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## **Supporting Community-Oriented Educational Change: Case and Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

A study of a federally funded program to develop and implement community-oriented social studies curricula and curriculum-based assessments grounds cautions for educational change initiatives. In this case, despite the project director's stated intent to support teachers' desire for instruction regarding local culture and history, top-down support for classroom-level change evidenced insensitivity. Production and implementation of the planned curricula and assessments was obstructed by teacher's lack of cultural identification with the targeted community groups, workload, competing instructional priorities, inadequate communication, and organizational politics. Professional development was sometimes beneficial but more often ineffective—either perfunctory, unnecessary, or disregarded. The findings offer insight regarding educational change and a systemic analysis.

An evaluation study of a federally funded program offered an appealing

opportunity to study an instance of community-oriented educational change in a project to develop and implement social studies curricula related to the local history and cultural traditions of school children in three regions of the country (Note 1). Anticipating that the study would provide empirical support for conceptualizations of successful school reform as emanating from local decision-makers and implementers, we were surprised to learn instead some sobering lessons about limitations inherent in policies and practices intended to support school-based education efforts emphasizing communities.

Top-down reform has been criticized as insensitive and unrealistic, but how should policy-makers and funders encourage and support communities and their educators? After a description of the project and the evaluation, findings will be organized according to emergent issues and then by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) levels of ecological analysis. It is not the notions of community-oriented education or teacher-designed reform which cause concern but a complex of implementation motives and issues. This case study is offered to deepen through vicarious experience the understanding of educators and others interested in sophisticating efforts to improve education.

## **The Heritage Project**

The Heritage Project was a three-year federally sponsored program to develop and implement social studies curricula based on local history and cultural traditions in rural public schools in three culturally diverse regions of the country. The stated intention of the project director, a university professor, was to support practitioners in developing and implementing community-oriented social studies curricula. The idea resonated with Fullan's (1991) and Sarason's (1990) contention that fundamental educational change requires the involvement of practitioners and with the groundswell for teacher empowerment (see Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree, & deKoven Pelton Fernandez, 1994).

At each school, Heritage Project teachers were to create social studies curricula focused on local communities in year 1, implement curricula in year 2, and develop and implement curriculum-based assessments in year 3. The project director and a central office coordinator were to support these efforts by arranging professional development, facilitating networking among sites, and distributing funds for materials and other needs. A local site coordinator in each state was to ensure smooth interface, focus on program objectives, and provide assistance to teachers. At historically and culturally distinct sites in the Southeast, Midwest, and Southwest, fourteen teachers and approximately 200 students participated. Each site was unique and complex. Contextual issues at each site played a major role in the life and success of the project.

**Table 1**  
**The Heritage Project: Sites and Personnel**

**Heritage Project Central Office**  
**Project director—university professor**  
**Central office coordinator—graduate student**

<b>Midwest site</b>	<b>Southeast site</b>	<b>Southwest site</b>
<i>Site coordinator:</i>	<i>Site coordinator:</i>	<i>Site coordinator:</i>
yr. 1: graduate	college	university

student  
yr. 2-3: central  
office coordinator

professor

professor

**School 1**

Caucasian

(3 teachers\*)  
(43 students)

**School 1**

African American

(2 teachers)  
(29 students)

**School 1**

Hispanic

(1 teacher\*)  
(36 students)

**School 2**

Caucasian

(4 teachers\*)  
(10 students)

**School 2**

African American

(1 teacher)  
(30 students)

**School 2**

Native American

(2 teachers)  
(25 students)

**School 3**

mixed ethnicity

(1 teacher)  
(30 students)

Schools were in  
2 school districts.

All schools were in  
1 school district.

Both schools were in  
1 school district.

\* Number of teacher-participants fluctuated from year to year. The number listed indicates those who were participating at the end of the project. Numbers of student-participants fluctuated from year to year at all schools.

