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Connecting the Dots

How Is Community Involvement Essential to Academic Achievement?

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Liberal Studies Capstone

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Abstract

Substantial research has proven the importance of parent involvement to children's academic achievement. When I began working with various local schools, however, I noticed a severe lack of community participation at each of the sites. Thus, I was prompted to assess the reasons why families were not as concerned about this issue as they ought to be, and so began the foundations for my Capstone. Through personal experience, extended research, and insight from various local teachers, I have facilitated the process of involving the local parents in their children's education. As this is a long-term goal, my attempts will not waver with the close of this semester; I seek to inspire the parents of a nearby elementary to form a parent-teacher organization and maintain contact within the community in order to benefit each and every student at the school.

Connecting the Dots: How Is Community Involvement Essential to Academic Achievement?

When I first arrived at the elementary school where I would be implementing my physical education lesson plans as a university Service Learner, I was pleasantly surprised by each of the interactions I shared with the students. Based on my previous experience working with local schools, I was expecting to be introduced to a rowdy group of poorly-behaved children. Contrary to my preconceived notions, however, upon my first day at this school I realized how enthusiastic and willing this new group of students truly was. Indeed, these thirty four students were well-behaved and seemed to be much more participatory than those I had dealt with in the past, despite the commonalities in demographics, statistics, and general socio-economic status between all of the sites at which I had volunteered. As a result, I began to speculate what it was that made these students, on the whole, much more excited about school than those uninterested students I had observed at different elementary schools. My assumptions lead me to believe that these students must have more parental support and a better basis for maintaining communication between parents, teachers, and school administrators. Thus, one can imagine my surprise after learning that, in fact, there is a frequent disconnect between parents and teachers in this school.

Soon after discovering the saddening reality of the lack of community involvement in the classroom I partnered with, I began to ponder the significance of my own parents in terms of their role in my elementary education. I can recall the many parent gatherings, the semi-annual “open house” nights, and the amount of time my mother talked me through my troubling mathematics homework, as well as the endless school events at which both

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my parents were inevitably present, including the school-wide talent shows I always participated in, the end-of-the-semester musical performances which demanded the students' participation, and each year's closing ceremonies which symbolized my advancements towards the following grade level. Each of these memories attributes to my eventual recognition of the fact that my parents played an essential role in my education, including development of self-esteem, confidence, and autonomy as a young girl enthralled in the system of private education. Though I attended a private elementary from pre-school until the end of fifth grade, I do not believe that tuition is the sole contributor to my parents' involvement with my schooling. In theory, every parent or guardian should be equally as engrossed in his or her own child's success as my parents were. After inquiring more information from my new confidant at the school I have become so interested in, Mrs. Jan Larson¹ revealed her deep concerns about the lack of community involvement in her classroom, which prompted me to begin strategizing on how I might improve such conditions. And so, the workings of my Capstone project had commenced.

What Is the Problem and Why Is It an Issue?

It was not long after taking interest in this matter before I discovered there are currently no parental obligations at McDearmon Elementary regarding contributions or volunteering. Because parents in this community are not required to participate or become active in their child's schooling, the majority assumes they have no responsibility in this aspect of the child's life at all. Interestingly enough, however, Jan has expressed a great potential for parental involvement in her classroom as she recalls an "overwhelming

¹ All names of people, organizations, and locations affiliated with my project have been replaced with pseudonyms.

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response from the parents” after she personally solicited support for the bake sale she had held in order to raise money for a recent field trip. She went on, “My sense is that parents get involved when called upon, but not to the extent of some schools that raise thousands of dollars for music and art programs.” Personally, I did not see this statement so much as the hyperbole that Jan had intended, but rather as a goal to keep in mind as I took my initial steps into this project.

That which I learned from questioning Jan on the specifics of her students’ outside support was a grim yet stimulating reality. She assured me that she does deal with compassionate and deeply-concerned parents, but more often she encounters students whose parents are completely negligent about their child’s education, for one reason or another. Myriad complications throughout this community impede the communication between Jan and her students’ parents or guardians, but the overwhelming lack of initiative on their behalf remains at the core of this issue. Mrs. Larson even added the fact that she has no knowledge of any form of Parent-Teacher Organization affiliated with the school, although she categorized her school’s parent involvement as “pretty average.” From my perspective, however, the lack of concern as demonstrated by the parents of this specific fifth-grade classroom seems to constitute McDearmon as being below average in terms of parental support, and the reasons behind the prevalence of this issue must be assessed.

This issue concerns me so because of the tremendous amount of support I received from my family, and my understanding of how this affected my academic achievement leaves my thoughts centered on how to inform each family on how easy and effective participating in school life truly can be. Parents like mine who sacrifice their time for holiday events, field trips, and other school gatherings help to create a welcoming school

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environment and a sense of community, both of which significantly benefit elementary students. Additionally, in Calkins words: “Parents’ involvement in school tells their child that they endorse the school and that they regard themselves as partners in their child’s education”(1997, p. 293). Thus, parents’ or guardians’ engagement in children’s schooling experience leads to more opportunities for these students to recognize the value of a strong educational background and put forth more effort into their schoolwork.

Though personal experience counts for my genuine trepidation for these children, the effects of parental involvement in children’s education have been evident in the published literature for some time. In fact, a study conducted by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in 2002, as cited in *Building Parent Engagement in Schools*, concluded that such benefits include superior standardized test scores and grade point averages, better attendance, improved classroom behavior, enhanced social skills, and a higher enrollment in more challenging curricula(Larry Ferlazzo, 2009). Yet, these are only a few of the many improvements a child with involved parents might exhibit. Relationships amongst community members are likely to be strengthened, such as those between teachers, administrators, parents, and children, thus resulting in a stronger sense of community and a perpetuating increase in engagement. Indeed, the advantages of supportive families are countless and the prevailing question behind this issue has left me wondering *why* there is such an absence of community participation at McDearmon.

Many obstacles particular to this community present themselves which further inhibit parents from expressing interest, including unavoidable language barriers due to local diversity, intimidation and lack of confidence when it comes to approaching schools and working with professionals, an absence of educational background in the parents, and a

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collective sense of isolation from the surrounding community as a result of the school's geographic placement. Alas, these are only a few of the underlying contributors to the pre-existing situation at McDearmon. It is also necessary to take into account that teachers like Jan encounter parents who have been imprisoned and affiliated with gangs, who work full-time in the surrounding fields and have precious spare time, who do not have adequate childcare, and those who are subjected to sending their children to school with no food or supplies. These statistics can be projected onto McDearmon Elementary as a whole, as the entire agriculturally-oriented and poverty-stricken community in which it is centered displays a general carelessness for student success. Nonetheless, there are no established requirements for parent participation at McDearmon, and the history of parental support at this institution has clarified that no single parent possesses enough initiative to take action on this pressing matter.

Feeling discouraged with these factors in mind, I came across a reading from authors Scott-Stein and Thorkildsen, who affirm: "Economic disadvantage and cultural differences must be considered in planning parent involvement activities but should not be seen as predictive of failure" (Melanie R. Scott-Stein, 1999, p. 33). Indeed, seeing as how McDearmon Elementary is not the only Title I school lacking parental involvement, I began to assess how I might improve such a school under these conditions. At this point, I see the situation at McDearmon as having two main flaws which demand attention. First and foremost, we need to break down the many barriers between parents and teachers. Next, we need to facilitate the processes of acquiring contact and maintaining communication within the McDearmon community. By researching the various efforts in the United States at increasing community participation through policy, I have unearthed an abundance of

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effective strategies which have been implemented in order to increase community involvement at the elementary level.

