509M – 1 credit field experience: Expectations, and assignments
Theme: School culture and decision making

During your MAT program, you will be required to complete several practicum experiences. The first one is designed to help you get acquainted with the routines and organizational structures of schools. Take full advantage of your practicum hours, as the experience will certainly be educative! At the same time, keep in mind that you are a representative of Western Oregon University and the university’s good name rests on your ability to be a good ambassador to the schools.

Expectations

Practicum credits are interpreted a bit differently than regular class hours. Typically, a 3-credit class equates to 30 (1:10) hours of class time per quarter. Practica, however, are figured on a 1:30 ratio meaning you will need to spend 30 at your practicum site to meet the minimum requirements for your experience. Of course, as with all practica, we recommend you spend as much time as possible at your setting as it will only help you to develop more rapidly as a teacher. Use the 509M – 1 credit tracking sheet found in the virtual library (http://www.wou.edu/~girodmlibrary) to log your hours. If you are currently working in a school, you may need to arrange to visit another teacher’s classroom during your prep time to do these observations.

Assignments

As with most university coursework, your practicum experience comes with a couple assignments. These assignments must be completed before you earn credit for this practicum experience. Be diligent in your efforts as incompleted assignments invariably cause problems in this program.

The activities you’ll be completing are from an excellent book called “Learning to teach: A critical approach to field experiences.” The book is no longer in print so the appropriate activities, titled 509M – 1 credit activities, are found in the virtual library (http://www.wou.edu/~girodmlibrary). Retrieve them as soon as possible.

The activities we have chosen will help you get started on the road to becoming a great teacher. We chose these particular activities because they revolve around becoming familiar with the ins and outs of daily school life – particularly as it relates to leadership and decision making. Hopefully these activities will help you see how things get done in schools – how change is made. Before you begin, be sure to read the introduction at the beginning of the book. It’s filled with some great stuff about the history, philosophy, and socio-political contexts of teaching.

Work through the activities and the final paper. You will only turn in the final paper but should draw systematically on your “data” from the activities so do them well!
Activities

For this first practicum experience, you actually have quite a bit of latitude in terms of exploring schools. Choose any 3 of the following activities:

1. Student governance and decision making
2. Faculty and staff governance
3. The role of local school boards
4. The politics of educational decision making
5. Assessing family-school relationships (phase one only)
6. Assessing the parent-teacher relationship

Several of these activities ask you to get out there and sit in on meetings. In arranging for this, please take extra precaution so as not to be a nuisance or be perceived as a nosy-body. Let them know you are there to observe and learn about how schools work — not to reveal shortcomings.

Complete these activities by following the instructions for each. If it asks that you do some writing about your thoughts on these topics, please do so but remember you will only turn in the final paper at the end of the quarter.

The final paper

At the conclusion of your efforts, write a brief paper (2-3 pages) that describes what you learned in your investigations. You could take several different angles such as: What’s important to schools and their interested parties? How are decisions made at all levels? What are the pressing issues at this school/district? Whichever angle you choose to take, write clearly and make a compelling argument drawing from your “data” gathered in the 3 activities above. In other words, use your experiences completing the activities above to inform your argument in the final paper. The final paper will be the only thing you turn in. Good luck!
Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT)
Western Oregon University
Practicum Tracking Sheet
Ed 509M: 1 credit

MAT student name: __________________________

Quarter enrolled (i.e. spring '03): __________________________

Each 1-hour of practicum credits equates to 30 hours of on-site experience. To log enough hours to earn 1 practicum credits, one needs to spend 30 hours in a school or working at your practicum site. This sheet is designed to help you and WOU keep track of your hours. Please fill it out completely and submit it at the end of the quarter in which your practicum credits are being earned.

Name of practicum site (i.e. Central High School): __________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Times on site</th>
<th>Total hours</th>
<th>Brief activities log</th>
<th>Teacher's initials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9/12/02</td>
<td>8:00 – 11:00 a.m.</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
<td>watched 1st - 3rd period in Mrs. Sanders social studies class and tutored 3 absent students</td>
<td>54S</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Documentation of practicum hours is in partial fulfillment of credit requirements. Other assignments may exist which need to be completed prior to practicum completion.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Times on site</th>
<th>Total hours</th>
<th>Brief activities log</th>
<th>Teacher's initials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning to Teach: A Critical Approach to Field Experiences

Natalie G. Adams
Oklahoma State University

Christine Mary Shea
Georgia Southern University

Delores D. Liston
Georgia Southern University

Bryan Deever
Georgia Southern University

LEA
LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS
1998 Mahwah, New Jersey London
INTRODUCTION

At the heart of this collection of classroom- and school-based activities, observations, and exercises, is a reconceptualization of the notion of the field experience. Typically a preservice teacher’s first encounter in the field is that of the “objective” observer who sits in a classroom to observe classroom practices “neutrally.” Often, students are reminded to follow rules of objective research such as the following: The observer must observe the entire sequence or event. Goals, limits, or guidelines must be set. The observation should be recorded completely and carefully, and observation must be as objective as possible. Embedded in this approach to the field experience is the assumption that if the student observer is immersed in what goes on in the field and given ample time to engage in a series of classroom observations, then he or she will emerge from the experience with some form of truth about the real world of teachers, learners, the nature of knowledge and the subject matter, and classroom life.

Our text, however, aims to disrupt this conception of teacher education and field experiences. Rather, this text is intended to assist you, the preservice teacher, in taking a critical look at schools and the politics of schooling through the creation of a reflective dialogue among yourself, your assigned classroom, and the larger school environment. We emphasize the problematic nature and dynamics of public schooling and seek to encourage in you a greater awareness concerning your attitudes toward and connections with these educational processes.

Perhaps you are asking yourself: What does it mean to examine classrooms and schooling critically? We use the word “critical” in a very specific way. To be critical about schools means to bring to the forefront issues of power, politics, equity, and equality. It means raising questions about the relationship between schools and the social and cultural reproduction of social classes, gender roles, and racial and ethnic prejudice. It means emphasizing the historical, social, political, and cultural factors responsible for shaping our present forms of schooling. It is important to remember that thinking critically about schools does not necessarily mean criticizing or being negative.

By asking you to analyze critically the intersections of race, class, gender, power, knowledge, and schooling, we require that you be more than a passive observer of teaching techniques and strategies. Rather than telling you what you should see, we ask you to consider how you might see in a different way—a way that is admittedly grounded in a critical paradigm. Consequently, in some activities, we generate this context through both the background material and the questions posed in which certain points of view are supported and others are restricted or even eliminated. This is done because we believe very strongly that many issues, such as race and gender, are not solved problems of the past, but are current issues that must be dealt with today.

By framing this book within a critical paradigm, we incorporate terms and concepts, such as hegemony, ideology, and racial stratification, that may not be familiar to you. These terms, along with the meanings they are given in this text, are important to understand before you continue this reading or enter the field. In the following section, we provide a brief overview of some of these terms and concepts in hopes that you might begin to develop a new language for describing what you see in the schools and classrooms you observe.