**Midwest site**

In the Midwest, where the project was implemented in two elementary schools in non-adjacent school districts, significant issues regarding teacher ideology and autonomy clouded progress. The lead teachers at each school, former students of the project director, were confident of their training and experience. Their self-directedness in the face of historically high principal turn-over in rural schools helped assure program continuation in an environment of fluctuating attention and support. But because of their confidence and autonomy, they felt free to follow their own ideas, including those which conflicted with program goals. Although they had expressed eagerness regarding community-oriented learning, they chose to thwart the program by merely extending their existing social studies curricula rather than developing new curricula emphasizing local history and culture. Their resistance to community-oriented curricula manifested conflict between their beliefs about their communities as cultural microcosms appropriate instructional goals and project philosophy. Although they preferred rural life, these teachers viewed their all-white communities as threads in the national fabric, not culturally or historically distinct. They believed it more important to introduce their students to the wider world than to the local history and culture of their remote communities. Teacher acceptance of the foundational principles of the program did not occur until, at the close of year 2, they bent to pressure from the program central office.

It was not quite a game of musical chairs, but there were a number of personnel

changes at the Midwest site in the three-year life of the project. Some were initiated by the project director in response to teacher unwillingness to work toward project goals. Others were initiated locally as teachers objected to unexpected project workloads. The site coordinator left the program at the end of year 1, and the unpopularity of the insistent central office coordinator who doubled as her replacement added irritation to discontinuity. At the conclusion of the project, only two teachers remained of the original personnel. Although the project director eventually touted the development of working relationships among these teachers as an important project achievement, in fact personnel changes diverted attention from project goals and undercut the development of working relationships, as new people constantly needed orientation.

### **Southeast site**

Three schools in one district were involved in the Southeast. Formidable difficulties arose because the Heritage Project teachers were not self-selected but reluctant participants in the program, identified by a school district coordinator who intended to use the program as a means to upgrade their skills. Luckily, two teachers were members of the local African American community whose culture and history were the focus of the program at that site. But a third teacher resisted inclusion of African American culture in the curriculum, and a fourth resisted the considerable extra effort required in curriculum development. Professional development and the urging of the site coordinator eventually led to a shift in favor of teaching local history, and some teachers eventually described their participation in the program as transformative. But during much of the three years of the Heritage Project, half of the teachers exhibited strong passive resistance.

The site coordinator complained that project expectations were out of line with actual possibilities and cited the director's lack of appreciation for local culture, expectations, relationships, and working styles as the heart of the problem. Urging the teachers toward project goals, she exercised a strong management style ultimately pivotal in producing what the project director called the strongest curriculum in the three states although, at the end of year 2, he conceded that it was "wholly inadequate." The site coordinator's insistence resulted in teacher distrust bordering on hostility, relieved somewhat through the intervention of the school district coordinator. The two of them ultimately developed a variant of a "good cop, bad cop" strategy that proved fairly effective. But, the project director so opposed the site coordinator's "directiveness" that the site coordinator believed in the end that he had punished her by withholding funds for her site, in effect, penalizing her site for actually managing to produce the required products.

At this site, the program's teacher-developed curriculum enhanced history courses in the participating schools, including regular history classes the Heritage Project teachers offered to students not participating in the program. Program-funded professional development and field trips introduced students and teachers to historic and cultural sites and other local resources. Among the three state sites, the strongest probability of continuation of project initiatives beyond the grant-funded period was apparent here, where the site coordinator and the school district coordinator organized a formal presentation to the local school board for that purpose.

### **Southwest site**

In the Southwest, two participating schools within one school district were located in two culturally and historically unique communities, one predominantly Hispanic, the other entirely Native American. The Caucasian teachers at the Hispanic school, although they were voluntary participants in the program, were described by the site coordinator as inexpert and unenthusiastic, resistant to both program goals and professional development. In order to produce a curriculum document, the site coordinator, after a long struggle, resorted to writing out teachers' orally communicated ideas which, she reported, the teachers were then unwilling to implement. In contrast, the two teachers at the Native American school responded to the opportunity provided by the program with enormous energy and initiative. One teacher assumed responsibility for the program at the school when the long distance between the schools and the site coordinator created a gap in local leadership.

New principals at both schools in year 2 caused consternation. At the Hispanic school, the new principal ultimately proved supportive of the program, but he was initially viewed warily by teachers. At the Native American school, the new principal instituted sweeping school-wide changes not favorably received by the faculty. During the principal's first year, year 2 of the program, teachers filed three class action lawsuits against her. Among the plaintiffs was the quietly assertive Heritage Project lead teacher. The following year, the principal reassigned Heritage Project teachers to positions in which they could not discharge their programmatic responsibilities.

