

Community-Building Principles: Implications for Professional Development

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This article reviews a Think Tank meeting among child welfare practitioners at the 2003 *Building Communities for 21st-Century Child Welfare Symposium*. The Child Welfare League of America's focus on community building is recognition of the vital importance of promoting and fostering collaboration with community members to enhance the well-being of children, families, and communities. The Think Tank participants responded to four questions concerning the knowledge, policies, and strategies that are needed for the development of strategies for community building and child welfare. This article highlights several of the findings of the preconference, which addressed the challenges and opportunities inherent in community-building practices and discusses the key principles that emerged from the Think Tank. The article emphasizes implications for professional education and cites selected examples of innovative community-building initiatives with families.

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The challenges facing children and families involved with the child welfare system cannot be solved by child welfare agencies alone. They require the concerted efforts of community members and collaboration among a range of human service agencies. Community building offers just that opportunity.

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) recognizes the importance of community building. CWLA began to address this issue by forming an advisory committee on community building to advise its membership on engaging in community-building activities. In 2003, following the release of its *Making Children a National Priority: A Framework for Community Action* (Morgan, Spears, & Caplan, 2003), CWLA joined with the Boston Children's Institute, one of the oldest and largest child welfare agencies, and the University at Albany's School of Social Welfare to cosponsor a symposium, *Building Communities for 21st-Century Child Welfare*, to promote community-building activities in the country. This article highlights several of the findings of a preconference meeting called a Think Tank, which addressed the challenges and opportunities inherent in community-building practices. Forty Think Tank members, who represented child welfare administration, policy, practice, and education, convened to outline promising community-building models and strategies. This article discusses key principles that emerged from the Think Tank, emphasizes implications for professional education, and cites examples of innovative community-building initiatives with families.

Community building is defined as an opportunity for families, communities, and agencies to work collaboratively to enhance support for families in communities (Naparstek & Dooley, 1997; Weil, 1996). Community building focuses on developing and strengthening social networks in a community to support families' emotional, social, and economic needs. One of its objectives is to create an environment that fosters members' participation in issues of community concern. Equally important is the creation of local leaders who can partner with external institutions to enhance the well-being of the community (Hirota, Brown, & Martin, 1996). CWLA and many other groups working with vul-



nerable families concur that child welfare involvement may be reduced when families are less socially isolated and more involved with neighbors and their community (Halpern, 1999; Morgan et al., 2003; Schorr, 1997).

Adoption of a community-building approach with families requires that social service professionals have requisite skills and knowledge. Professional development is a critical element in the successful adoption of community-building skills for work with vulnerable families. Social work's historic mission has been to help individuals and families in communities mobilize and support the well-being of those in need (Specht & Courtney, 1994). Consequently, community building is not a new principle, but it has a long history in social work.

History of Community Engagement with Families

Social work's engagement with the most vulnerable families and children is a continuous theme in the profession. Beginning in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Settlement House workers worked with immigrant communities to address the social and economic inequities immigrant workers faced in unregulated industries in American cities. During the same period, African American Club Women worked with migrants from the South to support the well-being of families in their new communities (Gordon, 1991). In both instances, these women, many of whom were social workers, recognized the importance of the interdependence of the community and families. Both European immigrants and Southern African Americans new to Northern industrialized cities valued communities for the support they could provide to children and families. The Settlement House workers and African American Club women helped families find employment, education, counseling, and child care (DiNitto, 2000; Gordon, 1991).

The enactment of the Social Security Act in 1935 established that the government would assume a role in supporting families by providing a stable source of income when wage earners became temporarily unemployed or disabled. Local community

organizations were no longer the primary source of assistance to families. It was not until the 1960s, when the government declared a "war on poverty," however, that agencies asked recipients of public welfare services to be involved in helping shape how services were delivered. This process had not occurred before, and it established community participation as a new avenue for community members to design services.

As the political climate of the last two decades changed, conservative social policy analysts began to espouse the view that poor communities fostered cultural environments that encouraged illegitimacy among women, poor work values, and disregard for mainstream cultural values (Mead, 1986; Murray, 1984). During this period, reduced funding for many social services also minimized community participation. Halpern (1999) argued that in the 1980s, the rise of categorical funding in human services and the emergence of prevention and intervention programs for young children contributed to a decline in funding for community support programs. Many programs did not involve the community but rather focused exclusively on addressing the family's role in child development. As a result, programs excluded communities and their assets, and consequently, families were more isolated from community supports and resources (Halpern, 1999).

