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Hora, Matthew T. & Millar, Susan B. (2011) *A Guide to Building Education Partnerships: Navigating diverse cultural contexts to turn challenge into promise*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

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The authors of *A Guide to Building Education Partnerships: Navigating diverse cultural contexts to turn challenge into promise* offer to provide the “diagnostic tools” that educators need to construct and maintain educational partnerships. Partnerships are now supported by federal policy – especially for STEM projects – which means this book and its diagnostic tools could become an extremely valuable source for the nation’s educators.

Having been involved in educational partnerships over the past dozen years, including serving on the national board of the Holmes Partnership (Holmes, 1996) I can attest to the challenges inherent in bringing together schools, universities, colleges of education, business interests and policymakers and trying to get them to talk to each other,

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make time for each other, and create a synergy that benefits their communities. This book lays out a map of the minefields ahead for the unsuspecting as well as the unique challenges and the potential rewards of this type of education reform work.

In the introduction of the book, the authors present a typology of educational partnerships, an analysis that is helpful at the start of this kind of undertaking. This section should be required reading for any group that wants to embark on such a partnership voyage. The authors identify three “ideal types”: “*limited partnerships*” with essentially one organization in charge; “*coordinated partnerships*” with horizontal alignments that bring together many different types of organizations; and “*collaborative partnerships*” which truly seek new ways of working on some common intractable problems (p. 7). Knowing which type best fits your partnership could be the key to success or failure, staving off much of the frustration and burn-out that has been experienced in the field of school-university partnerships for two decades.

Coordinated and collaborative partnerships probably represent the most common educational partnerships. The Holmes Partnership is a good example of a collaborative partnership that brought together schools, universities, teacher education programs, national associations such as NEA and AFT, and others to dialogue about innovative ways to bring about simultaneous renewal of K-12 education and preparation of educators in university settings.

The fact that the Holmes Partnership no longer exists is testament to the difficulty mentioned already; this is very complex and labor-intensive work, and yet it is some of the best education reform work seen in the last twenty-five years. Although HP no longer exists, many of the local partnerships between schools and universities that it fostered are still hard at work, bringing real change to schools and colleges of education, making teacher and administrator preparation more contextually relevant to their communities.

Minnesota provided the “embedded case study” of one such local school-university partnership that resulted in this book (p. 10). The authors have taken their extensive

field experience and distilled their “lessons learned” to publish a guide for those who are just starting out on this path. One of the lessons comes in the form of a useful schematic (p. 14) showing the many component parts of a partnership. The multi-directional flow chart arrows graphically represent (and accurately predict) that every process and every stakeholder is important. That is an authentic reading of real collaboration: it is messy, contextual, and constantly changing. Each time a new stakeholder comes into an existing partnership, it seems as though the entire process begins anew. In TedSizer’s Essential Schools model, this process was referred to as “the journey” (Coalition, 2011). Almost like a nomadic tribe, the partners retell their “journey” over and over, to bring new generations of collaborators up to speed on the culture and the process of the group. During the telling, some of those newcomers may rewrite the journey as they add their interpretation and new perspective; thus, the partnership culture evolves. That is one of the beautiful and sometimes back-breaking aspects of partnership; it is never finished, never complete, and always in many fundamental ways a work in progress. Yet the moving parts of partnership somehow fit our postmodern, multi-vocal world. Everyone wants real input; they do have real input in an effective, working, and non-hierarchical partnership.

“The third space” is a term used for the “new arena for activity in which competing interests, perspectives, and opinions play out as different organizations come together....” (p. 16). Gee’s term “affinity groups” (2007) is another concept that fits with the partnership model (p. 16). Affinity groups are people within organizations that share a language and a way of working to solve problems. Having a new set of terms such as “third space” and “affinity groups” can help jump-start novel thinking within partnerships, and thus the book provides another service by introducing some of these new concepts and terms. The authors also provide five underlying principles of partnerships (p. 19):

1. Partners think in multi-faceted terms. For example, maybe the partnership will focus on one university department and not the entire institution, or it may combine department representatives from non-traditional areas such as drama/theater with more traditional partners from

a college of education, to work with a local school or district.

2. Partners need to plan and socialize to get acquainted. As an example of this, at my institution (the University of Missouri St. Louis) we formed such a “get-acquainted” committee with twenty faculty and staff from the university and twenty employees from Express Scripts, a Fortune 500 company. For several months, this committee met and talked about the culture of the two organizations prior to the company locating a new headquarters on the university campus. This socialization was important for both organizations and eventually it helped initiate other tasks that broadened the participation from both sides.

3. The design process is critical. The authors urge new partners to spend a lot of time on this stage of development and not rush into any premature decisions about governance and structures.

4. Find people who are boundary crossers. In Chapter 4, the authors describe some of the critical characteristics of such people. These are people who can truly work outside of their comfort zone.

5. Partners foster new cultural dynamics. Conflict can be creative; so it is important to not rush consensus. Partnership conversations may be frank and often difficult and it is important to avoid the traditional *politesse* of strangers.

Trained facilitators who encounter this book will recognize the “forming, storming, norming and performing” analysis of group dynamics (Tuckman and Jensen, 1977) that has been around for many years, but which encapsulates the various realistic stages of partnership growth. In order to reach a high performance level, there is no way around the norming and storming phases. Hora and Millar suggest that the benefits of undergoing some uncomfortable, if not downright painful, process are well worth the effort in new insights and capacities. Synergy does not come cheap.

New solutions require a different way of thinking. Technical expertise can sometimes address typical problems, but emerging and increasingly interdisciplinary problems require new adaptive solutions. These new ideas

and innovative remedies are more likely to result from the collision of traditional organizational cultures.

Useful artifacts in the book help make this a true guide to the work of partnership. There is a glossary, because shared language is an important aspect. There are schematics that communicate the complexity of new developing relationships. Bibliographic references are also helpful and could point to additional experts and resources. I found, however, that the references were heavily in organizational science. I would urge educational partners to look also at the many professional development school (PDS) works in the field of education that have come on the scene since the days of Sirotnik and Goodlad, who are cited here, among others.

Many possible metaphors exist for representing innovative partnership work: “coloring outside the lines” and “thinking outside of the box” are two of the more common ones. In my professional development school partnership experiences, it was frequently explained that “we are trying to build the airplane in flight.” This truism always helped those who felt their equilibrium shifting rather dramatically as we ventured into the unknown together. A good quote in this book comes from an anonymous administrator who sums up this same idea in the form of a transportation metaphor:

“I feel like we were building the train and sometimes we were thrown on the track and we were getting run over by the train we were building.” (p. 95)

Good heuristic planning devices abound in this book, and I would recommend it to anyone forming or storming over a new partnership. However, as the authors repeatedly point out, there really is no one-size-fits-all prescription for creating educational partnerships. The tools they provide can help a new partnership (or a floundering one) get on track. Just make sure the track has functioning warning signals!

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