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Partnering with schools for community development: Power imbalances in rural community collaboratives addressing childhood adversity

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ABSTRACT
Complex challenges such as toxic stress and childhood adversity require cooperation and collaboration between organizations – particularly schools – and communities in order to be addressed. However, schools can be challenging partners in place-based collaborations because of the ways in which they are beholden to external mandates and pressures from state and federal agencies. This qualitative case study examines how stakeholder groups participating in a community collaborative frame the goals, opportunities, and challenges of collaborating to address childhood adversity and toxic stress in a remote, rural context. Using a technique called affinity networks to visualize the valence of ideas and beliefs across their collaborative network, we identify shared frames for their work as well as specific sites of frame competition between school-based stakeholders and others. We suggest that these patterns indicate the importance of explicitly framing community collaborations that include schools in ways that ensure equitable participation, particularly of historically marginalized groups.

Introduction
Toxic stress experienced in childhood is a critical community development and educational issue. Stress elevates cortisol in the brain, which triggers fight or flight responses and restricts the ability to evaluate all responses to a given stimulus (Johnson, Riley, Granger, & Riis, 2013). Mild episodes of stress are to be expected in the course of everyday life; however, prolonged exposure to extreme stressors can result in long-term changes in the architecture of the developing brain, affecting long-term outcomes and wellbeing of children (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Extreme stress for children, sometimes referred to as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), has been associated with abuse, neglect, undiagnosed mental illness in parents, substance use disorder, or family economic hardship (Luby et al., 2013). Without adequate support to address the root cause of these stimuli and develop adequate coping skills, the accumulation of adverse experiences and associated toxic stress in childhood can interfere...
with learning (Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, & Pollak, 2015) and lead to poorer health outcomes later in life (Mersky, Topitzes, & Reynolds, 2013).

Addressing sources of toxic stress for children lies at the intersection of a challenging, complex web of embedded systems and interconnected social and political issues, making it a “wicked problem” (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Problems become “wicked” when they are difficult to define, require a large degree of coordinated action, have high costs associated with them, have no “right” or “wrong” solution, and share connections to other problems (Southgate, Reynolds, & Howley, 2013). As a result, attempts to address wicked problems are often improvisational in nature and serve to mitigate effects rather than find a permanent solution. Cultural beliefs about the causes and consequences of poverty, for example, often impede the ability to create effective anti-poverty policies, leaving family systems vulnerable to the resulting direct and indirect stressors of economic insecurity such as stigma, transportation challenges, and other barriers (Evans & Kim, 2013; Hair et al., 2015). Furthermore, although children are often constructed as a sympathetic target population because of their dependency and perceived vulnerability, their parents are often subject to cultural blame and deficit-thinking which in turn affects the willingness of state and local policy-makers to create policies that see supporting parents as a critical part of addressing child wellbeing (Gorski, 2013).

Place-based community collaboratives to address the local complexities of preventing or buffering childhood adversity have received increased attention in the past two decades as promising approaches to community development (Noguera, 2015). Schools are often implicated as key partners in such collaboratives because of the critical role they play in children’s and families’ lives (Schafft, 2016). Models such as the Harlem Children’s Zone and city-wide community school initiatives bring together diverse public and private partners in community-based initiatives and have been identified as promising models of success with block grant programs such as the Promise Neighborhood initiative attempting to replicate their outcomes (Horsford & Sampson, 2014; Miller, Scanlan, & Phillippo, 2017). These programs often capitalize on community assets, leveraging the social capital and local knowledge within communities in order to create support networks for children and families (Boyd, Hayes, Wilson, & Bearsley-Smith, 2008; Green, 2017).

Partnering with schools, however, requires recognizing and working with the specificities of their institutional goals and structures. Schools are both a part of the local context and a statewide and national network, subject to external regulation and pressure from the state and federal government (Schafft & Biddle, 2013). They are often unable to be as locally responsive as other types of organizations, and educators frequently do not foreground community development challenges in how they measure the success of their practice (Budge, 2010). Furthermore, educators may have political or cultural beliefs about parents experiencing poverty that inform, or in some cases, impede their willingness to provide supports to these families (Gorski, 2013). Understanding how schools and educators navigate and contribute to community collaboratives, therefore, is critical to understanding how to best leverage these place-based community development initiatives that seek to address child wellbeing specifically.

This paper focuses on a qualitative case study of one such community collaborative in Lafayette County (a pseudonym), a remote, rural county in a northern state, Rethinking Education in Rural Spaces (RERS; a pseudonym). RERS is a coalition of mental health providers, non-profit leaders, Dawn Waters (a pseudonym) tribal members, and educators that have
come together to consider how schools might be leveraged as key institutions to more effectively assess and address the social, emotional, and educational needs of children experiencing toxic stress in their community. This study sought to answer the following questions:

(1) How do members of a community collaborative frame assets and challenges for addressing childhood adversity within their rural context?
(2) How are their perceptions of assets and challenges informed by their framing of the problems, contributing factors, and moral judgments they associate with childhood adversity within their rural context?
(3) To what extent does their framing align or differ across stakeholder groups?

