A school council's experience with school improvement: A Saskatchewan case study

Jane P. Preston
University of Prince Edward Island

Based on a qualitative case study conducted within one Saskatchewan (Canada) rural community, the purpose of this article is to describe the challenges a school council faced when supporting a school improvement plan. The primary data for the study were 35 semi-structured individual interviews conducted with school council members, teachers, and community members. Findings indicated that the school council policy, which mandated that its members assist in the development and promotion of a Learning Improvement Plan, was mismatched with what the participants viewed as valuable forms of community involvement in school. Analysis through social capital theory spotlighted an inverse link between supporting the Ministry of Education's goals and developing trust within volunteer groups. A core implication of the study is that promoting local forms of community involvement in school nurtures beneficial, nonthreatening relationships between the school and parent/community members.

[Key words: school councils, school improvement, community involvement, social capital]

Unlike most countries, the structure and deliverance of public education within Canada is a devolved process enforced through provincial and territorial jurisdictions.[1] As such, the leaders of the individual provinces and territories set decisions about educational governance, teacher certification, educational policy, and curricula. Because the Canadian governance structures informing public education vary from province to province and territory to territory, the terminology used to identify the governing bodies and educational associations also differs depending on jurisdiction. For example, within British Columbia, school councils are referred to as School Planning Committees; within Manitoba, they are called School Advisory Councils; within Prince Edward Island they are School Councils (Preston, 2008). As spotlighted through this research, within the province of Saskatchewan, school councils are referred to as School Community Councils. With the exception of Quebec, all provincial school

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1 Canada is divided into 10 provinces and 3 territories. Via the *British North America Act* (1867), education is the singular responsibility of each Canadian province or territory.

councils have parents and community members serving an *advisory* role for principals and school boards.

The purpose of this article to is to describe the challenges a school council faced while promoting a school improvement plan. As a part of the study, I address the research question: How do perceptions of community involvement in a rural school influence a School Community Council's ability to facilitate a *Learning Improvement Plan*? During the time of the study, School Community Councils were only in their second year of existence, and due to the newness of Saskatchewan's School Community Council policy, limited research has been conducted on them. Hence, this study spotlights innovative research and potentially serves as benchmark, comparative data for future studies on School Community Councils.

BACKGROUND: POLICIES AND DEFINITIONS

In order to fully understand the context of this study, background information on the School Community Council policy, Saskatchewan's school improvement policy (that is, *Learning Improvement Plan*), and my definition of community involvement are useful. With regard to School Community Councils, these parent/community member advisory associations were initiated in Saskatchewan in May 2006, during the time when the province's former 84 school divisions were being amalgamated into its current 28 school divisions. School Community Councils hold two primary functions: (a) [to] develop shared responsibility for the learning success and wellbeing of all children and youth," and "[to] encourage and facilitate parent and community engagement in school planning and improvement processes" (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005, p. 8). Every school within Saskatchewan is mandated to have a School Community Council. Permanent membership within this school council includes the principal (or designate), one teacher, and any other chosen person the School Community Council deems relevant and necessity. Elected membership includes five to nine parents/community members. As well, one First Nation representative and one or two high school students are to be designated to the School Community Council (Endsin & Melvin, n.d.).

On the topic of school improvement, currently there exists a global trend to increase student achievement through the creation and promotion of transparent, accountable, and measureable school improvement plans (Preston, 2009a). As contextualized within Saskatchewan, such school planning and improvement is facilitated through a formal document entitled the *Learning Improvement Plan*. Provincial policy mandates that the School Community Council collaborates with the principal and school staff in developing, implementing, and evaluating a *Learning Improvement Plan* (Endsin & Melvin, n.d.).

In addition to School Community Councils and the *Learning Improvement Plan*, within this study, I refer to the phrase *community involvement in school*; thus a definition of the term requires clarification. I define community involvement in school to be any student-focused interaction between members of the school and its student families,

community members, organisations and/or businesses. Examples of community involvement in school include (but are not limited to) parents/community members: volunteering at school, attending school sponsored events, fundraising for school resources, assuming positions in school governance, assisting children with school-related tasks/homework, and donating time and resources to the school. Community involvement in school also includes such things as: local business sponsoring student scholarships; local business participating in youth apprenticeships experiences; and, students partaking in local fieldtrips. Otherwise said, community involvement in school is any school-parent/community interaction that nurtures the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual needs of students. Community involvement perpetuates the belief that school staff, parents, and community members are co-responsible for the education and wellbeing of their youth.

