

# CONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNITY<sup>i</sup>

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*Based on the conceptual and reform literature detailed in this article, I argue that efforts to promote teacher communities in schools are driven by a variety of underconceptualized visions of the ideal school workplace. Policy recommendations for improving schools often suffer from a lack of clarity over which professional norms teachers should pursue.*

Several years ago, I was having a conversation with the anthropologist Ray McDermott about teachers' professional relationships in schools--ways teachers work collaboratively or independently--and about the confusion education reform efforts seem to convey about the desired qualities of these relationships. It wasn't long before the conversation turned to notions of community. "It's my second favorite word," he told me of community (family is his favorite). "Every time someone uses it, I jump up. But when I'm working analytically, my use of it has a very high overlap with when I don't know what I'm talking about. As soon as I get confused, I pull out 'community'" (personal communication, 1993). Prodded by McDermott's candor, I realized that I, too, employed the word *community* ambiguously and carelessly. McDermott and I are not alone. Sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, and educators alike have often expressed bewilderment over the many varied and contradictory uses of the notion of community (Bellah, 1985; Selznick, 1992; Tocqueville, 1848/1966; Varenne, 1986).

One of many underspecified uses of the word community is found in the abundance of recent reform literature on teacher professional communities. School districts across the country are implementing policies aimed at strengthening professional ties among teachers. These efforts focus primarily on changes in school organization. Site-based management, magnet programs, and house systems, for example, group students and teachers in more intimate, self-contained, autonomous clusters. Reformers hope to see teachers work together within these structures as colleagues and professionals, ready to take responsibility for their own working environment as well as that of their students. Reflecting the work of social analysts and theorists who have long been interested in the ties that bind people together, reformers expect, as a result, that teachers will form communities that inspire their work and enrich the connections among themselves and their students (Barth, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1988).

When reformers expect teachers to form professional communities, however, they imply that there exists an articulated and commonly understood notion of the type of community to which teachers should aspire. Consequently, they assume that, given the proper workplace conditions, teachers will know how to turn organizational potential into truly communal relationships; furthermore, they assume that teachers seek such communities. Voices from the field indicate otherwise.

In the schools where I have worked, as well as in those where I have observed, teachers and principals expressed an assortment of often contradictory beliefs about community. Some believed that professional community requires a sense of common mission; others pursued individual professional autonomy. Many teachers welcomed team teaching and scheduling changes which allowed them to watch colleagues in the classroom; others preferred not to have their teaching observed. As recent studies have confirmed, teachers' understanding of their roles as professionals varies greatly (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; McLaughlin, 1993; Merz & Furman, 1997; Metz, 1986; Smylie, 1992). Such findings help to explain the difficulties in pursuing teacher professional communities in schools. Current reforms that aim to build teacher professional communities do not adequately address these ambiguities, and may, in fact, encourage rather than reduce teacher isolation (Little, 1990).

In what follows, I examine the research and reform literature on teacher professional communities, focusing on ambiguous and contradictory assumptions about building teacher professional communities in schools. The absence of significant empirical and theoretical work on teacher professional communities hinders current reform efforts designed to build and sustain these communities. Two primary areas of inquiry inform the exploration of teacher professional communities described here: the social theory on community and the reform literature relevant to teacher professional community. Since I have detailed these areas of theoretical and empirical research in detail elsewhere (--, 19--), I will provide here only an overview, focusing instead on the complexity of the issues these literatures generate.