The 1990s witnessed an expanded view among child welfare professionals that poor families require supports beyond what human services agencies offer (Schorr, 1997). Today, although budget cuts are reducing some social service programs, vulnerable families and children need increased support. The investment of all community stakeholders—neighbors, human service personnel, community organizations—is essential to build communities. One agency alone is unable to assume the responsibility for serving all the needs of vulnerable families. Public child welfare agencies in several states have noted the importance of developing collaborative relationships with neighborhood residents, community-based agencies, churches, informal family networks, and other social service agencies to build communities (Johnson, 2000; Schorr, 1997).

The expansion of social networks among families through community building provides a new resource for families engaged with the child welfare system (Citizens' Committee for Children, 2002). Some families have experienced such supports as an opportunity to view themselves differently, resulting in their volunteering at social service agencies in exchange for the services they receive (Halpern, 1999). For example, families might receive assistance in sending their children to a summer camp in exchange for voluntary work. Once families have become engaged and develop social networks, multiplier effects occur. Successful community building is predicated on the belief that communities can develop and mobilize economic, social, and political resources to support families. Some of these resources are found beyond the boundaries of the community in the city, county, or other institutions (Karanja, 2003; Naparstek & Dooley, 1997).

How are impoverished community residents to build their communities so that they can participate in community change, develop leadership skills, and create a resource-rich environment that nurtures children and families? The Think Tank participants sought to identify the elements that influence the development of community building among vulnerable families that often interact with the child welfare system.

Think Tank Discussion

Think Tank participants assessed the strategies and lessons learned from exemplary programs that advance the community-building movement in support of vulnerable children and families. Participants considered how the integration of community building and child welfare practices could affect children and families in the future. Four questions guided the discussion: What community-building models or strategies appear to be most promising, and do any improve social service delivery in the context of community building and empowerment of community leaders? What are the key gaps in knowledge, policy, and practice? What is known about the cost-effectiveness and evaluative

research regarding these models? What concepts or principles might agencies adopt to guide future community-building developments that link family support and economic development?

The participants generated 10 core principles. Think Tank members represented discrete areas of leadership in services to impoverished children and families, and they brought unique perspectives that leaders blended together to form the 10 principles: (1) multisystems collaboration, (2) comprehensive/holistic services, (3) integrated services, (4) strengths-based services, (5) family- and child-focused practices, (6) community-based services with families at their center, (7) acknowledging the location of power, (8) local control, (9) social capital development, and (10) developing strong partnerships with major institutions.

For the purposes of this article, these 10 community-building principles are clustered into three thematic areas useful in guiding the development and education of those who serve vulnerable children and families: (1) cross-system collaboration that is integrated, comprehensive, and holistic; (2) a strengths orientation with community-based, family-focused, child-centered practice; and (3) brokering and building local power through social capital development with strong institutional partnerships.

The Think Tank identified a range of issues that negatively affect poor communities and hamper their capacity. Participants cited the fact that some professionals who work outside poor communities tend to view communities from a deficiency framework. Moreover, many agencies serving the poor represent "absentee service providers," and they are not engaged in communities in which children and families reside. In many instances, the power, authority, and resources reside outside poorer communities, which impedes economic and social capital development. The result is that poor communities are often marginalized, with little to no control over their ability to make desired changes. Lack of community power increases the disempowerment of its members.

Think Tank participants viewed community-building activities as providing an opportunity for families to begin to address their sense of marginalization and powerlessness. They saw community building as enabling families to envision themselves dif-

ferently to engage in activities that allow them to create opportunities that lead to self-efficacy. As families feel confident and have assets, they are able to connect with others and work on issues that affect the entire community.

Other areas Think Tank participants considered key to building poor communities include technological skills and the capacity to create occupational, income, and educational pathways and ladders. The community's ability to provide employment and economic opportunities was important.

The group affirmed that family-driven services, in which families share power with public service systems and service providers, were an important element of community building. Think Tank members agreed that upgrading the skills of child welfare and related professionals would enhance the development of community building among vulnerable neighborhoods.

