Race and Class Challenges in Community Collaboration for Educational Change

Linwood H. Cousins, Roslyn A. Mickelson, Brian Williams, and Anne Velasco

Abstract

This article reports the challenges of race and social class in an action research project to facilitate educational change through community collaboration with African American parents, community organizations, and public schools. This project was undertaken in Charlotte, North Carolina to enhance the participation of African American parents in their children's math and science course selection and placement in middle and high school. Focusing on the communities of three high schools and their feeder middle schools, this article reports important lessons and outlines strategic implications for future work in the intersection among African American communities, public schools and education, and universities.

Key Words: African American parents, race, class, community collaboration, parent education, the change process, equity, involvement, partnerships

Introduction

From 2002 through 2005, a university-community partnership called the Math/Science Equity Program (MSEP) worked to increase African American parental involvement in high school math and science course selections in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. Based at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC), MSEP's goal was to reduce the race gaps in higher-level

math and science course enrollments, and by doing so, contribute to reducing the race gap in academic achievement and attainment. MSEP was designed as a series of community-based parent enrichment workshops that built upon parents' existing knowledge. It developed their additional knowledge, skills, strategies, and social networks and created capacities for future collaborations among parents. Our multi-ethnic team of researcher-activists collaborated with several community organizations including the public schools, libraries, parks and recreation department, several churches, and a number of non-profit organizations in the development and implementation of our program.

This article focuses on the inexorable challenges inherent in such university-community collaborations, particularly those that, like MSEP, are action research projects aimed at educational reform. The article describes the lessons learned about the organizational, political, and interpersonal challenges that are inherent in efforts such as MSEP. Specifically, by describing and analyzing racial and, to a lesser degree, social class identity issues and the politics we found at the heart of these collaborations, we hope to offer meaningful lessons and insights to others who undertake collaborative relationships among public schools, universities, and communities.

Why Focus on the Collaboration Process?

Research-driven collaborations and partnerships among universities, communities, and schools are necessary to advance knowledge and educational opportunities to all, but they are loaded with many unforeseen issues (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2007; Anyon & Fernandez, 2007; Harkavy, 2006). Interpersonal and political issues related to power dynamics, trust, and identity processes are just a few of the potential challenges such collaborations face (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2006). Contextual issues invariably make this so, which in our case include historical and contemporary educational inequalities related to race, social class, and the specifics of the political economy in Charlotte, North Carolina where our work occurred (Caine, 2007; Smith, 2004). Consequently, despite MSEP's considerable successes, we faced – and this article highlights – barriers, hurdles, and contradictions in building partnerships with organizations and citizens across the Charlotte community.

The challenges we describe in this article are process issues often absent from the research literature on university-community collaborations for parental involvement in education. Highlighting these challenges may lead to cynicism about this kind of work (Brodsky et al., 2004; Miller, 2004). However, we believe we can offer necessary lessons and key insights from examining our experiences with the analytic and theoretical tools we bring to this endeavor.

This article sheds light on the tensions among actors from diverse social class, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, and with varying stations of power and privilege in the Charlotte community, as their interests and motivations converge and diverge in the course of implementing a program that all participants believe had value. We begin with a description of the political economy of educational reform in Charlotte and the project's origins and characteristics. We follow with a discussion of theoretical and practice-based tenets that informed and guided our work. To that we add a discussion of how identity politics and processes challenged and oft-times created barriers to collaborative work. A set of vignettes about our parental recruitment efforts provides the core qualitative data for this article.[1] Drawing upon the qualitative data we collected during the implementation of our project, we illustrate the organizational, political, and interpersonal challenges our team faced. We conclude with a summary of lessons learned and their implications.

The Political Economy of Educational Reform in Charlotte, North Carolina

The Math/Science Equity Program was a direct outgrowth of the authors' prior research on the race gap in higher-level math and science courses among students in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS). From roughly 1975 to 2002 the CMS district operated under mandatory court orders to desegregate. The district was well known for its desegregation plan, which utilized mandatory busing and other strategies (*Swann v. Charlotte,* 1971). In 2002, the district became unified and no longer made any efforts to racially balance student assignments to schools. As a consequence, CMS is rapidly resegregating by race and social class (Mickelson, 2003; Mickelson & Southworth, 2005).

Until 2002, CMS was a majority White district. By December 2005,[2] the student population of CMS was 126,903, comprised of 43% African American, 37% White, 12% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 3% Native American and multiracial. CMS faces the academic and social challenges other urban school systems face when their schools have concentrations of poor, low-performing students. At the same time that the schools in the central core of the district were becoming low-performing and high-poverty segregated minority schools, the suburban schools in the north and south of the district were becoming overcrowded, segregated, White, high-performing schools.

When CMS was released from court orders to desegregate in 2002, many of the district's schools were racially balanced. With exceptions in the outlying suburbs and city core, about two-thirds of CMS's 140 schools had between

57% and 26% minority students. However, within all schools, even desegregated ones, students were resegregated by academic grouping and tracking (Mickelson, 2001; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007). 1997 surveys of CMS eighth graders and high school seniors revealed that disproportionate numbers of academically bright African American youths were enrolled in lower-level math and science courses. That is, White high school students were more likely to take Advanced Placement (AP) or gifted/honors courses than Blacks with similar prior achievement, family SES, college-oriented peer groups, and effort (Mickelson, 2001).

