Imaginary Gardens and Real Issues:
Improving Language Arts in the Urban Elementary School

JOE CHECK

As America enters the twenty-first century, elementary schools across the country are striving for reform. Improvement of reading and writing skills is central to reform everywhere, but in urban schools it takes on special urgency. Large numbers of English Language Learners and the widely publicized "achievement gap" in reading scores between white students and students of color create intense pressure on principals and teachers to achieve measurable gains quickly.

Many National Writing Project (NWP) sites are well positioned to help such schools. A growing number of sites are conducting or exploring professional development formats that build on the traditional workshop series to create deeper relationships, helping schools address questions of reading, writing, and thinking through inquiry groups, teacher research, documentation of student work, and other techniques. Locally, such initiatives hold great potential for expanding partnerships between NWP sites and schools. Nationally, increased federal support for NWP—for example, the inclusion of NWP under the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Act (CSRD)—brings with it federal expectations that we will play a role in school-wide reform.

In addition, as the documented success of Writing Projects increasingly enters the research literature, schools and school systems engaged in reform turn to local sites with broader requests for assistance. Milbrey McLaughlin (1990) has pointed out, for example, that "if teachers lie at the heart of successful efforts to enhance classroom practices, then the professional networks that engage teachers comprise promising vehicles for change. The apparent success of teacher groups such as the Bay Area Writing Project... suggest that change strategies rooted in the natural networks of teachers—in their professional associations—may be more effective than strategies that adhere solely to a delivery structure outlined by the policy system" (p.15).

Heightened federal and local expectations can present site leaders with a dilemma: how does a practitioner-centered, writing-focused professional development network whose credo is "teachers-teaching-teachers" play a role in reforms which often implicitly or explicitly deny teachers' autonomy and efficacy?

My interest in these issues is longstanding. As director of a doctoral program in Urban School Leadership, my students are teacher leaders, principals, and system-wide administrators in more than twenty urban communities in Eastern Massachusetts. As Director of the Boston Writing Project and a member of the leadership team of NWP's Urban Sites Network, I work with teacher consultants locally and from across the country who are practicing and promoting urban literacy reform.

In both of these roles, I have recently begun to glimpse a recurrent pattern in urban reform. Large amounts of time, effort, and money are poured into a troubled school in a short period of time, with the expectation that both "defective" teachers and long-standing problems of school achievement will be permanently "fixed." The money is tied to specific reform programs which the school must adopt. In some cases these are publisher-sponsored workshops or for-profit educational innovations, in others they are "exemplary programs" sanctioned by national initiatives like the Annenberg Challenge (now active in New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and other metropolitan areas) or the CSRD (active in urban districts in all fifty states).

Reform typically starts with an initial flurry of activity and funding lasting eighteen months to two years, then this initial momentum slows noticeably. Multiple causes contribute to this slowing: a supportive principal or key teacher leader leaves to take another assignment and is replaced by someone less charismatic; burnout begins to set in among the most active staff members; grant funding which supported release time and new materials is withdrawn by the central office to be re-allocated to the latest high-priority "school in trouble." Under these conditions reform proves difficult to sustain, and in the end the school sees little long-term change in either teaching practice or student performance.

If this pattern is as common as my experience suggests, it raises serious questions. If urban schools are to be permanently improved, we need to begin by honestly analyzing both the forces driving reform and the school-based contexts which make it so difficult to achieve. Only when we have gained a basic understanding of these "facts of life" will we as writing projects be able to contextualize our professional development efforts, not just in terms of changes in the teaching of writing, but in the larger context of whole-school change. In this article I try to take a first step in this direction.

I offer three connected approaches to permanently improving literacy education in urban elementary schools: first, a portrait of an imaginary, composite urban school—East Elementary—that illustrates some of the reasons why lasting change is so difficult to achieve; second, consideration of some relevant research findings concerning reform and language arts instruction; third, suggestions for a new way to think about change. My purpose in this three-pronged focus is to highlight implementation issues that occur in schools when outsiders—reform experts, university faculty, content-area "coaches" — attempt to work closely with insiders—teachers and principals—to create lasting change. If such collaborations are ever to succeed, I believe we must shift the focus of effort from *exemplary programs* created by outside agents and supported by short-term funding, to the creation of *exemplary contexts*, the set of conditions that will allow a particular school with a unique history and faculty to integrate outside interventions into a process of sustainable success on its own terms.

I. An Imaginary School with Real Issues: East Elementary

The poet Marianne Moore (1951) once referred to her creations as "Imaginary gardens filled with real toads." Her poems were products of the imagination, but the issues about life they raised were real. The poetic form allowed her to talk about these difficult realities in unique and effective ways.

Taking a cue from Moore, I've tried to create "an imaginary school filled with real

issues." Drawing on published research, interviews, and my own experience, I've described a composite urban school—East Elementary — staffed with a principal and teachers who are both individuals and representative of larger realities. I'll ask you to join me on my initial visits to East, seeing the school through my outsider's eyes; then to sit in on conversations with school insiders while I think through ways to help East move forward and recommend first steps in the change process.

East's Profile, Principal Alice and Teacher-Leader Barbara

East is a historically low-performing school and its relationship with parents has never been strong. It has 800 students and, using the federal government's categories, reports 50% as African-American, 25% as Hispanic, 10% as Asian, 10% as white, and 5% as "other minority." About 25% of East's

students, disproportionately African-American and Hispanic boys, are in special education classes at least part of the day. There is a substantial Spanish bilingual cluster. East is a Title One school; 35% of its students read below grade level and 60% are eligible for the federal free lunch program. The average age of East teachers is in the late 40s; most have been teaching for 15 years or more. The teaching staff is predominantly white and female.

