

THE SAME, YET DIFFERENT: BUILDING ADVOCACY NETWORKS IN RURAL AND URBAN COMMUNITIES

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Family support for schooling has always been recognized as important in American public education, although there have been many interpretations of the term *Asupport*. More recently, *Ainvolvement* has replaced *Asupport* in education literature and most recently, the term *Apartnership* has become popular. The transitions invite the supposition that families have increasing influence over their children's education. This paper explores the nature of family-school relationships and families' educational influence as we have perceived them in parent networks formed to support girls' participation in science, mathematics and technology. The setting for our study is two West Virginia counties, one urban and one rural, both containing significant African American population.

In the summer of 1995 the Appalachia Educational Laboratory was awarded National Science Foundation funding for a three-year research and development project, *Rural and Urban Images: Voices of Girls in Science, Mathematics and Technology*. We are at the midpoint in this project, which is designed to accomplish three goals:

- C to have an impact on the infrastructure of science, mathematics and technology (SMT) curriculum design by providing examples of materials and methods indigenous to rural environments and useful in SMT education;
- C to create advocates for the inclusion of girls in SMT education among guardians, teachers, school administrators, policymakers, and community leaders by making them sensitive to issues and barriers girls face in SMT education; and
- C to add to the knowledge base about rural and urban SMT education with respect to

ethnicity and culture.

Voices addresses a gap in the present knowledge base about the effectiveness of community support systems in increasing girls' persistence in SMT, and the contrasts in effects of interventions among girls who live in communities that are similar in ethnic mix and socioeconomic status, but differ in that one is urban and the other is rural. Project elements change from year to year as the girls mature and their needs change, but two elements remain constant throughout the three years: the girls participate in monthly workshops; and they attend regular advocate meetings with one or more family members. The focus of this paper is the advocate network of family and community members we have attempted to build in the urban and the rural settings. See the Appendix for more information about the *Voices* program.

We chose for our participant pool, sixth grade girls from schools in counties with significant African American populations. The population of the rural county is about 32,000. Thirteen percent of its residents are African American. Student populations in most of the five rural schools involved with the project range between 20% and 50% African-American. By means of a stratified random drawing, we chose the thirty-four girls we invited to participate to reflect the proportions of African-American and European-American students in the schools.

This is an isolated county whose economy had been based on coal mining. Although coal continues to be mined in the county, automation has drastically reduced the available mining jobs. The county has lost 30% of its population during the past ten

years and currently suffers 21% unemployment, the highest rate in the state. Median family income is \$15,756 with 50.3% of its children living in poverty. The percentages of students in the participating schools who qualify for free or reduced price lunches range from a low of 60% to a high of 84%.

For our urban population we chose sixth grade girls from three elementary schools in an ethnically diverse urban county with a population of more than 200,000. The urban county's unemployment rate is 7.7 percent and median family income is \$30,030. County wide, 22% of children live in poverty. Minorities comprise 7.5 percent of the population. African American students make up between 44% and 50% of the populations of the three elementary schools chosen for the program. All of the program's participants now attend the same junior high school, whose population is 24% African American. Students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch in the elementary schools ranged from 59% to 94%. The junior high school reports about 45% of its students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch.

The research that informed our plans as we began our work with the girls and their families in August 1995 told us that both African American and European-American girls' self esteem is influenced more by their families and teachers, than by their peers (Flansburg, 1993), and that parent involvement has a significant impact on students' school performance at all SES levels (Epstein, 1992). We also understood from research that rural communities are less likely than urban communities to value education (Broomhall, 1992, DeYoung, 1993); but that rural teachers are more likely than urban

teachers to be linked to their schools' communities through kinship and history. (Lutz, F., Lutz, S., Tweeddale, 1992). While there is no consensus, some research indicates that rural parents more likely than urban parents to be involved in their schools (Sun, Hobbs and Elder, 1994). Some of our expectations about the rural schools were reinforced in an orientation session for the school coordinators. Coordinators from two of the schools told us that many of their students' parents were very young and didn't think education was important. They spoke of students in terms of their families - 'The Johnsons,' 'The Smith family,' and their knowledge extended beyond the immediate family to students' grandparents and cousins. However, only one of the three coordinators indicated that parents were active in her school.

