
Democracy & Education

Navigating Middle of the Road Reforms through Collaborative Community

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Abstract

The current wave of educational reform is complex and situated in market-based initiatives coupled with a renewed emphasis on local autonomy, deliberation, and community—middle-of-the-road reforms. In practice, schools are challenged to develop organizational forms that can support collaboration and community engagement, alongside the bureaucratic and accountability-driven reforms that demand more oversight, transparency, and demonstrable results. Our intent in this paper is to begin to map the emerging contradictions and opportunities that the complex reform climate presents for practitioners through a case study of a personalized learning charter school. In so doing, we illustrate how a community of teachers within a charter school navigated their work in the current policy climate. We found that explanatory frames that focused either on the market-oriented policy design or the democratically oriented structural mechanisms inside of schools were limited in their ability to help us account for what we were observing—that is, how teachers and staff used strategies of community and collaboration to reorganize how the accountability press from above unfolded in their school and in their day-to-day practices. We ultimately found that literature on collaborative community provided a compelling framework through which to interpret these findings.

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IN THE UNITED States, there has been a considerable marketization of education reforms nested in policies and initiatives like the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and Race to the Top. Examples of the reforms encouraged by these kinds of policies and initiatives—intended to increase student achievement and make educating those students more cost-efficient—include new accountability measures for schools and teachers (Abelmann, Elmore, Even, Kenyon, & Marshall, 1999), charter schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, 2015), and the privatization of school components (Burch, 2009; Burch & Good, 2014). These types of reforms support market-like

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competition and incentivization, measurable goals, and quantifiable results.

Much of the discourse around market-based reforms in education has been framed appropriately in its larger social political and economic context—typically described in terms of arguments for and against neoliberalism. Neoliberalism refers to larger political ideologies that view the public sector as extremely inefficient in provision of public goods and services where the kinds of autonomy historically accorded to government is disappearing in domestic policy and being replaced by an ever more transparent corporate agenda (Fabricant & Fine, 2015). One shortcoming of the existing literature is its tendency to roll many different kinds of reforms under the conceptual umbrella of neoliberalism. However, the current policy climate is not characterized by only neoliberalism or market-based reforms. Though the free market is often considered an antidote to what are seen as bloated bureaucratic government entities, federal and state governments seem to prioritize both standardization and choice (Ravitch, 2016). Many current policies and initiatives encourage bureaucratic methods of reform, including standardized high-stakes testing and federally mandated criteria for highly qualified teachers. Indeed, alongside of, and often embedded within the kinds of reforms discussed above is bureaucratization—a top-down press for increased efficiency and accountability to specific standards, the standardization of goals and assessments for students, and more uniform criteria for teacher effectiveness. These trends in the current educational policy climate are representative of what Weber (1978) called “instrumental rationality,” which is concerned with the ends over the means, and relies on the combination of market-based initiatives and bureaucratic authority (Adler, Heckscher, McCarthy, & Rubinstein, 2015).

An instrumental rational policy climate prioritizes ends over means—social actions are aimed at “rationally pursued and calculated ends” (Weber, 1978, p. 24) where “the end, the means, and the secondary results are rationally taken into account and weighed” (Weber, 1978, p. 26), but the value of or motivations for the ends are not necessarily prioritized. Instrumental rational social action is based in bureaucracy and the market (Adler et al., 2015). Bureaucracy has been described by Weberian scholars as two-sided—one side that is “administration based on expertise” and the other side that is “administration based on discipline” (Gouldner, 1954, p. 22). As Weber argued, bureaucracy promises control, efficiency, and discipline (Weber, 1978), but can also act as the famous “iron cage” that traps people in a system based only on efficiency and control (Weber, 2002) and can lead to inertia and depersonalization (Merton, 1968; Robinson, 2004). In an instrumental-rational climate, market-based reforms built on competition are intended to counteract the disadvantages of bureaucracy and stimulate innovation (Adler et al., 2015).