But at this site—and only this site—project personnel had forged explicit connections to the community that was the focus of the new curriculum. These teachers were supportive of and supported by the reservation community. One was a Native American, son of a tribal leader. With support of the tribe, he was reinstated to a position in which he could continue to offer the newly developed curriculum to students. But by the end of year 3, the teachers were under threat of reassignment or firing by the superintendent, to whom the principal successfully appealed. The following year, the lead teacher was reassigned off the reservation (Mabry, 1999).

The site coordinator and the teachers at the Native American school complained of the project director's lack of appreciation for local culture and context. The site coordinator also reported the project director misunderstood relative project achievement at the two schools, thinking the program at the Hispanic school stronger than that at the Native American school because of the furor at the latter, when the reverse was more accurate.

## **Methodology**

We (Note 2) conducted an external evaluation of the program throughout years 2 and 3, 1994-96. The evaluation featured a naturalistic (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), responsive (Stake, 1973) approach with attention to stated project goals. Some data was collected by site coordinators, suffusing the inquiry with a participatory (Greene, 1997) combination of internal and external perspectives and improving the evaluation's potential utility (Joint Committee, 1994; Patton, 1997).

Data collection involved interviews of the project director, the central office coordinator, all site coordinators, the teachers in each participating school, and the school and district administrators. Relevant classroom activities were systematically observed and documented in all but one of the seven participating schools. (Note 3) Observation and interview data were comprehensively validated (Mabry, 1998). An extensive variety of documents was analyzed including the program proposal and interim reports to the federal funding agency, annual reports from site coordinators,

curriculum documents, student products, teacher journals, assessment instruments, and materials from the project director's presentations to academic conferences about the Heritage Project. There was extensive triangulation of data by source, method, time, and observer (see Denzin, 1989). The impetus for both data collection and analysis was substantive rather than procedural in the manner advised by Erickson (1986), Lincoln and Guba (1985), Mabry (1998), Stake (1994), and Wolcott (1994), responsive to issues which emerged from the data, including:

1. How sensitive are the new social studies curricula to local history and culture?
2. How have teacher attitudes about local history and culture influenced the focus of curriculum and instruction? Has the professionalism of teachers been enhanced?
3. To what extent has the program been invigorated by community members and institutions?
4. How well do new assessments reveal the curriculum-related achievements of students?
5. What is the extent and usefulness of networking among sites and with the project central office?

Data analysis involved review, summarization, and categorization of documents; identification of themes and refinement of issues; analytic discussions within the evaluation team and also between the evaluators and the project director and central office coordinator. Analysis featured synthesis across data types and sources, issue refinement through the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), attention to multiple perspectives, review by site personnel of descriptions and interpretations of data, and review by the project director of a draft of the report. In a final analytic thrust, the data was reconsidered according to a comprehensive theoretical framework, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) levels of ecological analysis for a system-level perspective of the ideological and practical components and relationships among components of the project.

Analysis strongly attended to data and contexts rather than to external, non-situated, general notions of program quality. Findings were emergent, thoroughly grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and the data confirmed by the participants themselves as representing their experiences. That the conclusions surprised us is an indication that analysis was truly emergent, not an artifact of assumptions or bias. The thorny ethical dimensions of this study have been explored (Mabry, 1999).

A formative report was submitted to the project director for year 2 and a summative report to the federal funding agency at the end of year 3.

## **Discussion**

This study of an initially promising, well-financed effort to restructure curriculum revealed unanticipated difficulties and limitations related to community-oriented curriculum and to teacher-generated educational reform. In a national climate of increasing attention to cultural diversity (see Banks, 1993), we expected to applaud efforts to teach children about their communities' history and to enhance their appreciation for their own cultures. We expected our results to offer empirical support for theories of educational reform which emphasize the importance of local contexts and teacher initiatives.

Instead, to the project director's extreme distress and to our personal and

ideological dismay, what we reported to the funding agency and what we offer here is a presentation of intractable problems and interpretations of the nature and extent of defeating difficulties. We offer these so others may glean ideas through case-to-case generalizations (Firestone, 1993) relevant to programs of interest to them. We recognize that specific extrapolations to other cases or to the general topics of educational reform, community-oriented education, or rural education will be best made by readers who are familiar with those cases or who are experienced in those areas. We are evaluators, knowledgeable about education but not expert in each of these subfields. Our discussion of findings is organized in two ways: (1) interpretations emergent from the data related to educational reform, a vehicle for specific substantive discussion, and (2) Bronfenbrenner's (1979) levels of ecological analysis, a framework for systemic scrutiny.