SOME IMPORTANT TERMS AND CONCEPTS

In part, this book is about the connections between culture, race, social class, and gender, as well as the manner in which these intersect and intertwine within our pedagogy as teachers. Two concepts critical to such a sociocultural examination of schools and schooling are hegemony and
ideology. Hegemony, a term with its origins in ancient Greece, at first described the manner in which one city-state exerted control over another through economic or political means rather than direct military occupation. In a contemporary frame, this term refers to the manner in which individuals and social groups are controlled within a democratic society by some means other than the brute force of the military or police apparatus. There are three players in this process that we now consider: social practices, social forms, and social structures.

Social practices are outward forms of social expression found in words and language, gestures and rituals, and the various actions in which we daily engage within our social communities. One way of controlling individuals is to define what are acceptable and unacceptable social practices. In schools, a tremendous amount of time and energy is spent inducting young persons into those social practices considered appropriate in contemporary society. One might consider asking, however, whose definitions of “appropriate” drive this teaching, how these lessons become embedded in both the curriculum and the daily routines of school life, and why these social practices go relatively unchallenged.

Social practices are regulated through the social forms and social structures of a society. These are the formal arrangements of laws (social forms) and informal arrangements of common wisdom (social structures) that sanction certain social practices and not others. Schools are one of the principle sites where youth are taught what social practices represent “normal” life. Whereas social forms are visible and codified, social structures are those less-discernible constructions that limit individual life. These appear to be naturally occurring divisions beyond the control of the individual. In the United States, for instance, we speak of a “class structure,” even though this country is purportedly egalitarian offering no one the rank and title of royalty. We assume, however, that these social divisions do exist and that we all reside somewhere on this socioeconomic landscape with little or no control over what defines the various class positions. This belief, however, limits the actions we perceive to be available to us. The same situation exists for other social structures such as those of race and gender. What does all this have to do with education? Schools are one of the primary sites for teaching youth to believe in both the existence and the “inherent rightness” of social structures.

Social practices, forms, and structures serve to organize and sanction social actions. The knowledge, ideas, values, and beliefs produced and reproduced within these arrangements are what we refer to as ideology. Simply put, ideology is the assumed right way of seeing the world. As these ideas and practices become intertwined and embedded in our daily lives, we come to accept many things simply as commonsense truth. As a social form, for example, the laws of most states restrict the social practice of marriage to heterosexual unions. Ideology supports those laws by generally defining homosexuality as “deviant.”

In another example, the belief that Caucasians are genetically superior to other races was an ideological “truth” that guided social life for generations in this country. For example, at one time it was commonly known “fact” that African Americans were intellectually inferior to European Americans because of a difference in the average male skull size. On the basis of this (and other) racist ideology, laws were enacted to limit and deny the constitutional rights of African-American citizens of this country, and separate and unequal school systems were established and perpetuated to accommodate the “intellectual and psychological differences of the races.”

Another subtle manifestation of ideology is the way in which certain words become embedded in our public discourse while serving to limit and restrict (or even segregate) portions of the population. The word “ethnic” has come to be applied solely to persons of color. In this sense, ethnic issues are understood to be those issues of concern only to particular minorities. However, we all have ethnic histories. The inaccurate belief that European Americans are not ethnic serves to segregate one portion of the population from another and sets the European tradition up as the normal backdrop against which other “ethnic” perspectives are displayed. Using the metaphor of computer software, ideology positions European ethnicity as the default setting. Everything else is different.
The same can be said of gender. In contemporary society, "gender issues" are those perceived to be of interest only to women and feminists. Gender studies programs at colleges and universities usually are understood as being reserved for women. Issues relating specifically to men are not regarded as gender issues. Of course, we are all gendered individuals, but ideology positions the masculine as the default setting—the marker of normality.

Ideological beliefs exist at multiple levels in our society—at both macro and micro levels. A dominant ideology is the beliefs and values accepted and shared by the majority of individuals in a community/society (or at least that group holding power and privilege). An ideology of schooling, then, includes those beliefs and values accepted by education workers and students as the commonsense approach to the daily practice of "doing school." Consider the following "facts": There is always a right answer; intelligence can be measured; and human development always occurs in discrete and regulated stages.5

What impact do these concepts have on our daily work as teachers? One primary effect of ideology is the manner in which it influences our pedagogy. More than teaching methods or techniques, pedagogy is the integrated package of what we teachers do as mediated through ideological beliefs. Some mistakenly equate pedagogy with method, but this is only one small portion of the whole. Pedagogy includes our teaching strategies and techniques; our beliefs, values, and personal assumptions about the world; and what we believe to be the reasons and purposes of schooling. Pedagogy speaks to the entire constellation of who we are and what we do as teachers. All of this is informed, in turn, by our personal perspectives (influenced by ideology) and the sum of our identities. Driven by our cultural understandings of the world, these identities are constituted by the multiple intersections of our race, social class, and gendered selves. These are all primary aspects of the culturally constructed self.

Another effect of ideology is on the content and construction of the school curriculum. Actually, there are several forms of curriculum operating simultaneously in any school at any given time. The overt or formal curriculum is the body of official knowledge that usually carries some kind of institutional endorsement, either from the state or the district. This formal curriculum is also an ideological document. The decisions about what is necessary to be officially educated (i.e., receive a diploma) are largely informed by ideology. Why is certain knowledge included and other knowledge excluded from the official curriculum? True, we cannot teach everything, but that still does not answer the question of why some knowledge is important and included, whereas other knowledge is less important and excluded.

This excluded knowledge is sometimes referred to as the null curriculum. This is the structured silence, constructed by schools, about certain issues and perspectives. The null curriculum is just as purposeful as the formal curriculum. Someone, or some group, must make a conscious decision about what to exclude from the formal curriculum: hence, in the null curriculum. These decisions are all based on our ideological and cultural beliefs about what is and is not important knowledge.

Culture is the multitude of ways in which groups and individuals both live out and make sense of the conditions as well as the social and material environs of their lives.6 Culture is not some set of artifacts, although there are forms of cultural production such as painting, music, and dance. Rather, culture is the social practices and ideological constructions we use to make sense out of, and give order to, our worlds. People do not inhabit cultures, but live out cultural relationships. We do not put on culture as one would don an article of clothing, although clothing might be a form of cultural expression. Rather, culture is produced in the interchange between self and the world. Within this transactional dialogue, our social actions are driven by culture while those same actions simultaneously define and redefine culture in the spheres in which we circulate. Thus, culture is continually in a dynamic state of reiteration and redefinition.7

We must therefore acknowledge that culture is something produced in our society. In this book we examine the roles of public schools in the production and reproduction of culture. As
schools interconnect with both local communities and the larger social whole, they form complex systems within which individuals circulate. As we move within these venues, we produce cultural understandings, artifacts, and meanings. Thus culture is produced by people trying to make sense of the limitations constructed by social forms and structures in contemporary society.

Public schools are one place where individuals with different cultural perspectives come together on a regular basis. At once, schools become sites of cultural interaction and contestation. However, schools do not exist as some neutral field on which these relationships are played out: Schools themselves are culturally constructed sites that perform a filtering function. By designating certain cultural beliefs and actions as acceptable and others as deviant, the schools value and devalue specific cultural perspectives. The complexity begins to arise, however, when we recognize that we, as individuals, are sophisticated intersections of multiple cultural perspectives.