Based on this need, it is important to examine ways social work curricula and professional development of child welfare staff might incorporate community-building principles. Many graduate social work programs offer concentrations in which students gain skills to specialize in serving vulnerable children and families; however, one can argue that specializations are insufficient. All students in social work need skills in community building to serve families more effectively. Moreover, child welfare training programs for public sector caseworkers also need to incorporate community capacity-building skills.

To foster such professional development, the themes derived from the principles from the Think Tank are featured in this article as guidelines for educational and professional development. The article also presents practice examples and strategies for enhancing knowledge of child welfare professionals and social work graduates entering the field.

Integrated, Comprehensive, Holistic Collaboration

Think Tank participants noted that for community building to be effective, a range of profit and nonprofit organizations, and stakeholders representing key facets of a community life, must col-

laborate (Lawson, 2001; Naparstek & Dooley, 1997; Weil, 1996). Cross-system collaboration may result in new models of collocation, interdependence, and coherent service delivery with diverse professionals working on a team rather than independently (Anderson-Butcher, Lawson, & Barkdull, 2002). Holistic services must relate to all the needs that families deem important.

Agencies strengthen the family's community environment when they recognize that a community has resources for children's protection (Barter, 2001). Agencies should encourage families to develop relationships with helpers who live or work nearby, which reduces parents' social isolation and some residents' mistrust of child welfare agencies (Annie E. Casey Foundation [AECF], 2002; Schorr, 1997). Some child welfare systems outstation child welfare workers in schools or neighborhood child protection teams (Lawson, 2001). The change in relationship among service users, and the expanded network of community and human service helpers, sets the stage for later engagement and partnerships that can create community support for families (AECF, 2002; Mulroy, 1997). When workers know families and their neighbors and related support systems, they can mobilize more prevention, early intervention, and social support.

Practice Examples

Public child welfare agencies in New York City and Cedar Rapids, Iowa, have adopted a new process for reaching out to families by engaging neighbors to enhance service delivery (Citizens' Committee, 2002; Schorr, 1997). Both agencies have decentralized their services, delivering them in the neighborhoods where clients reside.

In Cedar Rapids, a neighborhood-based service providers' team consists of a public health nurse, public housing staff, and a child protective worker, who collaborate with neighborhood helpers to address family social service needs. In New York City, the Administration for Children's Services is fostering new collaborative models to ensure that children and families have frequent contact with each other because foster homes are located near the parents. The goal is to ensure that children remain in their

communities while in foster care to maintain continuity in school and proximity to their family (Citizens' Committee, 2002). Decentralizing enables agencies to collaborate with local neighborhood public and private agency providers and community organizations to ensure that services are coherent and accessible by children and their families (Schorr, 1997).

Mulroy (1997) described a demonstration project in which interorganizational collaboration among social services, child welfare agencies, and families successfully reshaped a service system in a small, isolated community to better meet the needs of multiethnic residents. The project succeeded because agencies met regularly, acted on the suggestions of neighborhood residents, and dealt with issues that emerged to improve the delivery of services. The stakeholders learned that collaboration is a process that requires a sustained commitment and mutual trust.

Implications for Curricula and Professional Development

Human service professionals assume an important role in ensuring that collaboration among public and private agency providers and community organizations meets the needs of neighborhood families. Social work professionals need to learn the skills to ensure that stakeholders have the capacity to collaborate as well as skills to conduct family team meetings (Schorr, 1997).

An effective community-building practitioner needs to be able to foster improvements in relationships among families and agencies to encourage family involvement in building community capacity (Medoff & Sklar, 1994). The use of family experts (current or former clients) to improve front-line practice and create more coherent case plans has been helpful in reforming front-line community child welfare practices (Van Wagoner, Boyer, Wieson, DeNiro-Ashton, & Lawson, 2001). Social work students should be exposed to more content on using expert indigenous leaders to guide service improvement in neighborhoods (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2002). Agencies can hire family experts to be trainers, educators, and peer service providers (AECE, 2002).

In social work curricula, theories of collaboration and their application in work with communities and organizations are

taught in the macro practice or community organizing courses. The master's of social work (MSW) program at the University of Albany offers a course on community building that introduces the importance of collaboration. An experiential class assignment fosters students' collaboration with parents at a school-based parent resource center on projects designed to enhance the well-being of children and families.

