

School Leadership, Social Capital, and Community Engagement: A Case Study of an Elementary School in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the community-oriented school leadership practices of a school leader at an elementary school within a colonia in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Analysis of interviews and observations revealed how this school leader employed a broad range of practices, strategies, and approaches to develop deep relationships between the school and community and to connect families to important social networks and community resources. Research on community-oriented school leadership and social capital theory are presented and utilized to analyze findings and identify leadership practices that support meaningful family engagement in marginalized communities. Findings revealed how the school leader created bonding social capital within the school community. As a result, parents and the school worked together to recognize their indigenous assets, identify and problem-solve common community challenges, and build mutual trust and respect. The school leader also created bridging social capital as she connected families with outside networks and brought important resources and services into a geographically isolated school community. Implications for future research and school leadership practice are presented at the conclusion of this article.

Key Words: school as community, principal leadership practices, international education, social capital, families, community engagement, parents

Introduction

Cities along the United States–Mexico border have colonias, or unincorporated and unregulated settlements with substandard housing and living conditions. Colonias, which are overwhelmingly populated by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, present significant challenges for student well-being and academic achievement, including: (a) high proportions of adult illiteracy; (b) severe poverty; (c) lack of access to quality public schools; (d) domestic violence, gang/cartel violence, and other nonviolent crime; (e) government malaise; and (f) a lack of community solidarity (Hernandez & Grineski, 2012; Heyman & Campbell, 2004). Geographic isolation further contributes to limited economic opportunities for families. In Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, individuals in colonias who can secure employment tend to travel far distances and work long hours for less than 400 U.S. dollars a month (Semuels, 2016). The challenges children and families confront are significant, but are further exacerbated by a lack of quality public schools. In Mexico, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2013), fewer than 40% of Mexicans obtain an upper secondary education, female students are less likely to be in school as they move through sixth grade, and schools have the highest student–teacher ratio of all OECD countries. Mexican children living in poverty are also more likely to attend public schools that receive limited funding (OECD, 2013).

Extreme poverty and poorly funded public schools leave few options for children. Yet, the dominant interest of many educational researchers is narrowly focused on in-school reform, while overlooking community-related factors. As Miller and colleagues (2011) stated, “the prevailing thought seems to be if we fix the schools, the rest of the ducks will fall into order, that is, employment and home ownership rates will increase, crime and drug use will go down, and so on” (p. 1080). Similarly, Berliner (2006) asked, “Why do we put so much of our attention and resources into trying to fix what goes on inside low-performing schools when the causes of low performance may reside outside of the school?” (p. 963). Scholarship has focused on broadening school reform efforts to address larger social and community issues (Anyon, 2014; Schutz, 2006), and some researchers shifted attention to the role of school leaders addressing school reform and community-related issues simultaneously (Green, 2015; Khalifa, 2012; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). In this study, I examine the community-oriented leadership practices of a school leader at a community-founded Christian elementary school within a colonia in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. I examine the following research question: “What school leadership actions help to continually strengthen the community while improving student learning?”

I begin with a brief discussion of community-oriented school leadership. Next, I describe how social capital theory is used to frame this study and discuss this study's methods. Then, I provide additional context for this study as well as findings. Finally, I conclude with implications for practice and research.

Community-Oriented School Leadership

Unrelenting waves of violence in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico created economic, cultural, social, and psychological problems for colonias (Hernandez & Grineski, 2012). Many families, communities, and households were destabilized from violence, and many citizens lost faith in government (Araujo & de la Piedra, 2013). Children lost access to caregivers, neighbors, community organizations, family, and friends. Some education scholars have emphasized the importance of “tapping a community's assets and creating links between schools and communities” (Gold, Simon, Mundell, & Brown, 2004, p. 56S). Epstein (1987, 1995), argued school and community are “overlapping spheres” where collaborations between school and community can benefit all stakeholders. Parents are critical to school–community relationships and to education outcomes, but school leaders have a critical role in (re)establishing and building relationships when they have been broken (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). Siddle Walker's (1993, in press) work on Black schools and principals in the Jim Crow South illustrated the importance of linking schools and communities in challenging and potentially violent contexts. She documented how Black families worked to ensure schools were financially and morally supported. In return, schools provided resources so families could strategically advocate for civil rights, equitable funding, and other resources. Siddle Walker's work also highlights the role of school leaders in connecting families with civil rights organizers, providing information to different community groups, and helping to build local, state, and national advocacy networks.

Additional research describes how school leaders build relationships with families, engage in public school–community organization partnerships, and address community goals with school resources (Auerbach, 2009; Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010; Ishimaru, 2013; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Sanders and Harvey (2002) conducted a case study that examined an urban elementary school and identified four factors to successful partnerships: (a) the school's commitment to learning; (b) the principal's support for community involvement; (c) the school's receptivity and openness to community; and (d) the school's willingness to engage in two-way communication. Khalifa (2012) found an urban school leader increasing student achievement and garnering trust by establishing a strong community presence, creating opportunities for parents to come into the school, and participating in community-based

advocacy. More recently, Green (2016) showed how a principal supported school reform and community involvement by: (a) positioning the school as a social broker in the community; (b) linking school culture to community revitalization projects; and (c) connecting instruction to community realities. While researchers have identified leadership practices that merge school reform with community development efforts, few studies have utilized social capital theory to understand principal leadership activity in challenging urban contexts (Green, 2016; Ishimaru, 2013). The next section explains how social capital theory further informs this research.

