

Networking and Negotiating for Adolescent Literacy

Joyce C. Fine

Cathy Toll (2002) in her chapter “Can Teachers and Policy Makers Learn to Talk to One Another?” explains why policy makers appear to want to change schools in ways that are incongruent with the views of educators. She claims that the discourses (Gee, 1996) of the two communities are so different that they are not able to communicate clearly and effectively. She suggests that teachers make decisions based on engagement with students, concern for children’s affect, and control of teacher decision making. Policy makers, on the other hand, see teachers as passive and unwilling to change. Policy makers insist on acquiring objective data that will guide reform, which usually has little to do with children and a lot to do with curriculum standards. The conflicting discourses, she suggests, reflect different perspectives and represent differences in power status.

Meanwhile, children’s needs are often forsaken while these two camps are competing for control. These discourse communities need to listen to one another. The dialog must help the two sides understand each other’s perspectives rather than perpetuate differences. How can this be done? It can be started by talking and working with the many layers of public, private, and governmental agencies in our communities. It involves a flexibility to share goals and talk, networking and negotiating along the way. One project that is an example of this type of networking and negotiation is described below.

In 2000 the Juvenile Assessment Center (JAC) in Miami received a grant for \$3 million dollars as part of a National Demonstration Project, Cops 2000, from the U.S. Department of Justice. The goal was to reduce the rate of recidivism through a post-arrest diversion (PAD) program. Many researchers from the field of social science were called in to participate. The grant was to create a model in which social services were offered to prevent large numbers of first time offenders (FTOs) from becoming repeat offenders. These services included family and career counseling, employment, financial assistance and other social services as needed.

The Assistant Director of the JAC, who became the grant director, was aware of the need to support adolescents academically, as well as with other social services. He contacted a reading professor for assistance. Was she interested in trying to establish some tutoring for this population? Would she set up an appointment between her Dean and the Juvenile Assessment Center’s Commander to discuss the possibility of doing this? Even though tutoring was not a part of the original grant proposal, they realized the importance of getting the students back on track in school. So began the networking and negotiating process that set the tenor of the next few years of this project. It has become an example of the type of socio-cultural negotiation that is required when large community systems begin to work together as well as with marginalized adolescents. This type of discourse across systems and societal levels is what is unique about this project.

The Model: CIPP

The best way of describing what took place under this grant is to use the CIPP model created by Daniel Stufflebeam (1966, 2000) which developed over the years. It is the framework

for guiding evaluation that is aimed at effecting long-term, sustainable improvements. It provides a means for the assessment and continuous improvement of programs, institutions, and systems. The CIPP Model includes knowing the Context, getting Input, beginning a Process, and producing a Product in a repeated cycle. As the context changes, continuously changing the input and adjusting the process makes the product or outcome evolve. It is a constant, ongoing interplay of people and situations that influence the outcomes of the project.

Context

The context of the program is Miami-Dade County, a large, diverse city. The Miami-Dade County Public School System is the fourth largest in the nation where almost 60 percent of the student population is on free and reduced lunch. Growing numbers of adolescents have been arrested, many from immigrant populations. There are over a 100 different languages spoken by students in the Miami schools. The Police Department, under the Department of Juvenile Justice, had set up the JAC so that any minors who had been arrested anywhere in the county would be treated uniformly, following guidelines for the protection of youth.

Input

Since the JAC had to continue its role in processing all arrested juveniles, it had to first establish separate groups or agencies for handling the research and the financial aspects of the grant. These subcontractors had to be approved by a vote of the Miami City Council. Once this was done, the newly hired representatives had to approve the plans for the tutoring project, redirecting some funds from the budget, which had been approved at the federal level.

On the university side, the grant had to be approved by the newly established Urban Center for Education and Innovation. While the newly hired director of research from another university wanted to make a private, contractual agreement with the professor, the professor wanted to provide tutoring under the mission of the Urban Center and as part of a practicum in reading. She knew that most of the teachers in the K-12 Literacy Masters in Reading Program were elementary teachers who needed to gain experience working with marginalized adolescent learners if they were ever going to be willing to teach them. If they never worked with marginalized adolescents in their training to become reading specialists, they might never want to work with this population. They needed to talk to the students and see them as individuals in order to understand their needs, issues, and situations.