A subsequent qualitative study investigated this gap in higher-level course enrollment (Mickelson & Velasco, 2006; Mickelson, Velasco, Maples, & Greene, 2002). We conducted about 150 in-depth interviews with African American and White students and their parents and educators about how high school courses were selected. The interviews revealed that although all parents want the best for their children, parents' knowledge of school system processes, choices, and strategies used by school personnel frequently varied with parents' social class and history. We found that African American parents were at a clear disadvantage compared to middle-class White parents who were more knowledgeable about the way the school system operated, who key gatekeepers were, and when important decisions had to be made for optimizing students' academic trajectories. Middle-class White parents also had better networks, were more familiar with the math and science course sequences, and were more likely to use varied social and political strategies to influence school personnel on behalf of their children's educational careers than either middle-class Blacks or most working class families.

The Math/Science Equity Program's Workshops

The heart of our university-community collaboration was the Math/Science Equity Program's HOME Workshops. MSEP's approach centered on parental empowerment workshops where participants received information about the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School system's high school math and science course sequences and the sequence's relationship to postsecondary education and professional careers.

HOME workshops' content and processes were developed in conjunction with multiple community groups, educators, and parents. Throughout the design and implementation process, the researcher-activist team from UNCC worked intimately with a Community Advisory Council (CAC) on the goals, content, scope, curricula, recruitment, and evaluation components of the project.[3] For example, at the suggestion of our CAC we developed the acronym

HOME (Helping Ourselves Mold Education) as a user-friendly name for MSEP's parent workshops, the first phase of our project. We used the phrase "HOME workshops" in our interactions with community groups rather than the Math/Science Equity Program, because the latter seems too officious.

The MSEP team presented the complete set of HOME workshops in a six-week format.[4] Weekly sessions were roughly two and one-half hours in length. Workshops were considered "enrichment sessions" that built upon extant parental knowledge and skills. Parents who attended learned about their educational rights under the North Carolina constitution. They engaged in hands-on math and science activities and participated in role playing designed to equip them for effectively managing their children's educational careers. Community organizations such as the public libraries, parks and recreation department, several churches, and a number of non-profit organizations collaborated with MSEP by providing space, publicity, personnel, and expertise.

What began as child care and educational enrichment activities for participants' children became a parallel children's math and science program once the children started to request an opportunity to do the same kinds of "fun" hands-on math and science that their parents were doing. The children's program became so popular, a number of parents attended the enrichment sessions merely because their children wanted to attend the children's program!

Workshop sites varied in order to maximize convenience for parents. They included the UNC Charlotte campus, community recreation centers, public schools, public libraries, and local churches. All parent participants and their children shared a meal with the MSEP team during HOME workshops. We provided transportation on an as-needed basis. We established a website at www.msep.uncc.edu and developed a project newsletter, "Letters From HOME," that we mailed out every two months. Several parent graduates of the workshops worked in conjunction with MSEP staff to develop an autonomous parent organization to succeed the workshops as a source of ongoing leadership training, networking, and information.

MSEP was designed as a quasi-experiment. Therefore, we selected three high schools and their feeder middle schools to receive MSEP workshops. We then matched these treatment high schools with three others that served as our control sites. Only parents of students who attended our treatment schools were eligible to participate in workshops. We expected parents who attended workshops would become more involved in their children's course selection, more of their children would enroll in high level math and science courses, and the increases in high level math and science enrollments among African American students attending our treatment schools would exceed increases in enrollments in our control schools.

Community Collaboration and Identity Practice for MSEP Workshops

MSEP was built on a foundation of community organization and development theory and practice (Fisher, 1994; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; McKnight, 1995; Rivera & Erlich, 1995). We expanded upon this theoretical and experiential foundation with knowledge about working with non-white and low-income communities (Dryfoos, 1994; Epstein et al., 2007; Ewalt, Freeman, & Poole, 1998; Moses & Cobb, 2001). The broad literature of community collaboration and school-family-community partnerships (Cousins, Williams, & Battani, 1998; Epstein, 1995, 2001; Fisher; Fisher & Karger, 1997; Gutierrez, 1997; Moses & Cobb; National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, 2003; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2007) suggest the following action research approaches:

- consider a community's social, cultural, economic, and political characteristics in contemporary and historical contexts;
- include indigenous and official community stakeholders and leaders in development and implementation activities;
- employ an empowerment model that builds on the strengths of participants;
- resist "top down" approaches in which social service agency experts or academics unilaterally control and enforce programs for community residents; and,
- take into account the social and cultural norms and interests that motivate and give meaning to the lives of people in whose communities change is sought.

Community collaboration for community education involves overlapping spheres of influence among families, communities, and schools (Cain et al., 2007; Epstein, 1995, 2001; Epstein et al., 2007; ICR, 2004). Community organization or development – referred to as "collaboration" in this article – means

> efforts to mobilize people who are directly affected by a community condition…([especially] the unaffiliated, the unorganized, and the nonparticipating) into groups and organizations to enable them to take action on the social problems and issues that concern them (Rivera & Erlich, 1995, p. 3).

