

C. S. 67: THE MOHEGAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A Documentation

The Context

The Mohegan Elementary School -- otherwise known as Community School 67 of the South Bronx -- occupies a site that is an increasingly familiar reflection of inner city despair and devastation. Surrounding blocks are home to tenements, boarded up buildings, and razed lots filled with junk, rubble, broken bottles, and abandoned tires and vehicles. The area boasts the largest number of drug arrests in New York City. It is a part of the nation's poorest single Congressional district, in which 40% of the population live below the poverty level. According to estimates, only a fractional percentage of Mohegan parents are high school graduates.

The neighborhood's youngsters would normally be thought to represent the nation's most disadvantaged. Of the school's 880 pupils, 78% are Latino immigrants and 22% are Black. Of the former, there are significant numbers of youngsters of Mexican and Santo Domingan as well as of Puerto Rican origins. More than a third of the school population is designated limited English proficient. Ninety-five percent of the youngsters come from single parent households, and many are in foster homes. For some, "home" is a single bedroom rented in another family's apartment, and shared with a parent and two or three siblings. *All* of the youngsters qualify for government-subsidized lunches, 100%. And in an area where child abuse cases are not infrequent, Mohegan leads the district with the largest number of instances.

Unfortunately, such settings are an increasingly familiar part of the urban scene, and each of their most salient characteristics is a separate predictor of school failure: poverty, single parent households, disadvantaged minority majority, parental lack of education. Not too surprisingly, in many such areas schools are demoralized institutions that have taken on the shabbiness and disrepair of their surroundings. The buildings are neglected, and essential resources remain unavailable. Slim hopes of success and terrible faculty morale speed the downward cycle.

Until fairly recently, Mohegan Elementary School was just such a place. The seventy-year-old building had fallen into such disrepair that old-timers talk of the stench of urine-soaked walls. It was simply impossible to get the Board of Education to fix leaking pipes and broken windows and there were literally no supplies in the building. (Actually, records showed deliveries but the materials delivered were evidently disappearing mysteriously out the back door.) The principal's office and an adjoining room were set afire in 1987. Some time thereafter, the office was patched up, but the damaged classroom was to remain boarded for two years, and without windows, walls, or floors. Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that morale and performance were dismal. There were evidently five principals at Mohegan within the two years preceding the present principal's arrival. And the school was staffed largely by "temporary" teachers, many of whom had lost faith in the

possibility of accomplishment. Cynicism and despair apparently reigned.

Given such a picture, the metamorphosis of Mohegan strikes many of its constituents as little short of miraculous. It all began to change following the summer of 1988 when Jeffrey Litt was named principal. When one enters the school today, one sees a clean, bright, orderly building decorated with children's work. There is minimal graffiti and signs of vandalism appear rarely in the building. There are a lot of smiling faces, and staff morale seems atypically positive and confident. And the place seems to breed an endless number of heroic tales -- of the principal, the custodian (hardly a frequent target of praise in New York City schools), the security guard, the parent volunteers, the librarian.

Major Factors

How did it come about? An attempt to understand the transformation at Mohegan would have to describe at least three elements which emerge as one spends time in the school, observes in classrooms, and talks with those involved with the school's daily life. The major components of the success story appear to be (1) a novel, ambitious, well-received curriculum; (2) an able and assertive principal; and (3) a remarkably dedicated parent group that supplements and extends strong ties to the community.

Mohegan Elementary School was one of the first in the nation to adopt the "Core Knowledge" curriculum designed by E.D. Hirsch as a way to implement his "cultural literacy" curriculum. In contrast to the usual ways in which curricular goals are specified -- in terms of broad capacities and understandings -- Hirsch's approach is to identify the particular items of knowledge that an educated person must possess. As follow-up to his controversial bestseller, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987), Hirsch has embarked on a Core Knowledge series that will yield a year-by-year guide for what children should study at each grade level, first through sixth. The first two of the series have already been published and are in use at Mohegan where the new Core Knowledge program was launched last Fall.