While our assumptions about the urban setting were informed by research (Garlington, 1991; Davies, 1989), we relied also on personal experience. One of the project staff is a long time resident of the urban county, another had directed a student and parent advocacy program in another city, and a third had worked with the particular neighborhoods of the target schools. AEL offices lie within three miles of the most distant urban school. In short, we felt we could anticipate some of the special problems of urban parents: the demands on time and stress level of parents who work or who must manage on public welfare, who are likely to be single heads of households, live in high crime neighborhoods and see little reason to invest in public institutions.

We believed and research affirmed that if girls were to practice and persist in behaviors that might rub against the grain of roles their communities and peers believed

appropriate, they would need the support and encouragement of adults. Flansburg, 1991, Adenika-Morrow, 1996). Our program invites the girls to pose questions, assert solutions, develop technological expertise and present themselves in their schools and communities as knowledgeable in fields more typically associated with male - particularly middle class white male - competence. We felt some - particularly rural, European American girls - would need to resist expectations that they should be Anice® and submissive, and others - particularly urban, African Americans - girls would need to resist expectations that they should reject academic challenge. (Ogbu, J. 1990; Fordham, S. 1993 cited by Powell, J. 1994). We were less sure, and research has less to say about, community and peer expectations of rural African American and urban European American girls.

We designed the advocate networks so that the girls could experience the support and validation we believed they would need if they were to succeed in SMT pursuits. The advocate network structure and activities were the same in both locales. The responses were not.

In both locales each girl was asked to identify one person from her family who would serve as her advocate and commit to attending advocate meetings with her or his *Voices* girl. We assigned advocates to girls who named no family member. Our first meeting was a kick-off session to introduce the program to the girls and their families. In addition to that session, we held two advocate meetings in the first year. In the second year the advocates and girls meet bi-monthly. There have been three advocate meetings

so far this year. At each meeting a meal is served, child care is available and, in the rural county, transportation is provided. Initially, we provided school bus transportation in both counties, but in the second year have found that the school's proximity to the girls' homes in the urban site made providing transportation unnecessary.

Each advocate meeting includes activities to engage each *Voices* girl with her advocate, and engage the advocates with one another. We bring to each meeting information about program activities and about topics such as how to support girls' academic persistence, particularly in science, mathematics and technology, the barriers facing girls in these fields, parents' rights to advocate for their children's educational welfare in the schools, SMT careers, college entrance requirements, and financial aid. At each meeting we invite discussion among the families about issues of concern.

In the first program year, teachers in the six schools served as program coordinators. In addition to handling organizational details and maintaining a program presence in their schools, the coordinators were expected to keep in contact with the girls and with their families. In the second year, responsibility for maintaining family contact has been given to community coordinators who are long time residents in the communities they serve, but who are not teachers. In the urban setting, we held the first advocate meeting in a community center and the last meeting of the first year at AEL. All other meetings in both counties have been in the schools.

Although the processes used to prepare for, disseminate information about and

conduct the advocate meetings have been essentially the same in both urban and rural locales, and although those processes have been informed by the experiences of other, primarily urban, parent involvement programs, rural and urban responses to the advocate network have diverged dramatically.

In the rural setting advocate meetings were well attended from the beginning. Forty-three parents and girls came to the first meeting. Commonly about 75% of the thirty-four *Voices* girls attend and relatively few (five or six) come without a family member. However, initially the advocates separated themselves by community. One of the schools serves the county seat. It was clear in the first advocate meeting that parents from this school expected to be involved in their children's educations and were accustomed to expressing their opinions. The traditional relationship between school and family in the other schools appeared to be one of quiet passivity. Lack of parent involvement in the schools seemed to be interpreted as evidence of trust. One of the school coordinators, an African American highly respected in the school and community, offered as evidence of her good relationship with parents that she had never held a parent conference. The school where she teaches recently disbanded its P.T.O due to a lack of participation. In the early advocate meetings, family members from these two schools tended to let those from the Atown@ school take the lead in meeting activities and discussions.