Theoretical Framework: Social Capital Theory

A social capital theoretical lens elucidates how community-oriented school leadership can strengthen the community and school simultaneously. Social capital originates from the idea that relationships and networks can be utilized by individuals and groups as a resource (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 248). According to Putnam (1993), “Social capital refers to features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 35). A community’s capability to act together in response to shared difficulties is an indicator of well-being (Ferguson & Dickens, 1999). A key predictor of a community’s capacity to act together has traditionally been associated with socioeconomic status (Boardman & Robert, 2000; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002), perhaps because individuals with higher social status believe more in their ability to influence government (Boardman & Robert, 2000). On the other hand, low-income communities can feel more isolated and sense government will not respond to their needs. While one of the most important ways socially isolated and impoverished communities learn about and gain access to resources is through social networks, the individuals within these communities may be less likely to develop or utilize social ties to advocate for resources due to despair (Boardman & Robert, 2000). Schools, however, can be a catalyst for building confidence, creating more diverse social networks, and instigating collective action that extends beyond leaning on family and friends for support. School leaders are in one of the most advantageous positions to build and expand networks that can help students and families (Green, 2016; Sergiovanni, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

I draw on two types of social capital to understand how community-oriented school leadership can strengthen communities and improve educational

outcomes: “bonding” and “bridging” (Putnam, 2001). Bonding social capital refers to ties between individuals with similar identities and backgrounds, such as families living in colonias. An example of bonding social capital comes from the work of Edin and Lein (1997), who found mothers in public housing units who utilized a network of family and friends to “make ends meet.” Bridging social capital relates to cross-cutting ties where “members of one group connect with members of other groups to seek access to support or gain information” (Larsen et al., 2004, p. 66). Teachers and families in colonias can form bridging networks that help families gain access to unequally distributed resources, opportunities, and information.

Education scholar Stanton-Salazar (2011) defined social capital as “the resources and key forms of social support embedded in one’s network of associations, and accessible through direct or indirect ties with institutional agents” (p. 1067). The institutional agent occupies a high-status position and can act strategically to empower students and provide access to a broad range of networks (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Other examples of “agents” or “brokers” are broadly described as individuals who connect discrete networks or organizations. Small (2006) used “resource brokers,” or “organizations that have ties to businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies rich in resources and that provide their patrons with access to these resources” (p. 274). Institutional agents or brokers could be school leaders, because they are knowledgeable about policies, make decisions about resource distributions, organize the school, shape culture, and are visible and accessible to develop partnerships and address community concerns.

In sum, social capital is useful for considering how community-oriented school leaders can build trust, community solidarity, and common purpose (bonding social capital). Social capital theory can also shed insight into how brokers connect families and students to resources, services, opportunities, and information (bridging social capital). As Putnam (2001) noted, “Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40” (p. 23). Social capital and the concepts of bridging and bonding illustrates that school leaders have the potential to serve as the superglue and WD-40 that is needed in discouraged and marginalized communities with weakened social ties.

Methods

Believing researchers should pay attention to community-oriented school leadership and more deeply consider how school leaders develop social capital, I determined it appropriate to conduct a secondary analysis of data from a

larger study (DeMatthews, Edwards, & Rincones, 2016). I utilized a qualitative case study approach that allowed me to explore a phenomenon (community-oriented school leadership) within its context (a school set within a colonia in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico) using multiple data sources (Stake, 2013; Yin, 2009). The school's leader, Señora Marie, was selected based on an extreme sampling strategy to provide an important and underresearched exploration into community-oriented school leadership in a challenging school community context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Concentrating on a single case established a depth of interviews and observations that captured the inner workings of community-oriented school leadership and revealed how a leader built solidarity and connected families with important resources. In-depth interviews and observations were the primary data collection tools used to focus on this leader's efforts to create a more community-oriented school and meet diverse student and family needs.

Data Collection and Analysis

Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with Señora Marie over one academic school year (2014–15). Interviews focused on (a) her perceptions about the range of challenges confronted by the school, students, families, and community; (b) how challenges evolved; and (c) the specific leadership actions she took to support the school and community. I conducted additional interviews with five teachers, eight parents, two local government officials, a community activist, and a local reporter. I conducted most of these interviews independently, although a colleague with experience conducting educational research in Latin America supported me in parent interviews and with Spanish–English translations. I have basic conversational fluency in Spanish, and at times I relied upon this colleague with native-level Spanish fluency to assist in interviews and translation. In addition, school and classroom observations typically lasted approximately six–seven hours and were conducted on the same days, because accessing the colonia was difficult. Observation sites included classrooms, cafeteria/kitchen, afterschool programs, assemblies, one-on-one meetings between Señora Marie and teachers or parents, and other impromptu activities Señora Marie engaged in during visits. Field notes focused on Señora Marie's interactions with students, teachers, and parents, as well as comments and actions related to school community leadership. Field notes not only documented her leadership practice, but also corroborated findings from interviews.

I coded data using NVivo 9 software in multiple phases. I began reading interview transcripts and field notes multiple times. I had previously coded data chronologically and by source. Next, I began with initial coding using low-inference codes derived from emerging themes in the data and from my

theoretical framework. Interview transcripts were used to delve deeper into Señora Marie's leadership and beliefs about the community. I reviewed these codes to identify emergent themes and wrote analytic memos to facilitate my thinking. Subcategories were created for leadership practices and beliefs related to building community solidarity (bonding social capital) and connecting with outside resources (bridging social capital). Next, I reviewed the codes to develop higher inference codes and to identify and consider possible relationships among codes. Additional codes were inductively developed when actions, beliefs, or practices did not fit (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Secondary coding allowed me to look closer at bridging and bonding social capital, how they were related or dissimilar, and how challenges within the community created opportunities.