Consequently, among other practices, MSEP included community members in all aspects of its work. Community members were involved in defining and delivering what MSEP offered parents. Indeed, Fisher's ideal of "letting the community members decide" (1994; Anyon & Fernandez, 2007) was a constant leitmotif in our deliberations.

Non-White and Low-Income Communities

Communities of color – especially African American communities in the particular context of school reform and related educational efforts – have their own experiences with community collaboration (Dryfoos, 1994; Ewalt, Freeman, & Poole, 1998; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Gold, 2006; Hilliard, 1989; Moses & Cobb, 2001; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).[5] These and other experiences in education-related change in African American communities suggest that to meet the goals of projects such as MSEP, change efforts must transcend barriers that limit meaningful and effective parental and community participation.[6] Barriers include (a) planning that excludes a community's cultural beliefs, values, and perceptions about the source of problems and their solutions, and (b) exclusion from participation in the development and implementation of change efforts – an issue of power (Castelloe, Watson, & White, 2002; Fisher, 1994; Grossman & Gumz, 2003; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2006).

Consider Robert Moses' work on community numeracy in the rural South (Moses & Cobb, 2001). Moses' Algebra Project and school reform activities in the Mississippi Delta and elsewhere use some very basic community organizing notions he learned and practiced in the civil rights movement of the 1960s (pp. xiii, xiv, 19, 21): give voice to the voiceless; tap into community and family; help adults be there for children; make families central to the work of organizing; and organize in the context of the community in which one works and lives. We added to these principles several tenets from Epstein's research on working in the nexus of school-family-community partnerships (1995, 2001). We developed "school-like" networks where the importance of school, homework, and related activities are highlighted for students and parents, and we increased parents' capacities to be the main source of information about school (1995, pp. 702-705).

In sum, community collaboration for community education requires that researcher-activists utilize overlapping spheres of influence among families, communities, and schools (Epstein, 1995, 2001). We envisioned our role (in terms of community organizer and program developer) as a catalyst or facilitator of change, rather than as autonomous leaders or educators (Gutierrez, 1997). We believed it was necessary to address the community's social, cultural, economic, and political characteristics in contemporary and historical contexts. Collaboration must include indigenous and official community stakeholders and leaders in development and implementation activities. We sought to employ an empowerment model that built upon the strengths of participants. Finally, we attempted to center our efforts in community education, participation, and capacity building.

Identity and Interpersonal Relations in Community Collaboration

Seldom do university-community collaborations unfold as planned (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2006). To make sense of the particular, interpersonally driven barriers and conflicts we discuss in this article, we turned to the literature on identity processes (Harper et al., 2004). Community collaboration is interpersonal by default. It may comprise one-to-one conversations, individual presentations to small or large groups, or simple conversations between small groups of individuals. Such face-to-face interactions are laden with all sorts of emotions, attitudes, cultural values, and cognitive styles and strategies. Additional issues include one's status as community insider or outsider, how one enters into a working relationship in a community, the macro-level dynamics that influence one-on-one relationships, and the mutual influence community members and researchers exert on one another (Brodsky et al., 2004; Miller, 2004; Suarez-Balcazar et al.). We believe identity processes are part and parcel of interpersonal relations.

John Ogbu's description of *community forces* in Black schooling (Ogbu, 2003; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) assists in our analysis. We extend his contributions by theorizing the *identities* of individual actors in a collective with what we call *interpersonal processes*. Identities, accordingly, are based in individuals and the collective to which a person belongs. Individual identities are the "imaginings of self in worlds of action, as social products…[They] are psychohistorical formations that develop over a person's lifetime, populating intimate terrain and motivating social life" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 5; see also O'Connor, 2001).

Finally, individual and collective identities are "dialogic" in nature (Appiah, 1994; Taylor, 1994), produced in dialogue between people through various sorts of interactions. Indeed, individual identities are constructed in interaction with collective identities from a "tool kit of options made available by our society and culture" (Appiah, p. 155). Collective identities participate as "tool kits" by providing scripts and narratives individuals can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories. In the end, collective identities fit individual identities into a larger narrative – a narrative that tells the what, why, and how of a group's (race/ethnic) existence (Appiah, pp. 160–161).

Taken in the historical context of African American life and schooling in Charlotte, these identity processes set the stage, we believe, for the kind of interpersonal relations – elements of strain, contention, and solidarity – MSEP's researcher-activists experienced in community collaborations with parents and community activists involved in MSEP.

Project Design, Methods, and Data

Based on the empirical findings of racially correlated math and science course placements *and* race and socioeconomic status differences in parental knowledge about and involvement in the course selection process, we envisioned a project that would empower African American parents to be more successful in guiding and managing their children's academic careers in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. To accomplish these goals we developed the Math/Science Equity Program (MSEP), described earlier in this article.

The MSEP Team

Because race and class identity are central to this article's analysis, we describe the demographics of the relatively diverse MSEP team. The two principal investigators (PIs) were an African American male professor and a White female professor. The person with the most direct contact and authority over the HOME workshops was its director, an African American male with a Ph.D. in science education. As a young student, he was told by a counselor that he wasn't college material. Memory of his miseducation fueled the passion with which he led the workshops. In addition to the PIs and the workshop director, the project manager (a White woman) and a group of nine graduate and undergraduate research assistants made up the MSEP team. Student assistants included an Asian Indian, several African American and White students. The multiethnic MSEP team comprised an even mix of men and women and a diverse group of academic disciplines, including sociology, education, anthropology, and social work. The project leadership team (two PIs, a postdoctoral fellow, and a project manager) included two men and two women.

