

# INTEGRATING LIBERATION THEOLOGY INTO RESTRUCTURING: TOWARD A MODEL FOR URBAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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*While the research on Catholic schools focuses on their distinctive character including the central role of faith communities within those schools, the challenges facing faith communities in urban Catholic schools have received relatively little attention. This essay argues that the integration of the principles of liberation theology, especially reflection on Gospel passages related to social justice, into the Accelerated Schools Project (ASP) may be a viable approach to restructuring in urban Catholic schools. The congruities and incongruities in the origins and purposes of liberation theology and the ASP are examined. Then a strategy is suggested for integrating liberation theology into the ASP, with the intent of building a deeper shared sense of community and commitment to social justice.*

**I**n *Liberation Theology and Critical Pedagogy in Today's Catholic Schools: Social Justice in Action*, Oldenski (1997) offers a compelling portrait of a Catholic alternative high school in East St. Louis that had adapted aspects of liberation theology and critical pedagogy. He describes how critical pedagogy coupled with the emphasis on social justice transformed students and educators. He concludes these practices can be used to transform both public and Catholic schools, as well as the alternative high school he studied. This represents an important challenge for educators, especially those in urban Catholic schools.

However, while the beliefs of educators in Catholic schools help distinguish them from public schools (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993), the process of transforming urban Catholic schools to meet the learning needs of inner city youth involves more than adhering to traditional beliefs about education or

Catholicism. Indeed, in the past few decades some urban Catholic schools have closed and many of those that had redirected themselves to service the inner city poor have faced similar problems as inner city public schools: The dominant theories of educational effectiveness simply do not work as well in inner cities as they do in the suburbs. Indeed, restructuring to meet the needs of inner city children involves reflecting critically on beliefs, which is why liberation theology and school restructuring seem important.

Integrating an orientation toward liberation theology into the Accelerated Schools Project (ASP), a successful restructuring methodology (Finnan, St. John, McCarthy, & Slovacek, 1996), could provide a model for restructuring that is appropriate for urban Catholic schools. Liberation theology is important because it can enable those within the Catholic belief community to focus on the challenges facing the urban poor. Utilizing the ASP is suggested because it is a systematic approach to restructuring (Finnan, 1996; Hopfenberg, Levin, & Associates, 1993) that can be effective in transforming the urban public schools that serve poor families, especially if implemented in a way that supports community building within the schools and their neighborhoods (Miron, St. John, & Davidson, 1998; St. John, Griffith, & Allen-Haynes, 1997). First, the compatibility between the underlying philosophies of liberation theology and the ASP is explored; next research evidence about the ASP in urban schools is explored; and finally, steps are suggested to be taken by those interested in integrating liberation theology into the ASP as part of the new wave of experiments in urban Catholic schools.

## **LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

In the past three decades, most of the national political systems in Latin America underwent remarkable, mostly peaceful transformations from dictatorships to democracies. In the middle 1960s, leaders in education and the Catholic Church began to reflect on fundamental questions about oppression in Latin America. They critically examined the assumptions of Marxism and Christianity. In the process they built new understandings about both oppression in communities of poverty and the process of liberation within these communities. In his analysis of the emergence of liberation theology in Latin America, Cleary (1985) observed: "Paulo Freire and Gustavo Gutierrez have been preeminent in the creation of liberation thought. Their contributions have allowed liberation theology to move along paths it might not have taken without them" (p. 74). Given the central importance of Freire and Gutierrez to the emergence of liberation theology, this inquiry begins with a probe into some of their writings.

### Freire on Conscientization

The central concept in Freire's writings is conscientization. "Conscientization refers to the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality" (Freire, 1985, p. 93). Thus conscientization is *situated*, in the sense that it involves understanding how the historical and cultural realities shape the individual's life. It is *transformational*, in the sense that it potentially involves the individual in a process of making fundamental changes in this reality. It also involves building an inner awareness, or *consciousness*. Each of these aspects of conscientization merits consideration.

