Social Learning Capabilities in Broward's Black Male Success Task Force: Informing Collective Impact Initiatives

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Abstract: Broward Schools is addressing an achievement gap for Black males with a collective impact initiative. Collective impact initiatives address complex social problems. The social learning capability of the initiative can be enhanced by applying Wenger's (2009) social learning spaces, learning as citizenship, and social artists concepts.

The persistence of the achievement gap where Black children underperform educationally demands more effective solutions (Holzam, 2012). "Organizations have attempted to solve social problems by collaboration for decades without producing results. The vast majority of these efforts lack the elements of success that enable collective impact initiatives to achieve a sustained alignment of efforts" (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 39). Broward County Public Schools started a collect impact initiative in School Year 2012 – 2013 to address its achievement gap. As the sixth largest school district in the United States with over 48,000 Black male students, Broward County Schools Black males' graduation rate is only 72%, 11% percent lower than the district graduation rate (Clement, 2012). In addition, almost twice as many Black male students are suspended (25%) versus 13% of the total school population (Clement, 2012). Broward has only achieved small incremental improvement in Black male graduation rates with prior collaborations. Superintendent Robert Runcie initiated the Black Male Success (BMS) Task force by partnering with the Broward Children's Strategic Plan (the Plan), an 11-year old community strategic planning process with over 200 child serving agencies, philanthropic foundations, and community leaders, and the South Florida Educational Research Alliance (SFERA), a collaborative of local faculty and graduate students that provide community based evaluation.

Collective impact includes five strategies to create community conditions of well-being including creating a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone organization to support the work. The collective impact strategies do not explicitly address the social learning capabilities of the collective impact initiative (Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012; Kania & Kramer, 2011). Without explicit delineation of strategies to promote learning on what works, collective impact initiatives miss important opportunities to create new practices and identities to achieve the shared result. Learning capabilities inherent in social systems shift the view of "learning as acquisition of a curriculum to a process inherent in our social systems" (Wenger, 2009, p. 2). Social learning capabilities involve both social practices and participant identity level work. Social learning capabilities in social systems, such as collective impact initiatives, are fostered by explicit social learning spaces, ethical learning citizenship, and effective social artists (Wenger, 2009). The purpose of this paper is to compare the BMS Task Force's collective impact processes with the components that foster social learning capability to identify learning enhancements to the collective impact process. The paper presents the components that foster social learning capability, a description of the BMS Task Force processes and corresponding

opportunities to enhance social learning capabilities, and implications for collective impact initiatives.

Components that Foster Social Learning Capability

Learning capability may be one of the most important characteristics to cultivate in social systems (Wenger, 2010). Learning has both individual and social dimensions. Individually, learning is about "the person as a social participant, as a meaning-making entity for whom the social world is a resource for constituting an identity" (Wenger, 2010, p. 2). For example, BMS Task Force members derive some of their identity from actively participating and making meaning of their efforts to close the achievement gap. Socially, learning in social systems includes producing practices that create social structures and systems and identifying systemic patterns and generating ideas for action (Wenger, 2009). For example, the practice of negotiating a common agenda results in a reified focus to guide the work of the BMS Task Force members. Social learning capabilities, at both the individual identity and social practice level, are strengthened by creating social learning spaces, fostering learning citizenship, and developing social artists.

Social Learning Spaces

Social learning spaces are "social containers that enable participants to learn what works" or do not work by using a high level of rigor in the inquiry of what is working (Wenger, 2009, p. 3). Rigor of inquiry comes from participant accountability and expressibility. Accountability means the work participants do to refine and expand their experience of practice. Practice is a place of knowledge. Accountability also involves participants "ability to become the person who will do the knowing" (Wenger, 2009, p. 4). Participants must learn the knowledge and skills necessary to engage cross-sector partners, discourses, and motivations. This knowledge is different than discourses, motivations, and knowledge found within an organization.

Rigor of inquiry is also evident in participant expressibility. Participants need to be able to bring their experiences of practices into the social learning space and make it accessible to other participants to fully develop the learning capability. Even tacit knowledge will eventually become a shared context of experience from substantial mutual engagement. Both accountability and expressibility can be fostered intentionally and systematically throughout a social system. Knowing as practice means that practice is the curriculum of the social learning space. Overtime, participants refine and expand their experience of practice and further develop the social learning spaces.