LITERATURE BACKDROP

What does past research reveal about the influence school councils have on school improvement, student success, and community involvement in school? Epstein (2001) addressed this question through her research on action teams, which, like School Community Councils, consist of teachers, parents, the administrator, student representatives, and community members. A distinctive aspect of her research was that these action teams participated in professional development through an organisation called the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS). The core feature of this collaboration involved the action team and the NNPS mutually writing, implementing, and assessing strategic school improvement plans. Results of this research indicated that action teams increased community involvement within the school, as well as improved student achievement, attendance, attitude, and behaviour (Catsambis, 2002; Epstein, 1995, 2001, 2005, 2007; Sanders, Epstein, & Connors-Tadros, 1999; Sheldon, 2003).

Additional studies that explore the influence school councils have on student achievement and community involvement yields contradictory results. A study done by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (1997) revealed that parent involvement via school councils is not necessarily linked with increased student success. In Chicago, 14 elementary school councils were part of an in-depth study to determine if their school improvement plan made a difference; the findings indicated that, at best, Chicago school councils marginally improved the academic successes and social accomplishments of students (Wenzel, et al., 2001). Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1998) described the influence that school councils have on school performance and classroom practices as no more than mildly positive. Corter and Pelletier (2004) stated, "Even in this age of evidence-based education, there isn't overwhelming evidence that parent and community involvement boost school performance" (p. 7). On the topic of enhancing community involvement in school, Vollmer (2011) stated:

> Few districts have the time, the resources, or even the inclination to conduct a comprehensive community involvement campaign. Most teachers and administrators are already up to their eyeballs in work, and, truth be told, many have zero interest in involving the public [to enhance community involvement in school]. (p. 69)

This study contributes to the debate surrounding the efficacy of school councils and their ability to create and implement a school improvement plan via community involvement in school.

Because my research was conducted in a rural community located within commuting distance to an urban center, literature that focuses on community involvement in both rural and urban schools is relevant to consider. With regard to rural schools, due to their often limited student enrollment, teachers typically know the personal background of their students, their student families, and the community at large. As a result, rural schools are ideally positioned to foster high levels of community involvement (Minner & Hiles, 2005; Parker, 2001). Prater, Bermudez, and Owens (1997) reported that rural parents attend school-sponsored events more frequently than urban parents; this point is perhaps due to the fact that rural parents/community members tend to view their school as the hub of their community (Herzog & Pitman, 1995; Preston, 2009b). On the flip side, rural schools also face challenges when promoting community involvement. For example, rural communities often fall short in the promotion of culturally-diverse local activities and vocationally-diverse local role models (Isernhagen, 2010). Additionally, rural schools tend to lack the infrastructure, economic diversity, and human resources needed in developing assorted school-community partnerships (Minner & Hiles, 2005).

Urban schools also display an array of pros and cons pertaining to community involvement in school. Because of location, urban schools are ideally positioned to take advantage of a large pool of educational resources including collaboration with postsecondary institutes, businesses, and community associations (Harkavy, Hartley, Weeks, & Bowman, 2011). Urban educators tend to use these proximal community resources to promote cultural-awareness and anti-racist education (Auerbach, 2009); as well, urban teachers tend to take advantage of the wider variety of community fieldtrips options that surround them (Preston, 2012). In a less favorable light, the larger urban student enrollment tends to promote less personalised relationships between urban educators and their students and student families. In turn, urban teachers and administrators tend to heavily rely on formal policies and procedure when promoting school-home relations and community involvement in school (Preston, 2012).

In response to the literature pertaining to rural and urban schools and community involvement, this research is novel in that it recognises a middle ground between rural and urban schools. Although this research is located within a rural community, community members within the research site displayed urban propensities in terms of employment, shopping, and entertainment opportunities. Thus, this study adds another element to consider when researching community involvement in a rural community.

