

The Bridge is Built: The Role of Local Teachers in an Urban Elementary School

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Abstract

This article documents the contribution of local elementary teachers and examines the teachers' role as a conduit between an urban school and its community. Based on participant observation and interviews with local teachers and parents, the research considers the teachers' bridging position as professional practitioners and community constituents and highlights the way their unique location manifests itself in the school and surrounding neighborhood. By looking at the teachers' work through the theoretical lens of social capital, the author makes the case that local practitioners are an essential resource in the effort to build effective collaborations between schools and the neighborhoods they serve.

Key Words: school-community relations, local teachers, community teaching, social capital, parental engagement, community development, low-income schools, outreach, families, family involvement, parents, urban elementary school, educators, roles

Introduction

Almost every morning of the academic year, Ms. Goodman, a middle-aged African American woman, sits inside the main door of an elementary school located in a low-income urban neighborhood. After the bell rings to signal the start of the day, she fulfills her role by spending half an hour taking down the

names of the children who arrive late. The school has over 1,000 children, and depending on the time of year and the weather conditions, “Ms. G” may document over 50 students. As children shuffle through the door, she greets them and briefly speaks to each one before they head to their classrooms. Sometimes her words are soothing, such as “Don’t worry, honey, you’re late, calm down, it’s going to be okay.” Other times she is more demanding: “This is your second lateness this week. Did you tell your mother I said you can’t keep being late?” After witnessing Ms. G in action over a period of weeks, I come to an important realization – no matter *which* children are late she recognizes almost every one and calls them by name. When I ask her about this, she shrugs it off: “But, I know almost every child in this school.”

Ms. Goodman and her morning ritual represent what I understand to be a fundamental resource in reforming urban schools – that is, a localized knowledge of students and families and a network of relationships with community constituents. As a paraprofessional who lives in the vicinity of the school, Ms. Goodman embodies the kind of commitment to and a particularized understanding of the local context that fosters trust and mutual accountability – critical factors in transforming the dynamic between schools and their communities.

In recent years, an increasing number of urban educators are calling for a community-oriented approach to school reform (Anyon, 2005; Oakes & Rogers, 2007; Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001; Warren, 2005). These calls are in response to the lack of cohesion and collaboration that traditionally exists between schools and low-income urban neighborhoods (Cahill, 1996; Giles, 1998; Reed, 2004). The premise of those who support community oriented approaches is that urban schools cannot function in isolation from the neighborhoods they serve; effective schooling must be woven into the social, economic, cultural, and spiritual fabric of the community.

What is striking about these discussions is that they rarely account for an existing connection between urban schools and their communities, namely, the practitioners with residential histories in the school’s neighborhood. Most low-income urban schools have a small cohort of teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff which live nearby or, if they no longer live in the community, were raised there and maintain contact with friends, former neighbors, and relatives in the area. By being an integral part of the school’s social and cultural context, these practitioners have a unique understanding of the school’s relationship to the neighborhood. As professional practitioners they are knowledgeable of the school’s routines, culture, and institutional functioning, and as constituents of the community they understand the difficulties that students, parents, and other local residents face in brokering meaningful engagement with the school. Many are parents themselves and understand first-hand the challenge of raising

children in the neighborhood. They usually share common racial, ethnic, and cultural identities with many of the children and families; their location and participation in the community give them a shared local identity as well. While educators, school administrators, and educational policymakers ponder the obstacles to building healthy, energized collaborations between urban schools and low-income communities, local practitioners are already making the kinds of daily connections to children and families that are the foundation on which school-community partnerships can be constructed.

My research over the past five years indicates that the contribution of local teachers is an important, often unacknowledged, and generally underdeveloped human resource in low-income urban contexts. In what follows, I argue that the position of local teachers in the community – their network of relationships and their particularized knowledge of the school’s social and cultural context – serve as a vital link between school and neighborhood. I conclude the article by suggesting ways that school administrators and practitioners might invest in the resource provided by local teachers with a view toward expanding the school’s connections to its community.

