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Book Review

A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform

By M. R. Warren and K. L. Mapp

Reviewer: Lea Hubbard, University of San Diego

The U. S. educational system continues to struggle to provide students with the skills needed for the 21st century. Students lag behind their international counterparts (Fleischman et al. 2010), and within the United States, ethnic and low-income students continue to underperform their white, Asian and middle-class peers (NCES 2011). Such inequities have prompted a plethora of educational reform strategies designed to improve student learning and respond to the democratic ideals on which this country was founded. Many educators and policy makers have been enticed to concentrate their reform efforts on implementing educational change at the hands of top-down decision makers and to “scale up” reform models that have been successful elsewhere. Parent involvement and community organizing in relationship to school improvement has largely been ignored or marginalized (Hands and Hubbard 2011). As a result, education reform has typically overlooked the complicated process of negotiation and collaboration that is needed to adapt and develop reforms that respond to the needs of local constituencies.

A Match on Dry Grass urges us to pay attention to the actions of parents and community members in their efforts to reform schools and to consider the merits of a bottom-up approach to educational change, an approach that views parents and community members not simply as involved participants but also as leaders well-positioned to lead change. Through a series of well-written and provocative case studies, we learn about the organizing efforts of community groups from a variety of low-income communities throughout the country (San Jose, Los Angeles, Mississippi, Denver, Chicago and New York City) who seek meaningful engagement in school reform. Although the cases are admittedly quite diverse, they share a set of common core themes that provide important lessons for those who care about educational change. We learn that the success of community organizing is inextricably tied to a group’s ability to build power and relationships. They must be able to navigate the many challenges posited by institutional constraints as well as the deeply embedded cultural and historical norms of the community. This comprehensive national study forges new ground by connecting the field of community organizing to the field of school reform.
The organizing groups described in this study engaged in processes that empowered and transformed individuals, communities and institutions. Organizers listened to the vision and values of the people, and instead of imposing ideas and plans, they conducted “listening tours,” as was the case in the Mississippi Delta. Similarly, in Los Angeles organizers conducted one-on-one relationship meetings to understand the needs of their constituents and to build powerful alliances between schools and communities. Alliances benefited parents in Los Angeles when people were able to fight together to remove a community garbage dump. Having “cut their advocacy teeth” on this fight, they were then able to fight for the reorientation of educational professional development and the improvement of instructional practice in local schools. And, importantly, organizers also trained parents to be “adaptive leaders” who were prepared to collaborate and forge new kinds of relationships across institutional lines. Attention was primarily on building a “relational culture,” social capital and trusting relationships among constituents. Organizers pursued meaningful dialogue in the interest of “humanizing the work.”

Through the rich ethnographic detail provided in this study we also learn about the enormity of the challenges organizing groups faced in their efforts to affect change. Resistance to those advocating for change was striking. Although these groups took a more general process-oriented approach to school reform rather then insisting on the implementation of a specific reform model, district leadership was often vehement in their opposition. In Alum Rock, when People Acting in Community Together (PACT) organizers worked to encourage small school autonomy, they were devalued and considered to be outsiders without educational expertise. In New York City, when the North West Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition attempted to address the severe overcrowding of Bronx schools, they were faced with an “unresponsive bureaucracy” from the city’s Department of Education (DOE).

Organizers were relentless, however, and ultimately their high-powered advocacy allowed them to claim a “win” in shaping public policy. Their strategic and sophisticated approaches to shifting the school-community power imbalance gained them access to decision making. The Bronx Coalition, for example, experienced some success after organizers taught community members research skills. Once empowered with data, the activists were able to reframe the reform debate and gain support from the DOE. Building power and transforming individuals and groups into political players gave the community a seat at the decision-making “table.”

As Warren and Mapp make clear, much of the struggle that community organizers encountered was due to the historical roots of the community in which they were embedded. They were challenged by the deeply held shared histories and identities, as well as the organizing traditions of the community. These “roots,” represented metaphorically as roots of a tree, often shaped the advocacy efforts that ensued. The Padres y Jovenes Unidos, for example, were a group of young people at Denver’s North High who fought for change within a city that had historically struggled for civil rights, where an “educational apartheid” system, rooted in race and class, had persisted for decades. Dispositions toward race and
education repeatedly plagued attempts to affect educational change. Similarly, the politics of educational reform complicated the organizing efforts of Southern Echo in the Mississippi Delta as they tried to stop the opening of a segregated school and increase state funding for a more integrated neighborhood school. Systemic racism and inequality in the schools severely threatened their work. Community organizers came to understand how much community context mattered.

*A Match on Dry Grass* makes a major contribution to our knowledge of community organizing and its influence on educational change. School reformers can benefit from the lessons elaborated upon here: the importance of building relationships across school and community, and the need to attend to issues of power and politics. In their zeal to reform education, the reform community has often disregarded the historical and cultural context of the community they serve and have listened exclusively to their own groups and not the voices of community groups (*Hubbard, Mehan and Stein 2006*). As a result, educational change efforts may not be representing or attending to the needs of all constituents.

Today more than ever, community groups are organizing to affect educational change. They are demanding a voice, an opportunity to play a formidable role in shaping educational policy. They are insisting on a more equitable distribution of power between school and community. As their sway is arguably growing, it is important to ask the following question: what role should community organizing play in school reform?

We do not hear a great deal from the authors about the underlying support for the organizing groups profiled in this study, yet we know that special funding support could end up earning some voices a disproportionate say in the reform debate — a say that is not necessarily reflective of the interests of the broader community. It seems advisable that due diligence be conducted to assure that advocacy positions genuinely represent a community’s position and not that of particular interest groups. That said, the case studies presented here suggest that community voices could invigorate discussions of educational change in positive ways. Perhaps we need a “match in the dry grass” — a fire that ignites ideas in the arguably dry world of education reform.

At the heart of education are the goals of a democratic process that privileges inclusion. This philosophy defies school-community divisions. It demands that schools and communities acknowledge the breadth of expertise and the rights of all constituents to be part of the reform dialogue. As long as assumptions persist concerning who holds the requisite knowledge to inform school change and groups retreat into intellectual silos, reform will continue to be shaped by the policies and practices of those with the greatest power, not necessarily those who have the most at stake.

*A Match on Dry Grass* has given the education reform community a great deal to think about.

**References**