The opportunities and challenges of leveraging schools for community development

Schools can be both effective and challenging organizational partners in the context of community collaboration (Bauch, 2001; Schafft, 2016). As more pressure has been put on schools to increase academic achievement for all students (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006), there has been a growing recognition by some districts of the importance of meeting the needs of the whole child, including basic needs (Sanders & Lewis, 2005). Often referred to as wrap-around services, several community school models have been developed over the past decade that seek to leverage the daily contact that schools have with youth to solve challenges related to fractured service delivery (Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & De Pedro, 2011), while also promoting community-mindedness among children, parents, and educators (Keth, 1996).

However, for every school district that has sought partnership with local service agencies to meet children’s and families’ basic needs, there are many more that have responded to the increased pressure from state and federal agencies to increase academic achievement by becoming myopically focused on the contributors to academic achievement related to instructional quality and school climate that administrators and teachers feel they can control (Mette & Stanoch, 2016; Schafft, 2016). Pressure to produce gains in testing may encourage educators to retreat toward the goals and objectives of the institution, rather than seeing schools as part of a larger community ecology with an obligation to the wellbeing of both community and school (Budge, 2010). Moreover, even in cases where school leaders see the importance of partnering with other organizations, the utility of such collaboration may ultimately be measured by progress toward the school’s own organizational objectives (often defined as increases on standardized test scores), rather than other diverse forms of child and community wellbeing (Green, 2017).

In rural contexts, where school and community wellbeing is often more interdependent than in suburban and urban contexts with denser social and institutional networks (Tieken, 2014), tension between organizational objectives and local wellbeing may be particularly acute (Schafft, 2016; Schafft & Biddle, 2013). Schools in rural contexts play a complex role in local community development as the primary sites of human capital development, but also as the primary engine of youth out-migration for labor markets and educational opportunities located elsewhere (Corbett, 2007). For this reason, community collaboratives that
involve rural schools are critically important (Bauch, 2001), but also can be intense and challenging for organizations in these spaces to navigate.

Initiating any community collaborative requires the ability of participants to navigate the challenges of the formative stages of partnership development to arrive at a shared understanding of the problem at hand (Nowell, 2010). In the context of wicked problems, this process can easily be derailed as participants must overcome patterns of thinking that consider certain elements of challenging problems as outside of their control within their organizational context. Furthermore, points of shared understanding must be identified and emphasized in order to create trust across diverse sectors and participants (Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Nowell, 2010). Although diverse facilitation protocols and resources exist to help collaboratives arrive at these shared understandings, such as restorative practices that focus explicitly on community reconciliation (Payne & Welch, 2015), asset-mapping (Emery & Flora, 2006; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003), or design-based social entrepreneurship approaches (Durkin, 2016), groups may not have the resources or expertise to take advantage of existing models. Therefore, close examination of these formative stages of partnerships that leverage schools to address child wellbeing in rural contexts may yield useful insights for encouraging and sustaining community collaboratives that include schools.

Theoretical framework

Framing is at the heart of the early phases of collaborative work (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001; Goffman, 1974). Typically, for a community collaborative to succeed, a shared vision or understanding of the work must be identified (Nowell, 2010). This type of direction setting is necessary to create a climate of optimism that collaborating will produce positive results (Florin & Wandersman, 1990). For wicked problems in community development, it is particularly important since the tendrils of the issue intersect with many other issues (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Arriving at consensus, however, can be challenging as individuals usually have pre-existing frames for considering these issues, often limited by their particular sets of experiences or networks of influence (LeBer & Branzei, 2010), and collaboration requires them to shift or transform those perspectives.

Individual belief systems, in framing theory, are organized according to schemata, or cognitive structures that help to represent concepts and ideas relationally (Entman, 1993). Frames help individuals to quickly access and sort through ideas, highlighting those that have the most use or importance in a situation and glossing over those that do not (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Shared frames that encourage collective action, therefore, have to accomplish several important tasks, most critically: defining the problem, diagnosing the causes, making moral judgments about the situation, and then suggesting solutions (Entman, 1993). Groups wishing to collaborate have several resources for quickly developing shared frames around issues. These resources are often ideological, cultural, or organizational, drawing on the shared reference points that individuals have from lives lived in the context of globalization, community, and formal institutions (Zald, 1996). By definition, however, frames call attention to certain ideas or concepts while ignoring others (Entman, 1993). In collaborative work, these patterns of attention are particularly important as they may demonstrate strengths or challenges for the group’s collaborative work itself.

Framing as it relates to these key areas for collaboration, however, is not always made explicit. Therefore, tension – or frame discordance – can arise when frames are not shared
by all participants in a community collaborative. This tension is made worse when primary stakeholders (defined as those on whom the success of the collaborative rests because they control key elements) are unwilling to acknowledge the discordance (Nowell, 2010). We theorize that frame discordance may be particularly acute in rural contexts due to the lack of alignment between organizational imperatives and locally derived needs. Educators in these communities, for example, may find themselves confronting the reality that they are preparing young people for work and lives that will not enhance their home community’s wellbeing (Budge, 2010).

