# The Central Roles of Teachers, Students and Parents: *Participatory Research in Multiethnic School Communities*

Nancy Pine

The inclusion of teachers, students and parents as major participants in school reform or transformation is critical if changes are going to fit the real needs of a school population. Although experts from outside the schools can help give perspective, they should not be the sole constructors of solutions to school problems. This paper reports on a project in four California public schools that used participatory research processes as a means to reform schools so that all members of the school communities could communicate hopes and concerns about schooling. The school staffs then analyzed the data and are currently seeking solutions that will fit the unique characters of their particular schools.

**Overview of School Reform in the U.S.**

School reform in the United States is usually generated from outside the schools, from the top down. Universities, research institutions, government agencies, and government consultancies develop new ways of teaching and managing schools. The people who develop reform policies and mandates are often poorly informed about how their reforms will effect classroom and school life. These reformers have spent little or no time in government run schools, and in fact, have often had more experience with fee-paying schools that cater to wealthy Americans than with government schools. Although these reformers may be well-meaning, and may be knowledgeable about their subject areas or about pedagogy, they have almost no knowledge about what it is like to teach in the local school or to be a student there.

Reform movements, therefore, frequently rely on a cycle of reasoning that omits the knowledge of teachers, their students and the students' parents. (See Fig.1) The reasoning related to school reform in the United States often goes something like this: students are not learning or succeeding because the schools and the teachers are not doing their job correctly, and the parents do not know enough to support their children's education. The results are that the "solutions" do not bring about change because they are irrelevant to the existing school situation, and because the teachers, who have never been consulted about what might work, have little reason to implement the solutions. Also, the "solutions" do not produce gains on external, standardized tests within two to three years. The reformers conclude, therefore, that the particular solution was a failure, and they develop a new solution, again without drawing on teachers' and students' knowledge. The next round of the cycle begins again (Connell, 1994; Darling- Hammond, 1993; Fullan, 1993; Throne, 1994). Although somewhat over-simplified, this describes a major portion of reform in the United States.

The Voices from the Inside Project has tried to counteract this "outsider" syndrome. Two processes that we have employed appear especially helpful for speeding up school change and improvement in a multiethnic and multilingual society.

**Importance of Insider Knowledge**

This project does not throw out the knowledge and expertise of the reformers from outside the schools -the central place to the knowledge, experience, capabilities, and insights of the people inside schools. It also places the selection of solutions in their hands. The project has sought to break the outsiders' dominance in the reform cycle, and make use of the knowledge of those who are central to the schooling process. Teachers and students have complex knowledge about how schools are functioning or not functioning; their life experiences within schools can define the complexity and ground school reform in daily reality. The teachers contribute their professional knowledge and its fusion with their daily successes and failures. Students and parents contribute their considerable insights about what is working and not working in their particular schools. In any society this is valuable information, but in a multiethnic society like many parts of the United States, where the teachers are from the dominant, Euro-American (white) culture and the students are often people of colour -for example, African-American or Latino- this is critical.

**Voices from the Inside Project**

The Voices from the Inside Project has been a collaboration between a university, The Claremont

Graduate School, and four local schools -two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Each school is located in a different education authority, and their total population is about 4500 students, ages 5 to 18. The project has finished its first phase of identifying the problems of schooling from inside the classrooms, and is moving into a second phase of solution seeking, solution implementing, and the evaluation of solutions that have been implemented.

This project has used participatory research in which the people in the schools have done research

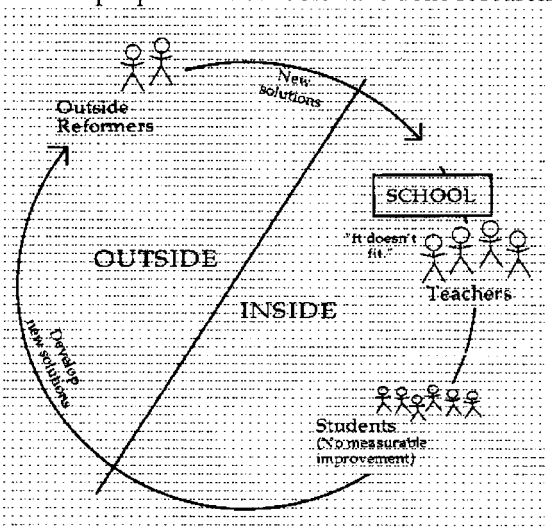


Fig.1: Outsider Reform Cycle. A reform cycle in which outsiders develop reforms that are irrelevant to schools and which do not utilize the knowledge of school staffs, students and parents

for themselves, in order to take action themselves. The staff (teachers, directors, librarians, teaching assistants, some caretakers and secretaries) have been the primary researchers who have collected and analyzed the data. Students and parents have participated through discussion sessions, open-ended question- naires that ask their opinions about schooling, and occasionally interviews.

