

Energy Express: Connecting Communities and Intervention on Behalf of Schoolchildren in West Virginia

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Low-income schoolchildren in rural communities often lack resources to support their educational and social development and nutritional status during the summer months. This article describes Energy Express, a summer reading and nutrition program in 76 West Virginia communities. The program uses college student/AmeriCorps members who, using a place-based curriculum, provide activities to support children's literacy by creating a print-rich environment. Energy Express intends to impact mentor's attitudes and skills related to community service as it enhances children's reading achievement. Ethnographic case study data is used to describe how characteristics of the communities that partner with Energy Express impact program implementation.

Many low-income school children are disadvantaged during the summer months by the lack of family or community resources to support child growth and development. Children's physical growth and development is stymied when school nutrition programs are not in operation and children lack needed nutrition at home. Children also fail to maintain academic skills when they are unable to participate in activities that support their emerging literacy. This may be especially problematic in rural communities, where programs that support children's educational and social development during the summer (e.g., recreation programs, camps) are scant. Communities may lack communication or transportation infrastructures necessary to ensure that educational or nutritional programs are provided to the community's neediest children (Butera & Dempsey, 1999; Gans, 1995; Stagner & Duran, 1997; Weissbourd, 1992).

Outcomes for youth are likely to be the product of many factors, and interventions that acknowledge the importance of comprehensive community efforts are becoming more common (Bruner, 1996; Maeroff, 1998; Stagner & Duran, 1997). Communities differ in their capacities to respond to the needs of youth. In specific, interventions aiming to support children's social and educational progress have often encountered difficulty "translating" program principles in rural communities (Butera & Maughan, 1999; DeYoung, 1994; Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997; Schorr, 1989). While rural communities may struggle with a lack of resources to respond to child need, the value of place inherent in many rural communities may serve to facilitate intervention as

the sense of care and deep-rootedness to the community becomes the central cohesion point of community effort (Bushnell, 1999; Hummon, 1990; Lutz & Merz, 1992; Miller, 1993; Orr, 1992; Perin, 1977; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995).

The purpose of this article is to present Energy Express, a summer program that provides low-income school children in 80 West Virginia communities with literacy activities and nutrition. Energy Express aims to partner with communities in order to build intervention activities for participating children and youth. The structure and content of the program are deliberately designed to relate to place. In addition to the program's literacy and nutrition goals, Energy Express considers itself successful when it addresses child and family need within the context of the community that hosts it. Case studies conducted as part of the evaluation effort are presented here in order to illustrate how community characteristics relate to program implementation.

Energy Express

Energy Express is an eight-week summer program for low-income West Virginia schoolchildren across the state. The program has rapidly expanded each summer from its original two pilot sites in 1994 to 80 sites in 1999. Energy Express is a collaborative effort of West Virginia University Extension; the state of West Virginia; and a variety of local, state, federal, and private partners. The program provides children with 7/12ths of their daily nutritional requirements by serving two meals: breakfast and lunch served family style. In addition, Energy Express children at each site are provided with a "print-rich" environment and activities designed to enhance their motivation and achievement in literacy. Multi-age groups of six to eight children meet for the 3-hour sessions between meals. Children en-

gage in choral reading, read aloud activities, drama, art and writing projects as they relate to children's literature.

College-student mentor/AmeriCorp members eat with the children and lead them in activities. Energy Express mentors are provided with preprogram training and are supervised and coached by a site coordinator (usually a teacher or school administrator) who assists them in designing activities, and in reflecting about the specific effects of various activities and the social, cultural, and economic issues that impact participating communities. The week before the program begins, mentors visit the homes of participating children; they also conduct a post-program home visit. Mentors design environments that provide children with the intended print-rich and nutritionally healthy program using their own creativity and children's interests to encourage children's interaction with each other, with the mentors, and with books. The curriculum is framed by a weekly theme (myself, family, friends, community, homeplace, ideal world), and children are supplied with a book to take home every week.

Mentors work with their groups to develop community service projects, which they complete over the course of the summer. They may create books to donate to libraries, read at nursing homes or plant trees and flowers in the community. In addition, as part of their experience as AmeriCorps members, mentors at each site develop a group service project aimed at an identified community need (e.g., erecting playground equipment, completing landscaping projects, or keeping the school playground open and safe for children during summer evenings).

Energy Express aims to impact the skills, attitudes, and beliefs of the college student mentors/AmeriCorps members who participate in the program. The preprogram training is designed to give them skills and ideas for leading literacy activities. It also acts to create a shared sense of identity across the program. Energy Express attempts to build on this shared sense of identity by publishing a newsletter and by maintaining on-going contact with each site throughout the summer. The community service activities and mentor reflection provide an opportunity to address mentors' personal development.