Principal Litt had moved rapidly with respect to Core Knowledge. He first heard Hirsch speak in November of 1990 at Manhattan Institute, and he became convinced that the focus on the sort of cultural capital many Mohegan youngsters could not get at home might be ideally responsive to what they need most. In the Spring, he took two teachers and the parent association president to Florida where the first Core Knowledge school was then operating, and the four returned exuberant. Over the summer, a nucleus or pilot group of seven teachers was selected to elaborate a curriculum for presenting the knowledge Hirsch had identified for each grade level. The task was one of devising the themes and contexts that would inter-relate the knowledge items -- a matter of planning activities and projects and designing materials. The group worked fulltime for almost two weeks, and part-time for five more.

The seven original Core Knowledge classes that began last September were supplemented by February when eleven more were reportedly added, and in the near future all but a few special education classes will be scheduled to use the Core Knowledge curriculum. Both the mandate and the speed could pose problems, but unlike other schools, where virtually any change

yields dissenters, it appears that there are none! According to all reports, *all* Mohegan teachers are enthusiastic about the Core Knowledge curriculum and look forward to becoming a part of the Renaissance Academy. Whether the reason be the excitement and attention that the project is commanding, or the receptivity and general orientation of the staff, *all* reportedly look forward to being a part of the venture.

Hirsch himself insists that his Core Knowledge curriculum should claim no more than half the school day and that school-determined, as well as district- and state-determined concerns should occupy the rest of the schedule. Although Mohegan's nucleus design group did have to accommodate city and state requirements, it appears that they found them extensively compatible with the Core Knowledge curriculum, and informal reports suggest that teachers are actually spending more than the recommended half day on the Hirsch curriculum. The general sense of all the adults associated with the school -- parents as well as staff -- seems to be that the core consists of material important to and esteemed by adults, not just the 'kid stuff' children need. There is certainly no question that the Core Knowledge curriculum plays a central role in what Mohegan's constituents feel is special about the school.

A great deal of credit for the transformation of Mohegan Elementary School belongs to Principal Jeffrey Litt who is an extraordinarily effective leader. In his four-year tenure, the building's physical appearance has been transformed, almost two-thirds of its teachers have been replaced, the school is functioning as a model in its district, and visitors come from across the land to observe its success. Inside the school, Litt seems to function mainly as visionary and symbolic leader; outside, he functions extensively as politician *extraordinaire* in dealing with the system. It was Litt who, with the assistance of the district superintendent (whom he credits), found and embraced the E. D. Hirsch program that defines the school's approach. He remains the curriculum's champion and most prominent spokesman (not only within the school and City, but increasingly at this point nationally). Litt is a real celebrator also of his students and his staff. The kids, he repeatedly tells both them and others, are the City's finest -- and the teachers, he tells all who will listen, are nothing short of world class.

Litt clearly is the carrier of the vision at Mohegan, although he has and depends on strong assistants -- an assistant principal, for instance, whom he calls "brilliant," a librarian he characterizes as "a gift from the heavens," a union building representative whom he strongly admires and with whom he works closely. Litt has established organizational structures within the school that make for good communication and smooth functioning. For instance, the present school has five divisions, called "academies," into which pupils and staff are divided. (The five are the early childhood classes which constitute Wonderland Academy; the middle school, called Upward Bound Academy; the bilingual classes, called Don Quixote Academy; the special education classes, called Progressive Academy; and the Core Knowledge classes, known as Renaissance Academy.) Each academy has its own director -- who, with the assistant principals, collectively comprise the Principal's Cabinet. Each teacher identifies primarily with academy colleagues but also with grade level content clusters as well.

Externally, when dealing with the district, with 110 Livingston Street, or with other organizations, Litt appears a consummate worker of the system. He likes to answer questions about how he accomplishes things -- things like getting the burned-out classroom restored after it had sat boarded up for two years, and how the school functioned during the Happy Land crisis -- by saying that his is "The School of Magic." Indeed, a five-foot computer banner on the wall behind his desk so proclaims. A more pedestrian explanation is that he possesses the savvy and skills to work within the system so as to satisfy his school's needs. Thus, he was able to find a school custodian who actually welcomed the challenge of a badly deteriorated building. He was also able to fill the school with young, inexperienced, enthusiastic teachers (82% of them minority) -- and then to help them further their own careers through an arrangement with Lehman College that meant a number of scholarships and brought Lehman mentors into the school to assist the tyros. Litt also found a security guard who himself has become a legendary figure in the school. And he has been able to outfit a parents room with sewing machine, refrigerator, microwave, and telephone.

