Striving for Success:
Promoting K-12 Success through Research, Community, and Action

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Presented at: Community Development Society Conference
Cincinnati, July 24, 2012
Community development as a Project

‘I believe in the beloved community and in the spirit which makes it beloved, and in the communion of all who are, in will and in deed, its members. I see no such community as yet, but nonetheless my rule of life is: Act so as to hasten its coming.’

Located in the eastern portion of the City of Phoenix

Uniquely geographically defined: landlocked in the heart of the Phoenix Metropolitan area.

Source: Google Maps

Source: City of Phoenix
Balsz Elementary School District

- Population: 29,000 (8,500 are under the age of 19)
- District spreads over six square miles
- School district is comprised of five school campuses and approximately 2,900 students enrolled
- Diverse community, predominately populated by immigrants and first-generation Americans.
- Significant refugee and homeless population
A Community in Transition

- Process of defining collective vision for the community facilitated by Valley of the Sun United Way and the Balsz Elementary School District Office

- Desire to form community partnerships to propel students to success

- Inclusive leadership: top-down & bottom up

- Amazing synergy is being created by stakeholders who were engaged in community dialogue
Community Surrounds

- Safety and Aesthetics
- Economic Situation
- Schools & Families
- Language & culture
- Messages sent to children about success
- Enriching Experiences
What We Did

- Designed the scan in collaboration with Balsz stakeholders
- Identified the major players needed to get a clear and compelling picture of the community
- Collected qualitative data in the Spring 2012 semester
- Analyzed data using qualitative data software Nvivo 8

Lused Research
- Literature review of school/community/partnerships
- Added literature on neighborhood dynamics, recreation, parks, open space, place attachment, protective factors for children, and community satisfaction
Whose Voices?

♦ Difficulties – given our (limited) resources...
  ♦ 15 focus groups with students, parents, teachers, principals, and community members
  ♦ 19 key informant interviews with local government workers, faith-based community networks, nonprofit leaders, police, businesses

♦ Community Conversations Participants
  ♦ How can we best capture and interpret what community members are saying?
  ♦ Decision made with stakeholders
Scan Questions

- What are the best things in your community?
- What kind of community would you like to see here?
- What things do not work well in your community?
- What comes to your mind when you think of children and youth?
- What comes to your mind when you think of schools in the community?
- What messages does the community send to children and youth about success?
- How can people and organizations work together to improve the situation in the community?
Structure of the Scan

♦ Writing in progress

♦ Divided into 3 inter-connected parts:
  ♦ Part A: Community engagement booklet
  ♦ Part B: Detailed description of themes and methods
  ♦ Part C: Appendix – list of community assets and statistics related to the community

♦ The audience of each part may be different.
Our Experiences

- This is our first big experience in understanding such a complex community as Balsz.
- We’d like to share with you our experiences and ask for your advice and opinion.
Working with the Community

- Building relationships
- The importance of gatekeepers.
- Willingness of the community to participate in the research.
- Feeling welcome
The Role of the Researcher

♦ To what extent should he/she shape the discussion in the community?

♦ Where is the line between research and consulting, especially in an Action Research project?
Theoretical Grounding

✦ Theory is indispensable:
  ✦ ‘The assumption that practice does not need theory is tantamount to setting sail in a ship without first possessing knowledge of navigation. How would one know that she or he had arrived when there is no course established?’

✦ The use of theory implies the possibility of theory-making, when adapting for specific circumstances
Engagement as Story-Telling

- Scan envisioned as a conversation multiplier
- Making community narratives more democratic and more transparent
- the Saying vs. the Said (E. Levinas)

‘A conversation is not so much about the future of the community but is the future itself’

Language: Metaphors

- Interpretation of qualitative data:
  - Emergence vs. Forcing
  - Double Hermeneutics (Kvale & Brinkmann, *InterViews*, 2009)
  - Validity not just a question for science

- Metaphors can provide analogies for stories, raise emotive reactions, and enhance memorizing

- Warning:
  ‘The choice of metaphors should not become a self-serving attempt at creativity that supersedes subject and substance. At their best, metaphors illuminate meanings of experiences; at their worst, metaphors distort or obscure the essences of them.’

Language: Metaphors

- 2 examples

‘Just like in a garden. If you won’t give the children the right kind of conditions to thrive, it won’t thrive’

Canals of Information: creating communication channels to bring life to the community
Synthesis: Hubs of Engagement

- The term was brought into the discussion by our research team and was adopted by the community.
- Places and organizations in the district, where the community meets, breaks bread, organizes events.
- In line with building community infrastructure.
- Theoretically grounded in Network theory.
- Story-telling: How can we best describe Hubs using metaphors?
Reflection

‘I believe in the beloved community and in the spirit which makes it beloved, and in the communion of all who are, in will and in deed, its members. I see no such community as yet, but nonetheless my rule of life is: Act so as to hasten its coming.’ (Josiah Royce)
What dilemmas have you encountered in your community development projects?

Have you ever used metaphors to describe a concept / issue in the community?

What advise would you give us?
Thank you for your attention!

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