In this study, we use the concepts of framing and frame discordance to locate sites of shared framing and what we call frame competition in the early stages of a community collaborative involving schools by examining the relative valence and divergence of beliefs and ideas across the collaborative for framing the issue of childhood adversity in this remote, rural county. Frame competition is identified as places where stakeholder groups in the collaborative hold divergent or competing ideas about an aspect of this issue and is based on the idea of counterframing, or the application of alternative frames to an issue to show how frames highlight or diminish particular aspects of an issue through the act of framing (Benford & Snow, 2000). By examining patterns of shared framing and frame competition at this formative stage, we can better understand how schools interact as partners in diverse community collaboratives focused on community development.

**Background on the case**

Lafayette County takes 3 h to drive end to end, stretching over a geographic distance equal to Rhode Island and Delaware combined. With a population of just over 30,000, the county exists in loose settlements – small towns separated by two-lane roads that snake across the county. Historically, Lafayette County exported raw materials, such as timber and fish, and served as a regional center for skilled laborers. Today, however, very little manufacturing exists, largely due to automation and global shifts favoring less expensive labor. As a result, education and social services are now the largest employers in the county, accounting for just under 30% of the labor force. The contraction in the local labor market has made it more challenging for residents of the county to procure full-time, living wage work. As a result, 22% of families in the county with children under 18 were in poverty, as compared to 16% across the state.

The county has a rich and diverse history, as the ancestral land of the Dawn Waters tribe and as the site of several reservations for this tribe today. Across the county, over 2,000 individuals identify as American Indian. Believed by the tribe to have occupied this land for centuries prior to White settlement, the Dawn Waters people, along with some of their allied tribes, were forced from the land in which they traditionally hunted and fished in the seventeenth century by English settlers. Although federally recognized as a sovereign nation, forced assimilationist policies until the late twentieth century, such as the removal of children from the tribe and their enrollment in boarding schools, contributed to the erosion of Dawn Water traditions, language, and culture, as children were punished for practicing these in school settings. The passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 finally gave Native parents the right to deny their children placement in schools or families outside the reservation; however, in 2015, a task force convened to examine the placement and adoption rates of Native children issued a report suggesting that Dawn Waters children were five times more
likely to than non-native children to have entered foster care, with placements usually occurring outside of the tribe. In this report, it is possible to see the ways in which assimilationist policies have continued through the guise of social service provision. Today, the Dawn Waters reservations have their own primary schools (grades K-8) that students living on the reservations attend, although Dawn Waters youth attend US public high schools in nearby towns.

Across the county, substance use disorder has been on the rise over the past 20 years, particularly heroin and prescription opioid use. However, treatment centers for substance use disorder remain a 2- to 4-h drive away for many Lafayette Country residents, and often these treatment centers have waiting lists in the hundreds. In a 2015 needs assessment conducted by a state health organization, residents of Lafayette County ranked “drug and alcohol abuse” and “mental health” as the two top public health concerns in the county, ahead of obesity, tobacco use, and cardiovascular disease. However, they also felt that the local public health system, as currently structured, was least well equipped to affect change around these issues.

Within this context, RERS was formed in 2012 as a sub-project of a local community center in the county. The director of the center became interested in an existing urban model of leveraging schools as social institutions to better address adverse child experiences across the county. The existing model was premised on providing personnel to schools (such as an instructional coach, a social worker, and a leadership coach) with specific skill sets based on the concepts of trauma-sensitive schools and to work more effectively with students experiencing toxic stress. The director intended to adapt this model for the remote, rural context of Lafayette County but believed that the model would need to be context-sensitive and place-based to respond to the unique challenges of the rural environment. To accomplish this, the center began to invite local leaders from a variety of stakeholder groups to join an advisory board for the initiative including social service providers, mental health professionals, public educators, Dawn Waters tribal members, and higher education faculty. The process of building the advisory board was undertaken slowly with an eye toward involving individuals from multiple sectors and stakeholder groups. As such, RERS represents a typical case of a rural community collaborative seeking to leverage schools to address a complex, “wicked” community development issue.

