

Improving the Education of Students Placed at Risk through School-University Partnerships

by Jianping Shen, Xuejin Lu, and Joseph Kretovcics

Introduction

U.S. schools and students, particularly those placed at risk, face many challenges. This article first describes some of the issues that confront schools and students placed at risk. After examining and endorsing school-university partnerships as an effective means of educating at-risk students, we delineate different kinds of school-university partnerships. Finally, we conclude that simultaneous-renewal partnerships hold the best promise of improving school and university education alike.

Issues Facing Students and Schools Placed at Risk

Poverty, low student achievement, and high proportions of minority students are among the characteristics of schools considered “placed at risk.” Orfield et al. (2000) reported that growing numbers of schools, isolated by race and class, face severe educational problems. High minority enrollments, they found, also tend to correlate with poverty, itself a predictor of lower educational achievement and other educational inequalities.

“Students placed at educational risk” commonly refers to those apparently predisposed to struggle in typical school programs (Johnson 1994; Slavin 1989; Henderson-Sparks, Paredes, and Gonzalez 2002). Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990) identified five broad sociocultural factors common to students placed at risk: race and ethnicity, poverty, poorly educated mothers, single-parent families, and limited English proficiency. Leithwood, Fullan, and Watson (2003) concluded that the most important risk factors perceived by teachers are familial: child

abuse, alcoholism, and single or absent parents. School-university partnerships provide the professional community and society at large with an effective means of educating students placed at risk.

School-University Partnership as an Effective Strategy for Working with Students and Schools Placed at Risk

Many scholars cite the effectiveness of school-university partnerships in working with at-risk students and schools (Ascher and Schwartz 1989; Sheridan 2000; Evans et al. 1995; Brown, Johnson, and Grueninger 2002; Henderson-Sparks, Paredes, and Gonzalez 2002; Holmes Group 1995; Adelman and Taylor 1998). At-risk students as well as pre- and in-service teachers can benefit from such partnerships.

Ascher and Schwartz (1989) reported that a primary reason for school-college collaboration is improving the college preparation of students placed at risk. Collaboration can provide curriculum enhancement, remedial programs, counseling, and other supports that promote not just high school completion, but college enrollment and attendance as well. Martin (1998) likewise noted the benefits of early-intervention programs.

School-university partnerships can benefit pre- and in-service teachers alike. Several authors (Holmes Group 1995; Brown, Johnson, and Grueninger 2002; Henderson-Sparks, Paredes, and Gonzalez 2002) have suggested that exposure to culturally diverse or at-risk youth prepares student teachers for the reality of the classroom setting, enhances their employability, and allows them to examine and apply instructional practices. At the same time, student teachers can lend academic support, offer enrichment activities, and provide social support to at-risk students.

Such partnerships can also help practicing teachers. The interaction of school and university cultures promises to enhance teaching professionalism (Sirotnik and Goodlad 1988). Teachers can discover new structures and approaches, both to share and deepen knowledge about teaching and to develop norms in learner-centered practice (Brown, Johnson, and Grueninger 2002; Darling-Hammond 1994; Henderson-Sparks, Paredes, and Gonzalez 2002). Such practices benefit at-risk schools and students in particular (Adelman and Taylor 1998; Holmes Group 1995).

Therefore, school-university partnerships have been at the forefront of educational-renewal strategies. Many reports (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy 1986; Goodlad 1990, 1994; Holmes Group 1986, 1990; Levine 1988; Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources 1989) elaborate on the role of school-university collaboration in educational renewal. The theory and practice of school-university

partnerships have been reported widely in the literature (e.g., Beaumont and Hallmark 1998; Clark 1999a; Darling-Hammond 1994; Goodlad 1994; Sirotnik and Goodlad 1988; Osguthorpe et al. 1995; Patterson, Michelli, and Pacheco 1999; Petrie 1993; Russell and Flynn 1992; Trubowitz and Longo 1997). Many such partnerships have been established across the country. The National Network for Educational Renewal alone numbers partnerships between 34 colleges and universities and 100 school districts, which themselves include some 500 schools.

However, school-university partnerships can be based on several different motivations. We will discuss four theories that describe interorganizational relationships in general and school-university partnerships in particular.