Background

My interest in local teachers emerged over the past decade, a period when I worked for six years in adult education before taking my current position as a teacher educator at a public university. The public schools where I currently place my student teachers are in the same neighborhood where, prior to joining the college faculty, I worked on community development and adult education projects. Those projects brought me into the neighborhood on a daily basis, introduced me to community stakeholders, blessed me with some important relationships, and offered me some insight into the estrangement that many low-income families experience with their local public schools. It was also an important time for me personally and professionally. Working five days a week as a middle-class White man among low-income and working-class women and men of color deeply altered the way I began to see my social, cultural, and political position in relation to urban communities.

From the beginning of this investigation, my interest has been to understand the contribution of local teachers in low-income urban schools¹. When I entered the public schools in the community where this research was conducted, I observed schools through the lens of my prior experiences as an adult educator in the community but outside the purview of public schooling. Having come to understand the gap between school and neighborhood from the community’s vantage point, my entrance into the schools raised questions for

me about the role being played by the teachers who function in the dual role of community constituent and professional practitioner. How does being a local teacher influence a teacher's practice, particularly a teacher's engagement with students and families? What particular insights and knowledge do local teachers bring to their practice that might contribute to their ability to work more effectively with students than their non-local counterparts? How do local teachers negotiate the hostility that often characterizes the relationship between schools and low-income communities?

Theoretical Framework

My discussion of local teachers in urban schools is framed by the concept of social capital. I find social capital to be a helpful tool in describing and analyzing the contribution of local teachers in low-income urban schools because the teachers' network of relationships with local parents, local residents, and community stakeholders is a foundational resource on which schools can build a partnership with the community. Social capital is "fundamentally about relationships" (Warren, 2005, p.137), and in this article the teachers' network of relationships is understood to be one of the primary assets they bring to their practice. In this study, I am defining social capital as "the material and immaterial resources that individuals and families are able to access through their social ties" (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003, p. 323.) By locating my research in the realm of social capital, I argue that the local teachers' network of relationships is a valuable commodity, one that urban schools can invest in as they bridge the gap that has historically separated schools from the low-income neighborhoods they serve. I am also proposing that the ethnic identities, cultural background, and life experiences of local teachers equip them to establish ties with parents and other local residents, thus strengthening the school's ties to the community. Ultimately, this research points to the need for urban schools to invest in the social capital of local teachers, to create policies and practices that draw on the resources of local teachers, and to develop initiatives that recruit and prepare more local teachers for urban schools.

Methodology

This research is based on interviews with eleven local teachers, surveys with thirteen parents, interviews with five parents, and participant observations in one elementary school over a three-year period. The eleven local teachers, all women, practice in the same school and live (or have lived) in their school's

neighborhood for extended periods of time; ten of them resided in the community for more than a decade. Five of the local teachers were raised in the neighborhood. Six of the teachers are current neighborhood residents and, even though the other five now live outside the school's immediate vicinity, they maintain a regular presence in the area through their ties to friends and family. The teachers for the research were selected on the basis of their residential history in the community.

The thirteen parents who participated in the research are local residents whose children are enrolled in the school. The extent of the parents' involvement in school activities varies considerably: five of the parents are active participants in the parent-teacher association and volunteer regularly as classroom aides. The remainder occasionally attends parent-teacher conferences but limit their school involvement because of their commitments to jobs or continuing education. The parents whom I engaged in this research were invited to complete a survey at the conclusion of an open forum I conducted for parents at the school. From the pool of parents who completed the survey I was able to identify, with the assistance of the school's parent coordinator, five parents who were willing to be interviewed. The experience of local teachers is the focal point of the research; I drew on the voices of parents to substantiate and clarify the data gathered from the teachers.

The research was collected in a low-income urban elementary school of 1,100 students. The neighborhood under consideration is a twelve block square within about one-half mile of the school. It is situated in a low-income section of one of the nation's largest metropolitan areas. The area was red-lined by bankers and real estate agents in the 1960's and 1970's, a period in which hundreds of buildings were vacated or burned, the social fabric of the neighborhood unraveled, and incidents of violent crime increased markedly. The community is currently experiencing an economic upturn, although the per capita income remains 50% below the national average. The area continues to be highlighted in the media as the location of violent crime and is often described by other city residents as a "no-go" area. Approximately half the residents in the neighborhood identify themselves as Black, the majority being African American, some with family ties to the Caribbean. About 40% of the neighborhood is Latino, mostly Puerto Rican and Dominican. A smaller but growing segment of the local population are recent immigrants from Bangladesh. The teachers and parents who participated in this research reflect the ethnic diversity of the community.

