

“Community Development in Schools:
Perceptions of Teachers across National Boundaries”

Presented at
The 12th World Congress of Comparative Education Societies
October 27, 2004
Havana, Cuba

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Introduction

In the summer of 2004, fourteen Kindergarten-Grade 12 (K-12) teachers from the U.S. took part in a Fulbright-Hays Study Tour of Vietnam. This paper will explore how some of these K-12 teachers conceptualized how their schools contribute to the communities in which their schools are situated and how their surrounding communities contributed to their schools. Their responses will be compared with responses to the same questions asked of K-12 teachers in Vietnam. An analysis will be undertaken to see the commonalities and differences between their sets of responses. The results of this study have implications for teachers to understand the transformative effects that schools can have on communities and that communities can have on schools across national boundaries.

Review of the Literature

“What the best and wisest parents wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely, acted upon, it destroys our democracy. All that society has accomplished for itself is put, through the agency of the school, at the disposal of its future members. All its better thoughts of itself it hopes to realize through the new possibilities thus opened to its future self (Dewey, 1902).”

In *The School and The Society*, John Dewey outlines how the school and society should be woven together for the benefit of all children in society. Society becomes better through the agency and the efforts of the school. To divorce the two from each

other in practice results in an educational system that disadvantages both individual children and the communities in which they live.

The community schools movement in the U.S. has been one effort to actively create partnerships that support and strengthen opportunities for students, families, and the surrounding community to work together for their mutual benefit. Using the community as part of the curriculum, students are involved in learning and service in the community as a way to connect both learning and civic engagement. Active and directed learning can increase student achievement and help young people acquire real-life skills (Blank, Johnson, & Shah 2003). Research and fieldwork show that such programs improve schools, strengthen families, invigorate community support, and increase student achievement and success (Epstein, 2001; Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Sheldon, 2003).

Besides the community schools movement, schools throughout the U.S. have tried to develop service learning and community service programs in which students engage in activities that help the community and build school-community ties (Kendall, 1990; Kraft, 1996; Kraft and Swadener, 1994; Rhoads, 1997; Waterman, 1997; Zlotkowski, 1995). Other scholars have examined how society is likely to benefit when its members develop a commitment to caring about the community (Larrabee, 1993; Noddings, 1984, 1992, 1995; Oliner & Oliner, 1995).

Although significant research has been done in the role of community in schools and the role of community in schools, the actual practice of linking the two worlds in a meaningful relationship continues to be developed with different meanings and in different contexts. In this paper, I will examine the responses of 4 teachers from the U.S. and 4 teachers from Vietnam to see what commonalities and differences can be observed across national boundaries.

Research Methods

The author of this paper conducted a series of 1-hour interviews with each of the teacher participants in this study. Teacher participants from the U.S. were members of a Fulbright-Hays Study Tour of Vietnam. Vietnamese participants were schoolteachers affiliated with a research program based out of a mid-sized university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The program sought to strengthen the ties between schools and local communities and to develop active learning strategies in the practice of teachers. The same interview protocol was used with each set of teacher participants. Some observations of the teacher participants' classes in Vietnam and in the U.S. were also undertaken.

Conversations with Teachers from the U.S. about Community and Schools

When asked about the role of community in their schools and the role of schools in their community, Fulbright-Hays teacher participants responded in a variety of ways. In this section of my paper, I will examine and analyze the responses of 4 teacher participants from the U.S.

Stephen Graves

Stephen Graves has taught for twenty-five years as an alternative educational teacher in a suburban town in the mid-west. Most of his teacher experience has been in the teaching of social studies courses including United States History and Economics. His instructional practice is primarily based upon lectures, quizzes, and tests with some-in class and out-of-class activities. Stephen sees the value of taking students from the school into the community to visit museums of history and art museums and feels that

these experiences help students to get concrete images of the material they are learning in his class. For Stephen, field trips “reinforce what you’ve been saying, what you’ve been teaching, plus seeing these actual objects firsthand I think creates more of an interest for my students. Like at Greenfield Village, they can see the seat where Abe Lincoln was shot or the limousine that John Kennedy was shot in. As a kid, you talk about these things and remember them more.” Trips to city council meetings and tours of city hall also help students in understanding how the city government works and the complexities of the work that is done. As the curriculum coordinator of all of the alternative educational schools in his district, Stephen also has brought in several speakers to talk to both students and teachers. He often has a county nurse speak at faculty meetings and to students about the problems of violence in the community and how it can be prevented. Stephen feels strongly that these types of trips and speakers help students understand how the community works.