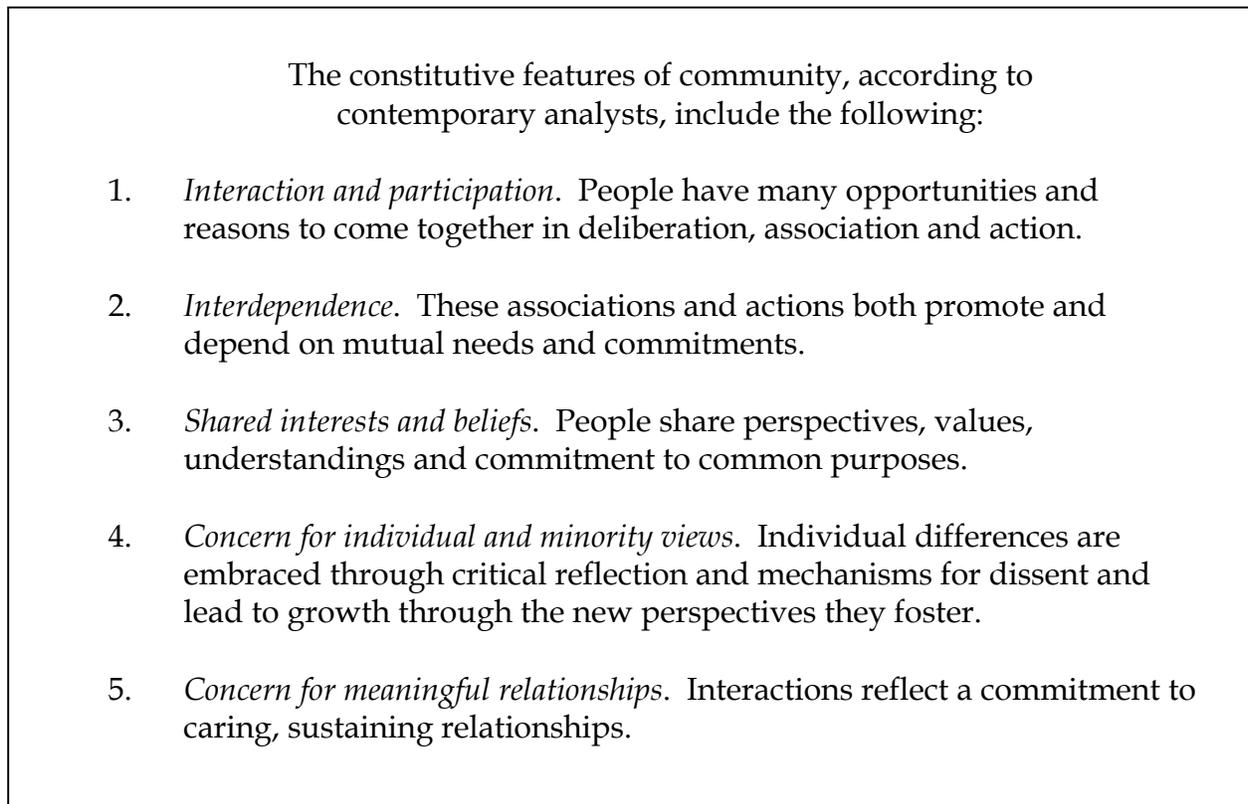
## **THE SOCIAL THEORY OF COMMUNITY**

First is the substantial body of conceptual literature devoted to understanding the purposes and practices of various notions of community (Bellah et al., 1985; Dewey, 1916; Gardner, 1991; Selznick, 1992). Drawing on their own experiences, social theory and political philosophy, these authors paint broad analytical portraits of their visions of healthy communities. These writings have a lengthy history that includes the work of the ancient Greek philosophers.

Central features of community, according to contemporary theorists, include: interaction and participation, mutual dependence, shared interests and beliefs, concern for individual and minority views, and meaningful relationships. The anticipated effects on individuals who belong to such communities include: a sense of identity and belonging, affirmation, commitment to the group, strong bonds and the development of

both common purposes and collective responsibility. I summarize the most common features of community identified by these theorists in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Summary of Social Theorists' Features of Community**



### **Problems in Constructing a Theory of Community**

In choosing to use community as a metaphor and analytic term for examining teachers' work in schools, researchers place their work in precarious territory. Four difficulties associated with the use of the term community are: (1) vagueness of the metaphor, (2) negative associations with the concept, (3) difficulties of employing academic discourse to describe community, and (4) distinguishing between *features of* and *processes to* community.

### **The Precarious Metaphor of Community**

Social analysts have long found ambiguity in American's use of the term *community*. The anthropologist Herve Varenne (1986), for example, studying American conceptions of society and social diversity, concluded that there is tremendous confusion over notions of the individual and community. Comprising a strange amalgam in American usage, the words *individuality* and *community* are used at times to describe similar social arrangements and priorities almost interchangeably. Reconciling

ideals of individualism and community and understanding their complexities has been an ongoing project for more than two centuries.