Learning Citizenship

Learning citizenship includes four practices and the recognition of identity as a learning resource. The four practices, briefly described here, are engagement, moving on, brokering, and convening (Wenger, 2009). Participants exercise learning citizenship through quality engagement with others in the social learning space by being open, authentic, responsive, and vulnerable. Participants also need to know when and how to move on or unlearn and let go of historical practices that are no longer effective or useful. Participants practice learning citizenship when they "import or export significant insights or challenges across the boundaries between the spaces" (Wenger, 2009, p. 7). And, finally, participants excise learning citizenship by convening partners and creating networks of connections that did not exist previously. These four practices contribute to fostering the social learning capability.

Learning citizenship also acknowledges the role of identity in promoting social learning capability. "As learning citizens, we proceed from who we are – our personal histories, connections, networks, vision, aspirations, and position in the landscape of practice – to find

forms of participation that increase learning capability" (Wenger, 2009, p. 8). Learning citizens are most effective when they participate in a voluntary, authentic and ethical manner. The participation of learning citizens has both local and systemic effects. For example, participant's need to share their own vision of the well-being of Broward's black boys and young men to create a robust shared agenda. Both the practices and identity of learning as citizenship foster social learning capability.

Social Artist

Social artists create the environments that foster social learning spaces and foster learning citizenship (Wenger, 2009). Social artists enable participants to maximize meaningful and effective learning by providing the leadership necessary to create and evolve social learning spaces. Social artists facilitate trust, comfort, and engagement of the whole person to maximize learning. In an often intuitive fashion, social artists navigate the paradoxes of being idealistic yet pragmatic, collaborative yet willful, and social yet intentional (Wenger, 2009). Through delicate balancing, social artists create high-energy social spaces where learning thrives.

Social artists help participants experience themselves as learning citizens, releasing care, vision, talents, and individual resources and channel these qualities into learning (Wenger, 2009). Social artists do not mandate or require learning as citizenship but rather create opportunities for participants to identify their learning as citizenship resources and potential and how to connect them within the social learning space. Opening social learning spaces and fostering learning citizenship identity are two key functions of a social artist. The BMS Task Force and the collective impact practices it uses will be compared to the social learning spaces, learning citizenship, and social artist components to identify enhancement opportunities.

BMS Task Force Collective Impact Processes and Social Learning Capabilities

The partnership between the School District, the Plan, and the SFERA adopted the collective impact approach (Hanleybrown et al., 2012) to solve complex, complicated community problems such as the low graduation rates for Black males, disproportionate rates of juvenile delinquency, and low college completion rates. The Executive Director of the District's Student Supports Initiatives reached out to the Children's Services Council (CSC) of Broward County's Director of Research, Analysis and Planning to re-create the BMS Task Force. CSC is an independent tax district created by Broward voters in 2000 to fund prevention programs such as afterschool and summer, diversion, and family strengthening programs. In addition to providing $60 million dollars for programs, CSC provides the leadership for the Broward Children's Strategic Plan, a cross-sector collaboration of 34 committees that uses Results Based Accountability (Friedman, 2005) to improve the well-being of children and families.

Results Based Accountability (RBA) is one type of collective impact process (Friedman, 2005). The practice has six elements: (1) agreeing on a shared result or community condition of well-being (i.e., children live in safe and supportive families), (2) using specific community indicator data to see how if the community is getting better or worse (i.e., rate of abuse and neglect, rate of children placed in foster care), (3) describing the causes and forces the rate going up or down (i.e., an increase in abuse in Broward was due to the economic downturn); (4) identifying cross-sector partners to help in the work (i.e., Department of Children and Families, businesses, schools, families, etc.); (5) researching evidence based strategies to implement to improve the community condition of well-being; and (6) developing an action plan that delineates the strategies each partner will implement.

