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# CREATING PATHWAYS OF CHANGE

## One School Begins the Journey

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*In this article, the authors explore community members' perceptions of change at an elementary school during the 1st year of implementing the Accelerated Schools Project. After conducting 23 interviews with a representative sample of the school community, three themes emerged: creating a school identity, experiencing a community of mind, and developing a sense of human agency. Despite critics who say that organizational reform efforts rarely influence instructional practices, First Way Elementary may have defied the odds, based on participants' perceptions, by making instruction their primary focus within the context of creating a new school organizational structure. The discussion focuses on how the school community made this happen in such a short period of time and the challenges they face as they continue to make changes.*

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**Change is difficult.** Perhaps nowhere does this statement resonate more loudly than in the field of education. For the past 20 years, we have witnessed a barrage of reform efforts that have attempted to improve education through policy as well as outside the framework of policy. Leading thinkers in education tell us how to change, when to change, and that it is impossible to change all in the same breath. At the same time, we know that change is inevitable. So even if we do not plan for change, the reality is that we are changing.

As educators, we know that school change comes in different shapes and sizes. For example, a middle-school team may collabo-



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rate to implement interdisciplinary instruction or problem-based learning (Stepien & Gallagher, 1993). A school system may invest in instructional programs such as Reading Recovery (Clay, 1985) or Paideia (Adler, 1940), which require intensive professional development for teachers. A school may adopt a comprehensive reform approach such as the Comer Model (Comer, 1988), Coalition of Essential Schools (Sizer, 1992) or the Accelerated Schools Project (ASP) (Levin, 1993). A local business forms a partnership with several school systems to help facilitate the implementation of Total Quality Management (Peters & Peters, 1991; Weller & McElwee, 1997). In a professional development school, university educators collaborate with public school staff as they engage in simultaneous renewal (Goodlad, 1994). A state legislature mandates a statewide accountability system with accompanying curricular and evaluation components or, on the other hand, opens the door for innovative organizational and instructional practices through charter schools (Garcia & Garcia, 1996). Most educators agree that there is not one right reform or change process; rather, success or failure seems to depend on the school community's collective will to change.

It was the concept of the school community's collective will to change that led us to explore ASP as one vehicle for school change. As teacher educators who had grappled with educational change for many years, we appreciated ASP because a prerequisite is that the school community demonstrates its collective will to change through a democratic voting process. Created by Levin (1993) more than 10 years ago at Stanford University, ASP currently is being implemented in schools in 41 states (see also Hopfenberg, Levin, & Chase, 1993). This process for organizational development of schools embodies three basic tenets from Hopfenberg et al. (1993):

- the democratic principles of unity of purpose, empowerment with responsibility, and building on strengths (p. 21);
- powerful learning experiences for everyone (p. 33); and
- systemic transformation in which the school community is involved in a process that includes forging a vision, taking stock, setting priorities, using the inquiry process for problem solving, and evaluating progress (p. 37).

A systemic school change process is complex, dynamic, and time intensive, so we do not expect dramatic changes within a school's 1st year. It is important, however, as Fullan (1993) suggests, to have a barometer or early indicator that change is taking place. We chose the school community's perception of change as such a barometer, believing that early perceptions can be a harbinger as well as a contributing factor to either a sustained or a derailed change effort. We were curious, therefore, to see if members of a school community completing their 1st year of restructuring believed that they saw signs of change. We decided to focus on First Way, an urban elementary school in the southeast that was becoming an accelerated school. Our primary research question was as follows: How do participants perceive the change process in the 1st year of the ASP process?

#### **FIRST WAY ELEMENTARY**

First Way Elementary is a 1st-year magnet school with students from a range of socioeconomic levels and cultural backgrounds from across the city, including a high percentage of second-language students and students from a nearby public housing project. Located in the inner city of a large metropolitan area, First Way is basically new in that the previous year it housed Grades 4 through 6 and now houses kindergarten through Grade 6. Only three classroom teachers and three special education teachers and their assistants are returning from the previous year. The administration consists of the principal, who has been at the school for 5 years; a new assistant principal; and a lead teacher who is also functioning as a full-time accelerated schools coach.