To sponsor an Energy Express site, a community coalition of parents and community organizations develops a proposal, generates a required local match, and fills a variety of support roles. Parents and community members are invited through home visits and personal contacts to volunteer in the program. They may read aloud, help serve meals, offer art activities, listen to children read, and share their special interests.

Evaluation data have been collected on an ongoing basis during the past 4 years of the program. A multi-tiered and multi-method approach to data collection and analysis has been adopted to address the purposes of evaluation, including: (a) documenting program effects related to each

of the objectives of Energy Express, (b) providing data useful for local and state program improvement, and (c) deepening our understanding of how contextual variables effect program implementation. Quantitative data including pre- and post-program data on child reading achievement and motivation as well as mentor survey data has been collected and is reported elsewhere (Butera, Dempsey, & McMullen, 1997; Butera, McMullen, & Pae, 1998; Butera, Pae, McMullen, Richason, & Bonnet, 1999; Dempsey & Butera, 1996). Allowing for threats to internal validity (e.g., test-retest) of the research design, these data are consistent across 4 years and suggest that Energy Express facilitates children progress in reading. The program also demonstrates a positive impact on mentor skills and attitudes about community service.

In order to understand how Energy Express works to impact participating children, mentors, and communities and explore the relationships between program participants, evaluation has adopted a naturalistic and participant-oriented approach (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Patton, 1990). Evaluation, in this case, moves away from impact oriented evaluation that emphasizes "knowing that" rather than "knowing why." Ethnography is adopted as a method, and the evaluator is "drawn into the activity as a full partner, no longer objective and aloof, but interactive" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 31). Although the approach raises questions about credibility in a predominantly scientific community, McMillan and Schumacher (1997) point out that a well-constructed case study can be a powerful evaluation, especially about the inner workings of a program.

Ethnographic case studies have been conducted in selected Energy Express sites over the past four summers. In 1997, the four-member evaluation team focused intensively on two sites, visiting each site 6-8 full days during the 8-week program and again in the fall for a follow-up visit. Case study data included site observations and open-ended interviews with site coordinators, mentors, parents, children, volunteers, and community members who were key stakeholders in the program. Site artifacts including site applications, planning documents, newsletters, volunteer logs, mentor and child journals, local newspaper articles, and child art and writing products were gathered. The entire data set from each site was compiled in a site notebook that was reviewed by each team member weekly.

Weekly evaluation team meetings were held to discuss ongoing and emerging themes at each site and across sites. As the program ended, case study data reduction procedures required each evaluation team member to reread the entire data set in order to identify recurring themes at each site. Case study themes were identified by using a member checking system in which team members discussed identified themes, reread the data set, and continued to meet discussing differences in team member perceptions. Drafts of each case study manuscript were sent to the sites in or-

der to check for accuracy and improve overall reliability and validity. The case study drafts were edited following site review. What follows is excerpted from the original case study reports.

Energy Express at Monroe¹

An abrupt right after exiting the interstate in the middle of a small city leads to Monroe Elementary School, a three-story, tan brick structure built in 1916. Once the premiere public school in a well-to-do neighborhood, Monroe Elementary is proud of its strong academic programs. Banners across the brick facade announce its blue-ribbon status as a school of excellence. The neighborhood around Monroe attests to its former affluence, but most of the fine, older homes have been subdivided into apartments or removed to make room for the interstate which looms over the school. Gas stations and fast food restaurants line the street across from the school. Inside the school, wide hallways, sturdy wooden doors and marble baseboards in the main hallway remain as testimony of Monroe's earlier grandeur. The rooms are sweltering in July, though the windows are open and fans are running.

Carla, the site coordinator, greets the evaluation team as they enter the building. She is clearly on the run, but she gives a quick tour of the building as she rushes off to help with breakfast. This is Monroe's second year as an Energy Express site, and Carla has been the site coordinator both summers. She is an experienced teacher having taught (mostly second grade) in the county for 20 years.

Two Energy Express classrooms are located beside the entrance to the school; three more are off a long corridor to the cafeteria, and two are in the basement. Both the corridors and the rooms are decorated with children's creations, including self-portraits and stories about children's families and friends. Classroom furniture is moved about in each room, with some areas designated for one-to-one reading or group activities. Books are abundantly displayed. Stories written on large pieces of butcher paper by the mentors and children are taped to the walls. Some part of each classroom has been covered with tape and butcher paper to prevent access, but, in most classrooms, teachers have left material for mentors and children to use. Sets of scissors, construction paper, crayons, markers, and class libraries and games are set out for children's use. The rooms are quiet early in the morning, but noise will pick up later in the morning when children come in from breakfast and interstate traffic increases.

In the cafeteria, mentors sit with their groups for breakfast. Three or four children sit at each table initially. More children straggle in throughout the next 45 minutes. Chil-

dren and mentors are dressed comfortably in T-shirts and shorts. Breakfast is cereal or pancakes, sometimes with fruit on the side. The children and the mentors eat and talk quietly. A few children look half-asleep. Carla, an adult volunteer, and a few volunteer teenagers bus tables and clean up after breakfast. Then the children go with their mentors to their classrooms. Most groups walk in lines and the children compete to be leader and hold their mentor's hand.