East's teachers are working hard to move forward together under the leadership of Alice, a committed and active African-American principal who came to the school one year ago. Alice is under tremendous pressure from above to implement new curriculum standards and improve student performance on statewide tests keyed to those standards. She also feels tremendous internal pressure to succeed based on three

factors: she has been a high achiever her entire life and is determined to meet the professional challenge of "turning East around"; she is among the first generation of women and "minority" administrators in the school system, and is aware that many eyes are on her; and she feels a special responsibility to the "minority" parents and children who make up the majority of the school's population.

Alice has spent her first year developing with her staff a mandated school-wide change plan which is now on file with the central office and for which she and the school will be held accountable. To improve language arts instruction, this plan relies heavily on adoption of an "exemplary literacy program" that is paid for by federal CSRD funds. The program's philosophy holds that the school must develop "owner-ship" of the program for it to be successful.

As part of the process of taking ownership, Alice has asked a "coach" from the univer-sity, myself, to help East identify change issues raised by adoption of an "exemplary" program in the context of the state's new language arts curriculum standards and high-stakes tests. In what follows I present a picture of the setting for change at East just prior to the initiation of the program, as seen through my outsider's eyes.

****

On my first visit to East, Alice suggests that I talk with Barbara, a third-grade teacher who is successful with students and widely respected by other teachers in the building. Though she holds no leadership title other than membership on the school council, Barbara is one of three or four influential

teacher-leaders in the building whose support is absolutely essential if the change process is to have a hope of succeeding.

In a long conversation with Barbara, a picture of teaching at East starts to emerge. Self-contained, regular education teachers, the majority in the school, have widely different philosophies and teaching styles. There are animosities between some individuals, but in general there is a "live and let live" attitude about teaching as long as colleagues feel that you are working hard and care about the children entrusted to you.

The most "progressive" teachers share a holistic approach characterized by anti-basal, anti-skill and drill, anti-prescriptive instruction that tries to address all four language skills—reading, writing, speak-ing, and listening—in a developmental manner that looks at the whole child. They value classroom activities that meet multiple curricular goals, and do not seek a strict one-to-one correlation between a single activity and a single outcome in reading or writing. They are deeply troubled by those who interpret the new curriculum as connecting a single classroom activity to a single curricular goal, an approach they see as pedagogically regressive.

A number of other teachers in the building have tried such a "progressive" approach and abandoned it for a much more tradi-tional one, one which is also favored by a vocal set of East parents. I recall Alice's words at our first meeting: "Take the whole language approach to reading. Many teachers here say they tried it but are now saying it doesn't work for urban low income

kids because they believe our children need a more direct and structured approach to reading, therefore they are going back to a heavy phonics approach. But the best teachers found that they have to use a balance of a whole language and structured phonetic approach."

A small number of teachers are clearly unsuccessful. Their classes have frequent discipline problems, their students make little progress, and savvy parents visit Alice early in the year to insure that their children do not get assigned to these teachers.

The Wave Theory

The following week I spend a good deal of time sitting in regular education class-rooms to which I have been invited, watching East's teachers at work and talking with them about why they do what they do. At the end of the week I meet with Alice and Barbara to offer first impres-sions.

We are sitting in the tiny principal's office on a Friday afternoon. The school has just gone from the noise and activity of dismissal to the quiet that follows, and Alice and Barbara have just come in from bus duty. Luckily, today no buses were late, no children got sick, and no neighbors have called to complain about noisy East students running through yards on the way home.

I struggle with what to say. I'm finding it very difficult to generalize about teaching at East, especially based on only a single week of observation. I decide to start with a comparison. The regular education

teachers here, I say, are like beach-combing artists, constructing individual, eclectic pedagogies by combining insights from years of classroom experience with treasures left on shore by successive waves of pedagogical innovation.

Alice and Barbara look at me like I'm crazy; it's an uncomfortable moment. Clearly I need to explain myself. Aware that I'm beginning to sound like someone who works in a university, I go on. I explain my "wave theory" of language arts teaching. Most East teachers are old enough to have seen at least three distinct waves of "new pedagogy" in reading and writing break over schools and recede. The first wave, writing process/writing workshop pedagogy, began in the late 1970's and crested in the mid-80's; the second wave, whole language, began gathering force as writing process receded, and the third wave, multicultural children's literature, began to really take off in the mid-1990s. None of the three "waves" completely receded, and all are being advocated and practiced simultaneously today. But staff development programs in school systems tended to adopt them in succession as each became the "hot" pedagogical innovation, so teachers were likely to experience them sequentially.

As an outside observer, it seems to me that most East teachers have constructed their own synthesis of techniques from these three waves, combined with their undergraduate or graduate training in the teaching of reading. Now they must comply with curriculum mandates, struggling to craft a pedagogy that is true to their beliefs and also meets the new demands of standards and testing.

Interested but skeptical, Alice asks me a question which is also a challenge: "How will understanding 'the waves' help East move forward?" I take this to mean: "I need to turn this school around in a hurry and I'm in a vulnerable position. If what you're explaining can help improve things here for teachers and kids in measurable ways, I'm still interested, if it won't, I can't afford to spend time on it."

Deeper into The Waves

Accepting the challenge, I jump in, explaining that writing process pedagogy challenged, for the first time, the primacy of reading as the focus of staff development, curriculum time and textbooks. But over time teachers learned experientially what researchers have confirmed: in many cases there is little difference between the classroom practice of teachers who label themselves "writing process" teachers and teachers who do not. Many teachers who got the training to make this pedagogy work in their classrooms experienced a remarkable transformation for themselves and their students. For others, change consisted of replacing the 70's jargon "brainstorming" with the 80's jargon "prewriting" and replacing a publisher's wall poster listing "The Elements of the Five Paragraph Theme" with a similar poster listing "The Five Steps of the Writing Process."

The second wave, whole language, enfolded writing in an inclusive approach to language arts, reclaiming for the reading community some of the ground it had lost to advocates of writing process. But as Alice and Barbara know, political pressure has made East's school system step away from

officially embracing whole language, though many teachers in the building use elements of whole language pedagogy.

