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ABSTRACT

Energy Express is an 8-week summer nutrition and literacy program in low-income West Virginia communities. Multi-age groups of eight children in grades 1-6 work with college student mentors for 3 1/2 hours each day, eating breakfast and lunch served family-style and creating print-rich environments that support their emerging literacy. The program emphasizes building partnerships between local and state agencies and communities. To sponsor an Energy Express site, a community collaborative of parents, groups, and organizations develops a proposal; generates a required local funding match; and assists in local planning, implementation, and evaluation. While West Virginia University Extension provides leadership, a number of state agencies and organizations and AmeriCorps work together to fund and operate the program. Energy Express emphasizes the value of place, acknowledging research findings that curriculum based on place can be a vehicle to connect children's learning to their emerging identities as members of a community. Weekly themes progress from myself, family, friends, homeplace, and community, to the ideal world. During the final week, children complete a community service project. The literature used in the program and the program structures (small learning groups, print-rich philosophy, family-style meals, volunteerism, and community service) all tap into the children's sense of place. The program has been operating for 5 years, and nearly three-quarters of participating children have made substantial gains in reading. (Contains 27 references.) (TD)

Place-Based Partnerships on Behalf of Children, Families and Communities: Energy Express

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While the rest of the nation has enjoyed unprecedented economic prosperity in recent decades, rural America has often experienced a decline in economic well-being (United States Bureau of Economic Analysis, 1998). This is especially the case in Appalachia, a region historically left out of the nation's race for economic progress. The people of Appalachia share a rich cultural heritage that includes a love of the mountains that surround them, a strong sense of family, kinship, and community, a commitment to personal freedom and independence and a rich oral tradition. In stark contrast to the lovely landscape of the region, Appalachians also share a long history of economic exploitation, poverty, and substandard housing. The poverty rate in the central Appalachian region is more than twice the national average. High rates of unemployment and illiteracy continue to plague the region and interfere with economic development (Butera & Maughan, 1998; deMarrais, 1998; Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997).

Educational opportunities in Appalachia have often been limited. In West Virginia, the only state entirely encompassed in the Appalachian region, schools have struggled to overcome inequities in funding and an inadequate tax base (Howley, 1996; Spence, 1998; Terman & Behrman, 1997). The disadvantages of attending poorly-resourced schools have often been compounded by economic disadvantage as families attempted to cope with economic hard times. During the past century it was not uncommon for young boys in the state to leave school in order to work in the mines, whereas young girls left to help out at home with chores and the younger children. Coal mining remains important in West Virginia's economy but the coal that remains is less easily extracted and the number of jobs in the mines have steadily declined. West Virginia is forty-ninth in the nation for per capita personal income. Many rural counties in the state remain the poorest in the nation (Kids Count Data Book, 1999).

Efforts to improve the educational opportunities of West Virginia's children have occurred. A lawsuit brought forward on behalf of schoolchildren in Lincoln County, West Virginia detailed the poor conditions of the state's schools and resulted in the 1982 Recht Decision. A Master Plan detailing requirements for school improvement was written. Although no doubt contributing to a number of improvements in West Virginia's schools, the Master Plan also put into motion a series

of decisions that resulted in state-wide school consolidation. Schools that were closed over the next two decades were most often in rural, isolated, and poor communities. The effects of school closures on student achievement and parent participation and satisfaction with their school has been problematic. The effects of school closure on many communities have been devastating (DeYoung, 1995; Fanning, 1999; Lee & Smith, 1994; Spence, 1998).

The impact of school closure on West Virginia communities raises questions about the function of schools as the focal point of community identity. If communities losing their school to consolidation lose a sense of themselves as a community, then it is clear that schools serve important community functions that extend beyond education. Further, if even very poorly-resourced schools in disrepair serve as a focal point of community identity, the case can be made that schools can serve as the focus for social, economic, and environmental community development as they serve the educational needs of children and communities. This case has been made (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Miller, 1993; Monk & Haller, 1986; Nachitagal, Haas, Parker, & Brown, 1989; Spears, Combs, & Bailey, 1990). According to Miller, (1993) three distinct, yet related approaches to building partnerships between school and communities have emerged including: 1) using the school as a community center; 2) using community as curriculum; and 3) using the school as the developer of entrepreneurial skill.

Each of the approaches Miller describes provide ways to think about how schools and communities can work together for mutual benefit. However, if schools are to assume broader roles in community development, it is essential that those who work in them conceive of the mission of schooling both broadly and securely connected to the life of the community. Yet the push to prepare students for a global economy and national curriculum standards have in essence removed much of the educational decision-making from the hands of local authorities (Fanning, 1999; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Under such circumstances, the task of developing partnerships between schools and communities is daunting. Further, despite rhetoric to the contrary, models of successful school-community partnerships are infrequent and have failed to provide convincing empirical data regarding their efficacy (Miller, 1993).