Although the high schools and junior high schools in his district have begun to do some work in the local community, Stephen feels that schools have not reached out enough to help the community nor has the community reached out enough to help the schools. Because of the disadvantaged backgrounds that many of his students face, Stephen feels that students do not see involvement in the community as a high priority for them.

John Williams

John Williams teaches high school social studies in a small town in the mid-west. Having taught for thirty-three years in the public school system, John felt that he had a keen understanding of the needs and wants of his students and the best ways to teach

them. His instructional practice is mostly teacher-directed and this approach is reflected in his response to questions about where knowledge comes from. He feels that in the ideal classroom “the teacher drives the car [of learning]. And all learning depends on the individual job that they do.” Students wait for the teacher to set the “feeling tone” and to deliver the curriculum and knowledge to the students. Assessment activity included tests, quizzes, and projects in which the students try to remember the information that they learned and present it in a different format such as in student-created posters or murals.

In terms of community involvement in schools, John tries to introduce his students to a wide variety of speakers from the local community. These speakers include local prosecuting attorneys, World War II veterans, and local citizens who emigrated to the U.S. from different countries. When asked why he invites local people to speak to his classes, John explains that it helps provide students with an alternative viewpoint of the knowledge that he had already taught them. Interestingly, he adds that bringing community members into the class “makes a wonderful connection to the community. In small communities like ours, if you make the connection, they love the schools, they vote for the millage [for additional school funding], they support it, they stand behind it.” Inviting speakers from the community helps community members see what goes on in the school and helps community members become more dedicated to the causes of the school.

John points out the importance of school in smaller communities in the United States. In light of the decline of businesses and local meeting places in smaller towns, John identifies the school as a crucial meeting place for all of the citizens of the town to meet. “The schools I think have continued to have tremendous influence on communities because so many people in town go to football games. That’s an identifiable part of town. I’ve seen this. Elementary children have a school concert that parents and community members go to. They sing “Jingle Bells”. Those kinds of community events are really

big for small town citizens.” The opening up of the school to the community can be seen especially in the building of a new school gym in John’s town. Realizing that both the community and the school needed new recreation facilities, the school superintendent in John’s district proposed the construction of a mixed-use gym in which the school uses the gym during the day and the local community uses the gym in the early mornings, late evenings, and weekends. Through this creative partnership, the superintendent was able to receive funding approval from the people in town for the gym to the benefit of both the community and the school.

Jeff Nash

Jeff Nash is a social studies teacher in a small town located on the outskirts of a major mid-western town. Jeff describes his classroom in the following way: “I think it looks like a place where students are not necessarily in perfect rows and facing the front and staring at a teacher who teaches for 55 minutes. It probably looks a little chaotic...and I guess it’s one where it’s student-centered too.” Jeff develops many of his own classroom materials and readings and allows students to access these materials during class time. He sees himself as a facilitator of learning who helps students to construct their own knowledge from the materials and readings provided them. He does not see his role as a teacher “to dictate everything a student learns”.

When asked about the role of the community in his school, Jeff explains that he tries to bring in speakers quite often from the local community. He attempts to find speakers who represent different perspectives on information that he is presenting. For example, Jeff finds many of his guest speakers from visiting local ethnic restaurants and local ethnic church organizations or clubs. Jeff recently had a Korean graduate student

come to speak to his classes. He also regularly asks Rangsey, a janitor at his school, to speak about his experiences as a refugee from Cambodia. Rangsey speaks four languages and, after leaving Cambodia, had to live in refugee camps in Laos and Thailand for several years. Jeff highly values the insider knowledge of Cambodian culture that Rangsey can bring to the students in his classroom. “I mean students could learn so much from him. He walks into my room, and I shut up. I want to hear everything he has to say.” Jeff also brings his students out into the community to experience local ethnic restaurants and to visit local ethnic religious communities such as mosques so students can “see, taste, and feel” different cultures that they talk about in his classes.