First, Freire linked his arguments about consciousness to the historical and cultural contexts in which they existed. He argued: "To understand the levels of consciousness, we must understand cultural-historical reality as superstructure in relation to an infrastructure. Therefore, we will try to discern, in relative rather than absolute terms, the fundamental characteristics of the historical-cultural configuration to which such levels correspond" (1985, p. 71). In Freire's experience in the 1960s, the dominant social force was the oppressive dictatorships in Latin America, and his arguments were situated in this context, in building an understanding of oppression. He argued that: "There can be no conscientization without denunciation of unjust structures, a thing that cannot be expected of the right. Nor can there be popular conscientization for domination. The right invents new forms of cultural action only for domination" (1985, p. 85). Does this strong leftist position about the politics of oppression in Latin America mean that conscientization, by definition, requires taking a political position in opposition to the political right? This implies that liberation theology is a political ideology first and foremost. While Freire positioned himself on the political left, he also argued against the tacit acceptance of any political ideology.

Indeed, he argued that the fundamental role of those committed to cultural action for conscientization is "to invite people to grasp with their minds the truth of their reality" (Freire, 1985, p. 85). Further, he argued that scientific knowledge cannot be subordinated to beliefs:

Those who use cultural action as a strategy for maintaining their domination over the people have no choice but to indoctrinate the people in a mythified version of reality. In doing so, the right subordinates science and technology to its own ideology, using them to disseminate information and prescriptions.... By contrast, for those who undertake cultural action for freedom, science is the indispensable instrument for denouncing the myths created by the right, and philosophy is the matrix of proclamation of a new reality. Science and philosophy together provide the principles of action for conscientization. Cultural action for conscientization is always a utopian enterprise. This is why it needs philosophy, without which, instead of

denouncing reality and announcing the future, it would fall into the "mystifications of ideological knowledge." (1985, p. 86)

Freire originally made this argument while in exile. In essence he took a position, based on reflection on his practice as an educator in Brazil, that: (1) the rightist dictatorships in Latin America were wrong when they claimed their regimes were essential in the cold war, and (2) tacitly accepting such arguments, the dominant American position during the cold war, represented a false consciousness. Further, he argued that: (1) a true consciousness involved first and foremost an understanding of the experience of the poor in Latin America, (2) it was not sufficient to base this point of view on philosophy alone, and (3) scientific knowledge must be used to test the claims of these false points of view.

The second element of Freire's conscientization involves focusing on a vision of humanity in action. The ultimate aim of the process, he argues, is utopian:

In this sense the pedagogy that we defend, conceived in a significant area of the Third World, is itself a utopian pedagogy. By this very fact it is full of hope, for to be utopian is not to be merely idealistic or impractical but rather to engage in denunciation and annunciation. Our pedagogy cannot do without a vision of man and of the world. It formulates praxis in which the teachers and learners together, in the act of analyzing a dehumanizing reality, denounce it while announcing its transformation in the name of the liberation of man. (1985, p. 57)

The very idea of education embedded in this construction is education for liberation, for the transformation from domination to freedom. In other words, the process involves both a critique of what is (denunciation) and a vision for what might be (annunciation). Freire further makes a link between this utopian vision for education and his arguments about cultural action:

The utopian nature of cultural action for freedom is what distinguished it above all from cultural action for domination. Cultural action for domination, based on myths, cannot pose problems about reality to the people, nor orient the people to the unveiling of reality, since both of these projects would imply denunciation and annunciation. On the contrary, in problematizing and conscientizing cultural action for freedom, the annunciation of a new reality is the historical project proposed for men's achievement. (1985, p. 86)

Further, for Freire the political aspect of conscientization is inexorably linked to a politically situated understanding. This position becomes clear when he critiques attempts to remove his methodology from the intent of educating for liberation:

Another dimension of the mythologizing of conscientization—whether by the shrewd or the naive—is their attempt to convert the well-known education for liberation into a purely methodological problem, considering methods as something purely neutral. This removes—or pretends to remove—all political content from education, so that the expression *education for liberation* no longer has meaning. (Freire, 1985, p. 125)

This is an especially difficult challenge for urban educators. In particular the challenge involves reflecting critically on educational practice as a process of social justice, educating for liberation of the child and family, rather than merely conveying a content. While holding an authentic attitude toward the poor and their liberation is compatible with Jesus' teachings, it is not always central to the educational beliefs of urban Catholic educators. Thus, the centrality of the belief community in urban Catholic schools is a crucial foundation, just as the Catholic Church was a crucial foundation for the liberation of Latin America.

