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Cynthia E. Hazel^a & Wendy B. Allen^a

^a University of Denver, Denver, CO, USA

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Creating inclusive communities through pedagogy at three elementary schools

Cynthia E. Hazel* and Wendy B. Allen

University of Denver, Denver, CO, USA

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This qualitative study investigated how pedagogy-driven schools create inclusive communities. From the analysis of open-ended interviews with members of 3 pedagogically driven public elementary schools (Core Knowledge, Experiential, and Montessori) in the United States of America, 3 themes emerged: (1) *community and culture*, (2) *structure*, and (3) *responsibility and expectations*. The emphasis on community building and conscious attention to culture was universal: Members wanted to be at that school, there was a strong belief in the pedagogy, and all school community members were clear that their most important outcome was student success. Each school had 3 essential building blocks in their pedagogy: academic education, affective education, and individualization of instruction. Each school expected adults and students to set and achieve high behavior and learning targets. Recommendations for applying these findings by practitioners and researchers are provided.

Keywords: choice schools; inclusive school communities; pedagogy; qualitative research; school reform

Introduction

It has been established that schools where all members feel a part of the community have better student outcomes (Goldring & Cravens, 2008). Historically, certain groups of students have been less included in the school community, and have had less academic success and persistence in schools. This is a great social inequity. Creating a school climate where all children are included, provided meaningful instruction, and engaged is the goal of almost all administrators. But, the process of creating an inclusive school community is often elusive. Development of an inclusive school community requires shared, ongoing commitment to the process of equitable education and development of a positive school climate (Sautner, 2008). By sharing the results of the current study, we hope to offer an additional lens for educators to use as they reflect on their practices, specifically how pedagogy may influence inclusivity. This paper reviews the research on the nexus of school climate and pedagogy, presents qualitative data that we collected from three pedagogically driven public elementary schools in the United States of America (US), and makes recommendations for future study and practice.

*Corresponding author. Email: chazel@du.edu

Inclusive school communities*Contributions from school climate and culture literature*

A large amount of literature over the last several decades has espoused the importance of school climate and culture, and the impact it has on student achievement, learning, and social development (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). However, when taken as a whole, the available literature lacks conceptual clarity; for one thing, school climate is often confounded with school culture (Van Houtte, 2005). In an attempt to clarify, Schoen and Teddlie (2008) proposed a model of school culture incorporating all of the literature to date from both the school climate and culture perspectives. The integrated model of school culture identifies four dimensions: (1) faculty orientation, (2) organizational structure, (3) quality of the learning environment, and (4) student-centered focus. Underlying the four dimensions are three constructs: (1) cultural artifacts, (2) espoused beliefs, and (3) basic assumptions. An alternative framework (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006) lists specific supports and structural factors crucial for school improvement. Similar to Schoen and Teddlie's integrated school culture model, student-centered learning climate and professional capacity are identified as core organizational elements. In 2007, the National School Climate Council (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2010) elegantly offered five main factors of school climate: (1) safety, (2) relationships, (3) learning, (4) teaching, and (5) environment. There are many other models and definitions proposed in the literature, but the examples provided highlight the promising conceptual models now emerging for inclusive education based upon both the school climate and school culture research traditions.

Inclusive school communities through pedagogy

Accompanying these lines of research are calls for educators to seriously reflect on current educational practices and policies, as achieving significant outcomes for children across the globe will require adults to become accountable and responsive to the needs of diverse learners (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). The above climate and culture models allude to learning and teaching practices. At the core of our educational practices is a term that is not often explicitly addressed by researchers: pedagogy. Having a common pedagogy among a community of educators is rare, but could serve as a powerful tool for implementing the factors needed for a positive school climate. The educational leadership theorist Margaret J. Wheatley (2007) hints at this phenomenon by stating,

The startling conclusion is that most school systems aren't systems. They are only boundary lines drawn by somebody, somewhere. They are not systems because they do not arise from a core of shared beliefs about the purpose of public education. (p. 103)

Pedagogy and pedagogically driven schools*Pedagogy defined*

The work of Paulo Freire will be utilized as a foundation for defining the concept of pedagogy. Although Freire (1970/2000) does not offer a definition for pedagogy, he

purports that educators can either promote liberation or perpetuate oppression through their pedagogy. Pedagogies that promote recognition of social inequities and action toward social change have been termed critical pedagogies. Much of the work in critical pedagogy is discipline specific and documents classroom ecologies designed to promote critical analysis and action. In a definition of critical literacy, Lalik and Oliver (2007) outlined three tenets: (1) all literacy is a form of political practice; (2) to develop critical literacy, one must consider equity and social justice; and (3) critical literacy is designed to result in personal and societal transformation.

The National Research Council's Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy (2001) defined pedagogy as comprised of 3 parts: (1) the content of what is being taught, (2) the methods of how it is being taught, and (3) the cognitive socialization or affective characteristics and skills that children are learning along the way. This definition of pedagogy can extend beyond the early childhood years and indicates that all teachers and school communities ascribe to a particular pedagogy, whether they can articulate that pedagogy or not. For this paper, we have defined pedagogy as comprised of three parts: (1) the curriculum, (2) the methods of instruction, and (3) the values regarding who and what are important that are explicitly or implicitly conveyed through the first two parts.

