

## From an “Insider” to an “Outsider”: The Metamorphosis of an Educator Navigating School-University Partnerships in Urban Communities

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When we reflect upon an experience instead of just having it, we inevitably distinguish between our own attitude and the objects toward which we sustain the attitude... Such reflection upon experience gives rise to a distinction of what we experience (the experienced) and the experiencing—the how.

**John Dewey**<sup>1</sup>

Within the past three decades, urban school and district leaders have increasingly forged joint ventures with philanthropic groups, universities, and other education consultants to turn disjointed collections of flagship and failing schools into systems of high quality schools.<sup>2</sup> School boards have turned to military,

government, social and private sectors in search of executives to recruit to improve urban school systems.<sup>3</sup>

***The burden has traditionally fallen on the “outsiders” to warrant that their contributions are neither ignored nor dismissed. How can outside agents get the buy-in from practitioners to influence student outcomes?***

As schools and district offices collaborate with agents from outside of P-12 institutions to bring instructional improvements to scale, observers argue that these partnerships are tilted because the “insiders,” or practitioners, ultimately decide whether they will implement the ideas created by the partnerships.<sup>4</sup> The burden has traditionally fallen on the “outsiders” to warrant that their contributions are neither ignored nor dismissed. How can outside agents get the buy-in from practitioners to influence student outcomes?

I contend that outsiders (e.g., representatives from Institutions of Higher Education) who during the earlier stages of the partnership

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the district level. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 83(3), 364-399.

Fullan, M., Rincón-Gallardo, S., & Hargreaves, A. (2015). Professional capital as accountability. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 23(15).

<sup>3</sup> Childress, S., Elmore, R., Grossman, A., and S. Moore Johnson (Eds.). (2007). *Managing School Districts for High Performance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Zavadsky, H. (2009). *Bringing school reform to scale: Five award winning urban districts*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

<sup>4</sup> Payne, C. (2008). *So much reform, so little change: The persistence of failure in urban schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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<sup>1</sup> Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

<sup>2</sup> Coburn, C. Bae, S. & Turner, E. (2008). Authority, status, and the dynamics of insider-outsider partnerships at

purposely seek to understand the formal and informal structures of the institution—as well as the urban context in which their work will take place—are more likely to have input that is embraced and implemented by insiders.

This self-reflective analysis draws from first-hand professional experiences with two school-university partnerships: the first as an elementary school teacher, the second as a university-representative working with an urban district office. I reflect, with references to institutional theorists, on how reformers and practitioners perceived attempted outside influence on instructional outcomes.

In the second section of this paper, I discuss the unique role that teacher preparation programs in Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) have as outside agents that prepare future and current insiders.<sup>5</sup> As outsiders, teacher educators are charged with preparing future teachers of urban districts to become reflective and collaborative agents of social change, responsible for meeting the diverse needs of students and families within an increasingly complex urban education landscape.

I conclude with a discussion of the lessons learned from these school-university partnerships and how they inform my current role as teacher educator and researcher.

## Situated Knowledge

I have personally and professionally confronted the obstacles commonly entrenched in the urban school context. Prior to my current role as

a teacher educator and researcher, I worked as a special education and bilingual teacher for six years in one of the nation's five largest urban school districts. The Title I schools where I taught—and which my son and daughter also attended—were in the predominately African American and Caribbean neighborhood where I grew up, in the southeastern region of the United States.

A substantial number of parents were my childhood peers. During my tenure, I dedicated hours to efforts that generated new opportunities for students. I refused to succumb to low expectations and the notion that success was not attainable. Instead, I helped start a photography club, lead tutorial programs, invited alumni of the schools to speak to the students, and pursued grants for different student empowerment projects.

Committed to bringing out the strengths in my collaborators and in enhancing the lives of children, I endeavored to incorporate the knowledge of parents and colleagues into the conversation about improving student learning. For example, by developing a partnership with an assistant professor from a nearby research IHE, I organized a series of dialogue sessions about education as a social justice issue.

I met the academic at a conference where I first learned about his scholarship. After I described some of the strengths and challenges at my school, he accepted the invitation to speak to our community. Since our school was targeted for both district and state-level interventions, teachers, students, and parents had become numb to the presence of the revolving door of visitors in fancy suits. It was my hope that families and colleagues would find his ideas about centering relationships and highlighting the community's cultural wealth as refreshing as I did.

