

## Coming Together: An Interactive Model of Schooling

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In California the attrition rate for African-American students is twice the rate for white students; African-American students have lower academic achievement scores than their white peers; and in 1986 only 5 percent of African-American high school graduates were eligible for admission to a four-year college or university, compared to 16 percent of white high school graduates.<sup>1</sup> A number of community-based programs have attempted to rectify these discouraging figures. In this chapter I examine one such project: Interface Institute (formerly Project Interface or PI), a community-based after-school math and science college preparatory program for junior high school students. PI is located in the Elmhurst district of Oakland, a predominantly African-American, low-socioeconomic community. PI students attend public and parochial schools all over Oakland, but about half come from four nearby public "home schools."

The philosophy of the program is to ensure an effective educational experience for students by forming a partnership with their parents. Such partnership philosophies are appealing ideologically, but they frequently founder as the "experts" try to make the transition from ideology to practice. Based on six months of participant observation and interviews with staff, students, and parents, I explore the reasons for PI's success in implementing a partnership between education professionals and parents and the importance of such a partnership for educating African-Americans.

### BRIDGING HOME AND SCHOOL

Historically, there has been tension and "natural conflict" between the home and school as teachers and parents guard their respective do-

mains.<sup>2</sup> Over the last three decades these two spheres have become increasingly separated, particularly in urban inner-city communities where African-Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities live. There is an absence of a shared culture within schools that have a predominantly African-American student population and a predominantly white faculty. Further, teachers have not been trained to teach the culturally diverse racial and ethnic groups that increasingly populate schools in inner-city areas. As a result, teachers often reject and negate the students' culture and cognitive competencies.

Most African-American parents have the perception that the schools have lower academic standards and lower expectations of African-American children than they have of white children. Consequently, these parents believe the schools are not doing a good job of teaching their children. On the other hand, teachers frequently perceive African-American parents as being uninterested in education, having low educational aspirations, and lacking the skills required to help their children.

Linguistic differences as well as differences in styles of verbal presentation between African-American parents and white teachers also lead to miscommunication. This linguistic divergence frequently amplifies the negative perceptions each has of the other. In other situations African-American parents and white teachers simply avoid each other based on personal histories of racially negative experiences. The result is that teachers and families do not attempt to establish a relationship between the school and home, and African-American children are left to mediate between the two spheres.

Accordingly, in this chapter I make three arguments. First, in the absence of a shared culture, it is imperative to bridge the gap between predominantly white faculties and the predominantly African-American student population. The school system works much better for whites than it does for African-Americans because school and family share a common language, similar educational expectations, and a similar concept of the respective roles of teacher and parent in educating the child. Second, the absence of a partnership relationship between home and school is detrimental to the learning capacity of African-American children and leads to low academic achievement among African-American students. Third, the success of PI derives from its effort to make education a joint project between the student, the program, the family, and the school. PI's interactive pedagogical approach enables students to seek out teaching methods to which they are most receptive, in contrast to the hierarchical, rote accumulation of knowledge that predominates in public schools. Because parent participation in the program is considered key to students' success, parents are re-

quired to contribute to the program. PI thus provides a bridge between the home and the school, and also serves to mitigate against the cultural discontinuity between school and home by building on the cultural resources of its African-American community and its families. Moreover, it acts to circumvent the pessimistic and predetermined nature of the dominant theoretical frameworks.

#### THE PROGRAM

PI is located in one of the four buildings of the Allen Temple Baptist Church complex, a social and political force in Oakland. A barracklike dilapidated structure, which houses many families, abuts the church property. The church faces single- and multiple-family dwellings that are in need of repair. Its sparkling white buildings stand in stark contrast to its surroundings. The neighborhood has a reputation for drug trafficking and related violence.

PI shares space with other church-related programs and activities. As many as eighteen people share the compact, open-design administrative office. Teaching areas are set up daily throughout the building in large assembly rooms and small classrooms. Several classes meet in one room, separated by portable blackboards. Tables and chairs in each area accommodate five students and a tutor. There is also a computer lab that has several outdated computers. The walls are adorned with religious paintings, biblical scriptures, and portraits of past and present famous African-Americans, particularly mathematicians, scientists, engineers, and inventors.

