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Summer 2020

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Hamann, Edmund T., "Partners, Not Adversaries: Higher Education and Diverse Schools" (2020). *Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education*. 431.
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Partners, Not Adversaries: Higher Education and Diverse Schools

By Edmund T. Hamann

Abstract

Often education researchers enter schools only to depict inequity and weak practice, but the same empirical skills that illuminate challenges can, under a different premise, illuminate excellence. This chapter describes how graduate students enrolled in an “Effecting High School Improvement” course helped a diverse public high school document its excellence and win National Education Policy Center (NEPC) recognition as a “School of Opportunity.” Although this case is unique in specific detail, other school/higher education partnerships could clearly function like this one did. Good schools may not have staff to document their multifaceted responsiveness to diverse enrollments, but, with university assistance, they can. In turn, such efforts to “document the good” can provide important practice, from both a research methods standpoint and as an ethical stance, for scholars in preparation.

Keywords: research ethics, anthropology of education, public education

As Levinson and Holland (1996) lay out eloquently, anthropologists of education trained to identify and depict how schooling can replicate an unequal social order often find themselves in paradoxical position—we find ourselves criticizing, grounded by empirical facts to be sure, the very institutions and people that allowed us into their doors. Moreover, Laura Nader’s (1972) call to “study up” notwithstanding, we often find ourselves visiting and studying in the most “non-White,” highest poverty, and most struggling schools. This is partially because

we are frequently concerned with inequity and intergroup relations. Nonetheless, our critical lenses are more frequently deployed depicting schools that the larger society has already shown its willingness to understand as weaker, problematic, or, in the nefarious words of No Child Left Behind, as “failing.”

This identifies two important problems to the practice of anthropology in schools. First, why should gatekeepers let us in if we subsequently are critical of them and/or others where they work? Second, how does it help schools with complex challenges if our work appears to reinforce a public narrative that sees those same schools as flawed or failing? But there is a third large challenge that also should be named: many anthropologists of education are “applied-ish anthropologists” (Hamann 2016)—that is, they are based in academia but in schools of education (rather than arts and sciences) where the primary task is the preparation of teachers, administrators, etc. That means we depend on schools as sites for practicums and student teaching assignments and as sources of part-time graduate students. So if our research criticizes the very same places with which we want to partner, then we are undercutting that portion of our work devoted to the professional preparation of responsive, capable educators who are familiar with and skilled at tackling the vexing challenges of demographically diverse schools with high poverty, high mobility, low parent education levels, and other dynamics often associated with “low performance” (Berliner and Glass 2014).

So it is in the face of and, in important ways, in response to these three challenges that I depict one component of a successful partnership with Lincoln High School, the oldest high school (of six) in Nebraska’s capital city. Lincoln High has the highest poverty rate (65%), enrolls students who speak more than thirty native languages at home, and is Lincoln’s only high school for which White students do not compose the majority. Lincoln High School was recently recognized by the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) at CU-Boulder as a “Gold” level, 2017 “School of Opportunity,”¹ the first Nebraska high school to ever be so recognized and one of the first forty-five public high schools ever to receive this recognition. (Seven more schools have been recognized since Lincoln High’s recognition). As part of the recognition, Lincoln High was profiled in the *Washington Post*² by their education columnist Valerie Strauss.

The remainder of this essay explains how, in the spirit of practicing anthropology, my graduate students and I from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln collaborated with Lincoln High educators to craft the application that led to the NEPC recognition and the opportunities that that recognition has subsequently enabled (e.g., favorable press, enhanced school spirit, increased attractiveness to prospective new students, more support for some of its initiatives like partnering with local community organizations for mentoring programs and family support). In turn, it proposes to offer an alternative pathway in which the preparation of future anthropologists of education can remain empirical but be associated with supporting large urban public schools rather than criticizing them. Our project did not pretend that Lincoln High faces no challenges; rather, it spotlighted and celebrated efforts to attend to those challenges.

Visiting a School/Writing an Application

When I began tenure-line employment in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2005, I had already spent six years (since earning my doctorate) affiliated with the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (the LAB at Brown), a federally-funded entity then-affiliated with Brown University. That previous experience pertains two ways here—it meant that I brought to Nebraska a significant background having considered high school equity and improvement efforts (see, e.g., Hamann [2005] and Meltzer and Hamann [2005]) and that I brought an applied orientation.