### **Emergent interpretations**

Findings from this study emphasized the importance of some difficulties regarding external support for classroom reform and for community-oriented education: (1) insensitivity of central office personnel to local conditions, (2) increased teacher workloads, (3) the cultural self-identification of curriculum developers, (4) teacher readiness and training issues, (5) a short project timeline as a condition of funding.

*Insensitivity to local conditions.* Centralization of project management and resources promoted coherence across sites but undermined sensitivity to local issues, with a negative net effect on achievement of project goals. The site coordinator in the Southeast, for example, complained that the project director did not (and perhaps could not) appreciate the local pace of life and educational history and traditions. She noted, for instance, that he did not take into account the lack of a teachers' union in her state and its historical result: longstanding passive resistance by teachers toward any directive from the top, including the top of the project. The lead teacher at the Native American school in the Southwest accused the project director of outright cultural insensitivity, citing among other things materials sent to the school which depicted housing and landscaping which students on the reservation were expected to understand as typical but had never experienced. In the Midwest, the relative isolation of the small towns in which the schools were located strengthened teachers' beliefs that children there needed opportunity to connect with the outside world, rather than to be focused inward as the project intended.

The project director evidenced sincerity in statements about his desire to support teachers interested in developing community-oriented curricula and in his early reports of the general agreement among participants on this fundamental goal and surprised disappointment in their lack of progress. If there was initial buy-in by teachers and site coordinators, then the Heritage Project is an example of the difficulty described by Wildavsky and Wildavsky (1984) of translating broad agreement into specific decisions involving many participants with many perspectives. The situation also bore a resemblance to the toxic discrepancy between federal expectations and local project capabilities described by DeStefano (1992).

The Heritage Project, in implementation, targeted attention more to physical artifacts of local culture, history, and traditions than to ongoing daily life. Possibly, the project director's personal interest in the sites undermined focus on the living present; site personnel murmured that he was interested in their sites for their vacation value, and the director did predict that evaluation site visits would be enjoyable. The focus might have been corrected had the project implemented the local advisory councils composed

of parents and family members promised in the proposal. But, at only one site, was a half-hearted and short-lived attempt made to establish such a group. The most significant actual involvement of communities, other than a few isolated local presenters, came in the form of public displays of student work.

Ultimately in this case, the very idea of a centralized project office and its function in policy articulation and program management militated against the intimate local sensitivity implied in classroom-level reform and in community-oriented education. But funding could not have been secured without the persuasive coherence of formal aims and structures—a paradox. The dilemma in this instance raised the fundamental question of whether external or top-down support can enhance local or bottom-up reform more than illustrating how it might do so. If even well-meaning support from the top obstructs change at the classroom level, then it is unclear that current mechanisms in governmental and foundational grant funding can be counted on to support classroom-level initiatives. If centralized or top-down assistance cannot succeed at the local level, does the enormity of local diversity ensure that reform at the school and classroom level will exhibit inconsistency, a chaos of unrelated events, lack of capacity for large-scale cohesion? Even if we can accept the lack of national consensus regarding the purposes, processes, and content of education, the prospect of educational anarchy is unattractive.

*Unanticipated workloads.* Particularly at the Midwest site where basic project goals were resisted, teachers complained that the project's demands on their time and energy went not only beyond their expectations but also beyond their original intents and agreements. They did not feel that project-related benefits to them or to their students compensated for the additional work. Already overloaded teachers ignored the more burdensome requirements of the project, the development of customized curricula and assessments, choosing instead to continue using pre-existing social studies curricula which introduced their students to a larger conception of history and culture. They expressed frustration that the central office coordinator urged adherence to project goals and operating procedures even when these required uncomfortable expenditures of time and disregarded their deeply felt intuitions about prioritizing instructional objectives.