The program was started in 1982 as a collaborative effort between Allen Temple and the Northern California Council of Black Professional Engineers, who were concerned about the underrepresentation of African-Americans in mathematics, science, and engineering. PI's goals have always been:

1. To increase the number of minority students who are capable of entering high school college preparatory classes, eventually pursuing academic and professional careers in math and science.
2. To serve students identified as having promise and potential who are not yet demonstrating the real level at which they can achieve.
3. To expose minority junior high and college students to careers in mathematics, science, and engineering, to the practicality of these disciplines, and to the many possibilities that the study of these disciplines offer.<sup>3</sup>

An initial two-year pilot grant from the federal government supported PI's early efforts. Today the program is funded by private foundations,

corporations, and individual grants, contributions, and donations, including parents' monthly tax-deductible contributions.

PI's founders assumed that many African-American students were not being exposed to math and science in the public schools, and that these students were not being prepared academically at the junior high school level to enter college preparatory classes in high school. They also believed that (1) all children can learn and achieve at a college level if they are taught by people who believe they can learn, (2) it is important to develop a program that builds upon African-American culture, and (3) there are college students who are eager to serve and work in minority communities.

There are three components to PI: a tutoring service, a role-model mentor service, and a career-exploration series. Students must participate in all components. The program is designed for students with unrealized "potential," that is, students who are intellectually capable of achieving higher grades at school and who are motivated to pursue college preparatory courses in high school. As a condition of participation, students are required to sign a contract indicating their acceptance of the rules that govern the program. Thus PI does not simply cater to "intellectually gifted" students.<sup>4</sup> Almost all of the students (95 percent) who enter the program are doing C to F work, although their test scores in mathematics are on average higher than those of other students in their schools. PI hopes that some of its students will become mathematicians, scientists, or engineers.

During the 1988-89 academic year, sixty-five students participated in PI's junior high school program—thirty-six males and twenty-nine females, all of whom are African-Americans. Students ranged in age from twelve to sixteen. Classes meet three times a week for two hours; two days are devoted to mathematics and one day to science. Eighteen people staff the program, including three administrators, twelve tutors, and three tutor assistants who had themselves been students at PI. The majority of the staff are African-Americans (thirteen) or other ethnic minorities (two). Eleven employees are males. The tutors are paid college students, most of whom are science, math, or engineering majors.

Students, parents, staff, and school personnel are enthusiastic about PI and convinced that the program works. But, like most community-based organizations, PI is too underfunded and understaffed to pursue systematic data collection and evaluation of the results of its efforts. However, since its inception, PI has analyzed its students' performances on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) in mathematics, which is administered to all students in the Oakland Public School District, and used the test results to diagnose students' learning needs. These data cannot substitute for a comprehensive program evaluation,

but the CTBS scores for eighth- and ninth-grade PI students in 1988-89 were higher than those of the average student from the home schools.<sup>5</sup> That PI's seventh-graders did not do as well suggests that students may need to be in the program at least two years before academic improvement is manifested. Moreover, it appears that students who remain in the program through the ninth grade not only reap the benefits of the cumulative effects of the program and school, they also consolidate their gains. During 1988-89 fifty PI graduates who were surveyed reported being "on track" in math; thirty-seven students reported that they were taking college preparatory math courses.

### INTERACTIVE LEARNING

In her monograph on mathematics and science education for minority students, Diane Beane found that the most effective programs include strategies that develop peer support systems, encourage students to work in teams, provide hands-on laboratory activities, and emphasize the practical applicability of math and science instead of theory.<sup>6</sup> Beane maintains that an interactive approach to teaching is effective in engaging the cognitive and affective abilities of minority students.

The following excerpts are two examples of how the interactive approach works at PI.