<sup>5</sup> Eddy, P. L. (2010). *Partnerships and collaboration in higher education*. Boston: John Wiley & Sons.

Diamond, J. B. (2013). "Distributed Leadership: Examining Issues of Race, Power, and Inequality." In L. C. Tillman & J. J. Scheurich (Eds.) *Handbook of research on educational leadership for equity and diversity*. New York: Routledge.

Per my request, he agreed to visit prior to conducting the first meeting to gain an understanding of the school context. The researcher, a Latino man from the west coast of the United States, said the ranch-style homes in the neighborhood reminded him of his hometown. With that simple observation, I remember, I felt more at ease with his collaboration with our school.

As the dialogue sessions were scheduled after school hours, I went to each teacher to personally ask for their assistance with promoting the gatherings. I used money from small teacher grants to create invitations for the parents and advertisements that we shared around the community. School administrators showed their support for the endeavor by securing tickets to professional basketball and football events, books, and educational toys from local partners, which were presented as giveaways during the meeting. For one of his visits, the university professor invited preservice teachers who were his students to attend the dialogue. Although I was a special education teacher who did not hold an official administrative title, I was influencing change at the school with mobilization efforts that scholars describe as distributed leadership.

One outcome of engaging the community was that the school administrators supported the idea to establish a school-based Before/After School Care Program. The program met the families' request for a safe, educationally sound, after school option for their children. It also provided job opportunities for families. For the first two years, I oversaw the recruitment and hiring of a dozen employees for the program—all of whom were relatives of students at our school. Despite the various instructional and extracurricular activities I engaged in, the driving narrative behind most school interactions during my six years as an urban school-teacher centered on state accountability, assessments, and surveillance measures.

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The adoption of high stakes accountability measures by state governments in the mid to late 1990s, reinforced by the 2002 federal passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, created a climate dominated by the politics of accountability in education governance. State assessments and the media's role in providing information about schools' performance to the public have drawn attention to the great variations of student achievement from district to district and among schools within a district. In this age of accountability, as low-performing districts want to get out of the spotlight, large urban cities continued to struggle with making improvements in student performance measures.

The experience I gained at the school level heavily influenced my desire to understand the role that community agency and leadership plays in enriching the lives of students in urban settings. As I witnessed the humiliated faces of students, parents, and educators who were casualties of policy side-effects—for example, the looming possibility of retention of students who did not pass our state test or the stigma of receiving a “D” as a school grade—my mounting frustration motivated my comments to the independent newsmagazine *In These Times*.

In my first media opportunity, I argued that accountability alone is simply not enough, suggesting that “instead of stigmatizing the school and putting more pressure on students, let's talk about the social issues that are going on, with-

in... outside and around the school.” Shortly after that interview I applied to graduate school in order to gain a deeper understanding of the processes in which educational policies are made and school systems managed.

## **Institutional History and Contexts Matter**

After beginning my graduate studies in 2010, I engaged in various activities where I examined the research, practice, and policies involved with educating students with diverse needs. As my career and academic interests took me across different urban districts in the country, I quickly learned that, despite having attended and taught in urban schools, each context was different and I was most often perceived as an outsider who represented an IHE. The first time I realized that my affiliation with an IHE made me an outsider to P-12 professionals was an upsetting and humbling discovery.

At the time of my contract as a professional development (PD) facilitator at a northeastern urban district, 30% of students were English learners (ELs) while 46% of students spoke a language other than English at home. Although ELs represented a substantial proportion of the student body and were explicitly mentioned in the district’s strategic plans, this sub-group had the lowest academic outcomes and the highest dropout rates in the state.

The alarming statistics, brought to the attention of the US Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice (DOJ), initiated an investigation that exposed the lack of sufficient support given to the learners in the district. In October 2010, the superintendent signed a settlement agreement with the OCR and DOJ, which called for the expansion of EL services and the assurance that every school

had the capacity to serve this student population.

Per the settlement, teachers were required to complete four categories of competencies trainings to be deemed qualified by the state to teach ELs. Since the inception of the OCR investigations, the district has hired or trained thousands of teachers. In addition to EL’s achievement gap, however, there was a considerable professional development gap for their teachers. A district office trained most of them, but the sessions were not competence-based.