Further evidence of Midwest teachers' perceptions that project demands outweighed benefits came in the form of expressed desire for stipends. The intrinsic rewards of participation, when measured against the tolls exacted, were insufficient to secure their commitment to project goals. Feeling little ownership of the project, these teachers participated only nominally until pressured to do otherwise, causing frustration and resentment on all sides and lingering divisiveness.

Curriculum developers' cultural identification. At the Hispanic school in the Southwest and at the Southeast site, teachers not associated with the local groups whose history was to be emphasized in the new curricula did not exhibit the initiative to develop their own curricula. In the Southeast, the insistence of the site coordinator was sufficient to ensure the development of the required products, although she considered the curricula developed there marginally satisfactory. Caucasian teachers at the Hispanic school in the Southwest made no noticeable effort to develop or implement community-oriented curriculum.

Teacher identification with local cultural groups exerted a positive influence. At the Native American school in the Southwest, teachers were immediately energetic in their engagement with the project. The two African American teachers at the Southeast site whose history and culture were to be highlighted by new curricula displayed sensitivity and growing initiative. Working together in the Southwest site, a Native American and a Caucasian sympathizer and activist for tribal concerns exceeded project



expectations by engaging in curriculum research as well as development, motivated by the opportunity to focus on the tribe's history and culture.

*Teacher training.* At six of the seven schools, some difficulties could be traced to teacher training. At each site, some training was provided by the project director, particularly regarding broad concepts of curriculum development and assessment, while some training was provided or arranged by the site coordinators, particularly regarding local culture and history. The latter was particularly successful in the Southeast. But there were problems both with teachers who had long been trained regarding the project goal of community-oriented social studies teaching and with teachers who had not.

The project director's former students included all three site coordinators and two of the original teachers in the Midwest. Although the project director had personally trained them and professed to have responded to their interest in community-oriented curricula, those teachers' responses to the project were the most counterproductive of all project personnel. Ironically, their earlier training with the project director had made them confident of their skills, which led to their assertiveness regarding the sufficiency of their pre-existing minor units on local history and culture and made them unresponsive to demands to emphasize local communities more. In effect, their project-relevant training predisposed them to reject the project. Professional development provided by the Heritage Project did not change their minds. (Note 4)

There were also difficulties with many of the teachers who were relatively untrained in the concepts and rationales of the project. Participating because of district directive rather than personal choice, half of the teachers in the Southeast actively resisted project goals and directives. The more receptive African American teachers had few curriculum development skills prior to the project's training and assistance but gradually and willingly improved. At the Southwest site, resistant Caucasian teachers at the Hispanic school also lacked relevant training and curriculum development skills and experience, but these deficits were overshadowed by their resistance. For unwilling teachers, professional development was marginally fruitful at best in terms of project outcomes.

The only teachers who reacted to the project with immediate enthusiasm were at the Native American school in the Southwest. Their positive efforts preceded professional development and were unaffected by it. Neither the teacher who was a member of the tribe nor the teacher who was an activist in promoting tribal issues was specifically trained in social studies teaching, but both were knowledgeable of local history and culture and energetic in pursuing project goals. This site produced the earliest and most sustained successes. The African American teachers in the Southeast, also successful in the end, posted slower results more clearly derived from professional development.

Mixed as these results were, in comparison to professional development in curriculum design, assessment training was a disaster. All personnel at all sites complained that the project director had reneged on promises to provide assessment training. The project director countered that he was merely to begin discussion of assessment, the real training to be arranged later by site coordinators. The more successful teachers managed to develop a few creditable assessments, but most teachers (and the project director) displayed little grasp of rudimentary measurement concepts. Among the major promises in the proposal to the funding agency, assessment was the worst failure.

*Project timelines.* In the policy hysteria (Stronach & Maclure, 1996) which has characterized educational reform since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, there has been too little recognition that educational reform takes a long time, (Note 5) longer

than the three years of funding granted to the Heritage Project. The project director observed that most of the first year of the project was needed for developing trust and working relationships; data suggested that a full year was not long enough for these pre-processes.

At the Southeast site and at the Hispanic school in the Southwest, community-oriented curriculum documents were created by the end of the first year, as required, only because a site coordinator wheedled or threatened teachers and, in one case, wrote the curriculum herself. At the Midwest site, curriculum documents were created by the end of the second year only because the central office coordinator demanded it, so much so that teachers complained to the project director. Most of the curriculum-based assessment instruments submitted at the end of year 3 were developed in the closing hours of the project and under duress. Few could be described as truly curriculum-based or authentic (Wiggins, 1993); most appeared unlikely to support strong inferences of student achievement as a result of the program; some were not assessments of student achievement at all, but rather instruments to evaluate instruction.

