

Compressed ethnography: A promising research strategy for studying family and community involvement in educational innovations

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I used a compressed ethnographic design to explore the question, “What factors enable family and community involvement (FCI) in a sustainable rural afterschool program?” This design is appropriate when the researcher has an established relationship with the case, is focused on a specific aspect of cultural context, and is willing to use data elicitation strategies. My initial theoretical proposition was that the way that the subject afterschool program honored local heritage through its community-based activities enabled high levels of FCI. I immersed myself in the program and the community in five one-week stays and several day visits over a five month period in which I interviewed 63 individuals, observed the program in operation, attended meetings, assisted with grant proposal development, and participated in several family events. I used both an inductive and deductive recursive approach to analyze my interview data, which led to seven factors enabling FCI in this rural afterschool program: heartfelt need; supportive leadership behaviors; overcoming perceived class distinctions; pedagogy; promoting collaborative relationships; rural community strengths; and a highly visible and varied curriculum. These factors enabled FCI through their dynamic interaction in developing social capital among the families, community members, program staff, and school personnel. Theories of class distinction, new science leadership, and a pedagogy of place held explanatory power in their capacity to promote social capital among these typically discrete groups. I provide recommended courses of action for afterschool program leaders, aligned with these seven factors, and suggest additional ethnographic research in other settings to extend these findings across community types as well as validate their usefulness for building FCI in the regular school day program.

Context

The appreciation of context in studying educational phenomena is at the heart of my study. I am focusing on the phenomenon of family and community involvement in education, within a sustainable rural afterschool and summer enrichment program. “Context,” as I intend its use here, was aptly captured by educational ethnographers LeCompte and Schensul when they described context as “elements in a setting that influence the behaviors of individuals and groups” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 18). Additionally, context is vital to understanding innovation, a typical shortcoming of objective approaches with experimental design in evaluating educational change (Simons, 1996, p. 226). The implications of context in understanding the phenomenon of substantial FCI in afterschool is particularly appropriate for such a complex topic, especially when overlaid with the multi-faceted characteristic of sustainability, and embedded in the wealth of cultural heritage in a rural community setting.

The Rural Setting

Researchers have been struggling for at least three decades to define the term, “rural,” with the debate over quantitative and qualitative definitions continuing today (Beale, 2004; Flora, Flora, & Fey, 2004; Greenberg, 2002; Rios, 1988). Beale (2004) and his colleagues with the USDA Economic Research Service as well as those in the Census Bureau continue to seek more refined indicators of population density, proximity to metropolitan centers, proportions of commuters, categories of road networks, and other measurable factors for calculating the relative rurality of any location in the country (Cromartie, 2003; Kusmin, 2007).

Greenberg (2002) and many of those dealing with rural education would agree with the assertion of Flora et al. (2004) that there are significant intangible characteristics that better

define the meaning of rural, particularly in light of implications for educational reform. Some of these subjective factors include a greater sense of the importance of family, a stronger emphasis on community identity, a more common sense of isolation and self-reliance, and a greater perception of limited opportunities than found in urban or suburban areas (Greenberg, 2002). While there is a vast difference across types of rural communities, such as those found in Alaska versus those in the Mississippi Delta, one commonality, possibly resulting from a perceived sense of isolation, is a significant shared interest in local heritage, particularly that expressed in folk music and story-telling (Kushman & Barnhardt, 1999). Increasingly smaller proportions of rural people in the United States make their living through agriculture; about 21% of the employment in non-metropolitan counties is farming or farming related, versus 13% in metropolitan counties, with only 6.49% of rural employment directly involved in farm production (Parker, 2002), but there is a commonality across rural areas in the connection that rural residents feel with the land, which the celebrated Appalachian author Sharon McCrumb expressed when she explained her roots, “That connection to the land is the key to understanding the people who settled here, those who are drawn to live here now, and those who cannot leave” (McCrumb, 2005, p. 1).