In addition to the UNCC personnel, MSEP also employed a number of community members as recruitment specialists, instructors during workshops, and members of the Community Advisory Council. As mentioned previously, MSEP also worked closely with community-based organizations including churches, schools, and public libraries.

Recruitment

We developed and implemented a formal process for recruiting parents. We held weekly training and marketing strategy sessions with MSEP team members, identified stakeholders that could help us recruit parents, and discussed strategies for collaborating with them. Recruitment strategies included: radio and TV public service announcements; speaking at churches and community organization meetings and with community development program officers; discussions with public housing authorities and parent advocates; meetings

and discussions with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' superintendent and related administrators, teachers, principals, coaches, students, and volunteers; distributing flyers in barbershops, beauty salons, and at grocery stores; and discussions with the Carolina Panthers Football Team and IBM representatives.

Several months into the project we hired two community outreach representatives to recruit parents for HOME workshops. Both individuals were parents who had successfully completed workshops. Ultimately, letters sent by school personnel on MSEP stationary proved to be the most successful strategy for recruitment. Counselors at treatment middle and high schools identified students in our target population – academically able Blacks who were not enrolled in the most challenging math and science classes – and sent their parents invitations to the next HOME workshop. If parents followed up on their invitations, they became the self-selected sample of participants in our project.

Research Design and Data

MSEP was funded for three years by the National Science Foundation and the Ford Foundation. We employed a mixed methods design. During the entire planning and implementation process we collected extensive qualitative data through field notes, observations, and interviews with participants.

The core quantitative data from the project came from the implementation of a "treatment" or intervention (in the form of HOME and Teen Summit workshops, although the data, lessons, and implications in this article are based on data from HOME workshops) using a quasi-experimental design. We selected a purposive sample of racially and ethnically diverse high schools to receive the treatment and matched them with high schools that would not receive the treatment. Parents of students in the treatment schools were recruited for MSEP workshops. Higher level math and science enrollments were to be compared in the three high schools where parents were eligible to attend workshops with enrollments in matched high schools where no parents attended workshops. During MSEP's first phase, our core activity was the HOME workshops.

We hypothesized that attending HOME workshops would have a positive effect on reducing the race gap in upper-level math and science courses. After two years of HOME workshops, we anticipated that the Black-White gap in higher-level math and science enrollment would narrow more sharply in our treatment communities' high schools than in our control communities.

HOME began six workshop series.[7] Three workshops series were successfully implemented. Three series did not have enough participants to make conducting them worthwhile in terms of the goals and resources of the project, and after one or two initial sessions, the workshops were cancelled.

This article presents and analyzes qualitative data collected from the initial phase of the project when we attempted to recruit parents to workshops and to develop authentic ties to members of the community. We collected qualitative and descriptive data (formative and summative) pertaining to the development of, recruitment for, and implementation of HOME workshops. Members of the research and workshop teams kept an ongoing field journal, took field notes on recruitment and outreach activities, and took ethnographic notes during workshops. These data were logged in a central database. Additionally, parent participants provided brief descriptive feedback about their workshop experiences through pre- and post-test surveys at each session. MSEP team members conducted follow-up interviews with parent graduates of HOME.

In the next section we present and analyze two vignettes that capture the workings of historical and contemporary forces that influenced our attempts at community collaboration. The vignettes convey the complicated nature of the interpersonal identity processes that emerged during the MSEP team's efforts to create a collaborative relationship with various community organizations and to recruit parents. The vignettes are at once fascinating, disturbing, and instructive regarding the possibilities, challenges, and contradictions of this kind of community-based action research for educational change.

Findings: MSEP Reaches Out to a Distrustful Community

Even with a reasonable conceptual foundation in place, and with many successes of other programs to guide and encourage us, doing the work of community collaboration for MSEP was fraught with challenges. Collaborative notions, such as "letting the people decide" (Fisher, 1994), are always easier in theory than practice. Indeed, before the people can decide, they must be at the table, so to speak. In bringing community stakeholders to the table to plan HOME workshops, the MSEP team experienced identity issues of power and trust. These initial experiences foreshadowed those that MSEP faced throughout the entire three-year process during which the six HOME workshops and four Teen Summits were implemented with varying degrees of success (for a detailed discussion of the full MSEP experience, see Mickelson, Cousins, Williams, & Velasco, in press).

The list of stakeholders and related actors/institutions we worked with over a 16-month period included members of both the private and public sectors, people from large organizations (the school system) as well as local grass roots organizations, Black churches, community grocery stores, and parents. Importantly, there were many instances of cooperation and convergence between stakeholders and MSEP team members in this collaborative work.

These collaborations taught MSEP a great deal about community attitudes and norms, and eventually our efforts increased MSEP's access to the target parents. Nonetheless, social and political strain and tension marked a significant proportion of the interpersonal interactions between MSEP team members and several community organizations and their representatives.

