

Teacher Development and Reform in an Inner-city School

JEAN ANYON

Rutgers University

The teacher development project described in this article reveals ways in which the social consequences of poverty and racial marginalization may be crucial to the outcomes of educational reform in inner-city schools. The study demonstrates that educational reform can be affected by the economic, political, and cultural context of which a school is in large part a product. The author addresses the consequences of this educational embeddedness for school reform, and suggests that in order to create good schools in the inner cities, educational reform must be accompanied by other, more fundamental social changes.

FROM MY FIELD NOTES

It is February, dreary and cold. I walk through several blocks of old, two-story wooden and brick buildings, empty lots, an abandoned factory. I notice windows that are broken, front doors that do not close completely; but the buildings are inhabited—I hear a baby crying and see a woman sitting on a stoop smoking a cigarette. I am in a large northeastern city that is characterized by extreme poverty and residential segregation. The population in this section of the city is 98 percent black and Hispanic.

I reach the school in which I will work with teachers, sign the guest book, and look around for the principal, whom I know. Two children run down the hall. Seven or eight children sit on a bench against a wall. The school guard watches them. A group of children run by, nearly knocking me over. Several yards away a woman is telling two girls they have to go home because they were late. I ask the guard for the principal and he points toward the main office.

The door is open, and inside is a small room with a long, waist-high wooden counter that creates a barrier between the door and two secretaries. This small space is filled with people coming and going. Leaning heavily on the counter and yelling angrily at a Hispanic woman is a

very overweight white man (the principal). His face is flushed and he is sweating profusely. More people press into the tiny space and out, moving between us. A woman leans over the barrier from inside, holds out a folder for the principal to see, and says, "He's a ten-year old terror from the hotel [homeless shelter]; they're sending him over here." The principal responds, "Start the process now. Get him into King [another school]."

Phones are ringing and in the corner a woman is speaking loudly into the intercom. The principal sees me, says hello, and continues yelling at the woman (who turns out to be the assistant principal). A loud bell begins to ring and rings for what seems a long minute; I glance at the clock, to see what time it is. The clock, however, says 6:30.

I go with the principal into his private office, a large room with a couch and framed pictures on the walls. He says to me, "It's a zoo here." After a pause, he adds, somewhat apologetically, "I'm not the greatest administrator in the world." I say something intended to be nonthreatening, perhaps comforting, and we begin to talk about my upcoming work with the teachers. I have been asked by the district to carry out a series of workshops in cooperative learning, a classroom technique in which students are taught to work in small groups to meet team as well as individual goals.¹ The principal tells me, "Do whatever you want." He also feels it necessary to warn me: "Remember, you can't plan here—things happen!" I ask if I may walk around the school and attempt to sign up teachers for my workshops. [End of field notes]

In 1977 a series of studies of almost 400 educational projects demonstrated that the presence of certain attributes of schools increased the success of efforts to improve the skills of teachers—a process commonly referred to as staff development.² The characteristics found to be most important to the success of staff development were a sense of teacher efficacy, a feeling of teachers that they can be effective with even the least motivated students; collaborative planning between teachers and administrators of what staff-development projects and strategies are needed; commitment and intrinsic motivation on the part of the teachers; skill training followed by staff-support activities after skill training is terminated; practical advice from consultants; specific administrative support and concrete commitment to the project on the part of the principal; teacher feeling that the school is a good school to teach in; and positive school climate.

While the conclusions reached by these studies of the late 1970s have been extended and amplified by over a decade of research, the basic valid-

ity of the conclusions remains.³ An important qualification to the studies has been to demonstrate the importance to the success of staff development of the immediate context in which teaching occurs.⁴ By “context” is meant the complexity, and the “nowness,” of classroom events.⁵

The staff-development project to be described in this article supports the idea that the realities of classroom (and school) life are crucial to the failure or success of any reform. The article takes this idea further, however, and expands the notion of context to include the larger social arena in which a school is embedded. The study demonstrates how educational reform can be affected by the economic, political, and cultural context of which the school is in large part a product.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

The combined community wealth of the city in which this project was carried out is in the bottom 10 percent of communities in the state. According to the 1990 census, per capita income in the city is \$9,437 (the state’s average per capita income is \$24,936). Fifty-five percent of the adults over sixteen in the city are either officially unemployed or have dropped out of the labor force. Poverty rates above 40 percent characterize many sections of the city, including the area in which the staff-development site is located.