In Lucy's room, children are listening to a volunteer reader, later identified as the superintendent of the school district. Children are on the floor and on beanbag chairs. One child leans on Lucy. The reader shows the book's pictures to the children and says, "Did you guys ever have a fort?" A boy says, "I did." The reader says, "Did you ever have a pretend town? When I was a kid, we had an old tree behind my house with lots of twisted limbs. I called it the Octopus Club." The children share stories about tree climbing and pretend. After listening to their stories, the reader finishes the book and takes his leave, the children thanking him for reading to them.

Lucy suggests, "Let's work on our mountain pictures." The children go over to the table at the back of the room and begin to work on half-completed maps. A small African American girl says, "See, I'm all done." She shows the colored map to Lucy who admires it. Lucy talks to Timmy who has just returned from a bathroom trip. "Do you want me to write, or do you want to write?" Timmy says, "You write it." and stands next to her, watching. "Is this mountain in West Virginia?" Lucy asks. Timmy nods and Lucy smiles.

The little girl who had finished selects a puzzle from the shelf. "Do you want to do that puzzle with Tish, Timmy?" Lucy asks. Timmy nods. "Well, how about it? Do you want to write the last word?" Lucy grins at him, handing him the pen. Timmy takes the pen and writes carefully. The caption over Timmy's map reads, "My mountain is in West Virginia. It has many colors. There are birds that fly above it." Lucy goes over to the floor to work on the puzzle with Tish and Jimmy.

Throughout the summer, episodes similar to this one are observed in Energy Express groups at Monroe. Children read individually to mentors and to themselves. They take turns reading the take-home book of the week to each other and they read many other stories as a group. Teachers from Monroe's faculty come in to read and sometimes family members of participating children come and read. Monroe's principal is a frequent visitor and he also reads to groups when he is there. Children produce art and writing projects related to the stories they read and their products are displayed in the corridors and classrooms.

At Monroe, issues related to child management often become apparent. The brick building, with its location next to the interstate, seldom benefits from a breeze, and it is very hot. Windows are opened wide, and outside traffic as

¹All site and participant names are pseudonyms.

well as workers refurbishing other parts of the building add to the noise that the children contribute. One observer notes that a mentor's room "was like a sauna, burning down all of an individual's tolerance." Under these circumstances, struggling to gain children's attention, mentors sometimes become increasingly directive. "While we're reading, you have to sit up, so get your mats. Sarah, we can't read until you're sitting up. Sit up, Derek." A few of the mentors become increasingly frustrated about children's behavior during the program and resort to using a "Three Strikes and You're Out" behavior management system. They keep track of the number of times they must speak to a child. When they have given three verbal warnings they send the child to talk with Carla.

Shortly before lunchtime, mentors help children gather their belongings, and they proceed as a group to the cafeteria. The children sit on bleachers at one end of the cafeteria as two mentors lead songs and rhythmic word games. The children particularly like "Make Rain" which really sounds like the progression of a rainstorm—from the first few soft drops through the downpour (complete with the swish of tires on the wet highway). One hot day, a violent thunderstorm does occur after the children's rendition of "Make Rain." Monroe is left without electricity and telephone service for several hours in the storm's aftermath.

After the singing session, groups take turns going to the bathrooms to wash hands. Children distribute plates, silverware, and napkins for their groups and pass around food in large bowls or trays brought to the table by Carla and the volunteers. Often non-program children and other adults "walk-in" and join them for lunch, as Monroe is designated as a nutrition distribution center for the state of West Virginia. Children clear their eating area after lunch. Parents or siblings come to pick up the younger children and older ones are dismissed to walk home.

After the children leave, mentors gather in the teacher's lounge for mentor reflection. Carla leads a discussion of concerns (often about a child's misbehavior), needs for materials, plans for the next day or week, ideas for activities, and progress deciding about the site's community service projects. Two mentors often dominate the discussion and several others rarely talk. Carla is replete with suggestions for the mentors and she also brings supplies specific to her suggestions. Carla encourages the mentors to use the mentor handbook provided by Energy Express to guide what they do with children. The mentors appear hot and tired and, after about a half an hour, they leave to work by themselves in their rooms. Later in the program, they spend two afternoons a week at a local community center cleaning up and painting it, after Carla talks to a local park and recreation administrator about the site's need to complete community service.

Monroe's student population is described in an interview with the school principal. About a third of the chil-

dren are of minority status (mostly African-American). Because of the seasonal nature of employment in the neighborhood and an open enrollment policy in the school district, Monroe's population is quite transient. As many as 40% of Monroe's children change from the beginning to the end of the school year. Children enrolled in Energy Express (only a tenth of the school's population) are selected by teachers based on the teachers' perceptions of the child's need for summer nutrition or reading support. Children who attend are limited to those who can get to the school on their own. The site cannot afford to provide transportation.