A key challenge arose from MSEP's base at UNCC – a predominantly White university that signifies to many African Americans a history of exclusion and exploitation.[8] The university affiliation also triggered anxieties about class differences among formally educated MSEP personnel and less educated community members (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). Perhaps the most critical challenge was rooted in the inclusion of White individuals in MSEP's leadership. Several community collaborators expressed tensions related to these issues. On the whole, individuals who led or were members of the organizations with which we worked – most/all of whom were African American – came from varied socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the personal interests, motivations, and identity processes of these individuals – influenced at least in part by their social class status and the historical and contemporary contexts of life in their communities, neighborhoods, and schools – appeared to conflict with MSEP's processes and administrative leadership.

We support these claims with vignettes from the field notes of two MSEP team graduate assistants assigned to community outreach. Their responsibilities were to recruit parents for the workshops and community stakeholders for participation in MSEP. The following vignettes cover the work of two African American, male graduate students.[9] The first of two vignettes – all taken from MSEP team members' journals of their interactions with community members – highlights tensions around race and social class identities as they played out in issues of community-school-university power, status, and trust. The racial tension in this vignette centers on the fact that the target communities are Black and some of the MSEP professional staff are White. The social class tensions reflect the hidden injuries suffered by those who do not have formal education and the power and access typically afforded to those who have education.

Vignette 1: Recruiting a School Amidst Racial Tensions and Distrust

Anthony Dotson participated in a meeting at Marshall Middle School. He was invited to attend in order to meet with the principal and the math coordinator. The invitation came from Mr. Taylor, an influential community member who served as a school truancy officer. Having had previous contact and conversations with Mr. Taylor, Dotson was guarded. He felt the need to protect the image of MSEP, because Mr. Taylor questioned UNCC's motive for engaging

in research activities with the African American community and, more specifically, with the West Boulevard Corridor (a moderate to low income and predominantly African American section of Charlotte).

Below are Dotson's notes from this meeting:

Dr. Terry Smith (Principal), Mr. Tom Jackson (Math Coordinator), Jerri Ward (Family Involvement Coordinator), Beverly Tims (Coordinator of Volunteers and Partnerships), and Mr. Taylor sat at the table with me on November 4, 2003 at 9 a.m. Everyone at the table was African American. There were multiple purposes for the meeting: (1) to develop a relationship with a middle school that will feed future students into the targeted high schools identified in the research proposal; (2) to propose collaboration with the middle school to identify parents that meet research proposal requirements; and (3) to invite Mr. Jackson to attend or become an instructor for future HOME workshops.

Mr. Taylor took the lead in having everyone introduce himself or herself. He then offered a brief introduction of the MSEP project from his understanding. I followed him with a more concise description of the project. I then identified community leaders, human service agencies, and churches that our project had reached out to and was currently working with to meet the goals of MSEP. Questions were frequently raised during my presentation regarding the following: the integrity of MSEP's intentions to "help" Black people; MSEP's similarity to CMS's AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program; a focus only on "students with the ability to achieve;" exclusion of elementary school students and parents; UNCC faculty being disconnected from the experiences of the African American communities participating in the project.

The above concerns are emblematic of traditional and emergent tensions in university-community relations. But within the meeting, tension seemed to also rest with the fact that a CMS official had spoken to Mr. Taylor about past hostile relations between school officials and one of the co-directors of MSEP, who is White. Although Dotson was forthright that he could only offer speculative insight into those issues, he chose instead to remind the group that the MSEP leaders had met with CMS's superintendent and had been granted support and permission to obtain technical support from the school system. This response seemed to calm fears and other apprehensions as the principal, Dr. Smith, began to make suggestions as to how her school administration and staff could assist with identifying potential parents to attend the community workshops.

Indeed, CMS's tendency to exercise tight control over the public comments of school officials seemed to be an effort to curb external criticism that the school system was still racist, insensitive to the interests of poor children of color, and its schools racially and socioeconomically unbalanced. Dotson's observations continue:

> Everyone in the meeting had come to an agreement that this project had the potential to be very beneficial to many families. However, some of them still seemed to have concerns. I began to feel that the question everyone wanted to ask, but was apprehensive about asking, was about the racial composition of the HOME team (several graduate assistants, researchers, and the co-director are White).[10] I spoke afterwards to some of the meeting participants, and my impressions were confirmed as I answered a series of questions: (1) Who will be speaking to the parents? (2) Who will be documenting or collecting the data? (3) How will this data benefit the university? (4) How will the project benefit the UNCC faculty?

These questions provided a snapshot of the interests of several African American professionals who believed they represented the interests of the African American community. They had concerns about social class issues among African Americans, between African Americans and non–African Americans, and about protecting the African American community by not supporting a project that could possibly harm and exploit African American people. Dotson also sensed that had the CMS superintendent – an African American male – not supported HOME, the tone and conversation would have been one in which the project would not be invited to collaborate with the middle school in question. Nonetheless, Dr. Smith asked that MSEP collaborate with a math program she had in place at the school. She spoke enthusiastically about the possibility of the MSEP team working with parents at the same time that their children were being provided math instruction. A small victory.