Pedagogically driven schools

In the US, one response to dissatisfaction with neighborhood public schools has been the establishment of public schools dedicated to articulated pedagogical models. The primary example in the US of this trend is Comprehensive School Reform: whole school transformations of pedagogical practices and school operations with the goal of increasing student achievement (Aladjem et al., 2006). Charter schools and option schools are two common terms in the US for public school alternatives to neighborhood schools. In the United Kingdom (UK), terms for publically funded alternative schooling options include specialist schools, free schools, or trust schools. To differentiate from public schools attended due to proximity, we have used the term "choice schools." Because the qualities of choice schools vary greatly, it is difficult to generalize about their prevalence (Schneider & Tice, 2008) or impacts (Berends, Watral, Teasley, & Nicotera, 2008). In 2007–2008 in the US, there were over 14,000 choice public schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Although this number sounds large, probably less than 5% of US students attended a choice school. In the UK, there were 24 free schools in 2011 and 8 more projected to open in 2012 (Department for Education, 2011). The greatest educational impacts of choice schools may be in the lessons they can provide to neighborhood public schools.

Our study

Our epistemology is based in critical and social justice theories. The study was designed to be grounded in the stories of the participants. Charmaz explained that grounded theory methods "consist of simultaneous data collection and analysis, with each informing and focusing the other throughout the research process" (2005, p. 506). Therefore, the study evolved as our analysis of the initial data guided

subsequent data collection, and analysis of that data guided the next collection, etcetera. Further, applying grounded theory to the advancement of social justice requires “attentiveness to ideas and actions concerning fairness, equity, equality, democratic process, status, hierarchy, and individual and collective rights and obligations” (Charmaz, 2005, p. 510). Our social justice agenda is to promote school environments that maximize the capacity of all students in leading fulfilled lives that contribute to the wellbeing of their communities.

We initially designed this study to investigate how three pedagogy-driven elementary schools created safety in their communities. However, during the data collection the participants stated that safety was not an issue due to the strong, inclusive communities at their schools. Therefore, we revised our research question: How do three pedagogically driven elementary schools create inclusive communities? To answer the question, we conducted open-ended interviews with members of three pedagogically driven elementary schools: Core Knowledge, Experiential, and Montessori. We selected schools with these pedagogies as they have clearly defined curricula, are distinct one from the other, and show evidence of academic effectiveness with elementary age children (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003). Although the schools espoused specific pedagogical models, the intent was to study the value of an explicit pedagogy, not the value of the pedagogies that the schools utilized. We focused the study on the fourth grade level (typical student age of 8–10 years old). Previous research has identified third or fourth grade as the level at which school attitudes become evident in students (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Hurley, 2000).

Method

This study was approved by the University of Denver’s institutional review board, the district’s external research review board, and the participating schools’ principals.

Data collection

This was a qualitative collective case study (Creswell, 2007), as our intent was to utilize multiple case studies to illustrate a single issue (how pedagogy can affect school community). Each of the three cases was bounded by being a choice school in one district.

Context

We conducted this study in a large suburban school district in the western region of the US, which we selected because of its many alternatives to neighborhood schools. At the time of the study, the district oversaw 22 choice schools (14% of the district schools). The schools that we solicited to participate in the study were exemplars of their pedagogical model: Each school was the first of its pedagogical model to have been established in the district, was recommended by district administrators, and had wait lists for student enrollment. See Table 1 for school demographics. As Table 1 shows, the Experiential School had a much higher percentage of poor students, and the Montessori School had a lower percentage of students who scored as proficient on the state standardized assessment of reading and writing proficiency. In general,

Table 1. School demographics and pseudonyms.

	District	Core	Experiential	Montessori
Demographics:				
Year Founded		1996	1971	1996
Grades Served	P-12	K-8	P-12	P-6
Number of Elementary Students (K-6)	42,217	395	231	201
Annual Elementary Mobility Rate	25%	15%	8%	8%
Percentage of Elementary Students qualifying for Free or Reduced Price Lunch (FRL)	25%	18%	44%	12%
Student Ethnicity (rounded)	76% White 17% Hispanic 4% Asian or Pacific Islander 2% Black 1% American Indian	82% White 13% Hispanic 3% Asian or Pacific Islander 1% Black 1% American Indian	80% White 15% Hispanic 1% Asian or Pacific Islander 1% Black 3% American Indian	86% White 8% Hispanic 3% Asian or Pacific Islander 2% Black 1% American Indian
Fourth-Grade State Assessment Percentages Advanced or Proficient in Reading (R) and Writing (W)	R: 74% W: 60%	R: 75% W: 60%	R: 75% W: 53%	R: 56% W: 32%
Pseudonyms				
Principal		Claire	Eleanor	Mark
Mental Health Personnel		Corina	Edward	Melissa
Fourth-Grade Teachers		Carol Christina	Elizabeth Evan	Maria Michelle Michael Marge Margaret Mary
Fourth-Grade Students		Carson (m) Cole (m) Cameron (m) Candy (f) Clara (f) Clarence (me) Charlie (m) Cassidy (f)	Erica (f) Eileen (f) Ellen (F) Elijah (m) Eric (m)	Manny (m) Mario (m) Monica (f) Martha (f) Matt (m) Marcia (f)

Montessori schools have shown lower proficiency for elementary students on standardized assessments, but these differences are eliminated in middle school. The higher poverty rates at the Experiential School did not seem to be a distinction for the areas we studied. As disconfirmatory analysis did not show these factors to impact our areas of inquiry, the results are not separated by the schools' rates for student achievement or poverty.

Participants

At each school, the principal, main mental health provider, and all fourth-grade teachers agreed to participate in the study (16 adults). Across the three schools, 19 parents gave consent for their fourth-grade student to participate and all students assented. Pseudonyms for each participant are listed in Table 1.