Research Literature

As outlined in his State of the Union Address at the turn of 2010, President Barack Obama's priorities explicitly revolve around improving education, a course of action under which family plays the most prevalent role, accordingly: "And so the question is whether all of us – as citizens, and as parents – are willing to do what's necessary to give every child a chance to succeed. That responsibility begins not in our classrooms, but in our homes and communities"(Obama, 2011, p. 1). Obama goes on to reveal his outlook on the effectiveness of Race to the Top and declares parents as having the most significant impact on a child's success- even more so than the teacher. Indeed, the President of the United States has established community participation in education as a critical issue- one which countless organizations, politicians, and associations alike have been addressing as an urgent matter.

Organized Advocacy for Parent Involvement

Public response to the dire lack of parent involvement in schools is evident throughout the United States, substantiating exactly how essential it is to academic achievement, student success, and to building an unwavering sense of community. Take, for example, the collective efforts of the United States Education Department, the National Parent-Teacher Association, the Harvard Family Research Project, SEDL (previously known as the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory), and the United Way Worldwide, at implementing policy to increase parent involvement in public schools. Through programs such as the Family Engagement in Education Act, these organizations have collaborated to

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attempt to reform the public schooling system so it might include more specific national standards regarding family engagement (PIRCs, 2010). Each of these affiliations sees community support as one of the key components in enhancing academic achievement across the country, mutually supporting the reauthorization of the Elementary Secondary Education Act (and thus, its protégé Race to the Top which replaced No Child Left Behind). For example, last year the National Parent-Teacher Association's proposal consisted of numerous strategies to enforce policy on the matter, such as an increase in federal funding for Title I schools and the utility of the State Family Engagement and Responsibility Fund (Minow, 2011). Though the outcomes of these projects were not ideal considering the prospective policies were shut down, they were successful in gaining national attention, thusly triggering significant public concern for parent involvement.

Evidence of such heightened interests became evident in November 2010 as the National Policy Forum on Family, School, and Community Engagement publicized a well-informed and scholarly group of panelists discussing possible solutions to this problem. Correlating to the ideals of the previously-mentioned organizations demanding involvement standards, this forum was hosted by the Department of Education at the nation's capital and addressed three connected pillars of education: family, school and community engagement. Known as the FSCE, this organization has provoked widespread interest in the lack of parent involvement in public schools (FSCE, 2011) by means of the internet; the official website features a series of videos which were recorded at the actual conference containing the panelists' thoughts on the matter. Available to anyone with internet access, these videos are significant because the speakers are professionals on the

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matter and suggest what the nation can and must do to improve community support in public schools.

Additional documentation of an improved awareness exists on behalf of authors of the prospective compact for Family, School, and Community Engagement, who support the efforts of the video-recordings on the FSCE web page. These three advocators published their ideology on national reform in which they termed the status of parent involvement as being “random acts” and offer solutions so as to transform these so-called random acts of parent support into frequent and routine contributions from parents (Beyond Random Acts: Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform, 2010). Weiss, Lopez, and Rosenberg’s advocacy for implementing policy on family support reflects the many attempts of similar organizations all across the globe. But regardless of these efforts, the United States has yet to see a mandated change through legislature in reforming the current policy on education.

Currently, the national standards for education are enforced through “Race to the Top,” which is President Obama’s recent replacement for No Child Left Behind. In 2009, the Obama administration released the details of this national competition, including its 4.35 billion-dollar fund, its reliance on accountability, and the four particular aspects of education which the program seeks to improve (United States Government, 2011). The last of these four pillars of reform includes turning around the nation’s low-performing schools as determined by standardized testing scores, which is a process comprised of numerous strategies to improve every aspect of why the school continuously fails to meet the national public education expectations. In this context, parent involvement has been declared to play a critical role in education and thusly should be similarly reflected in national

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standards; however, the only national standard under RTTT revolving around parent involvement is that which delegates the specifics of these standards to a more local government. In other words, the federal policy for parent involvement highlights its significance to academic achievement, but it fails to explicitly state any such principles. Rather, it leaves it up to the district or the state of said low-performing school to establish definite parent involvement standards (Department of Education, 2010). Some of the problems with such a lack of explicit national standards for parent involvement is that parents often do not believe they play an essential role in their child's education, as well as the fact that they typically do not know exactly how to become more active, both of which sustain the disconnect between community members. In the case of McDearmon in which there is no established parent-teacher group, it seems as if it is impossible to gain more community involvement. Consequently, low-performing schools such as McDearmon remain unsupported by the community and the RTTT funding, while schools located in more wealthy and involved regions reap much of this system's benefits, including generous grants from the government. So, although Obama's reliance on accountability under Race To The Top may be effective in other categories of education, I see it as unfair to those low-status communities who are incapable of overcoming their many inevitable obstacles. As evidenced by the situation at McDearmon, these communities remain disengaged at the sole cost of the underprivileged students, thusly contributing to the low achievement of the school and perpetuating the system which leaves the low-performing schools at the bottom with little outside support.

Although federal policy has yet to legally bind parents to contribute to their child's education, genuinely concerned community members and politicians still have made

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valiant attempts at doing so and have proven to have beneficial outcomes. Such as those previously mentioned, many innovative and operative endeavors at increasing community involvement in the classroom have yielded countless success stories without implementation of governmental policy. A prime example of such a program is Project Appleseed, a popular web-based strategy known as “the national campaign for public school improvement” and funded by PACE (Parents Advocating Challenging Education, 2011). The visionaries behind Project Appleseed have trademarked various movements, including Leave No Parent Behind, The Parental Involvement Pledge, National Parental Involvement Day, Public Schools Volunteer Week, and The Parental Involvement Report Card in order to facilitate the process of getting families involved and maintaining such community support. This program’s web site features various surveys, pledges, tutorials, checklists, newsfeeds, relevant articles, affiliated movements, and many more effective strategies for engaging the public in education, and it exists as an extremely helpful and informative tool for concerned community members (Parental Involvement and Engagement in Public Schools, 2011). Although the value of Project Appleseed is seemingly infinite and its successes have been immense in terms of alignment with its intentions, a certain partiality exists which impedes the implementation of Project Appleseed into many of the schools who might need it most. That is, the singular way in which the public can contribute to this organization is through the internet. Its copyrighted pledges, promises, and surveys can only be assessed through online submission, and without internet access Project Appleseed becomes irrelevant.

Such as in the case of McDearmon Elementary, the Title I communities who lack internet access and spare time and money do not benefit from web-based organizations.

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Sadly, these schools are left out of the equation completely in terms of prospering from the vast amount of opportunity to contribute and learn online: in the interview process, Jan Larson estimated only half of her parent base has internet access at all. Because only a minimal percentage of parents in low-income communities actually have availability to the internet, these disadvantaged populations are further deprived of ways to contribute, as exemplified in the bias efforts of Project Appleseed.

In fact, it seems as if most of the organizations advocating for parental involvement have inappropriate assumptions regarding which resources Title I schools are realistically capable of accessing. Consider the Public Education Network's Civic Index, which is an *online* tool developed to strengthen public education in the United States according to modern-society's needs (Public Education Network, 2008). Yet again, results are directly relational to availability of internet, such as frequent contact between Civic Index advocates and its concerned participants. Despite the advancements in technology which affect most twenty-first century public school districts, there are still too many people who remain uninvolved as a product of their own environment. Bearing in mind the limitations of the McDearmon community to which I have previously referred, it is urgent to assess how this community can overcome such obstacles to install and maintain a system of community participation.