Throughout the meeting Dotson was unsure of who truly supported MSEP. He felt he had to prove both his commitment to the African American community and his sensitivity to the historical mistreatment of the community by mainstream White institutions and their representatives, especially researchers. To appease their concerns, he felt that he had to provide personal, first hand experiences through his identity as an African American. He told them about his interactions in the targeted communities and his attempts to develop a relationship with parents. He shared with them statements made by community leaders regarding community involvement in another UNCC research effort. He provided a timeline that detailed the steps he followed to establish a mutually respectful relationship between UNCC, CMS, the community,

and parents. Fortunately, this seemed to authenticate Dotson's presence at the table of community gatekeepers and comforted those individuals who raised concerns about previous problematic relationships between UNCC faculty members and CMS.

In sum, Anthony Dotson's experiences document the highly interpersonal and racially charged nature of community collaboration. They document the fragile nature of these relations and what was, in our case, a persistent racial strain in community-university collaborations and, consequently, in community- MSEP relations. However, it was through dialogue – *a dialogic context* – that Dotson and the others attempted to resolve the tension and build solidarity. In addition to Dotson's own personal agency as an African American and an insightful and skilled community worker, we believe that interpersonal proximity – in this case, person-to-person, face-to-face interactions – aided his perception of the need to address and establish the social and political legitimacy of MSEP and its HOME workshops.

Vignette 2: Establishing Program Legitimacy Despite Racial (and Class) Mistrust and Suspicion

In a slightly different vein, Sean Langley also experienced what he perceived to be racially tinged social and political strain regarding the legitimacy of MSEP and HOME workshops. Although he encountered similar responses to his recruitment efforts, Langley believed what he experienced resulted largely from the fact that MSEP and HOME workshops were co-led by a White professional and were selective regarding its target population and schools.

In one instance, Langley was accompanied by the White PI to a HOME recruitment meeting at an African American Baptist church located in the neighborhood of one of the target schools. The audience included approximately eight parents, twenty children between the ages of 5 and 17, and a panel of two teachers, one counselor, and one principal. The educators were members of the church. Sean Langley addressed the group while the White PI sat among parents in the audience.

Sean Langley began the session by first distributing HOME brochures to each parent. He told the audience about the workshop and how HOME is trying to close the race gap in education by pushing more African American kids into higher-level math and science courses. He explained how we were specifically targeting African American parents whose children attended HOME's three target high schools and the middle schools that feed these high schools. He soon discovered that none of the parents' children attended HOME's target schools.[11] Consequently, he asked these parents to discuss the workshops with parents whose children attended the target schools. Langley went on to explain

the workshop content, hands-on math and science activities, social support activities for children, and the like. He ended by asking if there were questions. This is Langley's record of the following interaction:

> Questions began with members of the panel and were directed to Dr. Mickelson, the project co-director. She was asked about the term "academically able" and the project's limited focus on three high schools and their feeder middle schools rather than elementary schools and other high schools [not included in the design but where *her* children attended].

During this interaction, Sean Langley observed, in the audience, what appeared to be discomfort, skepticism, and at times agitation based on the fact that a White researcher was working on Black issues in a Black community, and what appeared to be beliefs by some audience members that the White researcher was naïve about schooling and the tracking of Black students. Consider this example:

> One audience member, with a bit of agitation in her voice, asked Dr. Mickelson "Why aren't you focusing on elementary schools, because that's where the foundation is set for students! After Dr. Mickelson responded, an elementary school principal raised a similar point and said "…there are many African American students with high grades and end of grade test scores at my school."

The principal's tone was such that Dr. Mickelson responded by highlighting the fact that the other co-director's sons attend the school in question, in an effort to convey to the educator and the audience that the co-director is an African American professor at UNCC. None of this seemed to resonate with the panel or audience. Dr. Mickelson still stood out as a White researcher studying Black children and for all the history that conjures. Nevertheless, at the end of the meeting two women on the panel said they enjoyed the session. One said, "I loved the information you presented." Another small victory.

Anthony Dotson and Sean Langley had experiences similar to other research assistants on our community outreach team. Based on our collective experiences as educators, sociologists, social workers, and anthropologists, most of these issues were not new. However, they did, we believe, take the form we encountered due to the characteristics of our project in interaction with the particular historical and contemporary contexts of life in the Charlotte community (Douglas, 1995; Mickelson, 2001; Smith, 2004). Eventually, we obtained enough support and involvement from local organizations and CMS – our most effective source – to recruit parents for several workshops, although never in sufficient numbers to generate a critical mass of African American students in the higher level courses offered in the treatment site high schools.

In sum, the importance of these vignettes is their candid examination of the racial (and class, to a lesser extent) mistrust in these Charlotte communities. Whether that mistrust was a consequence of the recent desegregation trial, the class tensions between the working and middle class residents of the community and highly educated university representatives, contemporary racial politics, or other factors remains unclear. That these tensions affected HOME workshops' efficacy and scope is unambiguous.

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

"Community organizing…is shaped by a complex interaction between human agency and the wider social, political, and economic context" in which it takes place (Fisher & Shragge, 2000, p. 1). In a general sense, we have found this to be true. This quote in some ways prepared us to face the fact that many community stakeholders would be quite ambivalent, if not hostile, about MSEP despite the fact that purpose of the HOME workshops was consistent with community goals, their content was culturally sensitive, and the MSEP team was diverse. The community's ambivalence and hostility make sense given the brief history of MSEP in the Charlotte community and the social, economic, and political contexts that mark race relations in Charlotte.[12] There are some lessons and important implications in these experiences.