Participatory research, grounded in the work of such reformers as Paulo Freire (1990) and Myles Horton (1990) and sometimes used in economic development projects (Chopra et al, 1990; Gonzalez Santos, 1991), is viewed as a means to empower people in a community. Its ultimate goal is a "fundamental structural transformation and the improvement of the lives of those involved. The beneficiaries are the workers or the people concerned" (Hall, in Brydon-Miller, 1993, p. 135). It involves three components -- investigation, education, and action -- and gives people the chance to be innovative and think for themselves (Park, 1993). Therefore, central to its process is its role of "strengthening the awareness in people of their own abilities and resources and its support to mobilizing or organizing" (Hall, in Brydon-Miller, 1993, p. 136).

In keeping with the participatory research model, the first phase of the Voices from the Inside Project was to name the problems of schools from inside the classrooms and then to look for solutions.[1] But many reform efforts in the United States address such issues as curriculum reform rather than more fundamental issues (Poplin & Weeres, 1992). In contrast, our "insider" participant researchers found over the period of one full year of data collection and analysis that the over-riding rupture within their schools was the inability to develop relationships with the students. This in turn made it impossible to shape curriculum so that it had any relevance for the students' lives.

**The Multiethnic, Multilingual Composition of U.S. Schools**

The four schools in this project are representative of schools in many parts of the United States which are becoming a microcosm of the world -a multiethnic, multi- lingual group of people. The challenge for educators is to create from these many separate threads of experience a whole cloth, to create a multi- ethnic, mutilingual learning community in which students value their home cultures while learning to work with and feel at ease with children from quite different cultures and world views. This challenge has always existed in the United States, but the situation has intensified because the numbers and variety of cultures have increased markedly in the last decade. In addition, the 1990s have brought us closer to understanding the necessity for a global village.

Although outside its borders U.S. schools are often portrayed as suburban places with all white students, in fact that is a myth.

We have a European-centered curriculum in our schools, and the majority of our teachers are Euro-Americans, but the student population has always included many people of colour and those numbers are now increasing rapidly. In California, for example, the students of colour are a majority, the Euro-Americans a minority (California Tomorrow, 1994).

The new majority in California (the people of colour) come from many cultures and ethnicities -people of Hispanic origin (both indigenous as well as newly immigrated from Mexico, Cuba, Central and South America); people from many cultural groups of the South Pacific; African-Americans whose near ancestors were taken to the U.S. as slaves; people from many different Asian cultures

-Japanese, Taiwanese, Chinese from Taiwan, Chinese from Hong Kong; Hmong tribal peoples and Laotians representing many hill tribes; people who speak Armenian and who come from many different countries- Russia, Georgia, Iran, Iraq. Most schools in urban areas now have a very culturally heterogeneous student population, and often a school will have children whose mother tongues represent 10 to 20 languages. One beginning middle school teacher in California, for example, inquiring about the primary languages of her 130 students, discovered they spoke 38 different mother tongues.

To create a learning community from this incredibly complex mix provides us with an exciting opportunity; but it also provides us with tensions created by competing agendas and by our considerable ignorance about how to proceed. The need to create effective multiethnic, multilingual, anti-racist learning communities has accelerated. The participatory research process included all staff (teachers, teaching assistants, directors, nurses, custodians), all students, and as many of their parents as possible; all of these participants had multiple opportunities to contribute their knowledge to the pool of data. The communication process was developed so that all of these people could listen to each other and to what the data were telling them. By using these processes individuals within these incredibly complex learning communities have found new and exhilarating ways to understand world views that were previously unknown to them and often buried by curricular and bureaucratic agendas. The participation of the students, parents and school staff has been central to understanding these complexities.

**What We Did -Participatory Research**

The first year of the project was devoted to naming the problems of schooling from inside the classroom. At each school, a team of researchers which included teachers and other staff members, led the participatory data-gathering process. This team and other school staff, not graduate school representatives, collected and analyzed the vast amounts of data from staff, students, and parents. In meetings held after school, on Saturdays, and during some weekend retreats, the school research teams, other staff members, and some parents pored over the thousands of responses. The university sought a muted role of providing a collective forum, suggesting methods for data-gathering processes, and providing a support system.

