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To Be Expected?

As a non-formal educator, I was very excited about the start of another school year: I would once more be working directly with high school students and teachers through the Green Action Project (GAP). The GAP is a year-long, time-intensive program that works with high schools that include a range of socioeconomically as well as culturally and ethnically diverse students. In fact, when I started the program through our small nonprofit agency seven years ago, I designed it with diversity in mind. Yet the program had never been tried at a school quite like Hoover.

The GAP provides a framework, guidance, and resources through which a team of students develops a research-based, action-oriented environmental education project. Because its flexible structure accommodates each school's specific educational and community needs, the GAP model can be applied in any high school. As the GAP director, I spend a lot of time in the schools and in the classrooms facilitating activities, helping students gather and interpret data as they conduct research, and giving support as they plan the community outreach and service components of their projects.

This year, one urban school in particular, Hoover High School, needed extra attention and time from me. Ms. Gonzales, the GAP contact at Hoover, had agreed to run a modified version of the program. Rather than have students volunteer to participate in GAP, as an extracurricular activity, Ms. Gonzales chose to substitute this project for regular classroom assignments. She selected 17 students from her two general science classes. The group was a mix of high- and under-achieving students.

Ms. Gonzales was certain that the students would be unable to generate their own project focus, so after some initial meetings with her, I designed several project outlines as options that she then presented to the students. They chose to do a project on surface and ground water

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pollution, researching the history of the city's source of drinking water and present-day pollution sources and drinking water contaminants.

Working with the students on a weekly basis, I soon came to realize that they were lacking access to resources as well as an environmental and educational base on which to build an in-depth project. They wanted to know, for example, who made sure they had clean drinking water, and when I told them that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) set the standards, they responded with blank stares. I was surprised because at other GAP schools, students are familiar with the EPA and most have a sufficient understanding of the agency and its role in the federal, state, and city governments. These students not only had never heard of the EPA, they were unclear about the governmental structure in general. So I spent time in the next set of visits diagramming that structure and discussing how the government interacts with and affects community issues – before I could even tell them about the EPA.

This put us slightly behind in our project plan, but the students remained interested and motivated. They looked at the national EPA water quality standards, compared them to their state's standards, and then looked at how their city measured up. Eventually they tested drinking water from various sources within the school and from a variety of sources within the city.

I became very attached to these students and really wanted to help them succeed and overcome the barriers they faced in developing their project. Ms. Gonzales and I knew that in selecting an extremely diverse group of students there would be many challenges, but we thought the benefits would be worth the extra effort. Two of the girls had little children and could not stay after school to work on the project, as many had volunteered to do. One of these girls, Renee, was extremely enthusiastic, surprising Ms. Gonzales with her dedication and involvement. Two Eastern European students barely spoke English. Yuan, the Asian American boy, stayed very quiet. Four Latino girls dominated the group. They would often talk with each other in Spanish, easily lose focus, and just giggle when they were confused.

Despite the challenges that these students had in researching a complex set of issues, interpreting the data, understanding new terms,

and working as a team, they remained enthusiastic about the project. They were passionate, but very unfocused.

As our work went forward, I struggled with the attitude of the Hoover teacher. Some of her comments to me were very troublesome. She actually said to me, “I wouldn’t have too high expectations for these kids.” Another time she said, “I swear, they are all a bunch of morons.”

All of the schools work towards the Spring GAP Conference, where each group is required to give a 20-minute presentation on their project and the issues involved. Students alternate between presenting their workshop and attending other student-led sessions. The students have a lot of room for creativity: GAP only requires that the workshops contain an oral, visual, and interactive component and an informative handout. This loose frame allows students to express themselves and convey their message in a variety of ways.

When they began their project, the Hoover students told me that their workshop would not be as good as those of the suburban students. But, they later met their peers from the other schools on several occasions, including an overnight in December when they had time to get to know one another. After the overnight, I heard comments like, “Wow, those kids are really nice,” and “I didn’t think we would get along so well and have so much in common.” They now felt much more comfortable about presenting to others.

Although the students had really learned a lot and gained a basic understanding of a complex environmental and public health issue, they had trouble communicating it and making connections between the various components. Often I’d think, I can’t tell if they get it or not. When we reviewed together, they seemed to really understand things; but when I asked them to explain to me what they learned, they couldn’t. I was afraid that they couldn’t pull it all together.

As the conference date approached, the Hoover students began to feel more secure about their project and presentation, but I began to worry about both. When practicing their presentation they would have their backs to the audience, read word for word in a low voice, or just tell the audience, “You can read the slide.” I focused on public speaking skills and various ways to communicate to a group, but the students

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did not see that they really needed to work at this and they were not committed to practicing.

A few weeks prior to the conference, I was really concerned: it was obvious that the Hoover students were less proficient compared to other schools and their presentation was inadequate. I approached Ms. Gonzales with my concerns. I told her that although the students had made much progress, they were not prepared to present alone. I suggested she facilitate the workshop to help make the connections and fill in some gaps. She was indifferent. “Oh, they’ll be fine, don’t worry about it,” was her response to my plea on behalf of the kids. I was stuck; after all, she was their teacher.