Afterschool Program Connections with Family and Community Involvement

Afterschool programs have existed in the United States for decades, usually with a focus on sports, clubs, or custodial child care of younger children for working parents (Seppanen, Love, deVries, & Bernstein, 1993, p. 2). Seppanen et al. (1993) also revealed that programs in the early 1990’s relied on parent fees for 83% of their budgets, resulting in relatively low pay for staff. The emergence of the 21st CCLC program in 1998 brought issues of enrichment and the needs of lower income families to the forefront, and helped to develop afterschool enrichment issues as topics of high quality research (Gayl, 2004).

The concept of community education, initiated in Flint by Thomas Mann (Decker, 1999), was one that C.S. Mott felt could revolutionize both education and communities affected by changes in major industry. Flint was suffering from plant closures due to changes already sweeping the auto industry, and the community had declining resources and support for public education even while growing numbers of workers needed new training for a changing employment landscape. The community education approach was to think of public schools as a center for learning for the entire community, rather than just for classes in a traditional eight-to-three weekday, nine month model. This late 1930’s documentary showed citizens of all ages going into the schools at all hours for a wide variety of classes, and showed school-day teachers using community members as part of their instructional strategies, linking more closely with community agencies, and using community activities as part of their content. This resonated with me as a possible solution to the almost complete separation of the schools from the community that I had experienced in my own public school experiences as both a student and a teacher.

I didn’t encounter anything in my subsequent association with public schools as either an educator or a parent that was even close to the community education concept again until 1998, when Congress authorized the USDE to implement the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) Grant Program, which emphasized that schools

should collaborate with public and nonprofit agencies, local businesses, educational entities (such as vocational and adult education programs, school-to-work programs, community colleges, and universities) recreation, cultural, and community and human service entities, for the purpose of meeting the needs of, and expanding the opportunities available to, the residents of the communities served by such schools. Grants awarded under this program may be used to plan, implement, or expand community learning centers, defined as an entity within a public elementary, middle, or secondary school building that (1) provides educational, recreational, health, and social service programs for residents of all ages within a local community, and (2) is operated by a local educational agency in conjunction with local government agencies, businesses, vocational education programs, institutions of higher education, community colleges, and cultural, recreational, and community and human service agencies (Decker, 1999, p. 45).

Objectives

This study's primary purpose was to answer the research question, "What factors enable family and community involvement (FCI) in a sustainable rural afterschool program?" Aspects of this major question included plans to look for any evidence explaining ways that:

- FCI is important in a rural afterschool program;
- Leadership attributes influence FCI;
- Youth and family perceptions of class distinctions influence FCI;
- Program activities and services influence FCI;
- Pedagogy influences FCI;
- Collaborative partnerships influence FCI;
- FCI influences program sustainability; and
- Additional unexpected factors influence FCI.
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I also intended to explore dynamics between family and community involvement and program sustainability and to demonstrate the usefulness of compressed ethnography as an educational research approach more suitable for revealing the dynamics of family and community involvement factors.

Design

Case Study

Several considerations contribute to the rationale for a qualitative case study design for meaningful program evaluation and research. The field of afterschool and summer enrichment programs, as opposed to custodial care, has emerged fairly recently; programs have widely varying clientele and design features; and most programs are still trying to refine their implementation and delivery. Such emerging programs and services are better served by systematic observations, interviews, focus groups, and process monitoring than by controlled experimental approaches with reliance on quantitative measures of what often are not the intended outcomes (Wilson, 2005, p. 95).

Quantitative research on the impact of FCI points directly to the need for alternative research strategies. A recent issue of *Review of Educational Research* included a 37 page examination of research on parental involvement showing that parent involvement in children's schools had beneficial impact on both achievement and motivation (Pomerantz, Moorman, &

Litwack, 2007). Even so, the authors stated, “Definitive conclusions about the causal role of parents’ involvement on the school front await experimental designs manipulating parental involvement.” That recommendation disregards sensitivity to issues of context, culture, and the ethical use of human subjects, particularly in light of the gossamer threads that weave relationships among children, parents, and schools. This dramatically illustrates the need for a qualitative in-depth examination of a case in which FCI is remarkable.

