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"Now Everybody Want to Dance"

Making Change in an Urban Charter[1]

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"One knows the world by seeking to change it"
(Sartre, quoted in Hess, 1992)

Caught in a crossfire of expectation and critique, many public schools today are living the contradictions of change, as they host both reenacted routines and a passionate revisioning by staff, students, and parents. The tension that critical educators have located between "structural determinants" and "the consciousness of individuals" seeking to implement change (Weiler, 1988, p. 147) might be better described in the case of current school reform as an ongoing tension between and within many seeking to change a system in which they have also invested: autocratic and compassionate administrators, teachers with building seniority, students who "know the ropes" but fail to comply. This chapter will take us inside a reform movement where the Inquiry charter opens up the challenge of real educational change. In the company of students and teachers we will encounter the risks, pleasures, and contradictions of interrupting structural silences—a microcosm of schools in the midst of structural and instructional reform. We will hear the reverberations of students and teachers pressing change at the site of practice in a system still driven by centralized and constraining policies.

AT INQUIRY CHARTER

Students in Inquiry Charter describe their education in terms of personal and collective, academic and programmatic change:

> If I were asked in tenth grade if I were going to college, I would have given a straight "no." I was never one who tried to do or accomplish anything. I now know I have abilities . . . [Inquiry] has changed me; I feel as though if I study criminal justice, I can probably make a change. (Chans, senior)

> I know a lot of students don't want to do the work, 'cause like on Friday you know you gotta do the work 'cause you gotta act in Monday's class. The first year nobody didn't want to act, now everybody into it, everybody want to act, everybody want to dance. (James, junior)

The comprehensive high school that houses Inquiry enrolls close to 2,000 students, almost 90% of whose families receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children. In recent years student attendance has averaged 65%, the dropout rate has approached 25%, and mean SAT scores have fallen 300 points below the national mean. Described by Inquiry teacher Bob Fecho (1992) as the "bottom of a hierarchy that siphons students off the top," Ali High is now undergoing the "charterization" of its faculty and student body as well as decision making on site-based management.

Founded by three teachers at the invitation of the Collaborative to invent a program, the charter is home to 260 students who represent a mix of ninth through twelfth graders, 8 core subject teachers who teach solely in the charter, and 15 elective subject teachers who teach across charters. Most classes are in a wing across an indoor bridge from the main building. The charter describes itself as a teacher-driven, writing-intensive, academically rigorous, project-oriented program committed to active, cooperative learning and a heterogeneous student body. The group belongs to the Coalition of Essential Schools, a university–schools partnership based on a belief in "the constructive confrontation of able teachers and willing pupils" (Coalition, p. 1). Participants believe in "personalized" teaching and learning to "[help] adolescents learn to use their minds well," the "governing metaphor [of] student-as-worker" and the curricular maxim "less is more" (p. 2). A student explains how this philosophy shapes charter life: "[Teachers] here want to know *why* you got one plus one is two, *how* you did it, and they'll probably get you up there and put you as a one and then another person, they'll want you to act it out!"

An opportunity for students and teachers to co-construct community, the charter has achieved a partial freedom, rare in the district, to fashion its own structure, subject to limitations of time and the isolation of breaking away from the shared system (Glickman, 1990). While initially core classes experimented with double "lab" periods weekly, now these classes meet every other day for 90 minutes, supporting more substantive and collaborative work. Rostering is accomplished within the charter to accommodate both this alternative organization of time and the assignment of *all* students to intellectually challenging courses such as algebra and physics.

The charter is described by staff and students as academically rigorous,

setting high expectations for students to pose and solve problems and to meet responsibilities. The curriculum is demanding: Students read such works as *Hamlet* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and write in genres from journal and lyrics to textual analysis; in algebra and elementary functions they utilize texts to create problems, which they collaboratively solve; chemistry students grapple with implications of nuclear regulations and policies. Data evidence impressive student outcomes, including better attendance, more credits earned, a higher percentage of major subject courses passed, and minimal student turnover. The charter is also designing performance-based assessments to reflect student outcomes. A pilot project required seniors to critically examine a common text and defend their thesis before panels of educators, parents, and peers.