Many teachers who got the training to make (writing process) pedagogy work in their classrooms experienced a remarkable transformation for themselves and their students. For others, change consisted of replacing the 70's jargon "brainstorming" with the 80's jargon "prewriting" and replacing a publisher's wall poster listing "The Elements of the Five Paragraph Theme" with a similar poster listing "The Five Steps of the Writing Process."

The third wave was children's literature. The recent emphasis on quality children's literature, particularly multicultural children's literature, is warmly embraced by the majority of East teachers. Many are spending their own money to equip classroom literature libraries while their school system continues to spend millions of dollars on a new series of basal readers.

The new basal has further confused pedagogical issues. The school system ordered basals by grade level, but so many of East's students are reading below grade level that the basal is useless for achieving the principal benefit for which it was

adopted—providing a unifying element to the curriculum in a school system with a high level of student mobility. And just as the basal series of the 1980's adopted the nomenclature and trappings, but not the spirit, of writing process pedagogy, the basals of the 90's have adopted superficial elements of whole language and whole literature while missing their essence, and have added a renewed emphasis on phonics.

Barbara responds that most East teachers have chosen a middle way, using some basal stories but supplementing them with whole works of children's literature. Many wonder if what they are doing is "right," she adds, and feel uncertain about the decisions they have made. "But," says Alice, "you still haven't answered my question: what's the connection between the waves, improved language arts instruction, and whole-school change?"

My wave analysis may be of interest to the "regular education" teachers at East, but if the school is to change, the concerns of teachers outside the "mainstream" must be part of the mix. Alice and Barbara suggest I spend the next week getting the perspectives of Jackie, a Special Needs teacher, Francisco, a bilingual education teacher, and Phyllis, a Title One specialist. At the end of the week, this is what I have found out.

Jackie
Jackie is struggling with the redefined professional role that special needs inclusion demands of her. For years she has used a prescriptive approach to language development based on the need to construct discrete objectives in her students' Individual Educational Plans (IEP's), with each instructional activity tied to a

measurable outcome. Now she is being called on to recreate herself in the more flexible role called for in the inclusion classroom, in which she is a second teacher paired for part of the day with various regular education teachers with whom she shares her "mainstreamed" SPED students. She still feels uncomfortable entering some of her colleagues' classrooms, and they are uncomfortable having her there. The training in Special Education she received 15 to 20 years ago and her years of experience writing, implementing, and monitoring IEP's are based on philosophies of learning substantially different from those held by Barbara and other teachers she must now team with. Jackie has, on her own, sought out workshops and classes in new, holistic pedagogies, but she is still facing a complex professional transition. Now she must work each week with five or more mainstream teachers whose styles are widely divergent from each other. Further, East students have done poorly on the recent state reading tests. Because the scores of Special Needs students are not figured into the school's testing average, she now feels pressure to help raise the school's average by classifying poorly performing students as special needs cases, even though she can identify no serious learning or emotional disability. Because this pressure runs directly counter to the philosophy of inclusion which the school has publicly adopted, Jackie feels doubly uneasy.

A school-wide approach to language arts would ease Jackie's transition by providing common ground for the collaborative planning she does with mainstream teachers. But if the proposed school-wide

language arts initiative is to be successful, she and her mainstream colleagues need a chance to discuss not just what they do, but *why* they do it. Because of the sensitive nature of this discussion, it must take place in a trustful setting, one which assumes that good teaching can look many different ways, that because one person does things differently from another does not mean that one is right and the other is wrong.

Francisco
Francisco teaches in the school's Spanish bilingual cluster. For him the single biggest issue around language is equity. He struggles daily not to be marginalized as a professional, and not to have his students and his program marginalized within the life of the school because their first language is not English. Pedagogically, his graduate level training has given him a sophisticated set of tools to analyze students' proficiency in both their native language (L1) and their acquired language (L2). Other teachers in the building seem to care about only one thing, "Are you teaching them English?" Yet Francisco knows that one key to building English proficiency in his students is to strengthen their Spanish, because research on language learning has shown that strengthening native language skills results in improved English skills (Cummins, 1996, 1981; Beykont, 1994; Ramirez, 1992). He also knows that older children must maintain their cognitive development in areas such as math, science, and social studies if they are not to fall behind, and therefore must receive some content-area instruction in L1. Outside his own cluster, no one in the school is familiar with this way of looking at language, and so it is difficult for him to talk about language

development with colleagues. He knows from the way other teachers react that he is using a vocabulary and developmental framework with which they are not familiar.

Further, Francisco has studied persuasive evidence that it takes six or more years of support for students to make a successful transition to a level of English that will allow them to succeed academically in the mainstream classroom, but because of laws governing bilingual education he is under tremendous pressure to push students into the mainstream in three years or less (Ramirez, 1992; Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1981). In these circumstances, he knows that some are bound to fail. If he attempts to do what his professional training dictates—hold on to his students for more than three years—the rest of the school sees him as "coddling" or "sheltering" them; if he pushes them into the mainstream, he knows he is setting them up for a failure which will confirm, to other staff members, negative stereotypes of Hispanic students as academically inadequate. Not only does Francisco bring a different developmental framework to the language arts discussion, he also brings powerful political issues around language status. These issues directly affect him and his students, but if he expresses them openly, he may be branded a "troublemaker" and find that he, his bilingual colleagues, and his program become even more marginalized. Francisco is angry, but he dare not express his anger.

Phyllis

When Phyllis started as a Title One reading teacher years ago, regulations confined her to one-on-one or small group reading instruction in a closely defined, diagnostic/

prescriptive framework. Over the years Title One regulations have become more holistic, recognizing that reading and writing are developmentally intertwined, and she has taken graduate courses and workshops in the teaching of writing as well as in whole language and children's literature. Though she still sees students individually or in small groups, her teaching philosophy is close to Barbara's. This is her first year at East, and she is still feeling her way along. She receives students from Barbara, Jackie, and Francisco, and she would like to synchronize her instruction with what goes on in their classrooms, but she really doesn't have a clear idea of what *does* go on, and she's never had a chance to talk to them about it. Already, though, she realizes that each one of them teaches with different assumptions. Right now, Phyllis relies heavily on her own accumulated, eclectic style that incorporates pieces of previous Title One philosophy and her graduate training, and concentrates her energy on her students while she feels out the other adults in the building.