Jeff feels strongly that, beside the guest speakers who come to his classes, members of the community have a large role to play in schools. He states, “The community and the school are the same thing. I think the school is provided for by the government but the country should be involved in every aspect of it because it is the learning and education of their children.” Although he sees the vital role that community members can play in schools, he realizes that not enough people are helping out the students in his school by serving as role models and getting involved with teens. Rather, the community seems to, in many ways, fear the students. Consequently members of the community unfairly portray students as the cause of societal problems. “A lot of people from the community look down on high school students so it’s not surprising that kids don’t want to run out there and deal with the community. I think some members of the community have bad attitudes about the kids. You hear a lot of it...the youth are the problem. However, it’s the older generation that can teach the youth not to be the problem.”

Jeff then sees that there should be a vital link between the schools and the community and the community and the schools. Schools and the community both have

needs that can be fulfilled by one another. However, Jeff feels that currently the integration between the two is very limited at the school in which he works.

Michael Mills

Michael is an English teacher in an inner-city high school located in the mid-west. He teaches in an alternative educational school and works with students who have experienced both academic and disciplinary problems in traditional schools. Michael's teaching style is heavily student-centered and focused on the needs of his students. In Michael's classroom, the content knowledge for his classes comes from "within the students". He says that "Most of the time, there's somebody in the classroom that has the information and it's my job to bring that information out so that they can teach others and teach themselves too."

In keeping with this constructivist approach, Michael and the staff at his school have devised several ways for students to work together to engage with subject matter in order to construct new meaning and knowledge. Sometimes, in his English class, he will ask his students to write poetry or a story together so that the students can build confidence in their writing skills. In an effort to save money, Michael's school has recently purchased thirty bicycles so that teachers can more easily take students into the community to local museums, art exhibits, or community events. Moreover, students at Michael's school are actively involved in taking care of goats, chickens, and other barnyard animals that are on the school grounds and tending to the small vegetable plots that are behind the school. In their care for and reporting about these animals and the fields, Michael's students make use of their English, Mathematics, and Science skills.

Michael and his fellow teachers feel strongly about community involvement in their school and school involvement in their community. Local community members

come into the school on a regular basis to help model poetry writing and poetry performance skills for students, assist with the barnyard animals and fields, and to give guest lectures on social studies topics or preparation for college. Recently a team of scientists came to the school to explain how soil sample tests work. Subsequently students became actively involved with the project by testing the acidity of the soil on campus and on the property of surrounding homes. Students collected all the data, analyzed the data, and eventually did a presentation on their findings to the city council.

Michael has a strong vision for his students in terms of their involvement with the community. "I don't want the students to view the school as a separate vacuum apart from the community. I mean the whole objective of school is to integrate them into the community when they are done with school." Michael works diligently to open up lines of communication about the school with family members and friends of his students so that they see the school as a welcoming place and a place where all community members are welcome. "Ideally our school can be a model for community development... connecting people...you know people can be so remote from one another. They can live across the street from the school building and watch t.v. all day in their home or they can come over here and play basketball in our gym." Michael's school has made conscious efforts to open the doors of their school "all the time" to the members of the community and begun to think of their school as a community center where members of the community and members of the school can live, work, and learn together.

Analysis of Fulbright Teachers' Responses

Each of the four teachers from the U.S. described the interaction between the community and the school and the school in the community in different ways. Stephen espoused an approach in which guest speakers came in to the school to provide information and students went out of the school to visit museums and local organizations.

The reason why he engaged students in the community was to access the knowledge that was held by other people. Students at Stephen's school did not volunteer to work in the community on their own. He believed that students were too busy with their own problems to help out in any way.

In order to generate enthusiasm for the subject matter, John also had speakers visit his classroom. Similar to Stephen, John saw that outside speakers could provide knowledge and information to the school but did not comment on how students in his school could be actively engaged in the community. Additionally, John used outside speakers in order to build up relationships between the school and the community.