### **Negative Associations with Community**

Ambiguity is not the only obstacle facing those seeking to use the term *community* analytically. Though much school reform literature tends to use teacher community in a universally positive way (meaningful relationships among teachers, a sense of collective responsibility for students and for each other), for many, community conjures up particularly negative visions: domination of the individual by the collectivity, religious communities insulated from the larger communities in which they are situated, stiflingly homogenous small towns or highly regimented cults. Many thinkers, writers, and policymakers question the prudence of pursuing community without careful attention to its darker side (Noddings, 1996; Selznick, 1992). The press for conformity in communities has been pointed to again and again as an unresolved danger in both philosophical and practical discourse (Nisbet, 1953; Peshkin, 1986; Selznick, 1992).

In the extreme, one need venture no further than the growing popularity of neo-fascist groups to recognize the hazard of beliefs that are shared without question. Deciding which beliefs are "worthy" and which are not, however, is a thorny enterprise. This is illustrated in recent debates over a multicultural curriculum. Whose ideas are worthy? Whose beliefs should be shared? (see Taylor, 1992). The challenge of communal association, theorists assert, is to foster a cohesive set of beliefs and interests while recognizing and growing from a plurality of ideas and perspectives.

Based on these fears, Americans' penchant for "rugged individualism" seems, to some, to conflict with calls for stronger communal associations. Some question whether idealized, liberal communities can exist at all--communities with a strong collective orientation that also maintain individual protections and freedoms (see Noddings, 1996).

Negative associations about community, then, come primarily from concerns about diversity and the protection of individual freedoms. In the 1950s, for example, the sociologist Robert Nisbet (1953) emphasized the importance of embracing diversity while engaging in what he called "the quest for community." Similarly John Gardner explains that the "common good" is,

first of all preservation of a system in which all kinds of people can--within the law--pursue their various visions...The play of conflicting interests in a framework of shared purposes is the drama of a free society. (1991, p.15)

Arguments for diversity within community are often confused with arguments for individual rights, justice, and tolerance--those put forth by Rawls (1971) for example. The confusion stems from the idea that individual freedoms are in conflict with strong collective community beliefs. For this reason, many would be critical of the type of community found in fundamentalist schools such as the one described by Alan

Peshkin in *God's Choice* (1986) in which a dominant set of beliefs curbs individual choices and beliefs. It is important to note, however, that those seeking to characterize the intrinsic strengths of community life do not narrowly view the protection of divergent views as a safeguard against "domination of the collectivity." These theorists reject the liberal dichotomy of individual freedoms versus the needs of the collectivity. Instead, they see diversity of ideas as an integral and desirable means for the growth of the community and of its individual members (Bellah et al., 1985; Dewey, 1916). First, these theorists suggest that embracing minority viewpoints promotes progress and enables communities to adapt to the demands and exigencies of a changing world (Gardner, 1991). Second, rather than being submerged within the group, individuals and their interests flourish specifically through their participation in the community (Dewey, 1916).

Accordingly, individual teachers in strong faculty communities may gain (rather than lose) a sense of identity and individuality through their participation in the community. Within a culture of participation, for example, many teachers and other staff members may have pet projects for which they are known. Consequently, identity and status within the community rely more on these types of recognized contributions than on titular or bureaucratically sanctioned roles (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk 1995; Westheimer, 1998). This calls into question critics' customary polarization of the individual and the collective.

### **Characterizing Community Using Academic Discourse**

In addition to the ambiguity and negative associations with the term community described above, a third difficulty arises when theorizing about community: the features and characteristics of community identified by social theorists do not render an entirely satisfying definition of community to those who have experienced the strong ties these features seek to describe. Do these features or characteristics constitute a way to identify communities, a checklist to assure ourselves and others that a particular alliance of individuals is or is not a community? To say "yes" would be to construe community as a static entity -- one which an analyst could examine in a snapshot and know in its entirety. Few social analysts would be comfortable with such a simplification. Dewey and others see community as an ongoing series of interactions and experiences rather than a static state. They see it as a process. While the features often outlined provide a common language for recognizing communities and their constitutive elements, they do not define community. Nor, I imagine, would they convince others of its importance. Used in conjunction with vignettes and ethnographic analysis, however, they can contribute a great deal to the construction of a coherent framework for understanding communities in practice.

