Addressing Goals of School and Community: Lessons from a Family Literacy Program

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Abstract

For educators interested in engaging in critical literacy work with families and schools, the efforts can be both exhilarating and exasperating. Reflecting on a two-year family literacy project, we consider the possibilities and pitfalls of the projects' design and implementation. The work described in this article takes a stance that is both critical and grounded in the notion of "funds of knowledge." We propose a framework to assist in the creation and evaluation of family literacy projects and examine its application to our own efforts. Finally, we suggest that those preparing or administering a project designed to promote family literacy consider more rigorously the membership of a planning team and the impact that team can have on the project.

Key Words: family literacy, community education, critical approaches, teams

Introduction

With the adoption of No Child Left Behind (2002), there has been increased attention on family involvement in schools. Schools are faced with the challenge of reaching out to families in ways that support NCLB's legislative goals. At the same time, there has been an increase in research and practice around what seems like an opposing agenda – changing school curricula to better reflect the goals of the population of students in the school. The latter goal in particular, advocated by Moll and González (2003) and referred to as "funds

of knowledge" practice, has been shown to be an effective way of addressing communities' educational needs. "Funds of knowledge" is defined as household/community knowledge and skills that are essential for the functioning of the family (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992), and a "funds of knowledge approach" to teaching (Moll & González) seeks to build on family understandings to develop new understandings in schools. Examples of successful projects include those that have built on Latino families' understandings of mathematics (González, Andrade, Civil, & Moll, 2001), Haitians' experiences with music (Conant, Rosebery, Warren, & Hudicourt-Barnes, 2001), African Americans' discourse patterns (Lee, 2000; Foster & Peele, 2001), and using Appalachian students' awareness of agriculture to learn mathematics concepts and reading skills (McIntyre, Sweazy, & Greer, 2001).

These two agendas – involving families in the work of schools and changing curricula to better reflect families – were our simultaneous yet conflicting goals as we initiated a family literacy program. Our question was, "How can we promote family literacy in ways that support the work of schools but still protect and build on a community's funds of knowledge?" As university professors interested in literacy and home-school relationships, we reflect on our success and failure at negotiating these agendas in a family literacy project in an urban elementary school that brought children, teachers, university faculty, and families together around books.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the goals of the project, outline our decisions and the results of those decisions, and make conclusions about how educators can both address the goals of schools while still building on the understandings, experiences, and wishes of the families that their schools serve. In this paper, we take a critical stance on our work by explaining the challenges we encountered (some of which we expected and some we did not) and how we addressed some challenges and failed to address others.

Setting

The project took place in an elementary school which served 600 students, some of the poorest children in our large urban school district, with 97% of the students participating in the free or reduced breakfast and lunch programs. The student body was comprised of about 50% African American students and 50% "other" (Note: these identity categories are used in the district), and approximately 10% of the student body spoke a language other than English as their first language.

This program was situated in a well-respected school; teachers and administrators are perceived as working for their students. The school offers many after-school programs, mentoring, and evening school activities. On standardized

tests, this school's growth scores consistently exceed the district average. It has been cited and awarded by various organizations for its success at narrowing the achievement gap. The school frequently hosts visitors from across the U.S. and around the world who want to see and learn about successful schools.

The school faced many challenges as well. It is situated in an impoverished, high crime area. The local housing consists primarily of small, wood-frame, single-family homes and two large federally subsidized housing complexes. A number of assistance programs located in and around the school support families in poverty and/or crisis. While some of the students were bused to the school, most students came from this surrounding community.

The Project: *FAB:ulous!*

After receiving a grant, we invited one of the local schools with which we had a relationship to participate in a family literacy project around books. We called the project *FAB:ulous!* because the primary purpose was to bring "*F*amilies *A*nd *B*ooks" together. Our primary activity was to host several "Family Nights" in which we planned activities and book give-aways around families' interests, which were discerned during the first event. Students from the school, their families, and a few families from the neighborhood whose children did not attend the school were program participants. Families learned of each Family Night through flyers sent home before each evening's event. We led most of the planning for each evening with one other colleague from the university, several teachers, and the principal from the school. Feedback from adults attending the program was sought anecdotally and through formal surveys.