Findings

Teachers in the Community

Local teachers have a different relationship to the community than the other educators in the school where they practice because of their residential history in the neighborhood. Their ties to the community give them a particularized knowledge of the school's social and cultural context. Local teachers know parents, residents, shopkeepers, day care providers, after-school staff, and are acquainted with local institutions, for example, churches, mosques, health care facilities, social service groups, not-for-profit organizations, shopping areas, and so forth. They have an established network of friends and family members and, in many cases, are involved in civic and religious institutions.

By circulating in the area near the school, local teachers encounter students and their families on the street, at the supermarket, public library, or corner bodega. All of the teachers in this study report interactions with children and families outside of the school. The extent of these encounters appears to vary, depending on the teachers' lifestyle, for example, whether they walk or drive; their participation in social, cultural, or religious activities; and their openness to making themselves available beyond the regular school day. Several of the teachers seem energized by seeing students and families outside of their regular working hours. One teacher describes it this way: "When I go to the supermarket, I see children from the school, or when I just go outside for a walk. The other day I went shopping and I decided to count. I saw eight students within an hour!" Another teacher says, "When I sit outside in the summer, the children ride their bikes by to wave at me and shout hello. They love stopping and talking to my daughter; it's like they want to know what their teacher's family is like."

A striking element of the teachers' presence in the community is the manner in which they function in their professional role outside of the school day. For example, several of the teachers make home visits. One teacher tutors students in her home. In some cases, teachers stop by a child's home when a child has been excessively absent and phone communication has not been effective. One teacher reports, "I call by my students' houses on the way to or from work. Sometimes a student would be truant or habitually late or absent. I call by their house to check on them." On other occasions the teacher visits a child to assist with an aspect of the child's academic work. One teacher describes the situation like this:

Let's say the child was having trouble in the classroom. I would go to their home and try to give them a little extra help. I'd speak to their

mom and say that so-and-so was having a little trouble with math today, is there a time I can come by and work with him because I'm afraid he's falling behind?

Although the data do not suggest that all local teachers make home visits or that visits occur on a regular basis, the ones that are made suggest an important connection between teachers and the lives of their students beyond the walls of the school. While this research cannot verify that local teachers make home visits more than the other practitioners in the school, my preliminary investigation indicates that home visits by non-local teachers are quite rare, if they occur at all.

Several of the local teachers interviewed report attending significant events in the lives of their students. A fifth grade teacher indicates that she makes an effort to be at students' sports events, dance recitals, and special religious activities. Another teacher reports her attendance at a cookout to celebrate an important occasion for the family of one of her students. Other teachers speak of their awareness of important events in students' lives because of their ongoing communication with neighborhood residents; they regularly acknowledge these occasions in their classrooms. The teachers' proximity to students and their families allows for a kind of local knowledge that is attained by living in the vicinity.

Parents' Perspectives of Local Teachers

It comes as no surprise that the teachers' presence in the daily life of the neighborhood receives special notice by children and parents. One mother reports her children's excitement at spotting one of the local teachers while the family is out and about in the neighborhood:

Sometimes when my sons and I are out shopping we see one of the teachers. We've seen them at the library once and at the grocery store. My kids always notice them before I do. My oldest son, he gets all excited, "There go a teacher, Mommy." Then, my littlest one gets all jealous because he don't be knowin' the teachers that well.

It's difficult to fully measure what it means to children and their families to see their teachers in the neighborhood; my experience as a community educator suggests that the significance of these encounters should not be underestimated. Children in low-income urban neighborhoods receive regular messages via the media, the streets, and even from some of their more unenlightened teachers, that the place they call home is substandard. In such a climate, the sighting of a school teacher elevates both the status of community and the school. Children see educational attainment as a possibility because someone

from their own world has “made it.” As one of the local teachers in this study said, “The kids know that I live around here. They know I grew up with some of their mothers. I say to them, ‘If I can make it, if I can graduate from college, then you can too.’”