The purpose of this manuscript is to present Energy Express, a state-wide summer nutrition and literacy program in low-income West Virginia communities. Energy Express has demonstrated efficacy in supporting children's emerging literacy and nutritional status and it has a positive impact on the attitudes and skills of the college student AmeriCorps members who work in it (Butera & Dempsey, 1999; Butera, Pae, McMullen, Richason, & Bonnet, 1999). But more important to the argument here, Energy Express is deliberate in its attempts to facilitate partnerships between communities and schools. In so doing, the program provides a laboratory of sorts for examining how schools and communities can form partnerships of place that firmly connect children's experiences with literacy to community development.

Energy Express

Energy Express is an eight-week summer nutrition and literacy program sponsored by West Virginia University Extension and a variety of state and local partners. Energy Express is designed to promote the school success of children living in low-income West Virginia communities. During Energy Express, multi-age groups of eight children entering first through sixth grades work with college student mentors for three and one-half hours each day, eating breakfast and lunch served family-style together and creating print-rich environments that are designed to support their emerging literacy. Energy Express has expanded rapidly from the original 2 sites during its pilot year of 1994 to 16 sites in 1995, 38 in 1996, 55 in 1997, and 68 sites in 1998. In the summer of 1999, Energy Express enrolled over 3,400 children in 76 sites across the state and employed over 430 mentors.

The meals in Energy Express are intended to fill a void that occurs during the summer months that are without school breakfast and lunch and are designed to provide fifty-eight per cent of a child's daily nutritional requirements according to United States Department of Agriculture standards. Serving meals family-style is intended to support relationships building between mentors and children and to demonstrate to the children that they are valued. They also provide children with an opportunity to learn how to make healthy nutritional choices and participate in the social interactions that surround meal times.

Between breakfast and lunch, mentors guide children in print-rich activities designed to make literacy meaningful in their lives. Energy Express activities are framed by weekly themes: Myself, Family, Friends, Homeplace, Community and Ideal World. Reading, writing, art, and drama are integrated into activities that encourage the children to appreciate themselves, their personal experiences, and their place in their world. The children create books, read aloud, write and perform plays and puppet shows, read silently, write in journals, participate in shared reading and produce art projects. Each week children receive take-home books selected for their relevance to the weekly themes for their personal libraries. During the final week of the program children are to learn about the value of service by planning and completing a community service project such as reading at a nursing home or planting flowers in a park.

College students from across the state are trained before the program begins to serve as mentors and are asked to commit to helping communities meet the needs of children. In addition to working directly with children, the mentors help create opportunities for parents, families, and other community members to contribute to children's learning through Energy Express by volunteering. Mentors visit each child at home during the week prior to the start of Energy Express, talk about the program with participating families, and invite them to participate in it. Mentors stay connected with families through weekly contacts for the duration of Energy Express through phone calls, visits, notes, newsletters or special events. Family and community members are encouraged to contribute time to Energy Express in a variety of ways such as reading with children, guiding art projects, taking dictation from children, answering the phone, keeping the recycled supplies organized or assisting with family-style meals.

The mentor group at each site also plans and implements a community service project in addition to the one that they complete with their children. All mentors become members of AmeriCorps, President Clinton's "domestic Peace Corps" and earn an educational award for their service. Energy Express aims to impact the attitudes of its mentors by increasing their confidence in their ability to make a difference in the lives of their communities and to strengthen their commitment to community service. Energy Express mentors are supervised and coached at each

site by a site coordinator, usually a school administrator or teacher who provides them with ideas for planning their activities with the children and leads them in group reflection sessions about their experiences in the program.

To sponsor an Energy Express site, a community collaborative of parents, groups, and organizations develops a proposal, generates a required local funding match, and fills a variety of support roles needed in local planning, implementation, and evaluation. The configuration of the collaborative is intended to develop shared ownership of the program, diversified funding, and program sustainability. The local collaborative includes no less than five members from a variety of backgrounds, each representing the community either as individuals or members of an agency or organization. Required members include a county contact, usually a West Virginia University extension agent, and a parent representative. Other collaborative members typically represent school systems, family resource networks, libraries, national service streams, civic groups, social agencies, faith communities, and the Extension Service. One of the responsibilities of the collaborative is to identify community partners who will contribute resources for program implementation.

While West Virginia University Extension Service provides leadership for Energy Express at the state level, care has been taken to emphasize partnering and to share ownership of the program. At the state level a number of agencies and organizations work together to support summer services for children via Energy Express. The West Virginia Departments of Education (through Title I), Education and the Arts, and Health and Human Resources, along with the West Virginia Commission of National and Community Service are major program funders. These agencies partner with Energy Express by serving on Energy Express committees, assisting with site selection, advocating for the program to the state legislature, visiting sites, and disseminating information about the program at state and national meetings.