A part of the reason for the savvy and the skills comes from Litt's background. He has had far more opportunity to learn the system than have most principals -- having worked at virtually all levels within it, including building level (as teacher, assistant principal, and principal), district level (as assistant superintendent in charge of pupil personnel and community affairs in the district he now serves as principal), and at the City level (as special assistant to the Chancellor). Litt also has strong political and community ties, having served as assistant to the Bronx Borough President and in such civic and community posts as district school board president and executive of three tenants associations. Currently, he chairs his district's Council of Supervisors and Administrators. Thus, Litt is not only an expert identifier of resources, openings, and opportunities; he further knows just how to pursue effectively the advantages he identifies.

Any attempt to understand the success at Mohegan Elementary School would need to focus strongly also on a third factor, the school's relationship to parents and community. A visit to the parents' room tells much of the story. Mohegan has a group of up to a dozen parents whose volunteer service is little short of incredible. This core apparently puts in time like 10 hours per day -- and has done so for years. The room daily becomes a social center filled with Mohegan pupils' younger siblings; and it functions as a powerful source of services and support not only for children but for their families as well. The group make themselves available to help youngsters and teachers who need help. They fill in as teacher aides, accompany classes on trips, follow up with families when youngsters appear in difficulty, and perform such services as making doctors' appointments for pupils and calling to remind their parents the day before the appointment. They tell their own and each others' stories -- and one of the heroines is the current parent association president who reportedly works fulltime on a night shift, regularly arrives back home just in time to dress and bring her kids, and remains at school for the school day. She reportedly sleeps only on the subway and during the one hour she allots herself for lunch. Her daughter -- a nineteen-year-old pre-med student -- is also one of the hero volunteers.

The service and dedication antedates Mr. Litt's arrival, although certainly

the parents are among his strongest supporters and the school's biggest fans. The comments of a social worker visiting the parents room on an official visit explained why -- and just how the research on inner city parents' school support misses the mark. A thoughtful Black woman, she contrasted the parent group at Mohegan with the parents at her own child's middle class school: the latter, she pointed out, will turn out in goodly number for parents' night, and will send monetary contributions when asked. But they are interested only in their *own* children's advantage, not that of other youngsters; and even for their own, few are willing to share their time, or to make any other *personal* psychic investment in the school.

One of the reasons why the psychic investment appears so impressive at Mohegan is the position the school occupies within the neighborhood. That dates at least from the tragedy of the Happy Land fire in late March of 1990. When the principal and the custodian and the security guard and several teachers heard the radio on that terrible Sunday morning, learning of the horror that had occurred just across Southern Boulevard hours before, all drove immediately to the school -- to find 87 bodies laid out across the wide street. They opened the school immediately, and for almost two weeks it remained open, functioning as the crisis headquarters for the entire neighborhood. Social service agencies pored in, church workers, government officials, literally hundreds of people each day. Bereaved families came to find consolation and support, and the Red Cross moved in for two weeks to serve three meals daily to all who came to the school building. The continuing presence of Mohegan school officials -- several of whom didn't leave the building for days after the tragedy -- created a bond that would be difficult to match elsewhere. The parent volunteer group at Mohegan still identifies strongly with the tragedy and have assumed an ownership of sorts of the boarded up remains of Happy Land. They still walk across the wide boulevard en masse to escort visitors to the scene.

It is not surprising, then, that the community reciprocates. But there are also more immediate and personal home - school ties that are perhaps equally unique to the area. These are associated with the school's curriculum. The particular nature of the community permits the school's curriculum to play a role at Mohegan that it probably could not occupy under other circumstances: Here, both teachers and parents feel that youngsters are gaining real command of a culture that their parents do not own. Thus, home and school are agreed that what the youngsters are learning is tremendously important knowledge. Moreover, parents' lack of such knowledge enables the youngsters to function as teachers within their own homes -- a further strengthening and solidifying of the home - school connection.