The first major data-collecting instrument was an open-ended questionnaire used by all of the schools so that comparisons could be made among them. This questionnaire was given to various constituencies of the school communities -staff, teachers, students, parents, and administrators- in order to compare and contrast their views about schooling. The questions were easy for everyone to respond to. For example, "What do you like about school?" "What do you not like about school?" They were written in the primary languages of the school communities. The high school questionnaire, for instance, was prepared in English, Vietnamese and Spanish. The school staff then compared and contrasted the responses from various groups, looking for common themes. (See Fig.2) After mining this initial data, second and third generation questionnaires were developed and interviews, journaling, and other means of investigation were added. The purpose was to probe the complexities of the original responses and reach an in-depth understanding of what all individuals viewed as the strengths and frustrations of schooling.

Children who were too young to write, drew pictures and dictated answers. Each additional questionnaire or interview added richness and depth to the understandings of schooling and to important issues that are almost never included in school reform solutions developed by outside reformers. Some typical responses were:

What do you like about school?

*My teacher shows an honest concern about how we feel. He'll give us time to let our emotions out instead of just work, work, work. Like for example, today he asked how I felt about the Rodney King trial. That's something I needed to release. I've walked about all day with a frown until my feeling was expressed. Thanks to him.*High school student

*One thing that should be done is to change the history books. Our history books show Hannibal, a man coming from Africa on elephants as white. It shows Egyptians as tan, and we don't even teach about the Zulu Nation but we teach about the Roman Empire -- what's the difference?* High school student

*What I don't like about me is my knees and the colour of my body.* Elementary school student

*My perfect school would have everything except violence things.* Elementary school student

*The perfect school would be one in which every student would accept one another. There wouldn't be discrimination of race, religion or ideas. The students would be prepared each day to learn the basic knowledge you need to get through life. All of the students would be nice and obey the rules. But this is the perfect school. Perfection cannot happen here on earth, only in the hearts of the people to help it change into almost perfect.*High school student

*If we don't allow teachers to teach and be with kids, our ship is going to sink no matter what programs we have. We've taken so much of the heart out of education. I don't think we can separate that from learning.*Middle school teacher

*As a teacher, I must first slow down in order to acknowledge the voices of my students -- to take those moments to give value to what is being said no matter how loud or soft, gentle or angry, relevant or irrelevant it may seem.*Elementary school teacher

*This really hit me yesterday when we were looking at all of the schools' information up on the board. To me, the children and the parents, even teachers kept saying, well, where did all the fun go, where did the fun go?*Elementary school teacher

Although throughout the year the four schools met periodically with each other, a great deal of their time was spent looking at their own school data and defining the major issues that were critical at those sites. The issues were reconfirmed and validated at an end-of-year, five-day retreat, when participants read and interpreted data from the other schools as well as worked to rename and classify their own issues. The retreat members then determined the issues common to the four school sites, and reapplied those themes to their own school data, again to cross-check its relevance for their particular situations. From this extensive amount of participatory research, seven underlying issues were found in the data of the four schools:

(1) Relationships, especially between teachers and students;

(2) Race, culture and class issues, including those of racism and prejudice;

(3) Values, which are shared among classes and cultures;

(4) Teaching and learning, in which students see little relevance in what they are learning;

(5) Safety, with students feeling progressively less safe as they move farther from the classroom;

(6) Physical environment, with students feeling devalued and depressed by unattractive surroundings; and

(7) Despair, hope and the process of change, which focuses on means for people inside schools to talk and analyze events and trends in their schools in substantive ways.

Of these, the school researchers agreed that "relationships" -- and subsumed within that "race, culture, and class"-- stood out as the most important issues to address in their schools.

**The Communication Process**

At the year-end retreat in June 1992 we instituted a communication process that forced us to listen to each other and to move away from previously learned communicative assumptions.This new process and employs a method of listening and response that is well- grounded in cooperative group work and brain- storming techniques (Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Kagan, 1989), facilitator literature (Lakey, 1990), and is embedded in traditional community gatherings and learning groups in many cultures and parts of the world (e.g., Au, 1980; Gunn Allen, 1988; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Vella, 1979). Each individ- ual's contribution to the group process is valued, and the discussion process aims toward creating group texts.