Poverty, the use of drugs (especially maternal use of crack), and deaths from AIDS have combined to create a population of children in this city growing up without parental support. The *New York Times* recently reported that “bands of youngsters can be seen roaming [this city] at night, stealing cars, and sleeping in hallways and doorways during the day, without any apparent adult supervision. [The majority of the youths—girls as well as boys—are between eight and eleven years old].”⁶

The K–8 school of the teacher development project is in the central section of the city. The building was constructed in 1861 for the children of German and Irish immigrants who worked in nearby beer and leather factories; Abraham Lincoln is said to have given a speech from the steps of the new building. The school population is now 71 percent black and 27 percent Hispanic. Of twenty-five classroom teachers in the school, sixteen (64 percent) are black, six (24 percent) are Hispanic, and three (12 percent) are white. All but 3 of the approximately 500 students in the school receive some form of public assistance, and are eligible for free lunch. The school has a population of homeless children whose numbers fluctuate. The official rate varies between 10 and 20 percent. A much larger percent are “hidden homeless,” children who are living with relatives or friends.

A psychological study of the fears of children in the school found that the most common fear expressed by the 45 children interviewed was for

their own physical safety; the second most common fear the children cited was that someone close to them would die. Many spoke of relatives and family friends who have died from AIDS.⁷

The state department of education has been monitoring the city's schools for alleged deficiencies since 1984. District efforts to reform the schools have been almost continuous since then. In May of 1988 the state threatened to "take over" the district and install state-appointed officials if standardized scores were not raised and administrative efficiency improved. In response, the city's board of education devised a five-year plan of goals and strategies for reform. Among the reforms was a plan to concentrate resources and innovations in eight schools in the central section of the city, where family income and student achievement have traditionally been the lowest.

The most comprehensive reforms planned by the board for the eight schools in this central ward were school-based management (in which teams of teachers, parents, and administrators are to jointly decide on school policy and practice); all-day kindergartens; departmentalization of the middle grades (so that students in grades 6–8 change classes for each subject); ungraded primary classes; a professional development project (training for teachers and administrators in shared decision making); and the preparation of schoolwide projects that would entitle each school to additional Chapter 1 compensatory federal funds for low-achieving, low-income students. There were nineteen smaller projects as well, including extended-day programs for homeless children in two schools; mentoring of students by successful community adults; teacher training in methods articulated by Madeline Hunter;⁸ and parent volunteer and literacy programs, among others. My cooperative learning project was added in 1992.

STAFF-DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS

I faced financial and other constraints on staff-development activities I could plan. For example, funds were not available for ongoing activities like outside speakers, attending conferences, or having teachers observe each other or in other districts.⁹ In addition, the school was in the throes of the numerous reforms chosen by the central district office. Teachers had not been asked what kind of staff development they desired.¹⁰

The package I offered teachers involved the following: Participation would be voluntary.¹¹ Because of my own experience teaching elementary school in a city very much like this one, I told teachers that I would, with their input, be able to gear the workshops specifically to the daily classroom realities they experienced.¹² During and following a series of six workshops, I would be available (for the five months of the spring semester) to provide support in teachers' classrooms—modeling lessons, sharing

materials, co-planning, observing, and giving feedback.¹³ In addition, I expressed my hope that perhaps cooperative learning in the classroom could be an important basis for positive group feeling among the children, and could thereby strengthen the collaborative aspects of traditional African and African-American culture.¹⁴

One of the first teachers with whom I spoke told me, "Well, I tried cooperative learning, and it didn't work. The fast achievers got beat up if they didn't give the slow ones the answers. The slow ones weren't interested in how to do it, they just pressured the high ones until they came down to their level." This sixth-grade teacher said he was not interested in workshops on cooperative learning. However, after I had made several visits to the school, almost half the faculty (twelve of twenty-five classroom teachers) had volunteered to join the program. Most said later that what had interested them was the promise of in-classroom support.