During each Family Night, we offered dinner as the first activity. Afterwards we taught a skill to the families. At the first Family Night, we taught the adults how to assist their children with reading. In later workshops, we focused attention on writing, poetry, and the reading of science and social studies texts. Most of the evening activities were directed in collaboration by us (university professors), the school principal, and classroom teachers.

Our Goals and Perspectives

Traditional views of family involvement in the work of schools seek to change families or to teach families that which they lack or what others assume they lack. We knew that getting poor and working-class families to do what schools wanted them to do has not necessarily affected student achievement. We also knew that "one-shot" parent involvement interventions have not worked to build either positive home-school relationships or increase student achievement. We did not want a "drop your kids off" program, either.

As we entered the project, we, as university faculty members, had two goals: to build on families' knowledge and interests, and to teach specific ways families can assist their children with literacy. We view literacy broadly, and we wanted the project to reflect these views. Literacy includes reading as a necessary component, but also focuses more broadly not only on the act of reading but on the beliefs, attitudes, and social practices in which literate individuals and social groups engage in a variety of settings and situations, including those involving technology (Pearson & Raphael, 1999). Literacy involves knowledge of the underlying discourses in a group (Gee, 1990), that is, the values, viewpoints, funds of knowledge, and language patterns established by members of that discourse group. In addition, we recognize the difference between *school* literacy and *community* literacy (Bloome, Katz, Solsken, Willett, & Wilson-Keenan, 2000). Rueda and McIntyre (2002) explain:

> School literacy, or what we call "reading" is characterized by practices we see in school – reading as an assignment, completing homework; drilling and practicing with print to "get better" at it. This is in contrast to community literacy which includes practices that serve a community function – to find something out (what happened to the fired police chief), for entertainment (to find out when the game is on), to run the family more efficiently (writing grocery lists), and so on. As we become literate, we learn the discourses underlying the literacy we are engaged in learning (or acquiring). Again, these discourses have to do with language patterns and internally accepted meanings and ways of behaving. (p. 192)

Holding this view of literacy and enacting it with children, their families, and their teachers, however, was much more complicated than we had anticipated. The project left us both invigorated and critical. From both anecdotal information and survey analysis, we believe that the project was a worthwhile experience. In general, participants and organizers seemed pleased. Though most of this paper will be critical of our own and the project's efforts, we want to make it clear that the people with whom we engaged in this work, teachers and families, entered into the events with integrity and enthusiastic involvement. We admire their work and feel honored by their engagement in this project.

The Framework for Analyzing the Project

To critically analyze our work in a way that can assist others who plan similar projects, we borrow from Rogoff's (1994) theory of intersecting planes as a way to examine any setting from a sociocultural perspective. Her planes include the *personal* plane – cognition, emotion, behavior, values, and beliefs; the *interpersonal* plane – communication, role, dialogue, cooperation, conflict,

assistance, and assessment; and the *community* plane – shared history, languages, rules, values, beliefs, identities, and activities. The sociocultural perspective indicates that when examining culture, educators must take into account all planes. We have taken a similar stance in analyzing our work in the family literacy project. We address three planes, each of which entails some of the same components of Rogoff's planes. Ours include the logistical plane, the school/ community plane, and the larger societal plane. We recognize that decisions we made and the results of these decisions affect and were affected by each of these planes. The categories aren't distinct and the dimensions overlap or permeate the other planes. The framework can be envisioned as concentric circles with the logistical embedded in the school/culture plane, which exists within the societal plane. The edges of the circles are blurred to illustrate that the contents of each plane interacts with and is understood in relation to the contents of the others. Each layer constrains the one(s) inside, especially if left unexamined. Figure 1 illustrates this model for the issues we faced in our project. In the next three sections, we apply this framework to each of these issues.