METHODOLOGICAL STRUCTURE, DATA COLLECTION, AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to understand the diverse beliefs and realities of participants in ways that honour their exclusive experiences, viewpoints, and situations, I employed the constructivist paradigm as the methodological foundation of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Creswell, 2012). For the research design, I applied the boundaries of case study, because case studies are ideal for securitising a specific situation or social activity (Stake, 2005). As applied to this research, the situation was a School Community Council and its ability to influence a school improvement.

The primary data source was 35 semi-structured individual interviews conducted over a seven-month period and involved 17 participants who were selected through purposeful (Mertens, 2005) and random sampling (Creswell, 2005). Fourteen people participated in two interviews, two people participated in three interviews, and one participant was interviewed once. Five individuals were School Community Council members, three individuals were teachers, and nine individuals were community members. Of the community members, three individuals had a child or children enrolled in the local school, and six community members did not have children enrolled in the local school. In total, 14 individuals were female, and three participants were male. The large number of female participants reflected the fact that every School Community Council member was female and only female teachers volunteered to participate in the study. The final group of participants reflected a diversity of socioeconomic status, profession, and age (which ranged from about 18 to 70 years old). All participants lived in or around the community I called Sunshine. (Throughout the article, pseudonyms are used in place of actual names.) A synopsis of participant characteristics is display in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Description

Name	Member Affiliation	Gender	Child or Children in Sunshine School	No. of Interviews	Place of Residence
April	SCC	F	yes	2	Within Sunshine
Lilly	SCC	F	yes	2	Outside Sunshine
Lynn	SCC	F	yes	2	Outside Sunshine
Ella	SCC	F	yes	2	Outside Sunshine
Zoe	SCC	F	yes	2	Outside Sunshine
Janelle	Teacher/SCC	F	no	2	Outside Sunshine
Tanya	Teacher	F	no	2	Outside Sunshine
Mandy	Teacher	F	no	2	Outside Sunshine
Sandy	Community	F	no	1	Within Sunshine
Rick	Community	M	yes	2	Within Sunshine

Name	Member Affiliation	Gender	Child or Children in Sunshine School	No. of Interviews	Place of Residence
Alice	Community	F	no	2	Within Sunshine
Amy	Community	F	no	2	Within Sunshine
Kate	Community	F	yes	2	Within Sunshine
Mark	Community	M	no	3	Within Sunshine
Cory	Community	M	no	2	Outside Sunshine
Crystal	Community	F	no	2	Outside Sunshine
Tabitha	Community	F	yes	3	Outside Sunshine

After personally conducting each interview, I transcribed each taped conversation, exploiting this process as an initial form of data analysis (Silverman, 2005). Transcripts were read again to provide additional familiarity with content (Cole & Knowles, 2000). Thereafter, each participant's interview was reread but more systematically to create a preliminary list of key ideas, commonalities, differences, patterns, and categories that were embedded within the transcripts (Basit, 2003; Stake 2005). These patterns and categories converged into larger themes in response to the research purpose (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Creswell, 2012). At this point, all interviews were reread ensuring that the data representing each theme were accurate. Both in keeping with case study design and to improve the trustworthiness of emergent themes, interview data were augmented by observational field notes (Angrosino, 2005; Stake 2000) collected during my attendance at three monthly school council meetings, during 11 community and school visits, and through the maintenance of a personal journal. These experiences allowed me to triangulate what people said they did (as through interviews) with what they actually did (as observed in meetings) (Heck, 2006). To support the credibility of study, participant quotations are threaded throughout the explanation of the research findings.

As for the research site, the rural town of Sunshine had a population of fewer than 400 people and, as mentioned previously, was located within commuting distance of an urban community consisting of about 200,000 people. Sunshine School was a feeder school for three small surrounding communities that were not big enough to sustain their own schools. Sunshine School was a kindergarten to grade 12 school, enrolled about 400 students, and employed about 35 staff members, many of whom commuted from the city. Community members of Sunshine were predominantly employed in locals businesses and/or the agricultural sector or through businesses located in the nearby city. Ethnic and socioeconomic data indicated that people within the greater community of Sunshine were predominantly White, middle-class citizens (Statistics Canada, 2009). Sunshine's School Community Council had seven representative parent and community members elected by the school community. For the most part, these elected members were middle-aged, White females, professionally employed outside the home.