Jeff believed very strongly that community involvement was an integral part of the students' education. According to Jeff, it was important for the community to be involved in and dedicated to the school. In serving as mentors to students and helping out at the school, ties between the school and the community would strengthen and, thus, society in general would be benefited. Jeff also made an effort to invite speakers who represented a wide variety of different people in the community instead of only inviting in people who represented the elites or people in high positions of authority. Interaction with the community is central to Jeff's teaching philosophy.

Finally, Michael aspires to create a seamless blend between the community and the schools. In his classroom, students are out in the community, riding bikes to areas of interest. Community members are invited into the school on a daily basis to help the students and contribute to the school. Moreover, Michael sees great value in having the students connected to and helping the community. According to Michael, "the whole objective of school is to integrate them into the community when they are done with school." Out of all four teachers from the U.S. sample, Michael then pushes beyond the idea that community involvement means having a guest speaker come into the classroom

once a year. Much of his curriculum is centered on active involvement by his students in the community and active involvement by community members with his students.

Conversations with Teachers from Vietnam about Community and Schools

Similar to their counterparts from the U.S., teacher participants from Vietnam gave a wide variety of responses when asked about the role of community in their schools and the role of schools in the community. Teacher's responses will first be described and then analyzed in this section of the paper.

Thach Dat

Thach Dat teaches a class of grade 4 students in a village town in a rural part of Vietnam. Her class is heavily structured around group work and she estimates that students work in groups about 80 to 90% of class time. Through group work, she feels that students have more time to help one another with constructing knowledge and to share information. Thach is especially interested in how groups can enable students to have confidence in their capacities to explore the course content by themselves and build their capabilities in constructing knowledge. She also sees value in that students begin to understand the importance of helping each other learn the same material. Instead of always working in competition with one another, a traditional trait of the Vietnamese educational system, her use of group work encourages teamwork, cooperation, and a spirit of shared learning. Although Thach does use group work extensively, she does not invite local people in to her classroom because she is not sure they can translate their knowledge into language that her 4th grade students can understand. Instead she talks to local people herself about topics she is presenting in class and then "translates this information to her students." Thach's conception of community is rooted in the school community itself rather than the community that exists outside of the walls of her school.

Nguyen Duc

Nguyen Duc has been a Geography teacher for grades 6-9 for over twenty-five years. Nguyen often has students working in groups in his classroom and feels that group-centered work results in greater sharing of information amongst students and contributes to the learning of greater group cooperation. Additionally Nguyen often invites speakers from the local community into his classroom. For example, local officials from the government will come and speak about the history of the government in Vietnam and how this history has influenced the village that the students live in. Local farmers also often come to the school to talk about how they grow their crops and about their experiences in the field.

Students also use a farming research station near the school to study the acidity of the soil and to learn how plants grow. Nguyen also has her student work in and study the plots of vegetables that are located on the grounds of his school. Bringing in outside speakers to the classroom and bringing students outside of the classroom is important to her because she seeks her students excited to “see the real thing and not just rely on information from the textbook.” Interaction with speakers and the environment helps students to concretize the abstract themes and ideas discussed in textbooks. Another reason why Nguyen invites speakers from the community to visit her schools is to build important links between the school and the community in which it is situated. Bringing people from the community into the school allows visitors to understand “the important work that the school does for the children of the community and binds the members of the community more strongly to the school.”

Pham Trung

Pham Trung teaches in a village outside of a small city in the southern part of Vietnam. Trung has taught Math for 10 years to students in grades 8, 9, and 10. When asked about his instructional practice, he repeatedly explained, “all of his lessons were rooted in reality and real-life practices.” That is, Trung developed his lesson plans around his students so they could see and apply math in their everyday lives. For example, he invites a local brick maker to show students how to make bricks out of local products, how to fire the bricks, and how to lay them to build walls and homes. Trung develops mathematical problems for his students that involve measurement and observation of the school grounds and of the school’s organic gardens. He incorporates local settings such as the school, home, and local neighborhood in his math problems so that students can “practically see themselves and their worlds in their academic work.” Through this personally-centered approach, Trung sees students as being more motivated to learn about math and more eager to apply the knowledge of math to everyday situations in their community.