It is 9:20 A.M., the beginning of a hot August day. Ms. D. is teaching pre-algebra to five male students seated around a table. The class started at 9:00, and already the students and Ms. D. were hard at work. There were several problems on the blackboard, but at this point students were reviewing their homework. The students took turns working out problems on the blackboard. When a student got stuck, another student helped his classmate. For the next hour, the students and Ms. D. alternated between writing on the blackboard, explaining the mathematical rules that applied to a given problem, working in the full group, and working in smaller groups. Ms. D. alternated between standing at the side of the blackboard and kneeling, on one leg, in her chair. She never sat down. The students did not appear bored, and they did not fool around. They attended to the work at hand.

It is 4:30 P.M. on an October day. Fifteen students are divided between three tutors in the Life Science class, all of whom are sharing the large assembly hall. Today's lesson is "The Scientific Method." Each group of five students is working on a different experiment. The group that I observed tested the effects of adding different chemicals to purple cabbage water. Each student in the group selected a different chemical and each obtained a different result. They bubbled with enthusiasm as they got feedback from the tutor and each other and as they compared their

respective results. After each group conducted its respective experiments, it presented its work to the others. Students and tutors asked questions of the presenters. During one presentation, a student asked if paper were live matter. Not only was his question treated with great appreciation, he was invited to perform an experiment to find the answer for himself, which he did. Following the presentations, students were told to develop and conduct their own experiments. The room shook as the noise and excitement escalated.

As is clear from these examples, a variety of teaching techniques were used in each class to engage and to stimulate students: tutors lectured for brief periods; students worked out problems on the blackboard or verbally; students worked in groups, pairs, and trios; and students did peer teaching. Different media were used—visual, audio, and hands-on experiments—to respond to students' different learning styles. Students shared their knowledge informally and formally through study groups or by presenting their work to their peers. This approach enabled students to develop competence, self-confidence, and self-esteem.

PI's philosophy of teaching was best summarized by one of its administrators:

Yes, we do stress [an] interactive, varied kind of teaching strategy. We are more than a tutoring program. It's a preparatory program, which means mentoring has to be done—role modeling. Tutors serve as role models, which extends beyond the tutor-tutee relationship. It means becoming more involved; to show the kids that there is need to interact even insofar as studying is concerned or when in new learning situations. One of the things that I know that we talk about is black students, as they get older, and when they go on to higher education, tend to separate themselves; they study in isolation. They don't share their knowledge. This is one of the things that we try to encourage here.

Tutors cited the benefits of the interactive approach and the diversity of activities in which they are engaged. In the words of one tutor:

If you don't want kids to be bored, you have to stimulate them and engage them. These kids come from schools where they are disengaged, and we have a responsibility to engage them in learning. I vary the format of the class, and I watch to see which student responds to what format. I'm strict, but I make learning fun. We want to turn them on to math and science, so we've got to all work hard to make learning interesting.

In PI's interactive approach, the teacher does not have a monopoly over knowledge. Students are also teachers—even the role of teacher and learner is alternated. Students enjoy learning, and the process promotes continued interaction and positive feelings about the learning process.

Another important reason for having students work together is to prepare them for the academically competitive and racially isolated environment they may encounter at some colleges. PI promotes interaction not only between students and tutors, but between students and staff. As the administrators interact with students, they also model the ideology of the program.

#### STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

To gauge student reactions to the interactive teaching approach, I interviewed thirteen students: six junior high students who had been in the program for at least a year, and seven high school students, five of whom had also participated in the junior high school program.

E. is a freshman in high school; he has been in the program since the seventh grade:

Before I started here, I was a real disciplinary problem. I didn't respect teachers or anybody. At first, when my mother brought me here, I didn't like it. I didn't want to be here. Mr. J. used to take me aside and talk to me every day. When he left and Mr. Y. came here, he took me aside and talked to me. We had long talks about a lot of different things. I don't know what happened, but I started to like it here and my attitude changed. My grades have improved, and I am getting along a lot better with people. I like the tutors and the atmosphere. People are friendly, and you can come to them when you need help.

