Participatory Democracy and Struggling Schools: Making Space for Youth in School Turnarounds

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Background/Context: *Federal policy, as codified in Race to the Top (RTT) funding guidelines, outlines four types of intervention: turnaround, restart, closure, and transformation. RTT has embraced a technocratic paradigm for school reform that frames choice less as the opportunity for the public to deliberate about what it wants from its schools and more in terms of the freedom of individual families to choose, as customers, from a diverse array of school options. This market-based system has eroded substantive opportunities for parents and students to participate in decisions about their schools. Although scholars have developed compelling arguments about the need to involve parents and teachers in a more deliberative and democratic approach to intervening in low-performing schools, there is little scholarship focused on the role of young people in school intervention processes.*

Purpose: *There is widespread agreement among progressive critics that RTT interventions are not sufficiently democratic. More work is needed to develop participatory approaches. In some cases this may require departing from a strict "evidence-based" framework and imagining new alternatives consistent with values of social justice and educational equity. It also requires expanding existing treatments of deliberative democracy theory to include young people.*

Research Design & Findings: *This article makes a conceptual argument rooted in theory, empirical literature, and practical experience in schools. After explaining theories of participatory democracy, youth–adult partnerships, and thirdspace, we propose five practices that should guide a deliberative, participatory approach to public decision-making about schools. These are: border-crossing facilitation, participatory research, multilingual and multicultural discourse practices, authentic decision-making, and joint work and distributed expertise.*

Conclusions/Recommendations: *The current school turnaround paradigm, embodied by closures, conversion to charters, and teacher reassignments, has left a great deal of collateral damage in its wake. Teachers work under threat of firing. We propose an alternative approach to improve struggling public neighborhood schools—not just another option in a menu of turnaround strategies, but an alternative frame and set of practices that expands the conversation about intervention. This approach encourages deliberation and communication among diverse networks of students, teachers, and families.*

The Chicago Board of Education, appointed by the Mayor, closed 49 elementary schools despite "months of protests, a citywide outcry against the closures, and two federal lawsuits" (Maxwell, 2013a). Twenty-three Philadelphia schools were shuttered by a School Reform Commission comprised of people appointed by the governor and mayor, "despite pleas from civil rights leaders and community activists to consider other options" (Maxwell, 2013b). In 2012 and 2013 school closures proliferated in poor communities of color throughout the United States, including those planned in cities such as Washington, DC, Detroit, and Newark. These closures exemplify an approach to school "turnaround" that often clashes with, and overrides, concerns voiced by the targets of reforms: communities, families, students, and teachers (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011; Howe & Meens, 2012; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Rice & Malen, 2003; Trujillo & Renee, 2012).

Although scholars have developed compelling arguments about the need to involve parents and teachers in a more deliberative and democratic approach to intervening in low-performing schools, there is less scholarship focused on the role of young people in school intervention processes. Such work requires a mix of critique and imagination. Critique helps to uncover and denaturalize deeply rooted social constructions of youth of color that limit their access to public decision-making. But this moment calls for imaginative proposals as well. We synthesize scholarship about participatory democracy, youth–adult partnerships, and thirdspace in order to develop guiding principles for an inclusive and democratic approach to improving schools.

SCHOOL TURNAROUND AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Federal policy, as codified in Race to the Top (RTT) funding guidelines, outlines four types of intervention: turnaround, restart, closure, and transformation (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Tallant, & Rahmatullah, 2010). As Table 1 indicates, people apply the word "turnaround" to the general category of intervening in a low-performing school and to one specific type of change process. The publicly articulated intent of these strategies is to identify the nation's lowest performing public schools, most of which are located in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, and reverse underperformance as measured by low test scores and graduation rates. Many urban districts view closing existing schools based in low-income communities of color and replacing them with charter schools as an efficient intervention in failing schools (Gronberg, Jansen, & Taylor, 2012).[1]

Table 1. Turnaround models (excerpted from Kutash et al., 2010)

Model	Description
Turnaround	New principal and at least 50% new staff.
Restart	Reopen public school under control of a charter school management organization that manages multiple charter schools.
School closure	Close the school and enroll students in other, higher-achieving schools.
Transformation	Improve teacher and principal effectiveness through comprehensive instructional reform and related strategies to promote student learning.

To support their call for change, RTT proponents invoke a mix of market-based rationales, such as restoring America's economic competitiveness, and moral claims about the need to boost educational achievement for African American and Latino students. The Denver Superintendent and School Board President in 2006, for example, tried to put closure in a historical continuum with the Civil Rights Movement by citing Dr. Martin Luther King's famous phrase "the fierce urgency of now" to justify a high school closure. A spokesperson for Newark public schools used similar language in explaining that closures "were driven by a fierce sense of urgency" (Zubrzycki, 2012). In their public remarks defenders of turnaround have positioned themselves as advocates of educational equity and often, unfairly in our view, used the mantle of change to paint opponents as defenders of the status quo. These invocations of urgency, however, do not fix the deep problems found in the kinds of turnarouds called for by the RTT intervention model. In the next section we articulate four critiques of turnaround policies, drawing on empirical analyses of the consequences of turnaround policies and moral critiques of how such policies get enacted.