Furthermore, a survey by the teachers union had synthesized the feedback about the category trainings and published it online: “many, many teachers were quite put off by the ELL Category trainings and called it the worst PD they ever experienced in their careers. There was not one positive comment about the category trainings.” I did not learn about this problematic PD history until months into my partnership with the district office.

Eventually, the trainers acknowledged that there was no formal procedures to document whether the strategies presented in these trainings were implemented and agreed that teacher participants displayed a dismissive attitude during the trainings. In short, the categorical trainings had been implemented more as a compliance measure than as a useful method for improving the instructional core.

I was one of three consultants hired from my university. The supervisor responsible for hiring us proudly shared that their office was the most ethnically and linguistically diverse staff in the district. As a former English language learner and a teacher from a large urban school district, I felt that I was a perfect fit for the position. It took me a while to realize, however, that the district staff members in this office had pegged me as an intruder.

I initially received a warm welcome by most. However, just as I had grown apathetic to the revolving door of fancy-suits during my

years as an elementary school teacher, the district staff were used to meeting and greeting new people who ultimately left. Moreover, most of the staff had worked at the office for years, while the department supervisors who were most enthusiastic about my contributions, were newer to the office.

An example that illustrates the complicated dynamics in this joint venture was a series of events that led to the early dismissal of one of my co-facilitators. During our orientation, two trainers told us that we could work from home. Despite their advice, I thought it was wise to work from the central office. During the first two weeks, I was the only one of the three facilitators who was consistently coming to the office and I was soon tapped to lead several projects. A few weeks later, a supervisor asked one of the facilitators not to return because she “was not putting in enough effort.” I believe those who encouraged us to work from home were partly responsible for her lack of engagement. Shortly before hearing about her dismissal, I contacted the other facilitator and suggested that he come to work in the central office because that was where most the information for our projects could be found.

For an 11-month period, I was responsible for managing a budget of \$163,000, oversaw professional development sessions for district teachers, and executed the specific goals of a time-sensitive project funded by a federal grant. As my time at the office progressed, the resistance from some staff members also increased. Upon reflection, I realize that my questions, demeanor, and institutional affiliation were the most prominent markers that defined my relationship in the office.

The staff were accustomed to operating without anyone questioning their actions. Considering the decision by the DOJ, the newspaper articles in the local paper, and the teacher union’s posting of the office’s failures on the internet, my presence and questions put them

on the defensive. Consequently, some staff chose to ignore my requests and requested to work with the other facilitators. It was the first time I experienced resistance to collaboration. The contentious interactions with district personnel taught me an important lesson about the need to come into a school-university partnership with an in-depth understanding of the institutional context, as well as the importance of building relationships with more than just the administrators.

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In their empirical exploration of the negotiation processes involved in a collaborative effort between an urban school district and a university-based research center, Coburn and colleagues found that authority and status during these partnerships were incredibly dynamic.<sup>6</sup> The district office is a context with hierarchical and more complex organizational structures than that found in schools.

While emerging research touts the synergistic benefits of insider–outsider collaboration, Coburn and colleagues contend that there is insufficient examination of the processes by

<sup>6</sup> Coburn, C. Bae, S. & Turner, E. (2008) Authority, status, and the dynamics of insider-outsider partnerships at the district level. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 83(3), 364–399

which partnerships are negotiated and maintained at the district level. Furthermore, the authors argued that the existing literature primarily focuses on researchers' reflections and typically they are at the school level instead at the district level.

Drawing on data from a longitudinal case study, this same research team found that the organizational structure, namely the stability of district leadership teams, influenced the negotiation between the "experts" and "practitioners." In my experience, I also found that the frequent administrative turnover in the district office influenced my perceived contribution as an outside expert.

Through interviews, the researchers also found that insiders and outsiders with more practical experience were given higher status, although outsiders were less likely to need experience to have status. The authors concluded that even though district offices may solicit the partnerships due to the "outsiders" level of expertise, these partnerships are skewed toward the insider practitioners. Finally, the authors advised outside agents to pay especially close attention to the insiders that had authority, because this authority is dynamic, and those insiders would be able to impart informal authority to the outside agent.