Yet even instrumental rationality does not encapsulate the whole of the current reform climate. There are other reforms and initiatives that are typically viewed as on the “other end of the education reform continuum”—policy designs that emphasize

democratic engagement. Democratic engagement reforms tend to be seen as highlighting processes and democratic values over ends, where policymaking is not only about solving social problems, such as the achievement gap, “but about how groups are formed, split and reformed to achieve public purposes” (Stone, 2002, p. 27). From this perspective, stakeholders are included in the decision-making process. Giving targets of public policy a seat at the table is believed to build more responsive and inclusive schooling while at the same time “preserving the ideals” of local control that are central to the design of education governance in the United States (Shober, 2012). Examples of education reforms that seem to sit squarely in theories of democratic engagement include community schools and other more formal policies like the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP)—part of California’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). The LCAP places responsibility on parents and community members to examine local funding needs and plan strategically for how funds will be spent. Additionally, democratically oriented instructional reforms, such as student-centered, or personalized, learning initiatives, which rely on student choice, are reflective of reforms based on theories of democratic engagement.

In the current climate outlined above, many scholars have focused on what they see as being the prevailing ideology: market-based reforms and accountability mechanisms. Some scholars and educators have bemoaned the rise of market-based educational reforms and what they see as the erosion of local control (e.g., Ravitch, 2016; Trujillo, 2013). Others have pointed to positive evidence for market-based reforms like charter schools (e.g., Angrist, Pathak, & Walters, 2012; Hoxby & Murarka, 2009) and have called for the expansion of these reforms (e.g., Burch, 2009; Lipman & Saltman, 2007). However, educators and others who work directly with poor children live a reform reality that is more layered and nuanced than reformers and their opponents might suggest. Indeed, there are many policies and initiatives that represent yet another category of education reforms that resist easy classification as either instrumental rational or democratic. Reforms such as the adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and parent trigger laws exemplify this sort of “middle of the road” reform. The CCSS is a paragon of standardization and accountability, yet relies on teachers’ collective interpretation of standards. Similarly, parent trigger laws would seem to exemplify characteristics of democratic engagement (community stakeholders can “trigger” a change in school administration) but are still nested in market-based ideals (the change is often handing control over to a charter school). The design of this other category of policies and reforms invokes theories of the market in their emphasis on competition, choice, and the importance of data in monitoring and improving outcomes and services. However, these policies are also based in principles of democratic engagement in emphasizing the need for the input of individuals and various groups and the role of community in decision-making regarding use of funds, purpose of curriculum, and design of assessments. In addition to these more formal middle-of-the-road policies, educators and schools must also navigate reforms on the ground

that are based primarily in principles of democratic engagement, within an instrumental rational climate. For example, educators may be involved in instructional reform designed to personalize students' learning experiences based on teacher and student choice, while also navigating accountability initiatives and bureaucratic requirements at the federal, state, and school levels. In what follows, we explore just this sort of challenge and argue that the rise of instrumental rational reform needs to be understood both in the context of larger social, political and economic trends and in situ, in a context that is interrupted, interpreted, and reshaped by practitioners in schools.

In light of what we have outlined above, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate how a community of teachers within a charter school navigated their work in the current policy climate. Our interest in how teachers' professional communities engaged with middle-of-the-road reforms emerged from our ongoing case study of a high-tech personalized learning charter school in a major urban city in California. The broad purpose of the study was to examine how and why teachers in a school designed to maximize personalization and student and teacher choice altered their practices in response to a press by the school's governing board to develop clearer standards and stronger accountability mechanisms. These mechanisms mirrored motivational qualities of accountability policies in market-oriented reforms—specifically the integration of rewards and sanctions as a factor central to school success. However, we found that explanatory frames that focused on neoliberalism, instrumental rational policy design, or the democratically oriented structural mechanisms inside of schools were limited in their ability to help us account for what we were observing—that is, how teachers and staff used strategies of community and collaboration to reorganize how the accountability press from above unfolded in their school and in their day-to-day practices. We ultimately found that literature on collaborative community provided a compelling framework through which to interpret these findings.

Navigating Middle-of-the-Road Reforms through Collaborative Community

In the current policy climate, we see elements of bureaucratization, marketization, and democratic engagement—instrumental rationality, but with a distinct emphasis on community and collaboration as well as local autonomy, choice, involvement, and capacity. We turn now to leveraging some basic features of current research from organizational studies—specifically, work from Adler et al., 2015—that draw directly from Weber's ideas of instrumental rationality to explore the importance of community and collaboration. In so doing, we aim to draw on sociological and organizational ideas to contribute to the development of a conceptual framework that begins to examine how schools and educators navigate a complex policy climate that prioritizes instrumental rationality alongside local autonomy, collaboration, and community in the implementation of instructional reform.