Monroe faculty encouraged children to participate in Energy Express and both Carla and the principal would have liked to have seen more children attend. In order to select the school's neediest children for participation, Carla maintained a waiting list that was comprised of the names of all of the students Monroe's teachers referred to the program. Children were ranked according to the perceptions of Monroe's faculty about the child's degree of need. Monroe teachers also referred children because they believed Energy Express would assist children with behavioral or social/emotional problems. A number of children attending are identified as children with disabilities (behavior disorders or learning disabilities). Carla has consulted with each of the referring teachers about each child and she is determined that Monroe's enrollment slots are filled by the school's neediest children.

Carla is vigilant about attendance. When a child is absent, she or one of the mentors calls to find out the reason. Enrollment slots vacated by children who no longer attending are filled by children on the waiting list. Four children considered especially in need of the program are walked to and from the program home by the mentors. Three children remain at the site after the other children are dismissed so that their mother can pick them up on her way home from work. Carla and the mentors take turns supervising these children who play quietly in a classroom.

According to interviews with key stakeholders, the local Energy Express planning collaborative at Monroe was made up mostly of school personnel. Monroe's principal is described as the driving force that secured Energy Express for his school. The county extension agent reports that the principal, after learning about Energy Express from school administrators in other counties, contacted him and asked him to organize the collaborative effort. Monroe got started in their planning process late and they struggled to get resources in place for the program. The agent reported "We created a monster. We haven't developed the plan like we should."

Despite shortcomings in planning, Monroe's Energy Express program runs smoothly. Both the principal and the agent credit Carla for making the program work. "Carla is excellent. She makes it work.", the agent reports. Monroe's principal says that he selected Carla as site coordinator

knowing she is one of Monroe's teachers who "comes through for the kids."

As site coordinator, Carla has many responsibilities, and it is easy to see why, at the program's end, she reports being tired and "just wanting to sleep." Before the program began, she recruited children for the program. She attended training, hired mentors, worked to gain the cooperation of Monroe's teachers for the use of their space and supplies and she secured needed supplies. Carla's personal contact with the superintendent right before the program began guaranteed the final thousand dollars for the required local match. During the program, Carla helps to get meals ready and to clean up. She meets with the mentors in reflection sessions, works with them on community service projects and responds to mentor journals. Carla visits each group daily, taking over activities for a few minutes to give the mentors "a short respite." Carla speaks to the school board and various agencies or civic organizations about the program, and secures local newspaper and television coverage of the program. She communicates with parents, and she maintains records for site monitoring and evaluation.

Mentor journal entries reveal that Monroe mentors enjoyed their relationships with the children even when they struggled about how to manage them. Mentors accounted for their difficulties with child behavior by referencing the "horrible families" of many of the children. Mentors report that Carla provided them with information about the program, the school, and individual children, and that she gave them supplies and helped them plan activities. Monroe mentors sometimes report seeking advice from each other or from Carla about how to handle challenging behaviors. But they also state that their mentor group "did not work together that well." They also sometimes felt that Carla "expected too much" from them.

At Monroe, the mentors have difficulty coming to agreement about their community service project, and they end up deciding between several projects that Carla suggests by voting in a secret ballot. Monroe mentors paint and clean a nearby community center in a low-income housing project. Their journal entries reveal their struggles connecting this project to the mission of Energy Express. During their final visit to the community center, one of the caretakers at the center provides them with a tour of the project. He talks about the children and families who live in the development. Monroe mentors comment on it in their journals.

I'm glad we got to tour the apartments and understand something about the housing authority. I went to junior high with some kids who lived there and I never really understood what it was about. I wish we would have had the tour the first day, though. It would have helped us understand what we were doing there.

Although the mentors at Monroe do not develop into a cohesive group during the 6 weeks of the program, mentor journal entries often detail their increased understanding of the lives of the children, families and community of the program. Carla supports this reflection with a daily response to each mentor entry. A few weeks into the program, Julie writes, "Justin is learning to take turns when speaking. Tommy is starting to come out of his shell."

On another occasion, Julie writes, "I'm realizing that children who could be labeled 'behavior problems' in regular classrooms appear less frustrated . . . [and] participate with more focused attention . . ." Julie ponders why this might be so. A week later when Julie is worried about whether her kids will have enough money to buy books in a book sale she scrawls, "There is no money here. Every one of my kids is on free lunch. Every one! How could that be?" Finally Julie writes:

I am learning to just love these kids. No matter if they run out of bounds in tag or try to start a fight in a game or put their nose up at the take-home book. I have a pride in my kids and I think they have a pride in themselves because of that! . . . What a job! I feel absolutely privileged and blessed to play a part in their lives.

