

Vicki Wells

Teacher Inquiry

Spring 2002

Topic: Community Mapping

According to Lynda Treadway, there is a special set of skills and attitudes that a teacher needs in order to be successful in the urban setting. These teachers need to be aware of more contingencies to be considered as additional complexities are addressed. One of the needs is to have a positive attitude toward, and an enhanced knowledge of, the parents, the students and the community. One of the ways to achieve this knowledge and a positive attitude is through community mapping. This study will include questions and research support, methods and procedures, along with results, implications and recommendations.

Rationale:

There are many reasons why educators need to participate in community mapping activities. It is through these activities, that teachers can get to know the residents, survey local housing, visit local businesses and organizations, discover the human resource agencies and investigate other community aspects that might interest them (Treadway, 1999). When teachers have gained this knowledge, then they are better equipped to make the connection between subject matter and real world situations. This enables students to draw on prior knowledge to make connections to new knowledge and the application of that knowledge to their lives (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2000).

Question to Guide the Inquiry:

Does community mapping enhance teaching and produce positive attitudes about the urban school community?

In *Community Mapping: A Rationale*, Linda Treadway asserts that community mapping is a process in which the anchoring of teaching and learning in the diverse contexts of students is encouraged. It provides a set of principles and a strategy in which teachers and students can learn about each other and, therefore, a connection is made between the school and real life. Because many teachers do not live in the communities where they teach, they must make an effort to become apart of the school community. It is through community mapping, these teachers are able to place learning in context, examine their own biases, and try to make the transition from outsider to insider. It is the culturally relevant teacher that sees herself as a part of the community and views her role as one who is giving back to the community, not trying to escape the community (Treadway). It is through community mapping that educators become acquainted with the culture, resources, barriers and potential facilitators and partners within the community. In understanding the community, a teacher can improve her instruction by having knowledge of the students' lives. Relationships between the school and the community can be initiated. When a relationship is established, the sharing of school and community resources is facilitated (Buchanan).

Methods and Procedures: Part A

This community mapping activity was planned by Rebecca Sharpe, the principal of Dogwood Elementary School, Marty Ulmer, the school social worker, Steve Dunkin,

primary grades resource teacher and Urban Specialist, and Vicki Wells, first grade teacher and Urban Specialist. The participants included all of the certified staff of Dogwood Elementary School and the interns that are serving at our school. This activity took place on a staff development day in October. The community mapping activity took place in the morning. In the afternoon, the groups gathered and prepared a Power Point presentation about their community mapping activity. The groups presented their findings at a staff development day in November. There was also a survey taken in February, asking the teachers to reflect on the new insights they had gained for teaching and new perceptions they had gained about our student population and community.

The procedure for the community mapping activity was adapted from the plan suggested by Mary O'Sullivan in *Community Awareness and Community Mapping*. The school social worker planned six areas for the staff to visit. The staff traveled in grade level groups. During the introduction of the activity, teachers and interns were given a list of questions that would guide them as they gathered information. Each group was given a set of maps and a starting place for their itinerary. There were also particular sites listed with each map that the group needed to visit and a list of the people that were connected with community resources that they needed to interview.

Members of the group will do one of the following tasks.

Driver: This person will provide the transportation for the group.

Scout: This person will read the directions on the map and lead the group around the area.

Note-taker: This person will record where the group goes and what they see. This person will be given a checklist on which to record the types of buildings in the

neighborhood. There should also be notations made on encounters made and conversations they may have.

Photographer: Using a digital camera, this person will take pictures of significant sites in the community. A helper will take notes about the photographs that are taken.

Collector: This person will collect artifacts that may include objects, brochures, community newspapers, and biological evidence.

Rubber: This person will do stone rubbings of historical markers.

Methods and Procedures: Part B Analyzing the data

Data was gathered by means of an evaluation of the activity and a survey asking for insights or a changed perception. The evaluation was broken into two categories for reporting purposes: high for a positive response and low for a negative response. The survey data was analyzed to detect trends in the responses.

Results:

Following the community mapping activity, the teachers were asked to evaluate the activity using the following criteria:

Was the objective/focus for the day defined?

Was the information applicable to school needs?

Was the session related to school or department mission and /or goals?

Was the activity successful?

The response was overwhelmingly positive with 96% of the teachers saying that the activity was highly successful and applicable to school needs. Comments from teachers included:

“I enjoyed the activity and hope to better understand my students.”

“We had one of the best in-services we have ever had. It was very beneficial.”

In February, I conducted a survey that asked the teachers to reflect on the community mapping activity and to respond with ways that the activity gave them new insights or changed their perception of the community. The survey data was analyzed to detect trends in the responses. The responses fell into four major categories: community services, student population, neighborhoods, and student backgrounds/home life. The keyword in the responses was “diversity”: diversity in the neighborhoods, student population, home life and community services. In the survey, 24% of the teachers listed the socio-economic diversity of our student population as their greatest insight, 20% became more aware of the diverse community services that are available to the students and their families, and 6% felt that the students have a diversity of family backgrounds. The greatest number of teachers, 50%, said that they were impressed by the diversity of neighborhoods. Our school community includes rural areas, established older residential areas, apartments and government subsidized housing projects and apartments.

Teachers’ insights were reflected in the following comments:

“It was enlightening to actually see where these children live and play. It makes it more real to me. I can better understand some of the problems they are having in school now.”

“I am more aware of why some items never get home or get returned to school, when, for an example, having a nutritious meal is more of a goal at home.”

“I am able to use examples, from the community, in my teaching. I incorporate places I never knew existed.”

“It changed the way I discuss home/life experiences. The information about familiar buildings, stores, rec centers, etc., has allowed me to speak from a knowledge base instead of guessing what they experience. I talk a lot more about apartments now because so many of them can draw from that.”

“I have learned that diversity in the classroom can bring varied and refreshing viewpoints to our learning environment (classrooms).”

Implications/Recommendations:

Does community mapping enhance teaching and produce positive attitudes about the urban school community? For the teachers at Dogwood Elementary School the answer was definitely “YES!” Should it be an activity scheduled each fall for the teachers new to our school? Again, “YES!” Because having a knowledge of the community and positive attitudes are the result of community mapping, it is an activity that can provide a foundation for the new teachers to be successful in the urban school.