Since that first meeting in November 1995, we have witnessed a gradual shift in the dynamics of the advocate meetings. They have become important to the girls.

Occasionally some parent *Voices* amused exasperation over having tried - and failed - to get permission from their daughter to skip a meeting. Over time the original definition of an advocate has blurred, so that if the Aofficial@ advocate cannot attend, another family member or friend comes instead. It is not uncommon for several members of a family to attend meetings. There is now more interaction among the families across community boundaries and more people are speaking up. Attendance grows from meeting to meeting. At the last advocate meeting, seventy-seven people - not counting young children - were present.

A shift also appears to be occurring from one advocate supporting one girl, or even families from one school supporting that school's girls, to the advocate network supporting the *Voices* girls. Parents are beginning to comment on changes they are seeing in girls other than their own daughters and on the value of the program for girls other than those from their own school. Project staff feel the advocates are truly becoming partners.

In spite of the sense among program staff that we were more knowledgeable about and thus better equipped to grow an advocate network in the urban setting, the experience has been far more problematic. Things began well with fifty-three people attending the first meeting held at a community center. People were vocal in their interest in and support for the program. If there was any sense of separation among the three school communities, it was not evident in the meeting. Several parents lingered after the meeting to discuss the program and offer their support. Surprisingly, of the twenty-nine girls attending, seven came without adult family members and formed a group that

appeared content to be unaccompanied. Most of this group had identified family members who were to act as their advocates. We had surmised, incorrectly, that those whose advocates did not attend would be unlikely to come themselves.

The experience of that meeting led us to an unrealistic optimism about the future of the urban advocate network. Shortly after the first meeting, poor health forced the staff member most familiar with the girls= neighborhoods to withdraw from sustained project involvement leaving the school coordinators the primary communication channel. The second meeting held in January at one of the three schools, drew eleven fewer girls and thirteen fewer advocates. Yet the same group of unaccompanied girls came. Wondering whether holding the meeting in a school might have had a dampening effect on attendance, we held the last advocate meeting of the year at the AEL offices. Even fewer girls and advocates attended. And yet again, a number of the girls attended without their advocates. We subsequently learned that these girls had chosen not to give the meeting notices to their families, regarding the meetings as a girls= night out.

In the second year of the program, the girls all attend the same junior high school. Seventeen adults and nineteen girls attended the first meeting of the year, held on a week day evening. For budgetary reasons, the two following meetings have been held on Saturdays in conjunction with the *Voices* workshops. The girls come to the workshops one Saturday morning a month. In alternate months lunch is served and the advocate network meets in the afternoon. Again, attendance in the urban site has declined from the first meeting despite the efforts of two community coordinators who contact families

regularly by phone and in person and despite assurances from family members that they plan to attend. In short, similar efforts in the two sites have produced very different results. Why is this so, and how should we respond to this difference? If we were certain of the answers we would have no need to ask the questions, but we have some educated guesses.

Our experience has been a lesson in the distinction between equal treatment and equity. At the beginning of the program and again this year, each girl was interviewed about her attitudes toward science, mathematics and technology, her aspirations, her sense of self, and her role models. The importance of family was a consistent theme in all interviews. It echoed across locales, communities and cultures. But families live in particular places and people respond to and interpret events according to the circumstances of the place and the norms and values of the cultures.

In the rural site, *Voices* is a high profile program. Other than church and school activities, little competes with workshops and meetings. The program brings resources to resource poor schools, opportunities to girls who would not otherwise have them, and positive attention to communities accustomed to seeing themselves depicted negatively by media. When a local t.v. station aired tape from a *Voices* event, we were told it was the first time the station had ever reported anything positive about the county. In addition, a number of *Voices* girls are from families who are both respected and well-liked in their communities. Their support and enthusiasm has raised the importance of the program in the eyes of their communities. The project has also received active

support from the school district. We drew the name of the daughter of a district administrator as one of the girls to be in the program. That administrator has served as our informal contact and supporter within the district's central office.