The regional educational laboratories were created to engage in applied research intended to help particular schools, districts, and states take on various educational challenges and then to document the processes sufficiently that the particular lessons from a given site could inform efforts at other sites. For the LAB at Brown, I spent six years studying state efforts—particularly in Maine and Vermont—to improve high schools, examined the overlap (and lack thereof) between improvement efforts and the inclusion of English learners, and studied the idea of content area literacy and, related to that, how all content area teachers are also language teachers. So it followed that,

at Nebraska, I created a graduate-level class called “Effecting High School Improvement” and first taught it in 2006.

According to the syllabus for both my first rendering of that class and the most recent version in 2017, “This course uses various lenses to consider how to improve high schools in non-ephemeral ways, ranging from rethinking the micro-scale of individual student interaction with teachers and curriculum to considerations at the macro-level of state department and federal efforts at high school reform.”

Although it has required some maneuvering given the weekly class has met in the evening and schools are open during the day, since the first version of the course, site visits to high schools have been part of the syllabus. While many enrollees have been current or former high school teachers, I have included site visits for several reasons. First, visits gave different students (with different biographies) a few schools that they had seen in common. Thus, they can make reference to the “mod schedule we saw at Westside,” “the magnet program we saw at Omaha North,” or “the Spanish for Heritage Speakers class at Crete.” Second, while many of my students had been in schools as teachers or counselors or, earlier, as students, few have been there wearing even a loose lens as “researcher” or “ethnographer,” where the primary charge was to observe and make sense of what was going on.

Acknowledging to my students that critical characterizations of schools can cause complications for schools and limit access for researchers (i.e., both parties can lose but in different way), in the first six renderings of the course (prior to 2017), I mitigated that risk by pointing out to my students that, based on a visit to a school of just several hours, there was no way we could know that school well enough to form defensible conclusions about it (that was also a point I made to school personnel who allowed us access to their schools). Being familiar enough with a place to be able to talk about it in class is a different and lower standard than being safely able to make evaluative comments (Maxwell 1992). But risk mitigation is not the same as an applied or advocacy-oriented stance.

Going back to my “applied-ish anthropologist” label (Hamann 2016), I wanted to think about how schools’ indulgence of my desire to visit with graduate students, my desire to orient them towards how to see and interact with prospective research sites, could be reciprocated

so that those sites, in turn, gained something from our visit as well. That was the background that led to the 2017 effort by my “Effecting High School Improvement” class to gather information at Lincoln High and then craft a first-draft application for recognition of that school as a NEPC “School of Opportunity.” I claim the act of volunteering labor that could help the school accomplish something it would pursue if it had the time can be replicated (changing details) by any similar graduate course that intends to help students think about ethics, value, and reciprocity related to their research site.

Crafting an Application for Recognition

I am not sure when I first heard about the NEPC’s Schools of Opportunity. For sure, it was after 2010 (which was when the National Education Policy Center was first created); likely it was either in January 2015 or January 2016 when Valerie Strauss would have profiled in her *Washington Post* “Answer Sheet” blog the first two cohorts of high schools recognized as Schools of Opportunity. At any rate, the spring of 2017 was the first time I taught “Effecting High School Improvement” course where writing an application was a possible class activity, but I concede it was not originally on the syllabus.

When I create a syllabus, I usually number it with a whole number and then a second number after the decimal point, explicitly intending to link syllabus drafts to the same metric used in software updates. So version 7.0 of “Effecting High School Improvement” indicated that it was the seventh time I had taught the class but the first version of that seventh class’s syllabus. Version 7.1 would be an update of version 7.0, and then version 7.2 would update version 7.1. In updating a syllabus, I won’t change large pieces of the class (e.g., required books, major assignments, etc.), but the updates do allow refining the syllabus in response to possibilities and limitations not known at the time the course commences.

So it was that version 7.2 included the application for recognition tie-in after the promise made in 7.0 to organize site visits and to expect reflective blogging about those visits had been revealed as challenging because of students’ daytime responsibilities. When we decided that vicissitudes in our various schedules meant that only a

single visit to Lincoln High was possible (with one being the lowest number of school visits ever associated with the course), I decided (1) that we needed to add greater structure and depth to that one visit and (2) that the expectation of multiple blog posts about multiple schools needed to be changed to multiple posts related to our single visit. Fortunately, writing to the criteria of the Schools of Opportunity application lent itself to that idea of multiple complementary postings about a single site.