As I walked down the second-floor hall to leave the building on the third day of recruiting, I saw a young parent and Mr. Johnson, a teacher, talking outside his classroom door. They were discussing the behavior of a slightly built boy standing next to the woman. Mr. Johnson was explaining that the boy had been "disrupting" his class: The student had thrown some chairs across the room. As the teacher spoke, the parent slowly pulled her leather belt out of its loops and started beating the boy with it across his face and head. Mr. Johnson paused, and she yelled at the boy, "I can't be coming up here all the time, what is your problem! I beats you and it don't do no good! What is wrong with you?"

For nearly ten minutes she yelled at the boy and beat him with the strap. He ducked and cried, but did not move away. Mr. Johnson continued talking to her during the beating, pausing occasionally while she hit or yelled at the boy. Several doors opened up and down the hall, teachers or a child peered out, saw what was happening, and closed the door. I retreated into a nearby classroom.

Finally the woman left, and the boy went back into the classroom, not crying any more. I went downstairs quite shaken, realizing I had been afraid of the obvious rage of the woman. I wondered why none of us who witnessed or were aware of the beating did anything to stop it. Downstairs I described to a teacher who has been in the system for twenty-five years what I had just witnessed. She did not express concern. She said "Oh, they get abused at home, but that doesn't happen very often here. If a parent brings a stick or something, we make them leave it at the front desk."

The day of the first workshop arrived and coffee and bagels were provided by the principal. We sat in the library, its wooden shelves built 131 years ago, and began to discuss cooperative learning. Despite the noise in the halls, the clamor and chaos of doors slamming, fire alarms set off by

the children, the intercom blaring, and children running outside the library door, the teachers were attentive and involved. What they liked, they said, was that we took time to acknowledge the reality of what one called “the situation we have here.” Most workshops, they alleged, are “useless” because “they never get to the discipline part. They say, ‘we’ll come back to that,’ but they never do.” “The [workshop] presenters say, ‘here it is—go do it.’ But we can’t! There’s too much going on here.”

The teachers said they were referring to violence (for example, recent experiences with a gun in the school, where third-graders were “shaking down” younger children for money), ongoing tumult caused by caustic relations with the principal, and what teachers felt were excessive demands of the numerous reforms.

When I arrived for the fourth day of workshops, the air in the school smelled acrid and foul. There had been a fire in the basement wood shop five days before. The fire had spread because the fire department, used to false alarms from the building, had not responded at first.

My field notes from the afternoon workshop read:

I can’t focus them. They are preoccupied, anxious, and unfocused. There is a tension in the air that you can cut with a knife. When I express this to Susan, an eighth-grade teacher, she grimaces and says, “Yes, I feel it too.” Twelve of the twenty-five classroom teachers (48 percent) are out today, which is not unusual for a Monday, but five of the subs did not show up and did not call to say they weren’t coming. The noise in the hall is overwhelming, with kids running, shouting, and doors slamming. Where we sit around a table with the doors closed we have trouble hearing each other. The intercom, which you cannot turn off, is blaring “Teachers—lock your doors! They’re supposed to be locked! [to keep unauthorized children and adults from entering the rooms].”

I attempt to start the workshop. It is already a half-hour late. I was going to use a video, but I cannot get the VCR to work; a teacher tells me it broke late last week. I feel immobilized by the chaos in the school.

We begin to talk about what is going on. Some teachers express despair and frustration: “You can’t teach here! It’s got to be better somewhere else.” “You can’t teach! Everyday it’s something [some problem or interruption].” “Mornings the kids come in, there’s been a shooting or something, and that’s all they’re thinking about. It doesn’t matter what techniques you use, it doesn’t make any difference.” “It’s because the community is dysfunctional; the parents are dysfunctional, and so are their kids.” “The kids have so many problems.”

“Nobody cares! The parents don’t care, the kids don’t care; and nobody does their job. People [teachers] ‘get over,’ and take off whenever they feel like it.” “It’s so much worse now—they’re so poor!” “You can’t blame it on poverty. When I was coming up we were poor, but we had rules. There are no rules now.”

A white teacher says, “These kids have major problems! Incest, drugs, the girls go from boyfriend to boyfriend. You look at them and say ‘what’s the matter,’ and they can’t tell you. I have a little boy [in first grade] who’s wondering where his mother went. No one knows. No wonder things go in one ear and out the other [when you’re trying to teach them].” Another white teacher says with what appears to be an embarrassed laugh, “We think, ‘they’re only going to sweep floors’—why teach them science?” A third concurs: “When you realize who they [the students] are, you laugh, and you can’t take it [teaching] seriously.”