S. is a junior in high school; she has been in the program since the eighth grade:

When I came to the program, I wasn't doing so good in math, and I didn't really like science. I mean, I wasn't serious about studying. . . . Like if you don't understand something real well and you can't get help in your school, you can come here and check yourself and get extra help. . . . You can also get help in preparing for a test. It's fun, you know, coming down here. [Laughs]. I mean, it's like an after-school thing. I mean, I never had that. I [used to] get out of school, go home, and do my homework. You can socialize down here. I come right after school so I can socialize before four o'clock. . . . It [the program] helps you focus on math and get your homework done. It made me look at math and science seriously. It kinda changed my attitude about my studies. I mean, I didn't like biology. But now I love it! Somehow, they changed my mind about it, 'cause I was really having such a hard time in that. It has really helped to improve my grades. I mean, that's what I come here for and that's what the program is all about.

D. is in the ninth grade; she has been attending PI for a year:

I started coming here because I was failing math. My counselor [at school] told my parents about the program and they brought me here. I really didn't want to come here, but now I am glad I did. Last year I was failing pre-algebra. This year I am in pre-algebra and I think I am doing pretty good. Next year, I am going to be ready to take algebra. I like that they [the tutors] do try to help you. They don't want you to fail. If you have a bad test score, you can bring it [the test] in here, and they will go over it with you to see what you don't understand. My tutor will work with me until I do understand. They also help you with your homework and encourage you to do the work, to work real hard. I have changed in my work. I've gotten better test grades. . . . I have been pushing myself to do what I am supposed to do, to do what I have to do. Like, if I am supposed to read, I not only do the reading, but the problems that go with the reading. I am doing more work than I used to do.

These excerpts are representative of the responses of the students who were interviewed. They told a similar story: (1) their grades have improved; (2) their attitude about learning has changed; (3) they like being in the company of "other achievers"; (4) their study skills have improved; (5) some of them reported being "turned on" to math and science; and (6) they all said that they now work harder. Their reports strongly suggest that PI is having a positive effect on its students.

Several themes ran through the interviews. First, the students perceive the tutors as being invested in their success, and they clearly appreciate the almost personal relationship they have with tutors. One student said, "It's like being in a private school." All of the interviewees except one attend public schools, where classes are generally overcrowded and there is limited opportunity for one-to-one attention. "I like the special attention I get from the tutors and the help of other students," said one student. While class size may be a factor in academic achievement, students' comments suggest that the experience of feeling that the tutor is invested in your success and believes that you can achieve is a more critical factor. PI is based on the premise that all students can learn, and staff, tutors, and parents have worked together to develop an educational plan based on that assumption.

The second theme that emerged is that PI students enjoy being surrounded by other achievers. Students are motivated not only by tutors but also by their peers. They experience themselves as being in a circle of achievers, which leads them to identify themselves as achievers and reinforces behaviors that accompany achieving. As one tutor commented, "These students have taken on the trappings of their environment," and define themselves as achievers. Literature on labeling theory supports the view that group interaction can promote and reinforce higher self-esteem and new sets of disciplined behaviors.

The third theme underscores the role parents and other family members play in shaping the educational outcome and aspirations of their children. Ten out of the thirteen student respondents identified a parent or other relative as having the most influence on their post-high school plans.<sup>7</sup> Twelve out of thirteen interviewees were planning to attend college directly after high school, with one student hoping to attend the Air Force Academy. In a state in which almost half of African-American teenagers do not earn a high school diploma, the aspirations of PI students are remarkably high.

### INVOLVING PARENTS

In recent years, educators and others have argued that parental involvement in school is a key to educational success.<sup>8</sup> According to James Comer, the basis for academic achievement is an underlying social bonding between the students and their school. This bonding results from an interactive process that fosters positive social relationships between parents and school staff, and thereby promotes the psychological development of students. In this spirit PI attempts to establish close ties with parents, who are expected to participate in PI and to monitor learning at home.

PI staff also seek ways of engaging parents in the education process. Parents were regular visitors at PI. On several occasions, I observed parents at classes and overheard them saying, "I'm just looking around," or "I'm paying a little visit," or "I thought I would just stop in to see how things are going." Parents frequently telephoned PI to speak with their children, to inquire if their children had arrived, or to inform the staff that their children would be late or leaving early. Many parents also picked up their children after class, as PI is in a high-crime area.

