

URBAN SCHOOL REFORM RECONFIGURED: RESEARCH AND MEANINGFUL ACTION

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Vexation

The goal of my current research is to collaborate with secondary science teachers to create inquiry-based, culturally relevant science instructional strategies, design effective classroom management strategies, and assist teachers in building caring relationships with students in an effort to produce learner-centered classrooms which will alternately result in higher teacher self-efficacy. I have spent the past seven months planning and implementing this study. To date I have solicited the teachers to be involved with the study, interviewed the *one* volunteer, surveyed all the teachers about their science professional development needs, and planned and conducted one professional development experience. On the day I conducted the professional development workshop while I walked along the hall I was assaulted by grimy walls, unkempt floors and the sounds of foul mouthed children. Teachers smiled and nodded but most of the students avoided my eyes. I asked myself, “Are these the children I see on the block?”, “Do their parents know they speak like this in the presence of adults?” Here I am a community resident, a parent and a university researcher, conducting my study with science teachers and I am totally overwhelmed by the environment. What am I trying to do here? Are my efforts with the teachers going to have any impact on most of these students? How can I, in good conscience, not try to do something about what I’m seeing here? What does any of this have to do with science education research? Thus my vexation stemmed from the sense of disconnect I saw between my research and the situation “on the ground” in that school community.

My journey with this vexation began two years ago as I was struggling to formulate a research study that would answer my question of how to increase the science achievement of students in urban schools. As I began to carry out my research study I started questioning the initial questions that led me to conduct the study. Should my questions narrowly focus on inquiry-based, culturally relevant science instructional strategies and classroom management strategies when the root of the student’s dismal performance in science has little to do with effective science education and much more to do with global economics, racial relations, and historical power politics? What I was witnessing at this school (in terms of physical plant, science curriculum and student and teacher actions) was the end result of decades of policies that has continually subjected residents, usually of color, in urban communities to inferior schools and seem to exactly reflect the words of Norm Fruchter (2007) “As a nation we have always failed to effectively educate poor students of color.” The conditions I witnessed in that secondary school are by no means unique and have been documented nationwide (Ruby, 2006). So how does one address this issue in the context of educational research within the sphere of science education? Or maybe the question should be, should one address this issue in the context of science education research?

These are the times that I remember how frustrated I felt as a teenager in New York City with an awaking interest in grassroots organizing. There I was a sixteen-year old with a desire to get the folks organized so we could get our block cleaned up and demand better services from the municipal authorities. Neither I nor the few adults who were interested had any idea how to do that. Yes, we were able to do the block clean-ups and secure a few summer jobs for youth but we never really accomplished much because we really didn’t know how to effectively organize for concrete outcomes. Is that the answer for urban schools? Do parents and interested others need to organize to fight for quality education? Richard Riley, former U.S. Secretary of Education (2004) states “strong, sustainable education improvement requires the engagement and mobilization of parents, business people and the public at large ... they must demand, own and protect reform (p x).” I am willing to go a step further by adding education researchers to that list. Who better to work with parents and other stakeholders than the academic community that have been immersed in education reform for the past 20 years? This is our opportunity to combine what we have learned about how people learn, conditions that have hindered learning, and reasons for the achievement gap, with the reality of the dismal state of education for high poverty urban students to help bring about real change.

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After an initial review of the literature (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister, 2008; Fruchter, 2007; Sexton, 2004, Mediratta & Karp, 2003) I have come to the conclusion that by building capacity of parents and other stakeholders in my local community through community organizing for school reform I can have a far greater impact on science achievement than any professional development I can personally deliver. The impact of community organizing for school reform in historically underserved urban areas has had notable effects at the community, school, and district levels. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform document “Organized Communities, Stronger School” (Mediratta, et al, 2008) reported that this type of organizing produced significant impacts on schools and student educational outcomes, and levels of parental involvement, civic engagement, and educational aspirations.

Given these far reaching impacts it makes imminent sense for my energies to be directed towards investigating models for a community-based entity focused on school reform. So here some are questions I will need answers to: 1) what entities have made commitments to school reform using a holistic approach? 2) are there published studies documenting their successes? I can then compile my findings into a literature review. Concurrently I would secure a commitment from my dean that the School of Education would support this effort. The major task at the university is pulling together like others who would be part of the venture. What suggestions might you offer to accomplish this? This would allow me to organize a team in my university unit that would consist of members from Educational Leadership, Teaching and Learning, Center for School Improvement, and Educational Assessment who have an interest in urban education/social justice. What lines of research can we generate from these alliances? I envision a team of community members and university faculty united to work towards school reform while each has its needs fulfilled. Community members including parents, students, and other stakeholders will get the effective schools they desire. University faculty would have an opportunity to engage in community-based research in action and use the knowledge we have amassed about effective learning, teaching and school administration in the last 40 years.

I think this is the true purpose of what I should be doing as a researcher. In preparing for my initial pilot study I had to explore issues in urban education. As a result of this exploration I have arrived at this juncture. My choice is to either delude myself into thinking that my individual work with teachers at my local secondary school will change educational outcomes for most of their students or face the reality that unless there is systemic change within that school community, education outcomes will remain static. This venture is my attempt at systemic change.