Pham Ly

Pham Ly has taught science to 6th-9th grade students for sixteen years. Her school is located in a farming community about twenty minutes from a mid-size city in the Mekong Delta. Pham tries to use the local contexts of her community in her lesson plans. By developing science experiments that have students use the farms that surround the school and the farms that students live on, Pham hopes to connect the content of her science class with information that students already possess through their previous experiences as community members. Pham is particularly driven by a conception of the school as a major influence upon the development of the community. According to Pham,

“schools have a big role in the educational development of all members of the community.” For example, schools help young children and young adults know about health issues in the Mekong Delta such as outbreaks of dengue fever and malaria. These young people then go home and tell their parents about how to recognize the signs of health problems and possible solutions. Information learned in the school can be “diffused” into the community through the interaction between the schools and the community.

Analysis of Vietnamese Teachers’ Responses

Similar to the responses of the Fulbright teachers from the U.S., Vietnamese teachers interviewed for this study integrate the school in the community and the community into the school in a wide variety of ways. Thach’s heavy emphasis on group work is in stark contrast to what can be found in more traditional Vietnamese classrooms where competition, not cooperation, is the norm. Interestingly, although Thach values the building of community *within the school*, she does not promote the use of outside speakers in her classroom. Fearful that they are unable to explain clearly what they know, Thach does not presently invite people from the community to her classroom.

Nguyen puts a strong emphasis on students working in groups both in the class and out in the local community. Whether it be studying garden plots on the school grounds or at a farming research station near the school, Nguyen develops lesson plans that require students to apply the new concepts they learned in class to real-world examples. Local speakers from the community are invited to reinforce classroom lesson but also to build important links between the school and the people who live and work in the greater community.

Like Nguyen, Pham Trung places significant emphasis on using spaces in the local community for student learning. Making use of the school building and the school gardens, Trung intentionally incorporates the lives of students into his lesson plans so that students can “see themselves” in the academic work that they do. Furthermore, Pham Trung works with local community members, such as the village brick maker, to show students the practical applications of their study.

Finally, Phan Ly uses farms that surround her school for lesson on biology and chemistry so that students can make use of the information and knowledge that they and their families already possess from their everyday work experiences. Through acknowledging the skills and knowledge students already possess, Pham’s approach honors the information students already bring to the classroom and extends it further. Pham is particularly interested in how the schools can play a crucial role in the community through the “diffusion” of information from teachers to students to parents to other members of the community and back again. Knowledge and information learned and constructed in school needs to be shared with the local community so that the community can continue to develop and prosper.

Discussion

Community Spaces as Classroom Spaces

Although there were many similarities in the way the teachers from the U.S. and the teachers from Vietnam made use of the community in the classroom, there were also some differences. While teachers like Stephen and Jeff used class trips in the community only occasionally to reinforce what had already been learned and discussed in the classroom, Michael made frequent use of the community as a natural extension of his

classroom. Similar to Michael's response, three of the four Vietnamese teachers in this study explained how they frequently used spaces in the community for ongoing projects that extended what students already knew. Indeed, while teachers from the U.S. saw the use of the community mainly as *reinforcement of the lesson* already taught, the teachers from Vietnam saw the activity planned at the community site as *the lesson itself*.

This strong emphasis on the continual use of community space as a learning environment may stem from the fact that many of the Vietnamese teachers taught in rural schools in which local vegetable plots were common. The study of school and local vegetable plots was already familiar to Vietnamese teachers and their students because many school families kept small gardens near their homes to supplement the earnings of their family. Class projects that involved tending gardens and increasing student knowledge about better farming methods was of vital importance to local families. Hence, lessons that Nguyen Duc developed on soil fertility and that Phan Ly created on the use of fertilizers on crops helped students learn but also, by extension, helped communities improve through improvements in family plot yields.