First, a key part of the complexity of community work is related to identity issues, the dialogic relations within them, and the historical and contemporary contexts that color the meaning of life (Appiah, 1994; Cousins, 2008; Fordham, 1996; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Taylor, 1994). We have learned that the community members with whom we interacted have had a collective experience as racial, social, and economic groups and as members of one or more organizations. Yet each of them has, like all of us, personal/individual motivations and interests. We cannot highlight one over the other – the collective over the personal/individual or vice versa. Common racial identity does not remove the sort of basic give-and-take of interpersonal exchanges, nor the barriers that get between people who want something from one another but do not know or trust one another. Identity is a psychohistorical formation (Holland et al., 1998); trust, familiarity, and reciprocity remain basic to it in human relations in community work and beyond. Consequently, if an organization is to achieve a successful collaborative partnership with a community, and if it has to counterbalance the ill effects generated by similar organizations in a community's past, it may have to spend time in a community to establish a collective memory of trust and commitment.

Specifically, Anthony Dotson stood face-to-face with individuals who questioned not only the project, but also Dotson's very authenticity as an African

American. Authenticity here means an unequivocal commitment to the Black community's causes, issues, and points of view. Sean Langley faced the prospect of having to justify the legitimacy of MSEP as unbiased because it has a White co-director and White research assistants and because workshops focused on "academically able" students, perceived as a coded way of talking about ability and intelligence – both very sensitive issues in African American communities. Both Dotson's and Langley's experiences occurred in an environment in which the representatives of communities and organizations sought to protect organizational and community interests. But they added to this their own individual interests based on their personal reference group (defined by race/ethnicity and social class) and their private motivations. This played out in differing degrees for Dotson and Langley when the African American community members and organizational leaders questioned the who, what, and why of the MSEP research and its researchers. Both Dotson and Langley faced situations in which a narrative about inequality and racial subjugation, driven by cultural models, influenced actions at multiple social and interpersonal levels (Appiah, 1994; Bruner, 1990; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Taylor, 1994).

Finally, notwithstanding the relationship complexities described above, it is especially noteworthy that much of the resistance and distrust regarding MSEP did not come from the African American parents to whom we reached out, but rather from some Whites in the CMS bureaucracy and African Americans who held leadership roles in CMS and in their communities (we discuss this at length in Mickelson, Cousins, Williams, & Velasco, in press). This yet again raises questions about personal motivations and the influence of class and race tensions in university-community collaborations. Some of the leaders in question are middle class educators. Some are community/neighborhood organization leaders who are neither college educated nor from middle class backgrounds. Others are political activists with a mix of backgrounds. Outsider-insider relations in general are always complex and must be accounted for in community collaborations (Brodsky et al., 2004; Miller, 2004). We knew to expect as much, but the extent to which racial politics have played a role across different social, economic, and political domains in the Charlotte community has been striking even to our seasoned sensibilities.[13]

The implications of the above lessons begin with the need to understand that perhaps our experiences with MSEP speak to the wisdom, if not the practical necessity, of embedding projects such as ours within existing community programs. Another side of the same coin would be to work with individuals who have the requisite community clout and sanctioning to move a program beyond the obstacles we encountered. Community programs and individuals that have community legitimacy, acceptance, and support have largely done

the bottom-up work we have been doing and have resolved many of the issues we faced. And although they are not ever out of the choppy waters of university-community (and school-family-community) collaboration, established and successful community programs are able to deliver some semblance of the project they originally envisioned in a way that is relatively inclusive of community interests.

Second, work such as ours must include parents and other collaborators in a review of the data as it is collected and in the identification of problems and solutions. We took it for granted that this would occur in MSEP because we had met often with our Community Advisory Council to discuss and review issues and strategies. Nevertheless, we now believe that we should have been more vigilant in having them share responsibility for the problems encountered and in developing solutions.

Third, there is an entirely different implication that we do not want to overlook, although we do not fully understand it at this moment and it is too early to measure. It is the role of consciousness-raising we believe our project may have inadvertently ignited among the parents, educators, and community leaders with whom we interacted over the course of MSEP's three-year history. Discussions about MSEP and HOME recruitment presentations to various individuals and groups throughout Charlotte, and the outcomes we have begun to analyze for those parents who completed workshops, may work to raise awareness of the educational issues we ultimately sought to address.

In conclusion, despite the challenges and difficulties we faced, the findings from the implementation of MSEP's HOME workshops include the fact that the overwhelming majority of parents who participated in our workshops expressed gratitude regarding the helpful things they learned. For example, on a consistent basis during and after our workshops, parents spoke positively about learning their legal rights, developing knowledge and strategies that help them participate successfully in the school system, learning strategies to navigate relationships with their children, building networks both to maintain their successes as parents and to spread them to neighbors and friends, and regarding the gratification of being "heard" (we discuss these outcomes at length in Mickelson, Cousins, Williams, & Velasco, in press).