The decision to become an accelerated school was made by the principal with the support of the central office after extensive research on school improvement models. The plan was that teachers would confirm their buy-in by accepting positions at the school. The concepts of acceleration and magnet schools were new to most teachers and parents; therefore, there was some initial confusion and unclear expectations as to the nature of the school population and curriculum. First Way followed a modified accelerated schools

process in which it had an initial launch, began the visioning process, and formed four cadres: positive school environment, resources and technology, outreach and community involvement, and child-centered curriculum. A coordinating committee was established to synthesize the vision. The school elected to conduct the taking-stock phase (which is traditionally the second phase in the ASP) within these four cadres.

### **METHOD**

Our research purpose of gauging the perceptions of participants led us to structure interviews that would help us learn about the perceptions and experiences of the First Way community. We conducted 23 semistructured interviews on a cross-section of the school community, including teachers, parents, students, and administrators. An effort was made to select participants whose level of involvement ranged anywhere from minimal to intensive as determined by the accelerated schools coach who served as the on-site informant. Our questions centered on the three areas of (a) understanding the ASP process, (b) describing a vision of their school, and (c) describing signs of change. We used the constant comparative method (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Strauss, 1987) to analyze the data from audiotaped and transcribed interviews to identify themes about participants' perceptions of change (see the appendix for interview questions).

### **FINDINGS**

As a result of analyzing our data, three themes emerged that provided a glimpse of central issues that the school was involved in as it embarked on the accelerated schools change process. The data suggested that during the 1st year, those in the school community felt that they were actively involved in creating their school identity, that they were experiencing a community of mind, and that a sense of human agency was beginning to emerge. They also voiced a clear sense of the challenges that were ahead of them.

**CREATING AN IDENTITY**

One of the interesting aspects of ASP is its name. Inevitably, educators are confused or, at a minimum, curious about what the name actually has to do with the project. This confusion may range from thinking that acceleration means students literally learn faster than do students in other schools to thinking that the school allows only academically gifted students to attend. In our data from First Way, we found that various members of the school community constructed their own unique definitions of acceleration. For example, the following interview excerpt demonstrates that this teacher knows that the school community is creating its own identity through the accelerated process.

A lot of us didn't know what acceleration was. I think that's what people have to define. I think a school has to define it for themselves. I really love being here and seeing that it's not this package deal. Rather, it's the teachers getting together and doing it. We are really participating in the changes. There's no, "This this is how your school has to look after 3 years." I find now that I am more comfortable with the word *acceleration* since I have been living with it for 7 months.

This teacher was encouraged by the fact that the school community collectively would define what First Way would become. She realized that becoming an accelerated school did not mean they were adopting a package program. It is interesting to note that the initial ambiguities concerning what acceleration means did not frustrate the staff but actually functioned as a source of empowerment to open up new possibilities for creating a school identity. We believe that this ability to embrace ambiguity is key in setting the stage for the types of thinking and subsequent action in which the school must engage to experience successful change.

**COMMUNITY OF MIND AND HUMAN AGENCY**

Perhaps Thomas Sergiovanni (1994, p. 5) said it best when he said, "There is no recipe for community building, no correlates, no workshop agenda, no training package. Community cannot be borrowed or bought." We agree with Sergiovanni's assertion, because

we believe that community building depends on the connection of people to commitments and purpose, and often, this connection is idiosyncratic in its nature. In other words, we cannot will community to happen, because it is a function of individual choice. At the same time, we know that the desire to belong and connect is a profoundly human one. And for this reason, creating a sense of community within schools may not be as difficult as it might sound, especially because a loss of community is a prevalent theme in our contemporary society (Bellah, Sullivan, & Tipton, 1985).