Successful community building among child welfare staff requires that human service administrators demonstrate commitment to it through the allocation of resources (Schorr, 1997). Child welfare staff must have time to develop relationships with indigenous community leaders. Relocating caseloads based on ZIP codes is a key facet of neighborhood child protective teams. An administrative commitment to train staff to be culturally competent also prepares workers to successfully perform their work with families (FamilySupport America, 2003; McPhatter & Ganaway, 2003).

Strengths Oriented, Community Based, Family Focused, and Child Centered

A community-based, family-focused, and child-centered approach to practice requires that workers understand and reframe a child's risk factors as family and community capacity-building issues (Adam & Nelson, 1995). Adopting a strengths perspective helps ensure that workers see families as capable, with an agency's assistance, of using their assets to resolve their own problems (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989). A family-centered approach addresses children's needs through family capacity building (Briar-Lawson, 1998; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Family-centered practice is based on the premise that families will join as partners to agree on problem identification and solutions (Briar-Lawson, 1998). Families assume a proactive role with the service providers and have expert knowledge that providers respect, welcome, and adopt. Family-centered practice has the potential to evolve into family-driven policies and practice when

professionals position families to provide peer services to one another, such as in parents organizing parent-led family resource centers. Mobilizing community resources is essential for families. Consequently, a community-based focus mobilizes natural helping resources, including neighbors and concrete supports such as jobs, meaningful roles, and peer services (Fleischer & Dressner, 2002).

Many researchers have argued that one of the failures of the child welfare system has been its focus on child protection at the expense of the family (Barter, 2001; Halpern, 1999; Schorr, 1997). Because child welfare agencies have sought to protect children from "dysfunctional" families, they have sometimes been unable to identify the strengths inherent in the family system. Researchers have long acknowledged that families have difficulty protecting and providing for their children when their communities lack economic, social, and political supports (Schorr, 1997). Despite these impediments, however, the adoption of a strengths-based, family-centered approach addresses interpersonal, economic, and parenting functions. Integrating family supports with employment and income-related services is a key foundation to helping impoverished families.

Practice Examples

A family resource center in Albany, New York, in a large elementary school in an impoverished community demonstrates a family-centered approach promoting economic and social supports. The University at Albany's School of Social Welfare collaborated with the neighborhood school to develop a parent-led family resource center. An AmeriCorp Vista grant provided small stipends for parents to work in the center. They organized other parents to become involved in developing the center. The collaboration among parents, the principals, and the university led to the development of a full-service school, including services from a mental health agency, a school nurse, and a part-time child protective worker providing preventive family support services. The agencies at the school have also provided internship opportunities

for social work students in the bachelor's of social work (BSW) and MSW program. They have helped parents obtain Earned Income Tax Credit and micro-enterprise loan funds to enhance their incomes. Staff reframe children's needs as family and community support issues whenever possible, so that if the services are not available at the school, workers can mobilize them from the wider community.

Implications for Curricula and Professional Development

The human behavior and the social environment courses in social work programs establish the importance of the child's environment and the manner in which interactions among many systems influence behavior. Human behavior theories incorporate the importance of the community system and its influence on human development. Some of the theoretical perspectives taught in social work education include ego psychology and developmental, strengths, and ecological perspectives (Goldstein, 1995; Maluccio & Pine, 1996; Saleebey, 1997). The ecological perspective is most likely to inform students about the peer service role neighbors can play in supporting families. The ecological perspective enables students to assess the effect of the family and community on individual well-being.

Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) asset-based model assumes that social workers might find untapped skills if they approached individuals and communities from an asset or strengths perspective. This model can effectively reinforce a strengths-based perspective on individuals, families, and communities. For example, reframing those who have successfully overcome obstacles such as drug abuse, poverty, domestic violence, and depression as having expertise that can aid others builds on the strength inherent in many vulnerable families. Implicit in this asset approach is the ability to help individuals define the assets they have and how they want to use them to enhance their own and others' well-being. At the University of Albany, BSW students mapped the assets of a neighborhood's vacant and abandoned buildings. They found an abandoned greenhouse, generated ideas about

how children could be involved in gardening, and developed a grant to promote a school garden for growing food.

