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Moving Mountains: Reform, Resistance, and Resiliency in an Appalachian Kentucky High School

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The dissertation summarized below examines the question of how stakeholders in an Appalachian Kentucky high school addressed the educational problems that they targeted for reform. Set against the backdrop of the controversial Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA), this ethnographic investigation describes the challenges of effectively coupling top-down state mandates with bottom -up advocacy and engagement. Drawing on over a year of participant observation at "Central High School" in "Hickory County," the research presents six connecting themes that are critical for understanding local paradigms and enduring paradoxes. Prominent in the local response was resistance to the priorities and policies set forth by the state. Although this resistance fueled the state's threats to take punitive action to encourage compliance with the standardized goals of the Reform Act, these threats, paradoxically, engendered greater resiliency on the part of Hickory County stakeholders to make the high school reflect their own priorities and ways of working together. Thus this research points to ways in which reform, resistance, and resiliency were entwined in this rural venue.

On April 11, 1990, the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) broke prominently upon the national scene as one of the most comprehensive public school reforms attempted by a state. KERA's passage heralded what was to be labeled the "third wave" of reform (Smith & O'Day, 1991). This approach distinguishes itself from previous waves in its integrated or "systemic" approach to using centralized resources and authority to create a more decentralized system of common schools. In the 6 years since KERA's passage, Kentucky has emerged as a national leader in state-mandated comprehensive school reform. And this trend only promises to gain momentum with the recent federal push to eliminate the Department of Education and devolve ever greater power and authority to the states.

In order to be successful, systemic reform as exemplified in KERA requires the effective coupling of top-down state mandates with bottom-up local engagement. Thus, one of the major emphases in KERA is the cultivation of local stakeholders who have the capacity to engage in public discourse—and action—related to the purposes and policies of their schools. To these ends, several of the initiatives in KERA aim to create more democratic decision-making structures. Teacher committees, site-based councils, and citizens' superintendent screening committees are three of the most important of these bodies. They are intended to give formal authority to people working directly in schools. This emphasis on incorporating previously disenfranchised groups into formal processes of decision-making echoes parallel concerns for democratization, whether in Newly Independent Countries in eastern Europe or in inner-city Chicago.

While policies may be written at a state level, actual reform is radically local. At the basic level of the school, negotiations about proposed changes are enmeshed in local webs of personal relationships, power hierarchies, and long-standing paradoxes about the very meaning of education itself. These webs have repeatedly ensnared those state officials who, expecting to see systemic reform progress in a rational, impersonal manner, misjudged how strong local cultural frames of reference can be. Reformers need to more effectively understand the role that these resilient strands of culture play in framing the local debates. For they are fundamentally important in understanding how much is at stake in adopting the KERA reforms and, hence, why there can be so much local resistance.

The southeastern, Appalachian part of Kentucky presents a particularly challenging and fundamentally important place to look at the many shades of KERA implementation. Long a set of school systems that have resisted attempts at centralized reforms, these rural Appalachian schools have entered a new era of accountability to exter-

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nal authorities at the same time that they have been granted greater autonomy. Whether this uneasy mix of decentralization with centralization can contribute to greater local ownership of reforms that are responsive to their rural contexts is a critical question.

If reforms are to be sustained and become integrated into the fabric of these rural settings, we must create environments for reform that support risk-taking and engagement by those who have the most at stake. In the Appalachian parts of Kentucky, this has been particularly difficult to do through formal means. But it is a critical prerequisite in this traditionally marginalized region. Because of Appalachian people' emphasis on self-reliance and their concern for autonomy, any externally initiated effort to improve rural schools or rural communities over the long term must cultivate ownership of the effort by diverse residents. It is not just the sustainability of any particular Reform Act that is at stake, but also the sustainability of viable, democratic communities of inquiry.

Research Questions

The central research question guiding this work was: *How do stakeholders in an Appalachian Kentucky high school address the problems that they target for reform?* This led to a set of related questions, which include: Were they successful in cultivating grassroots engagement and advocacy on behalf of their high school? Did they achieve significant reforms of long-standing problems? What roles did KERA and the state officials charged with facilitating it play? What do various stakeholders' responses say about the underlying cultural contexts of rural Central Appalachia?