Procedures

The primary research technique was unstructured and open-ended interviews, utilized to understand the subjective experience of the participants (Patton, 2002). See Table 2 for examples of possible questions prepared prior to each interview. All interviews were conducted by Cynthia Hazel, audio-recorded, and transcribed by Wendy Allen. Wendy attended all Core and Experiential interviews, while a third researcher attended all Montessori interviews. All interviews occurred at the participant's school. In total, we conducted 12 interviews and focus groups with the 35 participants.

Adult interviews. To better understand their perspectives given their unique role at their school, we interviewed the principals and mental health providers individually. To encourage reflection, we interviewed the teachers in focus groups with the other fourth-grade teachers at their school. Interviews lasted from 60 to 90 min. We provided the transcriptions to participants for their comments or alterations; only minor alterations were received. We collected demographic information (age, gender, amount of time in position, and amount of time at school) from each adult.

Student focus groups. In a private room at their school with the other children from their school, we asked each child to draw a picture of a safe and unsafe elementary

Table 2. Sample interview questions and prompts.

Participants	Sample Questions or Prompts Developed Prior to Interview
Administrators and Mental Health Providers	Please explain the curricular model/pedagogy of this school. How would you describe the student body? What is the greatest strength of this school? What is the greatest challenge for this school? How do you define and assess student engagement? How would you like to see the school change/develop? Please define community. How do you teach behavioral expectations?
Teachers	Please explain the curricular model/pedagogy of this school. How does this model impact your classroom? How do you define and assess student engagement? How would you like to see the school change/develop? Please define community. How do you teach behavioral expectations?
Students	Please look at your picture and tell me what you see. What is safe about your school? What is the relationship between safety and learning? When someone is a bully or is bullied, what happens?

school; we then facilitated a discussion using the drawings as a starting point. The art materials were 18" by 24" bogus paper and Cray-pas 12-pack oil pastels. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Interviews lasted from 45 to 60 min. Due to their age, we did not ask students to review transcriptions, nor did we collect demographic data.

Data management and analysis

We managed the data both electronically and in case binders, which included daily memos, periodic summary memos, and interim case summaries. Any day that we worked on this project, we each wrote a daily memo to record the day's activities as well as insights, hypotheses, plans, and questions. We wrote summary memos as a review of daily memos at organic transitions in the research. We catalogued, coded, and sorted the data together using ATLAS qualitative data analysis software (Muhr, 2004). We conducted constant comparative data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with the data collection, which formed the interim case summaries. Further data collection was designed in response to the on-going analysis.

Our first level of analysis was a descriptive analysis of each school community (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We developed a coding network from the inductive analysis of the Core School data with non-hierarchical interrelated themes and hierarchically arranged subthemes. As the coding network was applied to all school communities, we revised it to better reflect the similarities and differences between the three school ecologies. For instance, what was coded as *Community* for Core was refined in response to the Montessori and Experiential Schools' data into the overarching theme, and the subtheme of *Culture* was developed. After a descriptive analysis of each school was completed, across-case analysis was conducted and the coding refined further. The final coding strategy had three non-hierarchical, interrelated themes that defined the means of creating inclusive communities. We used graphic organizing techniques of matrices and networks (Miles & Huberman, 1994), as well as written summaries to refine the coding strategies and themes. Memos, member checking, triangulation within researchers, searching for disconfirmatory evidence, and considering alternative explanations were utilized to enhance trustworthiness (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The three themes that emerged to explain the inclusive communities of these schools will be used as a framework for the discussion of each school and across schools: (a) *culture*, (b) *structure*, and (c) *responsibility and expectations*. Each school engaged in a variety of activities that were designed to promote group cohesion, increase individuals' feelings of belonging to the school, and express the school's unique characteristics; these activities created the school's *culture*. Each school's culture lent itself to the formation of an overall framework that included discipline policies, affective programming, district guidelines, routines, curriculum, and school rituals. These predetermined components of daily functioning comprised the school's *structure*. In addition, each school identified individual and group expectations, roles, and commitments. These *responsibility and expectations* supported the implementation and sustainability of the school's structure and culture. For each school, we give a brief description of the pedagogy, followed by a description of the

school and its culture, structure, and responsibility and expectations. The individual descriptions are followed by an across-school summary of the significant themes. See Table 3 for an overview of the findings and Figure 1 for a graphic representation of the coding structure.

Description of each school

Core school

The founder of Core Knowledge, E.D. Hirsch, first introduced the philosophy behind the Core Knowledge curriculum in 1987 by advocating that previous exposure to cultural knowledge is critical to literacy and language development in children (Ellington & Rutledge, 2001). An advocate for “closing the gap(s)” in curricula sequencing in K-12 education, Hirsch developed the *Core Knowledge Sequence* (Core Knowledge Foundation, 2010) for Kindergarten through eighth grade. The *Core Knowledge Sequence* lays out content in Language Arts, History, Mathematics, Science, Visual Arts, and Music for each grade level. Areas of study are deepened as children revisit topics from previous grades. A distinction of this curriculum is that it does not prescribe *how* the children are taught the information, thus allowing teachers instructional license paired with the knowledge of what the children have learned in previous years. However, often Core Knowledge schools utilize a traditional approach to teaching, with whole-class instruction and each student working independently. In 2008, 1,067 schools in the US were known to be using the Core Knowledge curriculum, including 85 official Core Knowledge Schools (Core Knowledge Foundation, 2008). Although the curriculum has received some criticism for focusing primarily on Eurocentric topics, it has been utilized successfully with students living in high poverty (Johnson, Janisch, & Morgan-Fleming, 2001) and shown to positively influence school climate and teacher attitudes (Sterbinsky, Steven, & Redfield, 2006).