The analytical framework employed for the study was social capital theory. Social capital theory (Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 1993, 1995, 2000) spotlights the benefits that ensue when nurturing trusting networks within a community of people. Research highlights that effective school councils possess trusting interpersonal relationships between it members (Epstein, 2001; Kerr, 2005; Melvin, 2006). As well, the concept of community infer that a type of social bond between a group of people (Bauman, 2004; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 2001, Putnam, 2000). As applied to my research, it was my assumption that the School Community Council's effective use of the personal, professional, and social links between and among educators and parents/community members leads to heightened levels of community involvement in school.

RESULTS

What were the challenges the School Community Council faced while promoting a school improvement agenda? To answer this question, I segregate the thematic findings into three groups – SCC members, teachers, and community members. In general, School Community Council members perceived that bureaucracy limited they way in which they could influence the *Learning Improvement Plan.* Teachers believed parents/community members should be supporters, rather than formally influence the policies around student learning. Most community members wanted to maintain their status as supporters of the school, rather than become involved with the school improvement agenda. Each of these themes is further explicated below.

School Community Council Members Paralyzed by Bureaucracy

School Community Council members explained that what they perceived as valuable forms of community involvement compared to how community involvement was defined through the *Learning Improvement Plan* was mismatched. Lilly described what she viewed as valuable forms of community involvement when she said, "We want to be raising funds and driving the school bus and doing those types of things". As School Community Council members tried to activate forms of community involvement that they deemed important, they felt frustrated by limitations of the school council policy, which mandated that School Community Council members create and support community involvement via the *Learning Improvement Plan*. In explaining this process, Zoe commented:

> My understanding about our role would clearly be to support the administrator to meet their goals. Our school division outlines three goals and the focus of the School Community Council is to do whatever they can to align the school division goals with the school goals.

Some School Community Council members were concerned by their lack of influence in creating these local goals. Lynn believed that the school's *Learning Improvement Plan* was heavily influenced by the school division's centralised priorities and said, "The main goals are set by the people in the division's office. They are not set by us, and that makes them less personally relevant." She continued with a suggestion:

"I would like the SCC to be given a little more latitude and respect to choose their own goals". Ella also acknowledged that centralised authorities influenced what the School Community Council did. She noted, "They [the Ministry of Education and school division] tell you what you are allowed to support." In sum, most of the School Community Council members perceived that they had little influence in creating and implementing authentic, decentralised, community-focused goals.

Not only did the expectation to contribute to the *Learning Improvement Plan* appear to affect the School Community Council's ability to support what they believed to be a localised version of community involvement in school, School Community Council members regarded bureaucratic aspects of the school council policy as a waste of time. Lynn explained, "But please don't mandate my time with big 'P' politics, like creating a constitution. Just give me the constitution. I don't want to build it. That's not why I joined." Ella's comments reflected a similar frustration when she said, "And another thing that is wasted in regards to time … is that so much of our first two years was spent developing a Constitution and setting up this and that." In the following passage, Lilly explained how she believed bureaucratic responsibilities paralysed the school council's ability to promote community involvement, on their terms:

> It's [the School Community Council policy] so busy telling you, in such a very politically correct way, that you can do anything your community needs. Then we say, "We want to do this." We are told … No, you can't raise funds to start up the – let's say, the reading club or supplying the resources for the kids for something. You can't do that because you are not supposed to fundraise. They tied both hands behind our back and hobbled us. So what do they want us to do? I would have been better off staying by myself with the other parents supporting [a specific group] … or I would have been better off, just walking up to the individual teachers and saying, "Give me something to do."

In sum, rather than the School Community Council policy being recognised as a springboard toward increasing community involvement in the school, the School Community Council members perceived that the bureaucracy of the policy actually limited their potential to heighten community involvement in the school, on their terms. The majority of School Community Council participants voiced their frustrated because they believed that fulfilling the educational mandates dictated by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education and their school division consumed their volunteer time and mandated them to pursue community involvement in ways they deemed as bureaucratic.

