EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Making Children Larger and Cracks Smaller:

**The Role of a Participatory Evaluation
in School Restructuring**

**A report for The Gratz Connection
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May 1996**

I. Overview

The evaluation of The Gratz Connection was a collaboration between school "insiders"--teachers and counselors from across a set of 17 neighborhood schools--and "outside" researchers from Research for Action (RFA) with the overall goal of learning more about the phenomenon of dropping out. The Gratz Connection framed the drop-out problem as a systemic issue: a phenomenon likely to be rooted in earlier school experience even though the actual moment of exit typically occurred at the high school level. Statistical data on urban schools and drop-out suggests that transitional moments, particularly the movement from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school, are often the most treacherous for youngsters.

In a group discussion held at the start of RFA's involvement, the teachers and counselors participating in the study acknowledged that they often did not know what happened to children after they left their classrooms and/or schools. This gap in knowledge about what happens to children, along with The Gratz Connection's conceptual understanding of school failure as systemic, contributed to the decision to use a longitudinal case study approach in which these teachers and counselors would be paired with students whom they would follow as the youngsters traversed school levels. RFA provided scaffolding to these practitioner-researchers putting research skills in their hands: together we developed interview and observation guidelines for shadowing students; following visits with students RFA facilitated sharing and reflection sessions which were the first step in the analytic process.

Participants' experiences in the field, supplemented by analyses of data collected from school records, provided rich material for reflection on the ways in which schools as institutions both work for and fail youngsters. Looking and listening to students and then reflecting as a group on the meaning of what study participants saw and heard brought a diversity of perspectives that stimulated new ideas about what "child-centered" reform might look like. As teachers and counselors assumed a child-centered point of view, the world of schooling--one with which they were already familiar--took on new dimensions. With this fresh perspective, these teachers and counselors took steps individually and with others to set in motion a process of institutional change would render the children larger, and make the systemic cracks through which so many seemed to be slipping, smaller.

II. Major Findings

About drop-out:

- **The research highlighted the gradual nature of children's disengagement from school.** Youngsters tended to hover at the edge of the cracks before they fell through them. Transitional years were often treacherous ones as academic difficulties were "aggravated by [changes] to new schools with different organizational configurations and academic expectations" (Newberg 1995: 713). The connection which evolved between many study participants and the students they were following as well as administrative and personal associations that began to develop between and among schools in the feeder pattern indicated how creating bridges, both human and administrative, across school levels could provide a potent "safety net" for keeping students connected with schools. Conversely, the difficulty that a number of teachers and counselors had in maintaining contact with students as they slipped between schools or out of school highlighted areas that traditionally fragmented school systems need to be attentive to as they move forward with reform.

- **Study participants grew increasingly convinced that to be effective action addressing drop-out needed to occur across students' school *and* home worlds.**

Because of the formal and often thin relationship between families and schools, the effort to bring parents into the research process was stymied. Yet, teachers and counselors believed that without parents' participation an important interpretive and action dimension was missing.

> I think if the research went further, parents should be brought in. We are spread apart. And nobody is having connection. I think it's more reasonable when parents can get involved. They start changing their views (teacher).

About teachers:

- **Many teachers and counselors found themselves growing increasingly uncomfortable as they learned about the gap between what they believed ought to be and what they learned actually existed.** They saw the limits of bureaucratic approaches to identifying children who are absent frequently, late often, and/or are a disciplinary problem, frequently behaviors symptomatic of long-standing problems. They witnessed how the complex process of children disconnecting often is invisible to school staff. The dynamic of looking together at what was happening to youngsters, bringing to bear multiple perspectives, interests and agendas on the conversation, supported their being able to talk about this disconcerting reality. The discomfort experienced by study participants *and* the collective talk were essential ingredients to change.

- **The participatory nature of the evaluation engaged teachers in ways which prompted many of them to re-think the "best practice" model of professional development in which they are often cast as consumers of the ideas and knowledge of others.** Participation in the research increased both the meaning of what was being discovered and commitment to the findings. In their schools, study participants began to reconceptualize their roles less in terms of words like "mentor" and more in phrases and words like "resource to other teachers" and "facilitator." During the years of the study a view of teachers as reflective practitioners emerged.

