Social Networks and Structural Holes: Parent-School Relationships as Loosely Coupled Systems

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Purpose of the Study

To describe parent groups’ participation in school activities and policy issues

1. Parents’ social networks
2. Parents’ openness to other parents
3. Issues that gain parents’ support
4. Effects of change on parents’ support
5. Communications with school leaders
Theoretical Framework: Social Network Theory

- Set of social relationships with others
- Members share information and resources
- Social networks secure benefits (social capital) for children


Types of Social Networks:

- Formal, voluntary organizations
- Informal social networks based on contact with children

Network Density

Theoretical Framework: Parent Groups as Loosely Coupled Systems

• Connected, yet autonomous elements
• Elements responsive/independent of organization through constructed realities
• Organizations place communications in organizations’ context


Design and Method

• Second phase of study
• Follow up from individual interviews and participant observations
• Two focus groups of involved parents
• Questions based on themes that emerged in previous data
Blue River Villages

- District consolidated in 1995
- Multi-generational villages established in late 1800s on western side of district
- Rapid growth on eastern side of district
- Bond issue passed for two new buildings
- Unified support of school
- Differing values of traditional and newcomer parents on what “support” means
Findings

- Description of parent networks
- Communication from school leaders
- Shared values within parent groups
What is best for my child

The School

Volunteering

Policy

Decisions

Communication

School Leaders
Findings:
1. Stable, established, formal, dense social networks
2. Communication from school to parents—ineffective
3. Values—Maintaining status quo, social activities, fundraising
Findings:
1. Informal networks—parents support change
2. Communication from school to parents—inadequate
3. Values—Education, voice in policy decisions, pro-change, accessing social networks for children’s education
Perception of Villages:
1. Not part of established social networks
2. Limited communication with other parent networks
3. Perceived values:
   1. No change
   2. Doing things differently
   3. Separation
Perception of what they value:
1. Parents’ involvement
2. Policy/decision making
3. Control of parents’ input
Parents’ social networks as loosely coupled systems

What is best for my child

School Leaders

The School

Traditional Parents

Newcomer Parents

Villages Parents
Implications: Parent Groups as Social Networks

- Parents occupying structural holes:
  influential
  spokespersons for parents
  potential liaisons to interpret school policy to community
Implications: Parent Groups as Loosely Coupled Systems

• Perpetuates outdated traditions
• Makes communication between parent groups difficult as each group perceives their reality as “the” reality
• Dissatisfaction with school communication is inherent