Place in Energy Express

In addition to its deliberate effort to build partnerships on the local and state level in order to achieve its program goals, the activities of Energy Express emphasize the value of place. A number

of scholars have written in the last several decades about the relevance of place in understanding the cultural values of self, identity, and social relationships (Bushnell, 1999; Hummon, 1990; Lutz & Merz, 1992; Miller, 1993; Orr, 1992; Perin, 1977). The notion is that children's view of the world and their understanding of themselves and others emerges from their place of residence. Most authors writing about place acknowledge that the extent to which place figures in identity formation varies. Some individuals establish a deep connection to place. Those who establish this sense of care and rootedness may define their identity through that place. And, in such cases, as Bushnell puts it, "Place, particularly a rural place, becomes more than an opportunity for learning - it is the central cohesion point of a life interconnected with other beings" (p. 81). From this perspective, curriculum based on place becomes a vehicle through which children can connect literacy learning to their emerging identities as members of a community.

In Energy Express, the curriculum themes and the literature used in creating print rich environments are designed to tap into the children's sense of place. The community service projects by the children and the mentors are also intentional in connecting to a sense of place. It is important to note that the program's structures (small learning groups, the print rich philosophy, family style meals, volunteerism, and community service) are ones likely to valued in participating communities. In essence, the value the program puts on place relates to the program's ability to develop interventions for a geographically and socially distributed group of people (Butera & Dempsey, 1999).

As part of the program's evaluation, ethnographic case studies have been conducted at eleven Energy Express sites during the past four summers. Case study sites are chosen as representative of Energy Express sites across the state and vary in terms of their geography, location of the site, their experience in Energy Express, the population of children they serve and the nature of their community, and the collaborative effort involved in program planning and implementation. Each case study site is visited at least once a week by 2 - 4 members of six person evaluation team during the eight week program. The evaluators are doctoral students trained in ethnographic case study methods under the supervision of a faculty member. A lead evaluator,

appointed for each site visits a minimum of four times. Evaluators observe the daily activities of Energy Express and they also attend activities specific to the site under study including planning meetings, home visits, open houses, and participant meetings. During site visits, informal interviews are conducted with participants at the site including mentors, site coordinators, children, parents, and site volunteers. At each site key community stakeholders are interviewed, including community members and members or employees of the local board of education. Case study data also includes artifacts collected on site including children's art work, parent newsletters, articles in the local newspaper, and other written products. Ongoing field notes are gathered and a summary form is used to gather overall team impressions immediately following each visit. The entire data set from each site is compiled in a site notebook that is reviewed on an ongoing basis.

Weekly evaluation team meetings are held to discuss ongoing and emerging themes at each site and across sites. As the program ends, case study data reduction procedures require each evaluation team member to read the site data set in order to identify recurring themes. Using a member checking system in which team members discuss identified themes, reread the data, and continue to meet discussing differences in team member perceptions, site and cross case themes are identified. With multiple opportunities for team input, the site team leader writes the final draft of the site report under the supervision of the evaluation team leader. Drafts of each case study manuscript are sent to the sites in order to check for accuracy and to improve overall reliability. The drafts are edited following this site review. Excerpts from two of the case studies conducted in the summer of 1999 are used here in order to illustrate how the program works to facilitate partnerships of place.

Place-Based Partnerships with Children

The primary place-based partnership in Energy Express involves the relationship between participating children and the college student mentors. We have consistently argued that it is this partnership that is built between these two individuals that account for the beneficial program outcomes for both (Butera & Dempsey, 1999, Butera, Pae, McMullen, Richason, & Bonnet,

1999) Energy Express provides a framework for this relationship in a manual provided to the mentors:

> The Energy Express themes begin with an exploration of self, a topic every child knows best. The themes then encourage an ever-widening exploration of the world around each child and his or her place in the world. This is what is referred to as a "place-based" curriculum. The six themes are myself, family, friends, homeplace, community, and making my world a better place. These themes guide the selection of the take-home books each child receives, the selection of additional reading materials, and the writing and art activities you facilitate. The Energy Express themes were carefully chosen to make every child an "expert" having a great deal of knowledge about each one. Your role is to guide their exploration, helping them share their knowledge and connect their experiences to each theme. (p. 25)

It is important to note that the Energy Express Mentor Manual describes the relationship as a partnership. The child is viewed as a knowledgeable expert and the mentor as a qualified guide as the two set out to explore the child's place in the world. There is inherent risk in this description in that what the expert and guide discover in the child's place is the content for the program. If nothing of importance is discovered in the child's place, the curriculum could be void of content. Making things even riskier (from the perspective of traditional curriculum design), for the most part, the children who attend Energy Express are from low-income families and they are likely to be experiencing school difficulties. Many of the mentors have little experience with children and a few have just graduated from high school. Some of the mentors define their only experience with children as "a lot of baby-sitting." Yet Energy Express credits the ability of these partners to create the content of the curriculum. Sometimes the partners struggle but often they are successful as the following excerpt from the Alum Creek case study illustrates:

