefs about the role of parents and community in school. Then I will explore how those assumptions have institutionalized discrepant power relations among parents, teachers, and community that challenge collaborative endeavors to improve schools.

Cultural Scripts

Almost invariably, research around school improvement introduces culture as a key component and raises questions about all stakeholders' place and purpose within school culture (Barth, 2001; Davies, 2001; Deal, 1995; Eulina & de Carvalho, 2001; Evans, 1996; Fine, 1993; Sarason, 1996; Smrekar & Mawhinney, 1998; Waggoner & Griffith, 1998; Young & Levin, 2002;). An institutional analysis takes culture into consideration because cultural scripts become part of what is institutionalized. An appropriate question is, "What cultural scripts come into play regarding parent and community involvement in school improvement projects?"

In a study conducted by Waggoner and Griffith (1998) teachers discussed parent involvement in education according to traditional views: volunteering in classrooms, organizing fundraising activities, joining the parent association, and supervising field trips are some of the roles that parents appropriately filled. Furthermore, a prevailing ideology around parent involvement was that parents' roles included engaging in school-like or teacher-like activities at home (Waggoner & Griffith, 1998). I would argue that this type of thinking persists: parent and community members' involvement in schools is frequently a response to teacher requests to assist with extracurricular activities, and what counts as parent involvement in education are the things that most contribute to or mimic the work of teachers. It is no coincidence that many parents also perceive their role in these ways. When asked about parents' roles in school improvement, one mother replied, "I've done a lot of homework in the last I don't know how many years...because that's what I'm here for." Another parent admitted, "I think a lot of us felt we were more in the supporting role." This suggests that this view is entrenched at many levels.

Waggoner and Griffith (1998) found that much of what parents perceive as supporting the school and contributing to their children's success is often discounted. Nurturing and supporting children toward positive school experiences are the priority and extent of many parents' involvement, yet this laudable function is often not seen as a direct contribution to schools. One parent interviewed in this study picked up on the devaluation of parents' contributions, and suggested, "The parent's job is the morals and guidance [and] it has to be reinforced at the school." This statement acknowledges that parents may have a different view about their involvement and contribution to their children's education, and that schools often overlook what parents consider to be their critical role. The narrow vision of what counts as valuable parent involvement has become part of school culture, and accounts for the difficulty in engaging parents and community in ways that will directly impact improvement goals.

The AISI project, at both the provincial and local level, is designed to include parents in curricular areas. This expectation departs from traditional views on parent and community participation. In attempting to utilize parents and community as agents of school change and/or improvement, School District A's AISI project was inherently a project about culture change. This proved to be a complicated process because success of the Action Teams implied an understanding of partnership that deviated from the cultural attitude. To think that the formation of collaborative teams would serve to redefine culture was a naïve expectation at best. In my observation, parents were both uncomfortable with the role of setting academic goals and turned to the authority of teachers and administrators, and they supported those parents who chose to remain invisible from the school.

As one parent suggested, "I felt that we as parents didn't have as much to offer because, first of all we had to learn what the issues were." When teachers came up with ideas, this parent admitted that the others on the Action Team agreed to go along with the teachers because parents and community members felt ill equipped to offer alternatives. In doing this, parents affirmed the cultural expectation that teachers are responsible for student learning.

Parents and teachers perpetuated other traditional cultural norms. The idea that parent involvement in school occurs when parents are *at* the school, engaged in school-sponsored activities is reflected by one parent's statement, "You know, the parents involved...it doesn't matter what carrot you dangle. How do you get them out?" Another parent commented, "in junior high, senior high, you know some of the parents...drop off. How do you get those parents back in here?" Teachers also turned to parents to decipher what families need from the school, and largely held the same view that absence from the school meant that those parents were disengaged.

There was a dissonance between the Action Team's intended purpose to involve more parents, and the Action Team's driving culture, which had a delimited view of parent involvement. Additionally, the inability of the Action Team to radically change these perceptions resulted in cultural reproduction (Young & Levin, 2002). At the end of the project in June 2003, the uninvolved parents remained uninvolved, and teachers guarded their autonomy in the classroom. Regardless of the good will and earnest efforts of the Action Teams, the status quo was maintained. That culture was untouched is also illustrated by the fact that the end of the AISI project resulted in either a consolidation of the Action Team with School Councils, a renegotiation of action plans to focus on social events or communication strategies only, or complete dismantling of the Action Team. Clearly, culture acted as an institutional constraint on the Action Teams in School District A.

One final note about culture is the idea of symbols and structures. Culture is subtly promoted through physical structures or symbols. For example, in School District A, the sign on the entrance of the school door regulated visitors to report to the office. The uninviting tone of these signs serves to promote the idea that outsiders are not welcome, and that the professionals control the school building. Furthermore, the lack of directional signs inside the schools discourages those who are intimidated by the unfamiliar territory. The message that parents are not equally considered as part of the school culture is also sent through the absence of designated places for parents to congregate. On a more symbolic level, there is a relative lack of teacher preparation at the post-secondary or professional development level that assists teachers with collaborative decision-making. In School District A, professional development for teachers organized around parent and community involvement in education was not considered. Therefore, culture is promoted symbolically and structurally, and adds to the institutional constraints.