- **The collegial exchange that was central to the participatory research re-engaged some teachers with their classrooms.** For many teachers, the time spent outside the classroom reaped great benefits for their students.

> I was really getting to the point where you burn out. ... I had become just like the cinder block [in my classroom walls]. Real rigid. Some of us were very timid and rigid, I think. We didn't quite know where this [the longitudinal case study] was leading us. Like I had a teacher tell me, 'Maybe if some of you would stay in the building, maybe some of the kids would learn.' I said, 'Back off. Because ...all those years never going to any type of meeting where you're meeting any of your colleagues, where you're sharing ideas (teacher)..

The experience of teachers like this one aptly illustrates the observation made by researchers Ann Lieberman and Milbrey McLaughlin on the importance of teacher communities to the task of rethinking school goals and structures:

> Teachers choose to become active in collegial networks because they afford occasion for professional development and collegueship and reward participants with a renewed sense of purpose and efficacy. Networks offer a way for teachers to experience growth in their careers through deepened and expanded classroom expertise and new leadership roles (1992:674).

About school change:

- **Participating in the research increased the willingness of some study participants to make changes themselves and be agents of change in their schools**. Participation engendered a sense of ownership: "It gives you ownership to do the research itself." With this sense of "ownership" many study participants willingly assumed roles as change agents within their school communities. Nonetheless, the depth and breadth of change that occurred in schools was limited unless a number of factors converged, including good timing, strong leadership and willing colleagues. At some schools change was deep and broad, but at others it was more superficial and piecemeal, and at still others little or no change occurred.

- **Fragmentation, both between and among school stakeholders, and between and among schools, was the most significant barrier to change**. The participatory evaluation surmounted some traditional boundaries, for example, it successfully expanded the conceptualization of teachers' work and it created opportunities for teachers to visit children in schools other than their own and then meet to talk about what they saw in cross-school groups. Still, many established disconnections

persisted.   For example, the involvement of two important stakeholder groups, principals and as mentioned previously, parents, was marginal: principals because their role and that of teachers are sufficiently bifurcated that little ground exists for building a collaborative investigation; parents because there were no ready channels through which to launch and sustain a research endeavor. Repeatedly, the teacher researchers pointed out that for change to happen in their schools, principals needed to be brought into the ongoing process of discussion and reflection. New ways of bringing principals into closer relationship with efforts such as this one need to be formulated.

- **Restructuring which forefronts relationship building within schools as well as among schools is a promising step to offering greater educational and emotional continuity to students throughout their school lives and creating learning environments where a greater number of students stay connected**. This often begins with modest activities which bring people face to face. With greater familiarity, it is then possible to begin deeper discussions about organizational, social and curricular articulation.

About the research:

- **The participation of teachers and counselors in all aspects of the research--focus, data collection, interpretation and dissemination--deepened the investigation and broadened its implications.** Teachers brought to the inquiry their connection with and deep caring about their students. Because the teachers were following students from their schools, their school colleagues were often eager audiences for news about what was happening to the youngsters selected for the study. As school colleagues looked together at the experience of a few youngsters, a platform was created for consideration of the school experience of many children. Conversations among school colleagues frequently generated ideas about what "child-centered reform" at their school might look like.

- **The separation of high schools from the lower grade levels also limited utilization of the research**. The psychological, structural, organizational and curricular distance that exists between the high schools and middle and elementary schools restricted communication between school levels and inhibited the full participation of the high school teachers in the study. The logic of the system, which encourages promising students to leave the feeder pattern at the high school level, contributed to high school teachers feeling devalued by their elementary and middles school colleagues. To increase the use of efforts such as this one, the traditional multi-layered isolation of the high school from the lower grades needs to be addressed. Future work needs to take into consideration the many dimensions in which neighborhood high schools are distanced from the middle and elementary schools that feed into them.