Finally, in the rural site not only is family important, it is prevalent. While single parent households are probably as common as in the urban site, the girls rural girls frequently refer to activities involving grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. In second year interviews, many girls mentioned particularly liking the advocate meetings because they liked being with their families. The community coordinator said family members appreciated knowing that if a parent was unable to attend a meeting, someone else could go instead. Family ties also reach beyond the schoolhouse walls. Most school faculty grew up in the area, are at least distantly related to many of their students, and know the families of most. Informal conversation between the girls and the coordinators includes exchanges of information about births, deaths and community events. Word about local events spreads quickly among and across families and communities and between home and school. Even though parents in the lower SES schools appear to have no tradition of school involvement, there are social connections between home and school that appear not to be significantly affected by ethnicity.

Contrary to some researchers, we have found that many of these parents value education highly. When in the January 1995, meeting we discussed the amount of mathematics commonly required for college entrance, parents expressed concern about the lack of pre-algebra in the county's middle schools. At first they asked project staff to

approach district administration to request its addition to the middle school curriculum. One parent said, "They will listen to you." But when we encouraged them to take action, they were willing to take their request to the school board, resulting in the addition last fall of pre-algebra at the eighth grade level in all schools. This successful effort was led by a town school parent, but included parents from the other two schools. Their success has contributed to the value of the advocate meetings.

We have also found, rather than resistance, active support for girls' participation in science, mathematics and technology. We wonder whether the community's experience with high unemployment and the amount of media attention given to education issues in recent years has changed people's perception of the value of education for both boys and girls. We also wonder whether the low regard for education school coordinators perceived in many parents has actually been parents' compliance with a tradition of low involvement in schools.

In the urban site, the *Voices* has not had the high profile it has enjoyed in the rural site. The superintendent designated the district science curriculum coordinator as program liaison, with the program contributing a quarter of his salary in the first year. However, it was quickly clear that *Voices* was one of many obligations in a heavy workload, and not one with a high priority. He has frequently been difficult to reach with requests, and attends project events only when necessary. Similarly, the program entered schools that has hosted many programs over the years with, in the opinion of a number of teachers, little or no impact on students. Midway through the first year, one

school coordinator told us she had no hope for the girls from her school who were in project. While in the rural county there was competition for the paid positions of school and community coordinators, in the urban county in the first year principals identified coordinators. In the second year we were forced to search for a school coordinator without the principals' help and received a series of refusals. Although *Voices* has received attention from radio, television and print media, the same attention is given regularly to a plethora of programs in the county, so that such attention is quickly forgotten.

Neither did we see in the urban schools the social connections between school and home that were evident in the rural site. In the first year, only one of the three coordinators lived in her school's community and knew students outside her role as teacher. As we talked with school personnel over the course of the first year, the picture of the school-community relationship that emerged was an adversarial one. Teachers described themselves as trying - and failing - to counter the negative influences of their students' communities, and families.

When the girls moved to the junior high school, the apparent indifference that had met us in the elementary schools deepened. About fifty percent of the girls currently in *Voices* are African-American. Someone knowledgeable about the school told us that it would be difficult to gain teacher support for the program if teachers perceived it to be primarily for African-American girls. Another expressed disappointment that a program he had expected to welcome had turned out to be for the wrong students, i.e. those not enrolled

exclusively in honors classes. A third explained teachers' disinterest in the program by saying that they were generally exhausted and didn't want personal relationships with their students.