We do not circulate individually in a single cultural sphere. This is far too simplistic and offers a view of culture based on some gross generalizations that may lead to severe stereotyping. For instance, what is Black culture or White culture? Do all African Americans or European Americans share the same cultural base and see the world in exactly the same way? Of course not, and neither do any of the other large social groups identified in contemporary society. As social beings we are the intersection of multiple cultural points found in our ethnicity, our social class, our sex, our gendered identities, our sexual orientation, our religion, where we live, and the like. Furthermore, these constructions are hermeneutic and change over time as we move in and out of various social settings, accumulate new experiences, and meet new people. We live out multiple cultural relations simultaneously in sophisticated sets of dynamic constructions. This is fundamentally different from viewing culture as artifacts on a museum wall.

But why are those museum artifacts somehow perceived as forms of high cultural expression and representative of serious culture? How is serious culture perceived as different from popular culture? This dichotomy of serious and popular evokes some sense of the elite versus the masses, and this is one way that cultural questions help us understand how power is produced and manifested in the wider social order. In every place there are dominant social groups who control the material and symbolic wealth of a community/society. Those groups construct cultural practices and representations that affirm their central values, interests, and concerns. These practices and representations affirm the dominant culture.

Some assert that the central purpose of formal education is to induct youth into the culture of a community/society. The question then centers on whose cultural practices and representations are reproduced in the content, organization, structures, and rituals of schools? Most likely it is the cultural practices and ideological truths of the dominant group. These are the groups who many times control schools at multiple levels: school board members, faculty, administrators, state education officials, textbook writers, professors of education, and so forth. This should not be seen as some sinister plot, but rather as the result of particular social groups controlling the content and conduct of public schooling. Most of the time we believe our cultural perspectives to be the best (the result of ideology). Therefore, if one is in a position to control the content of schools, one will probably want one's own perspective to be taught to the youth of a community.

We might ask, however, if it might not be dangerous to the elite to teach the dominant culture to the masses—to throw open a door of access for all. This is the point at which the multiplicity of culture plays an important role. Members of the elite are not simply those who manifest one set of cultural practices. They also must circulate within other "correct" cultural spheres such as those of social class, race, and gender. Schools, therefore, do not teach everyone how to circulate within those dominant social groups. Rather, the intention is to teach an appreciation of and a belief in the superiority of those forms of cultural expression found in the dominant culture and, by default, the natural
superiority of those dominant social groups. For example, it is not necessary for working-class students to actually understand the complexities of Mozart or even appreciate the music. It is required only that they acknowledge this form of cultural expression as surpassing others such as rock, rap, country, jazz, and the like.

Where there are dominant social groups there are also subordinate social groups and, of course, subordinate cultures, sometimes referred to as minority cultures. However, to assume that there is one culture for each minority group in this country is, again, highly simplistic. One mistake made by many is assuming that minority and subordinate indicate some inherent inferiority. This is not the case at all. These individuals and groups simply do not have the same access to the material and symbolic wealth and resources of a community/society as do members of the dominant groups. Thus “minority” and “subordinate” are quantitative terms indicating access, not qualitative terms indicating worth.

Another cultural cluster are subcultures: highly specialized subsets of either dominant or subordinate groups. Individuals who form subcultures often choose to display distinct symbols and engage in social practices that are offensive to the parent culture in order to clearly establish an identity outside and in opposition to that of the genitor. Sometimes various subcultures move into mainstream prominence. In the 1960s, groups such as hippies, Black Panthers, and the American Indian Movement, to name a few, emerged to challenge the dominant culture of mainstream America. Within schools small cadres of students exist who have carved out for themselves a subculture niche. You might be intimately familiar with such groups from your own life as a student.

All cultural groups express themselves through particular forms of music, dress, food, religion, dance, and language. These practices are more or less unique and have developed from the efforts of groups to shape their lives from their surrounding material and political environment. However, it is not unusual for one group (often the dominant social group) to appropriate and introduce to the mainstream cultural forms whose origins are in subordinate cultures or subcultures. One effect of this appropriation might be to redefine the original intentions of that particular cultural form. For example, rap music, appropriated from its origins in urban street culture by more mainstream artists such as Kriss Kross and Markey Mark, has been embedded within other musical forms and styles by artists such as Madonna, Paula Abdul, and Janet Jackson. Whereas one effect is a more widespread hearing for rap artists, another is the homogenization of the form accomplished by severing the style from the cultural venue out of which it grew. Thus mainstream rap is fundamentally different from original street versions and no longer functions as an effective cultural form for that segment of our urban population.

Along with the production of culture is the concurrent deconstruction of culture. Deculturalization is the process of stripping away a person’s culture and replacing it with other cultural forms, usually those of the dominant group. The “civilizing” of the children of native peoples and the “Americanization” of some immigrants to this country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries took deculturalization as a primary objective. In this process, those who complied were deemed educated, whereas those who resisted were considered ignorant. Deculturalization was then understood as a desirable process because the cultural perspectives of other groups were judged inferior or even dangerous to the established social order. In nearly every instance it is the dominant culture that engages in these forms of “cultural cleansing” with subordinate or minority cultures as the target of their efforts.

In contemporary society, some groups have more influence than others in the production of culture, sense, and meaning, not because their positions are superior, but because they have greater access to the avenues of public communication such as the media, advertising, and the schools. Through the process of hegemony, the ideological messages of the dominant culture are infused throughout our daily lives. The growing corporate connections and expanding technological capabilities in contemporary society offer even wider avenues for the dissemination of particular cultural perspectives. Consider, for example, what some have termed the “Disneyfication”
of our culture as the Disney Corporation infiltrates our daily lives through the purchasing of commercial television networks, publishing houses, and public lands. ¹¹

Now let us turn our attention to three locations of cultural production investigated in this book. The first we consider is race, an artificial social category for the grouping of humans based on the primary physical distinction of skin color that has no basis in scientific fact. ¹² This grouping is usually used as a pretext for the inequitable distribution of material and symbolic wealth, resources, justice, or freedom. The smallest natural division of living creatures is species; therefore, any subdivision beyond that is a human construction. Many people, however, confuse race with ethnicity. Race is a socially constructed division based on physical distinctions, whereas ethnicity is a group of individuals with a shared sense of peoplehood. Individuals with the same skin color do not necessarily share this sense of ethnic community.

A belief in race is nearly always accompanied by a set of normative stereotypes assigned to a particular group on the basis of their skin color. Think about the larger stereotypes in our society: Asian Americans are inherently excellent in mathematics, African Americans in sports, European Americans in advanced academics, and so on. Although these stereotypes are based on popular mythology, they have become embedded in our ideologies. A direct parallel would be to argue that all brunettes are inherently excellent in mathematics, redheads in sports, and blondes in advanced academics. This may sound silly, but these assumptions are based on exactly the same defining criteria: physical appearance.