Product

The goal of Project LIFT: Literacy Intervention for Teens was established to provide this experience and to work with the JAC as a part of the PAD program. The Urban Center gave a \$5,000 seed grant to work out the arrangements and get started.

The negotiation with the research team entailed the professor designing a program and presenting it to the team of researchers and grant directors. The grant personnel suggested that the professor “dream up what she wanted to do.” In consultation with others who had run programs for marginalized youth, the plan was submitted. It was originally for 12-14 year olds

and included snacks and incentives for completing the tutoring. The professor felt the teachers would have the greatest opportunity to help students who were at these ages. The snacks were to help if students came to tutoring hungry and to give them an incentive and a “good taste” for literacy.

The original proposal was modified considerably with such changes as expanding to include any age juvenile who had been arrested and not having any food or incentives for those coming to the JAC for tutoring. The JAC representatives felt that the opportunity to have the FTO’s criminal record expunged was incentive enough to get them to participate in the tutoring. They wanted to support the adolescents without glorifying their situation. Understanding the officials’ perspectives led to a compromise.

The PAD program gave just under \$30,000 for purchasing materials and books and to establish a tutoring project in which ninety FTO’s would be assessed and receive instruction in literacy. Consideration was given to the fact that the adolescents previously had made the decision to break the law. The JAC officers limited the number of students who would be allowed to participate at any given time to fifteen. The tutoring would take place on the second floor of the JAC center, over the processing and holding areas for the offenders. If there were any breakouts of fighting or any other problems, the police officers would be just below and would be able to intervene.

Product

With these details in place, the professor began recruiting graduate students for the fall 2001 term. To participate, graduate teachers would read articles on adolescent literacy and prepare an action research project from their experience. Twenty-four teachers attended the first session, were given a tour of the facilities and were told basic safety precautions that would be needed for working in that environment. They were prepared to participate by offering tutoring on multiple evenings and on Saturdays each week. The teachers came and waited, but the students did not appear.

Finally, the students began to come on Saturdays. They have continued to come each term, but only on Saturdays and only small numbers of those who qualified for the service. The teachers who were able to tutor these students overcame their initial fears of working with these kinds of students. They were no longer put off by the appearance or gestures that showed resistance in the beginning. Each term, by the end of the first session, the students had new attitudes about why they were coming and about literacy in general. There were never any difficulties that erupted, but, we were not reaching enough students.

Context

Where were the large numbers of academically low-performing students? They were supposed to be recommended for tutoring after the social workers interviewed them with their parents. The social workers were supposed to be screening the FTO’s, determining if the FTO’s had been arrested for a misdemeanor, and evaluating them as psychologically safe enough to be released. If needy in the area of academics, based on a snapshot report from the school system,

the social workers were to recommend them for tutoring. Yet, the students were not coming for tutoring. Although some had begun to come on Saturdays, none came on the weekdays after school hours.

This meant that the graduate teachers who were supposed to be working with marginalized youth on the weekdays had to tutor another student situation. Through negotiation with the school system, they were able to tutor in an alternative school that was in session until 6:00 pm. This school had FTO's as well as other students with major adjustment problems. The professor made these arrangements and attended those sessions, also.

Input

The question of why the FTO's were not attending was still unanswered. The arrangement with the JAC was that the tutoring was part of the sanctions. This was a situation that had to be investigated. Several reasons were considered: it could be the location of the program or it could be that communication about tutoring as a sanction for completing the PAD program was a problem. The JAC then informed the professor that they had to seek the approval of the state's attorney for tutoring to be officially added to the sanctions. This led to more negotiation. After one state's attorney quit, tutoring as a sanction was finally arranged with the new state's attorney.