One of the initial steps in becoming an accelerated school is engaging in the visioning process. Most educators agree that broad, passionate shared visions of what a school can become is an important step for creating a climate for change (Fullan, 1993; Glickman, 1993; Levin, 1993; Sergiovanni, 1996). A successful visioning process and concomitant community building depend on meaningful and optimistic interaction among members of a school community. This process creates hope on the part of the participants, and it is this hope that actually becomes the energy for the change process. Visioning and community building create what Sergiovanni (1994) refers to as “a community of mind,” which exists when people feel connected to each other and work together for common goals.

*Community of mind.* As a result of our interviewing various members of the school community, including teachers, parents, students, principal, assistant principal, and other staff members, we concluded that the school community had developed a community of mind around three themes: diversity, powerful learning, and coming together.

Academic and ethnic diversity emerged as a major theme as a result of First Way’s visioning process. The focus on this issue on the part of the school community seems reasonable because the school is composed of a high percentage of students who speak English as their second language and a high percentage of students who are functioning academically below grade level. One teacher expressed her vision of how diversity is a strength and that every child is taught as an individual. In addition, this teacher’s vision for

the role diversity plays within the school community actually becomes a definition for acceleration.

The first thing that comes to mind is really looking at the diversity of the students and not seeing it as a real problem or challenge but as an exciting way to learn how to give each kid what they need. And I don't think you need a multicultural setting to be an accelerated school. I think every child is different. We just have the special combination of so many cultures that it's so striking and so varied that you can't help but see that different kids have different needs. And then you can match up people, and they can learn about different cultures in different ways. That's one definition of acceleration. It's just becoming aware of other people, other perspectives, other abilities, and then meeting those needs.

The staff was consistent in their personal visions, which focused on attention and concern for teaching each child as an individual, meeting individual needs, and capitalizing on individual strengths. One teacher said it simply and profoundly: "No kid should be given up on. I think that's the whole process of finding that gift and accelerating it so they feel that they have something of importance."

Another example of how the school developed a community of mind was its focus on creating powerful learning situations. This same vision was expressed many times in different ways. Teachers want children "to develop a love of learning and learning habits," "to realize what their strengths are," "to take control of their learning," and "to be taken from where they are to as far as they can go." The school has a vision of students of all abilities being engaged and productive. One teacher describes her efforts to recognize the different strengths of children and their different ways of exhibiting their learning:

I'm definitely getting more involved in setting up groups, different projects, having kids take more control. We are trying to make the content meaningful for kids. . . . I have given them the topics, and they have to come up with exhibitions of what they know. . . . They show their research in writing at first, but then they have a choice to show it in a song, a rhyme, a poster, a diorama, really anything, a painting, an experiment. They can choose another medium to express what they know. And you know they are all just taking it on.

The third focus of the school's community of mind was the desire to create a broad base of support within the larger community. The Even Start teacher was encouraged by the shift in teachers' attitudes toward parent involvement: "Before we have sent mixed messages to parents. We have intentionally disinvited them. We are sending out another message now to parents. Now at First Way, we have a philosophy that brings in the parents." Teachers also see the larger community as including the businesses that surround their downtown location and hope to "take advantage of the avenues that they could provide."

*Human agency.* We agree with the observation Joel Barker makes in his popular film, *The Power of Vision*: "Vision without action is merely a dream; action without vision just passes the time; vision with action can the change the world." We would take his concept one step further by arguing for a relationship between vision and action or human agency. Based on our data from First Way, we see that it is a community of mind (through the visioning and community building processes) that actually creates the conditions within the school for human agency, both personal and collective, to emerge and thrive.

As a result of the school's community of mind around diversity, powerful learning, and coming together, many teachers committed themselves to a yearlong course in differentiated instruction to earn certification in academically gifted education. Joan, a veteran teacher, explained how the course has revitalized her as a learner and a teacher after 27 years in the classroom.

The AG (academically gifted) workshop that I am going to is a very powerful, positive learning experience for me. I have learned a great deal in terms of activities to use to actually meet the needs of our children. And even though I talked about individualizing, differentiation—I didn't always do that. Now I have ideas that I can use. This is really good for me . . . this class and the focus and everybody saying that this is where we are and this is where we would like to be. Before, there was no talk of a vision. You just sort of knew that, OK, these are the skills that we teach. Here are the books. This is the syllabus. Get busy. You know, there was no coming together.