I persevere, and lead the discussion back to teaching the children social skills that are required for cooperative groups—sharing ideas and praising each other’s contributions. I feel somewhat ridiculous: With all the problems the children and teachers have in this school, why am I even bothering with something so trivial as “cooperative learning”? I feel that at this moment the teachers think it is ridiculous too.

Later I express my frustration to a male teacher and he says to me, “You know, some of the kids in this school run drugs for the dealers in the evening. They’re young, they’re unpredictable. They do it just to put food on the table for their families. That’s cooperation!”

The following is from my field notes of the last two workshops of the series:

While we were working today the counselor came in to ask if Tom Russo, a white eighth-grade teacher, could be excused for a few minutes to talk to his class. I said yes, and asked why. The counselor stated that one of the seventh-grade girls had been raped the previous evening, and some of the boys in Tom’s class had been circling and taunting her at lunchtime. The rapist’s cousin was in the class, and he was threatening the girl. Only two of the teachers in the workshop had known about the rape; we all exchanged glances, and shook our heads. Tom left to talk to his class, and we continued the workshop without missing a beat. One more brutality, too many to react to.

We had been discussing the difficulties they were having using cooperative learning with special education students (children with learning or other disabilities who are either put in a special class or “main-

streamed” for part or all of the day into regular classes). One teacher with a special education class said, “Some kid in my class pulled down his pants to his knees, turned around and said ‘kiss my ass!’ They wouldn’t suspend him, so I quit. The principal told me to take the rest of the day off. Finally, they suspended him.” When trying to explain why the student did that to her, the teacher said, “I think he got beat up [by the non–special education kids] once too often.” We talked about how the special education children get beat up often by the others, and about how some of the mainstreamed students have been running out of the building and leaving the area. “They don’t want to be mainstreamed. It’s too dangerous!” one teacher said.

We discussed on what bases the teachers had been pairing their students for cooperative groups. Several teachers discuss the problems they are having. They mention those of their children who had been “crack babies” and those who had been “alcohol babies,” and the difficulties of pairing some of these children with other students. A third-grade teacher says that Charles, a boy “born to crack,” is supposed to have glasses, but he hasn’t been wearing them this year and “won’t do anything.” (The social worker tells me later that last year, when he was in second grade, this boy attempted suicide twice.) The teacher continues, “He lives in a garage with his father, and comes in dirty with grease and God, does he smell. Nobody will sit near him.” The teacher keeps soap and a towel in her class, but “he won’t use them, and anyway, he needs a shower! Besides—he’s always falling asleep” [she thinks Charles’s father is giving him drugs]. We agree she should proceed with the cooperative partners without Charles.

I turned the VCR on to show a last segment of tape, and there was no sound. We could not fix it. We continued without the video, working on their activity plans for my next classroom visit. At 2:00, I noticed one of the teachers begin to nod and close his eyes. It was clear he would fall asleep if we were quiet. One other teacher said, “I can’t do this now. I can’t think.” We talked about what the fatigue was from. They said, “Don’t take it personally, Jean!” They agreed that because they were sitting down, and relaxed, the fatigue hit them. They say they are tense and watchful all day, on alert every moment. They become exhausted, they said, from the constant tension. When they get out of the classroom like this and start to relax, “it’s all over,” as one teacher put it, “and I collapse.”

I relinquish my attempts to get them to finish their lesson plans. This is the last session, and we chat until it is time to dismiss their classes. [End of field notes]

IN TEACHERS' CLASSROOMS

I walked into Barbara Jenkins's third grade, and saw the children happily working in pairs reading paragraphs of their basal readers to each other. They proudly helped each other sound out the words they did not know. As Barbara and I monitored the lesson, we realized they understood the text extremely well. When we processed the lesson the children expressed pleasure and pride: "I like helping my partner." "Helping my partner makes me like her more." "My partner took care of me." "I like reading this way; it's fun!"