In order to answer these questions, it is critical to "see people in the contexts of power and meaning" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992, p. 17) which shape their resistance and inform the ways in which they are resilient. I wanted to see what reform efforts looked like on the ground: in classrooms, in teachers' lounges, in sandwich shops, at laundrymats, and on front porches. Using Hickory County's Central High School[1] as the nexus, I began a year-long, systematic investigation.

My focus is on the perspectives at the ground level, that is, how diverse participants constructed their most pressing problems, and how this, in turn, generated new understandings of themselves and their schools. Certainly, many of the changes would never have been proposed had KERA not recommended, even mandated, certain practices or policies. However, I give center stage to the local voices, bringing in KERA when appropriate to highlight its role as catalyst, provocateur, and even foil.

[1]All names are pseudonyms.

My theoretical framework unites symbolic anthropology with the social construction of problems to analyze rural community engagement with educational reform. In answering the central research question, I break it into two constituent parts. First, I look at how these rural people constructed the most pressing problems that they identified for reform. Second, I make explicit the ways that they understood themselves as stakeholders within symbolic and political communities.

The Construction of "Problems"

The problems that precipitated the passage of KERA were not new. Indeed, they were the result of long-standing inequities in the provision, quality, and control of academic resources in Kentucky. Likewise, at Central High the problems of underachievement, low attendance, high drop out rates, and an almost complete absence of parental participation in academic affairs were not new. However, at this point in time, a critical mass of participants was no longer willing to accept the seemingly intractable as inevitable. They realized that they had a stake in no longer ignoring the problems of their high school. Coupled with a Reform Act that also defined these outcomes as problematic and with a change in administration at Central, more people became stakeholders in "their" school. They questioned the very legitimacy of the status quo, thus launching the state of educational affairs into the public arena as a "problem" requiring reform.

A key dimension in creating ownership of educational policies is the right to define the problems to be solved. As Berger and Luckman (1967) have noted, reality is socially defined; these "definitions of reality have self-fulfilling potency" (p. 116). Therefore, whether or not stakeholders are willing to identify a situation or paradigm as an intractable given or whether it will be treated as problematic, questionable, and, hence, even alterable, is a matter of great importance. Edelman (1988) elucidates the potential that is unleashed when something is defined as a problem:

> Problems come into discourse and therefore into existence as reinforcement of ideologies, not simply because they are there or because they are important for well-being. They signify who are virtuous and useful and who are dangerous and inadequate, which actions will be rewarded and which penalized. They constitute people as subjects with particular kinds of aspirations, self-concepts, and fears, and they create beliefs about the relative importance of events and objects. They are critical in determining who exercises authority and who accepts it. They construct areas of immunity from concern because those areas are not seen as problems. Like leaders and enemies,

> they define the contours of the social world, not in the same way for everyone, but in the light of the diverse situations from which people respond to the political spectacle. (pp. 12-13)

Further, it is not enough for a state law to declare that there is a problem; local people must deem this to be true for themselves. For as Mrs. Roberts, a central office person, put it, "You cannot fix a problem if you don't identify it as one."

Communities of Stakeholders

The ways that residents of this Appalachian county defined their problems reflect their understandings of the symbolic and political worlds around them. The ways that they infuse traditional lifeways and webs of relationship into the terms on which they pursue reform challenge official assumptions about schools' contributions to their host communities. Hickory Countians' understandings of the interdependence between people and places challenge models of education reform based on efficiency, mobility, and the independence of actors. In this small, close-knit rural setting, becoming a stakeholder in reform was not a private, personal matter. It was a strategic choice made within a lively social arena.

The title of my dissertation is drawn from a comment made by Mrs. Ely, a reform-weary, but very determined, educator in Hickory County. In the year that I worked at Central, it seemed that the degree of actual change were nearly imperceptible. But, to those engaged with the process of reform, changes were significant nonetheless. Standing with me on a hilltop, looking out over the mountains that rise high above Hickory's county seat, this long-time teacher remarked, "Reform is like moving mountains. It's grain of sand by grain of sand. You've got to take it one problem at a time."