WEAK EVIDENTIARY SUPPORT FOR RTT INTERVENTIONS

The Institute for Education Sciences acknowledges that the evidentiary base for turnaround is weak. In *Turning Around Chronically Low Performing Schools* (2008), based on 10 case studies of 35 schools, the authors write: "The panel feels compelled to emphasize that the level of evidence is *low* (emphasis in the original) because none of the studies examined for this practice guide is based on a research methodology that yields valid causal inference" (p. 6). A few years after some of the initial turnaround models were adopted more research became available for review. Trujillo and Renee (2012), reviewing studies of schools that underwent transformation in the past 10 years, find a tendency to report "snapshot" studies that

employ one year of test score data, rather than longitudinal research that examines the extent to which short-term growth can be sustained over multiple years. One of the few exceptions to the snapshot approach is an Institute for Education Sciences longitudinal study of changes in test performance from 2003–2007 in 750 low-performing schools. According to a summary of this study in Sparks (2012), 15 percent of participating schools sustained an increase in the number of proficient students by at least 5 percentile points over 3 years, and only 4 percent sustained an increase in both reading and math. This problem of sustainability of turnaround reforms was observed by families in Chicago: Two elementary schools established by then Superintendent Duncan in 2003 to replace three closed schools were then slated for closure in 2013 (Vevea, 2013).

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

A second, related critique is the disproportionate burdens faced by children and youth of color growing up in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, particularly when it comes to school closures. Unfortunately we could not locate any studies that provide information about the number, timing, and location of closures nationally, which would provide context for this point. The Schott Foundation (2013) created a map demonstrating the correlation between closed schools and schools with high percentages of African American and Latino students in Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia (see Figure 1). A map of Washington, DC, schools slated to be closed shows a similar trend (Huron, 2013). The disproportional impact of closure is not new: Valencia (2008) testified as an expert witness in a 1979 elementary school closure case about the disproportionate burdens experienced by Mexican American families.

Where critics highlight disproportional impact, districts and closure proponents tend to argue that the closures in communities of color are an unintended consequence of using objective decision-making criteria. Briscoe and Khalifa (2013), for example, who analyzed the closure of a majority African American high school, found that district officials framed their decisions in technical or bureaucratic language that emphasized fiscal efficiency, enrollment data, and statistics about student performance. Our review of news articles and case studies suggests that closure decisions tend to arise in a climate of budget deficits and select schools that possess some combination of under-utilized space and low academic performance (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009). Chicago's mayor, for example, defended the school closures by pointing to an alleged looming deficit of $1 billion and data suggesting that many schools were underutilized (Ahmed-Ullah, Byrne, & Chase, 2013).

Figure 1. The Color of School Closures (Schott Foundation)
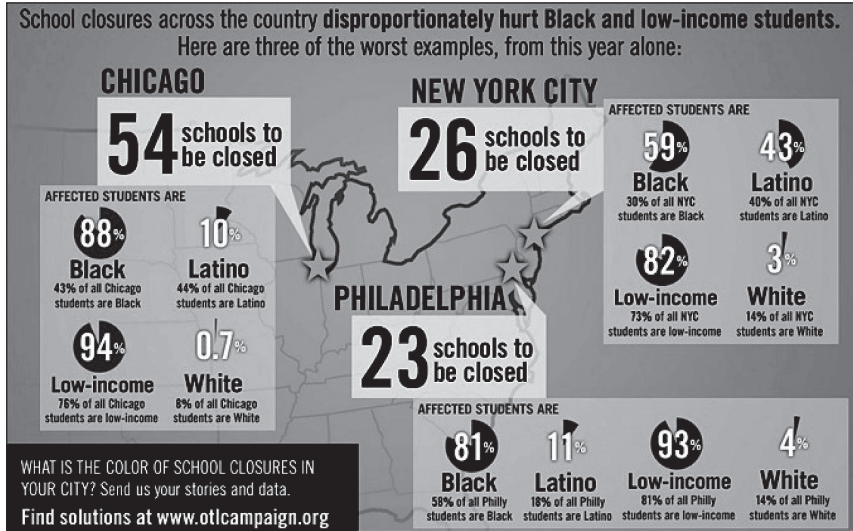
Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to adjudicate the multiple causes of each particular case, it is our view, based on recent studies, that closure decisions are shaped by political interests and never just technical. Several case studies have shown the ways in which allegedly objective analyses of data have been skewed or shaped by political considerations. Finnigan and Lavner (2012), for example, chronicle how decisions about which elementary schools were closed in "Union City" were shaped by the relative political power of neighborhoods, rather than a neutral process guided by objective criteria. Lipman and Haines (2007), drawing on archival analysis and participatory research, showed how school closures in the early 2000s in Chicago were linked to gentrification and school privatization agendas. Bilger's (2010) regression analysis of elementary and junior high school closures from 1991 to 2005 in Illinois (excepting Cook County because of its outlier status) found that race was a "significant contributing factor" and that "the schools most likely to close are not simply the smallest or most expensive schools" (p. 13).