On the one hand, the parents who participated in HOME workshops were pleased and wanted others to share the same positive experience.[14] On the other hand, getting people into the workshops through community collaboration was a daunting challenge. Ultimately, we learned that projects like the Math/Science Equity Program must become the property of one or more grassroots community organizations in large, race- and class-embattled communities. MSEP never was able to do this within the time constraints of our

funding period. We believe a key reason we were never able to meet this challenge relates to the racial and class tensions rooted in MSEP's association with a university and the high profile role of White researcher-activists associated with it.

Yet, rather than despairing at the challenges of these dynamics, we as collaborators must be prepared to embrace the complexity of individual and collective identity in university-community (and school-family-community) collaborations. The challenges they pose increase our knowledge and improve our lives. After all, as Moses and Cobb say, "That is what we do" (2001, p. xiv).

Endnotes

[1] We do not describe the complete project and its outcomes (see Mickelson, Cousins, Williams, & Velasco, in press, for these details). Instead we focus on our attempts at collaborative activities that occurred during an 18-month period in which we implemented the first phase of MSEP – our parental workshops.

[2] Our description of CMS focuses on the years 2002-2005 during which MSEP was implemented.

[3] Members of the CAC advised MSEP on the scope, design, and implementation of HOME workshops. The CAC consisted of parents, community activists, social workers, public school educators, business owners, and the like.

[4] MSEP's second phase was a program called Teen Summit, day-long seminars that offered a streamlined version of HOME's six workshops. MSEP's third and final phase was PEP (Parents Empowering Parents), a short-lived autonomous community group that was intended to carry on MSEP's work once the university-collaboration ended.

[5] As early as the 1840s, so called "African" grammar schools – discovered to be unhealthy and inadequate – were the focus of collaborative reform efforts among Boston's small Black population and White abolitionists (Formisano, 1991, p. 23). The NAACP helped African Americans in Boston fight for access and fairness in public education in the 1930s, more than a decade before the landmark *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision in 1954 (Formisano, p. 27).

[6] For additional discussions of community organizing and education in communities of color and related issues see Ball (1995), Castelloe, Watson, & White (2002), Cox (2001), Grossman & Gumz (2003), Gutierrez (1997), Hilliard (1989), O'Donnell, Michalak, & Ames (1998); and Perry & Delpit (1998).

[7] A HOME workshop series contains six weekly sessions that lasted 2.5 hours each. After the last unsuccessful workshop was cancelled, MSEP switched formats to one- and two-day long Teen Summits. Teen Summits presented abbreviated versions of the materials presented in the six HOME workshop sessions. MSEP offered four Teen Summits.

[8] We note this perception persists even though UNC-Charlotte is increasingly seen as a friendly place for African Americans: 25% of undergraduates are African Americans; this is a higher percentage than in any other historically White University of North Carolina campus.

[9] Although actual names are used for MSEP team members, pseudonyms are used for the names of schools, organizations, and citizens in this article.

[10] In fact, Dotson reported in a MSEP team meeting that several community representatives raised the possibility with him that the African American Co-PI and the African American workshop director were public relations fronts for the White PI who held the real reins of power.

[11]This instance highlights one of the recruitment complications MSEP encountered. Although a given church was part of a treatment school's community, the church's membership often came from throughout the county. This meant that some of the parents were qualified for HOME workshops while others were not. The fine points of experimental design were not well-received by parents who wanted to participate in HOME workshops but could not because of the schools their children attended. We address the ethical and practical dilemmas of adhering to our quasi-experimental design in a forthcoming manuscript (Mickelson, Cousins, Williams, & Velasco, in press).

[12]Indeed, a second luncheon sponsored by MSEP with community leaders confirmed that MSEP had generated status and respect by merely surviving for two years.

[13]See Mickelson, Cousins, Williams, & Velasco (in press) for a discussion of the extent to which MSEP overcame these obstacles and difficulties.

[14]Earlier we summarize our data collection process, which included pre- and post-tests at each session to document parents' perception of their experiences with MSEP/HOME workshops.

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Linwood H. Cousins, associate professor of social work at Longwood University, is a social worker and anthropologist who studies culture, race, and social class among African Americans and in the context of African American participation education and other mainstream institutions. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Linwood H. Cousins, Department of Social Work & Communication Sciences Disorders, Longwood University, 201 High Street, Farmville, VA, 23901; or cousinslh@longwood.edu

Roslyn Arlin Mickelson is professor of sociology and adjunct professor of public policy, urban education, information technology, and women's studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She has published widely on minority achievement, the political economy of education, and the effects of school and classroom composition on educational outcomes.

Brian Williams is an assistant professor of science education at Georgia State University in Atlanta. His scholarly pursuits focus on the intersection of science education, urban education, and multicultural education. Specifically, he is interested in the ways in which issues related to race, ethnicity, culture, and class influence teaching and learning in science classrooms. Most recently, Dr. Williams coordinated the Math/Science Equity Program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. The program examined the link between parental involvement and the tracking of African American students in science. In addition to his research, Dr. Williams has over 14 years of experience working with teachers and students in science education. He has taught science methods and content courses to K-12 teachers in the United States and Africa.

Anne E. Velasco, MSEP's project manager, is currently coordinating a women's health outreach program in Union County, North Carolina. Her research interests include gender, race, and education.