Belief in racial characteristics fosters discriminatory practices. Racial stratification is the construction of human strata (in the geological sense) on the basis of skin color, which justifies unequal distribution of and inequitable access to material and symbolic wealth. In other words, the closer your group is to the top, the more you get. Racism is the ideology that justifies racial stratification, and racist acts are those actions based on racism through which racial stratification is reinforced and perpetuated. Thus, racist acts occur because people hold racist beliefs and act on those beliefs. Those actions result in the perpetuation of racial stratification and division.

Institutional racism is the codification and bureaucratization of practices, knowledge, and values that both produce and justify the inequitable treatment of people on the basis of race. Institutional racism can occur in any social organization, even if the individuals in the institution are not themselves perpetuating racist acts. For instance, you might work in a school that tracks students through the use of tests that are prejudicial toward certain groups. This does not necessarily make you a racist, but the construction of the institutional practices around you might be racist.

The primary point is this: Although the basic assumption of race is an illusion (albeit convenient for some), the effects generated by and the actions committed in the name of race are very real and concrete parts of our daily lives. The question, then, is what roles do schools play in this process? If we teach only about getting along with one another and tolerating other races (i.e., Black history month), we fail to address the basic issue that race is an illusion in the first place. In the name of prejudice reduction, we are treating the symptoms and not the disease. Prejudice, however, should not be confused with racism although racial prejudice does exist. Prejudice is the irrational suspicion or hatred of an individual or group formed without an examination of that individual or group. This is not to say that exposure will guarantee a reduction in prejudicial attitudes. How many times have we heard someone refer to a person from another cultural group as “a credit to their …”? We are all prejudiced at one time or another in our social lives. The key is to resist acting on those prejudices and to attempt overcoming our irrational fears of “the other.”

The second source of cultural production is social class, defined through the economic and political relationships found within a given society. Class cultures are produced by individuals and groups living under constraints of income level, occupation, place of residence, and other indicators of status and social rank. Again, people do not inhabit social classes, but live out class relationships, some of which might be simulta-
neously dominant and subordinate. As with any cultural phenomenon, social class is generative and produces particular forms of culture that serve to define and maintain class boundaries.

Finally, there is gender. Like race, gender is another socially constructed term. In the discourse of public life many people wrongly use "sex" and "gender" interchangeably. Sex is the biological distinction of male or female grounded in one's role in the reproductive process. Gender is a set of social definitions (masculine and feminine) that are fluid and change over time. Much of the confusion occurs when individuals mistakenly attribute stereotypical gender characteristics with sexual roles: Females are genetically nurturing and dependent whereas males are genetically strong and independent. Again, this artificially constructed concept leads to concrete effects in the forms of sexism, sexual stratification, sexist acts, and institutional sexism (i.e., "the glass ceiling").

**A NOTE ON OBSERVING IN CLASSROOMS**

One purpose of this text is to provide you with a guide to help structure observations and field experiences in schools. In some ways, familiarity with classrooms hinders observation. Because each of us has spent a lot of time in classrooms already, our tendency is to continue the activities familiar to us. That is, we have been students in classrooms for at least a dozen years. We are accustomed to sitting quietly at our desks, paying attention to the teacher, noticing things other students are doing (e.g., talking, passing notes, taking notes, etc.), but trying not to let these activities distract us from learning the subject matter. Thus our tendency is to focus our attention on what the instructor is teaching. As students, the content was our most important focus, and noticing other things was a distraction.

During the field experience/observation, the major focus of attention needs to shift. No longer is content the main focus. Here, the content or subject matter may become a distraction. When the teacher writes something on the board, this is not a signal to put it in your notebook. Instead, during this type of observation, you may find a variety of aspects important. For example, you may note the type of material the teacher puts on the board. Is it a summary of main points, key words, or vocabulary, or is it a student's name singled out for praise or reprimand? In contrast, your observation might focus more on how students respond to the teacher as he or she writes on the board. For example, do they duplicate the information on the board in their notes, or do they take the opportunity to engage in other activities? Your observation may need to account for both of these aspects.

The exercises in this book provide you with a guide to help focus your attention away from the content or course material of a classroom and toward what is happening in the classroom and why. Why is the classroom organized as it is? Why is the teacher standing in a particular location? Why does the teacher move around at some times and not at others? Assuming that schools reflect society, how is society reflected by the school/classroom you are observing? Some of these questions might produce tension as you watch the teacher doing things with which you might not agree. This is healthy. This tension is an indicator that you are aware of the multiple layers of meaning and interaction occurring in the classroom. Such awareness can only be an asset in your later work.

Some of the exercises focus on schools in broad terms and address larger questions; others focus on specific interactions in particular classroom situations. Our goal is to provide a framework for activity that helps you address these and other questions. Finally, because schools are not neat little compartments of interaction, there is some overlap between certain exercises (e.g., dress codes and regulating the body). This overlap is not a weakness or repetition, because we are asking you to look at the same phenomenon from more than one perspective.

You will notice that the text is organized around the following five themes:

1. Preobservational activities: The exploration of self
2. Regulation of the "schooled" body
3. Pedagogy and school cultures: Issues of race, class, and gender
4. The school as an ecosystem
5. After the field experience: Now what?

Section 1 takes as its starting point the everyday lived experiences of preservice teachers. In section 2, the focus is on questioning how policies and practices of schools may operate to control what constitutes appropriate raced, gendered, classed, and sexualized student and teacher bodies. Section 3 examines the critical aspects of classroom structures, teaching, and learning. Section 4 illuminates some of the competing metaphors that underlie the organizational culture of public schools. Section 5 challenges students to redesign aspects of schools, schooling, and teacher education.

It is our hope that this book encourages you to engage in critical observations of and reflections on your field experiences including the production of personal narratives and an understanding that the work of education exists at multiple (and sometimes contradictory) levels of meaning.

NOTES

6McLaren, p. 171.
9McLaren, op. cit.
STUDENT GOVERNANCE AND DECISION MAKING

Background

Student governance and decision making are perhaps the most controversial and least understood components in the new site-based management models of school restructuring. Students are not generally viewed as having the cognitive, psychological, moral, or emotional maturity needed to make reasonable and responsible choices concerning their own educational programs, learning environments, and work pace. Students usually are viewed as consumers or products of the educational process; teachers are viewed as the proper classroom authorities in all matters related to curriculum, pedagogy, rules, and discipline. Most school curricula are set, and instruction is centered on the mastery of a state-mandated set of grade-specific standards. Nationally standardized tests control and shape an increasing amount of the students' in-class learning experiences and required texts. Not unexpectedly, this sort of top-down classroom "colonization" of students has resulted in myriad forms of student subservience, acquiescence, passivity, retreat, disruption, and revolt.  

As school systems struggle to revise and transform older administrative structures based on top-down management systems designed to ensure compliance, order, predictability, and social control, new concepts of school leadership and empowerment have been adopted by school administrators, teachers, and students. The school in which you presently reside most likely contains an odd combination of both organizational models. Student empowerment suggests that students are a central part of the educational process and should be encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their educational work. In this sense, teachers and students share tasks and co-negotiate learning options in educational cultures that are collegial, respectful, and collaborative. The goal of student empowerment is to take a student from dependency to independence.  

Activity

This exercise is designed to position you as an investigator into the nature and degree of student power and participation in the decision-making structures of the larger school organization.