Figure 1. Model of Intersecting Concerns of Our Family Literacy Project
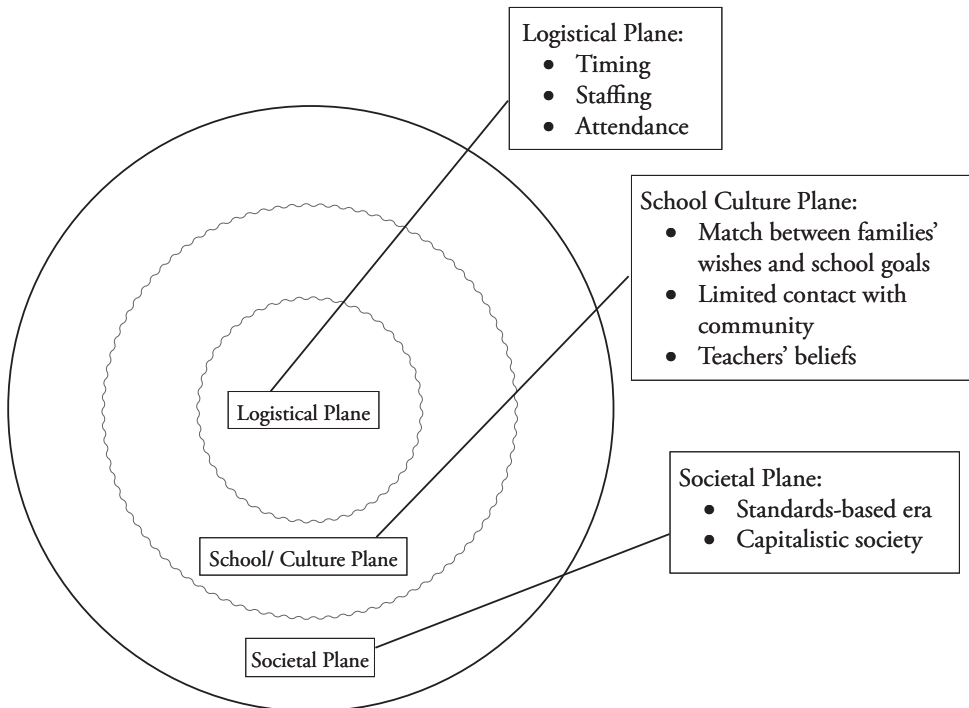
Logistical Plane

We had a number of practical and logistical challenges, some of which are shared here. This first "circle" of concerns is the most obvious because they are the most visible parts of the project. The behaviors categorized on this plane are those day-to-day acts and decisions that are derived from both our values and our past experiences with such projects. Our list of logistics that we criticize here is meant to be demonstrative and not necessarily inclusive.

Timing

Our family literacy program was a fixed term project awarded with a very short pre-operational timeline. We were awarded a two-year grant with no hope of re-funding because the money was from the settlement of a court case. The school was identified and the first Family Night was held within a four-month timeframe. The time limit on the funding and planning kept our sights limited as to what we might accomplish. We did not expand the circle of involvement into the school's community as much as we might have had we seen our work extending beyond the two years. While the school and community were enthusiastic and happy we chose their location, we were still seen as a "project" rather than an institutionalized approach or effort. This nagging sense that we were just doing a project left us feeling like we were not quite serving the school or the population well. Yet we had books to give away and skills to teach, and so we continued.

In addition, this school had several projects funded from outside sources. Of course, the school embraced the work and money that came with it, but the principal and several of the teachers sought and received other outside grants. Our efforts and money were seen as one of many – valuable, but transient and terminal. The school would go on, and so would the demands of the district and state. We wondered how much impact we could actually have to engage the school in adopting the notion of a community's funds of knowledge in the "enacted curriculum" (Henderson & Hawthorne, 1995) of the school.

Staffing

Our staffing demands for each evening required a great deal of preparation in the beginning and many individuals to carry out the work. Teachers were invited to participate, but their attendance was voluntary. We began each workshop with dinner for the families, and we needed many teachers to help serve. Then, we moved to a "lesson" of some sort, sometimes separating the adults and children. Then, we brought the families back together with an activity and book give-aways. Once routinized, the process was easier and

employed fewer people. The first few workshops seemed to address the goals of the school, one of which was to teach adult family members how to assist their children with reading at home. We soon learned that routinization can lead to comfort and ease, but runs the risk of being less responsive to the population served. In our early focus group interviews with parents (in efforts to ascertain funds of knowledge and goals), we found that the families did not want to be separated, but to have time together during these family workshops. When we subsequently changed our routine to be more responsive to the families, teachers became frustrated. Some had to change roles, and some roles had stipends attached, while others did not. With these logistical concerns, we were faced with the conflict of serving the goal of the school, which was to teach the literacy skills, or the goal of the population of families, which was to have quality family time.