I also examined dimensions of trustworthiness as part of the analytic process. First, the multiple data sources (including teacher and parent interviews and observations) provided for triangulation, allowing me to cross-check interview data from Señora Marie and ensure the credibility of my observations and interpretations (Merriam, 2009). Multiple data sources also allowed me to clarify meaning, verify the repeatability of my interpretations, and identify different ways of understanding (Stake, 2013). Second, to minimize interview bias, I recorded, transcribed, and allowed Señora Marie and other interviewees the opportunity to read, revise, and agree/disagree to their interview transcripts. This process allowed me to authenticate interview data as an accurate representation of what was said (Stake, 2013). Third, I maintained a reflective journal to track my reflections and biases. Finally, I maintained prolonged engagement that allowed me to build trust with Señora Marie and community members (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In the process of conducting research with and about people and communities of color, researchers must be "engaged, thoughtful, and forthright regarding tensions that can surface" and be "mindful of the enormous role of their own and others' racialized positionality and cultural ways of knowing" (Milner, 2007, p. 388). I began conferring with a Mexican American scholar at my institution with experience conducting research in the region and with a Mexican American journalist born in Ciudad Juárez. We discussed my own racial background as a "White man from the Northeastern United States living in the borderlands for just a few years" as well as how my race, gender, education, status as professor, linguistic background, and cultural heritage might shape how participants felt about me. I recognized a need to be more open with participants about my own background and the purposes of my research to understand different ways of knowing and to push myself to recognize the salience of racial oppression and other forms of injustice impacting

this community. Señora Marie also insisted that I be active in the school and community—eating lunch each day with students, participating in afterschool events and assemblies, and walking the community on occasion. These experiences as well as my own professional background as a teacher and school administrator in urban school districts in the U.S. allowed me to build relationships and contributed to what I believed was an ability to see strength, hope, and tremendous value within the school and colonia and to be more accountable as a researcher within this community.

Setting: Community Context and School History

Over the previous decade, Ciudad Juárez had been named the world's most violent city with an estimated 10,000 murders in the city between 2008 and 2013 (Moran, 2012). City residents experienced violence through the loss of family and friends, but also struggled with poverty and limited access health-care, housing, and stable employment. The colonia at the center of this study sits on the fringes of Ciudad Juárez. The colonia was approximately 30 years old and comprised of homes constructed of cinderblocks, adobe, and scrap metal. Most residents built homes on unoccupied land and siphoned electricity from nearby powerlines. The colonia was especially isolated because a lack of paved roads limited mass transportation. Supermarkets, gas stations, doctor's offices, hospitals, licensed businesses, and government offices were also absent. Some families operated stores in their homes that sold candy, canned goods, milk, bread, soda, and nonperishables. Most of the colonia lacked adequate sewage management. Many homes were heated by burning wood, rubber tires, or other scraps. Residents burned trash daily, as trash pick-up was not affordable. Parents described public schools as overcrowded, understaffed, and unsafe. Class sizes of 40–50 students were common, and AM/PM schedules meant children attended school for only four hours per day. Parents reported most children stopped attending school at sixth grade to work. The colonia was not ethnically diverse (a few families immigrated from Guatemala and El Salvador during the 1980s and 1990s). Guadalupe, an English-speaking parent, described the community: "Some people, they are from the South [Southern Mexico], and they came up for work, so they have no family here. Other people, they've been here forever." Guadalupe lived in the United States for most of her life, but was recently deported with her child. She shared the difficulties her child endured transitioning from life in the United States. Parents noted how the community had not always been close, because of people moving from other parts of the city and country for work.

Colegio Zapata

Colegio Zapata is a private, nondenominational Christian elementary school with an open enrollment policy. The L-shaped two-story cinderblock building is enclosed with a wall and iron fence and sits between two unpaved and eroded streets. From a distance, the school is not aesthetically pleasing, and its dusty courtyard has no plant life except for a small tree. Inside the courtyard, the walls are covered with large, colorful murals promoting gender equality, kindness and sharing, youth empowerment, and community solidarity. The school has no internal hallways, so each classroom door faces the outside. In front of each classroom are colorful bulletin boards adding warmth to the school. During observations, family members—mostly mothers—were present in all parts of the school (i.e., classrooms, bathroom areas, cafeteria, courtyard, offices).

Colegio Zapata was entering its tenth school year in 2014–15. In 2004, Señora Marie and her husband Luis selected the school site after volunteering across the city for decades. They used personal savings and donations from the U.S. to pay for the building costs, but families in the colonia and volunteers from the U.S. physically built the school. On September 2, 2005, Colegio Zapata enrolled students in Grades K–3 with additional grades added each year. Señora Marie and the community drafted the school's mission: “to provide hope to the people of Juárez by: (a) providing excellent academic opportunities to our students; (b) teaching general life skills to students and parents; and (c) building a strong sense of ownership and involvement in the community.” The school was 100% free to all families, which included books, uniforms, supplies, and two to three meals per day. All students were accepted, but class size was capped at 17. Roughly 140 students attended grades K–5, and the school day was two hours longer than public schools. The curriculum emphasized principles of social justice associated with caring for one's neighbor, being tolerant of others, and the importance of community service. All courses were taught in Spanish, except for English classes when a teacher was available. Monies from community-based fundraisers in the U.S. and external grants in Mexico and the U.S. funded the school. To offset costs and increase parent engagement, families agreed to five volunteer hours per week and five hours of adult education classes per month. Parents ran the main office, monitored common areas, supported teachers in classrooms, cooked meals, and cleaned the school grounds, bathrooms, classrooms, and offices. Señora Marie, Luis, and other community members also conducted optional Bible study in the building after school with local families. Parents and students were not required to participate in any religious services, although many voluntarily opted to do so.

Señora Marie

Señora Marie is a biliterate (English–Spanish) Mexican–American woman in her late 40s from the Texas/Chihuahua, Mexico borderlands. Her previous career was as a government accountant in the U.S., but after decades of volunteering in Ciudad Juárez, she and her husband founded Colegio Zapata. During their time volunteering, Señora Marie and Luis realized families could not read the Bible or complete basic consumer mathematics functions. Señora Marie noted, “People were paying other people to read their mail and pay their bills.” They spoke with residents about opening a school. Initially, many families laughed at the proposal because they felt it would not help. Parents recalled how others laughed at the idea of a “community school.” Undisturbed, Señora Marie and Luis moved their family into the colonia, acquired dual citizenship in Mexico and the U.S., purchased a parcel of land, and began building the school with the help of the community.