II. Toads in the Garden: Cautionary Research and Analysis

At the end of the week, back in my office, I put my notes in order in preparation for Monday's meeting with Alice and Barbara. Then I put my university hat back on and begin to consider East in a national, research-based context. At this early stage, I see two large "danger zones" threatening instructional improvement at East. The first is a set of conditions described by systems thinker Michael Fullan (1996) as *fragmentation and overload*. According to Fullan:

There is an overwhelming amount of evidence that educational change is... non-linear. This means that the most systemically sophisticated plan imaginable will unfold in a non-linear, broken-front, back-and-forth manner. It will be fragmented.... Overload and fragmentation... take their toll on the most committed, who find that will alone is not sufficient to achieve or sustain reform. (p. 422)

If Fullen is right, the quick fix of exemplary programs is unrealistic.

Diverse beliefs about how children learn to read and write represent an important element of fragmentation at East and schools like it, and as long as these beliefs remain unexamined, they are a major barrier to success, no matter what "exemplary program" is being put in place. For East to move forward, Barbara, Jackie, Francisco and Phyllis must begin to work together, rather than separately, for they serve the same group of children. But this will require time for the sharing of knowledge, activities for building mutual respect, and reflections which discover common ground in their divergent teaching philosophies and assumptions.

Another danger zone: at East both the motive force for change and the important ideas about how change is to be accomplished come from outside the school, indeed outside the teaching profession, implying that East and its teachers are part of the problem, not part of the solution. Yet for change to succeed, these very same

read the text beforehand. In the lecture, I found myself scribbling furiously to keep up, writing practically everything the professor said, trying to copy all the diagrams that appeared on the screen. My notes were messy and poorly ordered. I took five times more notes than I had the first time, and I had absolutely no time to apply any of the concepts being mentioned because I was too busy copying down their basic meanings. My students were right all along, I grumbled. The professor goes too fast! I shared my experience with my students. I actually felt like commending some of the ones who had been diligently going to every lecture, taking copious notes, while not yet having read past Chapter 1 in the text. Then I selected one more lecture for them to go to. "When you come to English class the day before the lecture," I told them, "bring your Psychology books."

That day in English class, we read. I asked them to open the textbook to the beginning of the section the lecture was scheduled to cover and start reading. I told them it didn't matter if that was a hundred pages beyond where they'd last stopped reading; I wanted everyone in class to attend at least one Psych lecture knowing what it was like to read the text first. (Later, when I discovered how many students were even more than a hundred pages behind in the reading, I began recommending that they skip those pages and starting that day, try to keep up. "You can make up those missed pages later," I told them. "But you won't be able to make up the experience of going to lectures having read the text first.")

Lately I've been learning more about how to teach note-taking and note-making, and I'm particularly looking for ways to help students improve their note-making skills. (I'm pondering, for instance, requiring students to use a dual-entry learning log in their Psych 100 lectures, which I would then look over.) But for now, I'm pleased with the results I've seen from this first-time effort. More of my students are reading the text before they go to class, and even those who don't are aware that it would help them and seem more inclined to accept responsibility when they do poorly on tests.

I hope their Psychology professor will be as pleased. In English class the other day, I overheard two students complaining about her. "That's practically all she ever covers," one student said. "Exactly what's in the book, what you've already read."

"I know," the other agreed. "I can't believe she goes so slow."

Mark Farrington, a TC with the Northern Virginia Writing Project, teaches freshman English at George Mason University, Fairfax, VA. This article is reprinted from The Journal of the Virginia Writing Project *(Volume 21, Issue 1).*

Imaginary Gardens and Real Issues

problematic teachers must be the implementers of the new ideas. In this paradox East reflects education reform nationally over the last thirty years. A major study of federal reform efforts in the 1960's, 70's, and 80's identified as a "core irony" the fact that federal policies were based on "a fundamental mistrust of the judgement and knowledge of educators, but successful implementation of those reforms relies on those very educators" (Elmore and McLaughlin, 1988).

Efforts to improve language arts over the last 20 years — the waves in the wave theory— represent a particular instance of change efforts thwarted by fragmentation, overload, and mistrust of the judgement and knowledge of teachers. Writing process pedagogy can be seen as the paradigmatic example of this phenomenon. As the process gospel spread rapidly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, language arts curricula mandated process steps, peer response, and the author's chair. But without high-quality, sustained professional development for the teachers on the receiving end of these mandates, little systemic change resulted (Applebee, 1984; Graves, 1984).

Succeeding innovations—literature-based reading, "big books," whole language, the reader's workshop, DISTAR, and others— met a similar fate. New ideas backed by strong research evidence were effectively adopted by small numbers of teachers, but their widespread implementation existed in name rather than in fact. A recent review of these efforts reached this conclusion:

> *It's clearly much easier to change the top half of the system than the bottom half. 'Reform' efforts are underway in every state in the country. It is less clear that these reform efforts have had any effect at the classroom level... At best, we can argue that the "sys-*

temic" reform may set the stage for innovations in practice, but does not assure them." (Hoffman, 1998)

The lesson here seems clear. Successful, research-tested techniques for improving language arts instruction have been developed. It is easy to find outstanding individual classrooms and teacher exemplars of success for any given technique, and these exemplars are publicized widely by advocates of a particular reform. But no reform has achieved success that could be termed widespread, and in too many cases the original spirit and intent of the techniques has been undermined by other factors. Seen from this perspective, the "eclectic" pedagogy found at East is more normative than unusual.

Batton and Vereline's survey of literacy practices made clear that the majority of the student's day, no matter what grade level, was being spent in activities related to reading and writing. And yet test scores continued to decline.