In the last several days Barbara had been teaching them to "get in their groups quietly," to "share ideas," and to "praise each other." She had made a lovely chart on which both she and the children recorded whether they had exhibited those behaviors during the lesson. The children were pleased with themselves, and Barbara was too. "I am really surprised!" she says to me. "I didn't think they could do it."

Eighth-grade teacher Tom Russo and I planned a lesson together. Before the lesson he told me he was a little nervous. "I have to slide into this," he stated. "It's very different." I agree to introduce the lesson to his class, and to work with him on the implementation of it. I realize I am nervous as well. A boy in his class who "accidentally" shot a teacher in the neck at his previous school had just returned from juvenile home and been transferred into Russo's class. Another boy had recently stabbed his father with scissors (in self-defense), spending the next few nights in the streets. On the morning of the lesson, the school's drug counselor informs Russo that he suspects one of the male students has been selling drugs from the cloakroom in the back of the classroom. While the children are at lunch, Russo and I search the room for evidence.

I introduced the lesson to Russo's class by talking about how hard it is "to go around and have everybody gettin' on everybody all the time," and how good it feels when we can help each other. I explained that they would be able to help each other with their math today, and that working with a partner they were to turn in only one paper, which they would both sign, certifying they had worked together on it, and that both understood it. We used role-playing to demonstrate saying and doing things that would make our partners feel good about themselves. The students' awkwardness at giving artificial praise was hilarious. As the lesson proceeded, I was thankful and relieved to find the class working beautifully. They were engaged. As Russo and I monitored them they exaggerated their praise of each other, smiling self-consciously. One very tough-looking fifteen-year-old boy, working patiently and seriously with his partner, sucked his thumb throughout the period.

Tom and I processed the lesson with his class, praising them for their good work. The students expressed satisfaction and pleasure at working with a partner. As I thought about the lesson later, I worried that an eighth-grader who sucks his thumb (much of the time, apparently) should be receiving psychological counseling. The guidance counselor told me the next day that “there are only two places these kids can get counseling on a regular basis. One has a waiting list of three months; the other will only see them for three weeks.”

In the weeks that followed, I continued working with the teachers in their classrooms. Most of them expressed surprise and pleasure regarding their initial experiences with cooperative learning: “They liked it!” “It’s the first time they’ve really gotten into reading all year.” “I am really impressed [with them]. I didn’t think they could learn so much.” In several classes, it is apparent that the teacher did not plan enough work. The pairs of children work so well together that they accomplish more than the teachers had expected. These successes are gratifying.

As the months progressed, I observed that although most of the teachers were trying cooperative learning, several were not able or willing to attempt the new strategies. One second-grade teacher is an example of this. Each time I visited her she greeted me with a different excuse for not being prepared to do the cooperative lesson we had planned. On one occasion it is the problems her students have that has deterred her. From my field notes:

As I enter the room there is a strong smell of urine. The windows are closed, and there is a board over the glass pane in the door. The teacher yells at a child from her desk, “I’m going to get rid of you!” Some children are copying spelling words from the board. Several of them jump up and down out of their seats. Most are not doing the work; many are leaning back in their chairs, chatting or fussing.

The children notice my arrival and look at me expectantly; I greet them and turn to the teacher, commenting on the broken pane of glass in the door. She comes over from her desk and says, “Jonathan put his hand through the window yesterday—his father passed him on the street and wouldn’t say hello. Jonathan used to live with him, but since he started living with his mother the father ignores him.”

“These kids have hard lives, don’t they,” I say. At that, she begins a litany of the troubles of the children in her class: Derrick’s father died of AIDS last week; one uncle has already died of AIDS and another is sick. One girl’s father stole her money for drugs. A boy had been brought to school by his mother on Monday who said that the boy had been raped by a male cousin on Thursday, but “he was over it now.”

She [the teacher] was trying to get the boy some counseling. Two boys were caught shaving chalk and “snorting” the dust and “they aren’t getting any counseling either.” One boy had a puffy eye that he got because he hit his mother; he hit his mother when she was sleeping, because she often gets drunk and comes in and beats up the kids while they are sleeping . . .

At this point I interrupt her to say, “It’s really stuffy in here. Why don’t you open a window?” “I can’t,” she replies, “because I have some children [points to a tiny girl] who like to jump out of school windows!” The children are totally out of control now, running around the room. One boy is weeping quietly at his desk. She shouts, “Fold your hands!” They ignore her. I realize I must leave so she can get them back in some order, so I say I will see her next week, and go out the door. It locks behind me.