**Methods**

This study of community collaboration involving schools uses a qualitative case study design, focused on the perceptions of RERS advisory board members. Out of the 22-person advisory board, 16 individuals participated in interviews lasting between 50 min and 2 h. Participants included four social service providers, four educators, three guidance counselors, two Dawn Waters tribal leaders, and three higher education faculty. With the exception of the two Dawn Waters tribal leaders, all of the participants were White. The semi-structured interview protocol was designed to elicit perspectives from each advisory board member about schools, the social service network in the county, and historic and present-day relationships with the Dawn Waters tribe. We asked about strengths and challenges for the advisory board and the vision that each member had for the project individually. All members of the advisory board were asked the same set of questions, although follow up and probing questions depended on the answers elicited.
Examining stakeholder beliefs using affinity networks

To analyze the data, we used a modified version of grounded theory as the basis for generating what we are calling affinity networks using the CAQDAS software Nvivo 11 (Charmaz, 2006). Affinity networks are maps that visually depict links between individuals or groups of individuals, their expressed beliefs or ideas, and others. Similar beliefs within a network of individuals are grouped at the center, with partially shared beliefs and unique beliefs at the periphery. Affinity networks are similar to sociograms in that they examine intersecting ideas across a network of individuals – in this case, the RERS advisory board. This type of analysis is appropriate given the salience of individual ideas and beliefs to creating a shared frame or vision for the project because it visually represents where perceptions and understandings of the relevant issues overlap or diverge between which groups.

To create the affinity networks, interviews were transcribed and then read by every member of the research team. Initially, four transcripts – from a social service provider, an educator, a Dawn Waters tribal member and a guidance counselor, respectively – were open coded by each member of the research team. Open codes were then discussed among the team and shared concepts were identified. Shared concepts were given the same code name to ensure consistency in future coding. Open coding was completed for the remaining 12 transcripts, with regular meetings to discuss new codes and nuance open coding categories. When possible, in vivo codes were retained at this stage to emphasize advisory board members’ words (Charmaz, 2006). In total, 203 unique codes were created in this process. We then conducted a review of the codes, grouping codes axially in ways that related them directly to the three research questions.

Following axial coding, advisory board members’ interview transcripts were assigned to categories corresponding to their primary identification for participating in the advisory board. These included: Educator (teachers and principals; indicated in Figures 1 and 2 as “Educator”), Guidance Counselor (indicated in Figures 1 and 2 as “Guidance Counselor”), Higher Education (indicated in Figures 1 and 2 as “HE”), Social Service Provider (indicated in Figures 1 and 2 as “SSP”), and Dawn Waters Tribal Member (indicated in Figures 1 and 2 as “TM”). Using the coding structure, affinity networks were generated using the project-mapping feature of Nvivo 11 to visualize convergence and divergence in the advisory board’s understanding of school and community supports for students with stress or trauma (see Figures 1 and 2). To identify shared and competing frames, we made compared clusters of shared, partially shared, and unique beliefs across affinity networks. Our analysis focuses on a comparison of the hopes and anticipated challenges for the RERS work, as well as a comparison of the perceptions of the existing challenges in addressing rural childhood adversity across school, social service, and the Dawn Waters cultural and national context. These affinity networks represent – as the definition of the problem and the definition of the mission – the key areas where consensus needed to be reached for collaborative action.

While a limitation of affinity networks is that they cannot represent the strength of any individual belief, it is possible to see the number of shared, partially shared, and unique ideas held by each group, which we have interpreted as shared frames where these themes converge, and frame divergence where these point to distinctly different or competing ideas. Furthermore, the figures themselves provide a powerful visual for seeing the connection or affinity between groups on particular issues, as well as the isolation of particular sets of ideas.
or groups. In the following section, we interpret the individual affinity networks to describe the shared and competing frames with the strongest resonance for RERS advisory board.

Findings

We find three strongly shared frames among the collaborative defining the parameters of solutions to childhood adversity in Lafayette County, including shared perceptions of teachers as high-impact sites of community investment, community cohesion as a primary asset for the initiative, and the importance of making RERS feel like an “insider” social program. However, within each of these shared frames, we found instances of frame discordance, with some groups providing several examples that ran counter to the shared frame and pointed to discordant definitions of the central problem and its contributing factors. In examining these instances of frame discordance, we identified several specific sites of frame
Figure 2. Perceptions of hopes and challenges for RERS.
competition, which included contested definitions of community, contested notions of educator and school capacity to change, and contested understandings of local control. For each of these we discuss the relative awareness of stakeholder groups of these contests, with a focus on blind spots within the collaborative.

**The positioning of teachers as high-impact sites of community investment**

All members of the advisory board acknowledged the many systemic challenges to leveraging local schools for this work. In their interviews, members talked about the challenges that their schools faced due to inequitable state-funding formulas, the eroding tax base within the county, and the ways this limited attracting teachers to their schools and paying for targeted professional development responsive to local needs (see Figure 1). As is characteristic of many small, rural districts, they acknowledged school staff in Lafayette County were overburdened by diverse responsibilities due to a lack of school nurses, guidance counselors, and school social workers, all resources that larger districts with greater numbers of students might have.

Because of these challenges, teachers were recognized by most members of the advisory board as already being the default frontline social service providers for students in schools with few other resources to meet their needs. As one principal put it,

> Every day, I know that teachers are putting out their own money for food, for clothing, for support and we do so unselfishly and don’t even think twice about it … We’re not social workers. We haven’t been trained in any of that, but yet we’re expected to be that.