Energy Express at Laurel

The community of Laurel is nestled in a river valley. Go down a winding two-lane highway, cross the river, and you are immediately in the town. The town consists of a dilapidated factory (now closed), a few small stores, a gas station, a few churches, and clusters of (mostly white clapboard) houses. Laurel is surrounded by mountains. In the summer, the dark green foliage on the hills over the town gives a sense of closed space.

The Energy Express site in Laurel is in the consolidated school (K-12) located on the highway through town. The school building is a conglomerate of the old original school building built in the 1920s and an add-on from the 1950s. The building is well-maintained, and a wide expanse of lawn in front of the school features some newly planted trees and shrubs. However, it is evident that the school has made the most of the scarce resources available in this rural community. The building is well-lit and cheerful, but contains few extra frills.

The site coordinator is John Wyatt, affectionately referred to by everyone as Duke. He has been the guidance counselor at Laurel for about 20 years and the Energy Express site coordinator for the 3 years that the program has been at Laurel. He is enthusiastic about this summer's activities, but a little nervous about evaluation.

In the cafeteria, 35 children sit around cafeteria style tables with a mentor at each table. Mentors, all but one

female, wear gray AmeriCorps T-shirts and shorts. Everyone is eating pancakes and apple sauce, and the children pass syrup and pats of butter to each other. The children's discussion about a church function last evening mentions Duke, two of the mentors, and a number of the children. One child asks what they are going to do today, and children talk about finishing their wasp nests, evidently begun the day before as part of the Energy Express home place theme. The idea for the nests is credited to mentor Jay, but several of the mentor groups are also planning to make wasp's nests. Children talk about nests clustered on the eaves of the school building and other places they have seen insect nests, inevitably talking about occasions when they have been stung. Everyone clears off the dishes and wipes tables. Children hold mentors' hands as they skip down the hall from breakfast.

In classrooms at Laurel, all furniture is pushed to one side and firmly covered with sheets. Signs are posted reminding children not to touch things in the classroom, and mentors put nothing on the walls. Instead, yarn is threaded across the room, and children's artwork hangs from them. Most rooms contain some ready-made bulletin board material that Paul, the extension agent, brought to the mentors to "help them get started." Duke explains, "I know it's supposed to be children's artwork, but this stuff Paul brought really helped." Duke continues:

The teachers in this school are not especially supportive of Energy Express and did not like the mentors using their rooms. Everything that was wrong in the building in September last year was our fault. Some teachers have been here for what seems like forever, and they see the classrooms as theirs. Last year we had trouble. One teacher was sure that the mentors had been in her desk. She set up a paper clip in the center drawer so that, if it was opened, she could tell.

Music emanates from Jay's room. Children are scattered about the room. Two children are helping Jay hang pictures of house plans the children drew. Two children are covering a balloon with glue and strips of newspapers (the wasp nests!) Another child is seated at a desk, writing in a notebook. Another two children are in a corner of the room, reclining on a big pillow, reading and taking turns poking at each other. Jay admires the drawing he is hanging up. "It's good, isn't it?" The girl helping him blushes and Jay repeats to her, smiling, "Yours is good."

Jay admires the progress of the paper mache workers. "You're almost done. We'll let them dry and then we'll pop them. Brandy, what kind of home place do you think lions have?" Brandy giggles. Jay says, "How about a jungle? Or a den, you know, a lion's den? You've heard of a lion's den. You've heard of that—like Daniel in the lion's den?"

In another room, a white-haired gentleman sits in a small chair with a book in his lap. Children and mentors are gathered about him as he admires a turtle on the floor. "Where did this fellow come from?" he asks. "Daddy got him," says a girl. "He was on the road." The white-haired man nods. "They'll do that this time of year. It's a dry land terrapin. I always try hard to miss them on the road. So does your daddy, I guess. Isn't it a marvel? He's got his house on his back." The kids admire the dryland terrapin. The white-haired gentleman holds up the book, pats the shoulder of the boy sitting next to him, and says, "I'll just sit here and read next to my buddy here." The boy beams.

Duke is in his office, talking on the phone. His office walls are covered with posters admonishing the reader to stay in school and stay off drugs. Across the top of each wall are framed photographs of each graduating class from Laurel during the past several decades. A bulletin board bursts with snapshots and notes, and Duke's desk is covered with papers, mail, and books organized in stacks. Duke finishes his phone conversation and says he has some time to talk. Asked about the volunteer reader, Duke says, "Yeah, he's something, isn't he? He was the mayor of Laurel and has been active in local and state politics. He likes to read to the kids. He says he wants us to call him Joe. It's easier for the kids."

Duke describes the need for Energy Express in Laurel:

Some really need the food. But most of the kids have enough to eat at home. Of course, I don't think they would eat what's good for them because many of them have little supervision. What the kids get from Energy Express here is the relationship with the mentors and the chance to do something fun with other kids and the mentors.