Accomplishments

As all of this attests, there are many extremely laudable features about Mohegan Elementary School, and about the staff that has created them, and about the district which supports them. All are certainly to be congratulated. To have accomplished what they are accomplishing is to win against strong odds indeed. Although some might hope for a more modern building for their children, they could not ask for a cleaner or a better maintained one. A strong and consistent commitment to youngsters

and their wellbeing and development seems pervasive throughout. A similar commitment to parents and to the community appears evident.

Such circumstances assume particular significance at this point, since it is too early to expect much change in the outcome indicator to which many now turn, achievement test scores. 1991 scores are the latest available, and the new curriculum only began in the Fall of 1991. Moreover, since averages are reported only by grade level -- and not all classes at any level were part of the Renaissance Academy as of Fall, 1991 -- the official Achievement Summary cannot show whether Core Knowledge students are doing better than others. Finally, as Mr. Litt points out, Mohegan's highly transient population means that the youngsters tested at any point in the school year are not the group tested earlier. A 41% mobility rate means that any group tested always includes some who have just entered. Hence scores mean even less at Mohegan than elsewhere.

Under these circumstances, two sorts of evidence assume greater import: school climate indicators, and the way in which the changes at Mohegan stack up in relation to what research is recommending. The climate indicators appear highly positive. From a school that was deluged with parent complaints (150 demands for transfers during one recent year before Litt's arrival) and teacher grievances (42 in the year before Litt came), Mohegan has reportedly become one where not a single complaint nor grievance is filed. Attendance is up slightly, and according to Principal Litt, 26 of the youngsters enrolled in the school are the children of parents who work in the building. One other out-of-district kindergartner enrolled this Spring is the son of the district superintendent, who lives in Westchester. Such testimony cannot guarantee positive learner outcomes -- but when combined with the obvious commitment of teachers and pupils to their work, they augur well.

Much of what is occurring at Mohegan is in close accord with what is currently being urged by researchers in the name of school reform and improvement: There is a strong emphasis on sustaining a safe and orderly environment; there is a clear school mission; there is strong administrative leadership which prominently includes commitment to an instructional program (specifically, to a particular curricular approach); attention within the school is strongly focused on instruction; and in multiple ways, the staff's high regard and expectations for students is made manifest. Thus, the Effective Schools research, and the lessons it provides for school reform, offer strong support for the changes that have occurred at Mohegan. (Levine & Lezotte, 1990)

The parent involvement and participation so visible at the school are also prominently recommended in contemporary research (Epstein, 1992). Because specialists in dealing with minority youngsters have found close partnership with parents to be a key ingredient of school effectiveness, they would be likely to find the nature and extent of parent involvement at Mohegan exemplary. (Comer, 1988; Cummins, 1986).

Hirsch's Core Knowledge curriculum is of too recent vintage for much evidence to have emerged regarding its effectiveness -- and the Hirsch approach is, as noted, a controversial one. Yet as also noted, it seems the object of much teacher enthusiasm at Mohegan, and that is of substantial import in predicting program effectiveness. One strong voice that would

favor the Core Knowledge curriculum, confirming the values Litt emphasizes, comes from a highly respected author who has written on the particular school needs of minority youngsters. To become educated, she insists, as well as to succeed in school, "poor children and children of color ... must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life." (Delpit, 1988: 296) The author of *Cultural Literacy* would surely agree.

Prospects, Challenges, and Suggestions for Consideration

The preceding section identifies some reform-related research that would support the Mohegan approach to school improvement. Yet if developments there reflect a number of the recommendations appearing in the education *reform* literature, the path Mohegan is following would find considerably less support in the school *restructuring* literature. To the extent that those seeking more extensive change are accurate about the limitations of prevalent educational arrangements and practice, this would suggest limits to what might reasonably be anticipated by way of outcomes at Mohegan.