The Core School’s mission was “to help students attain their highest social and academic potential through an academically rigorous, content-rich educational program in a safe, orderly, and caring environment.” Each of the two fourth-grade classrooms had close to 30 students, each seated at a desk arranged in horizontal and vertical rows, but separated from all other desks; all desks faced the front of the room which had a large whiteboard on the wall. The rooms had little space beyond what was taken up by the desks. The two teachers shared a paraprofessional, whose primary role was to help grade assignments.

Core culture. The Core School’s culture was focused on their commitment to a strong academic curriculum. Community members took pride in the fact their school had higher academic standards than most neighborhood schools. Principal Clair commented,

Kids who come here from other schools tend to say, “Wow, it is a lot harder here, I have to do a lot more work, I have to study harder for my tests.” And I see Core School maintaining that strong academic focus.

Core’s culture to care about each member was expressed in the value they placed on adults and children knowing and greeting each other by name.

Table 3. Matrix of results.

	Across-Schools	Core	Experiential	Montessori
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on community building • Conscious attention to community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to strong academic curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All activities designed to build community and relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect for self, others, and environment
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention to academics, affective development, and individualization • Global awareness and world stewardship • Activities to promote community, collaboration, and conflict-resolution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School-wide gatherings to build community and inform members of expectations • Individualization to ensure academic success and that all students were members of the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of individualization, affective learning, and academic development • Emphasis on self-direction, curiosity, exploration, and self-awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All routines designed to promote self-paced accomplishment • Individualization of almost all activities
Responsibilities and Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students: respect others' learning and capabilities, employ self-directive learning strategies, and engage in peer modeling • Adults: scaffold students' learning, model desired behaviors, individualize supports and consequences, embrace collaboration, and be responsible for each student's development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No student will interrupt the learning of another student • All adults accountable for students' learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find balance between individual and community needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students responsible for their learning • Adults as unobtrusive guides to students' learning

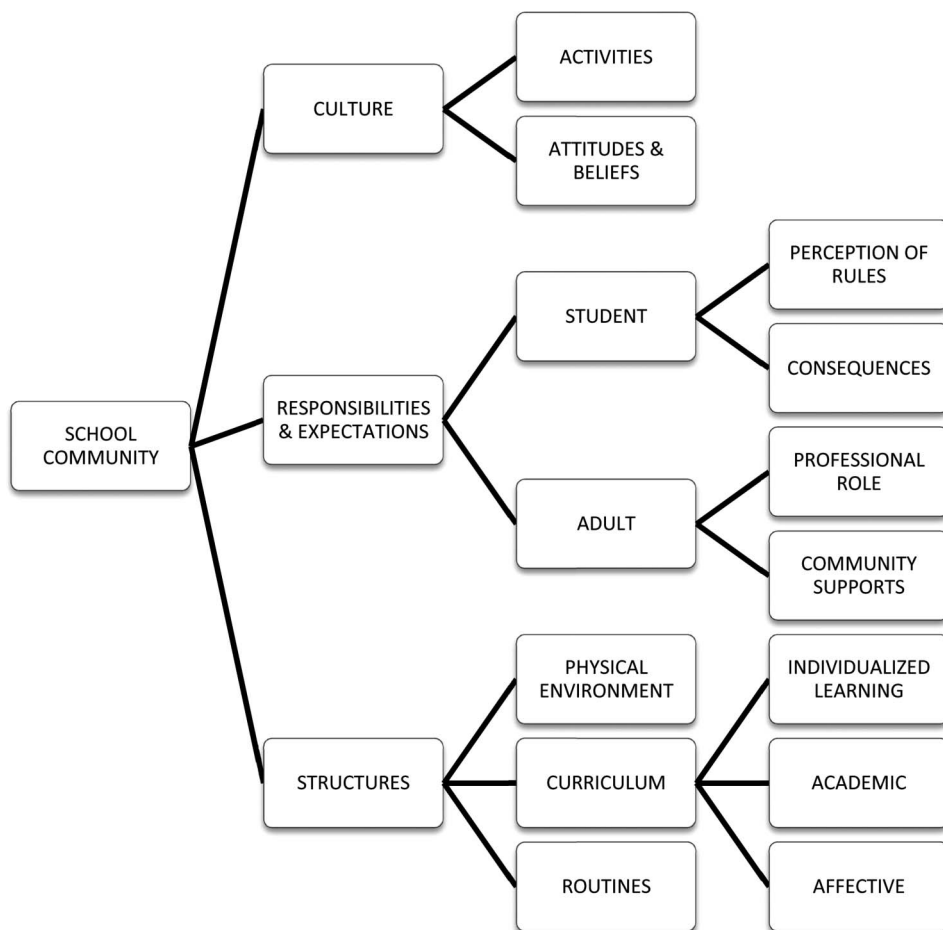


Figure 1. Graphic representation of coding structure and elements within each non-hierarchical code.

Core structure. School-wide gatherings, such as a Monday morning flag ceremony (where all students and staff would gather to raise the national flag), built community while simultaneously contributed to the foundation of the Core School's overall structure. Routines were designed to make every student an included member of the community: "We go out and visit new families, we do milk and cookies with new students so that they can all get to meet other new students and then they get to invite a friend from the classroom" (Christina, fourth-grade teacher). Although there was little student turn-over, the teachers saw it as important to make sure that structures were in place to help all students connect to and participate in the Core community.