One of the major purposes for instituting the communication process was to equalize the power

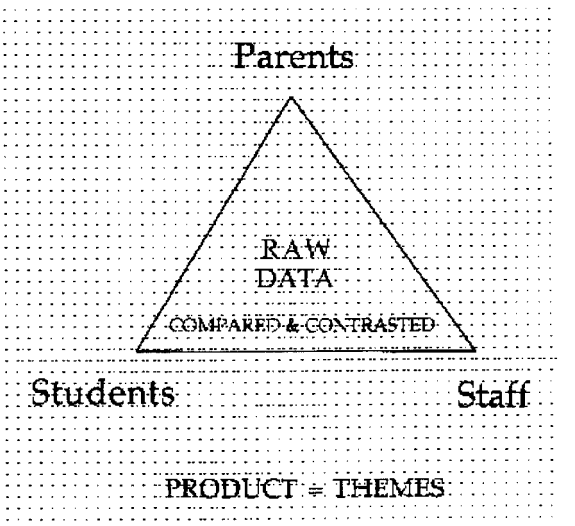


Fig 2: Triangulation of Data. The triangulation process was used to compare and constrast data in order to identify themes among various school constituencies.

of individuals within the project. It equalized not only differences in personality, which make it difficult or easy to speak, but helped participants counter the fact that "certain positions inside schools and universities carry with them a power and ease of speaking that others do not, and certain positions carry with them a subordinate stance" (Poplin 1992, p. 3). Support staff, for example, are often ignored in discussions where teachers, principals, and university faculty form the largest part of the group. Each person in the discussion circle of 8 to 25 people spoke in turn, and only then. The group decided ahead of time a maximum time limit for each person, usually no more than 5 minutes. Questions and comments had to be held

until that turn, and a facilitator and process checker (who both also participated in the discussion) provided the necessary control. As the groups learned this communication process, all members created the good-natured, but firm pressure necessary to equalize participation.

This communication process works because it provides an external control for imposed turn-taking that prevents domination by very verbal and assertive participants. It also gives participants an opportunity to think and listen so that each individual response is shaped by what precedes it. Out of these dynamics a collective dialogue emerges that is more reflective of the diversity of the group than it is of any individual. In addition, it establishes a foundation of trust which helps build community and generate empowerment. With this empowerment has come the courage for individuals to articulate their insights and perceptions openly and honestly. As one staff member said, "The process gives people courage and the ability to speak up more," while another noted that important viewpoints are expressed by those not often heard from. Each individual voice is validated and valued. The communication process, through steadied and focused brainstorming and conceptualizing, can help build a stronger community (Clausen & Pine, 1993).

*A mi me gusta que nos tomen en cuenta para poder expressar nuestras ideas. (I like the fact that we take turns in speaking so that we can express our ideas.)* Elementary school parent

*I do have a comment to make. I almost wanted to lean over and interrupt but that would be breaking the process. But do you realize the power of silence? You know it was really interesting to sit here and listen to that with the feeling, the validation of what people were saying by being silent...It was a very powerful experience, and yet it was powerless at the time itself.* Middle school teacher

*A mi me gusta el sistema de trabajo en grupos porque comparten opiniones y se fomenta la unidad porque cuando estn en unin, no importa la raza que sea todos somos iquales y porque se le da a uno la oportunidad de expresarse. (I like the system of working in groups because we share our opinions and unity develops and when we are united, race does not matter because we are all equals because we are all given a chance to express ourselves.)* Elementary school parent

**What We Learned -The Importance of Including and Listening to Others**

Three major observations have emerged from the Voices from the Inside Project that can help build multiethnic, multilingual learning communities

(1) the importance of involving school staffs in any school reform;

(2) the importance for including students and parents as fully as possible in giving voice to their insights about schooling; and

(3) the need for a consciously imposed communication process that can help break old patterns of communicative dominance and open ways to comprehend other perspectives.

*The importance of school staffs.* The staff members of schools, no matter what their positions (nurse, caretaker, secretary, teacher, director), interact with students and often their parents on a daily basis. Because of this and because they care about students' learning and progress, they acquire a reservoir of knowledge that no one on the outside could possibly have. coherent whole, they become astute observers of school needs, accomplishments, and dreams. They understand the dynamics required for school transformation:

*I am not the same person I was in September. I came to this project expecting to receive and I have, but the receiving has resulted from my giving of my own self. I came expecting to be instructed or taught and have taught myself....I've given myself time to think and in thinking, to feel.*Elementary school teacher

*So how do we teach those kids in a way that they can learn? I don't believe the present educational structure is able to do that anymore. It's like trying to run a battleship with a tugboat engine. We've got to replace the engine. I don't know what the answer is, but I know it is very complex. It will be like moving a mountain to change it all.Teacher*

School staff members have vast quantities of critical information that must be integral to school transformation if reform is to be relevant to actual school situations.