Ethnography

Ethnographic research, documenting the culture of groups of people, applies to investigations in which the problem is both “complex and embedded in multiple systems” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 29), which is almost an operating description of the afterschool world, a program offering whose very name defines it by what it is not. Afterschool staff members often describe themselves as second-class citizens in school settings where status depends on being a certified faculty member. The problem, or research question, of this study is: “What factors enable family and community involvement (FCI) in a sustainable rural afterschool program?” This question itself indicates multiple complex systems, such as the afterschool program, the school, the community, and the family, not to mention the dimension of the rural setting. FCI research literature indicates the complexity of FCI as a variable. Ethnography should also be used to describe unexpected outcomes or to help answer questions not addressed through other methods, which is the case with research on FCI.

A modified ethnographic approach has been developed for use when addressing a specific aspect of culture (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999, pp. 88-91). This design has been called compressed or focused ethnography as well as rapid assessment (ibid, p. 83). Compression is possible when the researcher is already familiar with the cultural context of the case setting, is interested in a specific cultural issue, and is willing to use elicitation data collection strategies, such as individual and group interviews, rather than observing naturally occurring events over time. Rapid ethnography requires that the researcher already has knowledge of the cultural system and enters the research with a specific data collection plan and timeline (Kluwin, Morris, & Clifford, 2004, p. 63). Compressed ethnographic designs also require that the study participants are already comfortable with the researcher (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999, p. 88).

Case Selection

This ethnographic case study was a “bellwether” case selection, because the case I selected, Sparta Elementary’s Mountaineer Millennium afterschool program in Alleghany County, North Carolina, possessed a number of the program characteristics that were of interest to me (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 114). Several features made Sparta’s program ideal for my study. The Mountaineer Millennium program had been recognized for its sustainability by The Finance Project (Szekely & Padgette, 2006) and by selection for sustainability presentations at the 21st CCLC nation-wide Summer Institutes in San Diego (2006) and Miami (2007), the NC Center for Afterschool Programs (NC CAP) state-wide 2006 and 2007 Synergy Conferences in Greensboro, and several other states’ 21st CCLC staff development institutes. Further, the very fact that Sparta continued to provide the Mountaineer Millennium afterschool program in the

2007-2008 school year, after its initial federal 21st CCLC grant expired in 2002, was evidence of successful sustainability.

Sparta's program success with promoting FCI in its afterschool program was also well-established through a variety of external experts. SEDL's National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning has previously selected Mountaineer Millennium's FCI strategies for presentation at regional conferences in Atlanta, Little Rock, Tampa, and Orlando, to name just a few. Tennessee's Department of Education requested a Sparta presentation on FCI at its annual Yes2Kids conference in 2007. NC CAP selected a Sparta program graduate in their first round of Afterschool Alumni in 2005. The National Afterschool Association requested a presentation on FCI from the Sparta Center Director for their annual conference in Phoenix in 2007. Further, Alleghany County is rated on the USDA's Economic Research Service Rural-Urban Continuum with the maximum score for rurality (Beale, 2004).

Findings

Five weeks plus multiple day trips of program and community immersion, individual and group interviews with 63 persons involved for school, family, or community reasons, and a myriad of participant observer experiences yielded over five hundred pages of transcribed interviews, dozens of artifacts, and multiple media samples. I used both an inductive and deductive recursive approach to analyze this imposing array of data. I categorized the findings in the voices of the study participants, and then integrated those categories with theoretical perspectives. Table 4.1, showing grouped comments in the voices of interview participants, is on the next page. These major categories of interview comments led to seven major factors that enabled high levels of FCI in Sparta's program, and I labeled them as shown in Table 4.2 on the next page.

This case study demonstrated the strength of a pedagogy of place in developing both the bonding type of social capital, which is based on a sense of cohesion among similar members of a group, as well as the bridging social capital that encompasses diversity (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003, pp. 2-3). Sparta's Mountaineer Millennium program celebrated local heritage, which included Latino cuisine, learning Spanish, a Chinese New Year's event, the Underground Railroad simulation, and many other activities that showcased the varied heritage of diverse elements of local culture. This focus on youth experiences with cultural heritage and local issues enabled community members of diverse background to come together because of their children's experiences with a culturally relevant content, and in so doing begin to build a sense of trust and the networks that are the hallmarks of social capital.