If we could not rely on the program's prestige in the urban county, or on active school support to help build the advocate network, what about our efforts to tap into family interest in and support for children's academic success? Certainly, both first and second year interviews revealed the importance of family in the lives of all the girls, regardless of family income, ethnicity or locale. And most families do care. One girl whose parents have never attended an advocate meeting told her interviewer that once she had brought home a *A* and her Mom told her she would have to study more. And her Dad has told her, *All I want from you is good grades, He doesn't want me to be a failure or drop out of school, get pregnant.*

However, in the urban setting there are more demands on parents' time and extended family members are less available. One community coordinator with a long experience working with the community's young people through church activities observed that the many programs for young people offered by schools and churches may leave parents the sense that their involvement outside the home in their children's education isn't critical. If a child needs help with homework, a community tutoring program is provided; if children are fighting, a peer mediation program is implemented; if teen pregnancy becomes a problem, a sex education program is developed. She wonders

whether parents may not feel their responsibility has been met when they allow their children to participate in these programs.

If parents do, in fact, feel their involvement is not critical to their children's academic success, the feeling is likely to be exacerbated by the fact that their daughters are beginning the adolescent's push for greater autonomy. This developmental stage has more leeway for expression in urban site. A number of the urban *Voices* girls have a great deal of the 'unsponsored independence' that Reginald Clark (1983) found to be linked - more than family income, education or family structure - with school failure. Possibly in the adolescent's contradictory message, 'come close/go away' urban parents are more likely to hear and accede to 'go away.' One *Voices* girl whose mother has tried to set limits on how she spends her time has battled mightily to have the level of independence she sees her peers enjoying. Sadly, we have lost many - but not all - of those urban girls who appear to have the kind of 'unsponsored independence' that Reginald Clark describes as the factor more than parents' education, income level, or family structure that is linked with school failure. (Cited in Rioux, J. & Berla, N., 1993). In the rural site we have lost few for any reason, and only two have left because of a loss of interest.

We based our plans for an advocate network in both sites on the literature about parent involvement (Curran, Garlington, Davies, Rioux and Berla) optimistic about our ability to connect with parents. We found that the same plans received different responses from urban and rural families. What remains the same in both sites is that family support is critically important to these girls, and that their families care about

them. What differs are the multiple forces that affect family responses.

Those forces have worked in our favor in the rural locale and against us in the urban locale. To connect with families and invite their active involvement, we will need to shape the structure and activities of the advocate network to fit the unique circumstances of these girls=families. Since the girls=current school is not a comfortable places for families, we plan to hold meetings away from the school. Since parents may not understand the importance of their support, we plan to demonstrate how highly we value them in the planning and conduct of the meetings; since informal communication networks among families and neighborhoods are more fragmented, we plan to improve our ability to identify and use them to raise the project=s profile in its communities. Since girls appear to push harder for autonomy in the urban site, we plan to show parents how strong an impact the active interest of family members has had on the girls=persistence in *Voices*. We hope to achieve a partnership with the families of the urban students, as we have with the rural families. The path to achieve it will be different, the form it takes may be different, but the connections formed among people who value one another and have a common interest in the success of particular children we hope will be the same.

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APPENDIX

**RURAL AND URBAN IMAGES:
VOICES OF GIRLS IN SCIENCE, MATHEMATICS, AND TECHNOLOGY**

INTRODUCTION

Considerable research and program development on females in science, mathematics, and technology (SMT) has been devoted to interventions in suburban and urban environments; girls from rural environments are silent voices waiting to enter the dialogue. What engages rural girls in a pursuit of SMT education: Would the same interventions be effective in an urban environment? While the culture of science and science teaching is well recognized as a critical factor influencing participation, few programs have been designed to increase participation by addressing cultural aspects. This program, however, will reflect the environments in which it is implemented, and will be unique in addressing three major gaps in the present knowledge base:

- C the effectiveness of support systems in increasing girls= persistence in SMT;
- C the contrasts in effects of interventions in an urban and rural setting; and
- C the effectiveness of materials reflecting rural environments in teaching SMT content.

This program is experimental. It jaxtapes two environmentsCone urban, the other ruralCin an intervention designed to recruit and retain middle school girls in SMT. Together, the two sites provide fertile ground for examining the effect of Aplace@ on girls= lives and their relationships with SMT.