In addition to the academic topics outlined in the *Core Knowledge Curriculum*, the school implemented three affective programs. The program that was most popular with the students presented strategies to negotiate conflict and bullying. Clara, a fourth grader, illustrated why this program was an important part of their school's structure for promoting feelings of community, as she explained her drawing:

On the unsafe side, I have [name of neighborhood school she had previously attended] in green because they don't care and they have too many unfair rules. I just think that is not fair. They don't care if other children are bullying you or lying and stealing and other things like that. And on the safe side I wrote "Core School" because we have a safer environment and we have programs and we care.

Although the Core School had many universal activities and programs, Teacher Christina emphasized the importance of individualization within with the structure: "I think they really understand how their learning is not always the same as how someone else is learning and how to be sensitive toward all of the other students."

Core responsibilities and expectations. Supplementing the Core Knowledge curriculum with a bully prevention program reinforced that there were behavioral expectations at the Core School designed to sustain the learning environment. As stated by Teacher Carol, the overall school expectation was that "No student will interrupt the learning of another student." Being responsible for your own learning and sensitive toward other students' learning needs was the primary expectation at the Core School.

The role of the student was to focus on his or her personal achievement while being respectful of others. Teachers and aides were to provide academic direction. The mental health staff, charged with addressed psychological needs of students in classrooms, promoted additional skills that would enable children to succeed academically. As responsibilities were divided among individuals instead of shared, the teachers and principal expressed the weight of their role in the school. Teacher Corina, responsible for character and anti-bullying education for the school, described this weight, stating, "Unless you work at it, teaching can be very isolating, which most people on the outside world don't understand." However, the Core School continued to seek, maintain, and value a community of people willing to always do their best for the sake of their students' learning and growth.

Core summarized. The Core participants believed their pedagogy allowed each child to thrive academically. The culture of the Core community emphasized achievement and high expectations for every student. Daily structured activities were important to the Core mission, as well as the mutual agreement by members of the school to work hard to support students' learning and growth. Carson, a fourth grader, spoke to the adults' commitment to the school and his own sense of belonging when he stated, "Well, the teachers care more about their kids than their jobs", to which his classmate Charlie replied, "Their job is to take care of us."

Experiential school

Experiential pedagogy promotes what Dewey (1938) referred to as "educative experiences," which use context as a conduit for exciting the learner, building skills for life-long learning, and applying learning to real-life situations. Whether the child learns specific information is not as important as having the child fully engage in the process of seeking out the answers to his or her questions. The main question posed within an Experiential pedagogy is, "How shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?" (Dewey, 1938, p. 23). The dynamic link between an experience and learning is mediated by relationships with peers, teachers, and family; therefore, it is no surprise

that activities and infrastructures related to relationship building are central to Experiential schools. A school reform model that follows the Experiential pedagogy is the Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound (ELOB). ELOB uses learning expeditions that include projects, fieldwork, or community service to integrate academic content and character goals (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1998). Teachers work collaboratively in teams and have students for more than one year to strengthen relationships. According to a meta-analysis of comprehensive school reform models (Borman et al., 2003), ELOB showed highly promising evidence of effectiveness.

At the heart of the Experiential philosophy was what Principal Eleanor referred to as “The Experiential Way:” promoting the unique potential of each community member through relationships and community engagement. The goals of the Experiential School were to: “Re/Discovery the joy of learning; Seek meaning in your life; Adapt to the world that is; Prepare for the world that will be; Create the world that ought to be.” Fourth- through sixth-grade students were classified as in the Intermediate Area and taught together by the same teacher for 3 years. The two Intermediate Area classes, of approximately 20 students each, spanned three connected rooms. One large room contained large tables with shelves of supplies around all perimeter walls; one small room had sofas, soft chairs, and a loft; one typically sized classroom had mostly open space, with computers against two walls and white boards against a third. During class meetings, all students would meet together. At other times, students would be spread throughout the three rooms, depending upon their preference and the demands of what they were doing.

Experiential culture. Whereas in the other schools in this study there were specific activities outside of the primary curriculum designated to build community, the Experiential curriculum *was* to build community and relationships. The goal of the Experiential pedagogy was to be a community, defined as a “group of people who take care of each other” (Principal Eleanor). All Experiential School practices strove to build community, including student advising groups comprised of the student, parents, and teachers; multi-age classrooms; neighborhood service projects; consensual decision-making; and daily clean-up chores that recognized everyone “owning the collective space” (Principal Eleanor). Although the pedagogy lived in a context of relationships, the ultimate educational goal for the teachers was that students “love learning – that’s my personal goal. If kids are happy here at school, that’s half the battle.” (Teacher Evan).

Experiential structure. The pedagogy of the Experiential School integrated individualization, affective learning, and academic development. There was an emphasis on self-direction, which required curiosity, exploration, and self-awareness on the part of the students while the teachers supported and guided their students’ abilities and interests. For example, when asked about his favorite part of teaching at the Experiential school, Teacher Evan explained:

For me, it is the student-centered philosophy: where kids get to come to school and approach their advisors and have ideas of things they want to do. I feel like it’s my job to help make those things happen instead of find reasons why it shouldn’t happen because it would be easier for me not to do it.

An important part of the curriculum was learning outside of the school’s boundaries or as the student Elena explained, “Because it is all about experience.”

Elena excitedly continued to tell the group a story about something creepy that had happened on their last camping trip. Choosing and preparing for an experience determined the content of a child's and class's curriculum, which was set during class meetings and individual advising times.