Table 4.1 Major Categories of Remarks in Participants' Voices

1. *"And then when you start working with children in this program and you see the need again, I think that's the thing that keeps it going."*
"I wanted to be with my friends, you know, socialize and get my work done."
"I've never gone to PTA. I come to Mountaineer Millennium family events."
"Kids come to school prepared the next morning."
2. *"Would you please come?"*
"They found out they were wanted."
"The principal wanted to see that everybody had the chance; then everybody here got interested."
"I became its strongest cheerleader and supporter."
3. *"It's more down-to-earth -- the Mountaineer Millennium."*
4. *"I would say, it's the togetherness of everybody in the program."*
"If one's got a problem, they've all got a problem."
"Jean really wanted them to learn their heritage."
"Trust me, they would have mathematics involved, every subject, all related together."
"Lots of people, lots going on, lots of choices for the kids."
5. *"Oh, I want to help out too."*
6. *"Everybody cares for each other."*
7. *"We did projects in town, so we did stuff with regular people, not just school people."*

Table 4.2 Factors Enabling Sparta's High Family and Community Involvement

1. Heartfelt Need
Children's Needs; Families' Needs; School System's Needs
2. Supportive Leadership Behaviors
Program Staff Leadership Invitation and Follow-up
Principal's Involvement
Central Office Encouragement
3. Overcoming Perceived Class Distinctions
4. Pedagogy
Nurturing
Place-Based
Aligned with the Classroom
Engaging
5. Promoting Collaborative Partnerships Between the Program and:
Host School
Families
Community
6. Rural Community Strengths
Caring for Each Other
Shared Heritage
Valuing New Opportunities
7. Highly Visible and Varied Curriculum

Implications

The question that seems most important to me in considering educational research, and perhaps helps explain the lengthy pursuit of my doctorate, is, “So what?” Do the findings of this study make useful courses of action available to other educators? I believe that these findings yielded lessons to be learned and used. It seems most helpful to consider these implications in terms of the factors that emerged as instrumental in enabling FCI in Sparta’s Mountaineer Millennium program.

Heartfelt Need

Most of us who work with grant-funded afterschool programs conduct needs assessments as part of our program design, and hopefully follow-up with regular reviews of needs as a way of striving for recurring program improvement (Pane, Mulligan, Ginsburg, & Lauland, 1999). The sense in Sparta that families and community members participated because they had a deep personal appreciation of the need for the program would indicate that it’s important to share and reflect on the results of needs assessments with families, children, school personnel, and community members. Our needs assessment processes must be continuous and must include interviews, focus groups, and group discussions to ensure that stakeholders and clients (youth and their families) have a similar perception of needs for the program and how the program can best meet those needs. This shared understanding of genuine need for the program is also linked to continued program sustainability, as stated here, “Communities support innovations which touch real and recognized needs of people” (Runner & Naylor, 2007, September, p. 14)

Leadership Behaviors

It is also evident that afterschool program leaders and staff must openly communicate direct invitations to families and community members, conveying the need for their participation and the ways in which they can participate. We need to follow-up on those invitations with multiple specific involvement opportunities, sensitive to the needs and cultural context of the program, as well as follow-up on connections and possibilities that families and community members offer. These invitations and follow-up behaviors are under the control of program leaders, who simply must make the time to repeatedly both invite and follow up if they are to enable family and community involvement.

After-school program leaders may have less direct control over the leadership support behaviors exhibited by the schools and hosts of their programs. It’s important to have clear communication with the leadership of the systems in which an afterschool program operates to identify shared goals and common understanding of how the afterschool program can help meet needs and achieve collective goals. Afterschool program leadership can then help contribute to pervasive clarity about the vision of the program in a way that adds force to the vision field.

Overcoming Perceived Class Distinctions

Part of the power of program leadership and staff behavior that repeatedly invites parents and community members to participate in the program is that it helps to develop a common

perception of being both needed and welcomed. The other feature that contributes to this factor is the very content of participation opportunities. Bringing people together to celebrate children's performances and accomplishments reinforces the idea that we all care about all our children. Potential obstacles related to class distinctions can be reduced when those performances and accomplishments reflect the local community, and families see parts of their lives reflected in their children's learning experiences.