What is community like? Why is it important? These are perhaps the most difficult questions to answer through the use of conceptual literature, though many have tried. Reading about community, like reading about love, falls short of the experience. Nonetheless, the presence of community has indications and consequences on which many theorists agree. It is these indications and consequences that we can

loosely call features. These features provide a common vocabulary for researchers examining communities in practice.

### **Distinguishing Between Features of and Processes to Community**

A fourth, related ambiguity plagues discussions of community: Can we separate "features of" and "processes to" community? Not always. The traditional barn-raising may help to clarify this point. Local residents work together to build a neighbor's barn. This event is often seen as testimony to the strength of nineteenth century rural communities. While barn-raising clearly requires strong bonds among neighbors, it is also a community-building experience. As local families engage in a common effort, their interdependence is made clear and their connections to one another are strengthened.

Similarly, school reformers view teacher professional community as a desirable outcome of restructuring plans. Specifically, they might seek, for example, to increase interaction and participation among teachers. Community, however, both shapes and is shaped by interaction and participation. If the outcome is itself a process (and community may well be an ongoing process), then what is often called a "characteristic" or "feature" of community may be both a "feature of" as well as a "process to" community. As will become clearer after examining current reform efforts below, current reforms rarely differentiate between organizational conditions and community-building processes.

It is noteworthy that Dewey and others emphasize not only that communities manifest a great deal of interaction and participation but also assert the converse to be true: interaction and participation depend on experience. In other words, community may be a side effect of continued interaction and participation directed toward other goals. The resulting sense of community also enriches and facilitates future interactions.

### **Why Use a Community Metaphor?**

Situated within this messy theoretical construct, then, the community metaphor carries with it a great deal of unintentional baggage: enormous variation and ambiguity, negative associations, inadequate descriptions from academic discourse, and problems distinguishing between characteristics and processes. So why use community to describe the social and professional bonds among teachers in schools and the circumstances and contexts under which these bonds form and are maintained? Previous school research suggests that moving from a view of schools as formal organizations to one of schools as communities highlights "strategically different aspects of the school environment and fundamentally different levers for policy" (McLaughlin, 1993, p. 80; Sergiovanni, 1994). "The community metaphor," writes McLaughlin (1993), "draws [policy] attention to norms and beliefs of practice, collegial relations, shared goals, occasion for collaboration, problems of mutual support and mutual obligation" (p. 81). By attending to teacher professional communities, we gain an understanding of the ways in which teachers' relationships structure their work and their lives in schools.<sup>ii</sup>

At the same time, by drawing on the sociological and philosophical literature on community, empirical work in schools can benefit from the progress which has been made in understanding communities -- what they are, how they are formed, how they are maintained, and what causes their dissolution. This literature can help researchers to better understand the personal and professional relationships among teachers in a school setting. By contributing to the conceptualization of the community metaphor, its dilemmas, uncertainties, and shortcomings, this literature on community offers the possibility that the difficulties associated with its use may be outweighed by the benefits.

## REFORM EFFORTS TO BUILD TEACHER PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES

A second body of work on teacher leadership, collegiality and school restructuring emerged in the mid 1980s following a series of influential reports. Documents such as *Tomorrow's Teachers* (Holmes Group Inc., 1986), *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Corporation, 1986) and *What's Next? More Leverage for Teachers* (Education Commission of the States, 1986) generated what Zeichner (1991) and others have called a "second wave" of educational reform. This literature emphasized teachers' professional workplace interactions and contexts (Barth, 1990; Lieberman, 1988; McLaughlin, Talbert, & Bascia, 1990).<sup>iii</sup> The resulting reform focus on building community for teachers has focused on three overlapping approaches: smaller schools, magnet programs, and site-based management for teachers and administrators.