Experiential responsibility and expectations. As one student pointed out to the interviewer, "We don't normally sit by ourselves, so we sit in table groups." This child validated the expectations of the Experiential community, which was to find a balance between fulfilling individual needs with collective group needs. Principal Eleanor felt it was a priority that the school question and maintain this balance, "When it came to a conflict between the individual and the community, the default has been the individual . . . but we are really working more toward – we've got to balance in our community." Each class agreed upon group norms; individuals lost privileges when they violated norms. Adults modeled the norms of behavior for students while simultaneously promoting the personal growth of each child socially and academically. When Cynthia asked a student named Eric how he worked things out with another student in the class who was being mean, he replied "In the beginning of the year, we have to write papers on it . . . and like we did bathroom norms." To keep up with such individualization required an immense amount of time and care for each student, which the adults were willing to provide based upon their commitment to the pedagogy.

Experiential School summarized. Within the movement and chaos of the ever-changing Experiential curriculum, the children found predictability and order. Students understood that their teachers expected them to be active agents in their learning and in the world. The teachers believed that students could not be minimized to their intellect, but were unique and multifaceted people with individual needs. The community thrived on the many relationships within the school, as well as seeking connections beyond the school. "The Experiential Way" created community through uncovering each child's innate ability to make new discoveries in and contribute to the world around him or her.

Montessori School

Maria Montessori started a school for underprivileged children in Rome in 1907 (Montessori, 1912/1964). According to the Association Montessori International (2009), Montessori's methods of teaching represent the most widely used pedagogy in the world with over 8,000 identifiable schools across 6 continents. In the Montessori pedagogy, the teacher acts "not as a passive force, [but rather as] a silent presence" to promote the "spontaneous work of children" (Montessori, 1912/1964, p. 370) at all levels of development. Montessori classrooms have children in mixed-age groups and are rich with materials designed specifically for Montessori lessons. Teachers prepare the environment, introduce concepts, and allow students long periods of work time to process each concept by collaborating, experimenting, problem solving, and creating products of their learning and experiences. The students demonstrate their knowledge by reflecting the concept back to the teacher or by teaching a peer in the classroom (P.P. Lillard, 1972). Borman et al. (2003) found Montessori pedagogy to have only promising evidence of effectiveness: Although studies indicate positive effects on student outcomes, too few studies included comparison groups. Since then there has

been additional research showing positive effects of Montessori pedagogy for creative competencies (Besancon & Lubart, 2008) and academic, social, and behavioral skills (A.S. Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006).

The Montessori School charter stated:

The Montessori School will provide appropriate challenges and support to enable each student to prepare for the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, social, physical, and societal transitions appropriate to each student's inner vocation. Our goal is to foster competent, responsible, and independent citizens who love learning and respect themselves, other people and their environment.

The school did not espouse either the American Montessori Society or Association Montessori Internationale tenets exclusively, and had teachers trained by each association. At Montessori School, two class groups of approximately 30 students each were guided by teaching teams comprised of one lead teacher and two teaching assistants. Similar to the Experiential School, students stayed in the same classroom with the same teaching team from fourth through sixth grades. Each classroom was large, with a few low round tables, many shelves with abundant supplies neatly organized, and a large carpeted central area.

Montessori culture. The Montessori School staff expressed commitment to the Montessori philosophy of "Following the child." Principal Mark said, "I have rarely been in an environment that doesn't have more confrontational relationships and challenges." For the students, this was taught as a triangle of freedom, respect, and responsibility. The Montessori School emphasized respect for self, others, and the environment. The respect for students as unique individuals was expressed by one teacher (Marge) when she stated,

I think [Montessori] supports a sense of safety in being who you are . . . and it doesn't have even anything to do with just physical safety or being bullied, it's just the ability of being comfortable with who you are when you are different and people being accepting of that and not judgmental about it.

Montessori structure. The Montessori School's structural elements were designed to appreciate the whole child, honor differences in learning styles, and promote self-paced accomplishment. Teachers set assignment deadlines but it was up to the students how they met those deadlines. Teacher Mary expressed the structure through the Montessori lens when stating,

[Each student is an] individual and they all have different learning styles and they all reach goals at different times and we respect and honor that. Just because they are at a certain age, doesn't mean they are at a certain point to us.

Although student behavior could appear random, there was a stable daily routine for students of navigating their own learning, with encouragement from teachers as needed. One of the classes held daily meetings, whereas the other met weekly; these meetings were to discuss norms and expectations, plan for upcoming events, and promote student empowerment.

Montessori responsibilities and expectations. Although there were structures in place, the teachers acknowledged that the Montessori curriculum demanded much student self-direction. The students' responsibilities centered on taking ownership of

their learning. This included seeking help when needed, managing how they were going to get their assignments completed, and developing strategies to enhance personal learning. As teacher Marge commented, “students have to be able to manage their time and for the kids that just really can’t learn how to organize, we have many strategies for them to use to help them learn the organizational piece.” The freedom to learn individualistically came with inherent responsibilities. Teacher Michael said, “For the kids that might have a little harder time with self-direction, I think the social aspect of being in Montessori is awesome for them.”

Students were expected to resolve conflicts with peers and act as positive peer models, as following exchange between the researcher and the student indicates:

Cynthia: So at this school if you tell a teacher that somebody is picking on you or being mean, what happens?

Marcia: Um, sometimes they’ll say “are you just tattle-telling to get somebody in trouble?” Or they’ll find that person and the three of you will later sit down and talk.

The adults were charged with unobtrusively guiding the student learning process. As well as guiding academic learning, teachers were expected to facilitate conflict resolution between students.