## **Making Sense of My Transition from Insider to Outsider**

In the two narratives I shared above, I describe very different reactions of urban school professionals to representatives of IHEs. In both cases, the insiders were wary of outside influences because of the surveillance and public declarations that deemed their efforts as failures.

In both cases the expert outsiders were, like the urban district insiders, members of historically margined ethnic groups, albeit from different regions of the country. Although there is

anecdotal evidence that explicit discussion about race and differences are critical for collaborative efforts in urban districts, these demographic considerations are often not explicitly explored in collaborative research.<sup>7</sup> In both of my shared experiences, however, intercultural communication were effective and perceived racial slights did not emerge.

A feature of large urban school districts that repeatedly receive criticisms, from both the staff within and observers outside the systems, is the bureaucratic structure and "pathologies" of these organizations. Both conservative and progressive education pundits point to bureaucratic problems in relationship to improving student outcome. A review of the literature on bureaucracies both elucidates the complicated nature of effecting change in urban districts and reveals the beliefs that often affect how outsiders view the insiders within the school systems.<sup>8</sup>

German sociologist Max Weber maintained that, although bureaucracies may concentrate power at the top of the hierarchy, it also provides for checks and balances to prevent the abuse of power. That is, bureaucracy has the potential to reduce and remove opportunities for corruption and arbitrary exercises of power.<sup>9</sup> Many argue that in urban school systems these checks and balances can become too rigid and lead to stagnation and active maintenance of the status quo by hostile bureaucrats.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Pugach, M.C., Blanton, L.P., & Boveda, M. (2014). Working together: Research on the preparation of general education and special education teachers for inclusion and collaboration. In P. D. Sindelar, E.D. McCray, M. T. Brownell, & B. Lignugaris/Kraft (Eds.). *Handbook for research on special education teacher preparation*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Weber, M. (1947). *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. New York: The Free Press.

<sup>10</sup> Chubb, J. & Moe, T. (1990). *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

One of the earlier critics of centralized school systems, Chubb and Moe looked to the achievement of private schools and a handful of successful school districts, and concluded that school autonomy—not over-bureaucratization—leads to better student performance. In *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, Chubb and Moe took the bold position that state governments needed to create a new public education system based on the market principles of parental choice and school competition: “bureaucracy problem namely is the more immediate explanation for the schools’ poor academic performance.”<sup>11</sup> Specifically, they argue that expansive centralized bureaucracies are antithetical to instructional improvement for two reasons: (1) entrenched bureaucrats are self-interested and resistant to evaluation and accountability and (2) bureaucracies limit unconventional school leaders and teachers’ discretion to propose and implement innovative educational approaches that would improve student outcome.

In *Reframing Organizations*, Bolman and Deal assert that blaming people, blaming bureaucracy, and blaming the quest for power are oversimplified explanations for an organization’s failure to achieve its mission.<sup>12</sup> Market-base reformers like Chubb and Moe unduly attribute sinister motives to the mobilization of educators.

Having been a teacher in a large urban district, I understand that these actors have a real and understandable stake in education policy and school governance. Furthermore, I felt more constricted by the hyper-focus on assessments, which was a greater hindrance to innovative instructional approaches than the

bureaucratic nature of schools. The idea that teachers, principals, and district staff are bureaucrats actively engaged in avoidance of accountability for student outcomes is assuming that organizational rationality exists and that the actors are pursuing misguided goals.

Moreover, Payne contends that much of education policy “discussion... proceeds as if schools were sane places. Thus, reformers of both the left and the right continue to act as if making this or that change in school structure will, by itself, lead to change.” But if urban school systems are in fact, as Payne argues, irrational institutions, then what other reasons can explain the inability to successfully educate all its students?<sup>13</sup>

Institutional theorists provide a more benign perspective on bureaucracies, arguing that bureaucratization of schools occurred as a response to change in social structure and a “worldwide trend of national development.”<sup>14</sup> The influx of immigrants and the rise of industrialization in central cities provided the “impetus to control school on a large scale.”<sup>15</sup> A key difference that separated the bureaucratization of U.S. schools from similar processes taking place in countries like the United Kingdom, however, was the value of local control and pluralism that this nation holds.

