

Collaborating for Equity:

Comprehensive School Reform in an Innovative University/School Partnership

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As a New York State approved Educational Partnership Organization (EPO), we are embarking on a bold process: to transform a comprehensive, public, open enrollment urban high school slated for closure by the state into a viable choice of excellence for urban families. EPO partnerships are unique legal reforms (Education Law 211e, 2014) that position a school as a “district within a district” with its own superintendent and unprecedented control over all aspects of running a school. Data are drawn from a long-term participatory ethnography of this partnership, now in its second year. The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of comprehensive transformation of educational infrastructure and practices on changing school culture. Educational researchers know what essential supports are needed to improve school culture or climate (Roderick, Easton, & Sebring, 2009), but we know less about how specifically to make those changes and what those changes mean to the school community. This paper examines the impact of comprehensive reform on the initiative’s goal to change from a culture of underachievement and negativity toward a culture of collaboration and excellence.

Theoretical Framework

To understand and interpret the data, we used an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws on theories of change, culture, and power. We draw on a theory of change that understands change as a complex process that includes an intersectional focus on moral purpose, building relationships, knowledge building, and coherence (Fullan, 2001). We theorize culture as practices that are mutually constituted between people as they participate in valued activities (Duranti, 1997). To understand how social and power

relations are transformed as the culture changes over time, we use Foucault's (1990/1978) concept of power as a complex set of force relations in which power produces. Foucault specifically notes that power produces both oppressive and positive relations. We use an analytics of power to trace how power relations are transformed given our understanding of change as a complex process and culture as participation in activity.

Methodology and Data Corpus

The larger study from which data are drawn is participatory ethnography. Building on participatory designs in qualitative research, we adapted participatory ethnography as a methodology that has been shown to be particularly well-suited for complex organizations (Darrouzet et al., 2009). Often used in complex corporations, participatory ethnography aligns with the critical literacy framework of Freire (1979) with its focus on researching with participants, not *at* or *for* them (Kinloch et al., 2016). When the complexity of an organization is as massive as a school's, it is disingenuous to think a single researcher will walk away with an understanding of that complexity. Instead, participatory ethnography focuses on building understanding within the system, alongside the participants, and positions all parties as knowledge builders and actors of change within the system. Furthermore, the critical participatory stance we adapted to this methodology explicitly positions the research as emancipatory and the researcher as full participant in that emancipatory work. As such, participatory ethnography in this study moves past building capacity in participants because of the organization's complexity (Darrouzet et al., 2009) toward working alongside the East community to co-construct justice and equity in urban education. We also use a mixed methods social design

experiment in our study design to structure an iterative process whereby analysis shapes future data collection that is focused on an equity oriented social change agenda (Gutiérrez, 2016; Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010). The EPO is, in effect, the “design experiment” we are documenting.

There are 38 formally enrolled participants in the larger ethnography: 9 administrators; 14 teachers; 15 students. The racial, ethnic, and gender makeup of the adult participants (teachers and administrators): 57% are white, 35% African American, 9% Latinx; 57% are female, and 43% are male. Adult participants’ experience in teaching and/or leading ranged from 27 years to first year teachers and administrators. While the research is ongoing, the full data corpus at this point includes: field notes (~350) of participant observation in classrooms, leadership and staff meetings, hallways, cafeterias, auditoriums, full day shadowing of key participants, lesson and unit plans and video (~24 hours) from a co-teaching experience in a 9th grade English class; formal (~40) and informal interviews (~200) of officially consented study participants (N=38); school wide administrative data; documents including: emails (~3800), newspaper articles, meeting minutes (~1500); research and teaching memos (~40); photographs; and, surveys of teachers, staff, students, and families. With permission, the climate surveys were adapted from the widely-used Consortium on Chicago School Research’s (CCSR) *My Voice, My School* instruments. The survey data corpus is illustrated below in figure 1.

Group	2016		2017	
	# of respondents	Response rate	# of respondents	Response rate
Teachers	132	80%	153	90%
Non-teaching staff and administrators	20	20%	45	82%
Students	678	52%	579	53%
Families	51	4%	46	4%

Figure 1: Survey Data Corpus

University/school partnerships: But what is an EPO?

Educational researchers know what essential supports are needed to improve school culture or climate (Roderick, Easton, & Sebring, 2009), but we know less about how specifically to make those changes. Universities are uniquely positioned to use their resources and knowledge base to transform educational inequities (Harkavy & Hartley, 2009). With recent calls for research that emphasizes collaboration with the school and the community (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014; Nelson, London, & Strobel, 2015), the research we present in this paper responds to these demands for community driven research that is useful to that community and relevant to practice.