Even in cases where districts make decisions based purely on objective data about underutilization, historical questions must be asked about why certain schools or neighborhoods are underenrolled. Community-based researchers in Cleveland, for example, pointed out that the current problem of excess building space originated in the 1960s, when the city accelerated school construction in East Cleveland to preserve racial segregation

(Galletta, 2012). Today it is the city's racially and economically isolated African American youth who bear the burden of closure and must travel outside of the neighborhood to go to schools.

UNDERMINING LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Democratic theorists argue that turnaround policies undermine the fundamental civic and democratic purposes of education. Howe and Meens (2012), for example, write that current turnaround policies substitute market-based models of individual choice for democratic deliberation and local control. There is a rich vein of scholarship on Local School Councils (LSC) in Chicago, for example, which were established in 1988 to cede site-based school management to a collection of 11 people, including parents, community residents, teachers, the principal, and, in high schools, one student (Fung, 2001; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Moore & Meritt, 2002). Although these continue to have a legislative mandate, the proliferation of charter and alternative models, which are not bound by the LSC legislation, has diminished their power.

Across the country, although more than 90 percent of school boards continue to be elected by their local communities, there is a shift among major cities to appointed boards, typified by the three cities with the largest numbers of school closures in 2013: Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC (Education Commission of the States, 2013; Resmovitz, 2010). What this means, according to critics, is an approach to community engagement that is more ceremonial or promotional than it is deliberative. Trujillo and Renee (2012), in their review of typical approaches to "community engagement" in urban districts, find a tendency to focus on building support for turnaround policies, rather than deliberation about whether a strategy is prudent or consistent with community values and needs (see Russakoff, 2014, for a detailed account of this process in Newark, New Jersey). The consequence is a marketing approach to community engagement to support a particular prescription favored by the district. The erosion of local governance both at the level of the school and the district have created structural barriers to democratic participation and have narrowed spaces for involvement, particularly of students.

THE EXCLUSION OF YOUNG PEOPLE FROM PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Schneider and Ingram's (1993) influential paper about the "social construction of target populations" conceptualized how youth are positioned in policy discourse. They identify two dimensions upon which target populations vary: power and how they are constructed by the public. Those high in power and constructed "positively," such as military veterans, are,

according to this scheme, "advantaged." Children and youth occupy a quadrant low in power but high in moral valence—called "dependents." Schneider and Ingram argue that these social constructions have consequences for who gets to be at the table when policies are formulated and for how policies are explained to and received by the general public.

To be constructed as a dependent holds certain advantages, in that policymakers must go to greater lengths to justify themselves when targeting dependent groups. Young people, particularly those of elementary age, are dependent on adult caregivers for nurture and basic provisions. But such a framing can also be damaging, in that it positions the targets as incapable of representing their own interests and unworthy of a place at the table when policy decisions are made. This type of social construction showed up in the rhetoric forwarded by school administrators in a contested high school closure decision that Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011) studied: "We view the decision to move the current Jefferson students to other schools as an admission of complete failure by the district over many years and as a *rescue mission* for the children that are there" (emphasis added). The rhetoric of rescue was voiced as well in public community meetings that we observed. One school board member said, to the students at a public meeting, "You seem to think we're doing this to you. But we're not. We're doing it *for* you." This stance is also exemplified in a quote from a Philadelphia City Councilwoman, who said, in response to an unexpected display of public art by fourth graders that called for more funds for schools, "I always find it sad when kids are involved with fighting. It's an adult problem" (Glover, 2013).

The paternalistic stance is also reflected in key omissions from policy documents outlining effective turnaround strategies. Kutash et al.'s (2009) report, for example, drew on interviews with practitioners to identify seven conditions that "drive effective turnarounds" at the school and system level, including time for planning, principal autonomy, and additional support staff to address students' social and emotional needs. Although sensible, missing from the recommendations are suggestions for student engagement or consideration of students as people with ideas about how the school might improve. The Institute for Education Science's *Turnaround Practice Guide* reveals a similar lacuna: The document, which offers four recommendations to guide turnaround processes, does not mention the idea of speaking with students or creating deliberative processes for student or family input. In the broader space of systemizing school turnaround, the perspectives of youth also are absent (e.g., Herman, 2012). Given the direct impact of turnaround on students, excluding them from discussions and recommendations means losing out on a significant resource. Such exclusion has negative consequences for

the success of school turnaround efforts because it can "hurt teacher and student morale and diminish trust in the administration, damaging the school's chances to improve" (Salmoniwicz, 2009, p. 21).

SUMMARY

RTT has embraced a technocratic paradigm for school reform that frames choice less as the opportunity for the public to deliberate about what it wants from its schools and more in terms of the freedom of individual families to choose, as customers, from a diverse array of school options. This market-based system has eroded substantive opportunities for parents and students to participate in decisions about their schools.