Signs of collective agency are apparent from a 1st-year teacher's description of how she is beginning to work with others. Jane comments,

I also think that within the grade levels that we do a lot of work. The sixth grade talks a lot. We took a day off and all had substitutes. It was amazing, and we all went to another school to watch thematic-related instruction. We then met afterward and had a conference and could really sit down as professionals and get a little taste of everyone's philosophy and their reactions to what they had seen. And it was really exciting.

Jane went on to credit the administration with its show of support in arranging such opportunities and actually setting a tone for risk taking.

You know they are taking some great risks. I really commend that. They believe in their teachers, and they are not just looking out for something to show us. They are asking us, "What can we do right now to make our school accelerated?"

Anne is a fifth-grade student in Jane's class. As Anne sketched and described her classroom, she proudly remarked, "We have a newspaper—that was my idea." This is how Jane described her evolution as a more child-centered teacher who felt personal agency herself as she dared to change drastically her pedagogy and classroom management:

As a 1st-year teacher this year, I remember the first kind of risk I took. Kids kept coming up to me and asking, "Can we do this? Can we make a newspaper for 6 weeks? Can we decorate that bulletin board? Can we make our own books?" I kept thinking that there were set things that they had to be doing. And then finally I said, "My other thing that I'm doing is not really working." So I just kind of took the perspective and said, "Yes, I'll be child-centered." I mean and really practice being child-centered because the need is coming right out. So I called a forum, put on a Stetson hat, and created some committees: a book-binding committee and a newspaper committee. We are involved in sending news to other states to try and get a letter from each state. And, you know, I would call forums when it was appropriate, and we got up to about two forums a week. And I

just thought that I had really made a switch that was powerful, to let these kids feel empowered. Because they know what they need. They really do; they just can't articulate it in terms of "I need to learn this," and so it just comes out, "Let's do a newspaper." And I have been trying to tap into that.

The beauty of this 1st-year teacher's story of her own agency is that she has mirrored the autonomy and responsibility that she feels as a faculty member into the community that she has created in her classroom—a community that recognizes and supports children as they assume a more active role in their learning.

In addition to the teachers and staff feeling a sense of agency and control over their lives at school, we were encouraged by witnessing that same sense of agency in the students we interviewed. Joshua, a fifth grader, assured us that students were an integral part of the social transformation of the school and, in fact, asserted that "the main people in a school that would know the school best is the students." He takes his role as student council president very seriously and makes us hopeful that the children at First Way are learning from their adult models that they can give voice to their vision through action.

Yeah, a lot of kids have good ideas, including me. Being the president, I bring situations up before the student council where we can change these things, like maybe get more books in the library. I think everybody on the student council can tell the people or ask questions about how they could make the school better. They could come up to a student council representative and ask them about that. That's what they could do. . . . You know, when you go to a meeting or something, you are sitting there trying to visualize what the other person is trying to tell you. Like another person in my class asked me if we could, like, put a little more concrete on the playground because every time it rains it gets mud all over the basketball courts. So I have to visualize how much it will cost, how much time that will take because we won't be able to play on the playground for a certain amount of time. If you don't take your job seriously, nothing is going to get done.

Only 7 months into the accelerated schools process, First Way Elementary is demonstrating that its community of mind is creating the

conditions where personal and collective agency thrive. And to paraphrase Joshua, we believe that something is going to get done.

#### CHALLENGES TO CHANGE

There are, predictably, challenges that must be faced along the way to getting things done. Administrators and faculty spoke of the difficulties in creating a new school and the problems that they are facing. These problems have grown from the confusion caused by the name “accelerated learning academy,” which led some parents and faculty initially to believe that the students would all be above average in academics; unclear expectations of parents and faculty about the resources that would flow to their school because of its new magnet school status; and the heavy work load imposed on faculty due to the shortage of funds and the demands of working through the accelerated schools process.

