Comprehensive School Reform: A Collaboration Between a Native American School District and a College of Education

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Abstract

This paper describes collaborative school reform efforts between a Navajo school district in Arizona and the College of Education, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The district is associated with the “Accelerated Schools plus Project” and is engaged in the program’s Inquiry Process, an educational transformation that utilizes school-site decision-making guided by action research. This paper will describe the university and district’s collaborative efforts to increase student learning through improved teacher professional practice. Such efforts include linking Navajo traditional values and philosophy and the Accelerated Schools plus process, offering professional development for district faculty and staff, encouraging increased parental involvement, and providing demonstration lessons in actual classrooms.

Keywords: university collaboration, school reform, rural education, partnerships

In the mid-1990s, Pinon Middle School, located on the Navajo Reservation in rural northeastern Arizona, USA, began seeking a school-reform program. The school’s representatives found the “Accelerated Schools plus Project” and were intrigued because the underlying philosophy of the school-reform project seemed to align with the Navajo philosophy of education. Thus began the collaboration of the College of Education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, which housed an Accelerated Schools plus satellite center, and Pinon Middle School. In subsequent years, the success at the middle school convinced district administration that Accelerated Schools plus should be implemented at the other two schools in the district. Currently, all three schools in the school district (elementary, middle, and high school) participate in the Accelerated Schools plus Project. Each school’s name has been edited to include “Accelerated” (e.g., Pinon Accelerated Elementary School). Only a few school districts in the nation are district-wide participants in the Accelerated Schools plus Project.

Overview of the Accelerated Schools plus Project

The Accelerated Schools plus Project is a comprehensive approach to school change designed to improve schooling for students from at-risk situations. The project is designed to structure schools that build on the strengths of all children and to accelerate their learning by making changes in curriculum, instruction, and organization that will facilitate academic and social progress. An abridged description of the Accelerated Schools plus process follows:
1. Members of the school community (which includes faculty, support staff, administration, and parents) define and describe the present conditions at the school - a period known as “taking stock.”

2. The entire school community works together to establish a vision for the school in which specific long-term goals are developed.

3. The entire school community will identify areas where present conditions do not meet expectations set forth in the vision. The school community then agrees upon initial priorities for action.

4. A governance system is established to facilitate the inquiry into priority areas and a complete understanding of problems before addressing solutions. This structure consists of task forces that will each be responsible for addressing a priority area, a steering committee composed of members of task forces, administration, parents, students, and finally, the school-as-a-whole.

5. Task forces engage in a collaborative inquiry process in which they a) attempt to understand the nature of their challenge area; b) search for possible solutions inside and outside the school; c) synthesize solutions; d) pilot test selected solutions; and e) evaluate the effectiveness of these solutions. This initial stage represents a radical change in the ways schools make decisions (McCarthy, Hopfenberg, & Levin, 1991).

The Accelerated Schools plus Satellite Center Model

A Satellite Center is a school or college of education that prepares a large number of teachers and administrators to work in schools with high percentages of students in at-risk situations. The school or college of education has entered into an agreement with the National Accelerated Schools plus Center at the University of Connecticut (previously at Stanford University) to become a center for Accelerated Schools plus in a particular geographic area. A carefully detailed contract is entered into by both the National Center and the Satellite Center. The initial paragraph of the agreement states, “This Satellite Center will be responsible for establishing a knowledge of and capacity for initiating and supporting accelerated schools for at-risk students in its local school districts and to spread this capacity to schools in districts in surrounding areas. The National Center staff will work with the Satellite Centers to build this capacity and all activities will be geared to that end” (Agreement with Satellite Centers, 1990; McCarthy, 1991).

In the early 1990s, the College of Education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, became a satellite center.

The UNLV Accelerated Schools plus Center

The Accelerated Schools plus Satellite Center at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas was established in 1991 and currently works with numerous schools in Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and Colorado. The school district described in this paper is a member of the UNLV Center network, and has also received support from the Accelerated Schools plus Technical Assistance Site at Grand Canyon College in Phoenix, Arizona.

The Basic Partnership Agreement

Each school that begins the process and affiliates with a Satellite Center enters into a Basic Partnership Agreement that details the rights and responsibilities of all. Each school agrees to provide at least one internal coach and one external coach. School teams agree to attend a five-day initial training provided by the regional center. They then agree to provide more than 40 hours of professional development for all the other members of the school community. In addition, the coaches and principal agree to attend monthly coaches’ meetings and two days of Inquiry Training and Powerful Learning Training during the first year, all provided by center personnel. In addition, center personnel make at least three visits to the school and help the school assess its progress in utilizing the model.
Pinon Middle School Enters the Accelerated Schools plus Project

Pinon Middle School teachers and administrators, with the encouragement of the local school district administrators and local school board, engaged in a search for a school reform project and to apply for a comprehensive school reform grant to fund such a project. The school, part of a public school system located on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona, is composed primarily of Native American students. The small town in which the school is located, can only be reached by dirt roads, which are impassable during bad weather. The town has a grocery store, gas station, post office, pizza parlor, and video store. A recently-opened medical clinic provides for basic health needs. For all other services, residents must drive at least one hour to the nearest town.