A guidance counselor acknowledged that while there are teachers that “bring their own garbage to the job,” for the most part teachers “will immediately respond to basic needs – they do it without breathing.” Social service providers, in particular, were sensitive to the challenging role of teachers in a system that did not value or train them for the kind of social service work they do. One said,

> There are really high quality human beings who care deeply for children throughout school systems all over Lafayette County, who will go the extra mile every single day. But it’s not part of – that’s all considered extra.

Despite their efforts to serve in this role, educators and other members of the advisory board talked about not having any holistic, school-wide approach to the meeting students’ social and emotional needs. An educator emphasized that this was really done on “an individual basis … there’s not a lot of schools that have a clear approach as to how to deal with this.” Social service providers linked this issue to teacher burnout, recognizing that for teachers who believe their job is to prepare students academically, acting as a social service provider caused stress that ultimately motivated them to leave Lafayette County schools.

Because of the default role that teachers were already perceived to play in providing support to young people experiencing toxic stress, the logic of better resourcing teachers with training on how to meet student needs seemed natural to members of the board and was central to their strategy for addressing childhood adversity in Lafayette County. Educators, by virtue of their contact with the greatest number of children for the greatest time, were positioned as high value assets that could be leveraged through additional community investment.
Community cohesion and connectedness as a primary asset

Many board members identified another key asset as the strong sense of community connectedness in Lafayette County in the face of scarce resources. “Everybody knows everybody,” an educator told us, with another remarking, “The sense of community is really strong.” There was a shared perception amongst the advisory board that despite the challenges of distance and lack of transportation in accessing social services, the community’s ability to collaborate and provide what people needed was an important strength. One board member said,

I think collaboration – it’s the way we are. There is this sort of rugged independence that people have, but when it comes to services I feel like collaboration is absolutely the name of the game, because we have to. Because there aren’t that many resources.

Advisory board members gave many examples of scarce resources and the ways in which people attempted to intervene and assist, particularly for children. These included a collective responsibility for young people’s wellbeing that went beyond the family. As one member described it,

My kids would never be able to get away with anything without me knowing and certainly people look out for one another. That’s one of the beautiful things around here. It’s like if somebody is going through a hard time, or if their house just burned down, you will find people giving their shirts – that they do not have! – to support and help.

Connections to others were identified as an important social resource for struggling families in obtaining needed resources such as food, access to transportation, and other forms of assistance. Some called this type of social connection a “survival strategy” for many families in the County. As many on the advisory board aspired for a strengths-based paradigm for their work (see Figure 2), this connectedness was seen as one of the primary assets that could be leveraged to enhance RERS efforts.

The importance of RERS as a community-led social program

Despite several years of work, the fractured nature of shared hopes for the work can be clearly seen in Figure 2, which shows no nodes connected to all the groups, but rather many partially shared between two to three groups. In fact, there was a much stronger collective sense from the board of the shared challenges that this work might face, most notably a worry about the ways in which people in the community and school professionals might resist their attempts to enact change.

The only near universal hope (notably not shared by the higher education faculty) was that the work would feel like it came from inside Lafayette County, rather than an outside initiative being imposed from change-makers located elsewhere (see Figure 2 “feels insider not outsider” and “perception of RERS as ‘from away’”). In interviews, many advisory board members made use of a particular regional idiom for discussing this, stating that the initiative should not feel like it was “from away.” Although the phrase is a regionalism that connotes initiatives and people born outside the state or in another part of the state, one facet of its connotation was explained by one advisory member in this way:

There’s been a significant movement in [to Lafayette County] of people from away. People with retirement homes, or people with vacation homes, who have a good bit of money and they come in and land prices are going up and local people are kind of getting pushed out of their homes. They can’t afford the property tax anymore. Homes go on the market, and the local people can’t afford them.
Being “from away” was considered a strong and enduring marker with meaning, even for members of the advisory board. Members used it to describe their own relationship to the county, stating if they were from the area or if they were “from away,” often followed with a statement about the number of years they had lived in the county.

Several advisory board members expressed anxiety about who would be hired as the project director for the initiative, with some saying specifically that it ought not to be someone “from away,” but rather needed to be someone from Lafayette County in order for RERS to succeed. As one member told us, “[It’s] just connections between people. Those kinds of things are hugely important if you’re the director of a program like this … you have to know what you’re up against.” The ability of the project director to build relationships and the necessity of having credibility as someone not from away was emphasized consistently by advisory board members. “The champion of the cause” will need to be the project director, one advisory board member said, naming the two most important qualities this person needs as “the communication skills, and that understanding of Lafayette County.” Another advisory board member put it this way: “We don’t take advice well from people that haven’t been in our shoes, do we?”

**Contested definitions of community**

Despite the observation by an advisory board member that communities in Lafayette County help their own, some members of the advisory board pointed to two types of divisions with the county that had significance to the project and suggested a competing frame that might help to explain why hopes for the project were so fractured. The first was the stigma that some families experienced with trying to access formal, particularly government, assistance. The second was raised by the members of the advisory board from the Dawn Waters tribe, who in their interviews challenged the advisory board to acknowledge the complex historical relationship between the White communities in Lafayette County and the Dawn Waters nation.