During the second of two orientation meetings, the staff solicited and encouraged parents to make suggestions for future program planning. As important as the invitation to participate was the warm atmosphere created by staff, which is captured in the following excerpt from the director's address:

I won't give a formal welcome. I am among so many friends. As a matter of fact, many of us are like family. [Points to parents in the audience.] This is Ms. W.'s daughter's second year in the program; she's doing beautifully in geometry. Mrs. S.'s son was among our first class of graduates. He is now at Morehouse. We have many success stories, and we know that your children will be our future success stories. *We want to form a triangle around your child, that is, you, your child's school, and our program.* We welcome your children and we welcome you. Mr. C. will tell you more about what we think we can do together.

Throughout the meeting, staff and tutors made frequent reference to the importance of parent involvement in their children's academic endeavors. At one point, on learning that her daughter would be assigned homework from PI, a mother expressed concern that additional homework might put too much pressure on her child. The director began her response by acknowledging how hardworking this woman and her husband were and how supportive they were of their daughter. Then, in a sermonlike fashion, she identified a number of things students need to do in order to complete high school and be eligible for college. Her oratory was received by a round of applause and a chorus of amens from other parents. (I wondered how differently this scene might have evolved had it occurred in a public school, and had the players been a white teacher and an African-American mother.)

In addition to visiting the program and attending meetings, parents serve on standing committees, assist with administrative tasks, act as role models and mentors, and accompany tutors and students on field excursions. There isn't a formal mechanism, such as a parent advisory board, for parents to affect policy and program, but parents articulate their concerns at monthly parent-staff meetings and directly to PI's program administrators. Parents who are also members of the church have access to some members of the program's board of directors and to the pastor of Allen Temple, who is a cofounder of PI. During the application process, parents are asked to identify their areas of knowledge, skill, and interest, as well as to specify their availability.

Cognizant of the discomfort many parents experience in talking with teachers and school administrators, PI hosted a meeting for parents, local school officials, and members of the Oakland School Board. The intent of this meeting was to "demystify" the public school system by providing parents and school personnel with an opportunity to meet on neutral territory and discuss their concerns. Other workshops gave parents information on adolescent psychosocial development.

Just as important as parents' involvement in PI is their monitoring of students at home. PI requires all parents to sign a contract that delineates their educational responsibilities: Parents must agree to provide a quiet environment for students to do their homework, monitor students' progress, attend four out of seven parent-staff conferences, volunteer two hours a month for program-related activities, and attend regularly scheduled meetings with the tutors. By making explicit the respective responsibilities of teachers and parents, the contract mitigates against what Sarah Lightfoot calls "the ambiguous gray areas of authority and responsibility between parents and teachers," which exacerbate distrust between teachers and parents.

PI only accepts children whose parents are prepared to be at least minimally involved in the education process. If parents do not personally return the admission application and attend the orientation meeting, their children will not be accepted into the program. Participants whose parents do not meet their contractual obligations are dropped from the program. During academic year 1988-89, two students were dropped for lack of parental involvement.

#### WHOSE CHILDREN ARE ENROLLED?

What sorts of parents are willing to be so involved in PI? Of the sixty-five students who participated in the junior high school program in 1988-89, thirty (46 percent) came from two-parent households; twenty-seven (42 percent) came from single-parent households, predominantly female-headed (26.5 percent of Oakland's families are headed by a single parent); six students (9 percent) lived with a grandparent or other relative; and information was unavailable for two students (3 percent).

These parents are employed in a range of occupations. Data from student applications show that 51 percent of the parents are employed in entry-level white-collar positions and blue-collar craft and technical occupations; 29 percent are employed in managerial and teaching occupations (only 12 percent of the wider community is employed in this category); 19 percent of the parents did not list an occupation on the application; and one parent was unemployed.<sup>9</sup>

I conducted six interviews with parents.<sup>10</sup> With one exception all the parents cited "declining grades" or "academic difficulty" as reasons for enrolling their children at PI. Two parents indicated that their sons were not being "challenged" or "stimulated" in public school. In explaining why she enrolled her son at PI, one mother said:

[Seventh grade] was the transition point for Don. He did OK, but he needed more stimulus, more challenge. He has the potential to do well academically. But I thought I couldn't give him the help he needed. He kept getting low grades in areas that I knew he could do with his eyes closed. It was becoming cyclical—he was getting low grades, being placed in low-motivating classes, and he got caught in a cycle of low expectations from teachers, low motivation to do well. And he started acting out, being disruptive. So I enrolled him here.