Although there is widespread agreement among progressive critics that RTT interventions are not sufficiently democratic, more work is needed to develop participatory approaches. In some cases this may require departing from a strict "evidence-based" framework (because such efforts have not yet been tried) and imagining new alternatives consistent with values of social justice and educational equity. It also requires expanding existing treatments of deliberative democracy theory. This literature tends, with some important exceptions (e.g., Hanson, 2013; Su, 2010), to focus on deliberative processes among adults. More work is needed to outline what a deliberative, sociospatial process might look like with robust participation by youth. We contribute to this effort in the section that follows.

TOWARDS YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL DECISION-MAKING

In recent years community-based organizing groups have been arguably the most effective facilitators of direct engagement in school reform by people living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2008; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Warren & Mapp, 2010). Youth organizing groups have developed and sustained campaigns for educational change, often leading to major policy changes in sectors such as juvenile justice or school reform (Garcia, Minkler, Cardenas, Grills, & Porter, 2013; Kwon, 2006; Warren, Mira, & Nikundewe, 2008).

Far less common, however, are sustained opportunities for grassroots democracy that are sustained inside of schools or school districts and are inclusive of student, teacher, family, and community voices (Zion & Petty, 2014). Inspired by examples of youth participation in local governance via formal roles, written into public budgets, for planning and institutional decision-making (e.g., Sirriani, 2005), here we articulate guiding principles for a public, mixed-age body aimed at school transformation. In developing such principles, we envision a form of direct democracy that is formalized and sustained by a school or school system but that tries to

avoid problems of elitism or tokenism that can be common in student government (Barnes, Newman, Knops, & Sullivan, 2003; Fielding, 2004). What might the principles and practices of such a group look like? This is a partly a design question—in terms of how to organize a setting that enables people with different levels of experience and power to work together—but it is also a moral question around values and ends. To develop some tentative outlines we draw on three literatures: participatory democracy, youth–adult partnerships, and thirdspace.

CONCEPTUAL RESOURCES

Participatory Democracy

Participatory democracy refers to a form of local self-governance in which ordinary citizens meet with each other to deliberate over ends and means, develop policies, and select plans of action for their institutions (Fung, 2007; Levine, 2013). Although some political theorists distinguish between participatory and deliberative forms of democracy, for our purposes we draw on scholarship about both types, because they are concerned with the same broad goals related to citizen participation, deliberation, and self-governance. Emerging scholarship has documented successful cases of direct democracy in terms of their practical benefits to the quality of public services, sustainability of common pool resources, and accountability of government officials (Fung, 2001; Levine, 2013; Ostrom, 2009; Zuckerman, 2013).

Research on grassroots democratic initiatives is useful for showing the ways that unequal power may surface in community coalitions whose stated intention is to provide venues for voice and community-driven processes by those who have not previously had such opportunities. Deliberative processes get undermined when stakeholders or community members try to work together under conditions of reciprocity and egalitarianism but fail to bridge deep-seated power differences or cultural practices. Barnes et al. (2003), for example, report that the physical location and furniture in a meeting unintentionally made it more difficult for senior citizens or physically disabled people to attend. The literature on parent engagement has produced longstanding findings about problems that arise for family–school partnerships when institutional agents enact deficit views of families or do not adjust meeting times to accommodate the daily routines of working families (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2009; Zion & Petty, 2014). Communication scholars have shown how variations in cultural norms for meeting behavior can impede the productivity of groups (Sprain & Boromisza-Habashi, 2012). O'Connor,

Hanny, and Lewis (2011), for example, showed how a community-wide effort in Rochester to empower "community resident" leadership was derailed by the inability of some members, schooled in the discourse practices common to nonprofit and foundation-driven strategic planning, to successfully listen to or accommodate the perspectives of community members who had less formal schooling.

Youth–Adult Partnerships

Where research on direct democracy has uncovered the discursive operations of unequal power and cultural difference, scholars of *youth–adult partnerships* have identified risks that are tied to unequal power because of age. The most common of these risks—which show up in multiple studies in a wide range of locales and types of organizations—revolves around the basic problem of how adults and youth work together (e.g., Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005; O'Donoghue & Strobel, 2007). The first risk, all too common, is that adults take on too much control or authority and young people disengage from the project (Silva, 2003; Su, 2010). But a second risk can also occur, when student empowerment efforts take place in spaces distant from the machinery of actual power and without the benefit of access to knowledge and expertise about how to effect policy change. Calls for youth voice emerged in a context of exclusion, so it is not surprising that many such efforts organize themselves to try to limit the power or control of adults. But what can result are projects that are not aligned with existing strategic priorities of schools or that focus more on self-expression than on sustained integration into the machinery of governance. In either case they can be easily ignored or marginalized by adult decision-makers.

Youth–adult *partnerships*, on the other hand, try to develop coalitions characterized by distributed expertise among people of a range of ages. In a recent review, Zeldin, Christens, and Powers (2012) defined youth–adult partnerships as:

> the practice of: (a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, (b) in a collective [democratic] fashion (c) over a sustained period of time, (d) through shared work, (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue.

