

A School-Based Urban Teacher Education Program that Enhances School-Community Connections

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A paper presented at the 2008
International Roundtable on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, New York

Urban schools face numerous challenges. Poverty; lack of economic stability; high mobility in and out of neighborhoods; schools with inadequate funding to cover the educational, social, and health needs of urban children and their families; and high teacher turnover in low income urban schools are just a few of the vital issues that call for collaboration with universities. To address these issues, a number of teacher educators have proposed moving teacher education into schools and communities, and a number of socially transformative implications of such a move have been documented. These include building trust and commitment with local communities (Murrell, 2001); participating in community organizing (Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006), creating a sense of civic engagement through a commitment to service learning (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000), preparing culturally responsive future teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2006); increasing the number pre-service teachers who choose to teach in urban or diverse settings (Noel, 2006); and transforming the educational system (Giroux & McLaren, 1996).

In the spring of 2004, a group of faculty and administrators from the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) and California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) collaboratively created the Urban Teacher Education Center (UTEC). This center moved a teacher preparation program off of the university campus and into Jedediah Smith School, a low income, culturally diverse, urban school serving children from two

public housing projects (100% free-and-reduced lunch, a federal measurement of poverty, 60% African American student demographics, 96% students of color).

By establishing an ongoing presence at the school, the Urban Teacher Education Center has become positioned well to help enhance the school-community efforts to collaborate. UTEC recently received recognition for its collaboration with schools and communities from the California Council on Teacher Education, which awarded UTEC its “Quality Educational Partnership Award for Distinguished Service to Children and the Preparation of Teachers.” This paper describes the process of gaining the trust of community members and presents examples of how this program has been able to help enhance school-community connections. It analyzes how “being there” (Murrell, 1991, 2001) over time begins to engender trust on the part of community members, allows for spontaneity and flexibility in activities undertaken with community, and gives community members a sense of stability, and provides another voice and for their change efforts.

Gaining Trust in an Urban Setting

Any organization coming from outside an urban community runs the risk of being seen as untrustworthy and not being truly committed to the community. As Reed (2004) describes:

Low-income neighborhoods are jaded by the comings and goings of organizations that have no grassroots base in the community...Local residents are weary of seeing new initiatives come and go. They are tired of the disruptions caused by

those who live outside the neighborhood who try to offer solutions that, no matter how well intentioned, are not grounded in the realities of the street. (p. 81)

With this mind, UTEC has approached its presence in the school and community through Murrell's (1991, 2001) concept of "being there." At its most basic level, this means that we are physically present in schools in order to learn, to show commitment, and to build trust with community members. Murrell (2001) describes these efforts as "*building community through our actual physical presence in schools* [ital. in original]" (p. 33). As Reed (2004) explains, "From a neighborhood perspective, presence is especially important" (p. 81). Our faculty and students who come through the Urban Teacher Education Center have been at the school for three years, showing our desire to be a part of the efforts of the community, taking part in both school and community-wide activities, and being available for school staff, students, and community members including parents and grandparents to have another set of ears that would listen to their concerns and take part in their community reform efforts. As Simmons et al. (1999) describe, this is

a conscious, ongoing, subsuming effort that requires not standing on protocol or rank, not being afraid to take a risk, and not being distant and reluctant to get muddy or messy in a real-life situation that needs a collaborative response...[in fact] we often seem to be deliberately trying to demonstrate this friendliness, humbleness, willingness, and flexibility to do what is necessary to move collaborative reform forward. (p. 42)

Activities to Enhance School-Community Connections

The need for stronger, more stable school-community connections in the Jedediah Smith School setting was evident especially during one year when the principal and assistant principal both resigned just before the school year began. The school district's response was to rotate four retired principals through the school during the school year. One principal was present for two months, another for three months, and the final two principals decided to alternate days at the site each week (one on a Monday-Wednesday-Friday, the other on Tuesday and Thursday). Despite the good intentions of the individual principals, the result of an inconsistent administration led to chaos, a break-down in communication, and a lessening of trust from the parents and neighboring community.

An unexpected result was that the community turned to UTEC for some stability, for another voice to represent them at the school, and for both structural and spontaneous joining of efforts to both create and strengthen efforts to educate children. Examples include (among many others that can be seen in the handouts):

Structural Collaborative Efforts

- The UTEC Coordinator took a sabbatical to serve as "community liaison" between the school and its community, during which time she participated in community "back-to-school" gatherings, sat in on social service meetings, among other activities.
- The neighborhood tutoring/mentoring program held within the housing complex asked UTEC for help, and UTEC students now serve as tutors for the program.
- UTEC created a Family Resource Center at the school, which it staffed for one year. It is currently used as an adult education classroom for community members.

- The UTEC Coordinator initiated a Community Outreach Committee at the school, designed to help strengthen community connections.

Personal Examples of Collaborative Efforts

- A UTEC student saw a child climbing the fence between the housing complex and the road. She stopped her car to talk with the child, and got permission to serve as an unofficial crosswalk guard for this section of the road. A parent who had seen this student acting as crosswalk guard asked if she could help him get information on community colleges for himself. She did some research on her own, interviewed two staff members of the school who live in the neighborhood and also currently attend the community college, and prepared a packet for the man and for the community overall.
- At a morning assembly at the school, a mom asked the UTEC Coordinator, “Would you tell Ms. [Principal] that I have an idea for choosing student leaders of the week?” When the coordinator told her that she should talk to the principal, the mom said “No, I’d rather tell you. Ms. [Principal] will listen to you.
- While standing at the exit of the school while children and their family/community members meet to walk home, one mom said “Hey Dr. [Coordinator], our church is holding a bar-b-q this weekend in the projects. Do you and your students want to come?”
- While walking down the hall from the restroom, a mom from the neighborhood who works part time as a cafeteria attendant said “Dr. [Coordinator], what do you think about all of this focus on race [that the new principal is implementing at the school]? I don’t know if I like it.”

Conclusion

When a teacher education program enters an urban school and community, just “being there,” with the humility of being a learner who can learn from community members, it opens new opportunities to integrate into the change efforts already underway in those settings. It gives another voice for community members who may not feel comfortable dealing with school personnel. And it provides stability for teachers, parents, and community members when there is turmoil and turnover at the school.

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