Attendance

Attendance at the evening events was voluntary, and we wouldn't have wanted it any other way. However, the busy lives of the families didn't always allow consistent attendance. We worried that our work might not have been as powerful for encouraging family literacy because of this lack of consistency. We very much wanted the traditional school goal of high attendance. Some of the teachers encouraged attendance by little in-class bonuses (homework free passes; time to share a new book with the class; time to read a book in school). The teachers believed that by providing the extras, they were supporting the effort of the project.

Further, the evenings were designed in such a way that adult support of child participants was necessary. The teachers were quite adamant about this requirement. They wanted the evening to be about learning, and they worried that it not be a babysitting service. Still, because of the school's location, children would walk over or be dropped off by car without an adult. Every child was always included in the evening regardless of involvement by an adult co-participant. Teachers would "adopt" a child or two for the evening. At the end of the evening, the school's principal and/or teachers would call to get children picked up or, if no one was home or no phone number was available, the children would be taken home by a faculty member or the principal.

We recognized that some of the children would attend the events without asking the permission of or notifying an adult guardian. Still, the children without adults and related transportation issues were not expected to linger. We thought our original communication home (via flyers with students) and the attached RSVP (asking for numbers of adults and children in attendance and a statement requesting adult attendance) would make clear that the purpose and

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emphasis of the evening would be on families. While the principal and several of the organizing teachers consistently rose to the occasion and "adopted" and transported the small number of students as necessary, we wondered how to make the project more compelling to draw in the families who did not choose to come.

Because we wanted to respect the needs and lives of the families, we became concerned that we were not finding out enough about the reasons for lack of attendance. Further, as with any rewards program, some students were included and others were excluded and marginalized. Did the message for those students not in attendance become one of exclusivity? We saw this had the potential to reinforce some students' feeling that "school is not for me."

School Culture Plane

Local or school-level challenges are those that arose from our own beliefs about the project, literacy, and the culture of the school. Like Rogoff's interpersonal plane, our mid-level school culture plane included issues of cooperation, conflict, assistance, and beliefs. These elements were manifest in three challenges that arose: the mismatch between following the families' desires and augmenting the school curriculum, limited community connections, and teachers' beliefs.

Families' Wishes or School Agenda?

We started the project with the goal of following the needs of the families. During the first two workshops, we separated parents and children during the evening to work with parents on strategies. Almost immediately, we heard parents saying, "Give us time with our children. We want to be together." We responded by structuring the third evening with whole group work that allowed family groups to engage in activities that could be replicated at home. So, while the change caused anxiety for some of the teachers as described earlier, it also positively altered the flow and feeling of the evenings. At the end of each night we were left with images of partnerships of people: adults and children and teachers together; three generations of families writing, reading, and speaking about books and poems; and families, teachers, and university faculty creating spaces for dialogue about what it means to experience humor in text. This move clearly followed the goals of the community more than the school.

Additionally, we interviewed the adults about their children's interests, reading preferences, and patterns. We asked about concerns and interests of adults regarding their children's literacy development, and we asked about the talents and knowledge of the adults. Drawing on past research experience on funds of

knowledge practice (McIntyre et al., 2001), we engaged families in activities that drew on everyday uses of literacy, like writing letters and grocery lists and reading signage and packages. We also planned subsequent workshops around the interests of the participants.

Yet, the teachers expressed their desires for the explicit teaching of literacy skills and strategies to the parents in an effort to augment the work they did with the children. While we began the project doing just that – "sit and get" lessons on literacy strategies – we changed the pattern of the Family Nights to fulfill the parents' desires. While our moves were responsive to the families, they were not always aligned with the school's goals, since we quite abruptly stopped teaching parents reading strategies and other "school-oriented" skills.

Limited Contact with the Community

Because the school was situated in a high crime area and operated in somewhat of a "lock down" mentality, the principal worked hard to include the community, but was neither naïve about potential problems nor able to change district policies requiring a locked building and no home visits by teachers. Still, while adhering to the district's rules, we were all, including the principal, well aware that we weren't tapping all of the strengths of the community.