1. Obtain and examine a copy of the student handbook at your host school. What topics are addressed? What do most of the standing regulations seem to address: behavior? clothing? conformity? allegiance to the organization?

2. Attend some of the regularly scheduled meetings of the student government. Discover how student government is organized at your school and what specific responsibilities are delegated to it? What is the scope and nature of the decision-making powers assigned to the student government? Do most of the "decisions" appear to be preordained? What issues appear to be out of bounds? For example, to what extent is student government involved in course selection and development, teacher evaluation, school management and budget decisions, scheduling decisions, luncheon menus, and disciplinary procedures? Is student government largely relegated to decisions concerning bulletin boards, prom queen, fund raisers, weekend dance or events arrangements, or class trip planning? Do you feel
a sense of real empowerment in this group? If so, why? To what do you attribute this?

**Reflective Narrative**

Most student organizations have very limited powers and regularly address only issues of little relevance to the larger school and district-wide educational bureaucracies. Interview some of the student leaders and members of the various student cliques concerning their perceptions of the school power structures. Through informal conversations with these various student subcultures, attempt to develop a slang classificatory system for all terms used to identify student groups in the school (i.e., the nerds, the jocks, the social climbers, the preppies, the druggies, etc.). Ask them some of the following questions: Who seems to control the dominant culture of the student organizations in terms of defining the acceptable boundaries of behavior? Which student subgroups are most actively involved in student government and why? How is membership determined? Do the student leaders seem to represent all the students or just a particular subculture of the students? Or are they merely those most willing to implement mandates from the administrative staff?

**Related Readings**


Background

Schools are both organizations and communities. They contain within them sophisticated networks (formal and informal) of adult subcultures (e.g., the administrators, teachers, coaches, maintenance staff, secretaries, paraprofessionals, tenured and nontenured faculty, males and females, etc.) as well as youth subcultures. Although each of these subcultures has its own informal boundaries, rituals, and rules, they all must exist and function within the boundaries and regulations of the larger school organizational structure, interacting with one another and the larger society. This larger school culture is considered the dominant culture, whereas the others are regarded as subcultures. School rules and regulations are often ways of maintaining the dominant culture of the organization against the dynamic pressures from subcultural groups for greater participation. School rules also work to maintain a certain set of power relationships between various groups in the school. The manner in which governance (decision making) occurs within the organization is clearly linked to these interests of power.21

Subcultural groups both control and are controlled by the school organizations in which they serve. In a sense, there is a continual dialogue among subcultural groups themselves and with the administrative elite. This creates a dynamic tension in a school no matter how autocratic, conformist, or participatory its basic organizational structure. In most American public schools, these subcultural relationships are perceived as threats to the status quo and impediments to the smooth top-down administration of the educational bureaucracy. Thus, a dominant organizational culture develops dedicated largely to managing change and maintaining control.22

Activity

Examine the manner in which faculty governance is conducted at your host school.23 How is governance organized? What is its position on a flow chart of the school or the school district? Who serves? How is membership determined? Are the faculty "leaders" chosen merely to be rubber stamps of administrative decisions, or is it the other way around with administrators selected because they have a history of supporting teacher empowerment? Who are the department or program chairpersons? What are their roles and responsibilities? Does any one person or any one group have the informal power to control decision making? How did they gain such informal power and influence?

What issues are addressed by these faculty and staff groups? How much real input does the faculty have regarding curricular, personnel, programs, policy, or financial decisions? Is faculty governance merely advisory or does the faculty have any real power of decision making? Observe how and what changes take place at your host school. Do the faculty seem most concerned with meeting their own needs, satisfying administrators, or helping students?

Do the faculty at the school appear to be satisfied or concerned about the decision-making power they have (or do not have) at this school? If they are concerned about their lack of empowerment, does it get expressed through the formal
political process or more often through informal acts of defiance and resistance (i.e., leaving when the school bell rings, sitting passively in faculty meetings, etc.)? Are the custodial staff, secretaries, and paraprofessionals ever included in the faculty decision-making bodies? If not, why?

In what kind of political activity are the faculty at your host school allowed to participate (Are they allowed to become actively involved in school board elections or hold political office? Are teachers allowed to organize at the school? Have there been any strikes? If so, what were the issues? Talk to the teachers, particularly the union organizers. Do the teachers’ organizations influence decision making at the school? How much influence do they exert? What are the issues? Are there union contracts at the school? Review these contracts for their provisions regarding salaries, curriculum structuring, class size, and so forth. Do you see any connections being established between teacher governance structures, increased democratic decision-making formats, and greater community involvement in the school?

Reflective Narrative

How do the faculty and staff governance structures compare with the student governance structures? Whose interests do the faculty governance structures seem to favor: staffs’? teachers’? administrators’? parents’? no one’s? Are the administrative, faculty, staff, and student governance structures mutually informing and supportive, or do their aims seem to be at odds with one another?

Related Readings


THE ROLE OF LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS

Background

The framers of the United States Constitution made no mention of education, but left that responsibility, instead, to the states through the reserved powers’ clause. In turn, most states, in their constitution or laws, decided that the operational governance functions for schools should reside in local school boards. In the 19th century, governance was lodged in school boards largely responsive to local community cultures and traditions. However, by the 1890s, rapid immigration, urbanization, industrialization, and business consolidations brought many changes to American society. As part of the progressive municipal reform movement, educational governance systems were centralized, and 120,000 local school boards were consolidated into what is now only about 15,000. Leadership shifted to a new professional middle-class group trained in the theories of scientific management, and large statewide educational bureaucracies grew at exponential rates. Today, almost one half of our public school population is enrolled in only 1% of our school districts. As a result, many concede that we have now constructed massive educational bureaucracies that enable national and state control over almost every aspect of local schooling in the United States.24

The Institute for Educational Leadership25 issued a major report on school boards in 1986. The report concluded that school boards lacked both the capacity for meaningful goal setting and the ability to make plans to accomplish specific local goals. School boards, it seems, were not willing to take the political risks needed to provide leadership for locally generated school reforms. School board members were not taking the time really to learn about the issues and seemed reluctant to decentralize decision making to school sites. Board members appeared to be more comfortable with national and state centralized systems of control over local school districts, especially regarding reform efforts to implement national standards, curricula, and standardized testing.

Local school boards are being lobbied by teacher unions, parent groups, and local business coalitions to provide a greater degree of local power, control, and decision making concerning local school governance structures, curricula content, and overall school programs and policies. Thus, the local school board has once again become an arena for political struggles between those seeking greater national and state control over local schools and those advocating increased democratic participation and decision making by the local community, parents, and teachers. Your own local school board also likely reflects many of these same tensions and struggles.

Activity

Attend a local school-board meeting. Before or after the meeting introduce yourself to some members of the school board and ask whether you might interview them either in person or by phone at a time and place convenient for them.

After gathering some initial profile data on your school-board member, tell your interviewee that you would like to find out more about what school-related issues are of most interest to school-board members. Use the chart from Fig 4.1 to record the board member’s responses.
Reflective Narrative

Study the responses made by school board members to your survey. Then give the same survey to some of the teachers and administrators at your host school. Do you notice any trends in their responses, especially to your questions about the importance of certain educational issues? Write a short response to your survey indicating how and why your own responses seem to be different from or the same as those provided by school board members, administrators, or the teachers at your host school.