For example, Barbara Batton and Linda Vereline (1995) of the New York City Writing Project conducted an intensive analysis of literacy instruction in a 1,200 student New York City elementary school designated for "corrective action" due to low test scores.

They found a school that was 100 years old and badly overcrowded, working at 125% of student capacity and with a long waiting list for kindergarten placement. Students new to the United States were a regular part of the student population, and each grade from K-5 had three bilingual classes.

A large number of "exemplary" literacy practices were in use, including twenty-minute blocks of silent reading time directly after lunch; ninety-minute literacy periods every day for monolingual and bilingual students; homogenous reading groups in grades 2, 3, and 4; specific reading assessments for group placement; remedial reading initiatives; classroom libraries; and a "reading buddies" program across grades. Writing practices included book making and publishing; a school-wide writing-across-the-curriculum program; and daily journal writing. Professional development for all teachers was being provided by the publisher of the school's new basal series, and mandatory ESL workshops for monolingual teachers were being given by an outside consultant.

Batton and Vereline's survey of literacy practices made clear that the majority of the student's day, no matter what grade level, was being spent in activities related to reading and writing. And yet test scores continued to decline. This caused them to take a deeper look at the educational context in the building, a look that uncovered hidden sources of difficulty. These included a "culture of mistrust" created by years of scrutiny linked to constantly changing district mandates, which in their report to the district Batton described in these terms:

This steady diet of prescribed pack-aged kits and history of continually-

replaced mandated programs across the curriculum for which staff is then given 'training' has sent a message of mistrust for teachers as independently capable and competent educators and has contributed to undermining teachers from taking responsibility for their own practice.

Batton and Vereline also found that though there were many literacy activities, the definition of literacy embraced by the school was a narrow one that relied heavily on the constructs in the basal series. In addition, they noted that the school was having limited success reaching out to parents, that there was a widespread perception of inequity in distribution of materials on the part of bilingual staff, and that teachers were very concerned about the absence of school-wide art, music, and movement programs. Taken together with the "culture of mistrust," these factors neutralized or outweighed the effects of the many "exemplary practices" which were in use daily in the school.

Confident that I now have a sense of the "local context" at East as well as a grasp of relevant national patterns in systemic and language arts reform, I begin to construct the recommendations I will give to Alice and Barbara on Monday.

III. Creating *Exemplary Contexts* for Mandated Systemic Change

My thinking starts with the context East shares with hundreds of other urban schools struggling to change. These schools are widely perceived by the voters and elected officials who fund them to be not

just failing but incapable of reforming themselves. Examples abound: Chicago's schools are currently run by Mayor Richard Daley's budget director, a man with no background in either teaching or school administration; Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan has called his city's schools "a total failure"; in New York, Mayor Rudy Giuliani has been advocating a voucher system of the type that has already been adopted in Milwaukee.

Because these schools are perceived as failing, their instructional agenda is heavily influenced by ideas and structures from the outside: mandated curricula, high stakes tests, and systemic reforms embodied in "exemplary programs" bringing reform dollars.

To date there is little evidence that these curricular and systemic reforms have achieved widespread success (Anderson, 1998; Christensen, 1998; Elmore, 1996; Elmore and McLaughlin, 1988; Fullan, 1996; Fullan and Miles, 1992; Hoffman, 1998; Miller, 1996; Muncey and McQuillan, 1993; Tyack and Tobin, 1994). In the case of exemplary programs, much of the evidence for success has been gathered by the programs themselves and is open to question (Pogrow, 1998).

Analyses of existing reforms lead to two realizations. The first is that limited, short-term interventions are bound to fail because "the problems addressed by current state-driven reforms or change agent programs are not acute; they are chronic" (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 15). The second is that success ultimately depends not on the externally-generated exemplary program or curricular innovation, but on the internal context—the school itself. Well-designed reform programs try to account for this by devoting attention to the "fit" between program and school or the balance between fidelity to "exemplary" techniques and adaptation to local needs (Chenoweth, 1992). But this still leaves the emphasis on the change program, not on the school.

At the moment, policymakers, reformers and school systems typically proceed as if adoption of exemplary programs and development of strong local contexts are non-conflicting goals, complementary parts of an overall school improvement strategy. From what I have seen, this is a naïve assumption. The experience of urban teachers and principals across the country is often that of development *versus* adoption, not the development *through* adoption that is assumed to be the norm. From their point of view, systemic reform is often an "imaginary garden" filled with "real toads" like the following:

1. Top-down and outside-in reforms in curriculum and staff development from the 1960s to the 1990s achieved individual successes, but produced little evidence of widespread, lasting change, whether measured on their own terms (fidelity of adaptation) or the school's (improved performance by students and teachers). There are few reasons to believe the current wave of exemplary programs and systemic reforms will achieve a different fate, for few of these programs address the major stumbling block to such reform— they de-value teacher knowledge and expertise by starting from the assumption that the knowledge and commitment necessary for change reside chiefly *outside* the school, in the university, policy center, or private consulting group sponsoring the exemplary program.

…few (reform) programs address the major stumbling block to such reform— they de-value teacher knowledge and expertise by starting from the assumption that the knowledge and commitment necessary for change reside chiefly outside the school, in the university, policy center, or private consulting group sponsoring the exemplary program.

2. Momentum for reform often comes from disinterested advocates seeking only to improve education. But in an educational system like ours, based in state and local political structures, motives are mixed. Reform can be driven by powerful elected officials responding to the short-term election cycle rather than the long-term cycle we know is necessary for renewal; or by a beleaguered superintendent's need to *do something right now,* to respond to disastrous test scores; or by persuasive, high-profile academics seeking prestige or profits through national adoption of their reform plans; or by a principal's need to show the superintendent he is a "team player" by adopting a reform favored by

central office. Or all of these motives may operate at once to create a political, strategic, and educational maelstrom that takes its toll on classroom instruction as well as on teacher and principal morale.