The conference finally arrived, a fun-filled educational day. Students showed up excited to share their hard work and learn from one another. The Hoover group, in particular, seemed eager to present. I was excited too. The conference is a highlight of the GAP program and reveals much about what the students have learned. It has always been rewarding for me to see students overcome their fears, extend themselves, and leave the conference with a sense of accomplishment and pride in their hard work.

After a large group mixer, the student workshops began. I always try to catch a little of every workshop since, on some level, I work with all the schools throughout the school year. I especially wanted to see the Hoover students, hoping to witness their smiling faces and beaming eyes after they finished, knowing they had done their best in showing what they had learned in seven months.

When I peeked into the room where they were making their first presentation, I found half the kids yelling at each other. Leshawn was calling the others names. Renee was bad-mouthing the students who did not show up. Carlita and Angela were shouting at their teacher. Yuan, Emmalisa, and a few others were still trying to get through the PowerPoint presentation. Others just froze in silence when they were supposed to speak. The workshop was an absolute disaster.

The teacher announced that she refused to be in the room during the second presentation. She said, “Fine! If you guys are going to make fools of yourselves, I am not going to be part of it.”

I tried to help out with a few immediate suggestions for organization and structure. Some of the students were totally defeated, while others started planning how to improve for their next session.

Their teacher basically wrote off this episode as “a disaster to be expected.” I was distressed because the students told me they failed. Carlita, who had developed into a team leader, moaned, “I knew we wouldn’t be able to do good.” The small amount of team unity that had been created crumbled at the conference. We held several wrap-up meetings to discuss what happened. I felt that there had been some areas of success, but when we tried to understand what went wrong, it always turned into a blame session. Ms. Gonzales did not participate in these discussions, however on several occasions I heard her basically tell the kids, “You embarrassed Hoover High School and me. I don’t even want to look at you.”

The students now dreaded a related service project that had previously excited them and did not follow through on it. And I was concerned that this event was feeding the many stereotypes that the affluent suburban kids had in regard to urban, minority students.

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A major factor leading to the success or failure of any program is the preliminary planning leading up to its implementation. This is graphically portrayed in the case “To Be Expected?” in which both the program coordinator and the cooperating teacher appear to have left too many things to chance.

Ms. Gonzales, the lead teacher at Hoover High School, played a key role in the program’s outcome. The criteria she used to identify the group of students selected for the project are not clear. Although it seemed that she wanted to develop a group with diverse ethnic origins, the young people had little other than their diversity in common. The lack of any homogeneity in the group was a detriment to their working together because they were never given the opportunity to build a cohesive team relationship that would enable them to work towards a common goal.

The GAP coordinator was well intentioned. She wanted her program to be available to even the most diverse groups of students. So when a particularly challenging group was assembled at Hoover High, she did not question whether the group could realistically be successful. She recognized that extra effort would be required of her and the group’s teacher, but she thought the risk was worth taking. When students’ sketchy educa-

tional background became a barrier to their success, she attempted to build their knowledge base and made numerous resources available to help them. When the Hoover students had a chance to meet and socialize with their GAP peers from neighboring schools, she was pleased for them since the experience seemed to build their confidence about what they were learning and to lessen their anxiety about making presentations to these same students later in the year. And when the time for the presentations came around, she stepped in at the last moment to teach basic presentation skills when it became apparent that the Hoover students had none. As she says, “I became very attached to these students and really wanted to help them succeed.”

The GAP coordinator clearly put extra time and effort into this group and had the students’ interests at heart. But how carefully did she plan for how the program would be implemented with this special group of students? What guidelines were provided to the school? Did the coordinator identify prerequisite skills and knowledge necessary for students to be successful in the GAP program, or did she assume that any and all students could be successful? Were there guidelines for how to select students, or plans for adaptations of the program for various groups? Was there consideration for limiting the

program only to groups that met specific criteria? All of these questions are related to the program coordinator's planning process.

What about her relationship with Ms. Gonzales? How much did she know about Ms. Gonzales and her attitudes toward her students? How clear was the teacher's role? How clear was the role the coordinator would take? How much did the coordinator's heavy investment in the class distance Ms. Gonzales from taking more responsibility for it herself?

Programs such as GAP will work in schools. But they require careful and thoughtful planning to achieve their goals:

- » Programs will be most effective if students are selected with the idea of building a team that can work together for a common good. This kind of team building takes time, and the more challenges facing the group, the more time it takes.
- » Programs like GAP can be expected to be most successful when the students have an active role in the planning and execution of their projects.
- » Teacher-leaders in these programs must have a genuine interest in helping stu-

dents find their greatest potential. This means that first they must have the belief that their students have potential. Second, they must structure experiences that challenge students to discover and use that potential. Finally, they must figure out what supports will make it possible for their students to succeed.

- » Programs that develop guidelines for implementing their models provide schools, teachers, and students with the best chance of a satisfying experience.