Unlike parents in middle- and upper-income neighborhoods, low-income parents have few, if any, professional educators in their social and familial network. One reason many urban parents have difficulty connecting to their child’s teacher may be because they lack the cultural capital that comes from social interactions with professional educators in other settings. Less than a third of low-income urban parents know a teacher in a context outside of a school (Horvat et al., 2003). With this in view, the possibility afforded by local teachers’ presence in the community, the chance for them to interact with students and families in their daily lives, becomes all the more important.

Local teachers are aware that their presence in the community is significant in the eyes of community residents. The most common word used to describe their credibility in the neighborhood is “respect.” Respect from the children stems from the fact that children view local teachers as a part of their lives outside of the school building. One local teacher describes it like this, “Because they know I’m in the neighborhood, I get the sense that they’re saying, ‘I’m gonna respect her because she’s one of us.’” Another teacher said, “When I meet children and their parents at the laundry or supermarket, they give me tremendous respect. It’s like I have some sort of prestige or something. I’m always recognized for being a teacher.”

The local teachers’ credibility with parents and other residents comes from their status as professionals and the fact that the teachers stayed in the neighborhood when their level of income could have taken them elsewhere. This idea is articulated by the Puerto Rican teacher when she says:

The fact that I’m a Hispanic teacher, I live in the community, I work in the community, puts me in a different place with parents. They see me as a professional and someone who made something of herself and that I’ve chosen to give back to my community. As one parent told me, “You haven’t abandoned your people.”

This reference to abandonment speaks volumes to the perspective of many inner city residents, particularly parents who are struggling, often against the odds, to raise their families in trying economic and social conditions. Walking the streets or entering some of the homes in the community, it is easy to see the evidence for the community’s sense of being abandoned – streets with potholes the size of cars, buildings in decay, unkempt vacant lots. Given this reality, parents are aware and appreciative of the presence of local teachers, since they know the teachers are choosing to stay connected to the area.

Local Teachers in Context

By contrast, community constituents are also conscious of the practitioners who reside outside the neighborhood and commute to the school. While the presence of local teachers is acknowledged and affirmed by the community, many of the “commuter teachers” in my research are noted for their lack of presence in the neighborhood. When the topic of teachers’ absence is mentioned with neighborhood residents, it is often accompanied with tones of anger and frustration. This emotional reaction stems from a complex array of factors, including the fact that low-income urbanites, almost all people of color, are tired of racially based stereotyping of their neighborhoods by some of the non-local teachers, most of whom are White and living in more affluent neighborhoods. Low-income residents are quick to differentiate between the practitioners they perceive as having solidarity with them and those that disregard them and the challenges they face in raising a family in a low-income context. In the minds of local residents, being physically present in the community is a fundamental indicator of whether someone from outside the community is “with us” or not. With this in view, local teachers and parents are also quick to identify the fact that significant numbers of teachers avoid being present in the neighborhood. One parent refers to the commuter teachers in this way:

Some of the teachers don’t know anything about our neighborhood. They are working in the neighborhood forever, but they don’t even know the streets. You say, “That child lives on so and so street,” and they don’t even know what you’re talking about. A teacher who knows the places around the school can walk down the street to talk to the parents to see why a child is always absent. A lot of teachers don’t do that because they’re scared of the neighborhood. I say, “If you’re too scared of the neighborhood, you don’t need to be working in the neighborhood.”

From a local resident’s vantage point, commuter teachers demonstrate their disdain for the area around the school by not maintaining a presence there, even though the reasons for this absence may be fear and anxiety for their own personal safety. The perception that many of the school’s teachers are not on the side of the local residents is a fundamental contributor to the gap between school and community. The fact that local teachers are a daily presence in a neighborhood, a place where so many of the school’s teachers choose not to go, creates a dichotomy in the minds of parents and local residents. There is a strong dichotomy of “us” versus “them” exhibited in my data set.