The limited contact with the community by the school or ourselves was a problem that we did not address effectively during the duration of the program. From our previous work, we knew that in order to represent students and families of color, we must recognize that the language and culture of schools often conflict with the cultures of minority groups, creating barriers to student success, including attitude and identity problems (Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1997; Foster & Peele, 2001; Gee, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1999; Tatum, 1997; Tharp & Gallimore, 1993). Thus, it was essential for us to become hyper-aware of the possibility of cultural misconnections. As Cose (1993) writes, "People do not have to be racist – or have any malicious intent – in order to make decisions that unfairly harm members of another race " (p. 4). We knew we needed to "see" color (Fine, 1997; Paley, 1979), to become aware of the "new mestiza," or mixing of cultures and races (Anzuldua, 1987) and with this knowledge not assume that particular groups have patterns of being. Heath and McLaughlin (1993) say, "The experience of youth growing up in one urban area can and do differ in important ways from those of youngsters growing up in another urban environment only two blocks away" (p. 37). It is with sensitivity to these issues that we raise the following points and acknowledge our limited and potentially biased understanding of the implications.

Having limited contact with the community might have led us to offend and/or marginalize individual families or family members. The many cultures

represented on any given evening included African American, European American, Japanese, Chinese, Arab (from a variety of nations), and multiple African cultures. The norms of these cultures can conflict. We needed to develop more sophisticated ways to learn about and engage families' funds of knowledge in this large group. Additionally, we needed to challenge our assumptions more regularly as we prepared and enacted the evenings' events.

We wonder, too, if the lack of community contact led to decreased multigenerational involvement. As stated earlier, some children attended the program without adult supervision. This might have occurred no matter what we did. This could be interpreted as a compliment and strength of the program (i.e., children felt welcome enough to attend on their own or liked it enough to take the risk of attending without adult supervision). Many of the teachers strongly believed parents who cared should and would attend with their children. Therefore, children who attended without adult supervision supported negative stereotypes of parents in the community.

Our lack of active engagement with the community led to decreased crosscultural involvement. While our audiences were diverse ethnically, they mixed little across cultural lines. Families without English as their first language clustered together during the dinners and activities. We did not have the knowledge to draw on to stimulate this type of engagement or facilitate the construction of new knowledge that is inherent in diverse groups of people. We were therefore privileging particular ways of being literate. We valued English in the texts we chose, particular patterns of storytelling and those strategies that are valued by the norms of white, middle-class schooling (e.g., letter writing, poetry, and non-religious texts).

In another example, we failed to meet the needs of some of the adults. Several had suggested we purchase adult books to create a lending library and institute adult reading groups. Our response was to purchase adult books as give-aways during one of the last workshops. Our heavy focus on the students' literacy led us to not truly hear what adults were asking for until it was too late. Our interpretation of the goal of building on family knowledge privileged our knowledge of and preference for how to inspire children's literacy.

Finally, our lack of community connectedness led to underdeveloped links between the community and school curriculum. This notion of connections between the family literacy nights' curriculum, the school's curriculum, and the community is further complicated by the context of U.S. schooling, and this aspect will be explored in the societal plane level or societal issues section of this paper. Here, we are concerned with the cultural mismatches among the three interests – community, school, and literacy project. We learned through parent surveys and a small group of individual interviews that parents liked

the program; we also learned through observation and interviews that teachers valued the work and the opportunities the program provided for the children and families in the community. This was affirming information. What we did not learn or foster were ways to facilitate students' understanding and negotiating the different literacy expectations of the three interests. As stated earlier, the school operated within a standards-driven notion of literacy that privileged reading and writing Standard English. The university faculty supported critical literacy (Finn, 1999; Freire, 1973; Tobin, 2000) linked to the funds of knowledge within families. Families' life experiences and cultures varied widely, as did their values for and about literacy. Because we, the university faculty, lacked the rich, deep connections to the community and families, and teachers were encouraged by policy not to develop these, we were unable to develop strategies for the children that would make explicit the connections and disjunctures in the enactment and valuing of literacy. This was not a stated goal entering the project, but had we better understood the community and the children of that community, this could have been a welcome by-product of our work.

Teachers' Beliefs

As described earlier, this school had received many kudos for their past work. The school had at the time of the project altered their curriculum to address the expectations of NCLB. Additionally, during our project, we discovered conflicting beliefs held by the teachers and families that made our simultaneous goals of addressing school and community more difficult.

Many teachers' beliefs about parents seemed to operate out of a deficit model (Delpit, 1995; Purcell-Gates, 1995). For example, some teachers believed the adults were not good parents, demonstrated by comments such as, "They just come for the dinner;" "They just come for the free books;" "They're stealing books;" and "They just see the program as a babysitter." Comments such as these were disturbing to us because, through our short interviews early in the project, we had witnessed the deep value the adults had about education and the love and concern they held for their children. Yet, as directors of the project, we failed to address the attitudes of teachers and their effects.