Organizational Forms of Community

Weber (1978) identified four "ideal types" of social action: instrumental rational (bureaucratic, efficiency-based); traditionalistic (clan-like, based in strong trust and loyalty); affectual (charismatic, committed to a leader or group of individuals); and value rational (commitment to shared end-value). Each of these ideal types of social action can be linked to different types of community that support different types of goals. For example, Adler and Heckscher (2013) began to parse out the distinctions among types of community—contractual (instrumental rational), traditionalistic, charismatic (affectual), and collaborative (value rational)—and how these types of community relate to differing task goals. We expand upon this typology by extrapolating (from the types and characteristics of these communities) the reform processes and supported reforms that relate to each community type. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Organizational Forms of Community

	Traditionalistic	Charismatic	Contractual	Collaborative
Type of Social Action	Traditionalistic	Affectual	Instrumental Rational	Value Rational
Characteristics	Collectivist; loyal	Based around a particular leader or idea	Relies on competition and incentivization Consistent rules and norms	Interdependent Relies on accountability
Reform Process	Ground-up reform process but resistant to change; community is representative of a "circled wagons" approach valuing current approaches and tradition	Top-down reform process filtered through a particular leader around whom the community has coalesced	Top-down reform process with hierarchical implemen- tation; incentives-based and reliant on competition, cost-benefit calculation, and self-interest	Mix of top-down and ground-up reform process; incentivization and progress monitoring are important, but the process is inter- dependent, rather than hierarchical
Supported Reform Example	LCFB	Leader-dependent	NCLB	CA CCSS Implementation Plan

The concept of collaborative community as a manifestation of value rational social action provides an alternative, multidimensional paradigm for viewing middle-of-the-road reforms in situ—an educational policy climate that emphasizes bureaucratization and marketization, but that implicitly relies on the work of teachers in their communities. Using work from an ongoing case study, we illustrate how this community typology and associated theories of collaborative community in the context of a middle-of-the-road reform climate helped us better explain organizational actions in a charter school’s implementation of a school model designed to use technology to provide personalization as well as teacher and student choice and to close students’ learning gaps.

The Case of Grant Academy

Research Setting

As noted above, we draw on our research from a longitudinal case study of a school we call Grant Academy (GA). GA is a charter high school located in a midsize school district in California that primarily serves traditionally underserved students. Grant Academy was born from a desire to offer an alternative to traditional high schools that were, in GA’s founder’s opinion, failing to serve low-income students of color by not offering enough social-emotional support, flexibility in scheduling, or personalized attention. His assumption was that offering high levels of personal attention and social-emotional support, along with a flexible schedule, open classrooms, and the ability to get instruction from a variety of online and face-to-face sources would curb dropout rates in “at-risk” student populations (defined by the founder as students from low-income households and students of color). More specifically, the founder of GA—a research professor at a private university—envisioned a school that was

designed to increase students’ sense of school connectedness and their opportunity to learn through a blended program of online college-preparatory courses supported by virtual master teachers AND a local program of integrated social and academic support provided by a student-focused team of principals, counselors, social workers, remediation specialists, ELL teachers, project teachers, and learning coaches. (“Grant Academy founding documents,” 2011, p. 7)

In other words, GA’s founder wanted to create a school that would embody collective responsibility for student learning and targeted, personalized intervention, facilitated by a technology-rich environment.

In GA’s charter petition, the charter management organization (CMO) under which GA would operate listed seven characteristics that illustrated what it means to be an educated person in the 21st century. These characteristics included (a) the ability to think critically and analyze information; (b) the capacity to understand processes of science and engineering (an emphasis on STEM); (c) an understanding of the basics of human health that could be the foundation for better eating habits and healthier lifestyles; (d) the emotional health and positive social-emotional skills; (e) a civic-minded orientation that is the foundation for democratic participation; (f) an appreciation for the arts; and (g) the autonomy and the ability to self-regulate. These

characteristics formed the foundation for GA’s design—particularly, the idea of promoting student autonomy and self-regulation through choice and personalization would be fundamental to GA’s success. By providing student choice, personalized learning paths and experiences, and social-emotional support, GA would prevent dropouts and ensure that each student graduated with these characteristics, so that students would be college- and career-ready.