Parents described Señora Marie as passionate, caring, hardworking, and as a Godsend. One parent described her as “the glue of the community,” which served as anecdotal evidence of her ability to develop bonding social capital. While many parents looked to Señora Marie for leadership, she was humble and deemphasized her role. She believed Colegio Zapata was a vehicle for social change. She said the school’s real mission is to “help families teach their children, help them understand the situation they are in, and somehow bring them together.” By living in the colonia, Señora Marie identified a lack of community solidarity. Migrant families and single parents lost connections to their family networks or were displaced and lost loved ones to violence. She said, “This community was in trouble; it lacked long-term roots and access to elders...there are no more wise abuelas [grandmothers].” This awareness was a major catalyst for establishing a community-oriented school. She frequently reiterated, “Ultimately, parents and the community are the most important part of a child’s education.” Her statement reflected an awareness of how important families are to student success, which guided her toward building community capacity rather than narrowly focusing on instruction and increasing test scores.

Findings

In this section, I present findings focused on the school leadership actions of Señora Marie and how they related to strengthening the community and improving student learning. Specifically, I describe how she understood community needs and built solidarity, how she positioned the school as a community hub, and how curriculum was aligned to helping students and families understand and address the challenges they confronted in their daily lives.

Understanding Community Needs and Building Solidarity

Señora Marie listened to the challenges parents shared in informal counseling sessions and open forums, which she typically facilitated herself, given the difficulty of bringing professional counselors into the school. She recognized many parents lacked confidence and did not recognize the existing assets within the community. She predicted if the community could unite and recognize its innate strength and talents, many challenges could begin to be addressed. In other words, Señora Marie recognized how social capital already existed, despite parents' inability to recognize and utilize it. She capitalized on parent volunteering and community service projects to develop parents' skills, leadership capacity, and a sense of recognition and connectedness.

Bonding Communities Through Parent Volunteering

Parent volunteering was utilized to build bonding social capital within the community. Señora Marie did not immediately recognize the potential of volunteering to build solidarity, but upon reflection of her own policies and practices, she learned how to do so through teaching and mentoring. When Colegio Zapata was founded, Señora Marie allowed parents to choose their volunteer jobs. She reflected, "This was a huge mistake. I did not realize how unprepared some parents were for this type of responsibility." Some parents did not show up for work, others took control of the cafeteria menu or the main office, while others avoided certain jobs. One parent who had been at the school since it opened described parents arguing over recipes in the kitchen and failing to clean for the next day. Señora Marie learned that the kitchen would serve as an important place to build relationships. She described what happened after she became tired of infighting and learned to make volunteering an opportunity to build bonding social capital:

I worked in the kitchen each day. We assigned days where different parents would oversee the kitchen and the recipes. I helped the ladies, and we talked a lot...After a while, they saw that if they were difficult on their day in charge, the other ladies would take it out on them later, like when they were in charge.... They all developed a sense of accountability for each other....It's been years now, and there's never an issue.... There is a culture in the kitchen now; everyone helps out, and new moms are brought into the system by my veteran moms.

Señora Marie became intentional about providing parents with the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, build relationships, and develop their leadership capacity.

Señora Marie began to further challenge the parents. She assigned responsibilities for ordering and purchasing food, rationing food between orders, and

preparing healthy meals. This required additional leadership and knowledge, which most of the moms already had the capacity to do whether they knew it or not. Not all parents could read or do the calculations to ensure the food lasted between orders. However, parents began to find ways of helping each other. A parent explained, “We all help each other; if someone doesn’t know something, we show them.” The kitchen became a place where parents learned to read and do basic mathematics. Parents recognized they could rely on other parents. Señora Marie highlighted an early breakthrough in building community solidarity: “They realized they didn’t need to pay someone to pay their own bills. They could learn.... They could ask someone from the school for help... and not just for paying bills, but for other things, too.” At a basic level, Señora Marie’s ability to challenge parents required them to recognize each other’s skills. In turn, this built reciprocity, trust, and bonding social capital. Parents reported being proud of kitchen work.

Señora Marie would become more strategic when connecting parents. Unfortunately, all volunteer settings did not required parents to work together or build relationships. Two parents initially began working in the school’s main office. Mariena was a parent in her late 30s who began working in the school more than five years ago. She had never worked in an office before, had no experience with computers or other related office technology, and did not know how to file alphabetically. Señora Marie mentored Mariena over the first few years. She sarcastically laughed about how Mariena feared the copier machine and noted, “Initially, we started off small. Like, how to file last names that start with the same letter [e.g., Garcia, Gonzalez], how to answer the phone, and how to make copies for teachers.” Mariena also kept student records, but noted, “I really didn’t know what I was doing.... She [Señora Marie] taught me so much now. I am thankful.” Señora Marie worked with Mariena to develop administrative skills and is currently training Mariena to be the school’s accountant. Mariena was formally hired as the office administrator and trained and mentored other parents. Observations and interviews revealed Mariena was a trusted parent and viewed as a leader. She became a resource broker, because she knew different resources available within the school and through partner community organizations. She gave parents advice, information, and connected them with resources.

Developing Community Leadership Through Service

Part of the school’s mission was “to provide hope to the people of Juárez by...building a strong sense of ownership and involvement in the community.” Señora Marie used the school as a vehicle to empower families and students. Teachers incorporated lessons about recycling, community and civic engagement, and community solidarity into lessons. Students learned how the

government operated and the importance of democracy. Nearly all participants shared the sentiment that Colegio Zapata was a significant part of the colonia. A central component of Señora Marie's leadership was listening and establishing opportunities for people to speak. She said:

I don't need to come in here and tell people what their problems are or tell them what to do. Ya, I might know a lot of the problems, but what difference does it make that I know it... Sometimes parents look to me to solve problems, but I'm not going to do that. It's their responsibility; we are just here to help.