Involving a Community with Limited Resources

Considering the circumstances under which this elementary school operates, it is necessary to determine how to improve community participation in a way which aligns with the confines of this specific population. Equally as important is keeping in mind the current status of parent involvement at McDearmon, seeing as how many of the public's

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proposed solutions are grounded in bias presumptions which exclude communities like this one. Indeed, the vast majority of the published literature on this matter offers suggestions on how to get *more* parent involvement, while the issue at my site is to *establish* parent involvement, and then to ensure it is maintained.

Establishing Parent Involvement: Educators Reaching Out.

Despite the clear limitations of the McDearmon community, there are still many ways to gain the attention of the relevant stakeholders. First and foremost, it is necessary to inform this community of how dire the situation at hand truly is. Parents need to be aware of how essential their involvement is, as well as how easy it can be and the many ways they can contribute to their child's education. Sending home or mailing a parent newsletter is a perfectly adequate strategy for enlightening the much-needed parents. Not only can these informational flyers provide parents with class updates and upcoming events, they can also outline class goals, highlight student achievement, offer home-based learning approaches, and inquire specifics directly from the parents themselves (Melanie R. Scott-Stein, 1999). Aside from raising parental awareness, newsletters can also be effective in fostering parents' interest and raising their confidence so their presence might become more prevalent in the classroom. When I inquired her school's standing on frequent newsletters, Mrs. Larson revealed that McDearmon typically sends home notices on a weekly basis, although they do not reflect the intentions as in the newsletters mentioned above.

Another key component to establishing parent involvement is preparing families before the start of the term. In *Raising Lifelong Learners*, Calkins addresses the significance of familiarizing parents with the upcoming school year and all that which it entails for the family, including expectations for parent involvement (1997). As she puts it, "Many parents

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are caught off guard by the number of expectations schools have for them, because while schools go to great lengths to help children know what to expect of school, they do very little to orient parents” (p. 293). Such is often the case, and when parents are finally summoned- for open house nights or parent-teacher conferences- once the school year commences, they already seem discouraged and overwhelmed with all of the teacher’s inquiries. Publications from John Hopkins University have suggested a plethora of plausible solutions to help with such an issue, including hosting a parent night before the start of the term in order to empower the uneasy parents. Authors Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies offer that such an event should take place in a relatively quaint environment, considering how often families carelessly go through the motions of school-wide open house nights: “Consider breaking down big events into smaller ones that are more inviting and less intimidating”(2007, p. 33). In doing so, teachers will provide a better opportunity for strengthening community relationships and communicating their areas of concern, depending on how the parents respond to the teacher’s strategies. Each of these scholarly propositions has been proven effective when fulfilled in the classroom in terms of breaking down the numerous barriers which commonly hinder parent or guardian participation. However, while informing parents, making them feel comfortable in a teacher’s presence, and communicating high expectations for participation are all key factors for establishing community engagement, it is even more crucial to develop ways to *maintain* this newly-acquired contact between parents and teachers.

Maintaining Parent Involvement: a Two-way Street.

Though newsletters and pre-term parent meetings are applicable strategies to setting the foundations for engaging parents, it is the teacher’s responsibility to reinforce such

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groundwork to develop lasting contact. As Mrs. Larson has mentioned, intimidation can often impede parents' presence in her classroom, which is why it is important to enable these adults to feel more comfortable when it comes to approaching teachers. It is up to the teacher to create an inviting atmosphere so as to encourage parents to participate frequently (Boult, 2006). Additionally, as Boult points out, teachers must ensure that even the busiest of parents have the chance to contribute by implementing somewhat of an open-door policy: "Such a policy needs to be supported by demonstrating that when parents come to the school to discuss issues or concerns, or simply to visit, they feel welcome and that their needs will be addressed as soon as possible" (2006, p. 14). So, teachers should communicate early on that parents or guardians are welcome any time in the classroom, provided that they do not interrupt the educator's teaching strategies or classroom conduct. Such is when the concept of hosting pre-term meetings becomes effective, as these may serve as perfect opportunities to communicate expectations between educator and parent. As a result of teachers enabling parents to feel more comfortable and confident at school, as well as avowing and ascribing with family members in regards to the teacher's expectations, teachers tend to benefit significantly. In theory, if parents and guardians feel at ease with the school, they will respect expectations and take advantage of the open-door policy in the classroom, which relieves the teacher of much of the responsibility which coincides with actively seeking community involvement.

Undoubtedly, it is up to the teacher to initially reach out to families for support and make them feel appreciated to ensure their dedication. Afterwards, however, it is important that parents actively seek to remain involved in their child's education, as Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies point out in *Beyond the Bake Sale*: "Certainly, there

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is a responsibility on both sides, and parents must continue to connect with teachers and other school staff on behalf of their children”(2007, p. 40). Thus, community involvement in public education is a collaborative effort, and teachers can only do so much before they ultimately become overwhelmed, discouraged, and redundant. After all, teachers like Jan do not have the time, energy, or persistence to constantly call upon parents without generating their response- and they should not have to. In this context, the parents and guardians are the stakeholders, and it is not the educator but the children who are affected by unengaged families.

Methodology

In order to gain insight on my concerns regarding parental support in McDearmon classrooms, I solicited advice from one of its experienced and dedicated teachers with whom I had worked with as a prospective teacher myself. I also collected data from attending a parent meeting at a local charter elementary, an opportunity which has provided me with a basis for evaluating two extreme levels of community participation.

Context

McDearmon Elementary is not the typical public grade school. Located in an agriculturally-based economy, this unique site is surrounded on all sides by crop fields which distance the school from any other aspect of the community. Latin American students comprise seventy-five percent of the entire elementary, in comparison to the state average of fifty-two percent (Public School Review L.L.C., 2011). Additionally, Public School Review has revealed an astounding statistic regarding the district’s total revenue: although McDearmon receives around six thousand dollars more than the California average, it is

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home to more than twice as many students as the state mean- Mrs. Larson's site receives just over 24,800,000 dollars for 3,000 students, while the typical California public elementary receives around 17,500,000 dollars for under 1,500 students (Public School Review L.L.C., 2011). Unfortunately, the thriving city in which this elementary exists is affected by a strong gang influence and has displayed high crime-rates, much more so than the typical district. These facts are significant in outlining some of the underlying issues obstructing more parent involvement at McDearmon Elementary.

Switching gears significantly, I present the context of a different cite at which I collected data (in the form of observational insight). In order to establish a framework with more breadth, I attended one of five annual "parent nights" in a kindergarten classroom at a local charter school. This two-hour session has been critical to my understanding of parent involvement, as it has served as the context to which I can compare that of my original study. Located in a much more "funded" district and populated by significantly less families who rely on agriculture for work (and thusly set back by its demanding schedule and low pay), this school is non-public and is not as impacted by federal funding, accountability, and standardized testing. Charter schools view the arts and "play" as critical to child development, and because they are not affiliated with the public education system, they are allotted much more creative ways of approaching education. For each of these reasons, the parents I encountered after hours in this specific kindergarten classroom have demonstrated the sheer potential for an overwhelming extent of community participation.

Participants

Jan Larson is the educator from which I have collected most of my data, and it is her fifth grade classroom which I hope directly benefits from my extensive research on and

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dedication to this problem. She has been an elementary teacher for eighteen years, and has been educating students at McDearmon since the school was opened one decade ago. Mrs. Larson is a Caucasian woman and does not speak Spanish, a typical setback with many of the teachers comprising all of the schools in McDearmon's county as well as its surrounding districts.