The program has three goals: (1) to have an impact on the infrastructure of SMT curriculum design by providing examples of materials and

methods of indigenous to rural environments and useful in SMT education; (2) to create advocates for the inclusion of girls in SMT education; and (3) to add to the knowledge base about rural and urban SMT education with respect to ethnicity and culture.

To reach the goals, we have four objectives: (1) to develop and test a strategy for constructing a social network made up of community members, family, and peers who advocate for and support girls' involvement in SMT; (2) to design materials and strategies that recruit and retain girls in SMT; (3) to conduct an ethnographic study that examines how girls, guardians, and teachers perceive the role of girls in SMT; and (4) to produce one or more documentaries to demonstrate (a) the social contexts in which rural and urban girls interact with SMT education, (b) barriers to their full participation, and (c) changes over time when systems exist to support and validate their worth and competency in SMT.

An examination of the intersection of girls and culture is critical to understanding the participation of girls in SMT. To effectively communicate these dynamics, we must give vision and voices to the girls in the project. Although the project will be implemented in only two sites, the resulting documentary, ethnographic study, and materials will greatly magnify its impact. As we examine the support mechanisms that must be in place and the types of materials and strategies that engage these communities, we will increase our understanding of how to systematically acculturate girls into SMT.

Program Content

Year 1

Focus of Monthly Saturday Session

SeptemberC Kickoff-collaborative learning exercises/team building/explain program.
Mid-OctoberC Challenger orientation.
NovemberC Challenger visit.
DecemberC Teaching fractions through crafts.
JanuaryC Chemistry of folklore remedies.
FebruaryC Designing quilt patterns on computer.
MarchC Analyzing the Southern diet.
AprilC Chemistry of food preservation.
MayC Preparing for the exhibit.
JuneC Exhibit.

Additional Activities

Orientation with parents, advocates, coordinator, invited community members and teachers. Meeting will include a hands-on science activity that teams girls, guardians, and advocates to perform an experiment.

Fall meeting: Telling stories about girls' strengths and interests. Value of parents' information to teachers will be highlighted. Hands-on groups activity.

Winter meeting: Raising awareness of gender issue in SMT as they affect learning and course selection. Hands-on activity.

Spring meeting: Role playing to practice acting as a partner in school conference. Hands-on activity. Year-end meeting: Exhibition

Key Players

6th grade girls
Guardians/advocates
Coordinators
Workshop presenters

Year 2

Focus of Monthly Saturday Session

Kick-off (hands-on activity)
Fall meeting: Parents/advocates
Spring meeting: Awareness of careers in SMT and course requirements to prepare for them. Presentations by WVU's Health Science and Technology Academy. (11th graders in Kanawha and McDowell Counties.) Hands-on activity.
Year-end meeting: Exhibition

Additional Activities

SeptemberC Overnight at Bluefield, WV Science Center.

OctoberCExpanding Your Horizons Conference.
NovemberCBuild Robots.
DecemberCRobots continued.
JanuaryCCreating school web pages.
FebruaryCCreating school web pages, continued.
MarchCMaking sense of statistics related to Community Health Investigation.
AprilCLifestyle survey.
MayCExhibition Preparation
JuneCExhibition.

Key Players

7th grade girls
Guardians/advocates
Science, mathematics, and engineering mentors
Coordinators
Women scientist presenters

Year 3

Focus of Monthly Saturday Session

Kick-off: Hands-on activities for parents.
Fall meeting: Problems and promises--How puberty silences girls. Parents write (or tape) letters to their daughters: My dream for you is...
Spring meeting: Making connections--Letters written by mentors about girls' strengths and achievements are shared with parents.
Exhibition

Additional Activities

In the third year, the girls and mentors will design, carry-out, and present projects involving science, mathematics, and technology.

Key Players

8th grade girls
Guardians/advocates
Coordinators
Elementary students
Mentors