When making this analogy, Mrs. Ely evoked many layers of meaning about mountains, human nature, and the slow process of fundamental change. In Appalachia, understandings about the physical world overlap with understandings about the human world; geographic location is intertwined with one's political location. In Hickory County, there is a poignant sense of accelerating loss of both land and close family ties. At the same time, residents expressed the desire to reassert their distinctiveness and to preserve their mountain spaces, especially their schools, as belonging to them, as vehicles for them to transmit valued cultural ways of being and relating with one another. In this process, they are actively engaged in constructing definable and bounded "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983), deeply rooted communities that offer alternatives to the (mainstream) values of transience, consumption, individualism, and material measures of success.

Hickory County people live within multiple sets of nested communities. Their decisions to become involved in school affairs touch their families, friends, neighbors, clubs, churches, colleagues, and more as the ripples set off by their actions widen. Thus, in constructing this analysis of how communities of learners came together and negotiated the extent to which they would adopt externally mandated changes to their schools, it is key to recognize the different ways that residents of Hickory County conceptualize what it means to be part of interdependent, rural mountain communities. In a booklet entitled "Culture: The Roots of Community Spirit and Power" (Sapp, 1989), regional educators and activists offered their understanding of the meaning of community.

> The key word in all of this is community. The television images and political rhetoric of mainstream America stress the individual family as the basic unit of our society. In this view, a community is just a large collection of individual households. But those of us who are rooted in and work with Appalachian and Deep South communities understand community differently. To be sure, we also honor our ties to our parents and to our blood brothers and sisters. Yet we understand our community as including all our ties of kin and clan, our bonds of church and barter, our connections with inherited ways of talking and our ancestral bonds. To us, this much larger family is the basic unit of society because it is our community which carries our cultural traditions from generation to generation. It is in our communities that we learn who we are, where we come from, and how to do things which make us who we are. We learn our traditional lifeways from our elders, and together we learn how to adapt to changing times and circumstances. Our cultures, our communities and our sense of place are one. Most mainstream Americans do not understand culture in the way just described, as a series of living relationships among people and between people and their land. (pp. 3-4)

This pervasive commitment to their own place inspired these Appalachians' desires to remain distinct and to act on their own behalf to create sustainable communities that they control. At the schools and in informal gathering places, parents, teachers, and young people debate what it means to be "educated" and also be "mountain." In the public spaces created by the democratic bodies mandated in KERA, stakeholders are redefining what effective schooling means to them and to the future of their "homeplace." Together, they are actively constructing what it means to be of the mountains yet move mountains.

Method

The dissertation draws on over a year of participation observation in a consolidated high school and the surrounding host communities. Ethnography is a particularly well-suited, if underutilized, approach to studying far-reaching and complex school reforms. Given the breadth and depth of this study, I made the commitment to move to Hickory County for a year and to live as part of the county and their high school.

Central High School in Hickory County offered an intriguing and consequential site from which to explore my research questions. Like many consolidated rural schools, Central High's campus was at the critical juncture where issues of autonomy, identity, and authority intersect. It is the gathering place for teens drawn from the furthest reaches of the county, the place where local meets local, and local engages the state. Anzaldua (1987) posits that individuals who live on such cultural borderlands, along the rough edges "where world[views] collide," exist in a state of tensions and explicit paradoxes. These places of confluence are potentially creative spaces where ambivalence and negotiation can result in syntheses of old and new, inside and outside, mountain and mainstream.

I made use of diverse means of collecting data, many of which were iteratively developed and refined in the course of the fieldwork. In total, I wrote, conducted, and/or analyzed 10 different surveys; I obtained at least one survey from over 95% of faculty and staff, as well as one from a random sample of freshmen and adult GED students. I interviewed 14 faculty members, 34 students, 12 staff, 9 community leaders, 5 business owners, 2 young professionals, 11 "involved" parents, 7 "non-involved" parents, 5 central office staff members, and 8 members of the central administration (including principals past and present). After nearly a year of negotiations, I also successfully interviewed all the board members, the superintendents, and the interim superintendent.