University/School partnerships are not new (Goodlad, 1991). Long-term University/school collaborations have resulted in the development of key components of authentic turnaround strategies (Bryk et al., 2010), significant gains in achievement and in sustainable relationships with families and communities (Officer et. al, 2013), and important insights into how changes are interpreted across boundaries of language and culture (Penuel, Coburn, & Gallagher, 2013). University of Pennsylvania’s Penn Alexander School (n.d.) developed a successful community public school with collaborative input from the school and community. Boston University’s partnership with

Chelsea Public Schools represents one example of a University “managing” a public-school district (BU/Chelsea, 2008). Other universities have developed charter schools, such as Stanford’s East Palo Alto academy. The long successful Preuss Charter School at UC San Diego (n.d.) offers important strategies for improving student outcomes.

Partnerships can take the form of Professional Learning Schools or focus on teacher training, curriculum development, and service learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Fahey, 2011; Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley & Goodlad, 2004; Kirschenbaum & Reagan, 2001; Kronick, Cunningham, & Gourley, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Gomez, 2001; PDS, 1995; Walsh & Backe, 2013). Systemic approaches are more complex and require deeper involvement on both sides of the partnership (Walsh, DePaul, & Park-Taylor, 2009).

The UR East EPO is distinct from these efforts in several important ways. We are not creating a charter school, nor are we serving simply as a management organization. Some of the charter schools mentioned have not been successful, while others do have successful strategies we can build upon. A key difference is the legal status as an EPO.

New York State New York Code 211e 5.1 states that an

‘educational partnership organization’ means a board of cooperative educational services, a public or independent, non-profit institution of higher education, a cultural institution, or a private, non-profit organization with a proven record of success in intervening in low-performing schools, as determined by the commissioner, provide that such term shall not include a charter school.

NY State’s unique legislation that now includes the status of “receivership” (New York State New York Code 211f). The status of receiver adds additional power to the school’s Superintendent than was included in the EPO agreement. At East for example, Nelms can supersede Board of Education decisions, including hiring. The one exception is hiring the Superintendent themselves; this remains a Board decision.

The potential of becoming an EPO initiated a labor intensive collaborative process between the University of Rochester, the Rochester City School Board (RCSD), the East High School community, collective bargaining units, and the New York State Department of Education (NYSED) that began with a Saturday afternoon phone call. Larson's long term involvement in the Rochester community through community based collaborative research and participation on mayoral and school district committees facilitated a trusting relationship with Van White, the president of the Rochester City School Board. In February 2014, White called Larson at home to ask whether the University would be interested in partnering with RCSD to stop East High School from closing. Larson was more than willing, but this sort of decision was not up to her. She facilitated the process of White bringing this question to the University officials who could make this decision. We engaged in multiple conversations with the school board, the University's Warner School dean, faculty with expertise in running schools, and with the University president that resulted in the University submitting a letter of intent to serve as an EPO with East High School.

Following the lead of the initial superintendent, Warner School faculty member and former superintendent Steve Uebbing, the EPO proposal adapted NYSED's Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness as an organizational heuristic. This made sense given that we would be evaluated using this tool. We organized a leadership team who headed six committees that would gather the information needed to write the proposal: district, building leadership, curriculum and teaching, social and emotional support, family and community partnerships, and student life which we added to the state rubric. This leadership team comprised of University faculty and school administrators

gathered comprehensive input from a wide variety of stakeholders to develop the full proposal. They met with community agencies, Rochester’s Mayor, parents, community members, teachers, administrators, and students. More than 2000 stakeholders over the course of six months provided extensive input, including from approximately 1200 students across grades 7-12 at the school in September 2014. We documented answers to questions about what students would like to see at East, what they thought needed changing, what classes they would like to take, and how we can better involve their families.

After analyzing data gathered from a year and a half of meetings, interviews, and focus groups, we developed a full proposal that was submitted to NYSED in December 2014. The University was approved to serve as the EPO beginning July 1, 2015. We opened the doors to approximately 1400 students in grades 6-12 September 8, 2015. Figure 2 offers a demographic snapshot from the most recent year of our partnership.