The Schools of Opportunity are appraised on ten criteria³, with the applicant having to explain their strengths related to the first two criteria—1. Broaden and enrich learning opportunities and 2. Create and maintain healthy school culture—and then getting to select which four of the remaining eight that they will write about. The other eight criteria are:

3. Provide more and better learning time;
4. Use multiple measures to assess student learning;
5. Support teachers as professionals;
6. Provide rich, supportive opportunities for students with special needs;
7. Provide students with additional needed services and supports;
8. Enact a challenging and supported culturally relevant curriculum;
9. Build on the strengths of language minority students; and
10. Sustain equitable and meaningful parent and community engagement.

All of these criteria are informed by the research of Kevin Weiner, Gene Glass, and other senior NEPC figures (e.g., Berliner and Glass 2014; Carter and Weiner 2013), as well as a number of anthropologists of education, like Norma González and Marjorie Faulstich Orellana (e.g., González, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Orellana 2015). While we collected material related to all ten criteria, Lincoln High chose to have its answers to criteria (1), (2), (5), (7), (9) and (10) constitute its application. Consistent with Peshkin's (1994:1) insistence on "speaking to and not down to," it was an important part of this project that it remain Lincoln High leaders' decision as to which criteria to emphasize and even whether to submit the application that we helped them prepare or not.

To prepare the draft application, we arranged for all five graduate students and me to visit Lincoln High for a day during the week that UNL was on Spring Break but Lincoln Public Schools were in session. That took away an obstacle for one of the five students (who works at UNL), but the other four participated by taking personal days from their jobs. Prior to our visit, during class time, we reviewed the School of Opportunity criteria and figured out how we would gather the information necessary to write substantively about the school's efforts in each domain.

Consistent with Cervantes-Soon's (2017) strategy to talk to the school leadership to figure out who else to talk to, I worked with the principal to arrange a schedule that would have us work sequentially, in dyads (i.e., two grad students together, or one grad student and me), with various aggregations of teachers, staff, and students. The principal knew who might provide us the most useful information for various topics, and he also knew which periods of the day he could pull someone to talk with us and which periods that would not work as well. Our visit began with a conversation with the principal and then a student-led tour of the building, which was confined to corridors and non-classroom spaces, like the cafeteria and media center, where our presence would not be a disruption. Then we ended up in a large multipurpose room where we could conduct three small-group conversations at a time with the various school stakeholders.

Our informants varied in terms of how much they knew about why we were there. So most conversations began with a brief review of who we were and what the School of Opportunity application process entailed. All, however, knew that we were there with the principal's permission and collaboration, and each endeavored to be as candid and helpful as they could. In several instances, those we spoke with referenced frameworks, grant applications, and planning documents, which we subsequently collected as text artifacts that complemented the information we received orally.

After our visit, each of the grad students took the lead on writing up responses to two of the ten criteria with each "lead author" being backed by a classmate who copyedited, revised, and supplemented the first version. I then read across all ten answers, making requisite additions (e.g., from the research literature and state education report card) and revisions, and wrote an introduction for the application. I

then turned the application materials over to the principal. At the beginning of May, at the deadline, he submitted it.

Apart from acknowledging receipt, the response from NEPC was slow. I remember seeing the principal at a high school football game the following October and asking if he had heard anything yet. When he said he had not, he then quickly added that it was a worthwhile exercise anyway because it had given the school a useful chance to reflect and had generated text helpful for school improvement plans and similar uses. But then, later that month, he received a call saying Lincoln High was a finalist and asking if it could host a one-day site visit. A related email explained, "The purpose of the visit is to confirm the accuracy of your application and to learn more about how your school engages students and teachers in purposeful, equitable work."