Zeldin et al. cite examples of partnerships, often housed within city government, that have contributed to sustained youth participation in local governance or community planning. Careful attention to these change efforts—both where they succeed and where they fail—has yielded a

confident set of characterizations about what youth–adult partnerships look like, which we apply to the school reform context.

This literature on youth–adult partnerships, however, has been less rigorous or critical in its attention to issues of power and privilege (for an exception see Zion & Petty, 2014). Some partnerships set out to recruit youth but end up excluding the most vulnerable or marginalized youth within a community (Campbell & Erbstein, 2012). Any initiative to engage young people needs, in our view, to attend to the construction of spaces that are inclusive and that respond to the presence and enactments of power and privilege. We employ thirdspace theory to inform a sociospatial approach to youth–adult partnerships that supports a paradigm shift in the role of youth in school reform while offering a critique of the power dynamics of school reform processes.

Thirdspace

Thirdspace theory has emerged in a wide range of areas, including city planning (Soja, 1996), learning ecologies (Gutiérrez, 2008), and school social environments (Chambers & McCready, 2011). In its various iterations, thirdspace has offered alternative approaches to understanding the negative consequences of leaving people out of policy decisions that affect them directly. We find this particularly relevant in the school reform context, where we fear that calls for student voice may be enacted as marketing efforts to build "customer" support for a particular model, rather than approaches that encourage deliberation and critique.

Instead of maintaining existing social and political processes of school reform by adding the marginalized voices of youth to support premade school intervention decisions, discursive and social space must be made for youth to give critical input at the beginning of the process. Chambers and McCready (2011) have used the phrase "making space" to reflect the practice of establishing spatial and discursive environments to involve youth in naming the organizational practices and values that excluded them. In making space to question existing policies and systems, distinctions must be made from the concrete (what is) to the imagined (what could be).

Soja (1996) provides a helpful frame for this distinction in terms of first, second, and third spaces. The first space is the space of power, described as "the way it is," and embodied in existing policies and systems constructed by those with the most power. In the first space of school reform, for example, the decision and plan to turn around a school may be established by policy makers and education professionals and presented to the community as the best course of action for its school. The second space

can be described as "the way it could be," and emerges when an individual or group responds to the existing policies and systems of the first space. In the second space of school reform, members of a community organization, for example, may articulate plans to increase their involvement in a low performing school in the community despite the district's plans. The third space is the space of dynamism and imagination. In third spaces, histories of exclusion and enactments of power are acknowledged and used to guide the construction of new practices. The third space of school reform may be coconstructed by policy makers, teachers, family members, students, and other stakeholders, transcending the binary "us vs. them" approach, and used to re-imagine educative practices that are not limited by traditional or contemporary notions of school reform.

An Example

We anchor our discussion of guiding principles in a composite example developed based on our own synthesis of several high school turnaround processes.

> *In a local high school, several years of low performance on state tests and a graduation rate hovering around 60 percent have attracted the attention of the school board, superintendent, and the news media. Members of the local community also have taken note of the school's worsening reputation. The school has had five principals in the past 8 years, and educational resources, such as elective and creative courses, AP courses, the school's gifted and talented program, and sports teams, have steadily decreased. Students have become discouraged and disengaged. The school has also been showing a steady pattern of emptying seats: A building that once served 1,200 students now has just 750 due to a combination of low enrollment and chronic absences. A growing number of families in the neighborhood have responded to the school's troubles by moving their children to other schools: Choice opportunities are publicized by the district and individual schools.*

> *With encouragement from the district, a charter management organization (CMO), with early signs of strong test performance in other cities, has visited the school building. Although a new principal has been hired for the school, the school district has begun considering multiple options for the building. Community members, parents, and students have sought information about the district's plans for the school, but remain largely uninformed.*

> *The new principal enters her job knowing that if the school remains below adequate in test performance, it will likely be designated for closure or reconstitution by the district. She has seen what this does to the morale of*

students and teachers in other high schools and does not want it to happen to hers. Drawing on limited discretionary funds for building-level innovations, she decides to reach out to parent and community groups that have been historically active at the school and ask for their help.

We developed this example to ground our conversation about guiding principles in a plausibly realistic scenario. The vignette is meant to surface the complexity of all the moving parts and multiple levels of power that affect one school facing the possibility of turnaround. This poses particular challenges for deliberative participatory processes because school turnaround decisions are shaped by multiple scales of policy, including the local school, its district, teachers' unions, the state, and the federal government.

What results can be a series of contradictions of scale that have potential to undermine or frustrate youth or community participation. For example, it is common for schools facing turnaround to have experienced multiple principals in a limited number of years. This experience of churn in the leadership disrupts school–community relations and erodes people's confidence in a new principal's staying power. Similarly, even in rare cases when a skilled school principal may be able to engender trust and build community partnerships to support the school, these same community members may not be involved in the actual district-level decisions about a school's fate. This is further complicated by the fact that school districts and states, not local school leaders, are responsible for measuring school performance. Thus, while community members may be willing to support a low-performing school through long-term deliberative processes, the timeframes and priorities of the district or state may undermine any such efforts.