Ability to Influence

According to Firestone and Seashore Louis (1999) schools are characterized by the existence of subcultures. Subcultures can interfere with the cohesiveness of an organization; they have the potential for divisiveness. This feature of subcultures may be used to explain the ineffectiveness of School District A's Action Teams. The composition of the Action Teams reflected both collaborative and competing values because the stakeholders themselves came from their own respective subcultures. For example, community members may be interested in school improvement to better serve the labor market; whereas, parents may prioritize their individual child's needs over the collective good. All groups were working toward improving the school, but the question of what needed improvement, or whom the improvement was meant to serve may have differed. One cannot ignore that different stakeholders tend to come to organizations with different expectations or value systems. The degree to which the schools respond to these differing subcultural values has organizational implications (Firestone & Seashore Louis, 1999).

Furthermore, parents and community members may feel entitled to more influence over educational decisions, but teachers and administrators have the tendency to regard certain issues as professional decisions. Thus, the Action Team's desire to effect change was first complicated by the existence of differing stakeholder values, but also made difficult because of a prevailing assumption of the school organization in terms of how parents and community were valued in school improvement processes. One could conclude that the Action Teams existed as subcultures within the school, and were themselves composed of subcultural values. This worked against any effort to fuse as a school improvement team working toward a common vision. It is important to note that most Action Teams in School District A were dominated by teacher membership. Because teachers are the primary bearers of school culture (Firestone & Seashore Louis, 1999), this further weakens the influence of those who are outside the teacher culture. As one parent poignantly stated, "If the administration didn't buy into it, it didn't really matter what you said."

School District A's AISI project held an underlying assumption that parents and community felt empowered to

engage in a school improvement initiative. Fine's (1993) work on three American public school projects suggests the contrary. She argues that "in current school reform movements, parents do not even enter school-based discourse "as if" social equals with educators, bureaucrats, or corporate representatives" (p. 5). The bureaucratic structures and taken-for-granted practices of schools serve to shut parents out of the organization. As was witnessed with School District A's Action Teams, parents' uncertainty in setting academic goals illustrates this point. Furthermore, a pervasive hierarchy exists in schools that is largely unexamined and unquestioned, placing administrators, then teachers at the top. The result is that school improvement is one-sided from the professionals' perspective, which, Fine (1993) argues, turns the original intent of promoting parent involvement into a problem of family needs. Schools tend to consider parents' lack of skills or knowledge as the problem, and all efforts are geared toward crisis intervention (Fine, 1993). This deficit model (Young & Levin, 2002) undermines parents' potential. In School District A, strategies such as parent workshops on monitoring homework, positive discipline, and surveys regarding parenting through teen issues, though well-intentioned, may have been perceived by some parents as critical of their parenting skills. An interesting irony was that the parents interviewed for this study adopted a similar attitude towards parents who were apparently uninvolved. One parent summarized the challenges of the AISI project as follows:

You know, to get those other people out is tough...And you would think that a kid's education is a pretty big issue...and there's people that are willing to do things for nothing... We struggled [with] getting the other parents involved when they just lack involvement all the time anyways. It is a challenge...and you get the same parents all the time. Especially for the kids that don't need the extra.

The implication is that some parents cannot be persuaded to participate in school activities, and their children's academic future is jeopardized as a result.

From a critical perspective, a pressing element that requires examination of culture as an institutional constraint working against school improvement initiatives rests upon what is presupposed in school culture: power. Sarason (1996) notes, "the problem of change is the problem of power [and] power suffuses all relationships" (p.335). The concept of power is a deep one, and admittedly goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, examining who the powerful actors are in an organization highlights the constraints and rules that guide organizational behavior (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991) providing insight into how to negotiate these organizational constraints toward more collaborative structures. Lubeck, Jessup, and DeVries (2001) suggest that "culture is a complex and contested social space" (p.504) which must be brought to the conscious level in order for change initiatives to be successful. Attempts to engage parents in schools may falter without consideration of the social distance between parents and teachers, and the fact that discrepant power relations inhibit authentic partnership.

Conclusion

This paper points institutionalized practices and taken-for-granted norms that made it difficult for School District A's Action Teams to effect more than superficial change in its AISI project. In the final analysis, institutional constraints of the Action Teams evolve from loose coupling between the Action Teams and the school organization, and decoupling Action Teams' intentions from actions. Constraints are also bound in issues of culture and discrepancies in influence between the subculture of the Action Team, and the taken-for-granted norms and behaviors that make up the school culture. Simple awareness of the institutionalized practices and culture is not the answer to improving parent and community involvement; however, no attempt to engage these populations can move forward without a clearer understanding of such constraints. Indeed, educational institutions resist change because they do not address features of the institutional environment (Ogawa, Crowson & Goldring, 1999). Including parents and community is not so much a matter of inviting them to the schoolhouse door. Metaphorically speaking, it is more a matter of unlocking the schoolhouse door from the inside.

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