Traditional curriculum and instructional approaches do not match the strengths of the Navajo learner, whose traditions are oral and whose strengths are in hands-on, experiential learning. However, even the Native American teachers were teaching in the traditional mode because of their own teacher education preparation and the mass-produced materials provided to the school. As a result, test scores were very low. Many students entering the elementary school speak Navajo and little or no English; others have little knowledge of their native language or culture. Approximately 2/3 of the teachers are Native American. A high percentage of students are receiving free or reduced breakfast and lunch. Some students live in remote areas of the reservation in traditional hogans without running water or electricity, and are bused 60 miles, one way, to the school. Others live in town in a dormitory run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Parental involvement is limited.

School community members spent a year investigating school reform efforts and finally voted to become part of the Accelerated Schools plus movement. The grant proposal was funded and the school began its preparation. An external coach was selected and a team from the school was identified to serve as internal coaches and training team members.

Navajo (Diné) Culture and the Accelerated Schools plus Project

The Navajo, or Diné, culture is a rich one. Life and learning are holistic and totally integrated in Navajo life. Navajos see themselves as part of a whole in a mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationship. Traditional westernized education fails to see the holistic and spiritual nature of values, work, relationships, and the environment. For the Diné, life and learning are holistic and are the focal points of the four great branches of knowledge, which can be synthesized into the four basic life processes: thinking, planning, living, and fulfillment (Benally, 1994). The school community was quick to see the relationship of the Accelerated Schools plus Inquiry Process to the Navajo philosophy of life and learning.

The Taking Stock process began the collaborative exploration of the school’s strengths and challenges. There was some stress during this process as the Anglo learning styles and native styles clashed. Navajo discussion style fosters the creation of group harmony and the accommodation of multiple views while working slowly toward group consensus. The wait time for Navajo responses is typically 6-10 seconds while the average Anglo wait time is 3-5 seconds (Dyc, 1993). This created some conflict as the Native American teachers felt some disenfranchisement as the Anglo teachers rushed to fill in the silences, that to them were uncomfortable. Some cultural learning had to take part on both sides so that the process could be effective. Actually, the Navajo style of discussion is much better suited to the Taking Stock Process and the Inquiry Process in the Accelerated Schools plus Project. Careful coaching by both the internal and external coaches allowed the process to move forward.

The school community developed a vision and compared the taking stock data to the vision to formulate priorities for action. Cadres were then formed around the top priorities. The school was careful to invite parents and students to sit on cadres. There are at least two parents and one student on each cadre.
Cadres meet regularly and are tackling the challenges of the school. Changes in curriculum and instruction are taking place slowly as the school community begins to understand the strengths of the students and the ways in which they learn best. The school district has not interfered in the site-based decision-making taking place at the school. Rather, site-based management has been encouraged. This, in turn, has created more empowerment. Last year, the school improved academic achievement dramatically and met the state requirement for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP.)

The Entire District Joins the School Reform Movement

The academic success of Pinon Middle School motivated the elementary school and the high school to join the Accelerated Schools plus Project. Thus, the district became an Accelerated Schools plus district, one of only a few in the nation. Results in the high school have been impressive. For the 2005-2006 academic year, Pinon Accelerated High School posted the highest achievement gains of any high school on the reservation. Initiatives developed through the inquiry process include the implementation of block scheduling and the issuance of laptop computers to all students in the school with the concomitant use of the Internet as an integral part of curriculum and instruction. The superintendent of schools runs district retreats and meetings using the inquiry process and holds school principals responsible for insuring that the process is followed faithfully in their schools.

University Level Student Involvement in District Schools

The University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) uses the district schools for field placements for pre-service teachers (student teachers or interns). This experience in a rural, high-risk situation provides our students with the skills and knowledge necessary to work effectively with students in other at-risk situations. Another university also places student teachers in the district.

UNLV also provides opportunities for doctoral-level research on the reservation. Currently, one of our doctoral students is in residence for one year in the district and is conducting a research study on the methodology of teaching vocabulary to Native American students. She also is serving as a resource to the elementary school teachers for reading research and instruction.