A third aspect of the definition of conscientization involves the individual's reflection on action and the relationship between theory and practice. Freire describes critical reflection as having a central role in conscientization:

The reflectiveness and finality of men's relationships with the world would not be possible if these relationships did not occur in an historical as well as physical context. Without critical reflection this is not finality, nor does finality have meaning outside an uninterrupted temporal series of events. For men there is not a "here" relative to a "there" that is not connected to a "now," a "before," and an "after." Thus men's relationships with the world are per se historical, as are men themselves. Not only do men make the history that makes them, but they can recount the history of this mutual making. (1985, pp. 70-71)

In an interview with Donaldo Macedo, a translator of his book, *The Politics of Education*, Freire (1985) describes the crucial role his own reflection played in his work while he was in exile:

It was while in exile that I realized I was truly interested in learning. What I relearned in exile is what I would recommend to all readers of this book: each day be open to the world, be ready to think; each day be ready not to accept what is said just because it is said, be predisposed to reread what is read; each day investigate, question, and doubt. I think it is most necessary to doubt. I feel it is always necessary not to be sure, that is, to be overly sure of "certainties." My exile was a long time of continuous learning. (1985, p. 181)

This statement captures the essence of critical reflection, which is the willingness to be critical and have doubt, even about one's own assumptions. By

being able to question and critique one's own assumptions, one is capable of meaningful learning.

Thus, when we begin to probe the three constructs embedded in conscientization—viewing action as historically and culturally situated, having a vision of the transformation of practice, and being willing to reflect critically, especially on our own practices—an integrated way of viewing consciousness in practice emerges. For Freire, this view is embedded in a situated understanding of the political aspects of action, political aspects that are historically and culturally situated in an understanding of the politically oppressed.

## GUTIERREZ ON CRITICAL PRACTICE

While Freire was an educator who reflected on the political aspects of the journey toward liberation, Gutierrez was a priest who reflected on the practice of theologians in their communities. In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutierrez outlines how reflection on the gospels led him to reject conventional notions of national development. He challenged church leaders to reflect on their own beliefs, their own attitudes toward the poor and toward social action. His writing helped stimulate a peaceful revolution.

In *We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, Gutierrez (1984) reflected on the changes in Latin America. He focused in part on freedom of individuals in their communities:

In search of this utopia, an entire people—with all its traditional values and the wealth of its recent experience—has taken a path of building a world in which persons are more important than things and in which all can live with dignity, a society that respects human freedom when it is in the service of a genuine common good, and exercises no kind of coercion, from whatever source. (p. 27)

In this passage Gutierrez places an emphasis on both the “genuine common good” and “human freedom,” a freedom without the exercise of “coercion” of any kind. Thus, he exposes the delicate balance between the community and the common good of the community on the one hand, and the freedom of the individual to make choices within the community on the other.

This theme of *individual in community* is central to Gutierrez's concept of critical reflection in action. He argues that solitude is necessary for individuals to reflect on their experiences:

When they find themselves alone—and there are many kinds of solitude—many persons would like to rewrite their lives; they wish they had not done or said this or that. Not all wishes at such a moment are dictated by healthy self-criticism; weariness plays a part, as does cowardice and even despair at the thought of the many obstacles and misunderstandings that must be overcome. (1984, p. 130)

The journey into self, then, is central to the construction of a new consciousness of practice. This solitude, with its accompanying loneliness and self-doubt, is essential to the emergence of consciousness: "The experience of solitude, on the other hand, gives rise to a hunger for communion. There is an aloneness with oneself and with God that, however hard it may be to endure at certain times, is a requirement for authentic community" (Gutierrez, 1984, p. 132). Thus Gutierrez argues that we must travel through our own uncertainties as we journey toward authentic community. Further, Gutierrez leaves us with no question that such an individual aspect of the journey is necessary: "There is, however, no question here of two stages: first solitude and *then* community. Rather it is within community that one experiences solitude. The successive levels of depth prove baffling, even to the person who is experiencing them" (1984, p. 132). Herein lies a very interesting aspect of Gutierrez's view of liberation: It is within community that one experiences the solitude—and, indeed, the freedom—to ponder the inner aspect of the journey.

Gutierrez adds two new understandings to the constructs that emerged from the review of Freire's writing. The first is the importance of a sense of community in the individual's transformation process. The second is the complex argument that the individual's critical reflection both precedes the emergence of a deep sense of community and paradoxically, perhaps, happens within the community-building process.