Toward a Theory of Interorganizational Relationship

The Symbolic Theory. Educational reform often has more to do with organizational survival than with reform. In Bolman and Deal's words (1991, 274): "When external constituents question the work of existing practices, organizations promise reform and stage a drama called *Change*." The drama promises largely symbolic reform; real change may be substantial or nonexistent. For example, at the beginning of a successful school-university partnership, comments such as "This is just a façade—a public relations act" or "I don't think it is going to make any difference" are not uncommon (Williams 1988, 140). Patterson, Michelli, and Pacheco (1999) as well as Lieberman (1988) reported similar phenomena.

The Resource-Dependence Theory. When both school and university recognize the potential strength of their interdependence, their partnership can move beyond appearances. The resource-dependence theory assumes that organizations cannot generate sufficient resources or functions to maintain themselves (Aldrich and Pfeffer 1976). Therefore, according to the resource-dependence theory, one motivation for a school-university partnership could be either organization's desire to acquire additional resources. For example, universities might want access to schools to aid in placing their intern candidates (Clark 1999b; Sinclair and Harrison 1988).

The Resource-Exchange Theory. The resource-exchange theory stresses mutual benefits for both organizations rather than organization A's unilateral desire to establish a relationship with organization B. Resource exchange has become one of the most powerful arguments for school-university partnerships. For example, Hathaway (1985, 4) observes:

The university and the school district are each other's own best resources. Between them, school districts and universities

cover virtually the whole range of human learning. That we are interconnected is undeniable. The challenge before us is to realize and build upon the extent, the possibilities, and the necessity of our connection and dependence.

The exchange of resources makes the interorganizational relationship a partnership instead of a sponsorship—a joint venture that meets the needs of both institutions (Borthwick 2001, 27).

The following dialogue involving a professor, a teacher, and a principal illustrates how their perceptions of school-university partnership were motivated by the resource-dependence theory.

Professor: The quality of university learning depends on the preparation of the students who come to us. We can improve what our students learn only as you give them the knowledge base and the skill to handle it.

Teacher: But school learning improves only as teachers and administrators are better prepared to improve it. There are a lot of great methods out there, and we need to learn what they are.

Principal: We need to get effective professional development opportunities in place for our teachers. University scholars are uncovering more information on how the brain works and how people learn.

(Harris and Harris 1995, 130)

The chief difference between resource-dependence theory and resource-exchange theory is whether the process is unilateral or bilateral. Nonetheless, both theories are survival oriented—an orientation that may not necessarily imply an intent to renew and innovate. The theory of simultaneous renewal addresses that omission.

The Theory of Simultaneous Renewal. Goodlad and his colleagues advocate school-university partnerships in educational renewal. In their classic study of schooling, it became increasingly clear that schools and universities must share equally in solving educational problems (Goodlad 1984). According to simultaneous-renewal theory, school-university partnerships seek to enhance renewal in both settings (Goodlad 1986, 1994). As Goodlad argues: “We are not likely to have good schools without a continuing supply of excellent teachers . . . [n]or are we likely to have excellent teachers unless they are immersed in exemplary schools for significant portions of their induction into teaching” (cited in Patterson, Michelli, and Pacheco 1999, 60).

This review reveals that school-university partnerships can be established 1) solely to seek institutional resources; 2) to exchange resources

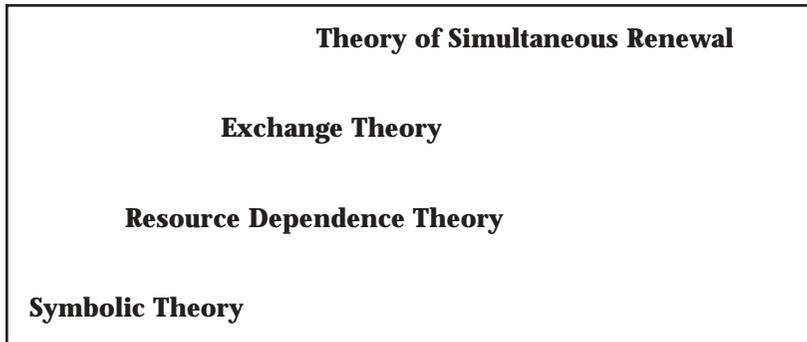
between or among organizations; 3) to provide an infrastructure for bringing about renewal; or 4) to make a symbolic gesture.