Researcher

Drawing from my experience as a student who progressed through a private elementary school with a substantial amount of community support and parental involvement, I cannot express the impact which my family has had on my education. Each time my parents inspected my "homework situation," as my mother termed it, I was urged to physically show her my progress. She frequently communicated with my teachers for any updates on my schoolwork and behavior in class, and time and time again she volunteered her time and money to support my school's P.T.O. Although I neglected these offerings as a naïve child, I now see the many beneficial effects my mother's contributions have had on my education. For instance, I literally was forced to finish my assignments because I was aware that if I did not turn something in, my mother would learn of it and I would have to suffer the consequences. Her persistence in remaining involved left me with no choice but to attend all of my classes throughout my entire time in school, which in turn instilled a sense of morality in accomplishing my schoolwork. Additionally, the extent to which both my parents visited my school and volunteered their time in school activities resulted in a more enjoyable education on my behalf. Because of this, I continually felt a strong inclination to uncover the details behind the situation at McDearmon Elementary

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upon learning of its most urgent issues (such as the school's non-existent parent-teacher association) as I volunteered my time as a Service Learner.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

Interview.

For my interview with Jan, I began with the following questions so I might develop a focused and urgent problem statement:

1. What, do you feel, are the most urgent issues with your classes (lack of parent involvement, lack of teacher/parent communication, poor role models for the kids, language barriers, etc.)?
2. How would you describe parent involvement at your school (If you have worked at more than one school, I'd love to know how they compare.)?
3. Currently, are there any requirements for parent involvement?
4. What is currently being done to improve parent involvement/ community support?
How effective are these current efforts?
5. What do you think could be done to increase parent involvement?
6. What do you think are the obstacles for increasing parent involvement?
7. Are there any other urgent needs that should be addressed either at the classroom or school levels?

Even after reading and rereading her responses to my seven initial solicitations, I still felt I lacked a substantial basis for my project. I then presented her with a set of follow-up questions which her first email had prompted in me:

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1. Are there currently any newsletters being sent out to your students, either at the start of their term, or weekly, monthly, etc.?
2. If so, are they offered in Spanish and English? What information is included in these newsletters? Do you ever get feedback from them?
3. Is there currently a "phone tree" or any such way of communicating with your community/parents for support? If so, is it effective and how often is it utilized?
4. On the whole, do you think your students and their parents have internet access- either in the home or in the community?
5. How do you think students feel about the concerns we have discussed? Are they ignorant to the lack of community support within the classroom, or do you feel they are also concerned about their parents' slight absence in their education?
6. Relatively speaking, how much do you think parents value parent-teacher conferences? Typically, how many parents fail to appear or communicate with you?

With Jan's responses to each of my inquiries, I began to contemplate how parents felt about this matter and how they contribute to the two emergent themes I had established. Thus, I developed a survey to present to the parents of those children with whom I had become so involved.

Survey.

The following nine questions reflect my specific concerns for community support, each of which I strategically included in order to give me a better basis for directing my efforts at taking action:

1. Do you have internet access?

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Yes

No

Yes, but not in the home

2. How often do you help with or supervise your child's completion of homework?

Every weekday/night

2-3 times per week

Never

Other (please explain) _____

3. How frequently do you communicate with your child's teacher?

Every school day

2-3 times per week

Only if an issue arises and/or at parent-teacher conferences

Other (please explain) _____

4. Are you aware of any existing parent-teacher organizations or support groups at McKinnon?

Yes

No

5. Do you think McKinnon should have a weekly newsletter sent home for class updates?

Yes

No

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6. On a scale of one to five, how connected to the local McKinnon community (teachers, administrators, other parents, etc.) do you feel?

1- completely disconnected

2- not connected

3- somewhat connected

4- fairly connected

5- extremely connected

7. Do you feel there are any urgent issues regarding McKinnon which need to be addressed (such as school improvements, more field trips, lack of communication, school budget, etc.)

Yes* If so, please list your concern(s) below.

No

Unsure

8. Have you ever heard of Project Appleseed?

Yes

No

9. Do you wish you participated more at McKinnon Elementary?

I contribute as much as I can

Yes

No

Unfortunately, I was unable to collect the responses to this survey. I handed them out to my teacher in envelopes so she might distribute them to each of her students, but

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extenuating circumstances made it impossible for me to collect these well thought-out surveys from the parents of Jan Larson's classroom. Because of this, I remain concerned and misdirected in terms of my project because I was unable to hear from the parents themselves.

Procedure

To say in the least, recruiting my participants was not an easy task. I established contact with three different teachers at separate institutions before I reached out to Mrs. Larson, none of whom demonstrated enough interest in supporting my project to maintain communication with me. I found the difficulties I was encountering borderline ironic, seeing as how I introduced each of these teachers to my Capstone with its foundations revolving around community support, but I never received a response from any of the three community members I initially attempted to involve.

Taking the first steps of my research, I sought to engage the immediate surrounding community of my university, but after a disappointing lack of feedback from each of the teachers at more local schools, I redirected by data collection towards McDearmon which is about thirty minutes away from my university. Nonetheless, my initial concerns stemmed from the conditions I witnessed in my Service Learning site with Jan and her students, and I remain gracious that Jan and I upheld interaction and she agreed to contribute to my cause.

Thus, after gaining Jan Larson's willingness to participate, I was urged to present her with my main concerns and areas of uncertainty as far as parental involvement was carried out at McDearmon Elementary. With both of our demanding schedules, we agreed to use email to share information and collect data. I then sent her an email which outlined the

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basis for my Capstone, detailing the Liberal Studies background and my particular interest in the impacts of community support. My next step was to narrow my focus, a task I was unable to do until I heard the story from Jan's perspective. I offered her seven basic questions regarding community participation, inquiring her personal concerns for her students as well as what she believed as the most pressing issues and their correlating causes and effects. The next email I received set my project into motion as it solidified my problem statement. Through Jan's honesty regarding her genuine concerns, as well as the numerous problems she presented to me, I experienced a surge of ideas for breaking down this system. Next, I offered my plausible solutions to Mrs. Larson according to what I saw as the two emergent themes stemming from her interview answers and graciously accepted the encouraging thoughts she returned. My work with Jan as a participant was extremely helpful, informative, and effective.

My next step in collecting data was presented to me analogously to a gift. One of my professors has a kindergartener enrolled at a nearby charter school, and she suggested that I might be permitted to attend the conveniently-scheduled "parent night" that she, too, would be participating in. In order to gain insight on the other side of the spectrum as far as how federal funding, community support, and academic achievement play out at a more advantageous school, I attended this parent meeting as a fellow devoted member of the community. Hosted by two of the most unique teachers I have ever encountered, this meeting consisted of parents of two different kindergarten classes collectively attempting to improve various aspects of their children's education. For about an hour, I sat amongst twenty eager parents avidly participating in their child's kindergarten-level education, until we parted ways to reflect two separate parent-bases: one for each of the hosting teachers.

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The general theme of the first half of the meeting was the importance of sleep for children of all ages. Aligned in a circular pattern, each of the participants was instructed to read one passage from the sleep-related readings which our hosts provided for us. Any time a concern or form of advice arose in a parent, he or she was encouraged to vocalize said matter, with respect to the time frame of the meeting. Throughout the time allocated for reading aloud and relevant discussion, our hosts had requested that each of us help ourselves to a piece of Beeswax, seeing as how the ladies were in need of forty wax boats into which they would be incorporating an upcoming holiday tradition for the children.

Soon, I followed my professor and other parents into their affiliated classroom, diverging from the main pack to go over classroom-specific activities and concerns. What I witnessed next was an hour of sheer dedication and genuine care on behalf of the nine remaining parents in this host's classroom. The "class parent" conducted much of this segment of the night, handing out two flyers on upcoming events and ever-so-politely demanding that each parent signs up for a specific time slot for volunteering for that upcoming Friday's class event. She also demonstrated her creativity and sense of humor as she displayed one of the crafts she had made as an example for what the upcoming class event would entail. After taking a second look at the calendar she had developed, I noticed an astounding amount of upcoming events for the children. For the short-lived scholarly month of December, which consists of less than three school-weeks, there were nine events in which themselves and their kindergarteners would be participating.