> The Alum Creek mentors meet each child the week before the children arrive on site by conducting a home visit. Although the mentors are given some guidance and suggested activities to do on these initial home visits, the meetings between mentor and child do not always go as planned as the mentor and child begin to negotiate their relationship. A parent whose child, Tommy, attended Energy Express and worked with a mentor named Penny. The first day Penny came for a home visit, Tommy didn't want to meet her. At first he was lying half-asleep on the couch and wouldn't look at her. Penny just sat down on the couch with him but didn't force him to talk. She just started talking to the dog and when he heard

her talking to the dog, he was like, 'O.K., I will start talking to her now.' He loves talking about his dog.

This excerpt highlights how partnerships are formed between mentors and children in Energy Express. Although at first Tommy gave no indication he was interested in her, Penny was optimistic in her efforts and assumed that Tommy had something to bring from his place, in this case his love for his dog.

Although this initial meeting between Penny and Tommy proved successful, the next step in partnership building was to take place in the very school building where Tommy had recently failed to pass from first to second grade. According to Tommy's mother, Tommy's struggles in school began with the other children's harassment of him about his birthmark that sometimes swells from cheek and lip. She explained that Tommy always keeps his head down, never smiles, and lacks confidence. Penny describes Tommy in Energy Express:

> At first, he would never do anything. He never wanted to write or read on his own. He would like it if I read to him, but that was about it. If I would ask him to write in his journal, he would say, 'I don't know how' and ask me to spell every word because he was so afraid to mess up.

Energy Express encourages Penny to keep trying to engage Tommy in print-rich activities every day. Both the program and Penny assume that Tommy will offer resources from his side of the partnership. The excerpt below is Penny's description of how it turned out in this partnership and is typical of the successes that mentors and children are able to accomplish:.

> Now he likes to read on his own. He likes to read to the others. He likes to write in his journal. One day someone asked me to spell a word, and I was helping someone else. Tommy said 'Wait a minute, I know how to spell it' and he helped them spell it. That really made me happy.

Although the relationship between Tommy and Penny is an example of how the place-based partnerships can be successfully formed between children and mentors, it is not the case that every partnership results in such beneficial outcomes. However, mentors are encouraged to be persistent in their attempts to engage the children in constructive activities and they have the resilience and energy of youth. At Dewitt, mentor Bobby is observed during read aloud with his

group of children. He completes the story only after many interruptions as the children relate their own stories that the read aloud brings to mind. At one point Joey announces that he can not read. Bobby responds by saying that "yes, you can. I've heard you myself." When Joey says, "Well, I'm not very good." Bobby responds immediately with, "Well, that's why you practice: Practice makes perfect." Joey considers this and says, "Practice does not make it perfect, Bobby: It makes it better, though."

The risk involved in assuming that each child will offer content related to the Energy Express curriculum themes may relate to the fact that children in Energy Express are unaccustomed to having value placed on the stories they bring to literacy learning from their own life experiences. Teachers in winter school feel pressure to cover curriculum goals and objectives. Further, other children, without guidance, can be unkind and tease children about their stories especially if the child telling it is considered different from the classroom norms. Below Julie, another Alum Creek mentor, describes how Bradley gradually began to respond to the value the program put on the stories he told about his place.

> The first couple of weeks Bradley would hardly talk to any of the other kids. He wouldn't do the activities with anybody. When I asked him to write in his journal, he would write a word and say he didn't have anything to tell me about. Then one day he came in and wanted to tell me about jets, which was something he really liked. He told me the story and I said 'that's a really neat story' And then he wanted to tell the group.

As soon as Bradley started speaking of the things he knew, Julie started to capitalize on his offering by having him write his stories in his journal and share them with the group. Below is a transcription of one of Bradley's stories offered and eagerly received by Julie and the other children:

> We were on our way to Morgantown, and a deer just walked out really slow and was just walking and we hit it. All the transmission fluid came out and smoke was coming out of the vents. Kathy, my sister, picked up part of the light and threw half of the light at it. And it had a scar down its face, and it was moving its leg which was off. She said, 'Die, you dumb thing!' Actually she said, 'Die you dumb monster!' Then this man, I forget his name, stopped and picked us up and brought us home. Mommy said that she hoped she has total insurance. And her cousin towed it. The front had to be up in the air, but the back

tires were on the ground. Oh, you know! Oh, you guys wouldn't know that. There is a guy that died there. He don't live there anymore. You can hardly see the house 'cause the trees around there, and that deer is laying right there. The house is on the side and you can hardly see it. The house is gray, and the deer is lying right beside a tree and you will see part of a car.