## DISCERNING CENTRAL CLAIMS

From these reflections by two of the founding scholars in the liberation theology movement in Latin America, we discern three central claims about liberating pedagogies which we can explore further in an examination of the experiences of practitioners in restructuring schools. The first claim is that the practice of liberation theology is historically and culturally situated. This is a political argument based on a historical-cultural understanding of context, an understanding that Freire argues necessitates taking a position in favor of liberation and freedom. Further, this issue represents a serious challenge to those who might wish to abstract methodological aspects of liberation theology into a reconstructed way of viewing the role of critical reflection in professional practice within the school restructuring process. To explore this first claim, reflections by Henry M. Levin, the founder of Accelerated Schools, are examined as a means of exploring whether his vision for school transformation is compatible with the underlying philosophy of liberation theology. However, this represents only an initial litmus test as to whether the ASP is situated in a particular historical-cultural context or moment. The more crucial question is whether the ASP method can help urban Catholic educators situate themselves in their historical-cultural moments.

The second claim examined is that liberation involves a change in individuals' consciousness about their practices. This central concern is with individuals' needs to recognize oppression within themselves, as a step toward reenvisioning their own practices. To explore this claim, the ASP methodology is discussed to determine if analogous processes are evident, then research on the educational practices of educators in Accelerated Schools is reviewed, focusing on whether the ASP fosters this inner transformation for educators.

The third claim uncovered from this review is that the path toward liberation involves not only a journey through solitude in community, but also a transformation of the community. In other words, through the process of building an authentic sense of community, a freedom can be created that has the potential not only to heal and transform the individual but also to heal and transform the community. To explore this claim, findings are analyzed from research in Accelerated Schools that focused on parent involvement and community-building processes beyond the boundaries of the schools.

## **ACCELERATED SCHOOLS AS A LIBERATION PROCESS**

Accelerated Schools is a comprehensive school restructuring process that has attracted more than 500 schools in more than 20 states (Finnan et al., 1996). The Accelerated Schools Project was originally conceptualized by Henry Levin, a professor of education at Stanford University, as a process of school-based change. This section explores the three claims emerging from the review as a measure of analyzing the compatibility between liberation theology and the ASP.

### **A SITUATED REFORM**

In his reflections on the origins of the project, Levin (1996) recalls that he began to ponder disparities that persisted in education. In particular he was concerned that the National Commission on Excellence in Education and other reform efforts made no mention of students who dropped out. He speculated that there were two possible hypotheses for this oversight:

One possibility was that we had won the war on poverty, but no one had noticed. The other possibility was that we had accepted a clandestine truce in that war. My curiosity won out, and I decided to turn my attention once again to the so-called educationally disadvantaged student to find out what happened. (Levin, 1996, pp. 7-8)

When Levin began to explore the status of schooling for the so-called "educationally disadvantaged," he found that schools were not structured to serve

the students who came without expected skills:

If children arrive at school without the skills that schools expect, slowing their development through remediation will get them farther behind. If all the young are ultimately to enter successfully the academic mainstream, we must accelerate their growth and development, not retard it. This notion was further reinforced by the fact that the only educational stimulation and excitement that I saw in schools with high concentrations of at-risk students was in the few classrooms characterized as “gifted and talented” or “enrichment.” In these classes, students were identified according to their strengths and provided with educational activities and projects that built on those strengths. Instead of being stigmatized with labels such as “slow learner,” they were celebrated for their talents. And learning was palpable in those classrooms, as these highly valued and stimulated students were continually motivated and challenged to think, reflect, create, and master. (1996, pp. 9-10)

Based on these reflections, Levin began to explore how schools that served at-risk students could be restructured to accelerate learning for all the students in these schools. Initially he and a few graduate students worked with a few schools on testing his ideas in action. He envisioned a 30-year movement and, during the first decade, the methodology has evolved and become more dynamic. The overall intent of the Accelerated Schools process is to transform schools from places that slow down the learning of students that the system identifies as being at-risk—a culture of remediation—into organizations that accelerate the learning of all children. In this sense Accelerated Schools can be viewed as a process with an intent of liberating all students from the oppressive aspects of schools as they are currently structured.