Another course of action is implied from this factor of reducing perceived class distinctions. Afterschool program staff can consciously recognize their potential to act as liaisons between the families of their children and the schools those children attend. They can help build advocacy skills among their children's parents, and assist in developing the tools and approaches that will better enable all parents to participate directly with schools in their children's education.

Pedagogy

These pedagogical approaches acted in synergy with each other and with the program's social and cultural context. They hinge on one another, and yet can be thought of separately when we isolate characteristics for program design.

Nurturing. The factors that this study identified can only be effective in enabling family and community participation if a program nurtures a sense of trust and support for its youth and families. Afterschool programs must be aware of the need to develop a supportive and positive atmosphere and a community of learners that includes participating youth, their families, and their communities. This pedagogical principal can also be applied to content decisions, including real-world character education learning opportunities in the afterschool program.

Place-Based. It is much easier to develop and demonstrate a pervasive nurturing atmosphere when the fundamental approach to designing learning experiences rests with honoring community heritage and celebrating community strengths. Conversely, it would hardly be possible to demonstrate the value of local community characteristics, much less learn from them, in an atmosphere that was not both nurturing and supportive. Afterschool programs can work with community agencies as well as families and youth to focus on using the local area as the starting point for learning experiences.

Aligned with Classroom Curriculum. This is an important element of a pedagogical approach that helps to enable family and community involvement. It is integral to the concept of learning that stems from local community heritage and issues. Afterschool programs can help the schools better understand their connection with the community, and vice versa, when they intentionally integrate curriculum objectives with place-based learning experiences. It is also helpful to participating youth to clearly articulate how their work with something like creating a habitat area is related to what they need to master in science, or how writing skills relate to the invitations that they send to community members. This alignment also clarifies ways that the afterschool program is helping to meet needs for academic reinforcement.

Engaging for Youth. Finally, all of these approaches should add up to learning experiences that excite and engage the children in an afterschool program. Programs should

involve their children in reviewing the local community for projects that become central to their learning. Youth participants engage with a pedagogy that stems from the principle that learning can be fun, and program leaders need youth input in order to ensure youth ownership in learning opportunities. This dynamic contributes to greater FCI with the delight that adults take in seeing that youth are excited about what they're doing and that they have pride and enthusiasm about the very process of learning and achieving authentic goals.

Promoting Collaborative Relationships

This factor also acts in synergy with the other factors identified in this study's findings. A clear implication for afterschool program leadership is the need to deliberately consider both formal and informal communication and linkages with their children's school, families, and communities. Sparta's program actually documented these contacts in a daily log that each staff member maintained, which helped to reinforce and record collaboration efforts.

Rural Community Strengths

These interview participants identified rural community attributes that both enabled and contributed to FCI in Sparta's Mountaineer Millennium program, including a sense that everybody cares for each other and all the children, that there is a shared heritage connected to the local community, and that they value new opportunities to help their children. These are attributes that may be present in many communities, regardless of rural, suburban, or urban settings. The larger lesson here is that afterschool leaders need to focus on identifying local strengths at the same time that they assess needs, and that they must then use those strengths to leverage involvement in their afterschool programs.

Highly Visible and Varied Curriculum

This factor also works together with the other dynamic factors that this study indicated are important to FCI in a rural afterschool program. Exciting learning experience must be seen outside the program if they are to help build FCI. Program leaders must carefully ensure that children are seen learning with "regular people," both out in the community and on the program site. They can have youth participants help build visibility through local presentations, performances, contributions to local media, newsletters, and website design, as well as purposeful invitations to community members and leaders to participate in program activities. This factor indicates that it's also important that youth learning activities are varied enough to capture the imagination of the children as well as adults.

Additional Possibilities

Finally, it's worth asking if the implications of these findings apply only to building FCI in rural afterschool programs. It seems possible that they could be relevant to developing substantive FCI in afterschool programs in other types of communities as well as in the total school, as indicated by the fit of these factors with the theoretical explanatory power of building social capital to better pull together Epstein's three sphere of influence on children's learning, family, community, and school (Epstein et al., 2002).

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