**The stigma of accessing formal assistance**

Members from every stakeholder group in the advisory board described the stigma attached to accessing some types of social services for struggling families within the county. An advisory board member made a distinction between the kind of aid that is “provided by neighbors under the auspices of kindness” and the kind provided by the government that is “under the auspices of what’s perceived as power.” Here, a distinction is made between aid that is derived within the community, built on person-to-person connections and social networks, and aid that can be accessed by anyone regardless of their character. What is at stake, in this dichotomy, is the social control that is exercised through social networks, and each community’s ability to determine who is deserving of such aid. This ability, however, was characterized by some advisory board members as kindness rather than power or control, in keeping with the strong shared frame of community connectedness in the face of scarce resources and isolation.

It is perhaps unsurprising then, that a guidance counselor described the ways in which this feeling of distrust toward government aid generalized to other forms of aid provided through organizations or institutions, even if the aid was provided in cooperation with local
sources or individuals. An advisory board member gave the example of a school board that was concerned about the quantity of food that high schoolers were taking from donated goods to the school’s food pantry and the amount of emphasis the guidance office was placing on basic need provision in general. She said,

It’s not easy to tackle that because even though we live in an area that has 77% free lunch right here and there’s so much poverty – those with power on the board of directors, on the selectmen, are not people living in poverty.

Class hierarchies in the community and the ways in which local power may be thwarted by the provision of formal services through schools were only discussed by three advisory board members, all either guidance counselors or social service providers, suggesting that this interpretive frame for the project – which diverges from the community connectedness frame – had not yet been widely accepted by the advisory board. While one educator did raise the issue of class divisions within the county, it was to discuss the ways in which teaching was one of the best paying jobs available in the local area, creating what this advisory board member perceived as a kind of reverence for teachers as “the knights of this area.”

“See what happens when those Indians come to town?”

There was shared concern among members of the advisory board that the youth of the Dawn Waters tribe were an important target population for the initiative because of historic traumas and contemporary poverty. However, there was an acknowledgment by all of the non-Native advisory board members that there was a tense relationship between the tribe and other Lafayette County groups. While some non-Native members of the advisory board named the cause of this distrust as “racism,” for most others it was a source of puzzlement and was described using vague and unspecific terminology. For example, one board member told us,

I’m not, you know, real familiar with that dynamic, but, um, just from what little I do know there is a history there, um … And not always a good one between the tribe and the non-tribal communities. There’s a certain bias and judgment that’s there.

Some of the non-Native advisory board members acknowledged the contemporary effects of a history of genocide and continued assimilationist policies in the state, saying,

There’s been obviously a history of discrimination, specifically against the [Dawn Waters], and so there has been a lot of distrust built up over time around that. There’s also those who are disadvantaged feeling like maybe there are others that don’t deserve the benefits that they’re getting. Feeling like if somebody else gets a benefit, then that’s actually putting me at a disadvantage. That’s kind of like the human nature with the, “I want the big piece of cake, why don’t I have the big piece of cake?”

This non-Native advisory board member references government resources and rights to which predominantly White neighboring communities do not have access, including fishing rights, community development funds, and other forms of social assistance. While these resources are specifically in recognition of the colonial nature of the relationship between the US Government and the sovereign nation of the Dawn Waters, he points to the ahistorical nature of neighboring communities by White residents of that relationship.

Dawn Waters tribal members spoke about experiences of racism that they or others had had within neighboring predominantly White communities. One Dawn Waters member
talked about the ways in which negative stereotyping affects the relationships between these communities, saying,

It can be tenuous at times … You know let’s say … if we look at crime, right? That happens at a rate of x percent per community [names a few towns in Lafayette County]. But when a crime happens in [town neighboring Dawn Waters community] and a [Dawn Water’s] tribal member is involved, it’s like … it’s magnified. It’s just like it’s … it’s just incredibly magnified to say, “See what happened when those Indians come into town?”

The effect of these experiences, this advisory board member explained, was that Dawn Waters tribal members found it easier to go to larger towns to do errands such as banking or shopping where they would not stand out or be stereotyped in this way. “There’s a [local] grocery store called IGA,” this advisory board member recounted, “and we call that ‘Indians, Go Away.’”

Notably, both of these competing frames suggest the importance of unresolved tensions around race and class within the context of RERS work and were mentioned by non-educators (though, notably not just by those outside of schools). These patterns of frame discordance and race and class as sites of frame competition become acutely important when examined in conjunction with frame competition around the capacity of schools to address these issues.

**Contested notions of school capacity for critical change**

While educators were seen as key sites of investment for challenging childhood adversity, there were questions among some members of the advisory board, particularly for non-educators, over the capacity of teachers and schools to transform their daily and institutional practices to effectively address the social challenges associated with issues of childhood adversity in the county. Teacher resistance was seen as one of the key challenges to the project (see Figure 2 “teachers being disrespected” and “resistance from teachers”) with one guidance counselor saying,

I think it’s gonna be very threatening if teachers feel that people are gonna come in and fix them. Number 1. That will be huge. Also, mental health professionals coming in to a classroom and telling a teacher how to teach – it is complicated.