Grant Academy is firmly situated in a middle-of-the-road reform context at the crossroads of instrumental rational and democratic policy paradigms. As evidenced by the design for the school, the founder, administrators, and teachers at GA were committed to democratic principles of civic duty, student and teacher choice, flexibility, and personalization. Teachers were fundamentally involved in the design and implementation of the school’s theory of action. GA had and continues to have a very strong teacher professional community and a theory of action of personalization and social-emotional support. However, GA is also charter school that necessarily must be focused on teacher and student accountability as well as measurable outcomes. For example, in GA’s second and third years, student and teacher accountability were driving forces, as indicated by the school’s emerging reliance on a “no excuses” disciplinary model, weekly data analysis sessions, and a focus on replicability—specifically, “the future potential of the school as a model alternative—credibility, replicability, scalability, and sustainability.” (“Grant Academy founding documents,” 2011, p. 6) Further, the reliance of the school design on technology necessitated a relationship with private providers of curricula and digital learning platforms. Indeed, in its inaugural year, the school partnered with one particular digital curriculum that each teacher was expected to utilize in their classrooms. The school is also nested within a policy climate characterized by middle of the road policies—the CCSS and an emphasis on increased school and teacher accountability.

Data Collection and Analysis

As a research team, we spent approximately three years collecting data at Grant Academy. The original purpose of the case study was to examine teachers’ instruction in a high-tech personalized learning school model; to illustrate how the school’s program design and teachers’ practices evolved over time; and to explore why design and practice develop as they did. In this case study, interviewing, naturalistic observation, and in-depth document analysis are used to illustrate the context of the case and the nature of participants’ experiences (Stake, 1995). From the school’s inaugural school year (2012–2013) through the 2014–2015 school year, we spent significant time in the school, interviewing teachers and administrators; conducting student focus groups; observing classroom instruction, staff meetings, professional development, and parent meetings; and analyzing both physical and digital artifacts, such as the school’s charter and strategic plan, course websites, classroom handouts, and classroom data. Overall, we collected nearly 40 interviews, four student focus groups, almost 80 observations, and hundreds of digital and physical documents and artifacts. (See Table 2 for a summary of collected data and time frame.)

Table 2. Summary of Collected Data and Timeline

Timeline	Data Sources		
	Interviews	Observations	Documents and Artifacts
Fall 2012	Participant Interviews: Content Teachers Master Literacy Teacher Assistant Principal Counselor Student Focus Groups	Content Teacher Classrooms Master Literacy Teacher Classroom Practice Professional Development Tuesday Staff Meetings	School Charter Parent/Student Handbook Recruiting and Hiring Documents Grant Documents Digital X Curricula School Email Communications
Spring 2013	Participant Interviews: Founder Principal Assistant Principal Content Teachers Master Literacy Teacher	Content Teacher Classrooms Master Literacy Teacher Classroom Practice Professional Development Tuesday Staff Meetings	School Email Communications Class Websites
Summer 2013	Participant Interviews: Exiting Teachers Master Literacy Teacher Assistant Principal		
Fall 2013	Participant Interviews: CEO/Principal Assistant Principal Content Teachers	Content Teacher Classrooms Friday Staff Meetings	Parent/Student Handbook Class Websites Strategic Plan Recruiting and Hiring Documents
Spring 2014	Participant Interviews: Teachers	Teacher Classrooms Friday Staff Meetings	Class Documents Class Websites Instructional Learning Matrix
Fall 2014	Participant Interviews: CEO Assistant Principal Teachers	Teacher Classrooms Friday Staff Meetings	Parent/Student Handbook Student Recruiting Documents Class Documents Class Websites Strategic Plan Instructional Learning Matrix

As is typical in qualitative research, we collected and analyzed data simultaneously (Hatch, 2002; Stake, 1995). Our analysis of collected data informed our subsequent data collection strategies and areas of focus. We kept track of the extensive amount of data through field journals and interview and observation protocols (Creswell, 1998). Further, during data collection, we memoed and discussed extensively in order to keep a running log of thoughts and lines of analysis and to maintain a detailed evolving description of Grant Academy, emerging themes, and interpretations of findings as they developed (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995; Strauss, 1987). To better enable organization, all transcripts, observational field notes, and memos were entered into NVivo qualitative analysis software.

Our analysis strategy included coding the data—first to organize the data and then to allow categories and themes to emerge (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). We engaged in constant comparative analysis as we analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), first identifying possible themes and then comparing these to the data as it was collected. Through our analysis process, we initially identified three key themes: “accountability imperative,” “community negotiation,” and “tension between top-down and bottom-up reform.” As we continued to observe work at the school,

we revised these themes, keeping “accountability imperative” and “community” negotiation—both of which were pervasive—but reconceptualizing “tension between top-down and bottom-up reform” as “catalysts for collaboration.”

