

The Political and Structural Exclusion of Student Voice in the School Closure Process

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Introduction

School Closure in the United States is steeped in educational policy and has historically been associated with declining student enrollment, limited financial resources, and consolidation of schools and/or districts (Tyak, 1974). Since the early 1980's, an increase in neoliberal and neoconservative ideology reflecting market-driven reforms has resulted in educational policy grounded in standards-based curriculum, high-stakes testing and school choice.

The school choice movement, which really gained momentum in the 1990's and continues to garner support, is an identified contributor to the recent increase in the number of school closings in the United States (McMillin, 2010). However, the most recent policy associated with school closure is the Race to the Top (RTTT) federal grant program initiated in 2009 by the Obama administration. School closure is listed as one of the intervention models found in the RTTT federal grant in which rigorous interventions are required in each of the state's lowest-performing schools, creating a tiered accountability system (United States Department of Education, 2009). Per RTTT, the lowest performing schools in the state must implement one of the following four intervention models: transformation model, turnaround model, restart model, or school closure model (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The intervention model specific to this study is the "school closure model."

According to Fast, Neufeldt and Schirch (2002), “the inherent worth and dignity of all people sets the stage for the capacity and necessity of all people to be involved in community decision-making” (p.185). However, nowhere in the RTTT competitive grant program is the issue of human dignity addressed as it relates to the stakeholders. The top-down, policy-driven process in which low-performing schools are closed is counterintuitive to the idea of “community decision-making” in which the interveners and the stakeholders would have equal value. The decision to close schools is actually regulatory language and part of a predetermined intervention in RTTT.

Current school reform policy ignores the importance of trusting relationships and does not consider the long-term social and emotional effects (Toneff-Cotner, 2015). Urban communities that are already feeling the ramifications of the school closure process have organized in an effort to request federal action to stop school closings, which they say disproportionately affects poor and minority students. As a result, the Education Department is investigating complaints filed under the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Since 2010, 27 complaints have been investigated, none of which were found to be a civil rights violation (as cited in Layton, 2013).

One of the cities most significantly impacted by this policy is Chicago, where activists in the community have voiced their belief that school closure associated with academic accountability should be viewed as a human rights violation (Layton, 2013). According to Fanjul (2012), politicians are not spending enough time talking about the needs of children. In 2011, a report documented that only two percent of the questions addressed in the first 10 Republican debates focused on children. Professionals are joining with parents and the larger community in an effort to push back against the number of school closures. Professionals have an obligation to inform the community at large about the policy issues affecting children and their families. According to Royea and Appl (2009) advocating is “an essential responsibility” of professionals working with young children and families, stating, “Taking action as an individual person or as part of a group can have monumental effects in the lives of children, families, and the professionals serving them” (p. 90).

This essay explores the long-term impact of the school closure experience with a focus on the political and structural processes as they relate to social and psychological issues. I begin with a description of my own research that examined school closure as described by adults who experienced the closing of their high school in the early 1990’s. Through this retrospective phenomenological study, participants identified issues around student voice and student agency as important factors needing attention in the school closure process. Findings suggest that there is a need to treat those going through the school closure process with human dignity (Toneff-Cotner, 2015). In the

discussion section of this essay, I summarize the potential harm to students experiencing school closure in the absence of human dignity and I contextualize these findings within the framework of peace education pedagogy.

Objectives or Purposes

In May 2015, I completed my dissertation on the topic of “school closure.” The purpose of this research was to understand the long-term impact of school closure among those who experienced the process of school closure two decades ago as an important and understudied phenomenon. In particular, the study explored the social and psychological dimensions of school closure such as identity, social capital, relational trust, community connectedness and engagement, school and community pride, tradition, and the sense of belonging. The study investigated the experiences of students who lived through a school closure in one Northwest Ohio urban community, who transitioned to a neighboring school, and who are now grown adults. Of specific interest was how the participants make meaning of the experience of school closure, given time and distance from the event and now speaking in the voice of mature adults with substantial life experience. The principal research question for this study was: How do adults, who as teenagers attended a school that closed during their high school career, describe the impact of school closure on their lives?