Late and marginal as many curriculum documents and assessment instruments were, it is nevertheless reasonable to ask whether too much effort was expended trying to develop them on schedule. Did personnel need the urgency of deadlines to do what they did, or would stronger curricula have been developed had they had more time? The project timeline proved to be a significant factor in ensuring that these products would be superficial and underdeveloped, artifacts providing stronger evidence of the project's failure than of its success. Here as elsewhere, the annual evaluations and interim project reports commonly expected of externally sponsored projects may actually hinder the changes funders intend to support. Premature reports document the difficulties which precede resolutions, and public exposure of growing pains demoralize program personnel. Funders' requirements for evaluations, such as ours, ensure that project personnel will be vulnerable to criticism during tender, formative periods.

### **An ecological analysis**

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) levels of ecological analysis offer a framework for a cross-site discussion of findings in four areas: (1) macrosystem, the ideological context of the Heritage Project; (2) exosystem, the organizational and policy context; (3) mesosystem, professional interactions and relationships; and (4) microsystem, classroom interactions, practices, and relationships. Ecological analysis offers a systemic view which incorporates both beliefs and practices. From this more etic (Note 6) and abstracted perspective, the portrait of the project emanating from description at each level and from the interactions among levels highlights the conflicts which arose in the fissures between concept and implementation.

*Macrosystem, the ideological context.* The most significant barrier to the project's achievement of its stated goals in the Midwest was the deep but unexpected rift between project emphasis on local history and cultural traditions and teachers' beliefs about the importance of broad content for social studies instruction. Believing their students needed broader horizons, an expansive view of history, these teachers opposed a parochial approach to curriculum.

Prior to their participation in the program, the Midwest teachers had offered students a unit or two on topics such as community architecture and nearby battlefields. More concentration on local color, in their view, would have limited student learning by neglecting grand historical topics unjustifiably. This ideological conflict set the teachers against the policies and procedures emanating from the central office, adversely affected

working relationships between teachers and the site coordinator, and foreclosed until the final year of the project on offering students a curriculum rich in local history and culture. Teacher resistance to externally imposed curricular change, not teacher empowerment, characterized the Heritage Project at the Midwest site for two of the three years of the project, a refusal broken during the final year only by the strong-arm tactics of the central office coordinator. Thus, conflict in the macrosystem obstructed change and also had adverse effects in all the other ecological levels. Teachers' counter-beliefs affected local policy and practice and working relationships, delaying and diminishing planned outcomes.

*Exosystem, the organizational and policy context.* Conflict between the central project office and every regional site seemed predictable only in hindsight. It was not initially apparent that a central structure would inhibit more than enhance classroom-level curricular reform but, in the end, the Heritage Project illustrated an inherent tension between centralized management and decentralized reform. Goals, policies, procedures, fiscal regulations, and other matters had to be formulated by the project director to exhibit the cohesion necessary to win grant funding from the federal agency and then had to be imposed on teachers in order to fulfill promises—the antithesis of teacher empowerment, local control, bottom-up strategies.

Consequently, site personnel complained of the insensitivity, even cultural insensitivity, of the project director; of being forced to do things they didn't want to do or consider appropriate; of lack of consideration of their regular teaching responsibilities; of receiving parcels of supplies so inappropriate as to be nearly unintelligible in their contexts, supplies purchased by central office personnel; of embarrassingly long delays in paying local suppliers; of broken promises regarding stipends; of their perceptions that one site was financially favored at the expense of another. These difficulties undermined trust and working relationships, with spill-over effects in terms of willingness to try the project director's ideas regarding curriculum and in terms of the nature of the delivered curriculum.

There was also conflict at the site level regarding policy and organizational practice at the Native American school in the Southwest. It appeared to the superintendent and principal that Heritage Project teachers refused to follow school and district policy, especially regarding expenditures; it appeared to the teachers and site coordinator that school and district policy and procedures were manipulated to intimidate and undermine them. It appeared to us that some simple misunderstandings might have been resolved by frank and friendly discussion, which never happened. (Note 7) These difficulties adversely affected working relationships, and teacher reassignment sharply limited student exposure to a painstakingly developed curriculum. Thus, at both the site level and the program level, conflict in the exosystem—both program policy and local policy—obstructed change and also had adverse effects in all the other ecological levels. Working relationships, confidence, and classroom practice were all undermined.