Grant Academy: Catalysts for Collaboration

GA was designed by its founder and its teachers to provide personalized attention via a combination of technology and face-to-face supports. In practice, classrooms were to exhibit differentiated pacing and content aligned to each student’s needs and interests, in order to close gaps in student knowledge, allow for accelerated learning, and promote student autonomy. Teachers were expected to collaborate to provide face-to-face supplemental instruction and social-emotional support. In the school’s charter petition, the founder described the ideal teachers for the school as those who

value an emphasis on the whole student, including career and college planning, personal growth and social-emotional skill development. They will have interest and experience in forming supportive relationships with students and problem-solving individually to ensure each student’s success. . . . [GAs] design promotes teachers’ abilities to focus on individual student learning by shifting the focus

away from classroom management and whole-group direct instruction common in traditional schools. Teachers who thrive on forming close, supportive relationships with students and problem-solving to help each student succeed will be attracted to this program. (“Grant Academy founding documents,” 2011, p. 34)

However, in GA’s first year, the initial design of the school was deemed unsuccessful—teachers were overwhelmed, there were constant discipline issues, and students were not making sufficient progress. For example, in one December staff meeting that included all of the teachers, the principal, the assistant principal, and the founder, frustrated teachers discussed students’ progress:

TEACHER 1: We have kids who have only completed three assignments this semester so far. How do we get our hands on the actual data, so we can show them exactly where they are and explain why we’re assigning their seats, et cetera?

TEACHER 2: [Student 1] hasn’t accessed the course since October 1.

Another exchange in an end-of-the-year staff meeting exemplified the other difficulties teachers had to face:

ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL: I want to take a moment to acknowledge the level of overwhelmed we are all feeling.

TEACHER 1: We’re coming up on the eighth month of 12-hour days.

TEACHER 2: Sometimes I feel like I’m barely afloat. I feel like I’m drowning most of the time . . . I feel like I’m not doing my best work.

Though the teachers and administrators had initially worked together to design the school in its first year, by the second semester of the first year, the issues with discipline, student progress, and teacher workload created a tension among teachers and administrators that numerous staff discussions could not seem to resolve.

After the first year of operation, due to the concerns over teacher workload, school culture, and disappointing student results, GA’s principal and founder were fired. The second year of operation began with overhauling school design and classroom practices toward improving student discipline, developing a cohesive school culture, and emphasizing accountability for student outcomes. The reforms that the school engaged in were almost entirely top-down. Toward these aims, new school leaders engaged in selective hiring practices and emphasized structure and alignment, discipline, accountability, and teacher professionalization.

A key turning point for GA came when a new chief executive officer (CEO) took over the school’s CMO and became acting principal. The CEO described his responsibilities as being “quality control”—ensuring that GA had a system of accountability in place to meet minimum standards of quality. In the CEO’s words, “We [Grant Academy] need to win.” As part of this quest for quality

control, the CEO implemented a new schoolwide discipline policy, based on a “no excuses” framework that would become a crucial part of the school’s new model and a key mediator for teachers’ practices. Once the “no excuses” demerit system was in place, the CEO introduced a “strategic plan” that included school-level goals, expectations for teachers and students, plans for expansion and replication, and core operational values. The overarching goals for the school became “college completion” and “Positive Multigenerational Change” (PMC). To achieve these aims, the leadership wanted to rely on “on-going key metrics” that established quantifiable goals for both students and staff to provide the foundation for personalization and teacher and student choice.

In Grant Academy’s third year, the school was seemingly able to find a balance between bottom-up and top-down reform. The idea of personalized learning and attention was again prioritized, and teachers and administrators worked together to develop a system of performance tasks and assessments—aimed at providing students with “rigorous, inter-disciplinary tasks” that would help the school move closer to its vision of preparing and placing its students in two- and four-year colleges and work toward meeting state standards of college and career readiness. Teachers implemented computer-based modules (teacher-created or compiled curricula as a mechanism of personalized pacing and student autonomy), using the Common Core State Standards as a guide for their curriculum development. Though the school still provided teachers with one possible digital curriculum, teachers also negotiated the ability to create or purchase other curricula. As one teacher described it,

I upload text to [the module] and then as a teacher, I embed questions in the text and kids cannot move forward in the text till they answer the question. I align questions to the Common Core Standards and I insert my own notes and my own reactions and they can write their own notes, their own reactions and then kids can see other peoples’ notes and respond to them and have virtual discussions while they’re reading.