Moved by the vast commitment of such a parent-base as in that of this charter school, I returned to McDearmon public elementary to distribute the last of my data collection tools. I passed out thirty four envelopes containing a double-sided survey -one side each for

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English and Spanish- to the fifth graders with whom I had become so connected, advising the class to bring it home to their parents or guardians. As I mentioned previously, I did not receive a response from the parents regarding my survey, so this aspect of my project has become null and void.

In terms of how consent was to be obtained from the parents to participate in my survey, I relied on the concept of implied consent. As I intended to conduct my survey by means of each student acting as a mediator between myself and the participant, at the top of each page I: ensured its anonymity; inquired age, gender, and ethnicity; informed the participants of my name, my affiliated university, and my intentions; and included a comment box, my phone number, and my deep appreciation for those who had contributed. My logic supporting the implied consent regarding these survey participants relies on the fact that if any such parent was unwilling to participate, he or she simply would not have filled it out.

Data Analysis

Each series of my data-collection process served as the basis for the upcoming data collection, as I analyzed each of the data-collection tools to create the next. In other words, I used Jan's responses to my first interview to come up with the second, more specific series of interview questions, and I used the feedback I received from my second interview to determine which questions I would include in my survey, my last tool for data collection at McDearmon.

After Jan had responded to my first set of email-based interview questions, I read over her comments several times, using a highlighting marker to outline what I saw as the most important aspects of her assertions. Next, I went through the text again, this time extracting

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each and every one of the concerns and issues which Mrs. Larson had included. Afterwards, I had recorded twelve separate areas of improvement and began to make connections between them for emergent themes. The first issue I had written down actually became one of my emergent themes, being the frequent disconnect between parents and teachers at this site, as I could categorize much of the more specific problems into being a result of this underlying cause. Of these individual results of said disconnection included economic obstacles, difficulties in meeting state requirements, language barriers, lack of parent involvement requirements, no existing PTA/PTO, and Jan's inability to dedicate any more time to her students.

Next, I sought an underlying cause of the remaining problems to which Jan had referred in her responses and came up with the parents' lack of willingness to take action towards their children's education. Under this lack of initiative on the parents' behalf I categorized economic obstacles and language barriers (both of which I saw as related to both of emergent themes), hungry or needy students, overcrowded classrooms, poverty, and parents' lack of time and/or general carelessness when it comes to school. From here, I ascertained most of the details Jan had included as being state and federal concerns which must first be addressed locally, a problem which I categorized as being an effect of insufficient parental initiative.

Now that I had verified two emergent themes within Jan's first interview, I began to contemplate how to solve each of the more specific issues in terms of their broader context. What I came up with was based on my groundwork in somehow informing, involving, or inspiring the McDearmon community, my target audience. To solve the issue of my first emergent theme, the frequent disconnect between parent and teachers, I proposed

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breaking down the many barriers between community members, specifically parents and teachers. Next, I suggested the necessity to facilitate the processes of acquiring contact and maintaining communication within the McDearmon community in order to help resolve the problem regarding the parents' lack of unsolicited willingness.

Soon, I had realized I had not yet obtained enough information from Jan in order to begin determining specific solutions, which is when I sent her a second set of interview questions. This next interview revolved around my ideas for action, as I was desperate to find out more about what was already being done so as to be capable of actually affecting these issues. I also inquired Jan's opinions on a few of my prospective plans for action.

Jan's second set of answers cancelled out most of my intentions for improving this situation at McDearmon. Basically, every one of her responses suggested the school's detachment and the parents' slight negligence for most things relevant to parent involvement. From the discouraging realities revealed by Jan I was prompted to hear from the parents themselves, which is why my survey was targeted at them and centered around plausible policies on the matter. Clearly, I was unable to analyze data regarding the survey I created. I remain in the dark on each of the questions my survey addressed, because the surveys I created never reached the children's homes.

In terms of how the data from the charter school I was involved with fits into my project, I used the insight I gained from attending the parent meeting to use as a contrast against my uninvolved public school. At the meeting, the "class parent" permitted that I borrow the binder she uses to organize events and remain involved with the activities for the children. I kidnapped this binder for two nights and went through each and every piece of paper it contained, gaining more information about this school's parent involvement

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with each turn of the page. Such a resource was useful in providing me with a better understanding of what parent involvement can look like at the elementary level. It was comprised of several different dividers which separated the various tasks the class parent is responsible for, including “class parent guidelines,” “field trips,” and “calendar of events.” Basically, this binder is the resource with which the current class parent remains involved, organized, and informed on the many children-centered activities the kindergarten holds each year. This binder is passed down each year to the following class parent and makes it easier to keep up with the many responsibilities of which this title entails.

Results

When compared against the highly-involved families of the kindergarteners at the local charter school I studied, it is clear that serious action must be taken to increase community participation at McDearmon elementary, especially in terms of determining who is at fault for this disconnection. From attending the parent meeting and analyzing the parent binder from the charter school, I recognized each of these two schools as being opposing extremes on the matter of community involvement. Once again, from analyzing my data I noticed two emergent themes which demand the full attention of the McDearmon community: common disconnect between parents and teachers, and parents’ lack of willingness to organize, both of which combine to result in the parents’ declining prospect of taking action towards a better schooling experience for their children.

It is clear that much discussion exists debating who is at fault for the lack of community support in many public schools. Last year, researchers Weiss, Lopez, and Rosenberg, who inspired the national policy forum for FSCE, criticized our nation’s current community

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crisis by delegating the blame to the teachers: “Educators tend to treat parents and families as bystanders rather than as partners, and often overlook their strengths and their capacity to transform public education” (p. 2). Released in an official document containing plans to reform the national policy on education, this statement identifies one of the main issues concerning parent support as the teachers’ fault for not reaching out to the parents. However, from the insight I gained through various methods of data collection this semester, I must beg to differ.

In terms of whose responsibility it is to involve the community, it is crucial for all educators to reach out to parents, make them feel welcome, and offer ample opportunity for everyone to participate. However, Jan Larson’s genuine efforts at each of these have been persistent and still community participation has continued to be less than par in her classroom. Thus, the fact remains that ultimately it is the function of the parents to take a stand in contributing to their children’s education. The saddening reality of this situation became apparent to me after I urged Mrs. Larson to expand on her final statements regarding her students’ urgent needs: “I feel overwhelmed with meeting the myriad of state requirements- the paperwork, the meetings, the test preparations, teaching to the different learning abilities that a classroom of thirty four necessitates- that I don’t have enough time to ‘teach’ parents what to do to help.” Since Jan seems to dedicate most of her time to the time-consuming demands of the classroom, she is left with an insufficient amount of spare time to spend on expressing the many ways her students’ families can become more involved. Thus, it should not be her responsibility to incessantly reach out to community members who nonetheless fail to react.

Description and Justification of Action

As my intentions of this praxis revolve around informing the local community so they might be inspired to become involved to improve academic achievement, my target audience is clearly the members of society surrounding McDearmon elementary- including parents, teachers, administrators, organizations, college students, and children alike. Admittedly, the general direction of my Capstone was geared towards increasing parent involvement specifically, but that is not to say widespread community participation was not intended and cannot still be encouraged.

Though an endless amount of plausible solutions exist which might help involve the local community, I have identified a few changes which McDearmon may realistically implement to improve student success considering this school's fairly prominent lack of resources. For example, researchers from John Hopkins University have suggested a plethora of plausible solutions to involving the local community, such as school-family compacts revised each year according to student achievement, partnerships between familiar community members and new parents, as well as establishing and localizing high expectations for parent support at the start of the term (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Each of these correlates to the policy regarding low-performing schools in Obama's RTTT, thusly suggesting their immense potential for success.