Teachers as Academic Leaders and Parents as Supporters

All of the teachers interviewed believed that neither the School Community Council nor any other parents/community members should have formal authority to influence what teachers taught within the classroom. Janelle explained:

> I really don't think they [the School Community Council] should affect my classroom. That's my classroom. I'm the professional, and I make professional decisions for the children. I would think that would be a real detriment and a real

negative event if the School Community Council started to interfere with how we teach.

Meagan's statement was similar to Janelle's: "We are professionals, and we know what we are doing. We went to school for a long time. Some parents are not in the same area of work but have lots of opinions about how we should run things." In turn, Tanya's statement was line with Janelle and Meagan's. Tanya said:

> I don't know if they [the School Community Council] should affect our classroom and how we teach. Certainly, it's good if they are supporting division goals, and they are coming and doing these things like math night … but do they affect how we teach? I don't think so.

Teachers appeared comfortable with School Community Council if it promoted forms of community involvement that *supported* the teachers in and outside the classroom; however, teachers appeared uninterested in having the School Community Council impinge upon curricular and pedagogical decisions within classrooms.

Teachers went on to describe the features that they thought were important for community involvement in school, and, through their comments, they indirectly highlighted the types of community involvement they believed School Community Council should promote. Janelle believed that parent attendance at the school's sporting events was important, and she explained its potential: "You do see lots and lots of parents at these school sporting events. That is a way they get to know each other … they travel with their kids and talk to each other during sporting events." On the topic of fundraising, Tanya and Janelle said, "Some parents just want that fundraising type of community involvement. They don't want any more than that. It's something they can do" (Tanya) and "Supporting fundraisers, that's community involvement" (Janelle). Mandy set up a student art display within the community, and, on this topic, she said, "They [parents/community members] really love it when we put up some nice art work. People "ooh" and "ah" about it." Once again, in all of these examples, parent/community involvement played the role of being supporters of the school.

Teachers went on to describe the perceived benefits of community involvement in school. Tanya indicated that community involvement helped to develop trust and communication between the students, the parents, and her. On this topic, she said:

> As you [the teacher] start promoting this community stuff, you realise how much more the kids – and community members – come to you. They trust you. They share things with you. They are more open with you. They are more willing to work with you.

Meagan indicated: "Promoting community involvement just shows that some [community] people do value school and care about it." Janelle also indicated how community involvement could serve as a positive role model for students. "I think there is also the other piece that when children see their parents coming into the school,

whether it's for drama or to watch the volleyball team, it shows the kids that parents think school is important." These comments highlighted that teachers believed parents/community members as supporters of the school strengthened personal, professional, and social relationships within the school community.

Community Members as Supporter of School-Sponsored Events

Similar to the views of teachers, community members believed that School Community Council should endorse community involvement where parents/community members assume volunteer roles at school, donate time and resources to the school, and participate in school-sponsored events. Ricky recognised that having a community bobcat driver, carpenter, or electrician volunteer to support school construction projects was an integrated aspect of community involvement. When Cory and Tabitha described an ideal form of community involvement, they referred to parent attendance as school events. Cory said, "It [community involvement] looks like a crowded dark gym where there isn't room to sit, so you stand in the back. You are watching both you and your neighbours' kids there on stage at the Christmas Concert." Tabitha indicated, "For me, it [community involvement] would be like when the school puts on a production … all of the community people come out to see it. They watch the production. They visit and have cake and dainties."

Community members also explained the benefits that result from community involvement in school. Alice and Tabitha talked about how community involvement creates a sense of pride in one's community, a similar point that was made by the teachers. Alice indicated, "When members of the community attend school functions and are visible, they show the kids that they are proud of them." Tabitha explained how community support of school events assists in the formation of stronger relationships: "Supporting activities in a small community and in the school are helpful and feed the pride of the community. This sense of pride makes people want to work together to accomplish things."

When asking participants if local parents/community members should have a legitimate voice in academic school decisions, as embodied within the *Learning Improvement Plan* answers were varied. For example, Alice said:

> I tend to not like that whole politics of things. If I had a choice of going to this [School Community Council meeting], going to the Christmas concert, or going to watch the little kids doing gymnastics, I would choose that [the latter two].

Cory indicated his disbelief that the School Community Council could realistically have an influence on school academics. Cory said:

> First of all, I would be very surprised if this Community Council is able to actually influence the curriculum. Second of all, I would also be very surprised if the teachers would say, "Oh, ya, that's a good thing that parents are getting involved and making decisions about curriculum."