Through this systematic process, a new school culture can be created (Finnan, 1996), a culture that thrives on practitioner reflection. Levin (1996) describes the present status of the Accelerated Schools Project as follows:

The Accelerated Schools Project is a 30-year experiment in creating a learning community. It is not a completed work, but a project that is always coming into being through continuous trial and error, theory and practice, inspiration and hard work. Acceleration necessitates the remaking of the school in order to advance the academic and social development of *all* children, including those in at-risk situations. This has meant creating a school in which all children are viewed as capable of benefiting from a rich instructional experience rather than delegating some to a watered-down one. It means a school that creates powerful learning situations for all children, integrating curriculum, instructional strategies, and context (climate and organization) rather than providing piecemeal changes limited to periodic changes in textbooks, training, and instructional packages. (pp. 13-14)

When we review Levin's statements about the origins of Accelerated Schools in relation to Freire's arguments about historically and culturally situating revolutionary projects, it becomes evident that there is a parallel in thought, but not necessarily a consonance in intent. The parallel in the logical process is evident in that both Freire and Levin start with an orientation toward the poor. Levin focused on students diagnosed as being at risk of failure, while Freire focused on the domination of the poor by elite classes in dictatorial Latin American societies. Freire concludes that social transformation and utopian thinking are necessary. Levin concludes that the patterns in schools that reinforce the lower attainment of students in at-risk situations must be transformed, an idea with a utopian aspect.

A lack of consonance in their ultimate intent is also evident. While Freire's aim is social transformation and he views education as a means toward that end, Levin's explicit aim is transformation within schools and he does not address larger social questions. However, we need to keep in mind that Levin is considering school transformation within a democratic society. And while there are inequities in American society, the discovery and transformation of those inequities is not Levin's explicit intent. Thus, while there are parallels, e.g., both discuss their efforts to understand Marxism, Levin gives a perspective on utopian thinking about educational transformation that is situated within schools, while Freire views education in its larger social context, as a process of liberation. Other underlying differences in intent also merit further exploration.

## RESTRUCTURING AS CONSCIENTIZATION

In addition to being oriented toward bringing at-risk students into the educational mainstream, Accelerated Schools have other parallels to the constructs embedded in liberation theology. An examination of three aspects of the Accelerated Schools Project can clarify the potentially liberating aspects of the ASP.

First, the ASP is built on three principles: *unity of purpose*, the process of striving toward a common set of goals for the school community; *empowerment coupled with responsibility*, a process enabling participants in the school community to take responsibility for important decisions, implement those decisions, and take responsibility for the outcomes; and *building on strengths*, using all of the learning resources that students, parents, school staff, and communities bring to schools (Finnan, et al., 1996; Hopfenberg, et al., 1993). When these principles are communicated and acted upon in schools, there is great potential for transformation of a school culture, a transformation that begins with the ways teachers view their own practices as educators (Finnan, 1996; Keller & Soler, 1996; St. John, Davidson, Meza, &

Allen-Haynes, 1996). It is this potential for transformation that is systematically examined in relation to the second two claims discerned from the review of writings on liberation theology.

Second, the ASP methodology includes a comprehensive, systematic restructuring process during the first year a school engages in the process. It involves all members of the school community in a process of *taking stock* of where the school is here and now, *developing and celebrating a vision for the school* as it might be, and *setting priorities* based on an understanding of challenges that emerge from taking stock juxtaposed to developing a vision (Finnan et al., 1996; Hopfenberg et al., 1993). These processes can be viewed from at least two vantages: as a comprehensive process with elements similar to an accreditation process; or as a critical process with the potential of building consciousness. While the process has mechanical aspects that are similar to most mandated school change processes, it also contains the potential for conscientization, or enabling practitioners to become more conscious practitioners. This could explain a contradiction evident in the Accelerated Schools literature: Virtually all schools can finish the first-year process, but only some Accelerated Schools seem to embrace change on a deep level (St. John et al., 1997). Part of our challenge then, if we attempt to view Accelerated Schools through the lens of liberation theology, is further to untangle these aspects of the getting-started process.