Importantly, the research suggests that, in addition to the local teachers, several other teachers in the school, including commuter teachers, are identified by community constituents as standing in solidarity with them and their

children. Although the parents I interviewed regarded only a small number of non-local teachers in this way, I intend to pursue the practices of these teachers in future research.

Community residents attribute the suburban teachers' lack of presence in the neighborhood as an instance of racial and class discrimination. From the vantage point of local teachers and parents, one of the main reasons that many White teachers and administrators drive in and out of the neighborhood and generally avoid the community is because the neighborhood demographic is primarily low-income people of color. One local Caribbean American teacher describes the behavior of some of her White colleagues like this:

They bring their lunch; they stay in the school until the end of the day, then they jump in their car and go home. That is what they do. You will never see them strolling up and down the street. When they're in the teachers' lounge, they are always making comparisons, comparing children in their community with our children. It's very, very piercing. They don't care about the social issues involved. They are not committed to this school or this neighborhood. The children can feel it. It's really a racial issue. But none of us are fooled – people in the community talk about these teachers and their White ideals; they know these teachers don't really care about the kids. People in the community see right through it, people see that they are here to promote their own careers on the backs of Black children.

The statements of this local teacher are a stark depiction of a polarization between White suburban teachers and low-income communities of color, an idea that is noted elsewhere (Lareau, 1991; Winters, 1993). This teacher's sentiments speak to the deep-seated animosity that permeates relationships between the community and many of the educators who are teaching the community's children. It is impossible to fully understand the important position of local teachers in the school without understanding the prevailing sense of estrangement in low-income communities of color, particularly the way parents and local residents experience alienation from many of the practitioners teaching the community's children.

The problematic relationship between low-income communities and public schools is well documented in the literature (Cahill, 1996; Giles, 1998; Good et al., 1997; Lawson, 2003; Reed, 2004; Warren, 2005) and can be explained by a complex array of causal factors including institutional racism, class discrimination, and cultural hegemony (Anyon, 1995; Lareau, 2003; Winters, 1993). The position that local teachers play in bridging this divide occurs in the context of an institutional culture that often insulates the school from its surrounding neighborhood, a culture which suggests that what goes on outside of

the school is generally “bad” and counterproductive to the “good” taking place inside the school. As Hyland and Meacham note, many practitioners in urban schools “view the families and home communities of their students as primary obstacles to their students’ success and therefore maintain a striking social distance from families and community members” (2004, p. 116). This is in direct contrast to the research which indicates that almost all parents, regardless of ethnicity or economic status, want their children to succeed in school and are willing to make changes to help them do well (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). It is against this backdrop, the alienation of parents by many practitioners, that the significance of local teachers is fully appreciated, the community’s bond with local teachers makes sense, and the role of local teacher as a bridge from community to school becomes visible.

Local Teachers as a Bridge for School and Community

Having considered the local teachers’ position in the neighborhood, the social network they have there, and the community’s disposition toward many non-local teachers, I turn my attention to the ways in which local teachers provide community residents with a connection to the school that they would not otherwise have. How does the presence of local teachers inside the school provide parents and other residents with a way to traverse the divisions between school and community? More specifically, how does a local teacher’s dual role as community member and professional practitioner create a conduit for communication and advocacy on behalf of local children?

Local teachers enter classrooms with a network of local relationships, cultural knowledge of students and families, and a contextualized understanding of the neighborhood and what it means to live there. This includes knowledge of the challenges associated with life in the area surrounding the school. In addition to this community knowledge, local teachers are professional practitioners and, as such, have knowledge of the school’s culture and how to negotiate the school’s policies and procedures. They also hold professional and collegial ties to the faculty and administrators in the school. Because they are members of two constituencies, the community and the school, local teachers have insight into the challenges parents face when they need to access the school as an institution, and they have the social capital to refer parents to various resources in the school.

In my research, I note numerous instances of local teachers drawing on their particularized knowledge to understand and advocate for students and families. Given the teachers’ knowledge of and appreciation for the community and the alienation historically felt by that community, it is not surprising to find that parents ask these teachers for assistance. A common situation occurs when

parents need information relevant to their child and they are either intimidated by the culture of the school or unsure how to negotiate the school system's bureaucracy. Local teachers are familiar with the parents' sense of intimidation; one teacher describes it like this:

Parents are fearful of coming into the school. Many of them have no formal education. They are afraid that words will be spoken that they don't understand and they'll look bad in front of the teachers and principals and their own children. They're afraid their lack of education will show.