Another approach to teaching strengths-based work with families is through family group conferencing, an innovative practice approach developed in New Zealand (Pennell & Burford, 2000). Many child welfare agencies have adopted family group conferencing to encourage parents to determine their own solutions and seek supports from extended family and neighbors to develop strategies to stop maltreatment, foster reunification, or develop adoption plans (Pennell & Burford, 2000). Teaching the strengths-based perspective through family group conferencing permits students and front-line workers to learn how to engage families and neighbors in determining goals and solutions for improving children's well-being (Burford, Pennell, & MacLeod, 1995; Marsh & Crow, 1998; Saleebey, 1997). One benefit of family group conferencing is that it helps families take charge of their challenges and determine solutions, which often require that they expand their social network, thus reducing social isolation and increasing their connections with others in their community.

Building Power Through Social Capital Development with Institutional Partnerships

Social capital is an essential component of community building. Building social capital is a process by which individuals gain access to resources as a result of interacting with others in a social network (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001). In communities, families that learn to assist each other in times of need develop social capital as well as trust and respect. This process can become the foundation for residents to collaborate with each other to improve their community. When residents join together to engage external institutions in improving their community, they are brokering and building power. Community groups often seek institutions that can have an economic effect, including banks, the department of labor, the department of housing, or private capital investors (Weir, 1999). The Think Tank participants noted that social capi-

tal development may foster partnerships with resource-rich external institutions, such as commercial developers. The success of building bridges to the external community can enhance internal community environment (Medoff & Sklar, 1994).

Practice Examples

The family resource center has fostered social capital through a Time Dollar program (Cahn & Rowe, 1992). Parents and children volunteer their time in classrooms, tutoring, and community service to earn Time Dollars. Goods they can purchase include computers, school supplies, and bicycles. The Time Dollar Store, developed and operated by the parents in the school, provides an incentive for elementary students to tutor younger students or serve as teacher aides. With more than 80% of the children involved, this effort enhanced the school community's sense of well-being as parents and children realized that their own assets could be used to meet their needs for concrete resources while serving others. The items obtained from the store were the result of parents locating donations from churches, businesses, and agencies in the city.

The Center for New Horizons in Chicago illustrates how partnering with major institutions can advance a nonprofit organization's community-building objective. It provides neighborhood employment, leadership development opportunities, and the enhancement of community capacity for a Chicago neighborhood (Karanja, 2003). The center developed from parents' involvement with Head Start. The agency served as a source of employment and a child and family support center. It has grown to assume a nationwide advocacy role on early childhood education, housing, and community building. The effort's success is predicated on the engagement of community members through the involvement of parents in issues of early childhood education. Community building is not a simple process, however, the Time Dollar store and the Center for New Horizons reflect the fact that involving parents in the educational concerns of their children can be used to mobilize their investment in their communities.



Implications for Curricula and Professional Development

Social work education courses on community organizing and community building will contribute to students' understanding of how to help residents build community capacity. Students need to learn how to engage residents in asset development so that the residents learn the importance of a community working collectively. Whereas Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) stressed the importance of locating individual and organizational assets, Sherraden (1991) has been a proponent of the need for poor people to develop tangible assets to enhance their economic and emotional well-being. He proposed Individual Development Accounts, in which money saved could be matched by the government or banks and used toward the purchase of a home or to acquire an education. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and banks have devised accounts and have helped first-time home buyers in low-income communities purchase homes.

The acquisition of social capital and accumulation of assets suggest that low-income community residents can seek to exercise control of their futures by discovering their assets. The role of social workers is to help vulnerable families assess where and how they want to enhance their social capital so as to engage with major institutional partners to enhance their community's environment.

Conclusion

The Think Tank and the CWLA's symposium, *Building Communities for 21st-Century Child Welfare*, represent one milestone in community-building knowledge development and exchange. The challenge in social work education and professional development is to ensure that schools integrate practice innovations emerging in the community-building movement into professional preparation programs so that future practitioners are equipped to be community and family capacity builders.



Community building helps return social work to its core mission of addressing families' social, economic, and emotional needs. What is different from the past and reflective of visions of Think Tank participants is that in community building, the social worker's role is to build capacity in families and communities as they define their own goals, solutions, and assets. When community residents do this, they learn they are capable of change and capable of caring for other families and neighbors. ♦

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