Many of these interviews required that I go to *them*—along a labyrinth of gravel and dirt roads that twist among steep-sided hollows, and to the tar-paper-sided homes, elegant legal offices, friendly police stations, the bookmobile, crowded and strange-smelling rural health clinics, family lumber yards, and so on, where these people worked and lived. I also did content analysis of print, radio, and television media, including analyzing the county's newspaper the entire year prior to moving to Hickory County and into the present, one year after the fieldwork period ended. I traveled extensively throughout the county with the truant officer, and, as my growing network of teen confidants grew, with young people.

I spent about 50 hours per week in and around Central High School. Much of this time was spent dressed as a teenager hanging out and learning their views of life, career choices, sex, and school. Other frequent activities included working as a curriculum consultant; assisting teachers and doing a series of writing and metaphor exercises with the sophomore English classes; interviewing state officials who had come to investigate the district; gathering information from regional, state, and national libraries and historical societies; and gleaning and analyzing statistical information from CD-ROMs and census databases for my own and for the teacher-grant writers' use. Outside of school, I frequented ball games, country stores, laundrymats, restaurants, and enjoyed opportunities to create and share information when I sat on front porches to "neighbor awhile."

The ethnographic methods that I have used make it possible to offer policy makers and practitioners an unusually rich and engaging account of the multiple, and often conflicting, realms where reform becomes real in the life of a community. There are five major highlights that set this work apart.

First, issues of gaining voice are central to the narrative of this study; the ethnographic nature of this research extends this discourse by providing another avenue through which the voices of those most profoundly affected by the changes—but least often heard—can emerge. I spent a great deal of time listening to and talking with a diverse group of students and staff. As a result, the dissertation's accounts illuminate the diversity of positions and social privileges within the high school body. The blend of interviews, observations, directed writing exercises, and metaphor exercises give vivid testimony of the student's understandings of the paradoxes they encounter and the limits of reforms mandated by a distant legislature.

Second, the way that I conducted myself and my work differed in key ways from other, concurrent external evaluations. At the time of this research, Hickory County was being investigated by the state for willful noncompliance with KERA and state officials. In this context of suspicion and resentment of external intrusion, my hands-on, personal work went over exceptionally well. In a 25-page methodology appendix in my dissertation, I address the contrasts between my research and the state's investigation. My approach builds on the concept of empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 1993) and feminist research methods, especially those espoused by Reinharz (1992), and emphases partnership and parity. My research program was a collaborative effort that integrated local educators' needs and perspectives into the project design at every stage. I also served as facilitator and information disseminator during a strategic series of transitions (new curricula). I have actively cultivated the local capacity for self-reflection and critique while openly acknowledging, both in the field and in subsequent academic settings, the risks taken by those who chose to contribute to this frank appraisal of reform.

Third, my methodology acknowledges and integrates the multiple dimensions of those involved (e.g., family allegiances, gender, academic success, race, age, SES, and sense of connection to place). By linking these previously fragmented dimensions, my work is able to embrace the personal ambivalence and oppositions that make the situation so dynamic. An illustration of the benefits of this approach is the section entitled "'Good Old Boys' and 'Loud Mouthed Women.'" I address how gendered constructions of leadership, gossip, and knowledge profoundly influence the ways that outspoken or critical members of the community are viewed. In addition, I point to ways in which women's marginal positions relative to the "good old boys' club," coupled with severe social sanctions for "getting above their raising," make it even less likely that they will speak out.

Fourth, I compare and contrast the power differentials both within different social strata in the community as well as between the community and the state. Within the local level, I also actively draw parallels between the ways that youth disengage from high school and resist the newly-required achievement tests and how faculty disengage from and resist these same reforms. Thus this compelling, multi-layered analysis of reform shows how hierarchies of disengagement from formal schooling are perpetuated concurrently.

Fifth, I include in the introduction of my dissertation a section entitled "Representation and Risk Taking" that explicitly addresses such key issues as preserving anonymity, empowerment and evaluation; the outsider as "expert;" and linguistic representations of nonstandard English dialects. These issues are more extensively analyzed in an appendix, which provides insights, strategies, and ethical issues of interest to researchers, policy makers, and ethnographers who would build on this research.