As Duke sees it, the mentors at Laurel are critical to program success, and one of the most important roles he plays as site coordinator is to provide the mentors with support. Duke knows each of the mentors well. They are all from Laurel and attended school there. He remembers the first day Trisha came to kindergarten and the difficulty she had separating from her mother. He remembers Jay's arrival in the community in the fifth grade and the ways in which he and the other mentors have worked out how to deal with the "break up" between Jay and one of the other mentors.

In the beginning, Andrea would bust out crying—just come in and start bawling. Usually it was because Jay would say something about Tina (the new girl friend). "Tina did this with me last night." I'm like "Jay, why are you saying this in front of her? Why are you being insensitive?" . . . The sec-

ond week of the program I just had to sit down and talk to her. I said, "Andrea, I'm really concerned. What's going on here? You've got to work with this guy." . . . She's doing better and better each time. . . . I try to tell Jay, "you could be a little more discrete." But she's handled it . . . Trisha has really gotten closer to Andrea because she saw her upset. She's gone to her, pulled her aside. I've let her do that a lot and the other mentors, too. I see Andrea upset, I don't go right to her. . . I just leave her alone, see how she's doing. And the mentors have been like that. . . They don't gossip. They feel that's your privacy, your space and they give it to you . . . But they are real close.

The mentors' close relationship with each other, with Duke, and with the children at Laurel is evident in a group activity later in the morning. The site has acquired a large military parachute that the children and mentors have decorated. The children and mentors gather in the gym right before lunch to play games with the parachute. They form a big circle, mentors and children grabbing the edges of the parachute and lifting in high in the air and down to the floor at Jay's count of four. Everyone takes a turn crawling to the center of the parachute and bouncing high in the air as the group works together to lift the parachute up and down. The children clearly enjoy one another's shrieks of pleasure at rising high in the air, and they enjoy their own turn. A child in a wheelchair is unable to be bounced, so the group agrees to push her underneath the billowing green fabric for her turn.

On the way to the cafeteria, Joe meets up with the children in the hall. The children greet him, and he shakes a few hands as they pass, promising to be back in a few days. He tells them he wants to eat lunch with them one day so he can see that they eat good food to keep them strong, "straight and tall." Complimented for his reading, Joe replies, "Well, heck, I like reading to kids. They keep me on my toes." He laughs. "And I knew all these kids from the day they were born. Heck, I held most of their parents as babies. You get attached to them that way."

As the children finish lunch, they and the mentors go out to the playground. Cars have already filled the parking lot and children are picked up by their parents who sometimes come into the cafeteria to talk to the children and mentors while everyone eats. After the children take their leave, mentors gather in one of the classrooms to reflect on the day's activities. Jay has brought in a puppet and the mentors talk about it among themselves, laughing. Duke comes in and says, "Okay, what was the event of the day?" Jay reports, "We switched a sister pair with Kathy. Her mother was upset because it appeared to her that the children were being punished." Duke says, "Yeah, let's talk about that." Each mentor talks about an interesting event

of the day, and a lively and animated discussion ensues. Much of the discussion is rapid and centers on mentors' ideas for supporting literacy with the children. They joke that one failed idea was "in the book from Morgantown." They brainstorm about what to do with the Styrofoam peanuts that Duke has acquired from a merchant in town. Finally, they complain about the chicken noodle concoction they had for lunch. Jay looks slyly at us and remarks that its recipe was probably in the book from Morgantown.

In interviews conducted throughout the summer, mentors talk about their relationships with the children, with each other, and with Duke. The mentors discuss how much the children have meant to them and how much they learned about their own abilities to work with children and each other to achieve a common goal. They are proud of their community service project. They have each planted a tree in the front of the school, and they identify which tree is theirs. They have landscaped a flower bed in the front of the school. A bench will be placed in the memory of Laurel graduates who have died. Every mentor credits Duke as the reason the summer has gone so well for them. Kathy's assessment of Duke's support is typical of what all the mentors tell us:

Duke is great. He will do anything, drop anything, do whatever you need him to do . . . Duke will do anything that will help you . . . Duke will take so many found objects and bring them around and say "Here you go. Here's six spools of thread; Why don't you do this? Or how about if you do this? Then, of course, it's all your good idea. I think we all knew Duke really well, all our lives, before this, and just being able to be comfortable around him and knowing that you could do this or couldn't do that, knowing that you could ask him for this. . . Knowing that I could ask him for advice. . . and that he wouldn't get well, he wouldn't think bad about you. . He wants us to do well. He expects it and you just don't want to let him down and you never would.