Señora Marie recognized parents needed to understand their own problems. She was purposeful about providing opportunities to speak freely. Forums and discussions with parents provoked input on community problems the school might address. Some parents shared concerns. Señora Marie believed reserved parents would see that speaking up was important. Families, students, and teachers would collectively try to address issues identified by parents. Señora Marie found that "by giving them voice, they also started to realize that together, things could change." Service projects ranged from garbage collection, fixing unpaved/washed out roads, and repairing homes to raising money for different community projects or individual problems. Most parents shared how the local government did very little to help. Roads were not repaired, litter was not cleaned up, and police rarely helped with community problems or crime. Service projects provided a sense of agency in the community, although some parents privately shared that things would never change.

The most significant service project that came about during this study represented aspects of both bridging and bonding social capital. Parents of a former student came to Señora Marie for help after their daughter was diagnosed with brain cancer. The family had little money, no insurance, and did not know what to do. Señora Marie acted as an institutional agent by connecting the family with a broad range of resources within Mexico and the U.S. Señora Marie shared,

I didn't know what to do, and I wasn't prepared for this, but I just got on the internet and got on the phone and started calling everyone... We learned as much as we could about what's available for [the child], and we prayed.

She admitted she felt powerless to help, but ultimately assisted the family in receiving a second opinion through a U.S.-based program that offers free second opinions. The second opinion provided an alternative treatment plan but required hundreds of dollars a month for chemotherapy and treatments. Señora Marie's actions reflect that of an institutional agent bridging different networks (school–healthcare–charities); however, hundreds of dollars a month for

treatment was an immense amount of money. Señora Marie and parent leaders saw an opportunity to raise money for the family. The subsequent set of events bonded the community. Students developed fundraisers in class, made signs, and collected cans and plastic to be sold to a recycling center. Parents debated avenues for raising money and utilized the kitchen to make empanadas and other baked goods to sell at nearby churches, schools, and downtown. Members of a local church in El Paso, Texas also sold baked goods and collected donations from parishioners. Colonia residents without children at Colegio Zapata became involved. Señora Marie noted “outsiders” without children at the school and “dads” were coming to the school for the first time. Ultimately, the community raised thousands of dollars for medication and other family needs. The child survived longer than doctors anticipated and is reenrolling in her school.

Nearly all participants shared how this set of actions pulled the community closer together and provided tremendous hope. Many parents initially doubted the child could be helped given the extensive cost of treatment and the severity of her cancer. Señora Marie noted how helping the child built hope and showed how the community was connected to each other:

We finally saw people coming together. We didn't ask them to, they just did it.... They weren't going to let this child pass away without a fight....

To me, knowing where we were, that says a lot; we've come a long way...

I will admit it, I had my own doubts. What did I know about doctors and hospitals and second opinions? I'm not a doctor or a social worker.

Señora Marie stated, “there is hope now” and was optimistic about the school's approach and commitment to the community.

Modeling Civic Engagement and Self-Advocacy

Parents frequently shared how government did not care about the colonia. Señora Marie, teachers, and parents told stories about government failures, like raw sewage in streets from busted pipes. Most parents were stalwart in their belief that civic engagement would not change the government's responsiveness. Señora Marie looked for opportunities to prove parents wrong and took advantage of any opportunity to model self-advocacy and civic engagement. For example, two men broke into the school at night and stole a freezer. The community told Señora Marie who the two men were, and she contacted the police. It took days and multiple phone calls for the police to arrive. When they did arrive, they were slow to investigate or follow up. Señora Marie reported that, “Parents told us to leave it alone, that the men could be dangerous, and following up is not worth the trouble.” Señora Marie knew these men and denied they were dangerous. She continued to follow up with the police, and,

ultimately, the men were arrested. The freezer was returned broken. The police asked Señora Marie not to bother them anymore, but she wanted justice knowing that the men were released without charges. Again, the parents warned Señora Marie that the police could get angry, or the men's family could retaliate. Señora Marie said,

This was an opportunity to make the system work as it should....The reason why the system doesn't work is because nobody believes in it and follows through. The system, it's set up to not work for people...I need to follow through as an example to the community... I guess I'm putting my money where my mouth is.

After six months and many visits to the police station and courthouse, the men were brought to trial and found guilty. When the judge sentenced the two men, Señora Marie asked the judge to assign the men to community service at the school, which he did.

The story was widely discussed in the colonia. Some parents reported that Señora Marie wasted her time and was crazy for fighting and getting very little back in return. Others saw how the government could work on their behalf. The community dialogue highlighted fear and hopelessness as well as a prospect for change regarding government responsiveness. Señora Marie saw the case as progress, stating, "This was one example; there have been other things we've tried to do here. It's just very hard to find battles you can win." The school now had positive relationships with the two men, who frequently visited. Other forms of community advocacy addressed infrastructure problems in the community. For example, Colegio Zapata frequently complained to the city about the conditions of roads. They filed formal requests, but they would often grow tired of waiting and fix the roads themselves. An additional example of advocacy and civic engagement came with Señora Marie's request from a government agency to provide parent training on consumer mathematics and healthy cooking/eating, a topic discussed in the next section.

Positioning the School as a Community Hub

Señora Marie was aware of the lack of community and government resources available. She hoped to bring professionals and services to the school, but the colonia's negative reputation stopped many from entering on any regular basis. She still managed to develop some partnerships, but primarily directed her attention to building parent capacity.

Establishing Partnerships Within the Community and Governments

The colonia had few community resources available and no central place like a hospital or nonprofit center where parents could go for help. Señora

Marie recognized a need to establish partnerships to bring resources into the community. She wanted to bring counselors, dentists, doctors, social workers, English teachers, coaches, and American college students from a nearby university into her school to support a broad range of social, physical, and emotional programs. Unfortunately, few professionals or students felt safe visiting. On occasion, Señora Marie could bring professionals to Colegio Zapata to provide services. She noted that her success was limited. Yet, Colegio Zapata was not the only community-oriented school or organization in the area. A network of churches, recreation centers, and nonprofits operated in Ciudad Juárez and had developed programs for children and families. In addition, the Mexican and U.S. government offered aid and resources. While these organizations were generally poor, even small partnerships were helpful because they offered greater access to transportation, additional community spaces, and more individuals interested in participating in group activities that served the community or helped students.