Findings

Briefly summarized, the dissertation can be divided into three sections: background about the reform and Hickory County, a set of three stories, and the conclusions. In the background section, I use ethnographic, geographic, kinship, and statistical analyses to present key areas of contention about schooling. I highlight those factors that initially compelled educational administrators to join in the original lawsuit that ultimately culminated in KERA. I then present an engaging, first-hand account of life at Central High that introduces some of the key conflicts that are pivotal in the three case studies that follow. Finally, I explore some of the paradoxical ways that local youth and adults understand what it means to be "educated," and the tense relationship between "book knowledge" and "common sense." Together, these chapters prepare the ground for the analysis of key events that follows.

The second major section is organized around the retelling of three stories. Each was a critical episode in the process of addressing central problems. Each of the stories presents an area of conflict that percolated up from a set of long-standing concerns and that came to a head during the year that I was in residence. The three stories can be seen as concentric circles, each one encompassing an increasingly larger set of stakeholders. The first story centers on one of Central High's core missions: curriculum. This first narrative revolves around how stakeholders addressed the problem of Central High's largely unchallenging curriculum. Teachers' committees, work groups, and faculty meetings were the main forums in which participants debated what kind of education the school should offer and to whom these should be available. The second story widens the relevant community of reformers to include parents, who play a formal role through the site-based decision making councils mandated in KERA. This case study illustrates how stakeholders negotiated solutions to the problem of an exceedingly narrow base of representation in school affairs. The third story encompasses a new county-wide process for selecting a new superintendent of schools. The account focuses not only on the problem of whom to hire (dare they recommend an "outsider?"), but also on the question of how to create a more publicly accountable process.

Each story is rich with quotes, examples, and critical incidents that illustrate how various constituencies grappled with the central problems. In creating public and private spaces for discourse, participants were drawn into an engaging exchange about the cultural paradigms that underscore how people work—or do not work—together around common goals. For some people, this process led to a greater recognition and, sometimes, reevaluation of the ways that they understood what it means to be a community. An important contribution is my incorporation of what teenagers learned about how one negotiates one's place and one's future. Throughout each story, I weave in a thread of running commentary by youth as they understand and critique the inconsistencies, priorities, and tactics of the adults around them.

Conclusions

Moving Mountains

This analysis began with the realization that while policies may be written on a state level, reform is a radically local process. If efforts to decentralize authority and to democratize participation are to be successful, reformers need a more complex, concretely grounded understanding of what reform looks like at the grassroots.

Certainly, the case of Hickory County shows reform is a tedious and tenuous process. Reform is never simply a matter of rational choice, of disinterested, apolitical ques-

tions of efficiency and organization. Rather, it requires face-to-face, personal engagement with long-standing issues of power and privilege that have created and maintained the system that is in place. Changes in the public schools (this rural county's largest employer and, perhaps, its most prominent institution) threaten to catalyze transformations of other hierarchies of power and authority that extend far past the schoolhouse door.

Since the initial fieldwork year, there have been some important improvements in Central's achievement scores, curriculum provisions, and parental involvement statistics. However, these changes, while laudable, are just the tip of the iceberg. For the most significant changes are not these cosmetic and numerical improvements, but movements deep under the surface. A critical mass of stakeholders redefined the problems that they targeted for reform. Just as important, together, stakeholders made important steps in moving from a dependency mentality in which they expressed little hope of change to a more active sense of themselves as stakeholders who could address their own problems. In the process, some moved from having a stake in the KERA's failure to having a common stake in its success.

Buoyed by the encouragement of the new principals whom their site-based council had selected, a critical mass of teachers resisted pressures from their colleagues to conform to past levels of mediocrity and public complacency. At the same time, they also resisted state experts dictating exactly what to do. Hickory Countians resisted the priorities and policies set forth by the state as ill-matched to their own most pressing needs; they wanted to articulate their own interests and define their own problems. And they were determined to incorporate cultural themes of their rural Appalachian homeplace into how they accomplished these ends.