In addition, the Executive Director partnered with the South Florida Education Research Alliance to provide an evaluation of the Task Force initiative. Structurally, the task force will

integrate the district's Innovation Zones with the Plan's committees using RBA as its collective impact framework. An Innovation Zone is comprised of elementary schools that feed into middle schools that feed into a high school. Broward School District has 28 high schools and 28 Innovation Zones. Each zone has regular meetings with the elementary, middle, and high school principals and other key school staff. Each zone identified a BMS Task Force Ambassador to lead the collective impact process in his/her zone.

The Plan currently has 34 communities and subcommittees that work on creating five results for Broward's children and families: (1) children live in safe and nurturing families, (2) children are physically and mentally healthy, (3) children are ready to succeed in school, (4) young people successfully transition to adulthood, and (5) children live in safe and supportive communities. Specifically, committees address issues from preventing abuse and neglect in families, to providing quality early education, reducing juvenile delinquency, and supporting youth who are aging out of foster care. Committees are led by program directors /managers from community based organizations and the CSC. The Plan also has a Leadership Coalition comprised of CEOs, local heads of state agencies such as the Department of Children and Families, philanthropic executives, and other community leaders that meet on a quarterly basis to provide oversight, resources, and strategies to the committees. Committee chairs and members have been trained in and use RBA to frame and drive their work in the committees.

Common Agenda

Developing a common or shared agenda for a cross-sector collaboration of partners is difficult. Two primary tasks are involved in developing a common agenda. The first task is to come to shared understanding of the problem (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Due to the multiple perspectives of the partners, the problem may be difficult to define. For example, is the problem of low Black male graduation due to the deficits of students, parents, teachers, and/or community? Is the problem only the result of deficits or has there not been enough attention on developing strengths and talents? Fortunately, the collective impact process can be successful with agreement on the primary goals rather than consensus on all dimensions of the issue (Kania & Kramer, 2011). The desired, shared result of the BMS Task Force is for all of Broward's Black boys and young men to succeed in school, family, work, and life (Black Male Success Task Force, 2012).

The second task is to identify the strategic action framework including the boundary or scope of the issue to be addressed (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). The framework is not a rigid theory of change or an elaborate plan. Rather, it outlines the basic hypothesis of the group of what it will take to create the desired change. The BMS Task Force is using evidence based strategies and RBA as the strategic frame. Innovation Zone committees define a flexible, one page understanding of the geographic scope and key factors using a one-page Turn the Curve report to communicate the data, causes, partners, strategies, actions and accomplishments.

Neither the BMS Task Force nor the RBA framework include an explicit discussion about how to maximize learning about practices that work or participants' identity as learning citizens to create the common agenda. Neither the BMS Leadership nor the Plan's Leadership Coalition are identified as social learning spaces although the discussion often revolves around what is working and what is not working. By identifying the meetings as social learning spaces, accountability and expressibility can be evaluated and improved. In addition, Wenger (2009) recommends participants identify the meaning of their participation in the social system to establish shared motivations, build trust, and highlight unique resources. The discussion to share participant identity does not systematically occur in the BMS Task Force process. While

Hanleybrown et al. (2012) indicate that the process should allow for an "organic learning process" based on trial and error, new learning, changes in the context, and new partners with new ideas and priorities (p. 5), the ideas of an explicit learning space with learning citizens created by social artists would highlight and validate learning opportunities and practices.

Shared Measurement System

Collective impact approaches use data as a focal point for alignment and accountability (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Shared measurement is "the use of a common set of measures to monitor performance, track progress toward goals, and learn what is or is not working." (Hanleybrown et al., 2012, p. 5). Measures for the BMS Task Force include aggregate rates of passing reading and math standardized test scores, school attendance, and internal and external suspensions for each school within an Innovation Zone and in the Innovation Zone as a whole. The school district provides the data to the Innovation Zones on a yearly basis. Eventually, the district will provide student specific data to the Innovation Zone committees to identify needs and opportunities for individualized supports.

The challenge with shared measurement systems in collect impact initiatives is finding the resources (time and money) to produce high quality data, deal with the fear of being judged and punished for low performance rather than learning what is working or not, and competing agency priorities such as providing service rather than collecting and analyzing data. The benefits of overcoming the challenges include establishing a common language (i.e., shared data sets) to focus the efforts, being able to better define which strategies are working or not, and creating confidentiality and transparency for mutual accountability (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). With robust, meaningful data, partners in collective impact work can document progress and learn to find solutions or mutually reinforcing activities and implement or adjust them quickly to maximize success.