The conceptual literature on community described above is not always applicable to schools. Moreover, the work that does address school communities focuses primarily on students and the importance of nurturing in them a sense of purpose and affiliation (Newmann & Oliver, 1967; Merz & Furman, 1997). Though many reformers assert a connection between teacher community and school community (Barth, 1990; Lieberman, 1988; Meier, 1995), notions of teacher community have received little scrutiny. On other hand, school restructuring literature, which honors teachers as central players, alludes to teacher community frequently while rarely attempting to conceptualize it with any rigor.

Why combine these two areas of inquiry? Those formulating theoretical conceptions of community can learn from the work of practitioners struggling to bring teachers together; similarly, practitioners benefit from greater reflection on the assumptions and, at times, competing visions that teachers, administrators and policymakers carry with them as they begin to reshape their workplace habits and conditions.

By exploring different works on community, it becomes quickly clear that the absence of empirical research in the school workplace that distinguishes between different conceptions of teacher professional community has led both researchers and practitioners to overlook significant individual and organizational factors contributing to the survival or dissolution of these communities.

### **Ambiguity in Reformers' Conceptions of Teacher Community**

There is little material among contemporary reformers and researchers that clarifies or reconciles ambiguous (and sometimes contradictory) visions of teacher professional community. There remains, in the literature specifically concerned with practice and policy, tremendous variation. Barth (1990), for example, envisions "school as a community of leaders" (p. 640). Rosenholtz (1989) sorted the schools she studied into those that were collaborative and those that were isolated. Lieberman (1988) writes: "the more that teachers share leadership, responsibility, and accountability with one another and with their principals, the more they come to perceive the school as a community" (p. 6). Metz (1986) reports conflicting conceptions of professional relationships in urban magnet schools. All allude to unspecified conceptions of teacher professional communities.

This latitude, which in theory may contribute to new ideas, in practice leads to uncertainty and ambiguity in policy decisions. Although there is some recent research that demonstrates the importance of professional community for teachers (McLaughlin, 1993), reformers rarely characterize the nature of such communities, focusing instead on the conditions necessary for their growth. As McLaughlin and Talbert's Center for Research on the Contexts of Secondary-School Teaching has found, work on the subject to date "has not yet been able to identify and investigate the dimensions which constitute [teacher] professional community or to discover how each of these dimensions works to support or undermine teaching" (Perry, 1997, p.37; McLaughlin, 1993).

In a professional culture plagued by "endemic uncertainties" (Lortie, 1975) and scarcity of time, resources, and status (Johnson, 1990) and a national culture characterized by independence and individuality (Bellah et al., 1985; Tocqueville, 1848/1966), reform efforts that provide only vague conceptions of teacher professional community are easily thwarted. In "Persistence of Privacy: Autonomy and Initiative in Teachers' Professional Relations," Judith Warren Little (1990) reports that:

the most common configurations of teacher-to-teacher interaction may do more to bolster isolation than to diminish it; the culture that Lortie described as individualistic, present-oriented, and conservative is thus not altered but is indeed perpetuated by the most prevalent examples of teacher collaboration or exchange (p. 511).

Feiman-Nemser and Floden (1986) report similar disparity. The "cellular" nature of teaching in schools, they found, may be seen either as an unfortunate lack of mutual support or as a welcome guarantee of professional autonomy (p. 517). Management plans that grant teachers greater decision-making authority often free teachers from bureaucracy but do not connect them to one another. As one teacher said in a workshop on enhancing teacher collegiality,

Planning the science/writing fair [an attempt to bring together students and teachers from different disciplines] was a nice opportunity to work with all of you, but it's done little to make me feel that we're all moving in the same direction or that I should care a lot about what goes on outside my classroom. (1992 workshop notes, p. 4)

As a result of ambiguity in conceptions of teacher professional community, implementation of reforms aimed at fostering teacher community are received with a mix of confusion, mild concern, and doubt (Rosenholtz, 1989; Smylie, 1992).