These modules also allowed the teachers to monitor student behavior. For example, in one classroom observation, a teacher monitored a student’s behavior with the classroom technology:

The teacher sees that a student is listening to music that isn’t instrumental (which isn’t allowed for the project they’re working on). She is able to remotely close the tab the student is using, and send a message to him saying that he has earned one demerit for listening to music that isn’t instrumental (off-task behavior). She then logs the demerit into Illuminate, which is where teachers take attendance and log demerits, including how many, what type, etc.

The modules also gave teachers the tools to gather instantaneous student data and respond accordingly, while also providing a foundation for the Common Core–aligned interim assessments that students took on a quarterly basis.

Modules, the associated performance tasks, and assessments were used to hold teachers and students accountable for progress and success. Students’ results on interim assessments were used as indicators of teacher effectiveness and to inform instruction on a

day-to-day basis. Teachers and administrators also engaged in weekly data analysis meetings, using data from module assessments, performance tasks, and interim assessments to determine which classrooms were performing well and why. This consistent use of and reflection on student data and curricular design was onerous for teachers. However, teachers shared these struggles and collaborated with administrators to redesign the school calendar to facilitate the use of modules and their alignment to frequent interim assessment and data analysis. The teacher who took lead on this initiative described the new calendar as

Eight weeks on, two weeks off. Every quarter we have a two-week break. The purpose is A) for planning time, and B) for remediation . . . Once we started the self-paced model, I think we realized that if we were going to be true to it, then we had to build something where teachers could plan and really dig deep into looking at what went well the previous quarter in order to inform their next quarter in their planning process.

This new calendar was the result of give-and-take between the needs to demonstrate progress and adhere to a rigorous assessment schedule, the design of the school as teachers envisioned it, and the needs of teachers to enact that vision. In essence, teachers had to respond to and align their practices to institutional and organizational priorities—the Common Core, “no excuses,” data-driven instruction, and accountability—while still maintaining an emphasis on personalization and student and teacher choice. Teachers and administrators had to rely on collaboration to strike a balance among the demands of accountability and standardization, the CMO’s desire for replicability and scalability, and the needs of the community of teachers to enact personalization at the classroom-level.

Discussion: Finding a Balance with Collaborative Community

Initially, we saw the dynamics at GA as illustrative of tensions between top-down reform processes built on marketization and a more organic bottom-up process of teacher community. And indeed, the democratic vision of personalized learning and self-pacing was at first cut short by external pressures to demonstrate results. But there was another part of the story that was not fully or even partially explained by the market-based reform versus collaboration and community narrative. The community at GA evolved as the school model did, and as it evolved, teachers *and* administrators at GA strategically used collaboration to respond to complex pressures from outside and within.

Drawing on the language of the organizational forms of community outlined earlier, the school initially exhibited a form of “charismatic community” coupled with a more “traditionalistic community” in which the founding teachers and administrators rallied around the founder’s vision, but the reform process was more ground-up than top-down. After a disappointing first year that was stressful for teachers, the new principal/CEO pulled back on self-pacing and personalization and instituted “ongoing key metrics” to increase accountability for student outcomes. He also took charge of implementing a new discipline system. Here, a form of

incentives- and accountability-based “contractual community” took shape, which resulted in some tension among community members. Teachers felt that they had very little say in how the new systems were designed and executed, and not all of them were on board. In the words of one founding teacher, “I went from being completely frustrated and hating the job, to trying to adjust and give them [the administration] what they want, to, ‘Hey, this is me, and I’m not changing it.’” Several other teachers echoed her frustration with the tension between the prioritization of accountability and the concept of personalization as well. Then, as the school moved toward implementing modules with individualized pacing plans for students, there was a tension between the amount of work teachers were being asked to do and the results the administrators expected from them. Teachers or administrators could have responded to this tension and others by “digging in their heels” and reverting to a more “traditionalistic” community in which members valued current approaches, traditional teaching, and embraced a “circle the wagons” approach to change. In response to tension, however, a form of “collaborative community” that embraced interdependence, rather than hierarchy, began to take shape. Teachers were given a seat at the table, so to speak, and this opportunity for discussion and collaboration allowed changes and new practices to take hold.