Lower School n=322			Upper School n=817		
Grades 6 – 8			Grades 9 – 12		
Demographics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> American Indian or Alaska Native: 0.6% Asian: 4.4% Black: 53.1% Latinx: 28.6% White: 13.2% 			Demographics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> American Indian or Alaska Native: 0.1% Asian: 4.9% Black: 52.4% Latinx: 34.8% White: 7.8% 		
Average daily attendance	English as a New Language	Students with disabilities	Average daily attendance	English as a New Language	Students with disabilities
91%	19%	12%	80%	21%	16%

Figure 2: East Demographic Snapshot for both schools

We did not follow traditional advice and make slow, incremental change. We changed everything all at once. Figure 3 illustrates examples of curricular and structural improvements we've changed so far.

Changes implemented in year one	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry based curriculum • Student-driven pedagogy • School structure and administrative organization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lower school 6-8 ○ 9th Grade Academy ○ Upper School 9-12 • Extended school day <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 72 minute classes • Staggered start times • All in, all the time culture • Expanded social and emotional support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 9 social workers • Restorative practices • East Evening school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support Period • Family group • Dual language program • Families as partners • Ongoing, embedded professional learning • Double periods of ELA and Math in Lower School • Vibrant Career and Technical Education • Driver's Education • 1:1 Chrome Book Initiative • New Sports • Formative assessment • Distributed leadership • Renegotiated bargaining unit agreements • Experience and access project

Figure 3: Changing everything

Change occurred throughout the year and intensified in summer 2016 as we reflected on what worked and what didn't work in year one. As context for the analysis of generative frictions, we have developed snapshots of the slow but steady growth we have seen since summer 2015. Figure 4 is an overview of three factors for which we have seen change between the 2014-15 and 2015-16 academic years: 1) graduation rate; 2) 9th grade advancement; and, 3) achievement; figure 5 shows the dramatic decline in suspensions over three years (the year before the partnership and the two years since the partnership began). Our full data corpus, including the climate survey data, reveal growth in more than these areas; however, for this paper we focus on factors for which we are being held accountable by New York State while under receivership.

Graduation rate		9 th grade advancement with credits		Achievement	
2014-15 33%	2015-16 40.1%	2014-15 45-55%	2015-16 70-75%	2014-15	2015-16
				Algebra Regents 16%	Algebra Regents 41%
				English Regents 51%	English Regents 58%

Figure 4: Incremental growth

We attribute the reduction in suspensions shown in figure 5 below to the implementation of restorative practices and progressive discipline. The East code of conduct (East High School, 2016, p. 6) states the following:

School discipline policies shall be aimed at creating a positive school climate, supporting the social and emotional development of scholars, and teaching nonviolence and respect for all members of the school community. By viewing social development as a critical aspect of discipline, the East EPO shall anticipate and respond to school disciplinary matters in a manner that is consistent with scholars' sense of dignity and self-worth and with a restorative justice approach.

Progressive discipline at East emphasizes a graduated approach to consequences that begins with restorative practices. If restorative work does not take hold in that instance, a system of warnings followed by consequences occurs. Progressive disciplinary consequences include verbal and written warnings, calls home to parents or guardians, suspension from sports, transportation, or other extracurricular activities, in-school suspension of varying lengths, short-term out of school suspension (5 days or less), long-term suspension (more than 5 days), change of program or permanent suspension. Each progression is associated with increasing risk or danger associated with a behavior or incident (East High School, 2016).

Building on research in restorative approaches to the crisis of punishment in the legal system discussed by Barnett (1977), restorative practices in schools focus on understanding that relationships have been broken and need restoration to prevent further harm (McCluskey, et al., 2008; McCold, 2006). At East, we contracted with a local agency that conducted professional learning in restorative practices, including training in how to hold peace circles, to all staff. The social workers we hired all had expertise in the wide range of restorative practices available and supported staff during the first year.

However, there was significant misunderstanding about what to do with student behavioral issues that used to result in non-mandated suspension, no matter how minor, along with a lack of understanding about the connection to progressive discipline. This adjustment was new to staff, students and families. What resulted was a perception that we couldn't suspend kids no matter what by some, while others pushed for traditional punitive measures that did not address the root causes of the infraction. Discipline was not being used to correct behaviors, it was merely an opportunity to demonstrate power and influence of various stakeholder groups (Foucault, 1990). This misperception accounts, in part, for the sudden drop in suspensions in September 2015. Once we clarified the connection between restorative practices and progressive discipline (which included suspension as the last resort), we saw an uptick in November 2015 that leveled off to a more representative level as staff, including security, developed better understandings of the shift to restorative practice.