The Effective Schools approach which is essentially being pursued falls short of the role transformations and other changes that have defined, for example, the District 4 success. Teachers' prerogatives have certainly been expanded at Mohegan (they now have a voice in textbook selection, and the nucleus group at least has participated in elaborating curriculum). But teachers had little voice in selecting the Core Knowledge curriculum, or in deciding whether to pursue it, and they recognize that the next principal could decide to replace it. Despite the positive reception of the approach, such circumstances tend to leave it primarily *the principal's* curriculum, and they raise the question of whether it could survive his departure.

Observations and interviews at Mohegan raise several questions that could prove important in relation to future emphases, directions, and success. Five issues in particular might desirably receive early consideration and attention.

(1) A first issue is whether in five years Mohegan Elementary School will appear one more faded Hawthorne Effect victory or whether it will still be flourishing. The Hawthorne Effect consists of temporary benefits variously attributed to the effects of novelty, to the attention paid participants, or to only temporarily augmented worker efforts -- as opposed to an organization's having managed to adopt and sustain a genuinely effective program. Despite the fact that teachers are clearly well disposed toward the Core Knowledge curriculum, it remains to be seen whether it could survive Mr. Litt's tenure. One influential determinant will be the extent to which the school's structure and norms and routine practices have come to reflect the Core Knowledge focus. Such impacts are not yet extensively visible. Moreover, it is uncertain whether or how the new teachers of the Core Knowledge curriculum will affiliate with it -- those who began in mid-year, and the rest of the staff who will be required to adopt the curriculum in the near future. Will they become knowledgeable, committed supporters and enthusiastic implementors, or will they be the required but relatively uninstructed appliers, without real 'ownership'? To the extent that any program remains largely 'the principal's program,' its continuation will require his continued presence.

Whether the initial triumphs will prove more real than the ephemeral Hawthorne Effect will depend also on just how much genuine instructional or pedagogical change takes place in connection with the Core Knowledge curriculum. As school restructurers insist, the secret to transformed education lies not solely in the *content*, but also in the *how* of instruction. It appears early to tell whether teacher behavior and activity will catch up sufficiently with the content changes they are undertaking to suggest durable improvement.

(2) Second, both the limits of human energy and of system resources recommend a careful balance between sustaining enough activity to keep things moving in an interesting exciting fashion, on the one hand, and on the other, taking on too much to be able to carry it through well. While it is certainly the case that a lot of activity -- and new activity -- fuels the excitement of teachers and parents, it is also true that if too much is taken on, not all will be implemented successfully -- and some will probably be implemented only on paper.

A related question is the *range* of new activities and programs that are launched over a relatively brief period. When the new ventures are related to one another and thus form a logically coherent whole, then each supports and sustains the others and a particular theme or focus is systematically elaborated. When, on the other hand, the new programs taken on bear little connection to one another, then the result can quickly become activities competing for attention and resources without rhyme nor reason. This "buckshot" approach to school reform is both frequent and unfortunate. It is rarely successful, because it cannot be sustained and it soon lapses into a set of 'on paper' activities that are inadequately implemented.

Mohegan will have to guard carefully against the buckshot approach. Perhaps its most prominent hallmark in any school where it occurs lies in the discrepancy between the number of activities reported, the number actually carried out, and the number staff feel fairly satisfied were carried out with sufficient resources and effectiveness. The plan to add a middle school, then a high school, to extend the Core Knowledge curriculum throughout the school, to adopt a choice system and add different sets of options at all three school levels, could jeopardize what is currently on the way to accomplishment but still not fully realized even within the nucleus group in the elementary program.

(3) A third issue many might raise pertains to the Core Knowledge curriculum. Can it be rendered sufficiently relevant and pedagogically viable for this population to sustain their interest, and satisfactorily articulate an adequate curriculum for them?

So long as the Core Knowledge curriculum does not dominate the full school day ... so long as parents and teachers remain enthusiastic about its significance and status ... and so long as it is supplemented with items coming from the native cultures of these youngsters ... it may continue as a *desirable* approach for Mohegan. So long as it is balanced and supplemented by other and more contextually determined curricular requirements ... so long as teachers succeed at integrating and relating the knowledge items so that the curriculum does not remain fragmentary ...

and so long as teachers have the inspiration and support to work together to assure such matters -- it seems to me that the curriculum may remain an *effective and viable* approach for Mohegan. Clearly, however, a number of contingencies are involved in success, and all bear watching.