The Role of Outside Speakers in the Classroom

Teacher informants from the U.S. and from Vietnam showed some similarities when discussing how they used speakers from the community in the classroom. Teachers, from both the U.S. and from Vietnam, used speakers to reinforce the lessons that were already taught and to provide information beyond what was available in the texts being used in the classroom. By asking World War II veterans from the U.S. to speak about their war experiences and by asking local Vietnamese government officials to speak about the history in their town, teachers from both countries sought to provide students with specialized knowledge that was hard for them to reproduce.

Pham, Scott, and Michael, highlight the range of alternative ways in which teachers from both countries used guest speakers. For example, Pham, one of the Vietnamese, teachers, chose not to use guest speakers at all because of her fear that speakers from her community would not be able to communicate well with her students. Jeff actively sought out speakers who presented alternative viewpoints to the mainstream. Inviting Korean graduate students and a Cambodian school janitor in his school to speak to his classes, Jeff sought to introduce his students to how the everyday person was living in each of the countries they studied. Out of all the teacher participants interviewed, Michael utilized guest speakers on the most frequent basis because he realized that the members of the local community were so rich with resources, skills, and information that the students could learn from. From soil samples, to poetry performance, to city government, speakers were often in his classroom not just speaking to students but also working with them. His use of guest speakers was not peripheral to the lesson but the lesson itself. Guest speakers did not come for just one hour of the day. They came for several entire days or weeks to work with students.

Teachers from the U.S. seemed to use guest speakers more often and be more comfortable with their presence than teachers from Vietnam. Vietnamese teachers' hesitancy in using guest speakers may be attributed to the fact that traditionally authority in the Vietnamese classroom comes solely from the teacher. While teachers from the U.S. have had a longer history of inviting outside speakers in the classroom environment, Vietnamese teachers have just begun to utilize these outside resources.

The Role of Schools in the Development of the Community

One of the most fascinating parts of this study was the range of responses that teacher participants gave to questions about the role of schools in the development of the

community. Stephen, Larry, and Jeff saw the role of the school in the community on a very limited level of engagement. Stephen explained that, because of other pressing familial and personal problems, students at his school did very little in the community. John saw the role of the school in the community as a place where students and community members could meet, exercise, or attend schools concerts or sporting events. Believing that the community in his district gave students very little credit for being possible agents for positive change in their community, Jeff spoke very little about how schools could contribute to community development.

Only one of the U.S. teachers, Michael, spoke at length about how the school had a very important role to play in the community. Moreover, he was the only teacher from the U.S. to explain how he planned lessons and activities for his students to take leadership in this regard in their local communities. Organizing students to do soil acidity tests in the schools' neighborhood and having students deliver goat milk they had processed to a local elementary school are but just two examples of active community involvement activities that Michael developed.

In their interviews, the teacher respondents from Vietnam often referred to the importance that the school can play in the local community. Many teachers explained how they promoted the development of students into cooperative group workers who could problem solve in community settings such as in local fields or in the fields of their neighbors. Developing these skills of inquiry and problem solving in the community itself, teachers sought to produce citizens who could be leaders in promoting the growth of their local community. Pham Ly spoke especially to this point when she underscored the ways in which students could help alleviate local public health issues through diffusing information they learned at school or in the community through their networks of family, friends, and neighbors.

As compared to teacher participants from the U.S., teachers from Vietnam then seemed to place a greater emphasis on how schools can play a significant role in the development of local communities. One possible reason why Vietnamese teachers stressed the importance of the school in the community is that all of the teachers interviewed were currently involved with a project that seeks to develop links between the schools and the community. Another reason may stem from the fact that many of the Vietnamese teachers worked in or near farming villages where parents often placed high value on the immediate, practical value of schooling. Parents were not supportive of education unless they could see some tangible results of their children's efforts.

Conclusion

In summary, teacher respondents from the U.S. were more likely than their Vietnamese counterparts to use speakers from the local community in their classrooms. Teacher respondents from Vietnam were more likely to consistently use spaces in the community as classroom spaces and to believe more strongly in the role that schools can play in

developing the community. This study points to the need for further research in the additional and alternative ways that teachers in the U.S. and Vietnam conceptualize the relationships between school and community and how these two entities can be of mutual benefit to one another. Additional research into these same issues in other countries, besides the U.S. and Vietnam, is also warranted.

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