The story did not end with its telling. In fact Rebecca, Alum Creek's site coordinator, offered Julie the idea and the tape recorder to make the story into a book by transcribing it and placing one or two lines per page. Bradley's group illustrated it. Julie describes Bradley's reaction to the strategy, "That made his day, I mean he was so proud of that book as he kept going around to pick who drew the pictures." This is an example of how Julie's contribution to the partnership and her expectation of Bradley allowed him to bring his emerging understanding of the world from his place to the task of acquiring literacy.

Place-Based Partnerships with Mentors and Site Coordinators

The importance of the role of the mentors in forming a supportive relationship with each of the Energy Express children can scarcely be overstated. Mentors enjoy their relationships with the children and they like to think "they can make a difference for them by helping them to like learning" as one Dewitt mentor echoed what many others told us. A pre-post mentor survey designed to capture change in mentor attitudes and beliefs demonstrates significantly more positive mentor attitudes about their own abilities and commitment to community service (Butera, Pae, McMullen, Richason, & Bonnet, 1999). Mentors explain that the fact that the program relies on them to use their own creativity is empowering. As Sandy, a Dewitt mentor puts it:

> You know, we are taught a lot of things in training. Things like how to plan, how to read with the kids, the areas and things you might need in your room. But that leaves a lot of open doors for you. This is good. It's how you want to do it. It is up to you.

As the story of Bradley and Julie illustrates, site coordinators often function as critical linchpins in how the mentors and children come to understand each other and develop place-based activities. In many ways, the partnerships that develop between the site coordinators and mentors mirror the relationships between mentors and children. It is the case that mentors vary in how well they are able to plan activities and form relationships with the participating children. Although

many mentors do surprisingly well, mentors also struggle, especially with children seen as very difficult to manage. When this happens the relationship with the mentor and the site coordinator becomes very important as they problems solve about what to do. The story of Mary Ellen and Christy at Dewitt illustrates this partnership as Mary Ellen tells about how she tries to support Christy:

> I thought if I went to her room, it might not be so intimidating. . . I just asked how things are going and how she felt. She started talking about some of her concerns and I said, 'I'm glad you brought that up.' If she hadn't , I'd decided I needed to be more direct. Then I said, 'I do think that we have a problem. . . I come into your room and I notice that . . . your read aloud goes really well and after that, things just seem to have a downward spiral.' . . . At that point she burst into tears and I told her I was sorry to have to say this and that I wanted her to know that I was not saying all of this to put her down. I wanted to do this because I know we can improve.

Mary Ellen and Christy begin to talk about how she could manage her group better. They come up with a list of ideas that Christy could try with the children that might help things go more smoothly. Mary Ellen tells Christy "Everyone has their own style: You do it your way." The following day, Christy tries out some of the new ideas. By the fourth week of the program, both Mary Ellen and Christy agree that things are going better for children and for Christy in her group. Mary Ellen, in talking about how Christy has developed, describes what Christy brings to the partnership:

> You know Christy puts in more time than anyone. . . And she loves those kids and they love her. They're always hanging on her. . .There are some people who are thinkers and not quick doers. . . it's hard for people who are more reflective and haven't had time to think about things. . .I am really pleased with how things are turning out. . . She has really learned and I think it was due to her hard work and her openness and her ability to sit down and think about a problem and how to make it work for herself and the kids.

The partnership between Mary Ellen and Christy made it possible for both Christy and the kids to be successful. In this case, Mary Ellen offered Christy the resource of her ideas just as Rebecca offered Julie the idea and the tape recorder to tape Bradley's story at Alum Creek. In both cases, the site coordinators conveyed to the mentor that they were available to help them but they did not take over the mentor's role. When this partnership between mentors and site coordinators

happens in Energy Express, the mentors are in essence valued for what they bring from their "place" to the program just as they in turn value the identities the children bring to the program.

Like mentors, site coordinators vary in their ability to provide mentors with support and resources. Usually they are experienced educators who have the resources gathered from years of practice to bring to the tasks at hand. However, seldom do they have any experience guiding the development of a young adult as they are asked to do with the mentors. Although they also are provided with pre-program training designed to give them strategies for their work, the particulars of mentor support are often left to the local site circumstances and the creativity of the individuals involved. Although some site coordinators struggle with these demands, a remarkable number respond to the opportunity to guide young adults in learning some of what they know about working with children with enthusiasm and good humor. They bring what they know to the partnerships with mentors. They tell us, "I get a lot out of a bag of chips and a quart of soda at mentor reflection." They brag about the good ideas "my mentors have". At the summer's end, they tell us "I'll miss these guys" echoing what the mentors say about the children.