One parent was referred to the program by her daughter's math teacher, a member of Allen Temple, as a "preventive" measure or as "another source of support" for a student who had been identified as "intellectually gifted." Although one student attends parochial school,

where presumably the class sizes are smaller, her parents thought that she could benefit from being in the small groups at PI.

These parents praised PI for reaching out to involve them. All the parents reported feeling welcome and comfortable at PI. One father said, "the people who are in charge over the teachers . . . are greatly concerned [about the kids], and they are not trying to sugarcoat over things because they know their importance—I mean, that day is out! They want parents involved!" While the nature of the interaction between parents and staff appears to be directed by staff, the quality of the interaction appears pleasant and salutary for both parents and staff.

All the parents reported having detected changes in their children as a result of their participation in the program: improved grades, improved study habits, improved self-confidence, and improved racial pride. One mother said, "I think that the teachers and the administrators are really good. They are on top of things. Like if Shawn's grades slip, they will call me." Another praised

the way they interact with the kids, I mean they are not intimidated by the kids. They give them room to blow off, but they still hold them accountable for their work as well as the program's rules. . . . I am so used to [public school] teachers molly-coddling kids, just wanting them to be quiet. Here, the tutors want to bring up their academics. They believe in the kids.

Parents also appreciate the fact that most of the tutors are African-American college students, whom they perceive as role models for their children.

The attitudes and involvement of these working-class parents in their children's school contrast sharply with the way working-class parents are often portrayed in the literature. These parents believe that it is their responsibility to ensure that their kids get a good education, and they seem to have a firm understanding of what PI is attempting to accomplish. While parents reported varying degrees of involvement in program activities, they perceive and experience PI as being supportive of their children and of them.

Overall, these parents appeared to be "take-charge" people who initiated contact with schools on behalf of their children: they sought information to help them make informed choices; they looked for outside resources to support their children's academic and educational aspirations; they had some standards for what their children should be learning in school and monitored their progress accordingly; they had expectations that teachers should contact them if their children had problems; and they had a clear sense of their own responsibility. In this

regard, PI has not had to teach these parents how to negotiate with their children's schools or serve as advocates for their children's rights.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the hierarchical model that predominates in public schools, teachers and parents guard their respective spheres and interact only at structured, infrequent, and brief moments. This model may work well if the culture of the school corresponds to that of the home, and if parents and teachers agree on educational goals and process. But in the absence of such understandings, the separation of spheres undermines the effectiveness of schooling.

In the interactive model employed at PI, the program, parents, and school form a triangle around students to engage them in the learning process and to improve their academic performance. By bringing parents into the educational process, interactive programs like PI attempt to create a shared culture by reconnecting school and home. Students who reported being "turned off" in school or not working up to their academic potential, or who had had no previous interest in math and science, are now "turned on" to education, are working harder, are "on track" in their respective schools, and are improving their grades and quite possibly their life chances.

Yet, despite the glowing reports from students and parents and despite my belief that programs such as PI do offer valuable opportunities to some African-Americans, the program has its limitations. Consider which parents enroll their children in PI. Were these parents already predisposed to participate in the education process? The answer is both yes and no. For the parents who indicated in the interviews that it was their responsibility to see that their children receive an education, the answer is probably yes. Other parents, however, may have felt obligated to participate as a consequence of enrolling their children. Having established the requirement of parent participation, PI created an environment in which parents felt comfortable and consequently became a part of the interactive process. It is unlikely that this group of parents would find mechanisms in place for such a partnership in their respective public schools.