As Coalition members, staff annually construct an interdisciplinary "essential question" rich enough to encompass a range of curricular requirements and engender provocative, substantive inquiry. Math teacher and union representative Ann Bourgeois reports to a student researcher:

> [Staff] argued about it for hours. I don't know whose idea it was, I don't remember now, but over the summer we spent many days meeting in each other's houses and discussing what our question would be. . . . You pick a question that is an *important* question; it's not going to be a waste of anybody's time to deal with it; it unites all the subjects.

Such a process, collaborative rather than individualistic, complex and conflicted rather than unidirectional, resembles the work of the real world more than the traditional school search for "right answers"; it provides a model for students to engage in the "substantive conversation" central to authentic intellectual endeavor (Newmann, 1990).

A Note on Methodology

Having entered during Inquiry's first year to do research with students on the charter and participant observation in an English class, I reentered the next year as an ethnographer working with students and teachers to collect data and feed back snapshots and initial analyses of charter life. To these ends, negotiating with staff, I documented classes and meetings. I conducted interviews with students, talked informally with students and staff, and worked with a group of students as both "informants" and co-researchers. I also facilitated a group for young women.

Alfred Hess (1992), an anthropologist engaged in school reform issues, poses this challenge to researchers of education:

> Are we there merely to catalogue what is going on . . . [or] to also seek to have a profound impact on how schooling is done in our societies? Do we simply catalogue? Or do we also critique? And if we critique, is that critique detached and dispassionate? Or is it engaged and active? (p. 178)

My intent is to offer engaged, critical reflection *for* rather than simply *of* the charter in the interests of collective efforts to change how we accomplish schooling. In its second year, classes revolved around the unifying, interdisciplinary theme of change as elaborated in the question, "How do people, events, and conditions influence change?" Below I document the evolution of Inquiry Charter as a learning community, drawing on data to tell a story about the charter as a community of faculty and students who rally and regroup around change.

STORY #1: HOW DO PEOPLE INFLUENCE CHANGE?

When I met with student researchers in early February, students were talking excitedly about that morning's events:

KURT: It was the history classes that were having the walk-out, we was supporting them. Not complete black history, we were asking for all history together, connect it, and if the demand wasn't met, they was gonna walk out of class and knock on the other doors to let us know they needed our support.

DAFINA: Not everybody was aware we had a meeting with Mr. Fecho this morning and then we had another [staff] meeting. That's why Mr. Fecho's class didn't walk, we knew about the meeting and we was like, why leave now. Give Mr. Fecho that respect to see what the outcome of the meeting was gonna be.

Next period Dafina and I took field notes as student representatives articulated "demands" to the staff:

KURT: We want more black studies in social science and history classes, this month especially. We don't want a complete makeover of the curriculum, we want how blacks tie into what's already being taught. . . . We realize this takes time, we don't expect drastic change immediately.

RASHID: If we don't know that history, like if we didn't know about slavery, it could happen again. We need to know more about blacks as a whole. Like with Martin Luther King, the history books focus on the "I Have a

Dream" speech, but not how Kennedy and them used him. If we know history as a whole students in Inquiry and even in the city and the whole country could unite. We need to look at black leaders' philosophies. Learning about the great things blacks have done builds black self-esteem, like if he did that I could do a little better. We want linkages, not straight black history.

(*Bell rings, and meeting continues into lunchtime.*)

LEE WEINSTOCK (TEACHER): I'm disappointed that you didn't see this with American government.

RASHID: But we only read the bad things; I'm sure blacks did good things.

LEE WEINSTOCK: It was not about individuals. I tried to show how the government works and how it doesn't. For Caucasians, African Americans, and others. . . . Also, we have three required years of social science/history. We could add a fourth year in African American history, or an elective.

BOB FECHO (TEACHER): Also linkages between what's taught and what it means for the African American community will be spread throughout the curriculum and help focus the course.

For many of us, the story unraveled backwards, so that the opening lines were not revealed until well into the event:

JODY: What happened with the substitute?

JAMES: What happened was he put on the tape, students were listening to Farrakhan which is, some people can take it in different ways, they feel like it's a negative attitude. The head of the social science department came in and cut off the TV, that made the students kind of mad, you know, and they then were asking why, if they had it on Kennedy or somebody, maybe he wouldn't've took it off. You know, they took it in a bad way and they wanted to have walk-outs and everything.