In order to address my target audience so as to offer said suggestions, I intended to send home a newsletter to each of Jan Larson's thirty four fifth-grade students. Offered in both Spanish and English, the newsletter was supposed to serve three specific purposes. First, I wanted to inform the parents of how community involvement is essential to student success. Next, I sought to inspire these family members to become more active in their

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child's education by offering encouraging thoughts to empower such community members. Finally, I aspired to actually involve the parents of Jan's students by organizing a parent meeting after school and announcing its goal for 100 percent parent attendance.

Communicating these three intended objectives by means of a newsletter should have guaranteed to capture the attention of my audience, especially considering my flyer was offered in Spanish, it welcomed children to the meeting for those who have inadequate childcare, and it included information regarding my bilingualism- which is an asset to those monolingual parents who are frequently left out of such events. Not only was my newsletter captivating, but it adequately encouraged parent participation in remaining devoid of the discriminatory factors to which some of the published literature has referred.

In regards to how my meeting would be conducted in an effective and meaningful way, I intended on following each and every piece of advice I had encountered throughout my extensive research on the matter. For example, I wanted to host the meeting in a quaint and welcoming environment and make sure to encourage each and every parent to become more involved by gearing my meeting on their concerns rather than mine. Also, although I am bilingual, my Spanish is far from perfect so I sought to rely on my vulnerability in terms of communicating my concerns in imperfect Spanish in order to break down the intimidation between parents and officials from the school. I also intended on soliciting each parent's contact information so I might initiate a phone tree between Jan and her fifth graders' families to make it even easier to stay connected, and also outline the fact that Mrs. Larson and McDearmon elementary will accept any form of parent involvement and reiterate the "open-door policy." Lastly, I was planning on requesting volunteers from my audience and assuring them that any amount of spare time would permit some form of

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parent involvement. Then, I would go on to detail some of the lasting effects of community participation in order to gain some ground in terms of developing a long-term and supportive parent-base at this public elementary, all the while empowering the parents to speak up and listening to their opinions, concerns, and suggestions.

Action Documentation

My action to involve the McDearmon community ended up being an immense failure. The attached newsletter as well as the survey I created, which I gave to my partner Mrs. Larson to distribute to her students, never ended up reaching the families of these needy children. As a result, I was unable to gain any insight from the parents and guardians of these children and I was incapable of hosting a meeting to facilitate improvements in parent involvement at this elementary school.

Before I made the newsletter, I spoke with the principal of this school to determine an available setting for my prospective plans to involve the community. I suggested the upcoming Friday at three in the afternoon, directly following the release of the children from school, and the principal advised me that there would be a charity drive at four o'clock that day. I assured that my meeting would be quick enough to be over within thirty or forty-five minutes, and so the woman and I agreed on said time, immediately before the scheduled charity drive. Shortly after deciding on three in the afternoon in room 401, I advised Mrs. Larson and provided her with thirty four newsletters specifying the meeting's location and time frame. At this point, I received verbal confirmation from both the principal and Mrs. Larson that they would both be present and I would be hosting and conducting the meeting in its entirety.

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One week later, I appeared at Mrs. Larson's classroom hopeful and excited about hosting this meeting and gaining more parent involvement, but was shocked to find an empty classroom and Jan sitting at her desk, equally as surprised to see me. She then declared that the meeting had been cancelled, quite taken aback as to why I was there. Apparently, the principal had notified Jan that this meeting was to conflict with the charity drive (although I had confirmed its brevity and the fact that I would ensure its closing before 3:45) and that it should be rescheduled. The principal had cancelled my meeting without communicating with me all week, and as a result I was unable to reschedule before the release of the McDearmon students for winter break. Not only was my newsletter thrown away the same day I gave it to Jan, but my surveys were not distributed either and now it was too late to even host a meeting at all.

Standing in front of Jan completely astounded and utterly speechless, I redirected my discouragement into an informal interview with Mrs. Larson. She repeatedly apologized for the principal's actions, guaranteeing that she must have been preoccupied and forgotten the terms of my meeting and its non-conflicting scheduling with the charity drive. What I gained from conversing with Mrs. Larson for the next few minutes was that the process of involving the community was a long, difficult, and complex one that cannot be achieved in such a short amount of time as I had hoped. Convincing me not to be completely disheartened by the situation, she promised me that she was doing everything in her power to involve her parents and that she had recently seen improvements. She then went on about the bake sale she had held that day in order to raise money for an upcoming fieldtrip to the Alcatraz prison off the San Francisco Bay (an activity I was unaware of), and told me she had about eighty percent of the parents contributing. She told me that these parents

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were more than willing to make infrequent contributions but they were unenthusiastic in terms of regular activities for which they had to contribute, such as monthly meetings. This reminded me of an article I incorporated into the research literature which suggested a number of suggestions to transform “random acts” of parent involvement into more regular demonstrations- the same article I kept in mind while establishing realistic ways of gaining parent support. It was at this point in our discussion at which I realized that I am incapable of gaining complete control of the status of community involvement at this school, regardless of my research-driven and time-consuming attempts at doing so.

Rather than giving up and remaining depressed on this realization, however, I began to contemplate how I could still affect this issue. I considered the fact that I could not reach out to the parents, the principal was completely uninterested in my efforts, and the teacher’s hands were tied, and I reassessed this situation to determine who was at fault for such a continuous disconnect at McDearmon. At this point I felt it necessary to discover what has been making community involvement so difficult to obtain this semester at McDearmon. Based on the events of the past week, in which the principal cancelled my parent meeting, failed to communicate with me about it, and lead Jan to believe I had rescheduled my plans, I determined the principal of McDearmon as being the most important stakeholder of this issue. The way in which she nullified my semester-long plans for improving parent involvement at her school suggests that she is either completely negligent, or that she had ulterior motives in doing so. After all, from an administrator’s perspective one could assume that my parent meeting would have yielded only beneficial results, seeing as how I am increasing community participation in her school without having the principal do so much as lift a finger.

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Thus, at the closing of my project I was left with unanswered questions in nearly every aspect of my research, data collection, and praxis. I had never been capable of acquiring contact with the parents and guardians of Jan's class, and I remained utterly dispirited about the outcomes of my Capstone. I soon realized that the feelings I was experiencing may be similar to those felt by many of the parents in this community, seeing as how helpless, uninvolved, and mistreated I had felt at the school. Not long after, I recognized the culprit of this matter might not be the teachers or the parents, but instead the principal of McDearmon elementary. To clarify, though I did everything I could to reach out to the community and took all of the necessary measures this semester, I still wondered why the principal of this school did not value outside support, as evidenced by her actions.

With all of my failed attempts at reaching out to the community to address this matter, I ultimately decided to reach out to the person who I see as the "gatekeeper" - the woman with all of the decision-making power and the final say in any matter pertaining to the school. In a concise and professional manner, I addressed the principal of McDearmon, herself. By means of a formal letter¹, I commended this woman on her students and her faculty and expressed my deep appreciation for allowing me to not only Service Learn at her school but also integrate one of her classrooms into my Capstone as somewhat of a case study. In this letter I wanted to address the matter of community support with much sensitivity, as I sought to inspire her to be more supportive while remaining pleasant and encouraging. With this in mind, I decided to share my own story to provoke new and different ways of gaining more community participation. I went into detail about the impact of my own parents on my elementary experience and included a scholarly reference

¹ I chose not to include this letter due to matters pertaining to personal privacy and general confidentiality.