Near the end of the semester I approached teachers with the suggestion that we create a professional support group that would begin meeting in the fall. Knowing the importance of collegiality and what Fullan calls “interactive professionalism,” I proposed that the group would discuss successes and problems of using cooperative learning.¹⁵ I hoped to work toward teachers’ joint planning and mutual observation.¹⁶ Because of financial limitations, there would be no funds to cover teachers’ classes, so the support group would meet after school. However, when I raised this with the teachers I found that even the most motivated demurred, stating that they were not getting paid for this, and that in any case when the school day is over they want to “get out of the building” as soon as they can. “I don’t want to think about it [after school]” and “You have to forget!” they said.

One teacher offered with a laugh that if they stayed after school (when almost everyone is gone), their cars—parked on the street out front—would be stolen. In fact, two cars parked in front were stolen during the last two months of the school year (during the school day) and one car—parked inside the schoolyard fence—was vandalized.

EVALUATION OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The school year ended without fanfare, two-thirds of the students staying home the last several days, their report cards having been distributed, their chairs already piled on their desks. I wondered, as I walked away from the building, what the cooperative learning project had accomplished.

It seemed to me that the extreme poverty in the community overwhelmed the efforts of even the most dedicated teachers. Ravages inflicted on the children by the environment often unfairly trivialized educational

remedies. Indeed, after what has amounted to more than \$250,000 in reform efforts (in the eight target schools) over a four-year period, and the introduction of over twenty-five educational improvement projects, the achievement scores of the students in this school have declined significantly since 1988 in reading, math, and language arts (as have the scores in all but one of the other schools in the central section of the city). The scores in the central ward have also declined in relation to other schools in the district, and continue to be among the lowest in the city and the state, considerably below state and national medians.¹⁷

According to a recent district survey of teachers and administrators in the eight schools of the central ward, only two schools have engaged extensively in shared decision making; after three years (1989–1992) of intensive effort in shared decision making as part of the restructuring initiative, almost half the teachers responding to the survey felt they did not know enough about the concept of shared decision making to offer an opinion about it. The majority of teacher respondents (69 percent) felt that the reforms to date “have not impacted positively” on their schools’ morale or school climate.¹⁸

In pondering whether any of the cooperative learning staff development might have “taken,” I was aware that even in more receptive environments it generally takes a year or two for cooperative pedagogical techniques to become a solid part of a teacher’s repertoire, and it usually takes concrete, ongoing support over a longer period of time for staff development to produce achievement or institutional effects.¹⁹ I also knew that even long-term staff-development projects can have limited results.²⁰ Significantly, the school in which I had been working lacked other characteristics thought essential for successful staff development (e.g., strong positive school leadership and what Rosenholtz has called a “learning enriched” atmosphere).²¹ Given these factors external as well as internal to the school, I was fairly pessimistic about what could be expected from my semester of work on cooperative learning.

In order to provide some evaluation of the program, in December of the following school year I orally surveyed eleven of the twelve teachers who had been involved in the workshops (one was no longer teaching). In the evaluation I utilized the following measure of cooperative learning: A lesson is considered a cooperative learning activity if it meets two criteria: (1) if group goals with positive interdependence among team members have been established; and (2) if individual accountability of each member of each team has been provided for.²²

Three of the eleven teachers reported using formal cooperative lessons regularly (four to five times a week); six teachers reported using cooperative learning two to three times a week; one is using cooperative activities less than once a week, and one is not using them at all. Most (eight) teach-

ers stated that they use “partners” regularly, simply allowing students to sit next to a partner and work together on assignments. Observation confirmed this frequent use of “work buddies.”