Consider further the following questions: Has the trend toward centralized decision making and standard rules served American education well, considering the purposes of public education you deem legitimate? What have been the positive and negative achievements?

What specific kinds of decision making would you decentralize and destandardize? What might be the positive benefits, and what problems might you anticipate?

Related Readings


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School-Related Concern</th>
<th>Little Interest</th>
<th>Some Interest</th>
<th>Great Interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Financial support for schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Collective bargaining for teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Parental participation in schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Site-based management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Finding excellent teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. School security issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Inadequate facilities/Computers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Curriculum development issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. School tracking systems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Crime/vandalism/violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. State-mandated curriculum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Racial/ethnic tensions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Education for at-risk students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Student truancy/apathy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. School management/leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. School/Business partnerships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Charter school development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. School choice/Vouchers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Implementing national standards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Student diversity/equity issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIG 4.1. School Board Members' Concerns and Interests Survey Form\textsuperscript{26} (reproduce as needed).
THE POLITICS OF EDUCATIONAL DECISION MAKING

Background

Before the 1960s, local community participation in educational decision making during the 20th century was limited not only in terms of who participated and how, but also in the range of educational issues deemed appropriate for grass-roots input. There was a tacit assumption that most educational decisions required technical expertise, and therefore should be delegated to educational professionals. Issues relating to governance, budget, personnel, curriculum, and discipline were generally considered outside the realm of local citizenry.

Much of this changed as a result of the community control movement in the 1960s as the old consensus broke down. Newly politicized groups of minorities and women, formerly excluded from the educational decision-making process, demanded to be heard. The idea that schools were essentially technocratically engineered, bureaucratic "machines" best run by the professionals was attacked. Although this community control movement did not produce any dramatic restructuring of political power in the educational bureaucracy, it did broaden the scope of local participation in many aspects of school decision making.

At this time, many large city school districts adopted some form of administrative decentralization with varying degrees of community participation. Some school districts began experimental community-controlled schools, and thousands of others added new parent/citizen advisory committees. A number of Indian tribes initiated community control experiments in both public and Bureau of Indian Affairs' schools near reservations. Generally, it can be concluded that more parents and other nonprofessional community members are participating than ever before in a wide-ranging number and variety of school programs and operations as tutors, volunteers, librarians, lunchroom assistants, hall monitors, classroom paraprofessionals, leaders to extracurricular activities, special resource teachers, and the like.

We are now being inundated with a bewildering array of terms such as school-based management, site-based management, the self-managing school, the self-renewing school, and school empowerment. These terms lead us to conclude that the impact of the current reform movements has been to increase local participation by students, parents, teachers, administrators, and local citizens in all aspects of the local community.

Unmasking appearances is the purpose of the following exercise. Ask yourself the following questions about the nature of educational decision making? In what issues do students, parents, teachers, administrators, and/or local citizens participate? In what ways do they participate? What are the consequences of their participation?

Activity

Complete the left side of the chart from Fig. 4.2 by finding out who actually does control the decision making regarding each of the educational issues listed (list as many numbers as apply).

Complete the right side of this same chart. Interview several teachers and administrators at
your school about who should control (or have more input into the decision-making process regarding) each of the educational issues listed. To assist your interviewees, ask them to examine the chart from Fig. 4.3 and tell you who should have more control over each educational issue. Make a list of as many of the numbers as the respondent wishes to use.

Following your survey of teachers and administrators, look around your own classroom and the school classrooms, halls, and meeting rooms. Do you see any explicit messages to the students encouraging their participation in the school decision-making bodies? Are there bulletin boards with up-to-date information on the issues being discussed by students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the local school board? Does the bulletin board provide a listing of the current names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of contact persons within each organization? Are there any formal structures, procedures, or networks so that students can easily provide their informal input on these issues? What recommendations might you make to the school administrators on ways to improve the process by which students can be informed and can contribute their ideas to the various decision-making groups in the school?

**Reflective Narrative**

Study the responses to your survey made by the teachers and administrators. Did you notice any trends in their responses? For example, did you find that teachers are almost never formally included in most of the important school-related decision making? Did you find that the teachers desired some form of input on most of these issues? Can you think of some good reasons why the insights, perspectives, and experiences of the classroom teachers might be essential in making good policy decisions on these issues? Can you think of reasons why teachers have been excluded from the political process for so long? Did you find that the teachers desired a greater degree of student input on these issues too? If not, why do you think this is the case? Do you think that students should be included to a greater degree in the formal decision-making bodies of the school?

**Related Readings**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does Control?</th>
<th>Control What?</th>
<th>Should Control?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To evaluate student performance?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To elect the school principal?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To elect a local superintendent?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To close a school?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formulate school disciplinary procedures?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School schedule?/Classroom schedules?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide lunchroom menus?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formulate teacher qualification policies?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote on teacher placement/retention?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose classroom textbooks?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine attendance policy?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility for school fiscal policy?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine school dress policy?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine classroom-level grading policies?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine whether school is providing equality of educational opportunity?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number/type of courses for graduation?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstreaming policies?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporal punishment rules?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial balance of students?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom curriculum, textbooks, and methods?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIG 4.2. The politics of educational decision making: Who does or should control? (reproduce as needed).
### Local Level Groups

1. Parents at local level
2. Local boards of education
3. School principal
4. Student council
5. Local education associations (PTA)
6. Teacher council at each school
7. Teachers
8. Local district superintendent
9. Members/citizens of the community
10. Students
11. School staff (e.g., bus drivers, dieticians, health officers, attendance officers)
12. Local police departments
13. Local business groups

### State Level Groups

27. State legislatures
28. State boards of education
29. State superintendent
30. The governor
31. Governor's select committee
32. State department of education
33. Urban city majors
34. Urban city councils

### National Level Groups

14. U.S. President
15. U.S. Congress
16. U.S. Supreme Court
17. U.S. Federal government
18. Department of Education
19. Council of Chief State Officers
20. National teachers' professional organizations
21. Ad hoc national educational task forces convened by U.S. President
22. National professional education accreditation/certification boards
23. National education standards boards
24. Federal district judges
25. Secretary of Education
26. Presidential advisors

### Extralegal/Pressure Groups

35. Education experts
36. Teachers' unions
37. Textbook companies
38. National testing companies (CEEB, ETS)
39. Colleges of education
40. National teachers' unions (AFT and NEA)
41. Political action coalitions (PACs)
42. Ad hoc single issue interest/lobby groups
43. Private philanthropic foundations (e.g., Carnegie, Rockefeller, MacArthur, etc.)
44. Corporate business leaders (CEOs)
45. Think tank groups (Brookings, Heritage)
46. Political parties
47. Lobbyists
48. Religious organizations and groups

---

**FIG 4.3.** Who does or should control? Groups involved in educational decision making (reproduce as needed).
ASSESSING FAMILY–SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