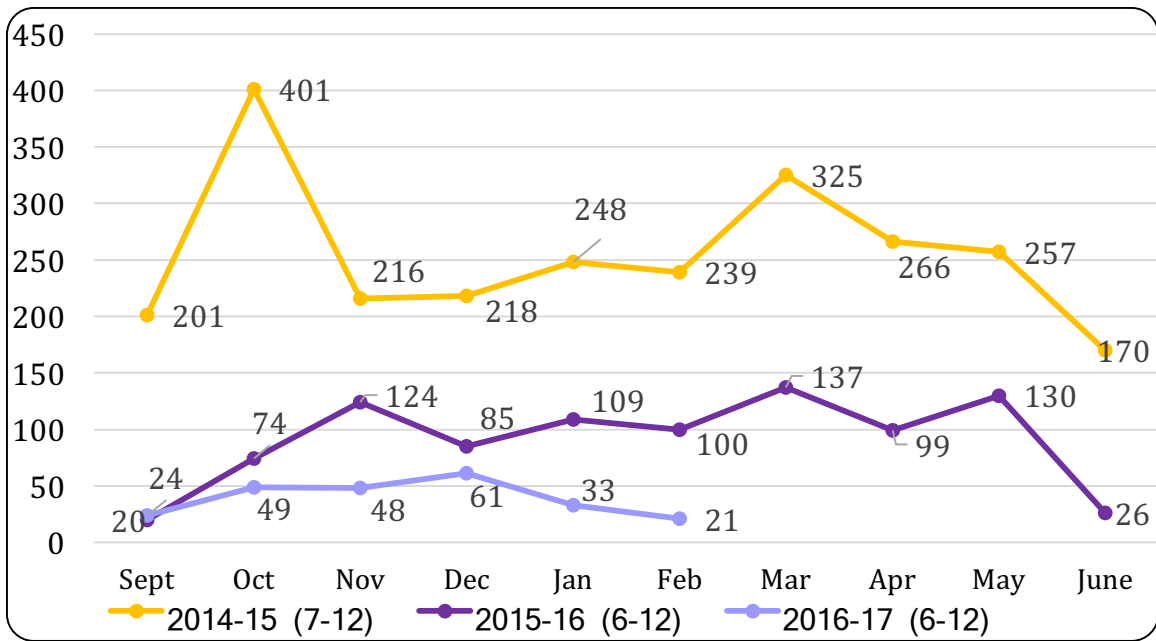


Figure 5: Reduction in suspension

We included intensive professional learning in restorative practices in summer of 2016 for all staff. The data we have so far in 2016-17 represent a significant decrease in suspensions that appear to reflect increased staff expertise in this work.

Preliminary Analyses of generative frictions

Analyses of both the qualitative and quantitative data reveal that power produces generative frictions (figure 6) that animate culture change. Building on previous research, we argue that what power produced at East are generative frictions (Larson et al, in press). Social and power relations involved in generative frictions are not binaries, nor are they oppositional. These identified processes are in relation to each other and are mutually constitutive and fluid. The social and power relations we found at the end of year one will not be the same as we find in year two, for example. Frictions produce energy and change, which in turn produces more frictions. They are generative in that they animate transformative change that results from the ongoing negotiation of frictions.

We have identified generative frictions related to overall culture change: 1) resistance/all in; 2) old culture/new culture, 3) new ideas/status quo; 4) trusting relationships/betrayal; and, 5) experiential knowledge/unknown knowledge. The overarching theme that ties all these frictions together is building trusting relationships; without these relationships, positive culture change cannot take hold.

Generative Frictions	Description	What produced
Resistance/all in	Frictions around the workload and what it means to be “all in”; work/life balance	Competition about who is “all in”; frustration; shifts to finding work/life balance;
Old culture/new culture	Frictions between what was and what the EPO has brought in; us/them binary between teachers and administrators	Lots of meetings and peace circles☺; crying; improved relationships; risk-taking
Status quo/new ideas	Resistance to change; describing “new” as not relevant to urban education	Resistance/fear of the new; revelations about vulnerability; risk-taking; trying something new
Trusting relationships/betrayal	Learning to trust each other but with bumps in the road	Early tensions between old/new that transitioned into increased trust
Experiential knowledge/unknown knowledge	What practitioners know from experience related to what researchers or new teachers bring	Skepticism about UR knowledge; increased understanding of the connection between research and practice; risk-taking