Third, once a school community has completed the getting-started process, it begins a comprehensive change process aimed at creating a capacity for accelerating the learning of all students. A new governance structure is created, with the school as a whole making major decisions, a steering committee guiding the process, and, at the core of the process, cadres of school participants engaged in an inquiry process intended to transform educational practices in challenge areas. The inquiry process was initially intended as a collective process by teams of teachers, but "spin offs" in the form of inquiry by individual teachers were also soon observed (Brunner & Hopfenberg, 1996; Keller & Soler, 1996). However, there is some question about whether this teacher-level inquiry is actually a spin off. A few studies have found that teacher inquiry actually precedes the emergence of inquiry in cadres in Accelerated Schools that more rapidly realize the potential for transformation (Dell, 1995; St. John et al., 1996). This process of practitioner-level inquiry versus inquiry in cadres closely parallels Gutierrez's claim (1984) that liberation involves solitude in community. This aspect of the emergence of Accelerated Schools merits further exploration.

Thus, there are several levels on which the ASP can be viewed as a liberating process for communities of educators, students, and parents. In Accelerated Schools, the process of reflecting on the meaning of the three

principles—empowerment coupled with responsibility, building on strengths, and unity of purpose—provides an opportunity for practitioners to think critically about past practices as well as to generate a will to transform them. The practitioner-inquiry process provides them with a method of moving toward the new practice they envision. Having longitudinal information on a small group of Accelerated Schools (St. John et al., 1997) provides an information source to examine two aspects of this transformation process: (1) the emergence of practitioner inquiry in Accelerated Schools and the relationship between practitioner inquiry and educational practice, and (2) the emergence of a sense of community within Accelerated Schools.

## CRITICAL REFLECTION IN THE ASP

A substantial and growing body of research on Accelerated Schools documents the profound influence the process has had on the educational practices and reflection of educators. This research finds that teacher inquiry is central to the success of Accelerated Schools (Brunner & Hopfenberg, 1996; Dell, 1995; Keller & Soler, 1996; St. John et al., 1997), and that open critical reflection by principals is crucial to fostering teacher inquiry (Dell, 1995; St. John et al., 1997). Consider this finding from a study of four exemplary Accelerated Schools.

The link between critical reflections and teacher empowerment was readily evident in our analysis of teachers' experiences in the school restructuring process. In schools where teachers were more willing to take risks...their principals had exhibited a capacity to reflect critically on their leadership practices. (St. John et al., 1997, p. 77)

By reflecting openly and collectively, educators can go down a different path than conventional school reform. Rather than over-emphasizing test scores, as do most of the reforms of the past two decades, achievement tests were not the primary outcome of value in these Accelerated Schools: "This criticism [of the conventional approach] is not meant as an excuse for low achievement in the target schools. There was, in fact, notable improvement in test scores in two of the target schools, and the other two held their ground while they contended with an array of more troubling issues...." (St. John et al., 1997, p. 79). Rather than replicating mandated reforms, "...these schools attempted to create powerful learning environments as a means of challenging their students" (p. 79).

The central importance of the orientation toward powerful learning in the ASP was also noted by educators in Catholic schools who had prior experience with the ASP. Indeed, powerful learning is consonant with the concept of critical pedagogy advocated by Oldenski (1997). In a study of first-year Accelerated Schools in Louisiana, three sisters were interviewed (two teach-

ers and a principal) in Louisiana's first Catholic school in the ASP. Each spoke to the ways the ASP had been consonant with their sense of "calling," their deeply held values that had led them into religious life (St. John, Dell, & Associates, 1994). In the spring of 1997, I also had the chance to interview principals in two other urban Catholic schools in New Orleans, both of whom had experience with the ASP. Both argued that the emphasis on teacher inquiry and powerful learning (in the ASP) was appropriate for their schools and for the students in their schools.

Remarkably, when the ASP takes root in schools, educators and parents begin to reflect critically and openly, as well as to take new forms of action (St. John, et al., 1997). There is a restructuring of power relationships within schools, involving parents and teachers in a more authentic dialogue about themselves and their care for children. This caring community also has ripple effects in neighborhoods surrounding schools. Indeed, while the community development aspect of the ASP is not its primary intent, it is an outcome that is often observed. Herein lies an intriguing aspect of the ASP. The process creates the opportunity for individuals in school communities to reflect and take action. As a consequence, the ASP can have ripple effects in the neighborhoods surrounding schools. This points to a potential compatibility of ASP with the concept of base community that is integral to liberation theology, if not with the values of social change and social justice that are also integral to liberation theology. Thus, the ASP provides an opportunity for conscientization, although this is not the explicit aim of the process.