Methods, Techniques, or Modes of Inquiry

Empirical phenomenology was chosen as the most suitable methodology for this research because it involves “a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994. p. 13). The study used purposive sampling and included five participants. Participants were students in grades nine through eleven at Jefferson (pseudonym) High School during the 1990-1991 school year. They experienced the process of the closing of Jefferson High School in 1991, followed by assignment to a receiving area high school.

Data Sources, Evidence, Objects or Materials

The closing of Jefferson High School in 1991 was documented through an archival review of newspaper articles, the school yearbook from 1990-1991, and a videotape of the final days of Jefferson High School. Semi-structured interviews provided multiple opportunities for participants to explore and describe their experiences (Creswell, 2007). The data analysis methods for this study included bracketing, intuiting, and describing (Moustaka, 1994). Analysis was guided by theories identified within a review of the literature.

Results and/or Substantiated Conclusions

There are two key areas in which this study contributes important information. First, the study reveals the impact of school closure at the individual level emphasizing the importance of relational factors, not easily captured in quantitative studies. These “intangible” relational factors contributed to the participants’ long-term view of themselves and their school experience. Second, the study reveals the impact of school closure at a broader level, where individuals interact with public institutions. These broader contextual issues are explored in terms of political and structural processes related to school closure.

Grief, loss and identity.

“It was very hateful and hurtful and I will never forget it.”
(Participant, January, 2013)

The experience of school closure, displacement, and transition results in many of the same psychological reactions and processes as those that surface when people grieve the loss of a loved one. The fear of losing Jefferson High School surfaced after the school levy failed in November of 1990. Emotions associated with grief surfaced as early as the fall and increased as the participants described how they tried to save Jefferson from closure, followed by the announcement and finally, the process of letting go of Jefferson and moving on. As the participants moved through the grieving process, they experienced a lack of control or voice, often expressing how things were happening to them in which they had no input.

Communities were fighting for the survival of their neighborhood high school, creating an emotionally charged environment that became a part of the school culture at Jefferson as early as December of 1990. The threat to close Jefferson combined with activism within the larger community created an “us versus them” feeling between neighborhoods. The greatest task for the displaced students was forming relationships in order to reestablish a degree of social capital and ultimately students had to redefine themselves within a new or revised identity (Marcouyeux & Fleury-Bahi, 2011; Spencer, 2005). The issue of relationships also surfaced as students reflected on their transition year and grieved for the loss of relationships with friends who were not assigned to the same high school, feeling torn apart by the process (Kirshner, Gaertner, & Pozzoboni, 2010).

Sense of belonging and connectivity.

“...there was always this feeling that something was taken away...”
(Participant, January, 2013)

In addition to “grief and loss,” a large percentage of the dialogue that occurred regarding school closure and transition centered around the theme, “sense of belonging.” In order for participants to feel that they belonged, they needed to have established relationships within their social system, whether it was at Jefferson or later at their receiving school. When asked what helped them navigate through the transitional year, each participant responded that it helped them to have some familiar teachers who followed them to the receiving school from Jefferson High School. One participant, who was a senior during the transitional year, discussed in great length her disappointment with the guidance counseling experience at her receiving school. While attending Lincoln High School (pseudonym) her senior year, this participant did not feel she had the relationship necessary to work with a counselor on personal matters such as career planning and/or the college application process. When referencing the guidance staff at her receiving school, Lincoln High School, she stated, “And you didn’t really not necessarily trust them, but you didn’t know them” (Participant, November, 2012).

In contrast, a participant who attended Washington High School (pseudonym) reported how “lucky” she felt because one of the Jefferson administrators followed her to her receiving high school. She later compared this familiar Jefferson High School administrator to the “North Star” in reference to how he guided his displaced Jefferson students through their transitional year (Participant, January, 2013).

Mistrust in the process.

*“We were asked absolutely nothing. We had no control.”
(Participant, November, 2012)*

Two decades of time and distance from the event have not completely healed wounds that occurred as a result of the school closing. Most participants demonstrated a cognitive understanding of why Jefferson High School closed, but emotionally and psychologically are still left questioning the decision (Kirshner et al., 2010).