During the months of the project many teachers, and several administrators from the board of education, had publicly expressed admiration for the program at interschool reform team meetings. I subsequently worked with ten more teachers in the school, and then filled a request to spend a semester in a school nearby. The following summer I hosted a summer institute in cooperative learning for forty teachers from the eight schools in the central ward. (The institute was held in August 1993. Over 250 teachers from the eight schools applied.²³)

In short, despite what could be viewed as quite limited results to the semester’s work reported in this article (only three of eleven teachers using cooperative lessons daily, and no structure established in the school for long-term support), the cooperative learning program has motivated other teachers and schools to try the techniques, and is considered a success.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING AND REFORM

Teacher praise for the cooperative learning program is accompanied by deeper cynicism about the long-range effects of educational reform. As part of a larger study of the district, I asked twenty teachers in the school what their thoughts were about the possibility that the district reforms (including my program) would make a lasting difference in the school or in the lives of the children who attend the school.²⁴ Although most teachers stated that various individual projects were “going well” and that teachers were “making a difference now,” only one teacher expressed the view that there would be any long-term effect to the district reforms. Instead, the most commonly expressed view was that “after the money is gone, everything will go back the way it was.”

I asked the same question of fifteen parents and two school aides, most of whom live in nearby housing projects. I described cooperative learning, and tried to explain how it might help the children—offering as an example, “Maybe they won’t fight so much.” Several of the parents laughed. One aide retorted, “They’re still fighting!” And of course, they are still fighting. Cooperative learning workshops cannot stop the hopelessness, the crack, the poverty, the anger, that cause the fighting.

Indeed, despite my own and others’ efforts over the years, it is clear that most inner-city schools remain deeply stressed. Those of us involved in school reform must begin to address the fact that, as Seymour Sarason and others have recently reminded us, the vast majority of educational reform projects in the inner city have failed to produce substantial change.²⁵

As Michael Fullan points out, the failure of a staff-development project occurs “despite the fact that we know a great deal about what effective staff development looks like.”²⁶ While it is not a point often made in the staff-development literature, it has been my experience that the characteristics that most studies identify as fostering effective staff development are found less often in the context of the distressed inner city than in more affluent communities. While this is not always the case, research that explores the relationship between social class and school quality supports this perception.²⁷ In the staff-development project described here, for example, only three of the ten attributes identified as crucial by the studies of almost 400 projects cited earlier (teacher motivation, skill training followed by classroom follow-up, and concrete advice from the consultant) characterized the situation.²⁸

A reform project reported by Lester and Onore is an interesting case in regard to the importance of the social context of staff development. These consultants carried out a project to instruct teachers in use of the writing process in an innovative, well-regarded school system in an affluent suburb of New York City. The project involved three years of staff-development activities (1985–1988), comprised of in-service workshops and classroom follow-up by the consultants in all three schools of the district. Teachers visited other schools and districts to observe; class assignments were reorganized to allow middle and high school teachers only four classes a day; and teachers were involved in the selection of consultants. Lester and Onore report that their staff development was successful. Most of the teachers in the district’s three schools were using the writing process by the end of the third year of staff development.²⁹

In 1990 a committee of teachers and administrators from that district requested that I carry out an evaluation of their language arts program. The ensuing evaluation found that, after two years, almost all teachers were using the writing process, and the majority were using writing across the curriculum. Two “holdouts” (two experienced male teachers) had been brought into the fold. Several new teachers had been instructed in the methods. To my knowledge, only one teacher refused to use the writing process, and she was not recommended for tenure.

The district had funded numerous supports to teachers in the two years following the reform, including the purchase of a library of materials to be used as teacher resources for whole-language instruction; released time for teachers to attend conferences and workshops, and tuition for summer refresher courses; a series of speakers and “motivational lunches” instituted by the principal of one of the three district schools; and professional development meetings, held after school once a month in each building to discuss classroom experiences. District funds were used to pay a teacher in

each school to coordinate continuing support for the project and to ensure upgrading of teachers' skills. In this affluent district, where the schools were considered good, reform was successful, making the schools even better.

CONCLUSION

I do not want to argue that successful staff development or other school reforms are impossible in schools in the inner city. James Comer's program, begun in New Haven, is widely known in part because it demonstrates educational success in an impoverished environment. Debbie Meier's high school in New York City is currently receiving similar plaudits.³⁰ Given the paucity of successful reform in inner-city schools historically, however, a question that needs to be addressed is how we can improve the chances that educational reforms in these schools will, in fact, succeed.

My answer is to argue that we must improve the community of which the school is, in large part, a product. A healthy community is more likely to produce a healthy school. This view suggests a revised conception of educational reform. The vast majority of school-reform efforts attempt to improve education by restructuring or otherwise altering what goes on inside school buildings, or in relations between different parts of the local, city, and state educational apparatuses.