If, as Deborah Meier (1992) suggests, the task of schools today is to help "young citizens . . . have wonderful ideas, invent theories, analyze evidence and make their personal mark on this most complex world" (p. 271), then this story offers a window on the process, as students and teachers grapple with theories of history and relationships between institutions and individuals, knowledge and change.

The story begins with a confrontation between a (African American) substitute who had altered the lesson and a (white) department head whose lines of authority in this reforming school were already felt to be hazy. Wedged between two liminal characters claiming authority over their learning, students begin to shape their own educational imperatives. That students themselves hold multiple, shifting views becomes evident in their words and sometimes

contradictory actions for change: While several express no interest in black studies, many more sign petitions, negotiate in classrooms, and plan meetings with staff and a walk-out in which 11 students sit in the marble stairwell before heading home. Students claim and gain collective voice by demonstrating commitment to change and acting within the system to articulate their concerns to staff. For some students, the academic content of social science offers a site for analysis of change.

By inviting students to their meeting and responding to their concerns, the staff demonstrates a flexible stance in relation to student interests. (African American) science teacher Phil Hand applauds their activism: "When I went to school blacks weren't in those books. . . . So we have this problem. We're proud you see it and come forth. Just let it be your own." Inviting students to co-construct a pluralistic curriculum, he draws boundaries that exclude the substitute from this community. By the time of the meeting, (white) social science teacher Lee Weinstock has begun to rework her curriculum, taking on the challenge of negotiating knowledge with students within the strictures of state and departmental imperatives. She advises students as active learners to help create the "linkages" they seek. (White) charter co-coordinator Bob Fecho suggests that the group also reconsider next year's courses.

Whereas in many schools ringleaders would have been suspended and collaborators silenced, here representatives are invited to negotiate with staff, and student activism, while causing unease for some, is welcomed as a sign of critical democracy. The status quo survives as the forces of change percolate. While students voice a range of opinions about the revised course of study, curriculum control has shifted from the exclusive domain of the (state, department, and) teacher to the shared, negotiated domain of teachers and students. A black studies course in the works for the coming school year indicates that this shift goes beyond the classroom to the charter. A new homeostasis was formed with students as active participants in formulating intellectual content.

Regarding pedagogy and decorum, teachers express the need for continued conversation. Lee Weinstock designs lessons to promote "orderly discussion." Students concur that although the materials have changed, teaching methods have not. (White) science teacher Natalie Hiller voices her discomfort with "not knowing where all this [student] negativity was coming from." Several teachers voice disapproval of the walk-out. There emerges a collective desire to fortify the charter as an orderly and secure learning environment, which may run counter to the drive to pry open with students' basic issues about how teachers should teach, students learn, and human beings behave in school settings. Teachers are socializing students into an ethos with which they continue to struggle, in which community is built not by suppressing but by acknowledging difference without continually referencing hierarchy. The

charter rallies and regroups, neither totally retaining a hierarchy of decision making nor abdicating all control to students but establishing a new, workable, and always fragile balance of shared authority.

STORY #2: HOW DO EVENTS INFLUENCE CHANGE?

In late March I joined Bob Fecho's English class in the library as they began to research the Harlem Renaissance. Investigation of this understudied era would require students to use secondary sources to locate and interpret primary documents, such as journalism and literature of the period, pictorial representations, and musical lyrics: The task is to re-create a day during the Harlem Renaissance. Students are to select one of several possible locations to re-create sites of important activity, such as the church and the meeting hall. Then they are to draw on a range of resources to research their area for a performance. Groups will prepare reports, create scenarios, and perform on Harlem Renaissance Day.

Field notes: Students have selected groups: nightclub, meeting house, library, church, *Crisis Magazine*, and media. Bob stresses that this research is oriented toward performance, so that pictures, for example, are important for re-creating scenes. Groups will draft reports, confer with him to locate gaps, then work toward performance. Students are having trouble locating resources: This era is rarely indexed, so how to find material on their topics? How to divide the work? The *Crisis* kids begin to find key figures; the nightclub group has nothing, then finds a pictorial history and pores over hairstyles. Bob ends class by applauding students' "great start" and reminding students of "the fine art of browsing" and the creativity of research. Several in the church group complain: "This project is *too* hard."