In nearby El Paso, Texas, many nonprofit organizations raised money and provided services to help the people of Ciudad Juárez. Several nonprofits operate on both sides of the border. Señora Marie had one such network, her nondenominational church in El Paso. She frequently visited her church to raise money to cover budget shortfalls and found individuals to donate funds equivalent to each child's educational costs. She learned to be "entrepreneurial" and build partnerships with well-funded organizations. She shared, "I don't like trying to sell our school or talk about all the things we are doing here, but I have to; I force myself to do it because we really need help here. There is so much need." One significant partnership Señora Marie forged (because she maintained U.S. citizenship) was with the U.S. Consulate. The partnership provided small amounts of funding for computers and teaching resources, but the Consulate also donated furniture, computers, and office supplies on occasion. While somewhat inconsistent due to shifting Consulate service officer assignments, many members of the Consulate and their families engaged in mentoring, tutoring, and afterschool programs at Colegio Zapata.

Another partnership related to the Consulate was with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). A grant from USAID provided funding for afterschool tutors and mentors. An afterschool English teacher was hired, and a flag football team and track team were created that played across the city. Señora Marie commented, "The grant obviously comes with some strings attached, but it allows us to do things we couldn't do otherwise....Most importantly, it gives kids a reason to stay in school longer, which means they are safe for longer." Señora Marie also built a partnership with the Mexican government's Federal Attorney's Office of Consumer (PROFECO). One of

PROFECO's primary objective is to "Foment a culture of intelligent consumption." Señora Marie was concerned with childhood obesity and health issues in the community, but recognized families had few options. She noted, "Our community does not have many options, and families need to walk and take multiple buses to get to a grocery store." Thus, many families had poor diets that consisted of nonperishable food or ate meals using available food that was not healthy. The partnership with PROFECO offered ongoing student and adult education classes on consumer mathematics, reading, and healthy cooking and eating on a budget. This partnership built parent capacity to teach classes to other parents in the future, a topic discussed later in the article. One of the PROFECO teachers noted:

The partnership really helps people in the community learn how to eat healthy with what they have, because we know they can't just go out and buy the best foods. They have to use a budget, and they need to understand basic nutrition. For some families, it is the first time they have ever learned about nutrition....When you are living hand to mouth, you can't expect moms to question eating habits or traditional cooking....So we offer them smart, simple ways to budget and cook, like using less salt, and other healthy ways to cook.

Señora Marie and parents enjoyed the healthy cooking classes. Cooking tips and lessons were then used by parents in preparing student meals in the school's kitchen.

Finally, Señora Marie collaborated with an international coalition of churches that provided service-oriented volunteers and certified teachers. Colegio Zapata housed undergraduate students and certified teachers from around the world. Depending on skills and background, volunteers taught full-time, helped with classrooms, tutored in English or other languages, and supported community service projects. Señora Marie explained:

The types of people that visit, some come for a couple of weeks, and some stay as long as a year....It exposes the kids to new people from new places. We had a teacher from Brazil, we just had a church group from Brooklyn for two weeks, and we had an undergraduate with us from Colorado....It might not seem like much, but this is one of the few ways we can expose students to different perspectives, races, and people...I think it gives them confidence to want to see the world....They learn that the world is bigger than Juárez.

Many of the students and families stayed in touch with volunteers via social media and email. As such, an international network of volunteers connected the community with expertise and experiences of people from around the

world, including college students and teachers. Virtual connections after the visits provided future opportunities for students and families to gain access to knowledge and information they may not otherwise have access to.

Building Networks Without Partners

While Señora Marie was reasonably successful in connecting her school and community with different partnerships, the overwhelming reality was that many organizations and individuals would not come to the colonia. Señora Marie's initial expectation that families needed to attend five hours per month of adult education paid significant dividends in building social capital in a place with few outside networks and partners. She talked about how adult education could strengthen the community:

Many parents here, these women, they don't know how strong and how smart they really are. I mean, they are untapped talent...I can see it right away. They can't always see it. A lot of them have been told they can't do things. They have possessive husbands, or they are in abusive relationships. They have no options. They feel like they have no options...and, think about it: living in a one room house; Kids see everything—everything that goes on. When mom has no options, what do you think the kids think? When mom can't help with homework, what do you think they think about school?... We have so much potential here, unlocking it is what we have to do. That's the hard part, but it's really not that hard; it's just getting them to see that they can do it, that's the hard part.

Señora Marie, her husband Luis, and teachers willing to volunteer provided courses to parents after school. The PROFECO and U.S. Consulate partnerships also brought adult education courses. Classes included home economics, reading, mathematics, English, administrative skills, family counseling, parenting, healthy eating and cooking, job and interview skills, Bible study, and others. Parents selected their classes, and veteran parents shared which classes were most beneficial, further demonstrating cooperation.

Nearly all parents agreed classes were useful. Some shared how lessons on basic job and office skills they learned helped them apply for jobs. Others reported learning how to improve their family's diet. Most importantly, parents reported how they could be role models for their children because they were in school, too. One parent said, "They [her kids] know I go to school too, that's normal to them. So they believe more in themselves." While many parents were busy struggling to make ends meet and could not devote their full attention, a handful of parents thrived. Mariena who became the paid full-time office administrator was one example. Several parents learned to read and write and received jobs at the school as teachers' aides. One parent who taught a class

shared how she felt compelled to help other parents because of what Señora Marie did for her. Señora Marie added, “Now, newer moms look up to the veteran moms who teach classes.... These ladies are mentoring each other, helping each other.... They see themselves together now.” While some capacity already existed, adult education and Señora Marie’s leadership helped other parents recognize and utilize these forms of social capital.