Ricky indicated:

> As we talked about before, the Christmas pageant, the music festivals, the sports, and those sorts of things always bring in a lot of people from the community. Then for other things, you've got to let the school do its job … a person or a Council has to know when to do things and when to step back in other areas.

Crystal candidly indicated her belief that community members did not need to "interfere" with the plans of teachers. Mark believed that when too many people are invited to make [school] decisions, conflicts arise: "Not all kinds of involvement finish up for the good. It can have unavoidable side effects." For the most part, community members viewed community involvement in school to be about parents/community members supplying physical, financial, and moral supports for students in school.

As a final point, most of the community members interviewed personally knew most people who lived the larger community of Sunshine, and these participants believed that promoting parents/community members as supporters of the school was especially important for Sunshine's, due to the town's commuter identity. Because community members regularly drove to and from the city for employment, shopping, and to pursue recreational and entertainment activities, many people within Sunshine did not have time to socialise with each other. As a result Cory indicated, "The people haven't developed into a stage of inter-dependence with each other … The sense of community suffers; it definitely suffers." Alice said, "We are not as close-knit as we used to be. Lots of people don't know each other [in this community]. Community members recognised that community involvement in school was one way to enhance the social tightness of their community.

DISCUSSION

When reviewing the results of all participant groups, a couple of predominant messages surface. The major challenge that the School Community Council faced in trying to establish and promote the *Learning Improvement Plan* was that School Community Council members, teachers, and community members, in general, were not comfortable with having parents/community members establish and promote an academic school improvement agenda. Moreover, participants did not perceive that the creation and promotion of the *Learning Improvement Plan* was an integral or important component of community involvement in school. On the other hand, these participants were comfortable with having parents/community members actively engage with the school through such things as fundraising, volunteering, and attending school-sponsored events. In essence, the School Community Council policy, which mandates that School Community Council members assist in the development and promotion of the *Learning Improvement Plan,* was mismatched with what the participants viewed as valuable forms of community involvement in school.

Social capital research provides an avenue to further contemplate the issues related to this finding. Putnam (1995) provided one of the most popular definitions of social capital: "features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants

to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (pp. 664–665). Social capital, as embodied through family networks, bonds of friendship, and connections with influential people or organisations, has many personal, professional, and social advantages. For example, social capital supports the wellbeing of individuals (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Veenstra, 2001; Woolcock, 2001), promotes opportunities to increase human capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 2001, 2002), and facilitates entrepreneurial success (Fukuyama, 1996). Franke (2005) viewed social capital as a resource that can be utilised by groups or individuals to achieve communal objectives.

Bearing in mind the underpinnings of social capital theory, the formalities attached to the creation and implementation of creating the *Learning Improvement Plan* devalued the natural social networks and relationships that existed between the School Community Council members, parents, and community members. As highlighted by Fukuyama (1996), an inverse relationship exists between bureaucratic rules and interpersonal trust – the more people rely on imposed mandates or rules to regulate social interactions, the less important it is for a group of people to trust each other. Otherwise stated, adhering to strict rules and procedures negates the need for members to rely on their own problem solving skills (Halpern, 2005). In hierarchically controlled circumstances, an organisation is less likely to generate group initiatives, produce group synergy, or be excited about achieving goals. The application of social capital theory infers that if Sunshine's School Community Council members felt they had more control over what their association did and how they achieved their goals, members would have possessed greater incentive to tap into their community's stocks of social capital (Rob & Zemsky, 2002).

Teachers and community members believed that community involvement fostered and nurtured social relationships within the school community. When applying social capital theory to this finding, a similar message is reinforced. Socialisation creates social capital, which supports community involvement. By its very nature, community involvement in school has the potential to play a highly social function. Halpern (2005) claimed that the most straightforward way to build local forms of social capital is to interact with people at community events. His examples of such socially-rich community participation include: going out and meeting neighbours, fundraising, volunteering, socialising with parents of children at school, increasing parent-school interaction, providing leadership for children's extracurricular activities, creating a common email list facilitating communication, and upgrading local parks and play areas. According to Putnam and Halpern, continual and repeated social interactions with fellow citizens during a variety of community events reinforce and create stocks of social capital within a community. Further research suggests that building trusting relationships (social capital) between and among people is the basis for promoting future involvement in both community and school life (Noguera, 2001; Putnam, 1995; Shirley, 1997; Warren, Thompson, & Saegert, 2001).