In site coordinator interviews conducted at the end of the summer, site coordinators explain their rationale for participating in the program that is "the hardest job I've ever loved." It is instructive to note that their explanations often reveal the deep connection and rootedness they feel to the communities in which they work and live. Mary Ellen's story illustrates this:

> I was an at-risk kid. My mother passed away when I was eleven. My dad worked in Wisconsin. Me and my sister ,who was about eighteen months younger than me, had to go on to school. I managed to cook, clean and get me and my sister out to school before he ever remarried. . . . I was eleven and the very next year I entered seventh grade. . . . I could never forget. I was having a really hard time because we had to walk a half mile to catch the bus and if the bus was five minutes early and you missed the bus, you were just stuck. . . . There was really no one to help me, to nurture me. And then there was this teacher. She took me aside and she said 'hey, I really admire the way you are putting this out and I know that it is really hard and if you ever need somebody, come to me'. . .She told me that I had real writing talent. . . . she made me realize that I had potential. . .that maybe I could go on to college and nobody in my family ever had. She cheered me on and in senior year she invented an award for me because she thought I truly deserved it. . . . It

was for classical reading. I had read all the classics in the library, every book and it wasn't; a requirement. It was just because we had no TV and I loved to read. She said during the graduation ceremony and I will never forget it. . . . She said it was for someone she knew has had a long, hard struggle and she is so proud of. . . .So, if I can reach just one kid in Energy Express I think it is a wonderful thing. . . . Whenever I am tired and really worn out. . . . I just think about that. . . . How can I make a difference to these kids today? How can I make a difference to these mentors who may need support but can't let you know that? . . . . I think this is a vehicle to serve my own personal goals. For what I want to give back to the community and so that is why I am really happy to.

Place-Based Partnerships with Sites

In addition to the partnerships that are formed between children and mentors and mentors and site coordinators, Energy Express is deliberate in forming partnerships with communities at the site level. Negotiation between central program purpose and local need is a purposeful part of the process of planning for an Energy Express site. Holding to a well defined mission while maintaining local autonomy, buy-in, and ownership requires constant negotiation. Over four years of evaluation data suggest that the necessary tension between the central principles of Energy Express and the implementation of these principles on a local level may in fact contribute substantially to the program's success (Butera & Dempsey, 1999).

Evidence of the negotiation between centralization of program mission and planning and grassrootedness in planning, purpose and implementation abounds in the 1999 case study data. At Alum Creek and Dewitt it was clear that site participants understood the rationale for central program principles and implemented them in good faith. This is probably most evident in the reading that occurred and in the print-rich environment constructed by children and mentors. Children at both sites read often and they engaged in activities that were designed to assist them in constructing meaning from what they read. They read aloud to each other; they read to community volunteers. They were read to and they wrote stories and produced art work related to what they read. Rooms filled with projects related to books and Energy Express place-based curriculum themes. Towards the end of the program a child at Dewitt, asked what she liked about Energy Express unhesitatingly replied, "Journal writing, read aloud, individual reading, noncompetitive

games, group writing, nutrition, one-to-one reading, drama, art, and clean-up " The evaluator recording her response notes "Did we hire her?"

The activities at Alum Creek and Dewitt featured place-based topics intended to help children connect the literacy of home and community to school activities. A breakfast conversation at Dewitt is animated as two small boys tell about going up into the mountain to shoot with their dads. The children read Cynthia Rylant's, When I was Young in the Mountains and they have little trouble filling the pages of a group book, When I was Young in West Virginia with narrative and illustrations: "I played jump rope with my cousins," "I climbed mountains," "I killed lizards with rocks," " I got my mommy some pop," and "I went to Energy Express."

Although there is ample evidence that sites understood and employed central program principles in implementing the program, the negotiation between central program principles and local circumstances is also apparent in the case study data and demonstrates the partnership that develops between the program and communities. For example, some place-based curriculum topics that have held the fascination of a nation for a generation are not discussed at Dewitt. An evaluator riding the bus up Nellie's Creek with the children and mentors asks about the Matewan Massacre and the Hatfield and McCoy Feuds. The mentors (who are from the community) explain that they really do not know much about it, although they have family involved. "My uncle was a judge or something" and "One of my best friends in high school was Hatfield so they're still around." The evaluator appears confused and finally the mentor explains:

> This area has been really weird about their violent past. It's like we became so ashamed of it, that we really didn't want anyone to know about it or something. I don't know. Like the Matewan Massacre. You know when I found out about that? This is amazing but I was probably like in seventh or eighth grade before anyone mentioned that to me because no one ever says 'hey, something big happened in Matewan'. . . . Everyone's just like 'I don't know' or 'shhh don't tell anyone.'

Asked about the possible use of this local history to build Energy Express curriculum, Mary Ellen has a similar explanation. "We don't talk about it here." She goes on to explain, "There are still lots of family feuds going on and we have lots of Hatfields and McCoys here: We don't want to get things started up again." Energy Express curriculum is negotiated on a local level.