The next week I talk with students about the project:

JAMES: Mr. Fecho, instead of just tell us, well this is the Harlem Renaissance, he'd say, well you have to act it out. So we have it in our minds, so when we get like 30 years old we could look back and say, I know what the Harlem Renaissance was and know what it *felt* like. . . . Sometimes you remember what you *do* better than what you been *told*.

ALICIA: I like it. We still on the research part; it's going to be decent. We looking up black ministers and churches, we gotta find out how the church looks and stuff like that.

JAMES: I'm doing meeting hall. . . . We trying to have a march, you know with a band, and then a meeting, set it up as they had it. I think I'm gonna be Marcus Garvey . . . because in his mind he was like saying, you know, this wasn't the place for us and we gonna have to go back to Africa. There's more to it, and that's why I wanna keep looking into it, to find out what he was really trying to say. . . . I'm not sure if it was for us literally to go back but I really think that he was trying to say for us in America, remember where we came from and be strong so everybody could be united.

Field notes: Students from all four of Bob's classes are seated at long tables in the cafeteria. He quiets them to review their upcoming double periods here and hands out worksheets to structure their performance plans. As they move from the research to the planning phase, some students lose concentration, talk to neighbors, wander from their groups. Leaders emerge, not always the ones I would've guessed, and carry along others who begin the worksheets. In the church group three young men dominate while the young women sit quietly, then express mounting frustration. The meeting house group, too, coalesces slowly, with young men taking lead roles and young women volunteering to question these public speakers.

A week later: Again all four classes in the cafeteria, and chaos mingling with productivity. The nightclub group is collecting tapes and negotiating roles. In the church group Ron and Derrick write out their sermons, and the young women design the action and set. The media group lines up interviews with key players. *Crisis* awaits Gail's return from the computer. Several sit unoccupied: One tells me he's been absent; Danielle disparages the project.

Two days before the Harlem Renaissance Fair: Energy runs high. Danielle is conflicted over whether to buy a dress and pumps for Friday. Bob takes the nightclub kids to Room 250, where they decorate, practice, have a blow-up fight, then *really* practice. Rashim returns after a week's absence, and I hook him up with Laketa to relate his Langston Hughes to her Jessie Faucet speech. Would they be exhorting whites or blacks, and what difference would it make to their speeches? Students creating a church in Bob's classroom position the "pulpit" to reflect the preacher's position in relation to the Lord.

The Day: Many of us, performers and audience, dress for Harlem Renaissance Fair Day, though Danielle wears jeans and sneaks. One young woman wears her grandmother's sequined gown; Derrick has borrowed preacher's robes; Natalie Hiller displays gloves and feathers. The young woman who lip-synchs Billie Holliday doesn't talk in class.

Church is hot with fans going and the audience joining in song. Students praise it as "decent" and "realistic." Keisha adds that meeting hall and library are "decent too, that's where you learn what people were thinking about back then. You learn the substance." Some parents attend. Another charter teacher's students request "a project like this." In L.A., rioting continues. Does this event constitute a response?

The Harlem Renaissance project as an *event* of collaborative research, planning, and practice took place over six weeks. The performance took place over six hours. In the life of the charter the event is significant: Time and space are restructured to involve students as collaborators and audience; the subject matter is responsive to students' black studies initiative; and the scope, depth, and creativity of the project flesh out the curricular maxim "less is more." Teacher and students reconfigure themselves as critical actors: The teacher forgoes more predictable methods for the risks and imperatives of collaboration and performance. Cut loose from standard questions and answers, students must seek questions and enact answers, negotiating new roles with teachers and peers.

While history classes study the era and dance class works on the nightclub, this project represents the vision of Bob Fecho from start to finish. As such, it displays the autonomy of the teacher in a microsystem that reflects ambivalence as it seeks to value both autonomy and the development of community. In the context of the larger bureaucratic system that has undermined teachers' autonomy over a median of 22 years, compelling them to "close their classroom doors" to gain autonomy, images of teachers engaged in mutual influence and communally shaped staff development have been scarce. In the smaller community of the charter, autonomy can promote change through the creativity and risk taking of individual teachers. Situated in this dialectic, the Harlem Renaissance project is an expression of teacher autonomy that may promote community by infusing into the system approaches that support valued pedagogical objectives such as collaborative, inquiry-based learning and by experimenting with a system of communication among charter teachers and students.