Figure 6: Generative frictions and culture change

The most prominent theme we have found is the need for trusting relationships. Why is trust important? To make the kind of profound culture change we are attempting, we must build a context where it is safe to let go – to not be afraid to take risks. We are working against the cultural model of a hero who saves the day (Copland, 2003). The hero is not the University, nor is it Nelms. We are working against the fear of letting competence work, make mistakes, and rethinking. Additionally, we seek to let students authentically lead, which is something that is still emerging at East but that is an explicit goal of the EPO. To accomplish this, we are building spaces for people to think about their own thinking, to be more thoughtful, and to construct a shared language around justice, equity, and accountability. For students, we have included a Family Group

structure at East. Family Group is a dedicated time 30 minutes per day where students and staff are paired and are given space to address some of the generative frictions between students and staff and as well between students. In this way, the moral fabric grows organically in the everyday practice of the school and builds trusting relationships.

Alongside building trusting relationships, the generative frictions identified in figure 6 occur. We focus on one such friction – old ideas/new ideas – here given its connection to overall culture change. One key new idea was working with researchers from the University more closely. There was apprehension about whether the University people actually understood what they were getting into:

I think there's a lot of people at the U of R that are getting involved in this program—in fact, if I had to guess, Joanne, I really feel like maybe even 90 percent or more of the people at the U of R that are all gung ho on this have no experience with urban education and that they're understanding of problems is very limited. And so I think there's going to be some shocks for many people to understand it's not as simple as blank and blank and blank, or that, um, they missed X, Y, and Z. So I think it's gonna be a really, um—a really neat balance because sometimes when I hear things people have to offer, um, in my mind, I'm thinking, "They don't have—they don't have the whole picture." And I'm not saying their idea won't work because I'm always excited about what people bring that maybe if we would look at it differently, it would work (Interview, 2015).

There were shocks indeed. However, this participant's openness to new ideas despite apprehension, or the generative friction, constructed space for collaboration and learning. When University people didn't leave despite shocks and mistakes, staff trusted a bit more and relationships deepened. Together, researchers and staff worked out strategies that built on each other's areas of expertise. Larson worked with the administrative team and union representatives to analyze qualitative data. In this process, they identified policies and practices that needed rethinking; this co-constructed analysis was used to rethink

policies and practices for year two. Nelms did extensive work with administrators that was, in part, based on this analytic process in summer 2016 that further deepened relationships and built coherence among the administrative team. The administrative team at East was a newly formed unit. It included 11 building based administrators. Of the 11, four were former East administrators, five were administrators from other schools or programs throughout the Rochester City School District and two were first year administrators. Knowing this, it was important to create opportunities for administrators to demonstrate their competence and capacity with little direction and guidance. At East, we were seeking to systemically improve school culture and utilized the 12 district-level strategic actions recommended by Leithwood et al., (2004).

As a district within a district we challenged administrators to create a *sense of efficacy* by identifying poor performance, taking actionable steps towards improvement and holding teachers and principals accountable for growth as the first step towards improving district and school culture. Focusing on *student achievement and quality instruction* requires principals to guide and focus the work of teachers and central office (e.g. our administrative team including the superintendent) to meet the academic needs of students. *Adopting and committing to district-wide performance standards, developing/adopting district-wide curricula and approaches to instruction and aligning curriculum, teaching and learning materials and assessment with relevant standards* will ensure equity and access for all students, regardless of the uniqueness of building principals and teachers. Creating *accountability systems and system-wide use of data to inform practice to hold district leaders accountable for results and to monitor progress* will help in focusing the work of principals in targeting classroom specific needs for

developing teacher capacity and staff development (aides, assistants etc.). *Targeted focus on improvement and investing in instructional leadership at the school and district level* will allow districts to allocate resources appropriately for supporting principal development. Distributed leadership encourages leaders to identify school needs and then utilize resources strategically to improve academic culture (Copeland, 2003; Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2004; Harris & Spillane, 2008; Hulpia, et al., 2011; Lambert, 2003; Leithwood, et al., 2008; Spillane, 2008, Spillane & Healey, 2010). The emphasis on utilizing resources strategically was the most difficult transition for administrators who were trained in a system of autonomy and limited accountability. Furthermore, *job-embedded professional development, district-wide and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community* for central office, principals and teachers creates conditions where external and internal experts can work collaboratively to address key performance targets. The synergetic work of developing principals and leaders simultaneously supports the research on distributed leadership which speaks to establishing collegial work groups, networks of learners across the school as well as cross-role leadership opportunities for formal and informal leaders (Copeland, 2003; Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2004; Harris & Spillane, 2008; Hulpia, et al., 2011; Lambert, 2003; Leithwood, et al., 2008; Spillane, 2006, Spillane & Healey, 2010). *New approaches to board-district and in district-school relations and strategic engagement with state reform policies and resources* is key for districts because creating buffers between the work of schools and things which may be distractions keeps the work focused and targeted (Leithwood, et al., 2004).