Interviews with key stake holders—the school principal, the director of elementary education, the county extension agent, parents—in the Laurel Energy Express program reveal common themes about the program and its history. Children attending Laurel's program were selected by Duke and by the Title One teacher. Many of the attending children have reading problems, but the Title One teacher doubts that children who attend Energy Express are the neediest in Laurel's enrollment area. Needier children come from homes farther away and lack transportation. Despite the fact that Laurel may not have reached the area's neediest children, the program worries about making scant resources suffice for the children that are there.

The value placed on community is often emphasized in interviews. Mentors value their individual relationships with the children, but they also report enjoying being a part of a group. Andrea writes in her journal, "I'll remember how excited the kids were and how bubbly. I'll remember how much they liked the program and liked me. And I loved being a mentor here Our mentor group is great."

Key stakeholder interviews credit Duke for the success of Energy Express at Laurel. But they also comment on the sense of community within and from outside the program as they praise the volunteers who are involved. Joe puts it this way:

The staff of cooks and helpers, the teacher (mentor) of each class, those of us who come to read or give some money. I've noticed a cooperative effort. And that one goal is there, and that's to make a better life for the young people because they are the old people of tomorrow. And I believe that's really the reason for the success—the cooperative effort, from everyone.

Lessons from Monroe and Laurel

These excerpts from the Energy Express case studies at Monroe and Laurel are instructive in that they suggest how community characteristics interact with program effects to bring about change in the lives of children, youth, and communities. It is important to note that Monroe and Laurel both demonstrate the key components of Energy Express. Both the mentors and the children complete a community service project. Children at Monroe and Laurel eat family style meals and are engaged in literacy activities in a print-rich environment during the program. Children read and are read to often at both sites. They write about what they read, and they produce art projects that relate to their reading. The curriculum themes are evident, and literacy is addressed within the context of children's life experiences. At Monroe, Timmy is helped to draw and label the West Virginia mountains that surround the school. Laurel's children examine a dryland terrapin and make wasp's nests during home place week. These place-based activities provide children with the opportunity to connect their understanding of home, family, and community with the literacy they are acquiring in school (Butera & Dempsey, 1999; Hicks, 1995-96).

At both sites, the relationship building that occurs between the college student mentors and the children in Energy Express is pivotal to the learning that occurs for both. The most skilled mentor lacks pedagogical knowledge and experience. However, they "teach" Energy Express children by constructing positive relationships and by serving as role models as they demonstrate their own enthusiasm for literacy and for the books that they read with the chil-

dren. Stories, images, and conversations the children offer become ongoing ways that mentors built relationship with the children. The more mentors understand about the children's lives, the more they are able to provide the connections necessary to support the children's learning. As mentors make use of children's understanding of their community to design program activities, they emphasize place by valuing children's identity embedded within the community. This emphasis on place serves to combine children's intellectual pursuits with their direct experience (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995).

The reasons why the mentors' development is enhanced by their participation in Energy Express become clear when we consider the relationship building that occurs between the mentors and children. Although mentors receive suggestions for literacy activities in training and via their interactions with the site coordinators, individual mentors determine what actually happens for the children of Energy Express. Both Duke and Carla offered suggestions to the mentors, but they also provided mentors with a great deal of freedom in making decisions about how to plan the day's activities. Of course, mentors' ability to construct meaningful learning experiences varied. But, in respecting and crediting mentors' abilities to facilitate child learning through their relationships with the children, the program in essence places value on the identity of each mentor as they come to the program. Mentors, like the Energy Express children, respond to this valuing of their identity with energy, creativity, and enthusiasm. Their belief in their own abilities is enhanced, just as children's literacy is enhanced.

Differences in how Energy Express is implemented at Monroe and Laurel relate to the differences in the communities. In this regard, Monroe and Laurel contrast most obviously in the extent of their "ruralness." Laurel is geographically isolated by the mountains surrounding it, and it possesses a clear sense of itself. In interviews, participants invariably identified individuals as from Laurel or from some other place. New community members are only slowly integrated into community membership. It is important to understand, according to Duke, that how Jay fits into the mentor group relates to the fact that he moved to Laurel in the fifth grade. With the exception of Jay, the mentors, like the Energy Express children, were born in Laurel. They have a personal history with each other, with the site coordinator, and with the community. They know the children in contexts other than Energy Express, such as church. Under these circumstances, Laurel mentors easily establish themselves in relationships with the children. Mentors exploit what they know about the children's lives to support the children's literacy, as Jay demonstrates when he talks about Daniel and the Lion's Den in his homeplace conversation with a child. The nature of Laurel mentors' communication with each other, the ways in which Duke offered them guidance in their roles with the children, and

their own comfort level at being among their own assisted them in establishing a sense of community with their groups of children. The curriculum of Energy Express, as it emphasized relatedness and place (home, family, friends, community) and the values that it defined (community service, place-based meanings), was readily adopted in Laurel because such values were already widely established in this tightly woven community.