It is important to recognize that devaluing teachers' potential for contributing to reform is not a problem particular to urban education or to the current wave of reform. In seeking to answer the question of why the organizational forms that govern instruction have persisted while challenges to them have been "mostly evanescent," Tyack and Tobin (1994) reviewed fifty years of historical evidence and drew this conclusion: "To bring about improvement at the heart of education— classroom instruction. . .—has proven to be the most difficult kind of reform, and it will result in the future more from internal changes created by the knowledge and expertise of teachers than from the decisions of external policymakers" (p. 135).

After considering these "real toads," the starting point for my recommendations to Alice and Barbara will be this: East's primary emphasis should be placed not on the outside element, the *exemplary program*, but on the internal task, making East an *exemplary context* for learning. This is a problematic recommendation from some perspectives, because it implies that the professionals who work in the school are to a large degree intelligent, competent, and caring enough to begin addressing their own problems, a proposition that, given the current state of urban schools, seems to many to be untrue on its face.

How does East go about becoming an exemplary context? The first step is to focus

on the long-term success of the school and the long-term needs of its teachers, students and parents, and then ask how mandated reforms can help the school get to where it needs to go. This is the opposite of what currently happens in many schools, where the school is felt to be adrift and directionless and outside mandates and change programs are seen as filling a vacuum of leadership and confidence.

Four areas, sustained over time, can provide common direction and respect for differences, enabling Barbara, Jackie, Francisco, Phyllis, and the rest of East's staff to move forward together to implement an effective school-wide language arts plan. These approaches can be undertaken singly or as complementary parts of an overall plan. They are compatible with both state curriculum initiatives and exemplary reform programs.

The *first* is regular discussion of a range of real work from East students. One formal way to start this process is to create a grade-wide writing sample, typically at a grade in which students are also taking a state or city-wide test tied to the new curriculum, and to conduct a modified holistic scoring session with the faculty using this sample. In this process, teachers rate and respond to anonymous, grade-wide samples of best, worst, and average student writing on a given topic, and then discus them and identify characteristics of low, middle, and high performing writers in that grade. In such a discussion, Barbara, Jackie, Francisco, and Phyllis would all be commenting on the same pieces of writing, and both the commonalities and differences in their approaches to language would quickly

become apparent. This, in turn, would provide grounds for further discussion as the year went on, discussion that could also be grounded in student artifacts from other grades and in areas besides writing. This is especially possible if teachers in the building already keep portfolios of such student artifacts, or agree to begin keeping them for this purpose. An important outcome of such discussions may be creation of a school-wide reading and writing philosophy that is simple, jointly created, and agreed on by *all* the faculty. The philosophy can then be posted in the principal's office, at the entrance to the school, and in every teacher's room, as well as translated into appropriate languages and sent home to parents with an explanatory letter.

The *second* is in-depth analysis, again on a regular basis and in a group, of the learning patterns of individual students using a simple but formal process which insures that this is more than just gossiping or complaining about students. One such process is the "descriptive review" developed by the Prospect School in Vermont, and now used by schools in other parts of the country; another is a reflective case study or case story, a technique now used regularly in educational leadership training (A good example and discussion of a descriptive review in an urban elementary school can be found in Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993; for descriptions of reflective case studies and "case stories" see Ackerman et. al., 1996; Thornber and Williams, 1996). Whatever process is used, it must insure confidentiality, be respectful of students, show students' strengths as well as weaknesses, and invite multiple perspectives on and interpretations of students'

behavior and learning styles. This is particularly true in the multi-racial, multi-lingual contexts of many urban schools.

The *third* is regular reflective writing by teachers, and sharing of that writing with colleagues. Writing and sharing starts group discussions on common ground, lets teachers reflect on their own processes as language learners, and leads naturally to further discussions about teaching language arts. It can also be combined with other methods mentioned: reviews of student work or looks at individual students can provide the ground for reflective writing which can then be shared and responded to, moving program planning along in a grounded way. Such writing can also take for its subject the process of using state curriculum frameworks, the impact of mandated high-stakes testing on students, teachers, and parents, or reflections on the implementation process of an exemplary program (see McEntee, 1998; Hole and McEntee, 1999).

The *fourth* is school-based teacher research, and discussion of data produced by such research, to check on progress of school-wide initiatives or promote inquiry approaches to teaching. Variations of this technique—teacher research, action research, and practitioner inquiry are three frequently used labels— have been growing rapidly in schools, and they can undergird long term change in schools like East, because they unlock both power and positive energy that can fuel connections across disciplines or teaching philosophies (see Check, 1997; Calhoun, 1994).

These four strategies—looking closely at student work, in-depth group analysis of

student learning issues using a formal process, regular reflective writing, and school-based research— are effective and doable, and in the real world are often found in various combinations adapted to what a school views as its greatest needs.

I know of examples across the NWP network and outside it, and I am sure there are many examples I know nothing of. Here, to demonstrate some ways these techniques work in the real world, I will mention only those I know best because I have participated in or observed them.

•In Boston, the school system's Center For Leadership Development will fund forty-six school-based inquiry groups this year and many of them, in response to a system-wide priority, are looking closely at student work. This is the fourth year of the inquiry group program, and Boston Writing Project (BWP) teacher consult-

ants have provided much of the teacher expertise on which the program is based. BWP member Steve Gordon has been a Lead Teacher with the program since its inception and in a recent Inquiry Group newsletter wrote of his belief in the program and the need to take it to a higher level:

I am convinced of the necessity of this work, its value to teachers, and the seriousness of teacher commitment. My big question is: what is the identity of the Inquiry Group Program as an institution in Boston's professional development plans? What is its place in building knowledge and methods that influence instruction and school culture? ... Most of our professional development involves "training" and workshops, which are considered essential methods for sharing "best practices" although they often do not

seem to result in enduring change. I feel a need to establish a permanent "bottom-up" methodology for professional development—to argue for inquiry groups as equally essential, a necessity rather than a luxury. (p.1)

• A Massachusetts professional development network, the Massachusetts Field Center for Teaching and Learning, has for the past four years sponsored a statewide Teachers Academy which supports school-based action research teams. Over a twelve-month period, these five-member teams identify, research, and address a school-wide change goal. Regular reflective writing by participating teachers is a formal and important element of the program. Evaluations show the program is successful both in creating change in individual teachers' beliefs and practices, and in creating school-wide change.