*The importance of students and parents.*

Within a complex multiethnic school community it is essential to have all members contribute to the investigation of problems. This is especially critical in a situation where the powerful positions are held by one particular cultural group that is dominant in the greater society while the rest of the school community comes from less powerful groups. Because Project Voices gathered all students, staff and as many parents as possible into the investigation process, the researchers (the school staffs) were able to collect critical information that usually does not reach reform decision-makers. The researchers encouraged students and parents to answer questions honestly, and an atmosphere of open dialogue and trust was often developed so that people responded from the heart. Many of the comments from students and parents were supportive of school efforts even while suggesting improvements. But some were

very difficult for teachers and staff to read because they showed large, disturbing areas which schools need to confront. For example:

*If I talk to my parents sometimes they get mad at me because of what I say to them. Or maybe they're too busy. If I talk to teachers I can't tell them that I said a bad word or something because they suspend me. So I guess the only people that understand are gangsters. They always understand and they always help me solve it too. Middle school student*

What don't you like about school? *My first period teacher seems so malevolent and shows no clemency towards us. We are supposed to have our hand shook every morning, this teacher does it with such an attitude like she doesn't want to. High school student*

*I think something should be done about teachers. They need to be reviewed more carefully because not all teachers are doing more good than harm and those who are, I believe are not getting enough recognition. I see that some teachers don't care, which is scary because of their power of influence. Teachers help create society. They should think about this.*High school student

What don't you like about school? *Lots of racism and fights and classes that tend to be boring. Students and teachers sometimes show no interest in what is being learned or taught. Elementary school student*

*Yo me he fijado que muchos nios no se quieren sentar junto a otro nio que no es de su misma raza. (I've noticed many children do not want to sit with another child who is not of their same race.)* Elementary school parent

*As one teacher wrote after reading quantities of high school student responses, "In the last 24 hours I have learned that more students than I thought dislike school because of the* ***teachers.*** *I went into teaching because I wanted to make school a good place for students. When I was in high school, it seemed most teachers did not care about their students. It was my rationale that I would be different and make school a better place for students. Are my colleagues and I failing to do this?"*

Without these comments and being brought face to face with their needs, it would have been possible to assume that schools are functioning all right, and that students just need to work a little harder and care more about their studies. We would not have realized how vastly important positive student-teacher or student-student relationships are to learning in these schools and, it appears from recent feedback, in much of the country. Issues of race would probably not have surfaced as honestly as they did without the help of students and their parents, for in their forthright responses they communicated the frustrations and pain of racism seldom understood by the dominant society.

Without the participatory research that involved honest responses from parents and students, the school staffs would never have had the opportunity to compare and contrast those responses with their own.

*The need for a communication process.*

The communication process was essential in order for us to confront many of these difficult areas, and it is presumably essential in many such situations (e.g., Boulding, 1990; Vella, 1979) if people are to learn to listen to multiple perspectives. The urgency of this need for understanding was expressed again and again by Project Voices participants such as these students:

*My parents always wanted for me a good school with not many fights, good instructors, good learning skills taught to us, and definitely someone to explain to Mexican parents (like mine) how the system works here. I think this is very critical and needed, because many Hispanic parents don't understand the pressure, stress and responsibilities that are imposed on us. Their schooling was totally different. They don't know they have to encourage us like Americans do their children. This is very true and important. Don't ignore this. I'm speaking from experience.* High school student

*Our group thinks that the issue of race, culture and class is true. The reason why is because if you're Black and you see a Mexican or White then you're going to say something or vice versa. No matter what color you are you're going to get criticized. We need to study other people's cultures so we won't be afraid.*Middle school students

The communication process helped us in the struggle to hear opinions and world views vastly different from our own. This in turn increased the depth of understanding critical to the change process.

As Paulo Freire and Myles Horton have emphasized, we make the road by walking (1990, p. 6). The school reform movements that will make a difference are not clearly charted. The participatory research process and communication process that were employed in the Voices from the Inside Project have opened up school change to new structures and ways of viewing the world, by placing those who have the most knowledge about how schools operate in central roles in the change process. They cannot do this in isolation, and the use of processes that open up communication among all members of the educational community will help move forward toward complex learning communities within a multiethnic world. These processes are often difficult and exasperating for all who are involved, for to change old patterns of behaviors and stretch for new uncharted visions is a challenge for all...and an opportunity.

Learning communities need to be willing to consider notions never conceived of in a monocultural world. Each community within this new, multicultural world will require significant space for diverse ways of knowing and viewing experiences and for means to express knowledge

through verbal and non-verbal mechanisms. The inclusion of all participants in these communities will provide a wealth of knowledge and experience that, if listened to, can create momentum for relevant change and improvement in a multiethnic society.

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Note:

1) There definitely are problems in the U.S. schools. The high school in our project, for example, has an entering class of 800 students. When that class leaves the school four years later, it has only 400 students. Fifty percent have been lost along the way.

# NEW ERA IN EDUCATION

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