In examining these capacities, several interesting patterns of discordance around both race and class arose, with educators showing varying levels of attunement to these competing frames.

**School blind spots around racism**

Social service providers and Dawn Waters tribal members both suggested that schools have difficulty acknowledging, much less confronting, racism (See Figure 1 “difficulty discussing racism”). As one social service provider with a history of working closely with the tribe acknowledged,

If you look nationally at Indian kids, you have to remember that a lot of trauma happened in schools. When you talk to any kids in the [Dawn Waters], half of their trauma recently is from outright racism or abuse … Kids got beaten for speaking another language. So, you know those kinds of things follow you for generations into the school building. So, even though you’re going to school on your own reservation, there’s a way in which, you know, your parents’ stories, your
grandparents were some of the people that got beaten and that makes for a very strange mix towards education.

The difficult history between schools and Native American tribes nationally, she acknowledged, was just as relevant in Lafayette County, affecting the ability of parents and teachers to build healthy and open relationships with one another, and affecting the ways in which schools both on and off of Dawn Waters’ land engage with the tribe. A Dawn Waters tribal member told us,

Teachers come on reservations and they come with the best of intentions to educate our children. Where they falter is – it is understandable – they can only see it from their perspective and when you introduce new material to them, the wheels start going [makes noise] and, “What the hell do I do now? This is a new value. This isn’t a new thing I haven’t thought of.” Lots of times, it comes out in form of anger, resentment, or whatever. “Your people can’t even succeed! How come this and this?” It is all like a backlash in a way.

In both the observations of the social service provider and the Dawn Waters tribal member, it is possible to see the ways in which the shared frame focused on leveraging schools may contribute to compounding disadvantage by ignoring racism and bias and focusing on how educators do their best under trying circumstances to do the right thing for county children.

**Contested educator awareness of class**

Advisory board members located within schools did recognize some of the critical social challenges associated with these issues; however, educators and guidance counselors focused their critique of schools on issues of class, describing Lafayette County schools as being normatively middle-class (see Figure 1 “middle-class environment”). One educator described the impact that the difference in access to stable employment by teachers has on the school environment, saying,

Teachers and administrators have a middle-class mindset. A lot of our kids … don’t come from a middle-class family. The values are different. They’re not worse or better, they’re just different. Sometimes that mindset or understanding of why things are happening doesn’t exist. I think just with more education about why things may be happening the way they’re happening can open a staff or a teacher or a student or family’s eyes so that communication opens up and it doesn’t continue and perpetuate the “I had a bad experience so you’re going to have a bad experience so we’re just not going to communicate with the school anymore.”

This educator locates the challenges of class difference in a difference of values and talks about the role of normative middle-class values in making some parents feel unwelcome within the school. Social service providers, while not acknowledging that teachers had self-awareness of this tendency, agreed that teacher’s status as middle-class workers skewed their attitudes toward parents (see Figure 1 “teachers lowly paid”). As one social service provider put it, “If you look at teacher’s salaries, it’s hard to be really sensitive to the sense of poverty if you feel like people who are really impoverished are getting more than you get.” Here, she points out the ways in which the distrust of government assistance frame affects educator capacity to feel empathy toward struggling families, despite their professional status.
Contested definitions of insiderness

Dawn Waters tribal members had many of the same concerns about the insider feel of the RERS work as the greater advisory board had about “people from away;” however, these concerns extended to the awayness of non-Native members of the advisory board and the Lafayette County community in relationship to the tribe. One Dawn Waters member described the necessity for the RERS initiative to work closely with tribal leadership, saying,

Again, it’s gotta be … [it] has to be brought forward by a [Dawn Waters] tribal member. It’s something that can’t be brought in from outside. Cause it’s gonna be … it’s gonna be looked upon in a very skeptical way … Like I said, we’ve had “help” in the past.

The clear implication of help imposed from the outside without consultation with the community mirrors, interestingly, the concern of the larger advisory board that “handouts” from “people from away” will not work for the White residents of Lafayette County.

While Dawn Waters tribal members acknowledged how schools struggled to confront their racist past, they also saw some hope for the future that those relationships could be repaired. “The culture has to be put back into the curriculum,” one Dawn Waters tribal member told us, referencing the ways in which schools had been used as tools of Anglicization and assimilation (see Figure 2 “curricular change”). He saw language preservation efforts, dance, and other cultural traditions as means of restoring the relationship between the curriculum and tribal culture as one important way forward. Another tribal member discussed the importance of recognizing, in all spheres, the sovereignty and history of the tribe. He talked about the ways in which this had been excluded from the curriculum and school events when he had attended high school, and how proud he had been when he visited the local high school recently and saw the Dawn Waters flag hung next to the American flag. In his words,

I am sitting in the gym and I am looking up at the wall and I see the [Dawn Waters] flag next to the American flag. That just makes, oh God, things come up in my throat and I feel really good about that and I said, “Oh my God, they are recognizing something about our nationhood.”