Although state and federal policies situate school failure and turnaround in the particular school, a practice that has been challenged in the literature (e.g., Knudson, Shambaugh, & O'Day, 2011), we propose a community-based participatory approach to intervening in failing schools. What follows are five guiding principles for the formation of a group that would address the example above. We speak from a mix of published literature and practical experiences in "turnaround" schools. In developing this approach, we have imagined it taking place at the scale of a neighborhood school, rather than the scale of district or state decision-making, despite the challenges of scale we mention above. We conjecture that teachers, students, families, and community members are going to be most drawn to participate in deliberations about schools that they know and where their direct interests are at stake. In our conclusion we discuss some ideas for how to align this local work with policy decision-making at more distant scales of regulation (Kurtz, 2003).

KEY PRACTICES FOR A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO SCHOOL INTERVENTIONS

Figure 2. Guiding Principles for a Participatory Approach to School Intervention

Border-crossing Facilitation

Each school and community context will reflect its own features, history, and challenges, and recognizing these differences should inform the work and structure of the group. Navigating the organizational spaces that exist between a school and the local community should remain a core emphasis of a participatory approach to school intervention. This allows both school and the local community to remain highly valued without privileging one over another.

Students, families, teachers, and community members have different experiences with the spatial and discursive environments of school and the local community. For example, inside the school, students of color from low-income families are often seen as dependent on positive relationships with teachers in order to succeed (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011), whereas in a community context, youth may be positioned as more resilient and possessing vital contributions to social change efforts (Christens & Dolan, 2011).

As Becket, Glass, and Moreno (2013) point out, community collaboration in a context of school reform can be transformative, but it requires a thoughtful process that acknowledges historicity, dynamics of power, and opposing perspectives. Because the interests of school professionals and community members can be in opposition to one another, this collaborative process should be facilitated by someone who can skillfully navigate the dynamics of the school institution as well as the organization and values of the local community. Negotiating these borders in order to involve youth in school reform processes should be the work of an individual who occupies dual or multiple roles. A facilitator with these border-crossing abilities may be more effective at creating collaborative and discursive spaces for people with disconnected or competing interests than a person hired by a community organization or the school district. Campbell and Erbstein (2012), in a study of seven youth–adult partnerships, found that the most effective efforts were those that were led by "boundary spanning" leaders who knew the community and were skilled at working across institutional sectors and age groups.

Participatory Research

Students are familiar with the day-to-day practices of their schools but may be unfamiliar with the policy contexts of school reform or alternative models of schooling. Other members of the community may lack knowledge of students' everyday experiences in the school but know about various school reform models. In recognition of participants' varied kinds of knowledge, we suggest participatory action research (PAR) as a vehicle to identify barriers to learning at the school and imagine new alternatives (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Irizarry, 2011). Emerging scholarship has shown the ways that PAR can be a vehicle for young people to identify knowledge that resides in their own families and communities and to generate ideas for reforming educational practice (Torre & Fine, 2008). Guajardo, Guajardo, and Del Carmen Casaperalta (2008), for example, describe their work in the Llano Grande Center, in South Texas, using oral histories and other PAR methods to fuel student engagement in academic learning and formulate alternative approaches to schooling. In this sense PAR grounds youth, community members, and school professionals firmly in the context of practice. Freire's (1970) problem-posing method strengthens such an approach by helping participants identify and unearth the root causes of problems at the school.

We envision PAR proceeding along two strands. The first strand would focus on "what is": youth and adult participants could engage in systemic inquiry—including auto-ethnographies, oral histories, spatial analyses,

and archival analyses—to uncover the kinds of barriers and problems that have been limiting opportunities to learn at the school. Such work ought to seek diversity as well as common ground. For example, it may be that the perspectives of families who are recent arrivals in the neighborhood tend to vary systematically from those who boast multiple generations of attendance in the school. Employing a methodology to surface and recognize these differences would be key. Of central importance here would be opportunities for members to discuss data, compare interpretations, surface biases, and make their thinking visible to each other (author; Torre & Fine, 2008).

The second strand of PAR would focus more explicitly on "what could be." These questions might call for the group to orient away from members' everyday experiences and instead study examples of learning and the institutionalization of learning (via school) from around the world. Examples of unconventional education institutions such as Big Picture Schools (http://www.bigpicture.org/), Llano Grande Center (http://llanogrande.org/), and Colombia's Escuela Nueva (http://www.escuelanueva.org/) might equip the group to go beyond their everyday experience and stimulate creative discussions about what might be included in a school that served the values and needs of the neighborhood's residents.