Process

The program was able to continue, but the numbers of FTO's who participated were still low. The professor was told that the Miami Teen Court was interested in sending students to the tutoring. The Miami Teen Court, which operates under the auspices of the Metro-Miami Action Corps, has FTO's and other students, as well, participate in mock court proceedings. The FTO's who go to trial, must follow through with their peers' sanctions in order to have their criminal records expunged.

Product

The Teen Court began to send student's families to Project LIFT. These students were already participating in the programs that had been stipulated for them in order to have their criminal records expunged. They complied to achieve their goal. Perhaps these student's families were more supportive. The Teen Court students were able to make good progress with the tutoring. These students were more motivated to change. Although they had been performing poorly in school, they were functioning at less severely low literacy levels. With the mentor-tutor, they completed the tutoring sanctions. These higher functioning students were the most successful in making gains.

Context

The COPS grant ended. The tutoring continued through the last month of funding. Recently the Teen Court organization has indicated that it wants to continue funding the program but wants to move it to their building, which is closer to where many FTO's have been arrested.

The building also is shared by an alternative education school for middle school students. This organization believes it will always have plenty of students who will participate.

Input and Process

The JAC is waiting until they get more funding to be able to continue tutoring. However, in the meantime, they have been recognized for the model they created. The JAC has been instituted as a separate arm of the Metro government, not part of the Police Department any longer. They will be able to continue their total-child support approach. They have offered their facilities for tutoring to continue and also are willing to send students to the Teen Court building if that turns out to be a better location to draw students.

Product

The teachers have all benefited from the experience and have made wonderful comments such as the following:

The information I have gathered and been exposed to by reading about adolescent literacy has given me the opportunity to compare that many of the strategies that are used at the elementary level can be used to assist marginalized struggling adolescent readers.

HB

When you can reach one of these children who has ‘gone astray’ and helped guide them back into regular productive society that is something that touches your heart and doesn’t easily go away...it gave me the desire to work with children who may not be where they need to be educationally or socially. JR

I have made a difference in the life of one student. And it feels exhilarating! Even if I have to do it one student at a time, I will achieve. JG

The FTOs involved made varying degrees of progress depending on the number of times they came and the degree to which they connected with the teachers. Some found the mentoring aspect very meaningful. One parent commented to the Teen Court that since her son participated in the program he has improved two grade levels. This comment suggests that the students need to be followed in a longitudinal study to measure the impact. Both the JAC and the Teen Court are supportive of this type of study.

Conclusion

This article documented how the negotiations involved in Project Lift: Literacy Intervention for Teens required the commitment and understanding of those involved to achieve the intended goal of supporting marginalized adolescents. There were many meetings in which the perspectives of the different governmental agencies, educators, and students were shared. Patience, persistence, and openness to honestly present what was needed, yet allow for the other’s discourse needs to be met, contributed to the success of this project and hold promise for further dialogue for literacy instruction, particularly in the area of adolescent literacy. Perhaps, this model of exchange could lead educators to more successful networking and negotiations with other government agencies. From this experience, it seems important to begin on a local

level to dialogue with governmental agencies if we hope to help more youth. Perhaps, getting policy makers and educators to talk on this level will build the trust and discourses of understanding needed for exchanges at the state and national levels.

References

Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacy: Ideology in discourses*. London: Taylor & Francis.

[Back](#)

Moore, D. W., Bean, T. W., Birdyshaw, D., & Rycik, J. A. (1999). *Adolescent literacy: A position statement*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Stufflebeam, D. L. (1966). A depth study of the evaluation requirement. *Theory Into Practice*, 5 (3), 121-133.

[Back](#)

Stufflebeam, D. L. (2000). The CIPP model for evaluation. In D. L. Stufflebeam, G. F. Madauss, & T. Kellaghan, (Eds.) *Evaluation models* (2nd ed.) (Chapter 16). Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

[Back](#)

Toll, C. (2002). "Can teachers and policy makers learn to talk to each other?" in R. L. Allington (Ed.) *Big brother and the national reading curriculum: How ideology trumped evidence* (pp. 137- 153). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

[Back](#)