Progress has clearly been made in helping parents and faculty embrace the belief that at First Way, all children are gifted and talented. Academic diversity and differentiation to create powerful learning experiences for all children is a touchstone of the school’s vision. When the resources from the magnet school office needed to run the school’s afterschool program were not forthcoming, the accelerated schools coach and others wrote a grant proposal and received \$30,000 from the city’s housing authority.

Creating new collaborative practices and professional rhythms inevitably makes demands on the time and energies of professionals involved in the change process. Many of the faculty spoke of the “too much, too soon” phenomenon. Joan shared this wise perspective—one gained after years of learning to deal with and manage change:

I would like to see us tone down. We are still in the midst of a beginning. We can’t do it all this year. And I would like to see a little more calmness in terms of what we feel that this school should become. I think that we as a group need to continue to come together and focus on our vision. And with the community, the parents, and the students, we ourselves can develop, within our own little family here, those kind of things that will work best for us. Because you can’t always look at something and duplicate it for yourself. We have these children here; we’re trying to meet the needs of each of these

children. And children are different. Some of the other [teachers] are somewhat frustrated. But I understand that it takes time to grow. And it takes that trial and error. I'm the one who likes to tone things down.

This struggle with growth and development that Joan describes at First Way has been addressed by Fullan (1993). He has written that the twin purposes of learning today are the intellectual ability to think and present that thinking coupled with the social ability to work with others. A third purpose flows from these two: the ability to cope with change, which Fullan defines as "the generic capacity needed for the twenty-first century" (p. 136).

Joan also succinctly and quite eloquently described the feelings that she shares with many of her colleagues about the need to see visible signs of progress. She asked this poignant question: "Is there ever a time when we feel that we really are achieving our vision?" The little progress that is accomplished each day often is only visible from a distance of some time and space. First Way is faced with the common challenge of setting realistic, concrete goals that can be recognized and celebrated along the way to making their vision a reality.

### **PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

We began with a general question about how participants perceive the change process during the 1st year of ASP implementation. What became apparent from our interviews with representatives from the school community is that there was a new excitement voiced by teachers, students, and parents as teaching and learning opportunities within the classrooms began to take on a more collaborative, democratic spirit and teaching and learning became more active and adventurous. We were struck that classroom practice was changing in ways not unanticipated but certainly ahead of any predicted schedule. School reform efforts, in general, have been criticized because of the lack of instructional changes in the classroom (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996). Why, then, was

First Way able to realize systematic instructional changes in the 1st year of their change process?

We believe the answer lies in the complex and dynamic quality of evolving relationships among ideas and people. If we boil it down, the themes that emerged from our data (i.e., creating identity, community of mind, and human agency) are all about creating and realigning relationships—collaborative personal and professional relationships among school community members and the relationship between the individual and the concept of change.

Elmore et al. (1996) in their research have identified two concerns that they say should complement each other as schools work toward school restructuring. One is the process of change, and the other is the content for teaching and learning or teaching practice. In their study, the most successful schools were those that “have a strong set of commonly held norms about what constitutes good teaching, and a high level of success at translating those norms into classroom practice” (p. 222). At First Way, with the common vision for powerful learning for all kids, the teachers took control of professional development by electing to attend an on-site class on differentiated instruction. This would be the first of several courses that would lead to the teachers acquiring certification in academically gifted. Imbued with the excitement of having a collective goal, equipped with new instructional approaches that have the goal of reaching all children, and buoyed by the support from colleagues risking similar changes in the classroom, these teachers began changing their classrooms. The teachers experienced regular interaction around problems of practice, so they could “engage in joint problem solving, probe the meaning of experiences and provide each other with moral support in the difficult process of change” (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 224).