The mentors at Monroe, on the other hand, struggled to achieve a sense of community in the program. They felt that the children “came from horrible families,” and they saw them as difficult to manage. Their mentor group lacked cohesion, and they did not easily seek help from one another. They could not agree on a community service project, and they resorted to voting by secret ballot in order to settle the matter. Although several Monroe mentors were from the community, they appeared far less connected to it than the Laurel mentors. In part, their difficulty establishing a sense of community related to the nature of the Monroe community (less rural, more transient, of greater diversity). The values and meanings that underpin the Energy Express curriculum were less clearly evident in this community, and the mentors and site coordinator struggled to find ways to translate Energy Express in meaningful ways.

Monroe was less rural than Laurel, but the relationship between “ruralness” and the ease with which community is established within the program can be easily overstated. The programs at Laurel and Monroe differed in many other ways. For example, in addition to differences in the population of children they served, Laurel had been an Energy Express site a year longer than Monroe and had had more opportunity to develop community resources to support program effort.

It is also important to note that the sense of community within a program can operate as both a blessing and a curse. At Laurel, while the mentors, Duke, and the children worked well together to accomplish program goals, the tightly woven nature of their community sometimes acted against the better interests of the program and the community. At Laurel, the selection of children for the program was not especially driven by need criterion, and outreach to needy children was less evident. Program participants at Laurel were sometimes not very open to ideas from outside the community. Jay demonstrated this in a humorous way when he poked fun at the “book from Morgantown.” More problematic for the success of the program, Energy Express was seen by the Laurel teachers as an outsider’s program. They were reluctant to share resources.

At Monroe, on the other hand, mentors encountered a more diverse group of children with a wide variety of individual needs. Energy Express was one of many efforts to bring resources from outside to address the needs of the children, as Monroe’s principal actively sought external

support for his school. Carla was valued in part because of her ability to marshal external resources to support Monroe’s programs. The faculty at Monroe were active in making sure that, as much as possible, Monroe’s neediest children attended Energy Express and they shared their classroom resources with the program. Monroe’s program was more open than Laurel’s to ideas from outside the community. Although Monroe struggled to achieve a sense of community from within and support from outside, the fact that Monroe was less tightly woven than Laurel served to facilitate the implementation of Energy Express.

It was clear in observations at both sites that mentors enjoyed their relationships with the children and their experience in the program. But data gathered during group reflection sessions, in individual interviews, and in mentor journals suggests that, while Laurel mentors were creative and thoughtful about their experience with children, Monroe mentors were more likely to reflect on the larger social and economic issues that impact the children, families, and communities in which they worked. As the summer program drew to a close, both sets of mentors reported they would “miss my kids.” But, Monroe mentors were more likely to speculate about why “their kids” might experience difficulty learning to read. They were apt to consider whether schooling practices might be changed to better the chances that “their kids” would do well. The Monroe mentors felt less embedded in community throughout the summer than mentors at Laurel, and they were less comfortable in their work. But they also appear to have been more likely to question their assumptions about children, families, schools, and communities.

It is clear that the site coordinator at Laurel and Monroe played many important roles in establishing Energy Express in the community. Their perceptions of their role, their understanding of the program’s mission, and their ability to form and maintain supportive relationships are critical to the program’s success. Multiple responsibilities are easily overwhelming, and the importance of support for the site coordinator is clear. Duke benefited from the active and committed involvement of the county agent and other community members who assumed responsibilities for securing funds and communicating about Energy Express to others in the community. This freed up his time and energy to provide mentors with support in their interactions with children and with each other. Carla, on the other hand, was less fortunate. The planning collaborative at Monroe consisted mostly of school personnel, and Carla had to work hard to recruit community volunteers. The county agent was far less involved in Energy Express at Monroe than the agent at Laurel. Carla struggled to address the multiple tasks involved in her role as she received less community support than Duke. Under these circumstances, she was less able to support mentor growth and the relationships between the mentors and the children. Further, Carla did not

benefit from the lifelong relationship with each mentor that Duke had and she struggled to form the relationships necessary to give each mentor support. To her credit, she did not give up trying to do so even when the mentors in question told her she “expected too much.”

Lessons of Energy Express for Community-Based Interventions

Evaluation data collected in Energy Express suggests that the program has a positive impact on the children, mentors, and communities that participate. However, the capacity of Energy Express to effect long-term change in children’s lives is no doubt limited by its short time frame. The program succeeds in part when it enhances the development of participating children and youth. But Energy Express may also be successful in that it provides an opportunity for communities to examine the common practices of schooling for low-income children—in essence, acting to energize the schools and the communities in which it is embedded. The value of place-based curriculum, authorizing local knowledge as it does, seems apparent. Energy Express is replete with stories like Monroe’s and Laurel’s that demonstrate how communities and intervention programs can work together to solve problems and address needs. When communities are energized in this way, they are brought into the processes of intervention and the intervention becomes part of the community in which it is embedded.

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