In addition to the negotiation between central program principles and local curriculum ideas, data from Alum Creek and Dewitt demonstrate that the sites each had a local mission that provided impetus for the program as much as that of the mission described by the central program. These local missions related to local needs as perceived by key stakeholders at the site. They were unique to the site and they appeared to contribute to how the program was implemented at the local level. At Alum Creek, interview data revealed that Energy Express was seen as a "drop out prevention program." As one key stakeholder put it in his interview:

> Now that's our perspective . . . that Energy Express, getting kids in here, getting young kids in here, particularly those that the world isn't all that beautiful for, that getting them in here early in their school career makes all the difference in the world in terms of them staying in school. We bring in a whole lot of marginal kids. By marginal I mean can they make it in Energy Express? Can we hold onto to them? Are they too much in the way of behavior problems? We bring them in and encourage them to be part of the program.

As the interviewee tells it, Alum Creek was quite likely to have enrolled at the site a large number of children with special needs, including those with identified disabilities. Interviewees were unanimous in talking about how all children should be included in Alum Creek's program and about how important it was that children enjoy their experience during the program since enjoying the program may have the effect of changing their attitudes about school. Although most Energy Express sites construct vivid print-rich environments, those created by Alum Creek's children and mentors were especially filled with colorful examples of children's art and crafts. Further, although they acknowledged the importance of the gains in reading achievement demonstrated by Alum Creek's children, key stakeholders most often described the program as a success because of the excitement the children displayed about it. As a teacher from Alum Creek tells it:

> When I have the kids return to school in the fall, I can tell which ones have been to Energy Express because they come in excited about school, excited about telling me what they have done in Energy Express. I would get a book out of my private library and they would say, 'Oh, I read that in Energy Express. I already know that.' They start telling me the story and they were excited about the different things, the crafts they did and the writing they did.

When the kids with learning disabilities came in, they weren't shy about starting back. There was none of this 'I can't.' It was more like 'yeah, I'll try' and 'I'll do that.'

On the other hand, key stakeholders in the Energy Express site at Dewitt saw Energy Express as a primary means to improve the children's reading achievement. Several interviewees told us that they thought participating in Energy Express contributed directly to the improved scores on standardized achievement tests demonstrated by the community's children during the previous school year. They were especially likely to mention that reading achievement was important to school success and they valued Energy Express for its emphasis on reading. As in Alum Creek, Dewitt's sense of local mission translated into how the program was implemented at that site. At Dewitt every time the evaluation team observed in a mentor's room, reading was occurring, often one-to-one with a child. All of the Dewitt mentors named reading as the most important way that Energy Express benefits children in their interviews. During mentor reflection at Dewitt, Mary Ellen modeled how to read aloud with children, dramatically reading a rendition of one of the take-home books and pointing out how to ask the children what the story meant. She teased the mentors. "It is okay to read aloud to the children three times during the day. It's not a sin to read aloud three times a day."

Key stakeholders at Alum Creek and at Dewitt viewed Energy Express as a vehicle that facilitated community response to the needs of its children. They subscribed wholeheartedly to the central tenets of the program. But they also saw the program as an opportunity to address a locally perceived mission. The ways in which each site set about implementing the program demonstrated the negotiation between the central program tenets and local needs. We believe that this sort of place-based partnership with local communities accounts in part for the program's success.

The Lessons of Energy Express for School-Community Partnerships

We believe that the lessons of Energy Express have important implications for school community partnerships. However, there is an important caveat. Energy Express shares common characteristics with schools, especially in its mission to enhance children's literacy learning. Most often the program is, in fact, conducted in a school building. Nevertheless, Energy Express is not

school. There are important differences which may limit the application of our findings to school programs. Energy Express operates at the behest of communities who seek to conduct a program. It operates with few of the constraints of schools with regard to curriculum, policies and procedures and community expectations about what must be accomplished. Energy Express enjoys its freedom from regulation in a fashion that few schools can hope to emulate. Further, Energy Express operates for eight weeks during the summer months. The energy that has given the program its name is invigorating to witness, but no doubt easier to maintain during this shorter time frame while the state is awash color.

Having stated this caveat, Energy Express can be seen as an example of how schools and communities might build partnerships that support children's literacy learning. Reading achievement data collected on stratified random samples of participating Energy Express children suggest that program's approach to enhancing literacy learning is effective in supporting children's reading. Nearly three quarters of the sample in 1999 (n = 603) demonstrated significant gains on individually administered tests of word identification and passage comprehension post-program (Butera, Pae, McMullen, Richason, Bonnet, 1999). Extrapolating from standard scores, we speculate that the prototypical "average" child in Energy Express gained about three months in broad reading achievement over the course of the program. These findings are limited by the one group pre-post test research design employed by the study but the fact that the findings are consistent over four years supports our conclusions even as we expand our design to add longitudinal study employing a control group. Energy Express data is at least suggestive that the print-rich, place-based approach to supporting children's literacy learning is effective.