Information presented in this article suggests that attention to the inner workings of a school may have little effect if the social context in which the school is embedded overrides those efforts. I would like to express this point metaphorically: It seems to me that trying to reform a school without attending to the social context in which the school is embedded is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door. Rather, what we should be doing—along with trying to fix what goes on in the school—is to attempt to reform (restructure, if you will) the economic, cultural, and political institutions of the community from which the school emerges.

Such change entails, at a minimum, providing the economic means for residents to acquire a tolerable existence; opening up political processes so that residents who are marginalized can move into the mainstream; and attacking cultural biases and expectations that denigrate a population in its own and others' eyes. To create good schools, and to successfully use staff development and other reforms to make them better, I argue that we must create good communities.

Educators could join with housing activists, progressive political groups, corporations willing to build or relocate, unions, advocates for the homeless, and religious, African-American, and Hispanic pride groups and other

community organizations. Grant proposals for school reform could be written with people from these organizations, and should include projects for a total assault on the problems in a community: Economic, political, and education projects should be part of one reform package.

It is important to point out that there is money available for the kind of overarching projects I am proposing. Many foundations that sponsor educational reforms also fund—separately, and in different localities—economic, cultural, and political projects. It is important to coordinate these. In the city where I am involved, for example, a foundation grant was recently received to mount a broad attack on the problems in one section of the city. In the next three years \$15 million will become available from this foundation to attempt to reform welfare, health care, law enforcement, housing, jobs, and educational institutions in the city's central ward. The plan is a product of a coalition of community groups.

This multifaceted approach, whatever its ultimate shortcomings, is compatible with a more realistic view of school change: It recognizes that political, economic, and cultural changes are, and have historically been, intimately connected—fundamental change in one of these areas fosters and is fostered by changes in other areas. One result of this process is that as institutions in a city deteriorate, so do its schools. Thus, reviving the economic and political life of the inner city becomes essential to reviving the educational enterprises there. If urban social arrangements were made more supportive of inner-city inhabitants, and these residents became healthier and more productive, the chances would increase that the schools could adequately educate their children. We would then be in a better position to use staff development, and other reform projects, to make the schools even better.

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Notes

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2 Milbrey W. McLaughlin and David Marsh, "Staff Development and School Change," in *Staff Development: New Demands, New Realities, New Perspectives*, ed. Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller (New York: Teachers College Press, 1979).

3 Milbrey W. McLaughlin, "Enabling Professional Development: What Have We Learned?" in *Staff Development for Education in the '90s: New Demands, New Realities, New Perspectives* (2d ed.), ed. Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991).

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10 Judith Warren Little et al., *Staff Development in California: Public and Personal Investments, Program Patterns, and Policy Choices* (Joint Publication of the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development and Policy Analysis for California Education) (Berkeley: University of California, School of Education, 1987), cited in McLaughlin, "Enabling Professional Development"; and Michael Fullan (with Suzanne Steigelbauer), *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991).

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17 Office of Planning, Evaluation and Testing, Board of Education, *Restructuring Urban Schools in . . . : An Evaluation of the Cluster Schools Program*, 1992.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. iii, 28, iv, and 46.

19 See Johnson et al., *Circles of Learning*; Shlomo Sharan and Yael Sharan, "Cooperative Learning: Changing Teachers' Instructional Methods," in *Current Perspectives on the Culture of Schools*, ed. Nancy Wyner (Brookline, Mass.: Brookline Books, 1991); and see McLaughlin and Marsh, "Staff Development and School Change"; Fullan, "Staff Development"; *idem*, *The New Meaning*; and McLaughlin, "Enabling Professional Development."

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23 The Summer Institute in Cooperative Learning, 1993, was funded by a grant from the Victoria Foundation. The institute was offered again in August 1994.

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28 McLaughlin and Marsh, "Staff Development and School Change."

29 Nancy Lester and Cynthia Onore, *Learning Change: One School District Meets Language across the Curriculum* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1990).

30 See Thomas Evans, *Mentors: Making a Difference in Our Public Schools* (Princeton, N.J.: Peterson's Guides, 1991), for these and other triumphs.