Building theory from these analyses, we have developed an emerging model of how generative frictions animate change in everyday interactions (see figure 7). As the model illustrates, when trusting relationships are constructed, people engage in risk taking (making a leadership decision, trying a new pedagogy, taking leadership in an emerging idea). How the risk is experienced in terms of success/failure shapes whether confusion or coherence is constructed. This is an iterative, fluid cycle of experiences.

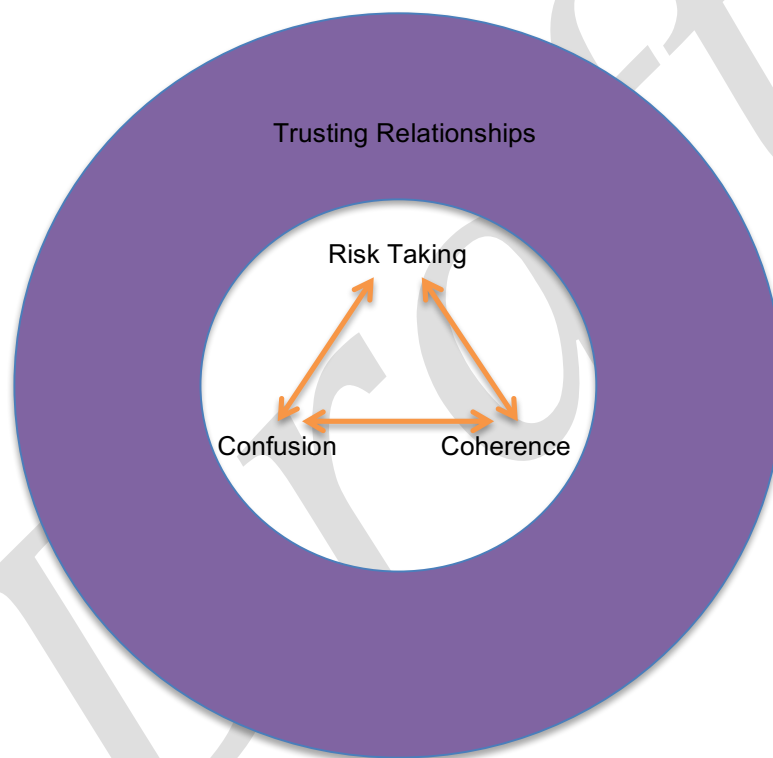


Figure 7: It's all about relationships!

This model reflects our theoretical framework in several ways. To produce authentic culture change, power relations need to be shifted. We found this shift could not begin until trusting relationships were built among all stakeholders. Once this trust began to take hold, people were willing to take risks to change their beliefs and practices, to make

mistakes, and to share those mistakes. The moral purpose we began with in the EPO proposal was enhanced and clarified as we co-constructed a mission and vision with all staff, students, and families. Through these processes, power produced generative frictions as people moved along the continuum of risk-taking, confusion, and coherence. In this way, the shared practices of the shifting culture were co-constructed and continue to be co-constructed as our work proceeds.

Conclusion

This partnership is still in its early stages; however, we have learned that the iterative process of trying something, reflecting on that attempt using multiple data sources, revising plans, and trying again is dependent on trusting relationships. We brought together communities that had traditionally been at odds to rethink how urban education should be done: University researchers; administrators, including from area suburbs who did not have experience in urban education; teachers; students and their families; and staff who had not traditionally been included in this kind of work. We continue to learn as we develop deeper relationships and trust.

We still have much work to do, but we do think there are implications beyond East that can be stated now.

- The emphasis on building trusting relationships in whatever context that seeks to develop equity and excellence in urban schools cannot be overstated.
- A focus on what power produces, positive and negative, is needed to understand the changes as they begin and develop over time.
- Having a clear plan with specified principals (the EPO) at the beginning was crucial piece to begin the changes. Furthermore, bargaining unit contracts could

be negotiated around these shared principles which proved critical to implementing changed policies and practices; without these agreements, we would not have been able to accomplish our goals.

- Researchers need to be fully present in the everyday work of the school, working alongside administrators, teachers, students, and families to develop the authentic trust needed for what we (researchers) know to be taken seriously. We should take the same risks staff are taking.

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