While the purpose of requiring parent participation is understandable (and even laudable), mandatory parent participation necessarily excludes a large number of African-American students: students whose parent or parents are working too hard to leave them time to participate in PI, or who lack the skills to monitor their children's schoolwork, or whose lives are too irregular or unstable to accommodate scheduled meetings and conferences. A more flexible approach to parent partic-

ipation, one that strongly encourages—but does not require—participation, would enable PI to bring more disenfranchised parents back into the educational equation. PI could serve as one model for reconnecting home and school.

Although PI and other such programs are to be commended for the work they are doing, they do not absolve public schools and society of the responsibility to educate all our children. If public schools are to remain a primary and viable source of mass education, if the literature on the positive effects of parent-school partnership in academic achievement is correct, and if educators really want to form partnerships with parents,<sup>11</sup> then educators will have to find new ways to bridge the gap between school and home. A “collective, concerted resolve” is required on the part of the state, schools, local communities, and families to educate all our children.

It is worth remembering that the daily struggle to survive takes precedence over everything else for African-Americans and poor families. If we as a society are committed to equal opportunity for all our citizens, then we must attend to the myriad of social problems connected with poverty—problems that render PI necessary but also limited in its effects.

#### AFTERWORD: THE LIMITATIONS OF SPONSORSHIP

Unlike most of my classmates, I had been in the field two months before the participant observation seminar began. While they had to find a field site in order to participate in the seminar, my field site had been handed to me. I entered the field as a paid research assistant under the auspices of the University of California (UC) Task Force on Black Student Eligibility. Whereas my classmates acted on behalf of their own research, I acted on behalf of a research team. This sponsorship had consequences that I could not undo throughout the project.

The study of community-based education programs was part of several research efforts sponsored by the UC task force, which had been charged by University President David Gardner with analyzing the causes of and solutions to the low rates at which African-American students are eligible for admission to the University of California. The goals of our particular research team were to examine the role of grassroots organizations in preparing African-American students for entry into higher education in California and to come up with a set of recommendations regarding what role the university should play in relation to these organizations.

I was one of two graduate student research assistants hired to conduct field work at two sites, one of which was Interface Institute. PI also served as my field site for my seminar paper. As I reflect on the totality of my field experience, I recall the difficulty I had in carving out a piece of research that I could call my own; there was a constant struggle to keep separate the work I was doing for the UC task force and what I was doing for the seminar. Perhaps more important at this point are the nagging, recurring questions about how my identity as a UC researcher may have set the stage for how I was perceived by PI participants and how their perceptions might have shaped the data I collected.

Six months before I was hired, a sociology professor, who was also a member of the UC task force and co-principal investigator of the research project, and a fellow graduate student visited Interface. The purpose of their visit was to explain the university's research interest and to secure Interface's agreement to participate in the study. No additional contact had been made with Interface until I entered the field. The same professor accompanied me on my initial visit to PI. His role was to reestablish contact with PI and to facilitate my entry into the field. The director was forty minutes late for our appointment, and when she finally arrived, she was curt and hostile. I remember the intense dialogue between the director and the professor and the director's often repeated question, “Why should we do this?” which I interpreted as “what's in it for PI?” It was not a good beginning, and I wondered if it were a harbinger of things to come. While no promises were made during that meeting, I am convinced that the appealing possibility of the university, with its rich resources, working in tandem with a financially struggling community organization loomed large on the director's horizon. Moreover, my identity, research purpose, and role in the field had been established during that meeting. I was an “official” researcher for the University of California conducting a “legitimate” study on its behalf.

Both the university's research project and the organization of Interface converged to shape the form of my research—the extent to which I could be a participant or a nonparticipant observer. Tutoring is the core service PI provides. If one conceives of participant observation in a narrow sense, then it would stand to reason that I should have been either a tutor or a student. However, Interface is a highly structured math and science program with paid tutors working three to four days a week, twelve to fifteen hours. The program had a full complement of tutors, the majority of whom were math, science, or engineering majors. Moreover, science and math are not my strengths. What the program lacked was administrative support (receptionist/secretary) and



technical assistance (reviewing and writing grants, proposals, program development, etc.), areas in which I have a lot of experience. In addition to the structural constraints and needs of the program, there was also the research mandate of the UC task force to consider. I needed to be able to move freely about the field site, to observe the comings and goings of staff, parents, students, and visitors and to interact with them freely. Being confined to a classroom would have precluded that possibility. Therefore, I literally alternated between being a participant observer—providing technical assistance and administrative support—and a nonparticipant observer, observing the tutor-student interaction in the classroom.