*Mesosystem, professional interactions and relationships.* At every regional site, site coordinators lived between one and four hours away from the schools. The project director and central office administrator were even farther away. Most participating teachers worked singly rather than as teams because their positions were in different schools and communities, no cadre or critical mass offered reinforcement or a sufficient base for secure establishment of ideas and practices. Logistically, it was difficult to bring project personnel together enough to forge strong, trusting relationships. Attempts were made: teleconferences, newsletters, site visits, student pen pals, shared videos and curriculum documents, regional professional development sessions.

Networking was not a total failure, and the second central office coordinator was

particularly praised by some site personnel for her responsiveness. But every site coordinator expressed frustration with the central office. Two lamented that their difficulties with teachers were exacerbated by distance which limited site visits and support. Lack of trusting relationships inhibited adherence to project goals and directives in all but the Native American school where, analogously, lack of trusting relationships within the school district inhibited implementation of the new curriculum. Movement toward ideological and organizational harmony was as elusive as curricular change.

So, conflicts in the mesosystem at the project level and at the site level obstructed change and also had adverse affects in all the other ecological levels. Without frequent contact or strong working relationships, partnerships among site personnel, among sites, and between sites and the central office were shaky and rattled the other layers of the system.

*Microsystem, classroom interactions and relationships.* Fewer difficulties originated in the microsystem as the effects of difficulties in the other ecological levels ultimately struck home in classrooms. Still, at the classroom level, in about three-quarters of the schools, instructional habits, prior curricula, and entrenched pedagogies--that is, inertia--inhibited development of new curricula. Resistance to new ideas and policies put teachers at odds with project administrators. One anomaly: At the Native American school, teachers' enthusiastic development and implementation of a new curriculum initially made them the darlings of the project administrators (but not school or district administrators), admired for their ideology and for their responsiveness to project goals. Inertia was common in the microsystem, and it hindered change. Primarily, however, the microsystem, the arena in which project outcomes culminated, was adversely affected by problems in the other ecological levels.

## **Conclusions**

As the grant period ebbed, the Heritage Project left a wash of positive effects: kids had fun and learned some worthy things about their communities which they would not otherwise have been offered; teachers got professional development and classroom materials, some of which they very much appreciated; some new working relationships were forged; some program emphases appeared sustainable at some sites. But the tide also left a disturbing debris of disappointing outcomes: primary goals perfunctorily addressed, secondary goals neglected or not attempted, curriculum and assessment products superficial or confused, feelings of frustration and resentment, and professional devaluation of an outstanding teacher. An explicit attempt to support local teachers and their desire to orient their teaching to their communities had faced and not always surmounted formidable difficulties. Embarrassed and hurt when this was reported in the final evaluation document, the project director worked determinedly to suppress and discredit the evaluation, deriding interview data—including his own—as "hearsay and innuendo."

This study shows that community-oriented education can generate teacher enthusiasm and skill development, and it can motivate student interest and learning. But our data also indicate that centralized or external support, if not carefully managed and minutely sensitive to local conditions, may poison rather than feed community-oriented educational change. Clearly, a good idea is not enough. The charm of the Heritage Project's generative notion attracted but did not sustain personnel commitment. If community-oriented curriculum was truly the desire of the teachers, a claim made by the project director but not universally confirmed by other personnel, then teachers' own ideas may not be enough to preserve the momentum for change. In the end, none of the

teachers who were active in development and implementation of the new curricula were among the program conceptualizers. In contrast to the literature which favors teacher-generated or bottom-up strategies, in this case, teacher investment was unrelated to their ownership of project ideas and objectives.

Teacher commitment depended instead on a variety of factors, two of which were particularly important. One, teachers tended to be motivated by their own predictions and perceptions of benefits to students, regardless of whether the benefits devolved from an external idea. The teachers on the reservation, sure their Native American students would benefit from knowing and appreciating more about the culture and history of their tribe, engaged with enthusiasm and dedication. The teachers in the Midwest, sure their students needed to know about the wide world rather than their small towns, resisted community-oriented curricula.