Multilingual and Multicultural Discourse Practices

We envision an intergenerational coalition of people working together that makes space for varied language practices and communication norms. Such efforts would begin with people's right to speak and be heard in their native language, including varied vernaculars and registers. Just as important as multilingualism is a set of participation structures that accommodates different cultural traditions and practices. We know from sociocultural research that styles of group communication and discussion vary across cultural communities, from expectations of formal turn-taking in some contexts to overlapping speech, interruptions, personal storytelling, and debate in others (e.g., Basso, 1996; Hudicourt-Barnes & Ballenger, 2008; Philips, 1972; Rogoff, 2003). The goal of multicultural forms of communication would be to enable every voice in the room to be engaged in dialogue without deference to dominant styles that reify power dynamics. Though challenging, this dialogue begins the process of making space for numerous ways for people to communicate their ideas and expertise. This could include, for example, artistic expression, spoken word poetry, or performance, in addition to traditional research mediums such as presentations or lectures (Barghava, 2013; Sabo Flores, 2008; Torre & Fine, 2005).

Authentic Decision-Making

Participation in authentic decision-making, in which people have opportunities to deliberate end goals and not just means or tactics for a predetermined end, is a defining feature of youth–adult partnerships (Zeldin et al., 2012) and deliberative democracy (Hanson, 2013; Levine, 2013). Consistent with deliberative democracy, groups should refrain from making decisions until people have had the opportunity to listen, explain their reasoning, and develop a sense of a shared or public interests (Fung, 2007; Hanson, 2013). Doing so can otherwise lead people to harden their stances or refrain from listening to others. It also may privilege those who come into the deliberation with greater prior knowledge or certainty about their positions.

For a group working on the topic of school reform, adherence to this principle would mean that a decision or plan of action had not already been made. The group would not be created for the appearance of public deliberation or to provide cover for a controversial decision. Of course, when decisions do need to get made, there are a variety of technical decision-making strategies that can be employed depending on the context and pragmatic considerations, including various kinds of polling and consensus building (Fung, 2007). In terms of protecting the rights and interests of participants with the least power, one strategy is to create a routine that pauses the whole group meeting and allows for "caucusing" with others when an important decision is at stake. Doing so enables people who feel excluded or uncertain the opportunity to formulate strategy before proceeding.

Joint Work and Distributed Expertise

Effective youth–adult partnerships tend to embrace the idea that every participant brings particular skills and knowledge; age is not the primary dimension upon which expertise is distributed. When framed this way, participants begin to see how young people bring certain kinds of relevant expertise to the table that others do not. For example, students may be aware of some of the tensions and contradictions that exist around particular school reform models; they would be the first to know, for example, that a decision to extend the school day would interfere with their responsibility to take care of a younger sibling. They may also be knowledgeable about social divisions in a community, the spatial organization and historicity of those divisions, and what is needed to address them (Lipman & Person, n.d.). Such knowledge is not limited to everyday experience. We have observed many youth–adult partnerships where some of the youth

are more skilled in facilitating group decisions than the adults or more knowledgeable about state law (Kirshner, 2008).

While it is important to recognize insights that younger people bring to the table, successful partnerships also build in some forms of developmentally responsive scaffolding that create pathways to participation for less experienced members. If groups do not take certain purposeful efforts to recognize differences in skill and knowledge, young people may not know how to participate or bring their knowledge to the group. Here the research on learning outside of school boasts agreement about what developmentally responsive scaffolding looks like: It is a dynamic relationship in which more experienced others support the participation or problem-solving of novices in ways that progressively change over time as the novice assumes greater mastery or skill. Rogoff (2003) calls a version of this, "guided participation," Li and Julian describe a "developmental relationship," and Zeldin et al. (2012) write about the value of "natural mentors." The notion here is that people with less experience will learn through participation in the ongoing activities of a group, particularly if they have opportunities to observe and enact practices they see performed by more skilled members. Such joint work may periodically require "just-in-time" coaching around a particular skill or knowledge—to pause the activity to explain or demonstrate a skill—but much can be done by learning through shoulder-to-shoulder participation (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chavez, & Angelillo, 2002).

Joint work also recognizes that adult members of the group may need support or training in particular areas. For youth–adult partnerships, in particular, scholars recommend that older members of the group receive training around how to share the floor and unlearn deep-seated deficit-perspectives of youth (Camino, 2005; Zion & Petty, in press). In such instances, there is great value in a border-crossing facilitator or leader who can recognize when problems arise and create explicit participation structures that prevent some voices from being silenced.

CONCLUSION

The current school turnaround paradigm, embodied by closures, conversion to charters, and teacher reassignments, has left a great deal of collateral damage in its wake. Teachers work under threat of firing. Students ask why people are shutting down their schools. Families worry about how far they will have to travel to find a viable, stable school for their children.

We have proposed an alternative approach to improve struggling public neighborhood schools—not just another option in a menu of turnaround strategies, but an alternative frame and set of practices that expands the

conversation about intervention. This approach, drawing on insights and research findings from participatory democracy, youth–adult partnerships, and thirdspace theory, encourages deliberation and communication among diverse networks of students, teachers, and families. It aims to create discursive space for people to exchange ideas across differences of power and privilege, gather data about *what is* and *what could be* at the school, and engage in the messy process of decision-making when multiple parties and interests are involved.