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to help outline the importance of parental involvement in schools. I offered no specific solutions and ended the letter so as to elicit an optimistic reaction from the addressee. Hopefully she will consider my letter and step forward in her community as a result, as she remains the most powerful and captivating means of increasing parent involvement to improve academic achievement at McDearmon elementary school.

To the parents/guardians of Jan Larson's¹ 5th grade class

Did you know...

- ❖ **Parent involvement is essential to your child's success in school!**
- ❖ Academic benefits include higher test scores & grade point averages, better attendance, improved classroom behavior and social skills, and more general interest in school.
- ❖ Contributing is free, and easier than you think!

A strong community starts with YOU!

- Have you ever felt disconnected from the McDearmonn community?
- Do you want to see an improvement in your child's academic achievement?
- Would you like to learn more about the many ways you can become more active in your child's classroom?

Let's start NOW:

There will be a parent meeting Friday, December 9th after school at 3:00 sharp.

****We are aiming for 100% parent attendance, so please try your hardest to have someone there to support your child.**

Hosted by Katie Meyer² and supervised by Jan Larson, this meeting will help us:

- ❖ Make new friends and strengthen community relationships
- ❖ Ensure every parent's dedication to student success
- ❖ Ask for volunteers- which parents can help?!
- ❖ Establish future plans for more community participation

This event will be casual, quick, & informative and available to Spanish-speaking parents. Children are welcome, too! This is an opportunity to discuss any concerns, ideas, suggestions, and contributions- we will be fielding questions and working together to benefit your child.

¹ Names, numbers, and locations have been replaced with pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.

² Katie Meyer is a bilingual CSUMB student who has worked with your children all semester. Questions? Contact her at (909) 555-6549

Thanks, and see you on Friday!

Critical Reflection

For the past three months, I have dedicated an inconceivable amount of time, effort, and fervor into developing my Senior Capstone project, which revolved around increasing parental involvement at an elementary school for which I had previously fostered a particular interest. My attempts at addressing this issue by means of researching the published literature, incorporating personal experience, and involving the relevant stakeholders have been culminated into an eleven thousand-word documentation. This has been quite a strenuous undertaking and has enabled me to display significant growth as an individual as I progressed, struggling to make an impact. Consequentially, this semester has not only widened my intellectual knowledge on the matter but also has provided me with meaningful insight about myself, public education, and the many saddening realities which coincide with teaching in low-performing elementary schools like McDearmon. Thus, I conclude my Liberal Studies Capstone experience as a dignified and more mature young woman, feeling proud of my efforts and much more prepared as a prospective public educator.

On Action Taken

As I ponder the many steps for action I proposed this semester, I do not feel I have ever been a more appropriate candidate to vouch for the cliché which affirms hindsight as being 20/20; I must admit that if I was given the opportunity to “re-do” this semester, it is likely that I would accept it. Though I remain impressed with all that I have accomplished and

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with my persistence in doing so, I can definitely identify aspects of my work that I would do differently, if given the chance.

Mainly, I would not have wasted so many of my initial weeks on awaiting responses from the various teachers I solicited, as a month and a half into the semester all I had to show for were my frustrations and feelings of insignificance. In retrospect, it is clear that Mrs. Jan Larson should have been the first teacher I contacted, rather than my last resort (although unintentionally so). Had I emailed this woman a month sooner, each of the problems which I actually encountered with my project never would have arisen, seeing as how my delay in obtaining contact with a community partner resulted in my entire project being set back as well. To name a few consequences of not contacting Jan sooner, I missed numerous important deadlines and correlating marks, I procrastinated even further because of my uncertainties, and the precious time I had to take action on this issue played a huge role in why I was unable to reschedule the parent meeting I had anticipated on hosting. Indeed, I should have recognized the brief time frame allotted for my Capstone and, accordingly, been more productive. However, seeing as how I am incapable of travelling back in time and ultimately my efforts were effective, at the closing of this semester I remain with no regrets.

Though I can ascertain my weaknesses as I conclude my Capstone, such is not to say that I have not demonstrated great vigor in its development. Every missed opportunity throughout the course of this semester provided me with an unwavering sense of persistence, and I am impressed at the resourcefulness and creativity I demonstrated in response to my many failed attempts at reaching out to community members for support. I also must commend the extent of my genuine passion for taking action to resolve the

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unavoidable obstacles I encountered while working with this low-performing school. My action was directed towards a stakeholder group whose participants barely endorsed parental involvement at all, and whose community-specific conditions justifiably prevented the very thing I sought to improve. Thus, my unyielding efforts at increasing parent involvement in such a low-status and uninvolved community serve as proof of my authentic concerns for the dire situation at hand, and I vow to continue struggling through the issues at this school until I see improvements.

Despite my successful completion of the Liberal Studies Capstone, I still plan on taking further action on this matter. At this point, my action has consisted of inspiring the principal to foster a better environment for gaining community support and parental involvement, but I do not regard this as sufficient. In spite of everything, I have many more ideas which I feel can be implemented easily in order to benefit these underprivileged students. First and foremost, I believe they would profit immensely if a “pen-pal” system was installed between these kids and CSUMB first-time “FYS” students. Through such a simple and easy system of communication between community members, these children will have access to better role models and they might begin to recognize the benefits of going to college. Not only would the children prosper from communicating anonymously with local, college-bound students, but if carried out this idea would integrate FYS students into their surroundings from the get-go, and even encourage them to behave in a way which reflects why children can look up to them. At this point, I have gained contact with the First Year Seminar supervisor and she has expressed her overwhelming support for my proposed plans, and Jan and I have already agreed to do our best to see that such a program is incorporated at McDearmon in the near future.

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Another vision I plan on seeing out at McDearmon is a field trip to the CSUMB library.

After Jan had mentioned the bake sale in our final interview and had declared its profits were to fund a field trip to Alcatraz, I began to wonder why Mrs. Larson's students were travelling all the way to the San Francisco Bay when an adequate opportunity for a field trip is a mere thirty minutes away. I then recalled how many elementary students I have witnessed walking by me diligently working in the campus library, and how the looks in their eyes often display not only curiosity but blatant amazement at everything they encounter: the impressive display of technology and books, not to mention the sheer number of students who are so dedicated to their studies. If the McDearmon children were capable of visiting the library located at CSUMB, they would see how many diverse college students there are at this institution that are just like them. They would definitely be astounded at how vast and aesthetically pleasing the three-story building is, and maybe these children would establish the CSUMB library as a place they wish to return to someday. Mrs. Larson remarked that McDearmon had never visited CSUMB, but that she sees this as having incredible potential in the future. I also mentioned that I had never visited Alcatraz and was immediately offered a seat on the bus when the time comes for her and her students to depart for the historic cite. Indeed, although my required integration into Jan's classroom has come to an end, the two of us will continue to work together to improve the dire situation at this low-performing school.

So, maybe it is possible to improve McDearmon students' education by directly affecting how they see themselves enthralled in the education system. Rather than involving the stakeholders themselves to improve Jan's students' academic achievement (as I have recently relayed this responsibility to the principal), I rely now on improving their success

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as students by means of different community members- those from CSUMB. After all, CSUMB is the most local four-year university to McDearmon, and it is comprised of countless college students and administrators who are not only just as concerned with local students' success as I am, but also readily available and accessible. If I accomplish each of these propositions, I feel as if the underprivileged students at McDearmon will have the opportunity to see, first-hand, the benefits of attending college. Establishing community-driven approaches to increase college-bound students at McDearmon might just end up as the most effective way to carry out my action.

On Lessons Learned

It is through reflecting upon this project that I am able to recognize all that I have learned in its process, over the course of this semester. Not only have I realized a great deal about myself, but I am also more aware of what it realistically takes to institute effective changes, especially in a public teaching environment.