Hope, in the words of this tribal member, lay in the direct confrontation and restoration of mutually respectful relationships between the Dawn Waters tribe and the schools, as well as a recognition of their sovereignty and culture.

Conclusion

In the context of diverse community collaboratives that involve stakeholders from multiple organizations or cultural groups, such as RERS, the process of defining what is needed to solve a complex problem requires negotiation among stakeholders for what value and opportunity look like within their specific context (LeBer & Branzei, 2010). Power, however, plays an important role in such negotiations. In the case of RERS, we see both institutional and cultural power imbalances that lead to the privileging of certain perspectives over others in defining shared value (Brennan & Israel, 2008).

One commonly theorized source of discordance in community collaboratives is institutionally derived ways of thinking, or patterns of diagnosing problems that result from working within an organization or institution, sometimes called “sector-embedded diagnostic frames” (LeBer & Branzei, 2010, p. 163). However, these discordances are also theorized to
be one of the greatest strengths of community collaboratives, as divergent perspectives provide more well-rounded insights into the nature of challenging issues and allow for the development of collaborative specific prognostic frames (Benford & Snow, 2000), or frames that point toward a specific solution. One overlooked aspect of these theories, however, may be the mutual intelligibility of institutionally informed thinking in community collaboratives, that is, professionals situated within one institution may be better able to understand or guess at the challenges faced by others types of institutions based on their own knowledge of how organizations and systems function.

Within such a framework, discordance that arises outside of dominant cultural and organizational experience will be challenging to collectively perceive, but more importantly may then be obscured by the attention that is given to intelligible types of discordance, such as those emanating from other sectors. In the case of RERS, the predominance of “not knowing” expressed by all sectoral groups – including educators, social service providers, guidance counselors, and higher education faculty – about the nature of challenges facing the Dawn Waters tribe is notable when contrasted with their willingness to make guesses about conditions faced by other sector-based groups within the community collaborative. For instance, while the RERS board showed similar rates of agreement about the challenges posed by rurality for schools and social service provision in Lafayette County, non-Native board members were far less certain and more hesitant in their description of the challenges these conditions posed for Dawn Waters tribal members. Furthermore, the descriptions by Dawn Waters tribal members of racism toward the Dawn Waters tribe suggests that there is significant need for attention to these issues, particularly if RERS hopes to leverage schools – who are specifically named in these anecdotes – as key partners.

The patterns of both shared frames and frame competition in the RERS community collaborative point to several important implications for other place-based community development projects involving schools, particularly those in rural or small communities. The first is to recognize that although asset-based approaches like those RERS has embraced can be critical to organizing in contexts used to being framed through a lens of loss (of industry, of population, of community), the close networks of social ties that are lauded as community assets must be balanced with attention to the patterns of social exclusion that they depict or perpetuate (Parent & Lewis, 2003). Working with schools may pull community collaboratives toward frames that privilege organizational, and specifically educational, ways of knowing, rather than allowing for new ways of knowing to emerge from the dialog within the group. Schools have complex relationships with their communities, as both local and national institutions in a global economic system that do not prioritize the sustainability or wellbeing of certain places. As a result, despite meaning well or hoping to help, educators may perpetuate structural inequalities – including racism, in the case of the Dawn Waters tribe, or classism, in the case of low-income parents – through the centrality of their role in collaboratives that seek to leverage schools and the normative values they encompass, specifically. Therefore, community collaboratives involving schools must pay attention not only to the representation of all groups within the collaborative, but also to the shared understanding within the collaborative of the unique positioning of each group and the relative dominance of organizational versus cultural frames for defining opportunities and challenges.

One way to ensure this attention may be through an early focus on reconciliation as an explicit collaborative commitment. Frameworks for gaining consensus and shared understanding that draw on restorative justice protocols or practices may provide more useful
tools and resources to support reconciliation work in diverse community contexts than asset-based approaches alone. The concept of restorative justice stems from tribal practices developed in New Zealand and Australia, specifically used in Maori circles to allow individuals who have transgressed against the community in some way the opportunity to understand how their actions offended their community and how to solve the problem with the community (Ryan & Ruddy, 2015). Such approaches do not place blame or guilt, but rather encourage ownership of past wrongs with an eye toward providing opportunities for right action in the future (Payne & Welch, 2015). In the case of RERS, a focus on restorative justice would create space within the collaborative for Dawn Waters tribal members to share their experiences, and allow non-Native members of the advisory board to hear those experiences and commit to ways in which they might prevent future instances through their work in the community and in the context of the collaborative itself. Through the use of restorative justice frameworks for their meetings and planning, rural community collaboratives such as RERS may be able to take up the complex question of how the work of organizations has affected marginalized groups within their community without accidentally privileging the perspectives of those organizations because of the technical challenges of bringing together them together for more integrated service delivery.

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