Can this kind of local, open-ended, grassroots scale of engagement be aligned with or supported by district, state, or national policies? On one hand the attempt to create incentives for local participation via federal policy seems fraught with risks and unintended consequences. Community involvement is difficult to legislate. It is often undermined by imbalances of power between stakeholders, efforts to stack committees with the politically connected, or cultural misunderstandings that lead to the voices of some being ignored (e.g., Finnigan & Lavner, 2012). Efforts to fill quotas—of students, of teachers, of parents—can be well-intentioned but do not guarantee representativeness or diversity. Research on student voice, for example, has shown that student representatives are often selected from a narrow slice of A-students, athletes, or the college bound (Fielding, 2004).

On the other hand, because school interventions are shaped by multiple policy scales, local participatory democracy initiatives will only be sustained if they are at least somewhat aligned with and recognized by school district and state policymakers. There are ways that federal and state policies could work in concert with the kinds of local participation we envision. What if the federal government framed the task of turning around schools as a civic engagement initiative, as a way to build community capacity? President Obama hinted at this self-governance frame in his 2012 acceptance speech. Framing the turnaround process as a form of civic renewal is not a stretch because schools, as the fights over closures have shown, are a core feature of what it means to have a healthy, just community. Look back at the major civil rights events of the 20th century and you will find schools at their center, whether it was Brown v. Board of Education, the Little Rock 9, or the East LA Walkouts. Today's public anger about closures is precisely because they are not technical or rational decisions—they cut to the heart of what a community or neighborhood is.

The federal government could provide guidance by tying meaningful indicators of community involvement to federal grants and funding training in participatory democracy processes. Local School Councils in Chicago, although not without struggles and failures, practiced what Fung (2001) called *accountable autonomy*, in which local actors had the space to

make decisions about their best interests, but were still accountable to city authorities for their participation in mandatory training, adherence to minimum principles of deliberation, and transparency of processes. Fung argues that successful councils relied on government to provide capacity-building and monitoring. This example could address some, although not all, of the problems of scale we described earlier.

Researchers, too, have a role to play in supporting a participatory vision of school change. The literatures on scholarship of engagement and community-based research provide a compelling frame for how universities might make civic engagement central to their work (Cruz, Ellern, Ford, Moss, & White, 2013; Douglas, 2012). Three features of engaged scholarship would guide this type of research:

1. Scholarship that is carried out collaboratively: A research project should be coconstructed and informed by the needs of the community and the expectations of the institution. This research should be clearly beneficial to the community, and the parameters of benefit determined collaboratively. It would be guided by deep and grounded reflection on the researcher's positionality.

2. Scholarship that is shared with multiple audiences: Findings that result from this research should be shared at the institutional and grassroots levels. Engaged researchers should consider themselves accountable to the community as they are to their respective institutions.

3. Scholarship that informs policy: Although engaged research can offer benefits to a local community, sustainability and impact are enhanced by connecting work to policymakers at various scales of responsibility (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2012).

With these principles in mind, one important project would be for researchers to investigate deliberative democratic processes that involve young people in school or neighborhood decision-making. Successful examples are hard to find in the literature; too often we get cautionary tales. Work is needed that links research about sustainable practices with design principles that can be generalized. Questions might include: *What are the features of sustained intergenerational collaborative processes involving community members with different roles and power? What can be learned from particular context-specific cases that can inform the formation of democratic, multi-aged groups in other places?*

Researchers also have a role in linking local community-based efforts to district and state policy. Community-based research and design-based implementation research (DBIR) both offer promising models (Penuel,

Fishman, Cheng, & Sabelli, 2011; Strand et al., 2003). In community-based research, university researchers form partnerships with people outside of the academy in order to collect and analyze data oriented towards local social change goals. Similarly, DBIR is focused on strong researcher–practice collaborations: it aims to link those who design and study educational innovations with those interested in developing capacity for sustaining change in education systems (Fishman, Penuel, Allen, & Cheng, 2013). Questions emerging from such a program could include: *How do the aims and interests of the community become linked to district and state priorities? What are the emerging linkages between community and school policy or school and district policy?*

Our aim here has been to promote a set of ideas to inform participatory processes that include youth, families, teachers, and community members in democratic intervention in low-performing schools. This is consistent with our vision of educational justice that is deliberative and connected to the needs of society. It is not a technical solution that should be judged solely against criteria of efficiency or short-term changes in test scores. It is instead rooted to a democratic vision where the criteria for success emphasize sustainability, student and community engagement, equity, and, ultimately, quality learning opportunities for young people living in poor and marginalized neighborhoods.

NOTES

1. Race to the Top is only one of several policy frameworks that call for turning around schools. Several other federal initiatives support turnaround, including OST School Improvement Grants and i3 grants. Similarly, districts and states may have their own reasons for closing schools or supporting charts. We focus on RTT here because of its federal significance and we view it as in alignment with a repertoire of reform strategies that prioritize turnaround or closure. (For more discussion, see Onosko, 2011).

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