Tying Curriculum and Instruction to Community

Addressing Gender Roles

Central to Colegio Zapata’s mission was providing hope to the people of Juárez. Señora Marie recognized how traditional gender roles led to the marginalization of women in the community. She believed these roles were explicitly taught. She elaborated:

Women here are taught to be submissive to men, and, when they refuse or resist, often times the men respond physically.... And you can’t just call the police here, they won’t do much if anything.... When I talk to moms, some of them just say, “that’s the way it is.” No, it’s not.... We need to change the way little boys and little girls grow up. We challenge those gender roles. If little girls grow up thinking they can be lawyers and doctors, and if little boys learn that they can be teachers and nurses and that women can do anything they can, a lot of this will stop.... But girls need to know they have options. They don’t need a man.

The curriculum was constantly reinforced with activities, assignments, and discussions about females in society. Students learned about different female leaders and athletes and were encouraged by their teachers to “dream big.” Señora Marie commissioned a mural depicting women and men in jobs that challenged traditional gender roles (e.g., female firefighters, doctors, lawyers; male nurses, teachers, chefs; see Figure 1). Señora Marie and teachers encouraged female students to play flag football with boys (a sport picked up at the school because of American volunteers). Similarly, adult education emphasized the importance of women being independent and engaging in leadership activity.

Señora Marie was a central figure in helping students and parents recognize women. All participants agreed she was a central figure in the community, and many looked up to her and believed she could solve their problems. While Señora Marie was humbled by the admiration, she recognized she was a model for others. She stated, “I do know that people watch how I act and respond. So, I want to model that women can be powerful and women can do things and women can stand up for themselves.” When students engaged in service projects, female students were encouraged to take leadership roles, and many

sought to emulate Señora Marie. Parent interviews revealed that her heroic characterization helped parents see how strong women can be. One parent noted, “She is strong and caring at the same time.” This statement is powerful, because it highlights how women can lead without being rigid, sterile, and uncaring. Another parent said, “She is a role model to many of us.” Together, the community was talking about how women were powerful and could do anything.



Figure 1. Community mural.

Teaching Hope and Solidarity

Señora Marie believed education should center around hope and solidarity. Teaching hope required courage in a context where extreme violence and poverty was pervasive. After observations, Señora Marie asked me about the quality of instruction I observed in the school as well as professional development opportunities for her teachers. She knew I was a former teacher and administrator with a background in special education and was concerned with the quality of teaching, noting that it was very difficult to attract and retain effective teachers. Yet, despite these challenges, she deeply believed that Colegio Zapata would be successful at educating all students if they could instill hope

and solidarity. She said, “It’s hard for some people and for our students to believe that there is a way out.” In a separate interview, she added, “My concern is not so much about reading, but about whether students believe in themselves and whether or not they will make the right choices in life.” Teachers incorporated lessons from the Bible about generosity and hope into the curriculum and talked about the importance of respecting one’s own life and the life of others. Students were encouraged to develop short-term and long-term goals and share their dreams with classmates and parents. As an observer, I frequently ate lunch with students in the cafeteria and talked to students about their life goals. Many wanted to be *abogados* (lawyers), *políticos* (politicians), *doctores* (doctors), *profesores* (teachers), *pilotos* (pilots), and *jugadores de fútbol* (soccer players).

Señora Marie recognized teaching hope and solidarity was driven not only through instruction, but also via schoolwide practices. She recalled how local public schools physically disciplined students and utilized other harsh discipline. Señora Marie was watchful over discipline and classroom management practices because she recognized students can easily feel disconnected. She refused to suspend students or remove them from classrooms for extended time. This is not to say students did not engage in misconduct, but misconduct was resolved using principles of restorative justice. Students were guided to reflect on how their behaviors impacted others, to identify positive alternatives to their behavioral choice, and to make amends with those impacted. Teachers and staff paid close attention to bullying and structured curriculum in ways that encouraged students to work together and build positive behaviors. Señora Marie also focused on how teachers disciplined students. Teachers overwhelmingly shared the same vision for discipline as Señora Marie. One teacher’s comment was representative of others: “I’ve never worked at a school like this before. We talk to children, not talk down to children. We treat them with respect. We don’t use the power against them.” Another teacher said, “We are good examples for students. If we have a problem with something they are doing, we talk about it.” Yelling at students was prohibited and never occurred across the 18 observations. Parents, who were frequently in their own child’s classroom, helped with discipline, but they did not yell at children for misconduct either. Observations revealed a strong culture of restorative justice and reflection, not harsh consequences.

While Señora Marie was optimistic about each child, she recognized escaping extreme poverty would be difficult and probably not possible for all. Señora Marie was aware of the school’s shortcomings and inability to completely transform its community given its lack of resources and immense social challenges. She understood change would be incremental. She was confident

that a curriculum of hope and solidarity supported future generations. In the final interview, Señora Marie powerfully summarized the long-lasting impact of the curriculum.

Sometimes, I know what we do here doesn't sink in for a long time. There is a lot going on out there, in their lives. We try to get as many kids into middle school and high school as we can, but the reality is, sometimes things don't work out...I know we are planting seeds though, and perhaps they sprout when they are parents, or they sprout when they are about to make a bad decision...I know we don't always see the fruits of our labor...Change is slow, and it takes time...Ten years ago, I thought we would have done so much more to help the community, but looking back I can't believe how much we've done. There is a lot more work to do, but I'm optimistic...People here are working together, and they care for each other...Poverty and other things here are serious. There is drugs and alcoholism, you know, and things are the way they are, but life is maybe a little bit easier and a little bit better when you have each other.

In sum, Señora Marie knew teaching hope and solidarity did not mean all problems would disappear. She did know the community would be stronger and more supportive when things were most difficult.