Through this collaborative community, teachers worked together with administrators to reshape the school calendar to better facilitate personalized pacing for students and to create a more feasible workload for teachers. This change supported the schedule of interim assessments and data analysis required by a high-accountability environment but took into account teachers’ needs and the needs of personalization. Additionally, the new principal and a group of teacher leaders piloted and then introduced a process for creating subject-specific and grade-level support for teachers who were struggling to develop modules to teach the complex tasks demanded by the new standards and the school’s interpretation of them. These changes were introduced in the context of the accountability-driven school model and were seen as extensions of that model, rather than rejections of it. From this work, a community of teacher-leaders emerged who were invested in developing new forms of assessments driven by strong curriculum, pushing for changes such as redesign in planning time, and even changing the structure of the school year, in order to allow the team to better knit the performance tasks to a valid rubric for assessing students’ progress.

The collaborative community that emerged in the school’s third year seemed organized around a different set of principles than that which had first brought the school into being—a structured contract and charter with a for-profit network. As school staff were digging deep into the question of modules, performance-based assessments, and a restructured school year, the charter school’s network leaders were entertaining the question of how to scale up. Rather than canceling each other out, or stymying work altogether, the deliberations within each community type—“contractual” and “collaborative,” in this case—unfolded simultaneously, sometimes in tension but other times synergistically. The scale-up conversation nudged the authentic curriculum and assessments conversation into a more

coordinated pilot, with clear parameters and feedback loops for organizational learning. The authentic curriculum and assessment conversation made its way into the discussion of how to bring the school model to scale, as descriptions of teachers' collaborative work on assessments ignited discussion about the risks of scaling up too fast absent clear data on the curriculum.

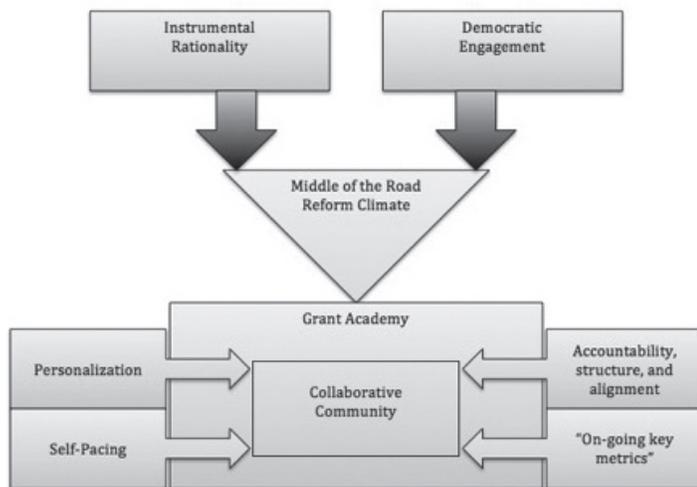


Figure 1. Collaborative Community at Grant Academy

Grant Academy is an example of teachers and administrators attempting to balance and attend to both the values (democratic ideas and attention to individual student needs) and the outcomes (demonstrable, quantifiable results) of education as a profession. The collaborative community in which Grant Academy's educators eventually engaged allowed them to navigate the sometimes competing ideals of instrumental rationality (e.g., standardization, accountability, measurable results, and key metrics) and democratic engagement (e.g., personalization, student self-pacing, and teacher input). (See Figure 1.) The instrumental rationality of the current reform environment has meant that teachers and administrators there must conform "to formal bureaucratic standards and to market norms of self-interest" (Adler et al., 2015, p. 312). Yet the school and its teachers still demonstrated "a commitment to a higher social purpose and to the organizational systems that support collaboration in the pursuit of that purpose" (Adler et al., 2015, p. 313).

We often see arguments for (or against) either market-based (instrumental rational) or community-based (democratic engagement) policy instruments in education policy research. For example, Ravitch wrote frequently about the evils of market-based reforms (Ravitch, 2013, 2016). Others have published studies claiming "non-market oriented" school districts outperform "market-oriented" districts (Weiss & Long, 2013). However, our work at GA demonstrates that market-based instruments like incentives and community-based instruments like democratic voice are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On the contrary, a give and take between the two can be a mechanism for policy implementation and critical change, not only to how we think about teaching and teacher community but to how schools create spaces for community and collaboration, within a climate of instrumental rationality, that can lead to change.