Background

An examination of the history of schooling in America provides clear evidence that the separation of the home from the school has a long tradition in public education, dating back to the early Republic period in American history. Horace Mann, for example, thought that poor Irish immigrant parents lacked the moral values, work habits, and social attitudes needed to enculturate their children into the American way of life and industrial work force. Thus, schools were seen as superior and ideal substitutes for the perceived culturally deficient immigrant family culture.29

Recent research studies, however, have overwhelmingly demonstrated that where school programs have a strong component of parental involvement, students are consistently better achievers than in identical programs with less parental involvement.30 Students in schools that maintain frequent contact with parents consistently outperform other schools. These positive effects persist, too, well beyond the short term. For example, children of color and those from low-income families who participated in preschool programs with high levels of parent involvement were still outperforming their peers when they reached senior high school.31

Although teachers and school administrators often publicly support the importance of greater parental involvement in the schools in official school communiques, the actual performance of American schools in this regard is less impressive. The term parental involvement, too, has been subject to a wide variety of interpretations. Does parental involvement mean that parents should be considered expert advisors? willing volun-
teers? teacher assistants? silent partners? supportive audience? collaborative decision makers? or enthusiastic day-to-day problem solvers? In the following exercise, you are asked to consider ways that educators can nurture and strengthen the family–school relationship.

Activity

Phase One. The checklist developed by the staff at the National Committee for Citizens in Education lists some of these new parental involvement initiatives and provides a diagnostic questionnaire that you can use to evaluate how well your host school is working with parents.32

Assessing the Family–School Relationship Checklist (Answer “yes” or “no”)

Principle 1: School Climate

_____ Do office personnel greet parents (in person or on the phone) in a friendly, courteous way?

_____ Do posted signs warmly welcome parents and visitors?

_____ Are directions written or posted to help parents and visitors find their way around the school?

_____ Is there a comfortable reception area for parents and visitors, equipped with a coat rack and information about the school?

_____ Is there an orientation program for the incoming class of students and their families?
Is there a program for helping mid-year transfer students and their families to settle into the school (e.g., is a staff member assigned to be their host)?

Are there regular social occasions or events at which parents and school staff can get to know each other?

Does the principal have clearly posted office hours when the parents and students can drop in to talk?

Does the school permit parents to observe in class?

Does the school have an "open door" policy, that welcomes parents at any time during the school day?

Principle 2: Communication

Is there a school newsletter with up-to-date information about holidays, special events, and the like.

Does the school send home a calendar listing dates of parent-teacher conferences, report cards, holiday schedules, and major events?

Does the school send home a directory of key PTA representatives and school personnel, with phone numbers?

Does the school hold annual back-to-school nights and open houses?

Does the school have a hotline for parents and students to deal with emergencies, rumors, and other burning questions?

Do your policies encourage all teachers to communicate frequently with parents about their curriculum plans, expectations for homework, grading policies, and how they should help?

Do parents know where to go with their concerns, questions, and complaints?

Does the principal review all the school's written communications, including report-card format and how test results are reported, to make sure they are respectful of a parent's adult status and yet easy to understand?

Are parents informed of their rights? This includes access to school records, due process in disciplinary actions, and participation in special education decisions.

Other?

Principle 3: Parents as Collaborators and Problem Solvers

Does the school require at least one parent-teacher conference each year for each student?

Does the school offer to set up teacher-parent conferences on request?

Does the school provide in-service training or other opportunities to help teachers communicate and collaborate with parents?

Is there an early warning policy directing teachers to consult with parents promptly if a child is falling behind or having social behavioral problems?

Does the school inform parents right away if a student does not show up for school? Are parents promptly consulted if there is a pattern of unexcused absences?

Does the elementary school confer with parents on the choice of classroom settings or teacher?

Does the high school require parent approval of a student's choice of courses?

Are training and resources (such as a parent advocate) provided for parents of special-education students to help them participate in the Individualized Education Plan and other processes?

Other?
Principle 4: Parents as Advisors and Decision Makers

Does the school publish and keep current a policy handbook for parents and students that covers discipline, absences, homework, dress standards, parent and student rights, and so forth?

If the school needs to develop a new policy or program, is there a mechanism for obtaining parent input?

Is there a parent-teacher organization that meets at least once a month?

Do parents ever approach the principal on their own initiative to question school policy or procedures, aside from procedures that affect only their child?

When a problem arises at the school, such as a sharp increase in vandalism or drug use or a significant decline in test scores, does the staff inform and enlist the help of parents immediately?

Are there established procedures for dealing with parents’ demands, especially those of a vocal minority?

Other?

Principle 5: Outreach to All Families

Is there a policy for informing non-custodial parents about their children’s performance and school events?

Do teachers sometimes meet outside school hours with parents who have jobs and cannot easily get away during the working day?

Does the school hold evening and weekend events for its families so that employed parents (mothers, fathers, others) can come to see the school?

If there is a substantial minority language population at the school; are written communications provided in that language?

Is in-service training offered for teachers on how to deal with problems caused by divorce, separation, or imprisonment, such as how to avoid being caught between warring parents, or the impact of family breakup on children?

Are there any special programs, such as peer group discussions, for students whose parents are separating, divorced, imprisoned, or deceased?

Is there an outreach program for parents—especially minority parents—who do not participate at all in school events, (e.g., in which faculty or parent volunteers are willing to make home visits or attend church meetings to answer questions,allay fears, and explain the importance of being involved in their children’s education)?

When a particular parent refuses to cooperate with the principal or teacher, is there a school staff member trained to intervene and work with that parent?

Other?

Principle 6: Promoting a Philosophy of Partnership

Does the school have a written statement about partnership with parents that is clearly available, especially in all written publications?

Are there in-service opportunities for training teachers to work with parents?

Is time at staff meetings devoted to discussing working with parents and reinforcing efforts of teachers’ and parents?

Are teachers encouraged to consult with the principal if they are having difficulty dealing with a parent?
Does the principal offer to sit in at meetings with teachers and parents or to mediate any dispute between them?

Does the principal substitute in the classroom or make substitutes available to allow teachers and other staff to have meetings with parents?

Does the school offer assistance to help parents with babysitting, transportation, or other logistical difficulties, so they can attend school events?

Are space, staff support and resources, (i.e., reasonable access to a copy machine, computer services, a desk, etc.) provided for parents’ school-related activities?

Other?

Principle 7: Volunteer Participation

Does the school have an organized volunteer program with a coordinator (paid or volunteer)?

Does the program draw from retired people, the business community, local citizens, and students as well as parents?

Is there a wide variety of jobs available for volunteers, including those that could be done at home or on weekends?

Are all parents expected to volunteer in some way during the school year?

Is the program reassessed periodically, with the participation of parents, teachers, and other volunteers, to ensure that the program is meeting school needs effectively?

Are local businesses and community organizations contacted to provide learning opportunities outside the school and to explore career options for high-school students?

Has a local business (or other institutions) been asked to “adopt” your school?

Other?

Phase Two. The following suggested activities are designed to help you complete a final assessment of your host school’s family-school relationships, especially from the perspective of the many barriers that face parents in their attempts to become more involved in their children’s education.