If we read this story in terms of the tension between a teacher's autonomy and the charter's coherence as a teaching and learning community, Inquiry's challenge might be how to let this event influence practice across the system without subverting the autonomy of individual teachers as happens once standardized curricula and teaching "packages" are adopted. Charter teachers need contexts to share efforts and generate approaches that resonate with their questions and passions. Given fertile conditions where autonomy is respected and community supported, such tension can nourish growth.

STORY #3: HOW DO CONDITIONS INFLUENCE CHANGE?

Both students and teachers, male and female, talked about classes where males did most of the talking. In Marsha Pincus's English class, where students grappled with gender and violence in *Othello*, *Antigone*, and *Beloved*, a comparison of African American male and female autobiographies opened the door to talk about gender, voice, and authority in this classroom:

KEVIN: Women's autobiographies turn me off. You be reading and then you get interested, it could be breakfast in 1942, then it 1992, it mess my head up.
DAVID: I like it, it's decent and funny to me.
MARSHA: I want to hear from the ladies.
KEVIN: This is a male-dominated class.
LATOYA: Women write to express themself because they don't think men is gonna listen— (*Several males interrupt*)
MARSHA: You proved her point.
LAWRENCE: We know the truth but don't act it. How many men think women are equal?
MARSHA: We still don't hear from the women here. When Latoya spoke three men jumped on her.
KURT: I don't feel men dominate this classroom, sometimes people just don't feel like talking.
MARSHA: Ladies, how many of you are quiet now and were not quiet in the first or second grade? (*Of seven females in the class, five hands go up.*)
KEISHA: [The males] got a whole rooting section over there!

Several of the young men continued to struggle with the issue: Student researchers Kevin and Kurt asked in a student survey, "Are males or females more outspoken in Inquiry, or is there no difference by gender?" While a majority saw "no difference," a significant minority circled "males." A senior, Lawrence, describes how his essay on change was inspired by English class and a play he saw over the weekend:

> I haven't truly *showed* any changes yet, but I feel the changes inside of me. I never thought I disrespected the ladies but after the play it seems that I was disrespecting them by expressing some of the major thoughts that I had against them in class . . . like they can't do this or that. The women in the class, they weren't really, they weren't expressing themselves as much as I expressed myself. . . . But now I'm gonna try to stop saying things like that. I'm gonna try and stop *thinking* like that.

Across several levels of the organization, females raised the need for young women to talk together. When conflicts erupted among girls, Nina suggested "group talks":

PAM: Like "Young Black Men"? They should have it for girls. I asked about that and I was told "no" because there was not a woman interested.
KIMBERLEY: I think that would help people.
JODY: What would you want to do in that kind of group?
VOICES: Talk! Talk about what's on our mind!

When female students and staff discussed issues young women were confronting, they, too, considered a "girls group," and a student suggested my name as facilitator. For 10 weeks a group of us shared lunch and talk about pregnancy, abortion, child rearing, relationships with men and women, abuse, school, the future. Our talk spilled over into relationships in and beyond school.

Back in the classroom, volatile issues of gender intersecting with race and violence were again addressed through reading an article about an alleged rape committed by fighter Mike Tyson:

NINA: I feel as though [the teacher] shouldn't have talked about Mike Tyson's case because that happened out in the street and if you bring it into school there's gonna be a lot of conflict 'cause everybody got different opinions, and when we was in advisory everybody was arguing—
PAM: I think she wants us to think about it, be interested—
KIMBERLEY: She likes us to argue though.
PAM: She don't like us to argue, she like us to learn how to say what we wanna say *without* arguing. . . . She was just asking, "Ya'll read the article, how do y'all feel about the article?" And the way we did it, she would ask me and if you had a rebuttal you raised your hand.
KIMBERLEY: It's OK to talk about it but not to get into it *too* much. You know, it could start something big, 'cause we was talking about it in class and it was Lisa, that teacher threw her out 'cause she started getting into a discussion with everybody. Everybody just arguing, everybody not worried about the math work. (*Laughter.*)

How does the "condition of difference"—most evident here in terms of gender—influence change? This series of encounters with difference illuminates a dialectic around the exclusion and inclusion of voices. In typical educational settings, nonmainstream voices tend to be silenced or marginalized. Reflecting on female silence in their classrooms, teachers describe young women as quiet because they are "intimidated" by what others might think,

anxious to be perceived as "good students," and concerned that males would not listen. In group work females often organized, while males wanted their ideas heard.