In this study, only one participant remembered her experience of school closure and transition as a positive experience. This same participant provided narratives that suggest that she has pride and trust in her community and within the public school institution. The participants who associated negative memories with the school closure experience appear to have developed a suspicious view of the democratic process.

Research associated with disaster capitalism has found that when decisions are made under duress, it undermines the collaborative process (Klein,

2007; Saltman, 2008). The rapid speed in which the decision was made to close Jefferson High School left stakeholders feeling devalued, believing that the administration had made its mind up to close the school well before the initial announcement that Jefferson High School was being considered for closure (Galletta & Ayala, 2008; Gustafson, 2009; Kirshner et al., 2010). There is evidence in the narratives that participants have been left with a mistrust of those in decision-making positions when it comes to public policy (Fullilove, 2004).

Student agency/advocacy.

“...let me control what I can kind of control.”

(Participant, December, 2012)

Intertwined in dialogue pertaining to the experience was a sense of lack of control and power by participants as decisions occurred from the top down and forced upon the stakeholders (Fullilove, 2004; Galletta & Ayala, 2008). One participant reported that she believes the lack of control she experienced as a result of school closure has impacted her as an adult as evidenced by her inability to become rooted in any one community and her distrust of elected officials to make decisions in good faith (Fullilove, 2004).

The participants who enrolled at Washington High School, a receiving school made up of a majority of white students, reported that racial issues surfaced the first year. According to the participants, Washington High School was being integrated for the first time through the enrollment of displaced black students from Jefferson. Racial graffiti surfaced on the outside of the school building, leading to disciplinary action against white students. This caused further dissention within the Washington community in regard to the newly enrolled Jefferson High School students. One participant in the study provided an example in which he and other students used agency to effect change. He reported that the principal of Washington High School refused to allow an “Afro-Club” to form, even though it had existed at Jefferson High School. This participant remembered that the principal believed such a club would be exclusive and promote prejudice and discrimination. In protest, several boys attended meetings of an all-girl’s club that existed for the purpose of community social service projects.

Discussion

Examining school closure in the context of peace education.

“Why does everyone have to have a piece of the pie? Why can’t we all come together and go to one school and one church?”

(Participant, August, 2013)

Under the current school reform model, a school identified as “low-performing” can be closed and the displaced students forced to enroll in other area schools in the district. Ideally, the schools receiving the displaced students would be higher-performing than the school that was closed; however there are mixed reviews in terms of whether students from closed buildings are being strategically placed in significantly higher performing schools, as well as a vague definition of what constitutes “significantly higher performing” (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009).

Peter Senge (2007), who specializes in systems theory, believes that adequate time and distance is needed after the initial implementation of a policy in order to understand its long-term impact. Peace educator, Tony Jenkins (2013), addresses the importance of systemic thinking when he uses the term, “wholeness” as the recognition of the interdependent parts of the system, stating, “When parts of a system are out of harmony, the system begins to break down” (2013, p.179).

The idea of “wholeness” is interesting to consider within the context of market-driven educational reform, specific to the reliance on competition, which could not have a stronger inference than within the most recent reform initiative, Race to the Top (RTTT). According to Jenkins (2013), wholeness is the preferred state as opposed to conflict resolution and that conflict “may produce winners and losers and exacerbate ongoing tensions in relationships between individuals, groups and the community as a whole” (p.180). There is evidence that the closing of schools does exactly that, it produces winners and losers, breaking down existing relationships between individuals, groups and within the community. While resolving a conflict or solving a problem may partially satisfy stakeholders, it fails to address the needs of each individual. In this case, disagreements may be addressed at the surface level, but never at the root of the problem (Fullilove, 2003; Jenkins, 2013). The retrospective study of school closure discussed earlier provided evidence that participants were not made whole after Jefferson closed, resulting in various levels of disengagement while at their receiving school. Approaching school closure as if it is a problem in urgent need of resolution will never result in a transformative process; thus, leaving stakeholders feeling disenfranchised. What is required is a systemic view of all the parts, both at the macro and micro levels, together with community engagement.