We do not want to diminish the good that the teachers felt were part of these comments. They would add or assume the following: "Couldn't we use the money we paid for the dinner or the books another way if they don't commit to the whole evening's activities?" "It's not fair that some other child only got one book or none" if the parents/adults took more than one book; or "I feel bad for the child whose guardian isn't here to support his or her work."

We recognized these last comments as a sense of pride in the work of the project. We, too, felt that pride. However, our concern was that we could not

help all the staff to get beyond the pride and deficit model to question what structures or institutions in society construct the lives of this community's people to feel they had to "sneak out" after dinner. For example, what about the nature of school makes it welcoming enough for a meal but not engaging enough or compelling enough to want to stay? We did not use this program to affect that kind of change within the school context.

We want to state that all teachers did not enact these beliefs all the time. We also want to state that the holding and enactment of these beliefs, while not excusable on an individual basis, cannot be seen as solely the responsibility of the individual. They must be seen as supported in the broader context of the racism and classism in U.S. society (Miller, 1995). While we will write about "teachers" as a group, we ask that the reader understand that these teachers may not be any more or less guilty than any other teacher that participates in the U.S. system of schooling that works to reproduce and replicate society (Anyon, 1980; 1997). We will explore this line of reasoning more deeply in the next level. Here we contextualize the beliefs and their enactment on the local level to explore them and the viability of the framework we are proposing.

Second, and related, was the conflict between teachers' practiced definitions of literacy and our definitions of literacy. Please note that we are focusing on "practiced definitions." We do this for two reasons. First, we want to acknowledge that we didn't collect in formal ways the teachers' definitions of literacy. Second, we want to highlight practice because in the last area of concern, societal, how teachers practice is being negotiated in rigid contexts of standards-based educational reform.

The teachers emphasized literacy as reading and writing. Class work included spelling tests, grammar, phonics, and basal work, as well as a four-block reading approach that the district was encouraging. The project was based on a broader definition that included media and critical literacy as well as speaking, reading, and writing. While presenters would share and demonstrate skills for and with parents, the presentations worked to integrate the richness of home literacy use to increase students' access to literacy and success in school.

However, we never effectively bridged the gap between home and school literacy, as defined by Rueda & McIntyre (2002) earlier in this article. Our definition of literacy was based in beliefs about the power of a family's and community's funds of knowledge. As much as teachers may have believed in or wanted to incorporate these funds, it was not apparent in their work that our efforts impacted their own. This was not terribly surprising considering the very real constraints teachers felt from district and state requirements to meet standardized curriculum goals and assessments. This localized issue, though, was and is contextualized in broader societal issues in literacy education.

Societal Plane

The challenges in our "circle" referred to as the societal plane were beyond the control of this project, yet they affected how much (and little) we accomplished our simultaneous goals of meeting the needs of both school and community. Rogoff (1994) describes her third plane as shared history, languages, rules, values, beliefs, identities, and activities. The project participants felt the impact of the dominant U.S. education policy, as prescribed in NCLB and its translations, not as "shared" but more as imposed and limiting.

The Standards-Based Era

During our work on this project, teacher accountability was very near on the horizon. The broader standards-based state and national context clearly impacted the work of the teachers associated with this project. At the time (and still), the state had a fourth grade writing portfolio and language arts assessment process. The implementation and scoring of the portfolio defined the process of literacy at this school as well as student success. One could argue that the portfolio as assessment was an improvement over what used to be, and we would agree. However, the development of the portfolio and how best to achieve a good score on it limited the content and pedagogy of teachers' practice. Further, the district designed and implemented weekly plans for teachers with the goal being that in any given week in any school in the district, all students in a particular grade would be studying a particular topic. Teachers shared with the authors that they believed this standardization of curriculum was the district's effort to address the mobility of the students they served.

It is not hard to imagine that the district's model created logistical problems and issues of de-professionalization and to see how it contrasted with our visions for the Families and Books project. Teachers were encouraged to focus on skills versus pleasure, enjoyment, and/or critique of text. To some extent the family literacy project became the way the school would address the "pleasure" end, while the teachers would address the skills. The teachers (understandably) did not see the two efforts as intersecting. This attitude and enactment became clear in interviews with teachers when they shared their perceptions of the program and its relationship to the work that they did in their classrooms. We became concerned that our family literacy project work supported the de-professionalization of teachers. The question we ask ourselves today is, what is the cost of any add-on project that seeks to support literacy if the notion of what makes good literacy remains unexamined?