In terms of myself, I have learned many valuable lessons which I definitely will remember as I take on a more challenging curriculum and begin my credential program. For instance, I learned that the manner in and extent to which I often procrastinate will not lead me to open doors and opportunities in any aspect of my life, whether it be final grades, job opportunities, or being capable of leading a stress-free life on which I so intend. As I am a very detailed and organized "perfectionist" in most other aspects of my life, when I leave tasks for the last minute there are severe consequences. It has taken several sleepless nights and unattended classes to make up for the time I lost at the start of this term, and my meticulous attention to detail only inhibits me from efficiently producing results. As I am to

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be incorporated into a second-grade classroom next month as a CSUMB teacher candidate, it is urgent that I take what I have learned from these difficulties to heart and try my best to break my terrible habit of procrastination.

In terms of what I learned about working toward change, I am now acutely aware of the fact that it takes a significant amount of preparation, dedication, and innovation to actually constitute some policy or have a meaningful impact on the matter. First of all, coming up with an authentic, relevant and local topic was difficult enough in itself, but after doing so I am now capable of seeing what is truly important to me as a future elementary teacher. I later discovered that determining my focus issue was, in fact, the easiest task of all. I then was obligated to spend an unexpected amount of time on researching my chosen issue, which was interrupted by the long and exasperating process of gaining a community partner who would invest substantial energies into my cause. Maintaining contact with this source and conducting more research on my issue, whilst simultaneously meeting deadlines and determining plausible solutions, became a juggling act that I proved unsuccessful (as I failed to meet a single deadline all semester). Finally, deciding upon community-specific solutions that could be carried out realistically is what I have found to be the most difficult duties of all, although this has also yielded the most personal satisfaction as well. As a student volunteer offering no personal gain to the stakeholders or contributors of my project, I have unearthed the reality that many school affiliates do not care about my Capstone project. Figuratively speaking, countless doors were closed in my face throughout this semester, while other doors I sought to explore were never available at all. Yielding success in affecting such an urgent issue has taken a series of failed attempts and intuitive revisions, and most importantly has required my firm confidence and

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unquestionable diligence all along the way. Nonetheless, I developed each of these in time, and I have absolutely produced results on affecting the issue of parental involvement at McDearmon. As I have never before taken part in such an involved and complex action project as Capstone, I am extremely satisfied with the outcomes of all that I worked towards for Mrs. Larson's class.

Possibly the most notable thing I came to learn this semester is the reality of my issue in terms of how it plays out in a low-performing school. Coinciding with this is how public educators like Jan struggle through each of the pertaining problems to adopt successful teaching strategies and develop a valuable learning environment for these children. Throughout my interviews with this experienced educator, I was inspired by everything she has done to accommodate each and every student so they succeed. With so many obstacles to overcome, Jan's work has left me inspired. Her optimism in the face of bleak realities has demonstrated to me what it takes to be a teacher, and a concerned and generous one at that. These are all contributing factors as to why I plan on staying connected with Mrs. Larson and redirect my inspiration to fuel who I become as a teacher one day.

Sadly, another truth I uncovered recently is the frequent irrelevance and incompetency of the public system of education in the United States. From my extensive research on Obama's legislation regarding education, mixed with my observations at a school under careful watch of the government, I have noticed that this system is far from flawless. Additionally, I have found that the school officials with the most power, such as the principal, may be the fundamental for the institution's problems. Such is something I intend on keeping in mind as I am thrown into the interview process to secure a teaching job. On a

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different note, I now feel as if the majority of public educators who are employed in low-performing schools are overworked, underpaid, and have the most enormous hearts of any other professional I have considered. Clearly there are exceptions to these assertions, but I have found that generally, the teachers with whom I have collaborated have demonstrated deep-rooted devotion for educating, which is one aspect of this project which will always occupy my thoughts as I enter the challenging and beloved world of teaching.

Synthesis and Integration

According to the university website, the Liberal Studies Mission Statement has five separate objectives:

1. “to provide instruction in content areas that prepare students for future careers, for life-long learning, and for becoming well-educated individuals;
2. to lead the collaboration with other departments, programs, and institutions, on and off campus;
3. to provide a broad-based liberal arts, subject matter curriculum to students;
4. to develop action-oriented students who successfully advocate for multiculturalism, multicultural education, pluralism, diversity, and social and ecological justice;
5. to foster students' skills in ethical reflection and critical thinking and in considering the contexts of histories, families, cultures, and communities in their interactions and practice with children, adults, and institutions and ecological systems”(2010, p. 1).

Throughout my Liberal Studies education, these five themes have been effectively integrated into my curricula as a singular philosophy which now shapes my perceptions,

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thoughts, and concerns as a prospective teacher. My Capstone has served as the basis for applying the LS philosophy in order to affect a particular aspect of education. For me, it was this university's unique concept of Service Learning that fostered my intent on community. It was also through Service Learning that I was capable of reaching out to local schools, as this program facilitated a mutual connection and helped with my confidence in relating to professional teachers. In fact, it was only through the efforts of SL that I became so involved with Mrs. Larson's fifth graders and was motivated to take action. It is clear that not only has CSUMB's academics prepared my intellectual knowledge for becoming a teacher, but its programs and the ideals supporting them have opened my eyes as far as being a capable, socially-aware educator. Furthermore, my Capstone's subject matter outlines the importance of familial support and community participation in terms of improving academics at a disadvantaged school, and my efforts are sensitive to many of the cultural and social problems of this specific community. Even still, I remain compelled to carry out further action to make an impact, even if I can only change one specific classroom at one elementary in one struggling district amongst many of the sort.

In regards to which of the Liberal Studies Major Learning Outcomes and Content areas informed my project, I believe my Capstone mainly reflects: Ethical Reflection and Social Responsibility, Focus of Study in Spanish Language and Cultures, and Knowledge and Lifelong Learning. The first of these three themes has shaped the way I see myself in society, and it has informed me on how I can use critical reflection not to remove myself from this position, but rather utilize my advantaged status to change the world. As a white, upper-class woman soon to have her bachelor's degree, my life entails certain opportunities which many other people are not capable of acquiring, and what I learned

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from investing in well-taught courses on Ethical Reflection and Social Responsibility is that I have a responsibility to take action for those individuals who do not have the resources to improve society themselves. This is precisely what I attempted to accomplish at McDearmon, a community whose generally uninvolved parents are often hindered by their economic and cultural difficulties.

In addition, my chosen emphasis as a Spanish Language and Cultures Minor has supported every aspect of my project. Because of my lower division and sixteen-unit accumulation of Spanish courses, I have developed an expansive understanding of Hispanic and Latin American cultures and ethnicities, a fact which interests and involves me more with this population as every day progresses. I took particular interest in the McDearmon community largely because of its dominantly Spanish-speaking population, and I utilized my fluency to reach out to this community. My intentions on hosting a parent meeting were to offer the Latin American and Hispanic families an opportunity to participate without the ever-present language barrier inhibiting their doing so, as well as to demonstrate my vulnerabilities with speaking Spanish to empower them as they could have related to me on a deeper level.

Finally, I have incorporated a third MLO of the Liberal Studies Department, Knowledge and Lifelong Learning into my Capstone as my entire focus issue remain grounded in improving academic success of the students. My objective for increasing parent involvement is solely based on benefitting the students and finding ways to inspire them to value their education. More specifically, my future plans for involving CSUMB into Mrs. Larson's classroom are backed by my hopes in facilitating these underprivileged students

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become college-bound and career-ready, a long course based on every teacher's inherent belief in lifelong learning.

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