Furthermore, Meyer and Rowan differentiate district and school administrators’ commitment to the formal structures and appearance of legitimacy from the core technical work of teaching and learning.<sup>16</sup> In other words, school

Moe, T. (2006). Political control and the power of the agent. *Journal of Law, Economics and Organization*, 22(1), 113–154.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> Bolman, L. & Deal, T. (2013). *Reframing Organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>13</sup> Payne, C. (2008). *So much reform, so little change: The persistence of failure in urban schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

<sup>14</sup> Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1978). The structure of educational organizations. In M. W. Meyer (Ed.), *Environments and organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 92–93.

<sup>16</sup> Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1978). The structure of educational organizations. In M. W. Meyer (Ed.), *Environments and organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

administrators coordinated efforts were designed to buffer classroom activities from the scrutiny of outsider observers, and maintain the public confidence in their institutions.

## Implications for a Teacher Educator and Researcher

The US, comprised of more than 15,000 school districts, has a network of schools where there are extensively diverse demographics of students and yet all quite similar in structure.<sup>17</sup> As the nation moves to assure all students have access to a quality education, large urban districts are especially pressed to find ways to implement changes across complex networks of schools. Sociologists and institutional theorists elucidate the challenges of enacting reform in these contexts. These partnerships, if gone awry, can be time consuming and frustrating for university representatives and expensive for district offices.

During my special education preservice teacher education training, collaboration was primarily framed in terms of collaboration with general education colleagues and students' families. From the narratives above, however, it is evident that teachers have the opportunity to collaborate with a host of professionals and community members outside of their schools.

So, how can teacher educators prepare teachers to become change agents within complex urban districts?

For one, both of my narratives underscore the importance of explicit attention to the sociocultural markers and histories of the collaborating partners. In the elementary school I worked in, I shared many of the demographic characteristics with the families I worked with,

but not with the university professor I collaborated with. It was helpful to have an upfront conversation with my collaborator about our cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

A similar conversation about the value of multiculturalism also took place in collaboration with urban northeastern school district. Pugach and colleagues argue that it is not only necessary to identify the sociocultural identities of teachers, teacher educators, students, and families in collaborative research, but also to indicate the demographic information of researchers in these contexts.<sup>18</sup>

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Moreover, IHE representatives and teacher educators must be cautious in asserting their roles as experts, especially if they lack experience in the P-12 classrooms or in that specific urban context. How can university-based external partners encourage buy-in from large urban school practitioners?

One of the challenges that my narratives underscore is that school leaders are conditioned to conceal and buffer the actual occurrences in classrooms from outside scrutiny. Consequently, in collaborative efforts in complex system it should be expected that insiders

<sup>17</sup> Childress, S., Elmore, R., Grossman, A., and S. Moore Johnson (Eds.). (2007). *Managing School Districts for High Performance*. Harvard Education Press.

<sup>18</sup> Pugach, M.C., Blanton, L.P., & Boveda, M. (2014). Working together: Research on the preparation of general education and special education teachers for inclusion and collaboration. In P. D. Sindelar, E.D. McCray, M. T. Brownell, & B. Lignugaris/Kraft (Eds.). *Handbook for research on special education teacher preparation*. New York: Routledge.

would be slow to discuss any past failures of their own or that of their faculty and staff, especially if disclosing that information could be seen as potentially tarnishing their public image.

The implications of my experiences clarify ways in which outside partners can best engage the system without overstepping their roles and meeting resistance.<sup>19</sup> Although I served as a liaison between the school community and the university professor prior to his visit to our school, when I was the university-representative, I did not have a similar gatekeeper available to teach me the dynamics of the district office. Furthermore, had I been proactive in taking steps to learn the institutional history of the district office I worked with, I may have been sensitive to the staff's resistance to my efforts.

I learned that any school reform effort should not purposively antagonize teachers and practitioners, nor inadvertently slight them, because they are the group with the greatest power to “sabotage reform. No realistic estimate of strategies for change in American education could afford to ignore teachers or fail to enlist their support.”<sup>20</sup>

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*across education communities to inform education policy and practice.*

<sup>19</sup> Coburn, C. Bae, S. & Turner, E. (2008) Authority, status, and the dynamics of insider-outsider partnerships at the district level', *Peabody Journal of Education*, 83(3), 364–399.

<sup>20</sup> Tyack, D. (1974). *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. See p. 289.