The Integration of Interorganizational Theories

The Hierarchy of Interorganizational Relationships

Identifying interorganizational relationships that purely manifest the practices predicted and explained by interorganizational theories is difficult, if not impossible. Nevertheless, interorganizational relationships tend to demonstrate elements of each theory, with one theory predominating.

Figure 1
The Hierarchy of Interorganizational Relationship



The four theories seem to form a hierarchy, as shown in Figure 1. The symbolic theory describes the least-useful form of partnership, while the resource-dependence theory explains an unreciprocated approach by one organization. Going a step further: if both organizations perceive that resources from the other organization are vital for organizational survival and effectiveness, an exchange relationship is likely to evolve—even if the exchange is solely for survival's sake. Finally, at the pinnacle of the hierarchy is simultaneous renewal, which occurs when the partners begin to challenge each other or to take advantage of the exchange relationship to renew and improve themselves.

Collaboration and Tension in School-University Partnerships

It has been widely documented that interorganizational relationships contain both collaboration and tension (Schmidt and Kochan 1977). Analysts generally consider collaboration desirable, but the function of tension has been controversial (Assael 1969; Schmidt and Kochan 1972). In school-university partnerships, the literature tends to empha-

size collaboration (e.g., Clark, Herter, and Moss 1998; Russell and Flynn 1992; Slater 1991; Smith 1992).

The resource-dependence theory implies that motivation to interact is asymmetrical. Organization A is motivated to interact, but organization B is less interested or not interested at all. An interorganizational relationship forms only when the motivated party is powerful enough to force or induce the other to interact. The organizations' asymmetrical motivations and desires make tension natural in this relationship. In this framework, collaboration between the organizations is low.

According to resource-exchange theory, an interorganizational relationship forms when organizations anticipate mutual benefits or gains from the exchange. The theory suggests that collaboration between participants will be high, because the parties want to acquire resources for their survival and effectiveness. Tension will be low, because the interorganizational relationship relies primarily on voluntary exchange.

The simultaneous-renewal theory implies high levels of both collaboration and tension. Although the foundation of interorganizational relationship is collaboration for renewal, renewal is consistently associated with tension (Fullan 1991; Sirotnik 1991), both within and between organizations (Beaumont and Hallmark 1998; Dixon and Ishler 1992; Lieberman 1992; Pasch and Pugach 1990; Sirotnik 1991; Timpane and White 1998; Trubowitz and Longo 1997; Winitzky, Stoddart, and O'Keefe 1992). High levels of collaboration and tension make simultaneous renewal possible (Shen 1994, 1996).

Little interaction takes place in a school-university partnership when collaboration and tension are each low. If both institutions are under attack, they may make a show of reform. As a result, their relationship will lack substance.

The motivations and patterns of interorganizational relationships are summarized in Table 1.

Note that the simultaneous-renewal model, which offers the greatest potential for educational renewal, features high tension accompanied by high collaboration. If confirmed by empirical findings, this model holds great promise for conceptualizing and developing school-university partnerships as well as for examining the characteristics of simultaneous renewal.

Moving toward School-University Partnerships Characterized by Simultaneous Renewal

Recent literature suggests that school-university partnerships employing simultaneous renewal are the most effective model for educational change. For example, Sheridan (2000) reported that in a collaborative model, the shared goals for assisting students placed at risk not

Table 1
Collaboration and Tension in Different
School-University Partnerships

		TENSION	
		High	Low
COLLABORATION	High	Simultaneous renewal theory	Exchange theory
	Low	Resource dependence theory	Symbolic theory

only helped the students to graduate but also helped high school and preservice teachers alike to meet the needs of all students. Brown, Johnson, and Grueninger (2002) as well as Henderson-Sparks, Paredes, and Gonzalez (2002) formed similar conclusions.

In this paper, we have discussed several issues involved in educating at-risk students and particularly emphasized school-university partnerships as a strategy for educational change. We propose that educators move beyond the symbolic theory, the theory of resource dependence, or the theory of resource exchange and embrace school-university partnerships characterized by the theory of simultaneous renewal. Through school-university partnerships that contain high levels of both collaboration and tension, schools and universities can challenge and cooperate with each other to make both institutions better.

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