Results and Conclusions

Pinon Accelerated Middle School has experienced a significant transformation during its membership in the Accelerated Schools plus Project. The school had investigated numerous school-reform projects before selecting Accelerated Schools plus as the one most likely to meet the unique needs of the school. The Taking Stock Process enabled the school community to identify strengths and challenges that then formed the basis for cadres.

The Navajo culture lent a special flavor to the deliberations and reporting out as the entire community participated, including community members and elders. One-size-fits-all curriculum and instruction were identified as ineffective because they did not build on the strong oral traditions of the Navajo. Teachers began to create rich instructional activities that built on the strengths of the students. A pair of sixth-grade teachers developed an integrated unit around an incident in Navajo history, thus exposing their students to the required, state-mandated curriculum as well as their cultural history.

Another challenge identified through the Taking Stock process was the issue of parental involvement. Some scholars hypothesize that parental involvement in school will differ based on social status. Lee and Bowen (2006) believe that parental involvement yields higher gains for children from European American backgrounds who come from high social status families. Parental involvement on the part of poor families is not enough to overcome the
achievement gap that exists between lower and higher economic groups. They talk about the notion of “cultural capital” as the academic benefits that children of the higher social status gain because of the match between family lifestyle and what is expected by the schools (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Numerous efforts have increased parental involvement dramatically, especially at the elementary and middle school levels. The Parent Report Card Party, held every 9 weeks, is successful in getting parents out to the schools. Parents are invited to meet with teachers and pick up their children’s report cards. Each session draws approximately 200-250 parents. Refreshments are served and tables are set up in the high school gymnasium to facilitate communication with teachers. Concurrent presentations are often offered along with the Report Card Parties. For example, there may be a session in the auditorium on how to help your child prepare for the standardized testing. Also, Active Parenting Workshops for Parent Volunteers are attended by 20-25 parents each semester. Additionally, parent/teacher meetings are sometimes scheduled during the day and parents are allowed to ride the bus with their children. This seems to enable parents with transportation issues to come to school. Administrators and teachers have indicated they feel the increased parental involvement has demonstrated to students that their parents believe education is important.

Teacher retention, a serious problem on this isolated reservation, was impacted by the Project. One of the concerns regarding teacher retention is the necessity for professional development. Through cadre work, it was brought to the attention of the UNLV Accelerated Schools plus Satellite Center’s staff that the quantity and quality of professional development that was offered to faculty and staff was sorely lacking. The district is over two hours from the nearest university, making it difficult for teachers to attend graduate courses during the academic school year. To exacerbate the problem, all roads into town are dirt and often impassable due to muddy conditions. Some teachers had attempted to gain professional development credits (needed for pay raises and re-certification of teaching licenses) through on-line courses, but access to the Internet is often problematic. As a result, over a dozen UNLV faculty have visited the district and offered university coursework at the graduate level (for certified teachers) and the undergraduate level (for school employees working towards certification). Such classes are scheduled as Friday evening-all-day-Saturday sessions and necessitate two or three trips to the reservation per semester. While faculty are at the reservation, they often provide demonstration lessons in the elementary and middle schools. Teachers have indicated that being able to see the techniques being discussed in their university coursework put into action with their own students has helped them implement the techniques themselves.

A major concern, as is typical in American schools, is student achievement, especially on state- and federally-mandated tests. While test scores continue to fluctuate on a year-to-year basis, the basic trend is in a positive direction and classroom teachers report higher on-task behavior and higher-quality student work. Pinon Accelerated High School, which has been working with the project for only two years, has posted the highest academic achievement gains of any high school on the reservation for the 2005-2006 school year. Working through the Inquiry process, the high school has started out this school year by giving each student a laptop computer and teachers are learning how to provide stimulating and motivating lessons using the Internet as an academic resource. The school has gone to a block scheduling system that allows for longer class sessions and more in-depth academic explorations.

The district-wide involvement in the project has provided important support for the collaborative school reform project. Both the university and the district have benefited from the synergy. Both university students and faculty have gained important knowledge about the culture and ways of learning of native children and adults. District administrators and teachers have benefited from professional development and university coursework designed
to help them become outstanding professionals who can design and implement instruction that matches the strengths of their learners.

**Importance of the Study**

To our knowledge, this study is one of the first to describe the selection, implementation, and ongoing results of the Accelerated Schools plus Project in a Navajo school district. The implications of this study for the expansion of the Project into other Native American schools as well as schools with high percentages of single cultural groups are important. The knowledge gained about parental involvement in Native American schools has resulted in important interventions in the district. Additionally, the effect of this school reform project on student learning appears to be positive.

**References**