1. Take a snapshot or draw a picture of the entrance to the school. Examine it carefully. Does the school look inviting, friendly, and homey? How do you think that parents of different cultural or class groups would tend to “read” the school entrance? What architectural features present physical barriers between parents and schools?

2. Now, take a second snapshot or draw a picture of the school’s main office. Examine it carefully. Does the school’s main office look inviting and friendly? Is there a special room for parents at the school? Does anyone in the school have a special assignment to make parents feel welcome? How were you greeted when you came into the office? Is there any official protocol established in the school to deal with parental visits? Are translators available for parents who do not speak English? What are parents and other visitors required to do when they enter the school? Sit in the office for an hour. Make note of the interaction between parents and school personnel.

3. Make a list of all the special events held at the school during the year that include parents. When are these events held? How are they advertised? Are parents invited individually? Is child care and transportation provided for these events? How does the school communicate with the parents? What messages do school policies give to parents about their acceptance in the daily life of school? Are some groups of parents more welcome in the school than other groups? How does the scheduling of open houses, PTA meetings, and conferences prevent some parents from being more involved in the school?

4. Attend a PTA meeting. Make a tally by both race and gender of those who attend. Find out how PTA officers are elected. In what activities
is the PTA involved? Interview the head of the PTA and ask her or him to construct a similar list of the ways that she or he conceptualizes the idea of parental involvement.

**Reflective Narrative**

Now look more critically at the information that you have gathered. Have any of your findings surprised you? On a separate page, make a list of the areas you determine to be special strengths at the schools and those that need more work. Discuss your findings with a school administrator.

**Related Readings**


ASSESSING THE PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

Background

The involvement of parents in the school has been found to be an important indicator of student success. Recent educational research studies have overwhelmingly confirmed the psychological, social, and academic benefits of greater parental involvement and participation at every level of children’s elementary, middle, and high-school education. Given the demands of parental work schedules today (regardless of social class), most parents find it difficult (if not impossible) to be physically involved in their children’s schools, especially during normal school hours. Research also shows, however, that parents of all social classes want to be more involved in their children’s education but seek more direction from the classroom teacher. Teachers themselves feel ambivalent about the wisdom of encouraging greater parental involvement in the schools, and only about 47% of inner city teachers surveyed believed in strong family involvement. As a result, schools have begun to see the value of more in-service teacher education programs focusing on parental involvement and have begun to experiment with many innovative and creative parental involvement programs and practices.

In the following exercise you will be invited to examine the nature and scope of parent-teacher relationships at your host school from the perspective of the many barriers that parents face. Consider the following questions. Despite the growing body of research literature that catalogs the effectiveness of parental involvement programs, are the parent-teacher connections at your host school either nonexistent or confined to periodic, superficial "displays" of parental support (i.e., the annual PTA meeting, meet-the-teacher nights, and end-of-year awards ceremonies)? Are there any school and teacher practices that deter further parental involvement? What is meant by the term "parental involvement" at your host school?

Activity

The following checklist developed by the staff at the National Committee for Citizens in Education lists some new parental involvement initiatives and provides a diagnostic questionnaire that you can use to evaluate how well your host school is fostering healthy parent-teacher relationships.

Assessing Parent-Teacher Relationships Checklist (Answer "yes" or "no")

Principle 1: Classroom Climate

_____ Are parent observers welcome in the classroom?
_____ Are there any adult-size chairs besides the teacher’s?
_____ Is the classroom organized so that a parent can see easily what happens in it?
_____ Are examples of every child’s work displayed regularly?
_____ Is the classroom routine written down and clearly posted?
_____ Are socioeconomically poor parents worked with from an empowerment rather than a deficit model of parental involvement?
_____ Other?
Principle 2: Communication

Are parents informed at the beginning of the year how they can reach the teacher?

Does the teacher tell parents about good things as well as problems?

Does the teacher try to communicate at least once a month with each parent (less often in high school, but regularly)?

Does the teacher talk to parents in person (or on the phone), in addition to sending written messages?

Does the teacher provide regular opportunities for parents to see their child’s written work?

Does the teacher let parents know about expectations for homework, grading policies, and how parents can help?

Does the teacher let parents know what information about the child is needed to help teachers do a better job (e.g., family stress or major changes in family: illness, birth, death, divorce, etc.)?

Does the teacher praise parents regularly in front of peers at group meetings?

Other?

Principle 3: Parents as Collaborators

Do teachers ask parents for their advice on how to deal with their children?

Is there an early warning system for notifying parents if a student is falling behind or having social problems so the teacher may confer with them about the situation?

Before parents are informed about a serious problem, are other school staff consulted to gather their perspectives on the student?

Are parents encouraged to advise teachers when a child is exhibiting a learning or school adjustment difficulty at home?

In suggesting ways that parents can help at home, does the teacher take into account a student’s particular cultural background and home situation?

Do teachers make it clear to parents that parents must respect teachers’ need for time alone and with their own families?

Do teachers help parents understand that their child’s needs must be balanced with those of the whole class?

Are parents employed in the classrooms as teacher’s aides? tutors? counselors? chaperons? hall monitors? or assistants in the computer labs or library?

Are parents invited to speak to the class about their careers, their hobbies, and the like?

Other?

Principle 4: Parents as Advisors and Decision Makers

Are parents with questions and ideas about school policy encouraged to play an active role in the school as members of advisory boards?

Do teachers attend parent–teacher organization meetings regularly?

Do teachers listen actively to parents’ concerns and pass them on to the principal or the parent–teacher organization president?

Do teachers make it clear that some decisions about a child are not negotiable (e.g., grades, promotions, etc.)?

Other?

Principle 5: Outreach to All Families

Are teachers adequately trained and supported in their dealings with the
problems of divorced or separated families?

---

Do teachers make special efforts to reach families from other cultures (e.g., home visits, translators, etc.)?

---

Do teachers meet outside regular school hours, if necessary, with parents who are employed?

---

Are teachers persistent in their efforts to reach parents who try to avoid coming to school?

---

Do teachers invite parents to eat breakfast and lunch with their children at school?

---

Other?

Principle 6: Volunteers

---

Do teachers use volunteers creatively (both parents and other citizens) to meet needs in the classroom?

---

Do teachers expect every parent to help in some way, and are parents offered a variety of ways to do so?

---

Other?

Reflective Narrative

What further implications and recommendations might you draw from your findings. The report, *A Nation of Risk*, and other similar reform documents tend to acknowledge the primacy of parental participation in “the work of the schools,” emphasizing the role of parents in the achievement of national- and state-level curriculum content, subject standards, disciplinary ex-pectations, skill basics, and standardized testing. By contrast, Joyce Epstein, at the Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students, has argued thus:

[Perhaps the ideal situation for children's education and development occurs, when school-family distinctions become blurred—when schools become more family-like and families become more school-like.]

Jane Roland Martin presented the imagery of the “schoolhome,” a place characterized by “safety, security, nurturance, and love ... [and] guided by a spirit of family-like affection.” Which model characterizes the school climate at your host school? Do you agree or disagree with Epstein’s and Martin’s images for the American school? Why or why not? What is your vision of the ideal teacher–parent relationship?

Related Readings