The principal was expected to negotiate with the district so that teachers could promote the Montessori pedagogy as unhindered as possible. Principal Mark described how authentic Montessori pedagogy should give students freedom regarding what subjects to learn and when, but in order to adhere to some district guidelines,

We have to have a little more that’s required [by the district], like literacy plans. You know we’ve got to make sure we test kids for literacy and that their progressing at the expected district level, to get off the literacy plans.

Adhering to the Montessori Method was further challenged since the sequencing and timeline of content taught did not match the district expectations. The principal went on to explain “it may be that something they’re testing for in third grade and we don’t have until fourth grade or vice versa.” Although their test scores were competitive by sixth grade, scores on the standardized state tests appear lower in the fourth grade (see Table 1) possibly due to this mismatch between the Montessori and the test content sequencing.

Montessori summarized. From the Montessori School perspective, community was created through unique, empowered learners who were protected from outside threats. There were numerous expectations for students in self-directing their learning: time-management, setting personal goals, self-motivation, and respect for self, others, and the environment. It was anticipated that from this process, students would learn to be comfortable with their uniqueness as learners. Adults were expected to support, encourage, and protect students.

Across school analysis of how inclusive communities were created

Culture

Each school had developed a different culture. However, the emphasis on community building and conscious attention to culture was universal. The first

commonality was that members wanted to be at that school: Many adults and children stated that their school was the best school in the area for the students in attendance. The second common element for community-building across school environments was a strong belief in the pedagogy. Community members could articulate the school's educational philosophy, how it differed from mainstream models, and why they thought it was good for learning and development. Although each mentioned that there were challenges, administrators and teachers did not let outside mandates, financial constraints, or other logistical concerns keep them from practicing in a way that felt true to their pedagogy and beliefs. Finally, all school communities were clear that their most important outcome was student success. School members worked to promote a culture that would promote the welfare of each member of their student population. Their self-awareness of why they did what they did and how they believed this enhanced outcomes for their students led to unity, mutual respect, and pride in their participation in the school.

Structural components

In looking across the structural dimensions of each school, there were significant similarities. Each school had three essential building blocks in their pedagogy: academic, affective, and individualization. *Academic* referred to activities designed to support learning in reading, writing, mathematics, and science; *affective* described topics outside of the academic arena such as self-regulation, problem-solving, and conflict resolution; lastly, *individualization* described teaching practices that acknowledged and accommodated diverse learning trajectories. Although each school had academic, affective, and individualization components in their curriculum, the amount of integration of these components varied. For example, the Core School used additional affective curricula to complement their primarily academic Core Knowledge curriculum. In comparison, the Experiential School described their curriculum as simultaneously addressing individualization, academics, and affective components. For the Montessori School, the individualization and academic curricular components were particularly linked.

Global awareness and world stewardship was another commonality among the three schools. The most extreme case was the Experiential School, where students were expected to visit and gain experience at a variety of national and international locations. The Core Knowledge curriculum placed emphasis on learning about leaders and philosophers, and how their work influences our world today. For the Montessori School, the connection to the world was made on a more abstract basis through lessons around peaceful interactions with all people and valuing uniqueness.

In addition to the daily curricular activities, each of the three schools engaged in activities around community-building, conflict-resolution, and teacher and staff collaboration. The Core School had regular assemblies to inform the community of certain universal behavioral expectations and provided staff recognition through celebrating birthdays and acknowledging members for their accomplishments with students. At the Montessori School, students used peace tables to resolve conflicts, teachers employed peer modeling strategies, and teaching teams co-taught student cohorts for 3 years. For the Experiential School, regular group meetings were held to achieve consensus regarding school practices and management. In addition, school-wide service projects were important routines for this civically engaged school.

Although the pedagogy delineated the overall structure of the school, each school had routines that promoted school members' sense of belonging.

Responsibilities and expectations

Each school expected adults and students to set and achieve high behavior and learning targets. Each school had a strong commitment to implementing the pedagogy with great fidelity, despite having fewer resources available than desired, having children and families who had selected the school as a "last chance" as well as those who viewed the school as a "first choice," and government mandates that conflicted with the schools' philosophies.

Three key expectations for student behavior were shared across the schools: respect others' learning and capabilities, employ self-directive learning strategies, and engage in peer modeling. Respect was linked to the broader curricular theme of individualization, as well as representing a key ingredient to building community.

Furthermore, there were several adult behavioral expectations across schools. These included scaffolding students' skills, modeling desired behaviors, individualizing supports and consequences for students, embracing collaboration and teamwork, and being responsible for each child's development. The last theme was striking given the number of contextual issues at play in the schools; however, each adult clearly espoused this commitment.

Discussion

This study investigated how three pedagogically driven schools created inclusive communities that allowed all members to feel safe and needed. Each school's common vision created a community that attended systematically to the school's and inclusion of its members, created structures to support the individualized academic and affective development of students, and held expectations that students and adults would be responsible for each student's learning.

Developing a common vision as a means of promoting community

Within each school studied, belonging was successfully promoted despite the variations in *culture*, *structure*, and *responsibilities and expectations*. The data illustrated that pedagogy can play a role in creating a unique school culture that influences the daily flow and structure of learning. Having a common pedagogical vision facilitated trusting relationships, provided a framework and reasoning for decision making, and served to protect the school from drastic changes due to outside influences. In other words, we found that having a common pedagogical vision, more than the content of that vision, facilitated growth of the identified themes.