A key characteristic of using a shared measurement system is moving the participants from a punishment mindset to a performance improvement mindset. Learning citizenship invites participants to be open, authentic, and vulnerable to let go of what is not working and to broker cross-sector strategies and approaches. Using the concept, "learning citizenship," creates an environment of trust and comfort in which to interact with the data and measurement systems. Learning citizenship also encourages participants to move on from strategies, practices, and identities that are not working or inhibiting success.

Mutually Reinforcing Activities

Each partner in a collective impact initiative brings unique sets of expertise, resources and relationships to the initiative. The objective of the initiative is not to create impact through large numbers and uniformity; rather it is to coordinate and integrate the differentiated expertise and activities into a mutually reinforcing and supportive plan (Kania & Kramer, 2011). For example, in the BMS Task Force, the District's expertise with academic success strategies will be integrated with the Plan's expertise with children with behavioral health needs or children in the foster care or delinquency systems. Each partner's activities and strategies are mapped onto the shared data measurement indicators that inform the partners if the mapped strategies are working. Because the causes of Black male success and failure are complex and complicated, the collective impact solutions must be interdependent and mutually reinforcing (Kania & Kramer, 2011). In some communities, coordinated mutually reinforcing strategies can occur among "hundreds of organizations that simultaneously tackle may different dimensions of a complex issue" (Hanleybrown et al., 2012, p. 6).

In the BMS Task Force, the Innovation Zone Ambassadors will coordinate and align the District initiatives with the work of the Plan's committees to improve results for Black males. Mutually reinforcing activities will be evidence based or evidence informed strategies. Research indicates that high expectations, teacher and administrator education on Black male culture, and parent involvement increase academic success (Holzam, 2012). In addition, the District is implementing changes to the disciplinary matrix to reduce Black male suspensions to increase in time in class (Pope, Personal Communication, 2012). These evidence-based activities will be integrated with the Plan's committee on preventing juvenile delinquency through diversion programs that provide an alternative program so youths do not receive a misdemeanor offense on their record to reduce the "schoolhouse to jailhouse" pipeline for young Black men. The coordination of each partner's expertise maximizes the resources of the schools and the community. It is also anticipated that new activities and new constellations of activities will evolve and emerge over time as the collective impact initiative is responsive to the data (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Successfully marrying school strategies with the community strategies is not a linear, straightforward process. Inviting the Ambassadors and Plan chairs to act as social artists creates an expectation of artfully synthesizing the resources, relationships, and opportunities of each sector. The Ambassadors and Plan chairs will need to create spaces where members can learn together about how align strategies and maximize resources. As social artists, the Ambassadors and Plan chairs can both create the social spaces for learning using the committee meeting structure and support the members as learning citizens to be open, authentic, and engaged in the learning process. The evolution requires continuous communication, the fourth component of a collective impact initiative.

Continuous Communication

The BMS Leadership group and the Innovation Zones meet regularly and share their one page Turn the Curve reports via a web portal. Cross-sector partnerships and initiatives need trust between stakeholders to effectively act and learn collaboratively (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Trust is established over time by partners consistently experiencing the unique value of their contribution to the initiative and seeing how their piece contributes to the whole and to success. Business, education, non-profit, and community leaders need regular engagement "to recognize and appreciate the common motivation behind their different efforts" (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 40). Through dialoguing about the problem, the data, the mutually reinforcing activities, and the changing context, partners will create a common vocabulary and set of principles to guide, align and inform the work.

The BMS Task Force holds monthly meetings in each Innovation Zone and a quarterly meeting for the entire initiative. The meetings reiterate the shared result or common agenda, review any new data, receive an update on the implementation of the mutually reinforcing activities, and reflect on what is working and what is not working. Each Innovation Zone committee will be comprised of cross-sector partners including District staff, Plan chairs and participants, youth, parents, business, municipal, and other interested and passionate partners. Each Innovation Zone committee will generate a one page Results Based Accountability or Turn the Curve report to focus the dialogue and learning opportunities. The Innovation Zone Ambassador will be trained in Results Based Accountability to create a climate of mutual accountability rather than punishment. All documents and data will be available on web-based portal for Innovation Zone, Plan, and community members.