• In my own work with schools I have seen how a simple shift in the use of a standard reflective writing technique can open new areas of awareness for a whole school. Several years ago a BWP teacher-consultant asked me to work with her during the opening sessions of a year-long professional development series. The Boston elementary school we were working with had low test scores, high enrollment, and a student body that was highly diverse, including a majority of African-American students and bilingual programs in both Spanish and Haitian Creole. At the second after-school workshop, which included the whole faculty and the principal, we asked participants to do a piece of short, memory-based personal writing—a

standard technique both of us had used many times before. This time, we added a single sentence to the directions: "Please feel free to write in whatever language you feel most comfortable." Immediately, the dynamics in the room changed. When it came time to share aloud, we encouraged those who had not written in English to read what they had written just as they had written it, and then to provide an impromptu English translation. The discussion that followed was rich and animated, and opened up in an unprecedented way major issues of language status, "correctness," pedagogy, and philosophy that had been boiling just under the surface. Some of the bilingual teachers said they had never before felt free to express themselves as professionals in their first language, and that it was a liberating experience. Others, both bilingual and regular education teachers, wondered if we were sending the wrong message, devaluing the importance of English which was, after all, the key to school success for both bilingual and monolingual children. Some teachers pointed out that the situation of those African-American children who spoke non-standard English at home was in some ways similar to the situation of the Spanish and Haitian-speaking children. Among several of the Haitian teachers, there was conflict over whether their "real" first language was Haitian Creole, an emerging language, or the traditional French in which much Haitian schooling is conducted. At the end of the time period, few wanted to leave. It had become clear to all that the beliefs revealed in this

conversation were affecting teaching and learning in the school in an important, hitherto hidden way.

The read-aloud in three languages was a breakthrough moment for that workshop series; it acted like a lightning bolt suddenly illuminating the true tension and complexity inherent in literacy learning in the school. After that moment neither teachers nor workshop leaders pretended that better reading and writing could be achieved simply by applying an appropriate selection of "best practices." Something far deeper and more personal was at stake. By June, the school had made substantial progress in defining for itself its own shared philosophy of writing, based on those things the whole staff could agree on, and individual teachers and clusters of teachers had shared and learned new techniques, analyzed student work and their own teaching, and made significant change in their classroom approaches to literacy.

The philosophy statement, when viewed from the outside, contained little that was surprising —writing was a process, writing should be done regularly and in a variety of forms at all grade levels, there are many different "correct" techniques for teaching writing, parents should be regularly informed both of writing lessons and of why the lessons were designed as they were, improved literacy in the first language strengthened English language learning, all the school's students had the right to regular instruction in English fluency and usage—its importance was that it embodied a set of negotiations around differing and strongly-held beliefs that had started the teachers and principal on the road to school-wide change—to becoming not a

replication site of a national exemplar, but their own "exemplary context."

With these three examples in mind, I now feel ready to meet with Alice and Barbara, but I'm apprehensive. The recommendations I'm making are not easy to implement and may not be favored by the district superintendent because they take too long and don't achieve directly measurable student results. This puts Alice in a difficult position, and without Alice's support my recommendations will go nowhere. East is already suffering from fragmentation and overload: both principal and teachers are stretched for time by the extra meetings required for the mandated curriculum reforms and the exemplary program. On the other hand, my visits with Jackie, Phyllis, Francisco, and the regular education teachers have given Alice, Barbara, and me a way to talk about the dirty little secret of mandated whole school change—before you can make a school *change* you first have to make it *whole*. Wholeness comes from dealing, on the school's own terms, with internal fragmentation and internal goal-setting. Francisco, Phyllis, Jackie, and Barbara must have ways to talk to each other not just about what they do, but about why they do it. And all four must be able to talk as professionals to Alice, and she to them. The externally-generated reforms can be either an obstacle or an opportunity, depending on whether East can achieve a core wholeness and identity as a school that is larger and more central than the external change forces. If it can, then outside reforms may bring additional resources, opportunities for professional development, and links to external networks that can enrich East. But if mandated external solutions take the place of internal coherence, initiative, and identity, then the battle for reform is already lost. The core focus must not be on the *exemplary program*, but on how to make East an *exemplary context* for teaching and learning, in the long term and largely with the personnel already in place. I look forward to Monday's meeting with excitement, hope, and a little fear.

Conclusion

At this outset of this essay I argued that NWP sites are well-positioned to assist urban schools attempting reform, and that increased federal funding brings increased opportunity but also presents a dilemma: how can a project based on "teachers-teaching-teachers" make a place for itself in a reform movement that routinely treats urban teachers as part of the problem, not part of the solution?

I argued that we must shift the focus of collaboration from *exemplary programs* to the creation of *exemplary contexts*, the set of conditions that will allow a particular school with a unique history and faculty to integrate outside interventions into a process of sustainable success on its own terms.

To focus on exemplary contexts we must clarify our thinking about change. Rather than uncritically accepting the change process often promoted by national reform advocates, "scaling up" exemplars for reproduction across the country, we must advocate for "scaling down," which Joseph P. McDonald defines as "working on the real problems of redesign at the actual sites, where new beliefs must be adopted, new structures and cultures worked out, and new ways imagined…" (p. 245).

The locally-based NWP network is an ideal vehicle for helping urban schools build exemplary contexts, because it is already both scaled-down and relevant. McDonald specifically cites the NWP's success in curriculum reform, but reminds us that changing a school is "a much bigger and more ambiguous undertaking than the redesign of writing instruction." He recognizes that the Writing Project holds great promise because it uses an approach that "takes teachers' actual contexts seriously, that nonetheless introduces teachers to outside areas, that offers them an appealing new identity rooted in new competencies, and that manages not only to forgive but to encourage and support learning on the job" (p. 248).