COMMENTATOR GINA LAGALY has spent a lifetime discovering the magic of empowering kids, especially teens. Her diverse experiences range from working with severely abused children on the psychiatric unit of an inner-city hospital to teaching science enrichment at her son's school. In 2000, she established her own foundation, Oklahoma Kids in Environmental Education, Inc. (OKIEE, Inc.). Now perched in the driver's seat of a big blue recycled school bus named Edison, she brings the magic to children across the state. High school service learners trained to conduct a variety of activities with elementary students power this unique mobile program, Eco-Motion.

Facilitation Notes

To Be Expected?

The director of an agency's outreach project with local high schools finds that the model she developed at suburban schools does not work in the same way when she tries it at

an urban school. Although she devotes a great deal of time to working with students in the urban school, the results are not positive. The case presents many issues for those

seeking to implement programs in a variety of settings with diverse audiences. It specifically asks the reader to assess whether the notion of “one size fits all” can or should be a workable goal and how best to determine a reasonable target audience.

Can one size fit all?

Central to this case is the expectation that a program that has proven successful in mostly suburban high school settings, where students volunteered to participate, will be just as successful in an urban high school, where students do not volunteer but are selected by the teacher to participate as part of their regular classwork. Was this a realistic expectation based upon the alignment between student skills, knowledge, and motivation and the requirements of the project? Discussants wondered how much information the author had about the students and the school context at Hoover High School before implementing the project there. Discussants also asked whether outreach programs can or should try to work in a variety of settings without examining what that would mean for the program. The author says that when she conceived the Green Action Project, she designed it with diversity in mind, but just what does this mean? Does inclusion of diverse participants – racially, ethnically, economically, geographically – carry with it responsibility for making adjustments to a model so that equity can be achieved?

In discussions of this case, many people marveled at how the case reflected the quan-

daries they themselves had encountered when trying to implement a “successful” program in diverse settings. Not one of these people, however, had stopped to examine what it was that made the program successful so that the potential for success in the new context could be evaluated and necessary adjustments could be made. Discussants agreed that knowing one’s target audience is important to the efficacy of any program and that perhaps it is not wise to assume that what works with one group or in one setting will have replicable results when some of the dynamics change. Much discussion focused on the wisdom of trying to implant a fixed model/system everywhere, assuming the results would be the same.

The importance of clear expectations

The author’s assumptions about the willingness of the teacher to take an active role in the project was just as erroneous as the assumption that the students would have the level of skills, knowledge, and motivation necessary to engage fully in the required activities. Discussants wondered whether there were standards and models for the school to follow in identifying participants and structuring the program or whether only loose guidelines existed. Specifically, people asked what the baseline prerequisites were for student participation (or even whether they had been specified), whether roles were specified for students, and whether students had a clear idea about what success would look like. Many found it odd that the author

spent so much time at this one school and felt compelled to fill in all of the educational gaps she identified. Discussants wanted to know what the teacher was supposed to be doing. These questions led discussants to ask whether there were clear definitions for the roles of the project director and the school-site sponsor. They also wondered about how the progress of school teams was assessed and whether there was a formative evaluation process aligned with the goals of the program that could be used to provide indicators of success.

Discussants thought it important that programs working with schools provide structure and guidance for students about expectations, roles, and indicators of success. They also agreed that baseline criteria for student skills and knowledge, related to program demands, need to be developed and then applied in either a formal or informal way to help determine whether or not a program can be expected to have success with a particular group. This process would also be helpful in an early identification of what gaps might need to be filled so that all participants would have an opportunity to be successful.

What is the role of an outside agent when working with a school community?

In this case, it appears that the director of the GAP took major responsibility for directly working with the students, defining the topic for the student project, teaching presentation skills, and filling educational

gaps (for example, about the structure of governmental agencies). Discussants noted that although she works with all the schools, her role in this school went far beyond what she usually does. Did she find herself spending more time in this school because she hadn't done the necessary planning that might have identified the special challenges for this group? Or, did she feel some sort of guilt about the educational inequities she found in this school? Or, did the lack of clear expectations and role definitions contribute to the teacher's limited involvement and leadership?

Because nothing is known about the background of the author or her knowledge about the learning process, we also do not know whether she had sufficient skills to facilitate learning and assess understanding as she engaged with the students. Did she simply lead students through the steps and assume they were learning? While the author indicated her desire to help these students, and to assist them with their project, discussants questioned what the students at Hoover High School really learned. Were they set up for failure because of their lack of initial investment in the problem being studied, or the way in which their involvement was structured, or even the method used to select them as participants? Discussants noted the high cost of this kind of failure if it serves to reinforce for the students and their suburban peers that they were incapable of measuring up and being successful.

So, what might have contributed to this being a more successful experience for the students? In addition to the previous suggestions, discussants thought that whenever possible, outside agents should recruit teams of teachers to work with a project. Whether the team is composed of two people, or more, the members help to support one another, provide more stability, and also contribute different skills and personalities to the activities. The team of teachers and the outside agent should then be working

in a partnership to accomplish agreed-upon goals, and this takes time. Time is also an important investment when providing training or an orientation to the role of the site team; their understanding of their responsibilities and the demands of the project are critical to success. Discussants pointed out that this partnership between the outside agent and a well informed site team should be based upon good communication, trust, and a willingness to take *calculated* risks together.