Although Hickory Countians' resistance fueled the state's threats to take punitive action to encourage compliance with the standardized goals of the Reform Act, these threats, paradoxically, encouraged greater resiliency on the part of local stakeholders to make Central High reflect their own priorities and ways of working together. In this, participants in the expanding discourse found the new, more representative, decision-making bodies established in KERA to be a boon for diversifying those who had a voice. Mrs. Raleigh, a veteran teacher, reflected her rural Appalachian peers' determination to finally speak for themselves:

> In this educational reform, as in any new endeavor, to be told what to do rather than to discover problems and solutions through our own methods and resources is disheartening. Ever since Johnson's War on Poverty, some political body has been trying to "fix" the problems for us rather than assisting us in solving them ourselves, like children. . . To have someone who doesn't live here or understand our heritage suggest that he knows what's best for both our region and schools is so demeaning and unproductive. The most positive things about KERA are that it allowed local control and tries to be nonpolitical. What a difference in focus from the usual dictation and "missionary work!"

Learning to find, and then exercise, their voices was a real challenge for many of those who felt most comfortable hiding behind the mask of the shy mountaineer stereotype. But this fundamental shift in agency is what is really promising about this case. The sense that they could—and should—define their own problems and speak for themselves was key. They were on their way to becoming stakeholders and effectively negotiating the terms on which they would accept reform of their consolidated high school. Given the scope of the challenge, even incremental progress toward their goals was monumental.

Cultural Themes

Throughout the earlier chapters of the dissertation, a fugue of voices compete, diverge, combine, and ultimately resonate on several common themes. In the 73-page conclusion chapter, I present the six cultural themes that emerged. Each connecting theme was selected because it expressed an underlying local frame of reference that influenced how these rural stakeholders approached the problems that they targeted for reform. Each theme is organized around a set of assumptions, myths, cultural symbols, and ways of relating that were known by nearly all participants. These themes are not static frameworks that are impersonal cultural absolutes; they are dynamic ways of approaching and understanding change.

At the heart of this dynamic are the two complementary elements: resistance and resiliency. Resistance was both active and reactive, and was directed against local as well as state groups. Parents and teachers resisted former administrators' stranglehold on information regarding the Reform Act. They called for more open discussion of reforms rather than clandestine decisions that effectively marginalized non-elites from participating. Local stakeholders also resisted external definitions of what their priorities and policies should be, in part to assert their continued mountaineer autonomy to the state, but also because they did not want to simply import solutions that they felt were mismatched to their goals and lifeways. As Mrs. Denton, a parent protested, "I don't want to be a model school if it means we are modeled after someone else!" Hickory Countians also resisted the implications inherent in KERA that they were unable to govern their own affairs without greater state accountability mechanisms.

Resiliency was a parallel element. At the same time, (re)defining their own problems created spaces for local reformers to take into account, and thereby reify, their rural values of mutual interdependence, "people before programs," and the enduring importance of family ties. They used the myths and symbols around them to renew their sense of purpose and construct themselves and their cultures as worthy of protecting. They drew on myths of family, The Great Flood, and a heightened sense of nostalgia to remind themselves of times in which they had acted together on behalf of their schools and their children. In this way, their response also engendered greater resilience, and ultimately led, in a way state reformers could not have fully anticipated, to sustainable ownership of educational reforms. By reclaiming the terms on which they were willing to face their problems, stakeholders in Hickory County are, indeed, moving mountains.

Like the interlocked circles that make up a wedding ring quilt, the six themes share elements in common yet are complete entities in themselves. Taken as a series, the rings form a distinct pattern. They take on further shape in contrast with the common background upon which they all rest. Each of the rings (themes) is patched together with fragments of stories, of pieces of the larger fabric of life from which these themes are cut. Some of the fragments are used in several rings; some key pieces are the links that join several themes. Repeated pieces create dominant motifs within a particular ring. Each piece has a unique design, a balance of white and black that gives each piece its special pattern. These designs are comparable to the balance of resistance and resiliency within a particular storyline or incident. Some rings or themes emphasize resistance more than resilience, and in some the motifs are reversed. But both are present to some extent in each theme. Reform has many shades of gray. It is this interplay of the various designs of resistance and resiliency that give the quilt of Hickory County its unique and vibrant character.