The locally-based NWP network is an ideal vehicle for helping urban schools build exemplary contexts, because it is already both scaled-down and relevant.

What does this mean for Writing Project directors, co-directors, and teacher consultants? As a local site director who has also been involved in national initiatives, I am certain of three things about our collective work: because literacy lies at the heart of student achievement and extends to every subject area, Writing Projects reach whole schools. Because we promote teacher-conducted professional development and practitioner research, we develop leadership. Because we provide summer institute experiences that are often transforming, we understand change.

Now we must thoughtfully take the next step. We must work with each other across the NWP network as well as with practitioners like Alice, Barbara, Jackie, Francisco, and Phyllis to explore the connection between improved literacy instruction and an improved school. For some sites, this may involve taking a look at how inservice is provided, for others it may involve collaboration with reform groups.

There is much knowledge to share in our network. NWP's Project Outreach sites have developed processes to help sites look at their own work. The New York City and Philadelphia sites are deeply engaged in collaboration with reform groups through the Students at the Center Project. The Urban Sites Network and English Language Learner Network provide forums for new learning and for sharing what we have learned. Our challenge, particularly in urban areas, is to develop new forms of partnership with schools and other collaborators while maintaining the core of what we know and do as Writing Projects: that teacher knowledge and commitment lie at the heart of successful change, that individuals change systems as much as systems change individuals, and that writing and learning walk hand in hand.

References

Ackerman, R., Maslin-Ostrowski, P. and Christensen, C. (1996). Case stories: Telling tales about school. *Educational Leadership*, 53, 6, 21-23.

Anderson, G. L. (1998). Toward authentic participation: Deconstructing the discourses of participatory reforms in education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 35, 4, 571-603.

Applebee, A. (1984). *Contexts for learning to write: Studies of secondary school instruction.* Ablex Publishing: Norwood, NJ.

Batton, B. and Vereline, L. (1995). *Literacy practices in two neighborhood schools.* New York: Institute for Literacy Studies.

Beykont, Z. F. (1994). *Academic progress of a nondominant group: A longitudinal study of Puerto Ricans in New York City's late-exit bilingual programs.* Doctoral dissertation presented to the Graduate School of Education of Harvard University.

Carini, P. F. (1975). *Observation and description: An alternative methodology for the investigation of human phenomena.* Grand Forks, ND: University of North Dakota Press.

Calhoun, E. F. (1994). *How to use action research in the self-renewing school.* Alexandria, VA. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Check, J. (1997). Teacher research as powerful professional development. *The Harvard Education Letter, XIII*, 3, 6-8.

Chenoweth T. (1992). Emerging national models of schooling for at-risk students. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 1, 3, 255-269.

Cochran-Smith, M. and Lytle, S. (1993). *Inside/Outside: Teacher research and knowledge.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Collier, V. P. (1987). Age and rate of acquisition of second language for academic purposes. *TESOL Quarterly, 21*, 617-641.

Christensen, L. (1998). Reconstituting Jefferson. *Rethinking Schools, 13*, 1, 1-8.

Cummins, J. (1996). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society.* Ontario, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.

Cummins, J. (1981). Age on arrival and immigrant second language learning in Canada: A reassessment. *Applied Linguistics, 2*, 132-149.

Elmore, R. (1996). Getting to scale with good educational practice. *Harvard Educational Review, 66*, 1, 1-26

Elmore, R. and McLaughlin, M. (1988). *Steady work: Policy, practice, and the reform of American education.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

Fullan, M. (1996). Turning systemic thinking on its head. *Phi Delta Kappan, 77*, 6, 420-423.

Fullan. M. and Miles, M. (1992). Getting reform right: What works and what doesn't. *Phi Delta Kappan, 7*, 45-52.

Graves, D. (1984). The enemy is orthodoxy. In *A researcher learns to write: Selected articles and monographs.* Exeter, N. H.: Heinemann Educational Books.

Gordon, S. (1999, November). A lead teacher reflects…. In *Inquiring Together Teacher Inquiry Group Newsletter*, Boston Public School.

Hoffman, J. (1998). When bad things happen to good ideas in literacy education: Professional dilemmas, personal decisions, and political traps. *The Reading Teacher, 52*, 2, 102-111.

Hole, S. and McEntee, G. (1999). Reflection is at the heart of practice. *Educational Leadership, 56*, 8, 34-37.

McDonald, J. P. (1996). *Redesigning school: Lessons for the 21ˢᵗ century.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

McEntee, G. (1998). Diving with whales: five reasons for practitioners to write for publication. *The Quarterly of the National Writing Project, 20*, 4, 21-26.

McLaughlin, M. (1990). The Rand change agent study revisited: Macro perspectives and micro realities. *Educational Researcher, 19*, 9, 11-16.

Miller, E. (1996). Idealists and cynics: The micropolitics of systemic school reform. *The Harvard Education Letter, XII*, 4, 1-3.

Moore, M. (1951). Poetry. *Collected poems.* New York: The Macmillan Company.

Muncey, D. and McQuillan, P. (1993). Preliminary findings from a five-year study of the coalition of essential schools. *Phi Delta Kappan, 74*, 486-89.

Pogrow, S. (1998). What is an exemplary program, and why should anyone care? A reaction to Slavin and Klein. *Educational Researcher, 27*, 7, 22-28.

Ramirez, J. D. (1992). Executive summary. *Bilingual Research Journal, 16*, 1-62.

Thornber, J. and Williams, R. (Eds.). (1996). *Center X Quarterly, 8*, 2. UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.

Tyack, D. and Tobin, W. (1994) The 'grammar' of schooling: Why has it been so hard to change? *American Educational Research Journal 31*, 3, 453-479.

Joe Check directs the Boston Writing Project and the NWP Urban Sites Network.