Significantly, this local teacher is aware not only of the parents' anxiety, but also that lack of education is a key contributor to the parents' fear. It has previously been established that differences in educational attainment between teachers and low-income parents are a major factor in the lack of parental engagement in urban schools (Reed, 2004). In this research, the local teachers' awareness of the role of educational differences appears to be a major reason for the local teachers' successful engagement of parents.

In addition to differences in educational attainment, the local teachers in my research cite language barriers as an obstacle which keeps parents away from the school. One local teacher says it this way:

A lot of parents are reluctant to come into the school, especially immigrant parents who are not proficient in English. They tend to be hesitant. But, when they find out where I live, that I live nearby, they seem to become more confident, as if they're saying to themselves, "I know this teacher, I've seen her around, and I can go to her to get help if I have to."

In addition to this local teacher's ability to identify language issues, what I find particularly striking here is the teacher's awareness that her presence as a local resident in the neighborhood offers parents a welcoming, safe contact in the school. This connection between teacher and parents occurs despite the fact that the local teacher is an English speaker and has her own limitations in communicating with the parents. In this case, it appears that the ties they share as community residents helps to mediate their language differences.

Other local teachers report similar examples of community constituents approaching them for assistance. One local practitioner received a call from a parent seeking advice prior to her son's suspension hearing. The teacher had never met the parent before but someone in the neighborhood suggested the parent call the teacher because "she'll know what to do." Another local teacher cites examples of parents coming to her when they needed government entitlement documents from the school's office. The local teacher describes the situation like this:

A lot of parents have so much on them, just working and trying to survive. Some parents don't even have a job. They are on public assistance and they have to march into the principal's office to get a letter to prove their child's in school. It's embarrassing. Sometimes they come to me and ask if I can take care of this for them.

In this instance, the parents are drawing on the cultural capital of this local teacher, and the teacher works with the parents to circumvent the school's protocol. The teacher's desire to help the parents save face is a reflection of the local teacher's particularized knowledge of what it means to be a low-income parent of color in a school culture that is predominantly White, educated, and middle class. It is also a testimony to the teacher's commitment to her people, people from her community, in opposition to the dominant culture of the school.

Teachers as Advocates for Community Access to Schools

Local teachers are often called upon to negotiate the tension between their dual role as professional practitioners and community constituents. In my research, an issue that illustrates this negotiation most clearly is the local teachers' response to the school's policies on parental presence in the classroom. As with all schools in the city's system, parents have limited access to the school building, and they are rarely permitted to enter into their child's classroom. In spite of these requirements and the security considerations they imply, local teachers believe that the school's posture on the accessibility of parents to the school building sends an important signal that parents are not welcome. Parents have no access to the classrooms during the course of the regular school day and are only free to enter into the classrooms during the four open houses held each year. One of the community teachers in this study reported being "called on the carpet" by the principal for letting parents come into her classroom. The teacher reported feeling caught in a bind between the parents, some of whom she has known all of her life, and the school's administration, which reprimanded her for allowing parents into the classroom.

This desire to allow parents greater presence in the school was verbalized by several of the teachers in the study and described by one teacher as follows:

I'd love it if the parents could walk their child to the door of my room, give their kids that extra kiss and say "have a nice day." I think it would make a world of difference. Then the parents would feel invited into the school. They should be able to come into their child's class, not just on open house night or for parent-teacher conferences, but every day. I would like them to come in and watch; maybe they can see something that I'm doing and they can implement it with their child at home.

This welcoming attitude toward parents in classrooms stands in stark contrast to the school's policy which seems to maintain barriers between the school and the surrounding neighborhood and to keep parents at a distance, on the outside of the daily functioning of the school.