## **BUILDING COMMUNITY**

If we extend Gutierrez's insights into the domain of school reform, then we need to ponder how success with the ASP influences community building in schools and in neighborhoods surrounding schools. Several studies have documented the ways the ASP can help build community within schools and heal divisions between schools and their neighborhoods (Miron et al., 1998; St. John, 1995; St. John et al., 1997). This research reveals how the deep social divisions of race and class that divide urban communities also can divide educators in urban schools. Not only did educators reflect on their own educational practices and whether they were addressing the learning needs of the children in their classrooms, they also reflected on their relationships with each other and with parents. Indeed, a ripple effect has been observed in the neighborhoods surrounding Accelerated Schools. These studies indicate that schools must first heal divisions among educators, creating a deeper unity within the schools and communities, before they can begin to be a force for community building in the neighborhood. However, once educators in the target schools reflected on the learning environments, they began to reinvent their relationships with parents (St. John et al., 1997). Thus when educators reflected critically on their practices as educators, they became more wel-

coming toward parents.

In two Catholic schools, the principals indicated that the dialogue about the faith community was central to their efforts to build unity within the schools and to reconstruct the power relationships with parents. When educators and parents reflected on their strengths and developed visions for their schools, they came back to the issue of the value of the belief community. Their vision statements, for example, emphasized both religious values and powerful learning opportunities. Thus, in Catholic schools, critical reflection in the restructuring process leads directly into issues of faith, which suggests a more direct linkage is desirable.

## **TOWARD A NEW MODEL**

When we compare the philosophy and origins of liberation theology to the Accelerated Schools Project, there appears to be a very basic compatibility. And there appears to be a need to deal with theology as an integral part of restructuring in Catholic schools. Thus, I conclude that deeper and more direct links between liberation theology and the ASP's systematic restructuring process could be crucial to restructuring in urban Catholic schools. Not only are the philosophic foundations for the two methods analogous, but the integration of a more explicit focus on reflections on the Gospels, especially passages that relate to the call for social justice, seems crucial in Catholic schools located in inner cities.

The alternative of generating a new restructuring method, building on understandings reached from research on Accelerated Schools and from case studies like the one written by Oldenski (1997), could be used to generate a new restructuring method, one tailored for Catholic schools that integrates the fundamentals of liberation theology. Indeed, this may be a desirable long-term goal for urban Catholic educators. However, as the decade of experience with Accelerated Schools and other restructuring processes indicates, it can take a decade or more to refine a restructuring methodology. Therefore, it makes sense to encourage urban Catholic schools to experiment with integration of liberation theology into the ASP.

Specifically, the experiments with the ASP should be encouraged among Catholic schools in inner cities. ASP training methods for these schools should be expanded to include reflection on key passages of the synoptic Gospels, much as the priests in the early liberation theology movement began to reflect on the New Testament in new ways. Through reflection on the Gospels, parents and educators alike can openly discuss issues of care and justice in their communities, a process that was central to the building of base communities among the poor in Latin America (Cleary, 1985; Gutierrez, 1984, 1988). This involves taking a step beyond seeing repression from outside, by reflecting on how individuals and communities share responsibility

for action (Freire, 1989; Gutierrez, 1984). It includes taking personal responsibility, through reflecting on the oppressor within. This process can help educators and parents to reflect on the issues of care and justice in their learning communities and the value of serving the poor, of using their talents and God-given strengths to build spirit and community. Public schools are constrained by the boundaries of secularism, well-established by litigation, from engaging in this crucial discourse about faith in learning communities. However, Catholic schools have no such boundaries. They can be true centers for community development through learning in our urban communities.

The combination of liberation theology and the ASP offers a way to build learning communities in urban Catholic schools. Liberation theology offers a way to reflect on the plight of the urban poor, from a perspective that values the central beliefs of Catholicism. This approach explicitly values the sense of calling that attracts educators to work in Catholic schools. The ASP offers a way to move through critical reflection into new forms of action, to restructure schools to meet the learning needs of children. The combination seems to fit with the challenge facing urban Catholic schools that have chosen to work with lower-income families.

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