A final aspect of this study involved Sunshine's rural identity and its close proximity to the city. Compared to urban communities, small towns display higher amounts of

bonding social capital but lower amounts of bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000). If the School Community Council wants to increase community involvement in school, commuting and non-commuting community members need to be supplied with more opportunities to interact with each other. The School Community Council can play an integral part in enriching the social networks and communication between the commuting and non-commuting people of Sunshine, via community involvement in school. Furthermore, the commuter employment and living status of many community members and teachers actually has the potential to improve the wellbeing of the school community via the bridging social capital that commuters bring to Sunshine's community. Through bridging social capital, the school community can take advantage of the external knowledge, culture, and resources that commuters possess. A school community with high levels of bridging social capital is more innovative (Auld, 2008), a feature that has great potential for enhancing effective forms of community involvement in school.

In sum, the socialisation of teachers, parents, and community members has great potential to inform higher levels of trust (social capital) among individuals, and, higher levels of trust among people have great potential to increase levels of community involvement in school. A rich aspect of this statement is that there is no beginning or end point, as each step more fully enables the entire system. That is, socialisation fosters social capital, which fosters higher levels of community involvement.

CONCLUSION

In line with the above explanation, most participants of this study perceived the simple acts of attending school-sponsored events and volunteering for school functions as valuable and nonthreatening. Before parents/community members can effectively assume the roles of school council members, school advisors, and teacher collaborators, they need to feel welcomed and comfortable in their child's school, because, with a welcoming and hospitable school environment, parents/community members can more easily build trusting relationships with school professionals and other parents/community members. The existence of such natural and trusting parent-school relationship is the first step to effectively pursuing and accomplishing any school improvement agenda.

In this study, it was apparent that there was a misalignment between how the School Community Council policy described the parents'/community members' role in school improvement and how participants ideally construed their own role. Regardless of the education levels of parents/community members, making informed educational decisions involves the understanding of pedagogy, curricula, and a raft of educational jargon, much of which is not readily understood by parents/community members who may not be formally involved in the educational system and its administrative domains. On such a basis, expecting a volunteer group of parents/community members to contribute to specialised decisions may perhaps be inappropriate for some individuals. Moreover, expecting parents/community members to contribute to a

Learning Improvement Plan may create a situation where only a specialised handful of parents feel they are worthy to assume membership on a School Community Councils, which, in turn, marginalises School Community Council involvement to a select few.

Within the past decade, Canadian policymakers have emphasised the importance of parent/community involvement through school council membership (Preston, 2008) and have promoted the assumption that parent/community involvement in school planning will enhance school-community collaboration (for example, Alberta Education, 2005; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). For years researchers have spent much effort describing visible and invisible types of community involvement in schools (for example, Berger, 1991, 2008; Garcia, 2004; Epstein, 2005; Lopez, 2001; Roffey, 2002). Within this literature and research, depicting parent/community members as mere *supporters* of the school has been recognised as a lower stratum of community involvement. In contrast, based on this research and the ideologies of social capital theory, parent/community members as supporters should be recognised as an essential aspect of community involvement in school, due to its rich potential to create solid, trusting relationships that increase the social cohesion of the entire school community. A core implication of the study is that promoting local forms of community involvement in school nurtures school-home relationships. Consequently, policymakers need to recognise that having parents/community members as supporters of the school is vital to promoting the overall wellbeing and success of youth.

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Jane Preston is currently an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Prince Edward Island (Canada). She enjoys teaching undergraduate and graduate classes and doing research that focuses on leadership, community involvement in school, rural education, and Aboriginal issues. Her research is predominantly qualitative in nature and is documented through case studies and narrative approaches. Jane's kindergarten to grade 12 teaching background is based on experiences gained while living and teaching in Canada, Taiwan, Egypt, and Kuwait. Please feel free to contact her at jpreston@upei.ca or follow her on Twitter: @jppreston1.