The local teachers' solidarity with the community is also evidenced in the loyalty they express to their students and families. The community teachers' sense of ownership for the children of the neighborhood contributes to the parents and local residents looking to these teachers' as allies in the school. Eight of the eleven teachers interviewed used familial language to describe their students, referring to them as "my children" and identifying themselves as a second mother. This self-identification by practitioners as second mother is consistent with the literature on urban teachers of color (Cooper, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2001). As one local teacher says,

I don't see my students any different than my own children. I always believe that I am going to treat my students the way I would want another teacher to treat mine...so I don't see them any differently. In fact, the children in my classroom sometimes say, "Mrs. M doesn't have two children. She has thirty-two children."

Conclusion

Although local teachers are a significant resource in urban schools and play a significant role in bridging the gap between schools and communities, their potential is usually unrecognized by school administrators or other practitioners. In fact, the access they provide to parents and the importance of their position in the neighborhood is often minimized by the school's culture. On a daily basis, these teachers make the kinds of connections to parents and local constituents that could become a platform for meaningful school-community collaboration. Local teachers have a particularized knowledge of the school's social and cultural context, knowledge that could be drawn on to establish more effective educational practices with students and families. However, the depth and breadth of their contribution is often impeded by the prevailing ideology of most urban schools, an unspoken set of principles that pathologize low-income communities of color.

The potential of local teachers is largely undermined by the prevailing culture of urban schools, a culture that characterizes the community as deficient, needy, and hopeless, and positions the school as a sanctuary of goodness, a safe haven where students come to free themselves from the negativity of their neighborhood. In such a context, the professional contribution of local teachers may be affirmed, but the community connections, cultural knowledge,

social ties, and historical understanding of the students and families which make these teachers so effective are barely utilized. Over half of the teachers in this study are lead teachers and are selected to mentor newer faculty and to provide professional development training. Although valued as professionals, the teachers' role as liaison to the community is rarely, if ever, acknowledged or affirmed. Due to the climate of the school, the teachers tend to keep the community aspects of their identity and practice on the down-low; they engage parents and other residents in quiet, unassuming ways, below the radar screen of the principal or their suburban-dwelling counterparts.

This lack of acknowledgement of local teachers is problematic because their dual role often calls them to additional service; their workload is usually greater than their non-local counterparts because, in addition to their regular duties, they are called upon to assist students and families because of their community connections. Because of their knowledge of the neighborhood and their history of relationships with students and families, they also tend to identify with those they serve, to be invested in the successes and failures of students, and closely involved with the problems of families. At times the responsibilities of their dual role can be overwhelming, as one local teacher put it, "Sometimes parents come to me; they ask me to handle something for them. Or they want to tell me about their problems. They open up to me like you wouldn't believe. At the end of the day, I find it can all get to be too much."

In seeking to address the gap between low-income communities and urban schools, educators, administrators, and policymakers can begin by identifying and celebrating the contribution of local practitioners and by implementing strategies that support their work. Educators, especially school leaders, can provide spaces for local teachers to give voice to their knowledge and understanding of the community and offer their perspectives on the way the school engages the neighborhood. My experience is that school context has so suppressed the unique position of local teachers that the teachers themselves need to initially engage in a dialogue with each other, a dialogue that allows them to validate and articulate the resources they bring to their practice. Once the local teachers are more fully conscious of their role as bridges between school and community, they are in a stronger position to share their community knowledge within the school and, as a result, to be more fully acknowledged by the school as a whole.

In the past 20 years or so, sociologists and urban planners have come to approach distressed neighborhoods with asset-based planning (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Similarly, those committed to contradicting the detachment of public schools from their communities can celebrate the contribution of local teachers and invest in the social capital they bring to schools. Rather than

buying into the deficit thinking that characterizes the gap as too wide to cross, the contribution of local practitioners can be identified as an existing bridge leading to the creation of stronger, healthier school-community relationships.

Endnotes

¹This work is significantly influenced by Peter Murrell's description of community teachers and his articulation of the process that leads community teachers to engage in "accomplished practice" (Murrell, 2001). In this paper, I focus on elementary practitioners who have residential histories in their school's surrounding neighborhood. In most cases, the teachers under consideration here fit Murrell's definition of a community teacher. I am using the descriptor *local teacher* to emphasize the teachers' position between school and community rather than the teachers' level of accomplishment as a classroom practitioner.

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