In this third story, students address gender differences as they affect and are affected by the curriculum. The teacher provokes students to analyze patterns of participation, and several males pursue the issue of gender difference in the charter. The issue is also pursued by females seeking spaces with "no boys [where] we can *really* say what's on our minds." The charter invents two strategies to create more "speaking roles" for young women: Safe (segregated) spaces are created for females to talk with one another, and key figures exercise power to help launch and navigate a sometimes treacherous discourse of differences in the coed classroom.

Data support the need for young women to have a space to develop their voices by exploring commonalities and differences (Bell, 1991). Again, students convey the need for change, and staff attend. While the structure is partial and temporary, it provides one image of how difference can be engaged among and between (shifting) identities of students. If the charter's imperative is the full participation of young men and women in the construction of knowledge, work in integrated classrooms remains crucial. Teachers' exercise of power to engage female voices may involve acknowledging obstacles to taking on difference in the classroom. Macpherson and Fine (in press) describe a differences discourse as marked by "destabilization of knowledge," the compensating "power of questioning," and the coexistence of multiple and competing discourses (in press). For young women in Inquiry, addressing the Tyson case destabilizes dominant knowledge about male aggression and female victimization, unleashing competing perspectives that are dangerous and stimulating. The classroom "event" reverberates throughout the system, as students struggle to deal with difference without resorting to aggressive postures.

STEPPING OUTSIDE: CHANGING THE SYSTEM

How teachers and students in this charter reconfigure authority, community, and difference provokes a set of questions relevant within Inquiry and reverberates to other parts of an educational system in the midst of change. When accustomed hierarchies are challenged by newly empowered voices, how might change protect stability while nurturing growth? How can teachers be supported in their (collective) development of practice-based inquiry (see Chapter 10)? How can tensions between constituencies with intersecting interests (e.g., department heads and charters) be negotiated without camouflaging important differences? How much autonomy does a charter need from the rest of a school?

Two seniors frustrated with decisions made for their senior class talk about making change at their school:

NINA: [Change] is not a one-man thing. I think everybody should come together, speak up just like we spoke up about history, we wanted to know more about black people. That's what people need to do is talk and tell them what you want.

PAM: Because [charter] want us to make ourselves heard.

When schooling is about building participatory communities, students learn to make themselves heard—to occupy speaking and acting roles in their educations, to co-construct with teachers what knowledge, whose knowledge, and how knowledge is produced in school. Just as the charter's philosophy encourages students' critical thinking and action, the charter itself entertains conflicting forces and goals, forging temporary syntheses that enable the closely linked reflection and action that Clark (Chapter 2) calls "reflaction." How can the charter as central unit of change in this restructuring movement be supported, provoke ripples in its school, and incite radical change in the larger bureaucracy?

Still marginal to the mainstream of American public education, charters as a locus of reform must seek a delicate balance between attending to their own developing identities and engaging with the broader educational communities they need in order to flourish. Charters must have resources to address among themselves shared worries, goals, and conflicts, to develop their visions of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. At the same time, charters must interact productively with others seeking change—to co-construct public knowledge about accountability, to address differences across and within schools, to confront vested interests and power asymmetries that dictate the contours and limits of public education.

Charters must continue to move at once inward and outward, seeking self-definition in relation to dynamic boundaries and values. So, too, the educational reform movement must develop itself in the very process of transforming the mainstream, attending at once to the contradictions endemic to its work and to the immediate, dire need for public education that addresses the capabilities, desires, and needs of students. Marsha Pincus reflects with a student researcher on the evolution of Inquiry's essential questions:

> We started out having kids make connections between learning and themselves. And we said, once you make those connections you can bring about change. It makes sense for next year's question to be about power: What is power, who's got it, how do you get it?

NOTE

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