Two, the cultural self-identification—or lack of it—of the curriculum developers with targeted communities proved important. African American teachers in the Southeast, whose own culture was to be celebrated in the new curricula, made more progress than their Caucasian colleagues. The Native American sympathizer and the member of the tribe performed admirably in the Southwest, but not their Caucasian counterparts in the neighboring Hispanic school. Cultural identification generated momentum and sensitivity in community-oriented curriculum development and sustainability in implementation. An important caveat: Cultural identification and investment do not automatically accompany residency. In the Midwest, where active resistance was strongest, many teachers were longstanding members of their communities.

Professional development is a politically and professionally attractive concept in the current reform climate, despite recognized limitations of professional development to effect intended change (see Little, 1994). But this study shows that professional development can bite back. The teachers most extensively trained in community-oriented education, those in the Midwest, were also most resistant to developing and implementing community-oriented education. Important as the project's ideas may have been to them, other ideas were more important. Training gave them confidence; confidence promoted autonomy; in this case, they exercised autonomy in contradiction to the program. Teacher empowerment can strengthen programs or can strengthen opposition.

This study also found professional development which was irrelevant. The reservation teachers learned what they needed on their own initiative before the project's professional development was made available; when training was offered, they found little worthwhile. The teachers most in need of training, those in the Southeast and in the Hispanic school in the Southwest, responded to it slowly or not at all. As in other human endeavors, communication proved crucial. In this case, there was a reciprocal relationship between communication and trust and problem-solving. Encumbered by logistically difficult distances, communication among far-flung partners was inadequate. Lacking frequent face-to-face contact, familiarity and trust eluded them. Also, lacking frequent face-to-face contact, problems at schools were not apprehended quickly enough by site coordinators or the project director. Small problems grow fast and unpredictably. There is a better chance of defusing irritants while they are minor, before they explode. In the Heritage Project, failure to nip unrecognized problems early undermined trust, which discouraged communication and candor in communication, which diminished the opportunity to recognize and address problems. A version of this vicious cycle was found at every site.

Our data suggest a need for much more local sensitivity and adaptability by

policy-makers and educationists in colleges and universities who are interested in assisting school improvement. This study indicated that there is potential for successful initiatives originating with folks other than local implementers but also some early red flags which went unrecognized in this project: weak initial interest of some teacher-implementers, centralized rather than localized directives and decisions, logistical difficulties regarding communication and coordination, and distrust and insensitivity (often unintended). As in this case, initial levels of enthusiasm by prospective personnel may appear sufficient to justify a new initiative but may over represent their long-term commitment and fail to sustain their efforts over time.

The concepts of teacher-designed change and community- oriented education retain appeal despite the mixed results in this case. The likelihood of unintended heavy-handedness in centralized support, the difficulties of generating and maintaining personnel commitment, and the importance of enthusiasm and sensitivity emanating from teacher identification with communities suggest important considerations for these approaches. We offer this cautionary portrait to encourage rumination, discussion, and the development of increasingly sophisticated approaches to improving education in the many continuing initiatives across the country.

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## Notes

1. Information about the program has been anonymized regarding title, subject area, personnel, and sites.
2. The authors were assisted with data collection by doctoral students Tracy Cronin, Jeff Davis, and Sharifah Shakirah Syed Omar.
3. In year 3, one participating teacher was attending a conference at the time of an evaluation site visit.
4. The project director disputed this, claiming that community-oriented education was initially resisted but later fully embraced by the Midwest teachers. However, seven months of classroom observations by a different researcher the following year revealed not a single creditable lesson about the local communities (anonymous, personal communication, 1998).
5. Recognition that change is slow has, of course, appeared in the literature of educational reform (see, for example, Darling-Hammond, 1990), but full understanding of the time typically needed for program development is not evident in most Requests for Proposals (RFPs).
6. An outsider's perspective based upon external categorization and structuring, as opposed to an emic approach based upon insiders' viewpoints and constructions of meaning (see Seymour-Smith, 1986, p. 92)
7. We did, however, recommend such discussion and intended to support it with our data until forbidden by the project director to do more than "watch this play out" (see Mabry, 1999).

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