(4) A fourth issue is whether the time necessary for implementing curricular and instructional change will be made available to teachers. According to the reports of the nucleus group, the Core Knowledge curriculum has changed the way they approach their jobs -- from a tradition of separate and individual planning to one of group planning. A new curriculum -- and one that demands contextualizing to avoid a dictionary or item-to-item approach -- made collaboration necessary among the nucleus group. Such a requirement has probably been a substantial boon.

But the question is whether the collaborative opportunities made available to the initial nucleus group (A) will be sustained for *this* group, and (B) whether such opportunities will be extended to the *rest* of the teachers, all of whom will soon be moving to the Core Knowledge curriculum.

Collaborative time is perhaps the most potentially explosive issue for the near future at Mohegan. It may also be the most pivotal single issue so far as continuing success is concerned. As an absolute minimum, teacher teams need a weekly period of one and one-half hours of uninterrupted time together. (Evidence shows that shorter periods, or interrupted periods, simply fail to generate reflection and go instead to socializing, or at best to coping with immediate challenges.) Collaborative time is a *continuing* essential, and for *all* the teachers one hopes will change. The goal is not to arrive at a product which will then be complete -- a polished curricular package; rather the need is to keep a process going, in order to sustain reflection, assumption-challenging, self-renewal.

Evidently, attempts to find the needed time at Mohegan have failed this year and the time originally available to the nucleus group has been reduced. Moreover it appears that the new teachers joining the Core Knowledge team at mid-year have yet to have a single collaborative session -- with the original group or even just among themselves. Under such conditions, no more than the most minimal implementation can be expected. The nucleus group has continued to assemble on their own time, since it has become a social group. The same cannot be expected of them as the situation continues, nor will it continue as this small circle is enlarged.

Research suggests that a primary explanation for the benefits associated with greatly improved schools is often the teacher collaboration the transformation has occasioned. It is the collaboration that gives rise to the reflection, to the professional discussion, and to the associated "self-renewing" that is essential to good schools. (Rosenholtz, 1989; Little, 1986; Goodlad, 1984) Research of the past decade strongly recommends reallocation of teacher time: When teachers worked separately and individually, it seemed reasonable to require that aspiring professionals undertake planning and preparation on their own time. Now that continuing collaborative interaction has been found necessary to sustaining a good school, the teacher workday must be reconfigured so that such time is made a regular part of it. Otherwise we stand to lose a number of the

benefits we have tended to attribute to other things (superior curriculum, resources, etc.).

(5) Finally is the issue of whether the choice arrangement now projected at Mohegan will prove meaningful and successful, or whether choice will be assigned too minor and tangential a role to matter. The answer will determine whether choice can deliver genuinely diversified options and match teachers and students to preferred learning environments, and whether it can catalyze the reforms now widely recommended (e.g., teacher interdependence, collaboration, empowerment).

The Mohegan Elementary School is now reportedly planning a Performing Arts specialization and a Two-way Bilingual program between which families must choose. Without more options, this is hardly a choice system -- since presumably more than a third of the youngsters are compelled to opt for bilingual instruction (thus lack genuine choice), and since the Core Knowledge curriculum will reportedly be common to both options.

Four options are reportedly projected for the middle school: Health and Medical Careers, Environmental Studies, Law, and Two-way Bilingual programs. Unless these choices represent already ascertained teacher preferences, or student preferences, or (ideally) some combination of the two, then the usefulness of choice as a reform catalyst and a matcher of people to programs has already been compromised.

Carefully designed choice programs can prove fruitful in maximizing teacher and student interest, dedication, effort, and hence learner accomplishment. But it is only well-designed programs that can do this, and otherwise choice can prove something of a sham, in announcing benefits that are not really there. It would be too bad to see Mohegan's fine accomplishments and rare credibility marred by such a trap -- or, for that matter, by falling prey to negative developments related to any of the four other issues discussed above. Because as it now appears, Mohegan is an extraordinary accomplishment.

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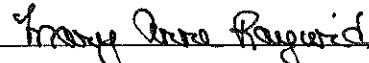
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