Preliminary Considerations on the Concept of Collaborative Community

The current wave of educational reform is complex and situated in both instrumental rationality and democratic engagement. The educational policy landscape is one based in marketization, standardization, and accountability coupled with a renewed emphasis on local autonomy, deliberation, and community—middle-of-the-road reforms. A central aim of this paper is to reconsider the perceived tension between instrumental rational reforms and those based in democratic engagement. Make no mistake, vast tensions do exist between these two reform models, specifically in the presumptions they offer about the role of government or market in addressing public policy. We are not defending instrumental rationality or reforms rooted in democratic engagement. Our argument is that we need to take a close look at the problems and realities of practitioners working inside of schools as communities. As part of this argument, we offer a very preliminary sketch of how community is invoked by teachers and administrators at a particular school within a policy and institutional context where both reform models (sometimes uneasily) coexist.

By preliminary, we mean open to consideration and outright rejection. In the spirit of opening this debate, we consider several possible objections to the utility of thinking about types of community that form in response to market-based reforms. It might be objected that the Weberian typology of community is redundant with prior work on the role of community in educational change. Indeed, there is a long and robust literature on teachers' professional communities and their importance in reform implementation (e.g., Coburn & Russell, 2008; Gallucci, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). For example, scholars working in this space have suggested that community should not be conflated with normative conceptions of rich democratic dialogue (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001). Teacher professional communities can reproduce power asymmetries in schools where the least powerful voices are silenced (Achinstein, 2002). The quality of the interaction in a community also has implications for the enactment and sustainability of a reform. When a teacher is involved in a community in which there is frequent and ongoing discussion of a policy or instructional reform, there is greater opportunity for lasting changes in instruction (Spillane & Zeuli, 1999; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Further, a community that embraces conflict and engages in open discussion about dissenting opinions creates the context and opportunity for learning (Achinstein, 2002). On the other hand, a teacher community that exhibits "pseudo-community," in which teachers exhibit "surface friendliness" and behave as if they all agree (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001), may encourage further isolation, dismantling the opportunity for community learning. The considerations we have raised about the role of collaborative community in response to complex policy contexts is consistent with this literature. However, we also think that research comparing and evaluating public policy can be better leveraged by theorizing that more precisely links different

kinds of community to different forms of authority, social action, and ultimately, reform.

It also might be argued that the idea of collaborative community is implicit in or naturally follows from reforms rooted in theories of democratic engagement. From this perspective, policy designs rooted in theories of democratic participation come first, and the authority and ability of teachers to use community to their benefit is largely dependent on the existence of the policy design itself. The account we have provided is somewhat consistent with this view. If teachers at Grant Academy had not been given the right to develop their own curriculum/modules, then much of the work that they conducted would have been challenged or at times impossible. Our suggestion is that some features of democratic engagement are conditional to collaborative community, but other assumed features, such as the inherent tension between school choice and charters and democratic engagement may be more malleable—creating dilemmas for teachers in schools and paradoxes in their work, as opposed to unmovable roadblocks. By the same token, the argument that market-based reforms by design work against teacher collaboration might be too reductive. Of course, it can be argued that certain features of market-based reforms (such as giving external corporations the right to intervene in public schools without rigorous oversight) can work against the formation of professional community in schools. However, we maintain that market-based reforms do not necessarily preclude the possibility of democratic deliberation at the school level. Instead, as demonstrated by the teachers and administrators at Grant Academy, democratic deliberation within an environment of instrumental rationality can lead to change when facilitated at the school-level.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, the school system in the United States has undergone a radical period of reform with increased emphasis on neoliberal, market-like pressures including competition and consumer choice. While not dismissing the intensity of market-like pressures, this article has drawn attention to the complexity of current reforms, specifically the larger environment of ideas that emphasizes marketization and bureaucratization—instrumental rationality—alongside local, community-based engagement. To date, there has been little discussion of the structures at the school level that provide teachers with the opportunity to dialogue about *how* to implement reforms in this context, and *what* changes in curricular, instructional, and assessment practices specific to their school context are involved in this work. Our work at Grant Academy demonstrates the power of collaborative community when confronted with a complex policy climate that prioritizes marketization, bureaucratization, and democratic engagement. Organizations within which teachers work—schools—would benefit from being reshaped in such a way that responds to the trend toward market-based reforms *and* enables deeper collaborative practices, deliberation, and dialogue. Acknowledging the tension between instrumental rationality and democratic engagement, but not allowing it to stymie progress is a first step.

Leveraging community, and paying attention to the types of community supported by the school as an organization, is one way to do this. More empirically grounded research and dialogue is needed to help schools meet policy challenges and find productive ways of integrating democratic processes within the current policy climate toward the goal of greater equity and quality for all students.

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