The first of the six themes begins by restating Hickory County residents' fundamental conviction that they need to take the lead in looking out for their own best interests. *"We take care of our own,"* expresses the desire for local control and their determination to put their own "people before programs." I recap several illustrations from the stories of the essential dilemma that the local educational elite do not take equal care of *all* students, but primarily look out for their own friends, kin, and peers. While the case of Central High illustrates elements that might lead to a more inclusive sense of collective responsibility (e.g., the claim that "we are a family here") it also shows how vested interests have repeatedly undermined a more equitable stance to taking care of all young people of Hickory County. In this, my work challenges notions of rural schools as operating akin to harmonious, extended families.

The next two themes summarize how a person should act when trying to resolve long-standing conflicts of interest and to propose changes. Participants asked, "How can a person be of the mountains yet move mountains?" *"We solve things face to face,"* the second theme, expresses the preferred ideal of being able to talk openly and informally with one another as equals. However, recognizing that power differentials based on family name, wealth, race, church affiliation, public office, and gender significantly undermine actual equality, this theme points to the significant gap between the ideal and actual practice.

"Do not act like an expert," the third theme, exhorts those who would support reform to do so in a way that does not demean or marginalize others, especially the majority (81%) of adults who have no formal education beyond high school. Instead, actively building coalitions in which the "common knowledge" of all stakeholders is respected is key. This theme incorporates the concept that formal schooling does not in itself make one educated. In fact, numerous examples illustrate how those who have a significant level of schooling may be at greater risk of "losing the mountain," that is losing touch with the constituents for whom they are supposed to be advocates.

The next two themes point to the power of numbers and information to legitimize stakeholders' interests and authority, create value judgments, and give substance to definitions of the problems. Instances in which *"numbers are legitimating"* are summarized under the fourth theme. Both state officials and local faculty use statistics to evaluate, rank, and assess the achievements of Central High School and its students. But those on the receiving end of such numbers resisted them as adequate definitions of who they were or could be. Recognizing that these statements carry official sanctions, I caution that the Central's increasing dropout rate (53%) and daily absentee rate (17%) may be at best weak indicators of the degree of change, and may even be misleading as to the actual direction of underlying changes. For example, faculty and administration attempts to actually document student absenteeism and then confront students who had "laid out" of class actually backfired, causing Central's absentee rate, and eventually also the drop out rate, to significantly increase.

Fifth, in Hickory County as elsewhere, *"knowledge is power."* Information about how schools operate, what KERA mandates, and what stakeholders' rights and responsibilities are all are valuable commodities. Therefore, those who did not want KERA to succeed resisted by hoarding such knowledge at the top administrative levels. Stakeholders are just beginning to discover how one finds out what one needs to know. Further, "homefolks" are going through growing pains as they venture to ask questions and try new methods of producing their own information. A critical dimension to this process of generating and sharing information is the cultivation of alternative spaces for discourse. I

take an extensive look at photocopied flyers, gossip, and such rural institutions as mountain country stores as places where resistance and resiliency are generated. It is in these spaces that much of the creative work took place in redefining local priorities, forging regional alliances, and sharing useful information about what it was that county residents supposed was happening at Central.

Finally, the sixth theme, *"we are mountain,"* brings together elements of a concretely grounded ethic of rural renewal based on connection to place and progeny. The importance of place to people in this rural setting is one of the most important contributions captured by this ethnographic account. Their mountain hollows provide places of autonomy and independence, havens for mountaineers who resist change for the sake of change alone. The mountains also stand out as rugged and enduring symbols of the importance of slow change and resilience in the face of challenge. Drawing on allegories and metaphors of the mountains, Hickory County youth and adults describe themselves and their communities as enduring, resilient, and endangered. Youth and adults identified with the sheltering mountains that surround them on every side, stating "We are mountain, we will endure." Constructing themselves as being like the mountains gave form and substance to these Appalachians' desires to remain distinct and to act on their own behalf to create viable, vital communities and schools.