Given that the Energy Express approach may be effective in supporting children's literacy learning, the advantages of a print-rich, place-based curriculum approach to literacy learning in supporting school-community partnerships are important to acknowledge. The value of place in the lives of the children and communities that Energy Express serves seems apparent. Theobald and Nachitagal (1995) believe that place should be the chief curricular focus for children According to the authors, place as curriculum is advantageous because 1) it is intertwined with knowledge of

self; 2) combines intellectual pursuits with children's direct experience; 3) addresses the problems inherent in a knowledge base that is over-specialized and organized on the basis of discipline; and 4) socializes children into living well within their community (as opposed to preparing children to participate in a global economy). As we have attempted to illustrate with the case study data, the processes of designing activities and connecting them to literacy in Energy Express has the effect that Theobald and Nachitagal propose. Place-based curricular focus may be both effective and appropriate for schools that would build partnerships with the communities they serve.

Partnership in Energy Express emanates from the value the program places on accomplishing its objectives through the process of building community in a variety of ways and at a variety of program levels. The negotiation that occurs at each level of the program is also present as the program expands. Energy Express was conceived as a community-based, collaborative approach toward improving the quality and quantity of summer services for children, especially those from low-income families. This strategy creates the opportunity to identify and partner with local capacity to provide leadership, resources and commitment to program purposes and to develop the infrastructure capable of supporting a system of summer learning for children. Energy Express is also part of a partnership with two other community-based AmeriCorps literacy programs. This group is collaborative and has worked together in order to expand programs via joint funding, to share human and financial resources and to make decisions that are beneficial to children's literacy enhancement across the state.

Under these circumstances, we have been loathe to participate in the whole-language versus skill-building debate that has characterized much of the discussion about learning to read in the past several decades. Energy Express does not provide children with skill-building instruction, but this is not because we do not believe that it is an important component in good reading programs. Rather, we assert that, as a summer literacy enhancement program using college students, intensive instruction in reading skills may be inappropriate. This assertion has thus far protected the program's ability to insist on the integrity of the print-rich, place-based approach, while building partnerships at the state level with constituencies that favor a more intensive

approach to reading support in the summer. It may be important for the program to increase its efforts to use more of the accepted educational language to explain its objectives and outcomes, to look longitudinally at program impact and to communicate in ways that strengthen rather than polarize relationships among key stakeholders. These lessons are important for school-community partnerships.

While the importance of efficacy in any approach to supporting children's reading can scarcely be overstated, the value of Energy Express as an approach to literacy learning also relates to the ability of the approach to empower participants. In order to explain how this empowerment relates to school community partnerships, it is necessary to acknowledge that both communities and local schools have been disempowered in many cases by the ways in which curriculum is designed, conceptualized and delivered and by changes in the locus of educational-decision-making. This is evident in the ways in which curriculum developed by representatives of a dominant group is liable to exclude or de-authorize the knowledge and experience of dominated groups, including low-income families and communities. Place-based curricula such as Energy Express authorizes local knowledge and provides strategies that focus on producing identities that are rich and solid (Connell, 1994; Wexler, 1992). They also seek to build community by emphasizing the connections between children's lives and the life of the community. This perspective is no small part of understanding how schools and communities (especially in low-income areas) might seek to form school-community partnerships.

Energy Express as an intervention effort struggles with what is does not accomplish and we have detailed these program improvement issues elsewhere (Butera, Pae, McMullen, Richason, Bonnet, 1999). While nearly three-quarters of the participating children appear to make substantive gains in reading, a quarter of them do not. We are well-aware that some of the neediest children and communities in the state do not participate in Energy Express in some cases because they lack the resources (i.e., transportation) to do so. Mentors and site coordinators alike often struggle to respect the children and families that participate in the program, especially if they are perceived as very different from their own. The community service projects are not always well-integrated with

the rest of the program. The central program staff is often unable to provide the sites with technical assistance and support when they ask for it, especially as the program has expanded. These program shortcomings are problematic and only begin to suggest some of the issues school-community partnerships might face.

The lessons of Energy Express may seem especially suitable for schools and communities in Appalachia. While we believe that the traditions of the region do indeed make place-based partnerships especially suitable, the lessons of Energy Express may have meaning for schools across the nation. Although the communities and places of Appalachia may be easier to identify, nestled as they are in river valleys and hollows, it is clear that all children and all schools are embedded in a community and each child brings his sense of place to the task of learning to be literate. Placing value on the cultural understandings of self, identity and social relationships within the community is an effective way to connect children to their community and to school literacy. At the heart of the debate about school reform are questions about the purposes of schooling. Preparing students to make choices about their vocation and connecting them with their nation and the world beyond is clearly a critical part of the answer to the questions this debate raises. Nevertheless, working in partnership for the common good must necessarily be part of what all communities consider important in the education of its children.

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