Literature on school climate and culture (see, e.g., Elbot & Fulton, 2008; Freiberg, 1998; Wagner & O'Phelan, 1998; Wilson, 2004) discuss elements similar to our findings. For example, Wilson (2004) described a positive school climate as one that focuses on academic achievement, respectful and positive relationships, fair behavioral expectations, engaging families and the community, and providing awareness of safety issues. A study that compared option and neighborhood schools found that academic progress was greatest in schools, option or neighborhood, with

a shared vision and administrative conditions that promoted teachers' abilities to focus on learning (Goldring & Cravens, 2008). The findings from this study suggest that building consensus on teaching and learning beliefs may be a means to achieving an inclusive school climate.

At the three schools we studied, one school had a much higher percentage of students living in poverty and another school had lower standardized achievement scores (than the other two schools and the district mean). Both of these factors can lead to a deterioration of school climate and member inclusivity. However, we did not find this at these two schools. The shared pedagogy and the commitment of the families to the schools, as seen in the lower than district average mobility rates, may have been protective factors for the students and the communities.

Limitations

This study contributes a rich picture of how the studied schools created inclusivity for their members. The three main limitations of the study are those common to qualitative research: (1) scope, (2) data collection choices, and (3) researcher lens. The scope of the study extended to three elementary schools, with focus at the fourth-grade level, in one western US school district. Although the intent was to focus on the fourth-grade level, at two of the schools the students were in multigrade classrooms as prescribed by their pedagogical model. With our form of data collection, we were unable to tease out the effects of multigrade instruction from the impact of a shared pedagogy. We selected these schools because they were exemplars of pedagogically driven schools. However, given the selectiveness of the sample, it is possible that not all option schools do as good a job of creating community for their members. Second, the study was limited by data-collection techniques. Open-ended interviews (including student drawings) were used to obtain the participants' perceptions, which was what we sought; but, other data collection methods might have revealed other linkages. Finally, our personal biases may have affected interpretations. We purposefully recruited exemplar schools and may have been predisposed to find evidence of strong, supportive communities. However, assessments of trustworthiness substantiated the findings presented.

Conclusion: addressing systemic issues to developing a pedagogical vision

The majority of public schools in the US and other countries are neighborhood schools, attracting students largely due to proximity. Members of the typical neighborhood school community come with diverse beliefs and attitudes related to learning and teaching; thus, rarely does a common pedagogical vision naturally form. Some schools may never achieve a comprehensive pedagogical vision, but many can work toward agreement related to one or all of the three themes. Through the process of strengthening these individual parts, the school community could move more easily toward a common pedagogical vision, or at least a shared understanding of how their members define teaching and learning. Developing a pedagogical vision at a neighborhood school that leads to an inclusive community will require the efforts of many people. Numerous opportunities exist for both practitioners and researchers to advance the capacity of all schools to articulate their pedagogy and utilize this vision to enhance the contributions of all members:

- Practitioners and researchers can encourage school-wide awareness and discussions of the school's pedagogical vision. If this is too abstract or daunting a task, beginning with one of the three elements (culture, structures, or responsibilities and expectations) may be a sensible place to start. In order to solicit multiple voices and not create undue additional work, an existing team may be able to incorporate this into their work and mission.
- If there is no support for this work among all school members, these discussions could start with a receptive subunit of the school community, such as interested parents, administrators, teachers, or support staff. Documenting impact for this group may lead to wider interest.
- For the applied researcher, working with practitioners who utilize various methods to support the development of a school's pedagogical vision and evaluating the outcomes would contribute greatly to our knowledgebase.
- The schools in this study started with a shared pedagogy. Further investigation into the contributions of a shared pedagogy and the contributions of pedagogical content in the development of inclusive communities is warranted. Conversely, it is feasible that schools with highly inclusive communities may evolve toward more cohesive pedagogies. These areas are ripe for investigation.

This study suggests that a clear pedagogy may contribute to feelings of belonging for both adults and elementary students. We found that three pedagogically driven schools were able to create inclusive communities through their common, well-articulated vision that revolved around each student maximizing his or her potential. Enhancing the ability of school communities to assist all students in maximizing their potential is the goal of inclusive schooling. This study suggests that initiating pedagogical discussions with school communities offers one means to increase the effectiveness of schools to support all community members.

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Notes on contributors

Dr. Cynthia E. Hazel is an Associate Professor and the Program Coordinator of the Child, Family, and School Psychology Program within the Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver. Dr. Hazel is committed to population-wide wellness promotion for children, families, and school communities. Dr. Hazel has a diverse background: She received her B.S. from Arizona State University in Architecture, a Masters in Art Therapy from Vermont College, and a Doctorate in School Psychology at the University of Northern Colorado. Dr. Hazel has coordinated arts-based after-school programs for urban youth, served as the Behavior Evaluation and Support Teams Coordinator for the Colorado Department of Education, and practiced as a school psychologist in communities of predominately poor, Latino families from the preschool through secondary levels. Dr. Hazel's research interests include student school engagement, data-driven decision making, supporting student to graduate from high school with their cohort, preventing bullying, and consultation. Dr. Hazel is a Nationally Certified School Psychologist through the National Association of School Psychologists.

Wendy B. Allen is currently a PhD student in Educational Psychology at the University of Northern Colorado. Mrs. Allen works as the Program Coordinator for the Buell Early Childhood Leadership Program at the University of Denver and is particularly interested in

pedagogy for adults working with or on behalf of young children. Additionally, Mrs. Allen is interested in issues of motivation and adult learning environments, theories of transformational learning, and evaluation methods for leadership development. Mrs. Allen has a Masters in Child, Family, and School Psychology from the University of Denver and a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Northern Colorado.

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