Shared learning spaces can inform the development of continuous communication practices by emphasizing accountability and expressibility. Identifying the BMS task force members as learning citizens can guide the development of the elements of continuous communication. For example, is the communication authentic, responsive and humble? How is cross-sector information being brokered in the process? How each is partner's identity (history, connections, vision, etc.) engaged to promote learning? Conversely, continuous communication may be a practice that social artists use to evolve social learning spaces. The convening of meetings, shared measurement system, plans for mutually reinforcing activities, and communication structures will be supported by the fifth component of collective impact initiatives, backbone organization (Hanleybrown et al., 2012).

Backbone Organization

The Broward Schools and the Children's Services Council have staff dedicated to supporting the Task Force and the Plan committees and act as the backbone organization. Initially, backbone organizations were described as separate organizations with separate staff with specific skills to serve as the backbone or anchor of the collective impact initiative (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Recent research reveals at least six different backbone organization structures including one funder, new and separate non-profit, existing non-profit, government, shared across multiple organizations, or steering committee driven (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). The BMS Task Force has adopted a "shared across multiple organizations" structure with the District, Children's Services Council and South Florida Education Research Alliance assuming different required functions. The functions of the backbone organization include guiding vision and strategy, support aligned activities, establishing and maintaining shared measurement practices, advance policy, and mobilize funding (Turner, Merchant, Kania, & Martin, 2012). Without a backbone organization infrastructure, collective impact initiatives tend to fall apart (Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Successful backbone organizations implement adaptive leadership principles (Kania & Kramer, 2011) across multiple levels of collaboration (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). Adaptive leadership principles include

> the ability to focus people's attention and create a sense of urgency, the skill to apply pressure to stakeholders without overwhelming them, the competence to frame issues in a way that presents opportunities as well as difficulties, and the strength to mediate conflict among stakeholders. (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 40)

Being an organically emergent process, the original structure of the collective impact initiative may evolve with lessons learned and/or changing community dynamics. Most collective impact initiatives have a leadership level and a workgroup level. The leadership level sets the common agenda and the strategic framework and monitors progress while the work groups implement mutually reinforcing activities, monitor the data, incorporate new partners, and identify the needs and challenges. The BMS Task Force has a quarterly meeting of leaders and updates are also provided to the Plan's Leadership Coalition on a quarterly basis as well. The Innovation Zones are the work groups that will be working in their specific zones to improve results for Black males.

The backbone organization function of the BMS Task Force provides an opportunity for the members to view themselves as social artists working in social learning spaces. The difficult, deeply entrenched challenges of successfully supporting all Black boys and young men require data driven, creative learning processes. The old solutions and patterns of thinking need a fresh application of paint with new designs, new types of media and new energy. Based on the

comparison between the BMS Task Force practices and the components that foster social learning capabilities, the next section will highlight implications for collective impact initiatives.

Implications for Collective Impact Initiatives

Examining the Broward BMS Task Force's collective impact practices in light of the components that foster social learning capability revealed several recommendations to enhance social learning capabilities of other collective impact initiatives. To be effective social learning spaces, collective impact initiatives need to acknowledge the identities and meaning of participation of the participants. The containers of learning in collective impact initiatives such as meetings, reports, on and off line dialogues must have high accountability to learn about what works/does not work and expressibility to insure maximum integration of knowledge.

Collective impact initiatives that foster the mutual recognition of learning citizenship maximize the value of each participant's identity as a learning resource. The learning citizenship framework also provides criteria for evaluating the initiative's ability to engage participants, release old, ineffective practices, broker cross-sector approaches and information, and leverage each other's identity to promote learning. There needs to be an opportunity to learn about the motivation and unique resources of each participant to build trust and align the mutually reinforcing activities. By viewing themselves as social artists, collective impact leaders can promote and evaluate how well they create and evolve social learning spaces and learning citizenship identity and practices. The collective impact literature does not clearly delineate how the social learning will occur throughout the five practices, thus the need to support social learning dynamics using social learning spaces, learning as citizenship, and social artists.

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