When introducing me to parents, board members, visitors, or anyone who happened to come into the office while I was there, the director said, "This is Ms. Jules [I don't think she ever got my name correct]. She's studying our program for UC." Letters to parents (written on Interface stationery and signed by the program manager) broadly outlined the university's research efforts and requested their participation. In interviews with program participants, I told them that I was also conducting research for a seminar, but this information remained secondary. My "official" university identity was in the foreground, and it was to that identity I believe people responded.

Most of the people I interviewed (staff, parents, and students) questioned me about why the university was interested in PI and what the university planned to do with the information. I had constructed a careful response so as not to say anything that might bias their responses. I explained that throughout California, African-American students have a low rate of admission to UC and other four-year colleges and that the university was looking at a number of after-school programs in African-American communities to see what they were doing to prepare young people for colleges and universities. In this context, students, staff, and parents had motives to be careful about what they revealed to me. They had a vested interest in telling me about the program's successes, amplifying the positive and minimizing the negative. After all, there might be something in this for them: Interface might receive material, academic, or technical assistance; students might conceivably be identified and tracked into UC; parents may have seen this as another opportunity to help their children in some way.

This is not to say that informants painted a totally rosy picture. But staff attributed the program's weaknesses solely to the external factor of inadequate funding. And yet I observed and overheard differences (tensions) related to pedagogy (whether tutors were "tutoring" or "teaching") and classroom decorum. Had I not shared my observations

with staff, they would not have identified these as issues. As it was, they acknowledged these differences but downplayed their importance. Even students minimized the weaknesses that they reported. For example, a majority of the students stated that the science module was the weakest academic component. When I probed this point, I discovered that what they meant was that they experienced a disjunction between what they were learning at PI and at school, which they said, when pressed further, meant more work for them. While they didn't want to do "more work" and wished for better coordination between the two spheres, students emphasized that they had fun in science and learned "new things."

Because there were certain questions that I had to ask for the UC task force, the parent and student interviews were somewhat more structured than they would have been if I had been conducting interviews only for my own project. While many parents were pleased to meet an African-American student who was in a doctoral program (and at Berkeley too), and under other circumstances they might have given me more than affirming, positive, appreciative success stories, the fact remained that I was conducting a study on behalf of the university and they had a vested interest in the outcome.

By engaging in this bit of reflection, I do not mean to suggest or imply that the reports of success were untrue or exaggerated, only that when weighing the data, I had to consider the impact of sponsorship. Could it be that my role as a UC research assistant dwarfed my own research project, shaped what I observed, shaped my informants' and my own responses? Did sponsorship invalidate my study?

I can confidently say no to those questions. I was there! It is precisely this aspect of field work, conducted in the time and space of those we study, that saves the researcher from the liabilities of sponsorship. Participant observation affords the researcher opportunities to interact with and to experience the realities of others. Moreover, once in their space, the researcher becomes more self-conscious and attuned to her experiences, which can be used as a barometer of what's happening. I *experienced* something positive occurring at PI. Did I make up the excitement of the science classes? Did I dream up my engagement in the classes—so much so that I sometimes became one of the students and conducted my own experiment? Did I imagine that I wished I had had Ms. D. for algebra and Mr. M. for geometry? I did not! Had I relied solely on questionnaires or interviews, then perhaps I might have been deceived by responses designed to put the best light on the program in order to please the UC investigator. But I did the field work, observed what happened, peeled away the layers, and saw the program as it was.

Moreover, participant observation made me conscious of the liabilities of sponsorship in the first place and allowed me to take them into account in my interactions with students, parents, tutors, and staff.

## PART FIVE

### Researching the Researchers