### **Reform Assumptions**

Popular leadership strategies such as site-based management, house systems and magnet programs aim to build teacher professional communities by creating smaller, more personal settings and by granting teachers greater control over their school. These are organizational adjustments: changes in the arrangement, conditions, and hierarchies under which teachers work. As I noted earlier, when reformers expect these changes in the organization and leadership of the school to result in strong teacher professional communities, they assume that (1) teachers and administrators know how to turn organizational potential into truly communal relationships and (2) teachers seek such communities. Though there may be such schools, the studies cited above as well as my own experience in schools suggest that teachers may neither know how nor seek out ways to develop these communities. Some teachers enjoy watching their colleagues teach and having their colleagues watch them; others prefer to be left alone. In some schools, teachers meet frequently to design school policies and to work together on semester-long interdisciplinary projects; in many schools, teachers shy away from collective undertakings.

How might these assumptions limit our understanding of the formation and maintenance of teacher professional communities in schools? In making these assumptions, we do not distinguish between organizational conditions and processes of community-building. Smaller schools may provide conditions that make the establishment of teacher professional communities a possibility, but they do not necessarily engender the support, sense of shared mission, and strong personal ties that social theorists say are hallmarks of healthy communities.

The traditional norms of schools often constrain the development of communities. There is a long history of individuality, an emphasis on autonomy, and competition in schools and in society. Connecting teachers to one another may require more than setting the conditions for those who embrace community to have the opportunity to participate. It may, for example, require enacting experiences and processes designed specifically to build teacher professional communities.

Schools, moreover, are frequently subject to teacher turnover. Therefore, sustaining a community from year to year demands an institutional culture and set of practices capable of regenerating community. This is no easy task. Institutional history and resistance to change demand that those pursuing community do more than hope

that new teachers will work well with seasoned veterans. Community is not self-winding.

Organizational conditions, then, may be necessary but are not sufficient. "The educator," writes Dewey (1938), "is responsible for [selecting activities] which lend themselves to social organization, an organization in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something" (p. 56). The same could be said of reformers (or administrators, or teacher educators). What is important here is that the assumption that, given proper conditions, community will "happen" may be an erroneous one. Conditions are one thing, processes are another, especially processes that acknowledge individual and organizational factors as they influence outcomes of community-building.

Current organizational reforms may "empower" teachers, but they will not necessarily foster strong bonds in hierarchical and isolating school environments--ones in which teachers value control of their own classroom and must often compete for scarce resources, prestige, and choice assignments (Conley, 1991). A strictly organizational view of reforms which seek to build teacher professional community, then, obscures significant cultural factors which facilitate or block the formation of teacher professional communities.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the conceptual and reform literature on teacher professional community, I have argued in this article that efforts to promote teacher communities in schools are driven by a variety of underconceptualized visions of the ideal school workplace. What these communities would look like has been increasingly unclear as more and more complex reform efforts are built on shaky conceptual foundations of professional community for teachers. Policy recommendations for improving schools often suffer from this lack of clarity over which professional norms teachers should pursue. Should reformers establish national professional boards to certify teachers? Encourage in-school peer evaluations? Restructure the school day? In each policy question, the measure of success depends heavily on the notion of professional community which teachers and reformers uncritically embrace.

I am persuaded, as are many reformers, by the rhetoric of community as a basis for school reform. Earlier studies, however, demonstrate the persistence of professional norms that run counter to the rhetoric and creation of such communities. Detailed descriptions of teacher professional communities in practice could help researchers and practitioners alike reconsider the understandings of and approaches to school reform efforts.

Until the goals, conditions, and processes for community-building are made more explicit and more is learned about how to nurture such communities, organizational reforms designed to facilitate stronger teacher communities may be misguided, producing further disappointment over improving schools. If schools are to pursue such communities successfully, then researchers and policymakers should profit

from learning how teachers view their workplace, how they define community and how they struggle with the dilemmas of building professional communities amid competing visions.

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> This article is adapted from the author's recent book *Among Schoolteachers: Community, Autonomy, and Ideology in Teachers' Work*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1998. Support for this research came, in part, from the Spencer Foundation. Reprinted text is copyright 1998, by Teachers College Press and used with permission.

<sup>ii</sup> I use the terms *teacher professional community* and *teacher community* interchangeably to mean a community of teachers in school.

<sup>iii</sup> While these reports redirected the reform focus and discourse, many expressed concern over their immense claims and "mystifying innocence" about school change. See, for example, Apple (1987) and Cuban (1987).