Discussion

While many school leaders ignore or deemphasize the role of parent engagement and adult education in their schools, Señora Marie did not because Colegio Zapata was in a community where few other resources besides parents existed. In my review of community-oriented school leadership literature, I highlighted how school leaders improve student outcomes by tapping community assets, linking schools with community organizations, building strong relationships between families and educators, engaging in advocacy around equity issues, and positioning the school as a broker of resources (Gold et al., 2004; Khalifa, 2012; Warren et al., 2009). Señora Marie engaged in similar practices to simultaneously support families and students. For example, she cultivated relationships with the U.S. Consulate and a coalition of churches to bring volunteers to teach and support community projects. These partnerships represented how Señora Marie played the role of a “broker” or “institutional agent” (Small, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2011) by empowering families and students and providing them with a set of networks, information, and supports. She extended her role as a broker by organizing parents who benefited from trainings and other opportunities to be leaders in their community to teach and support parents who were newer to the school.

This study also highlighted numerous ways bridging and bonding social capital can be leveraged by a school leader. Señora Marie never utilized the terms social capital or bonding and bridging, but she recognized actual and potential resources within her community and connected them to a durable network that was utilized by families and students. While many scholars have argued that socioeconomic status is a key predictor of parent engagement and community organizing (Boardman & Robert, 2000), Señora Marie believed her community had the innate capacity and resources to address many of its central challenges. She helped to build bonding social capital by utilizing the school as a community hub and creating opportunities for parents to work and learn together. In her daily work, she created open forums where parents collectively shared concerns, identified new problems, and developed plans. She developed a curriculum that emphasized solidarity, rethinking problematic gender roles, and incorporating restorative justice practices with the intention of eliminating barriers of cooperation and building mutual respect. Volunteering and adult education requirements ensured parents built relationships and recognized the mutual benefits of cooperation. Even though the community was fractured from violence, dealt with bouts of extreme poverty, and had an influx of new families, parents at the school recognized their connectedness.

Señora Marie confronted several challenges in developing bridging social capital given the geographic isolation of the colonia, the lack of businesses and community organizations within its boundaries, and the fear of violence in the colonias that kept many professionals away. Señora Marie also noted how she struggled to be “entrepreneurial” and brag about her school to bring in resources, yet she pushed herself out of her comfort zone. Bridging social capital was evident through strategic partnerships with the U.S. Consulate, USAID, PROFECO, and the coalition of churches providing volunteers. Señora Marie built bridging social capital when she connected the family of a sick child with an American-based program to receive free second opinions. Once again, Señora Marie felt uncertain acting as a resource broker given her lack of experience working with national organizations. Her sentiments captured a sense of “flying the plane while building it” as she sought new avenues to help a family in need. Her ability to step outside of her own comfort zone allowed students and families to access new and important networks. While Señora Marie was successful at building bridging social capital, she continually found that the community context limited her opportunities to bring in more professionals and services to help families and students. This finding reflects the importance of context and the potential challenges even the most motivated school leaders can confront when seeking to provide supports and services to marginalized communities.

Implications

This research has several important implications for school leadership practice. Putnam (2001) believed it is important “to ask how the positive consequences of social capital—mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness—can be maximized” (p. 22). School leaders must ask this question in regards to their leadership and consider how they can create policies, expectations, cultures, and practices that support recognizing and building social capital. This study provided examples of how a school leader crafted school policies and built parent expectations and trusting relationships. As such, school leaders should consider how to work with communities to redevelop their school mission and vision, adopt curricular and pedagogical changes promoting community engagement, identify community organizations as partners, and build relationships between the school and parents. Central to Señora Marie’s practice was reflection. When parents fought over kitchen duties, she recognized her policies failed to promote cooperation. She revised her practices and learned how to increase institutional effectiveness. School leaders should commit to reflecting on their practices, consider what they can learn from failures, and capitalize on untapped assets. Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, school leaders should recognize innate value and resources within parents. Señora Marie gave voice to parents based on a belief that parents had social capital to share. School leaders must recognize and model such beliefs, especially in communities where parents might distrust educators and where other community resources and partners are not available.

This study has important implications for future research. First, additional research is needed to consider how to develop social capital when community-based organizations and other resources are not geographically located within a community. Recent attention to geography of opportunity in the school leadership literature underscores the important role of school leaders in identifying indigenous resources within their communities and building partnerships with communities and families (Green, 2015, 2016). Yet school leadership preparation standards and courses provide limited insight into how school leaders can identify community assets, build trust with marginalized families, create networks of families, and develop parent capacity in support of the school’s mission. Additional research focused on community schools and community-oriented school leadership can provide a more comprehensive set of practices and can also include other leaders, such as teacher, parent, and student leaders. For example, Quezada (2004) identified a rich variety of parent leadership and co-educator roles that bridge the school and community together in support of student learning. Other studies that have focused on community-oriented

schools in marginalized communities have also considered the importance of parent voice in school decisions and the evaluation of school improvement (Chavkin, Gonzalez, & Rader, 2000). In the current study, Mariena was identified by others as an important parent leader with access to networks and information. Future research might simultaneously look at parent and teacher leadership to understand how they complement each other and build different forms of social capital as well as some of the potential challenges that may arise (Warren et al., 2009).

Finally, this research provided a depth of information into one specific case but was limited by its focus on one school in a unique context. Consequently, it is difficult to identify a comprehensive set of community-oriented leadership practices school leaders might draw upon in different and similar contexts. Future research might investigate school leadership in different contexts and how school leaders can use forms of bridging and bonding social capital to support families and students. Finally, future research might include longitudinal studies of community-oriented schools and school leaders. While spending a year in the data collection process provided a rich opportunity to examine daily practices associated with community-oriented school leadership, it is also clear that this work can be a slow process evolving over many years. I studied just one year of this school's ten-year history. Future studies can benefit from longitudinal data to track the impact of community-oriented leadership on student achievement, community well-being, public health, and other relevant indicators over longer time periods.

Endnotes

¹The larger study focused on the history of the school and emphasized the application of social justice leaders.

²Pseudonyms are used for all study participants and the school.

³The term "parent" includes other responsible family members (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, relatives).

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