In early November, Lincoln High welcomed two researchers from NEPC. Per advance arrangement, they met with a group of approximately twenty parents, teachers, and students for an hour and had a chance to wander the halls and visit various classrooms. I met the researchers for a cup of coffee before their visit, helped deliver them to Lincoln High, and was able to sit in (silently) as they engaged the aforementioned panel. I did not accompany them to the classrooms, but I did join them for lunch afterwards and took them to our iconic state capitol building for a quick free visit (an observation deck on the 14th floor allows one to look at Lincoln High from above from a quarter mile distance and also to see its catchment zone and surrounding environs) before they headed back to Colorado. As they were driving home, I wrote a short email :

Hopefully you're safely home by the time you read this. Thanks ... for your visit to Lincoln and Lincoln High today If you have any further questions please don't hesitate to reach out. As a single final point, I think it's interesting to think of Lincoln High in relation to the larger district ecology. As you know, Lincoln High is the only high school in Lincoln where the majority of students are not White. In that context, it is crucial that it not be understood as the weakest school in the system (a title it would not deserve at any rate, but racism is not logical). Phrased a different way, it is important that the success of students of color in Lincoln Public

Schools not be understood as “less than” because the high school where they have that success is seen as “less than.” In that spirit, for Lincoln High to truly be a school of opportunity, it not only needs to be carefully inclusive, but it needs to be excellent (and understood as such). To its [sic] immense credit, I think that it is.

That was the last of our communication until January 2018 when we received the welcome news that Lincoln High had been selected for recognition as a “gold level” School of Opportunity. That news was briefly embargoed so that the school district could draft a press release and other recipients could assemble similar announcements. (Lincoln High was one of eight public high schools recognized in this competition.) Then a big joint announcement was made, and the *Washington Post* published the first of its two stories. The first story described the competition/recognition and traced brief descriptions of all eight awardees. A second story later in the spring described just Lincoln High.

Reflections and Larger Implications

In an interview I did with him for the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center,⁴ the principal explained:

This recognition has been a very positive thing for our school. Being an educator is not an easy gig, and sometimes, especially in today’s political climate, it is a thankless one. And working in a building like ours, in a district like ours, sometimes we don’t get recognized for our hard work. This award has provided affirmation to our staff, students, and community about the great place that Lincoln High is and has provided us encouragement to build on what we have. We have been recognized by our School Board and Administration, by the Local Newspaper, and our State Legislature.

In a later part of the same interview, I asked if he had been hesitant at any point welcoming us to Lincoln High. He conceded:

I'd be lying if I didn't hesitate some when the opportunity for this collaboration came up originally. As a school leader, I knew that we were going to be vulnerable. We talk to our teachers all of the time about how the most important thing you can do to improve is to watch someone else teach or to have someone else watch you teach and give you feedback. I felt like this was a great opportunity for us to get feedback on what we are doing well and on areas where we needed to improve.

If the experience was ultimately good for Lincoln High (and per my ethics it was crucial that it was), it also generated a sense of pride among my now-former students. When I emailed them with the news of the recognition and passed their names along to our College of Education and Human Sciences communication officer, one explained:

It's rare to get an opportunity to see class concepts being put into practice in real time. Visiting Lincoln High helped us to frame our discussions around effecting high school improvement in terms of real people, at a real school, trying to make things better for their students. I was impressed by Lincoln High's knowledge of current research in education, as well as their sincere effort to put what they learned into practice. Most importantly, LHS saw improvement as an endless process and continues to work toward becoming a better, more equitable place for all their students.

This was a process not without risks. While we endeavored to be trustworthy to Lincoln High's educators, it remained the case that they took a chance on giving us access. In turn, I think this process is remembered much more and much more favorably because of the external recognition that it generated. I think the principal was sincere on that early fall day, before we knew Lincoln High was a finalist, when he said the generation of text was itself useful, but at that stage, it felt like a pretty big mobilization for what to that point was a very small reward. Still, ultimately, I think and hope that this experience outlines that the needs of researchers and researchers-to-be can

be reconciled with the needs of practitioners in service to the shared work of documenting good school practices that help a comprehensive public high school with diverse enrollment favorably shape rising generations.

Notes

- 1 URL: <http://schoolsofopportunity.org/recipient-details/lincoln-highschool>
- 2 URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2018/01/22/here-are-eight-schools-of-opportunity-that-do-extraordinary-things-for-students/?utm_term=.5b4e9ge22196
- 3 URL: <http://schoolsofopportunity.org/selection-criteria>
- 4 URL: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub/288>

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