It is no less difficult to call into question the assumptions and preconditions that the district operates under if indeed the teachers were correct when they

said that the district thought their model would best serve a mobile audience of students. We do not want to underestimate the difficulty children have in adjusting to new schools, new expectations, and new routines. This is compounded for children if their home culture is non-synchronous (McCarthy, 1990) with the school's culture. However, we do want to challenge the assumptions that the district might be making when it applies a blanket policy to diverse contexts and individuals, and we want to challenge them specifically in light of family literacy work. Our project could only be viewed as a nice thing because it did not fit into the model. But we did not use it to challenge that model to help teachers and the community.

Schooling in a Capitalist State

For too long the role of schools in the United States has been to replicate and reproduce society (Anyon, 1980; 1997; Apple & Weiss, 1983). Schools continue to support U.S. society by educating future workers who can take on the jobs at various skill and income levels as "needed." The notion of critical literacy as part of that preparation is problematic for society. Of particular interest to us as we analyze this work and engage in future work is the possibility and potential family literacy projects have for encouraging the teachers and the community to use reading and writing for success that includes literacy for citizenship, empowerment, and change. We believe in this potential, even though our work in this project did not realize that possibility.

In summary, the issues we faced in this literacy project rested on: (1) the logistical plane (timing, staffing, and attendance); (2) the school culture plane (the mismatch between families wishes and school goals, the limited contact we and the school had with the community, and teachers' beliefs); and (3) the societal plane (working within a standards-based era and a capitalistic society). While these issues were specific to our project, we know that some of the implications can generalize across similar projects. Below, we make recommendations that cross these intersecting planes of concerns.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

We offer the following recommendations with awareness that any given situation will have its own specifics. Our suggestions can provide those in the planning process with guideposts for more complex work in literacy programs. While we looked at the issues we faced in relation to three planes – logistical, school-based, and societal – we make our suggestions holistically. We did this because the planes are interrelated and suggestions are contextualized within all three simultaneously.

First, create an inclusive team representative of each constituency. This seems intuitive. The reality is the creation of the team will take time for the development of rapport with a wide variety of people. Membership need not be stagnant, however. While other logistical concerns may cause pressure for the project to begin, the project initiators must continue to make connections within the school and community. As the spirit and power of the project grows, others will be inspired to contribute.

The team and the project can benefit from new membership. The tone of the project team must be preserved when change in membership occurs. We suggest that respect for diverse voices and for children's success are central to the team's work. In our case, we needed to listen to and honor diverse community voices including families, students, and school personnel. Importantly, the leadership team should understand each member's beliefs about children, teaching, and learning so that conflicting beliefs can be addressed early.

The work of the team cannot be limited to planning. The work must also be self-educative. Part of the team's time should be dedicated to learning about each other and the diverse cultural roots of community members. We know that literacy is representative of and enacted within cultural norms (Finn, 1999). Educating those involved with facilitating the project can work to empower both facilitators and program attendees, while demonstrating the respect essential to literacy work.

Finally, literacy projects can create spaces for individuals and communities to explore and challenge oppressive practices. Freire's work (1973; 1993; 1994) is the most famous example of this. We are not suggesting that every project follow Freire's model. We are recommending that those involved with this work remember the power of the written and spoken word for creating spaces as they plan and implement their projects. The spaces created with and through literacy are limited by broader contexts of culture and society. The spaces are physical and have emotional, spiritual, and psychological dimensions. Tapping into these dimensions is risky and needs to be explicitly considered. The team members need to continually engage each other in deep reflection about the spaces they are creating and those they are closing down.

As suggested by this article, the work of family literacy programs should recognize both their educational and political possibilities. It is not, nor should it be, considered modest work. Without careful consideration of logistics, school culture, and/or broader societal contexts our work can be undermined or hurtful. To paraphrase Lisa Delpit (2002), "Since language is one of the most intimate expressions of identity…to reject a [families' literacy practices] can only feel as if we are rejecting [them]" (p. 47). Researchers and practitioners in the field must acknowledge the serious risks as they plan and administer family literacy programs.

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