As the teachers began to see success with the instructional practices, they began to believe that they could make changes and to sense a new personal relationship to change. In essence, the teachers began to view themselves as change agents. They shared their stories of change enthusiastically and expressed a consciousness that there are layers of change in teacher development (Allen, Cary, & Delgado, 1995). And the layers of change are not so daunting when

there is open support from colleagues and administrators for risk taking. The collective agency, encouraged by the common vision which manifested itself in restructuring efforts (i.e., grade-level meetings and differentiated instruction course), fostered a new professionalism. As teachers gathered to share their stories of change, more change became possible—by virtue of the new and growing relationships that supported the notion of individual teachers taking action alone or with colleagues. It was a new spirit of agency passed on to students who eagerly sought more responsibility for their school's success. Lieberman (1986) articulates this power of changing relationships:

Contexts, needs, talents, and commitments differ, but one thing appears to be constant: schools cannot improve without people working together. . . . None of us, no matter what our position, has the answers to the complex problems we face. The more people work together, the more we have the possibility of better understanding these complex problems and acting on them in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. We need to understand not only the variety of collaborative activities and arrangements, but what people get from these relationships and what it takes to sustain them. (p. 6)

At First Way, we are beginning to understand what people get from these relationships. They have generously shared this knowledge in their stories of the support they feel from their colleagues to take risks and explore possibilities. And they tell stories that demonstrate not only their growing trust in themselves and their colleagues but also in their students. These are lessons of change that the teachers share with their students.

Obviously, there are more stories to tell and lessons to learn from our case study. But the greatest lesson for us has been the need for the nurturing of the individual and collective will to change so that a cross-fertilization can take place. This is happening at First Way because of the beginning systematic efforts to create collaborative learning structures for adults and children.

As Beattie (1995) notes, "When our collective images and imaginations are linked in the creative act of giving voice to shared

visions, the process can enable and empower us to reform and transform both self and community” (p. 66). We see that the school community at First Way is beginning to create pathways that will enable its members to reform and transform themselves and their school. Obviously, it is too soon to know whether it will become another statistic in unsuccessful reform efforts or if those at First Way will defy the odds and actualize their collective vision. We are cautiously optimistic that their journey will not end until their change process yields a more equitable and excellent education for all children.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview Questions**

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#### Students

1. Your school is becoming an accelerated school? What do you think that means? How do you feel about your school? What do you like?
2. Describe your dream school. What do you want your school to be like? What are you doing to help make your school like that? What do you think you can do?
3. Have you had a chance to tell your teachers and others about your dream school? If you have, how did it make you feel?
4. Do you remember a time that you learned a lot? What did you learn? What do you think helped you learn so much? What did your teacher do? How did you feel about all of that learning that you did?
5. Draw a picture of your classroom. Include yourself, your teacher, and anybody else you would like.
6. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your school?

#### Parents

1. Tell me what you have learned so far about accelerated schools.
2. What is your personal vision (dream school) of what First Way can become as an accelerated school?
3. Tell me about any involvement you've had with the launch or creating the vision or any of the meetings so far.
4. I know the process is just beginning, but what have you seen or heard so far that shows that the process is beginning to make a difference (e.g., your children's comments or actions, your personal observa-

- tions, conversations with other parents or teachers)? What do you think you can do to make a difference?
5. What are some of the challenges that you can foresee that First Way will face?
  6. What do you know, if anything, about the Partnership for Accelerated Schools? Do you see any benefit in First Way being connected to this partnership?
  7. Can you describe a powerful learning experience that you have had?
  8. What else might you like to add that I have not asked?

#### Teachers and Administrators

1. Tell me what you know about how your school became an accelerated school.
2. What do you think makes an accelerated school?
3. What are you most pleased to see in the collective vision being created for First Way?
4. What is your personal vision of what First Way can become as an accelerated school?
5. What are some of the changes that you see happening at First Way now that it has become an accelerated school? How are you working with others in this process? Teachers: How are things changing in your classroom? What are you doing to help create possibilities for changes? What do you think you can do?
6. What are some of the challenges that you can foresee that First Way will face?
7. What do you know about the Partnership for Accelerated Schools? What kind of contribution, if any, can you see such a group making?
8. What has been a powerful learning experience for you through your work with accelerated school?
9. What else might you like to add that I have not asked?

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