A predominant theme associated with RTTT is the idea that low-performing schools must be transformed. Transformation is the process of making meaning of new information and is only complete in the presence of empathy and understanding (Jenkins, 2013). There is a discourse between the desire for a “humane society” in which school-age children’s social, emotional and psychological needs are recognized and prioritized versus the mandated implementation of market-driven policies that almost always result in unintended outcomes that often go unnoticed in an era of high-stakes accountability in which

standards and testing have become the focus of attention. An example would be the disparity between wealthy districts and those that serve poor communities in terms of the number of children experiencing the effect of current school reform policies. The lowest-performing schools tend to be found in the poorest areas, often urban and rural communities that serve the most marginalized populations (Rothstein, 2004). Thus, closing schools under the guise of academic failure has the potential to impact poor urban and rural communities at an accelerated rate when compared to the general population. Reardon (2009) stated, “We live in a world of disparities where few enjoy advantages, a world of peacelessness” and that “peace can only be obtained under the existence of the fundamental precondition of mutually advantageous circumstances” (p.398).

Peace educators believe that violence in society should be recognized so that non-violent methods can be used in order to acquire a level of connectivity that transforms conflict, replacing violence with harmony (Standish, 2015). According to Jenkins (2013), the transformative process cannot be driven by external forces, stating, “To transform something is to change its very nature or essence” (p.178). It occurs through the acquisition of knowledge and lived experiences associated with human psychology, sociology, culture and history. The process invites inquiry and reflection as well as an ongoing process for social, cultural and institutional analysis. Conflict and differences will exist within and between relationships; however, if such relationships protect the dignity of others, skills can be developed so that there is the capacity to manage and transform.

School closure is driven by external political and economic structures that fall well outside of human psychology, sociology, culture and history. The urgency in which the decision occurs to close schools, followed by the immediacy of the transition process as displaced students are reassigned to their new receiving school does not allow for a prioritization of the dignity of those going through the process, nor does it value or protect existing relationships. In fact, within the RTTT policy, it is implied that the existing relationships within the low-performing schools contribute to the poor academic outcomes, requiring radical reform measures even if it means shuttering the school doors.

Conclusion

The findings of the retrospective study of school closure lead one to the conclusion that left unchanged current school closure policies and practices offer inadequate support to those marginalized students who often comprise the majority of students impacted by school closure (Galletta & Ayala, 2008; Goldin & Katz, 2008; Kirshner et al., 2010; Ravitch, 2010; Rebell & Wolff, 2008; Rothstein, 2004; Steinberg, Allensworth, & Johnson, 2011). Unfortunately, rarely when one of these school closures occur do the resulting school closure actions address the importance of human dignity or student voice in the decision making

process (Galletta & Ayala, 2008; Gustafson, 2009; Kirshner et al., 2010). A devaluing of this human element, or intangibles, within an organization leads to a failing system (Jenkins, 2013; Senge, 2007).

When schools are closed, the transition experience can only be viewed favorably if students are actually assigned to a school that is significantly of higher quality than the school they left (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Galletta & Ayala, 2008; Kirshner et al., 2010). What constitutes “higher quality” depends on the perception of the individual student; in some cases, it may refer to the academic programming, but in most cases, it is likely to be associated with the social-emotional environment they find themselves in when the dust settles (Toneff-Cotner, 2015).

It is hard to measure the social loss or the psychological hardship these students experience by being forced from their school. When making reform decisions, policymakers need to understand that they must consider every child within the system, which requires not just looking at one particular group of students and how they might benefit, but looking at the academic performance or potential performance among all students from all social classes who will be impacted by the closing. It is for this reason that it is imperative to contextualize the process of school closure within multiple theoretical frameworks, for example peace education theory, rather than relying solely on the market-driven theory most closely associated with the current educational reform movement. Only when we do this will we come to understand that there is a more sustainable approach to transforming the educational system, while at the same time preserving human dignity.

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