Significance

This dissertation lays a significant and provocative foundation for further research into the process of community engagement with the "problems" of educational reform. By contrasting the cultural themes prominent in a persistently poor, marginalized, and rural district with the objectives of their state's systemic Reform Act, this research highlights key tensions and paradoxes that continue to shape KERA's fate. By presenting the ways in which reform, resistance, and resiliency were entwined in this rural venue, this research challenges previous knowledge about how reforms become real in the lives of rural people and their schools.

In addition to the methodological contributions and specific conclusions noted above, my doctoral research makes the following points:

1. Exclusive reliance on broadly construed, generic measures of change amalgamated across a state miss fundamental local differences. Work at the grassroots level is critical to understanding diverse local responses and sources of resistance to systemic reform. My work documents issues specific to the rural, Appalachian third of the state.

2. Standards-based reform is anything but standardized. High standards need not imply that school faculties will use the same curriculums to achieve these ends. Indeed, as the case of Central High indicates, the most significant progress towards increasing staff and students expectations of—and commitments to—student success was made when culturally relevant pedagogical styles and content matter were brought into play.

3. Concepts of appropriate leadership are often gendered. When women try to act as public leaders, the challenges, criticisms, and isolation they face compound the difficulties of their positions. My research documents important ways in which women in this venue nevertheless rallied some of their peers to action.

4. The rugged mountain geography is both setting for and symbol of Hickory Countians' drama of educational development. By drawing out the importance of a sense of place in respondents' concepts of themselves and their schools, my work makes novel contributions by redefining both "rural" and "place." My research broadens understandings of these terms by giving examples of ways in which the symbolic and metaphorical dimensions of these terms are invoked and elaborated.

5. Resistance and resiliency can be mutually inclusive. Resistance to state-mandated standardized reforms is often seen as evidence of a local school system's incapacity to change. However, my study shows clearly how resistance can actually enhance capacity for sustained growth. Resiliency in adapting cultural themes and ways of working together to their current situation was a marked feature of reform in Hickory County.

6. In a context in which differences in power and status are both persistent and large, it is critical to look first hand at those alternative spaces in which those with little formal or public power exercise resistance. Thus in this ethnographic account, data gathered from informal, nonschool, and face-to-face neighborhood spaces (e.g., anonymous copy machine graffiti, gossip networks, and country stores) are as important sources of "data" as are formal surveys. A different methodological approach might have concluded the average parent was not engaged with school reform. In fact, they were indeed deeply concerned and talkative, just not in school-sponsored settings.

7. Instead of seeing them as failures or as marginal to the educational system, my work incorporates the experiences of those 50% of students who eventually drop out and/or become teen parents. I see their "failures" as central, even necessary, components of this rural school system. For as long as half of students do not finish school, those who are "successful" on the school's terms are in a privileged position, poised to fill the ranks of the few professional, technical, and government positions that do exist in the county. This situation fuels one of the basic conflicts documented through this dissertation. Namely, one of the fundamental objectives of KERA, enhancing the academic achievement of all students, remains at best a suspect, if not outrightly contested, goal in Hickory County.

8. Reformers need to cultivate patience. Hasty (state) intervention in a budding local reform could destroy the unique and well-adapted solutions that are just beginning to emerge.

9. As arose repeatedly in my study, there are serious limitations to change when the school system is by far the single largest employer and the regional economy is seriously underdeveloped. Persistent impoverishment of the majority makes them particularly vulnerable to the affluent and powerful members of the "good old boy" networks.

10. The Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990, or any other systemic reform, is, in itself, insufficient to create stakeholders who have a genuine interest in sustaining reform. If changes are made simply for the sake of superficially complying with the minimal standards of a particular act, much of the original intent of the reforms will be lost. Stakeholders in rural hollows and urban centers must all take an active role in defining their own problems and priorities. They must devise solutions that incorporate, not marginalize, their own local cultures. Thus this work provides the basis for more critical and complex analyses of the challenges of creating local ownership of educational reforms, the key to sustaining significant change.

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