

# Community members' perceptions on social, cultural changes and its implication for educational transformation in a small school district community

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## Abstract

*Systemic organisational transformation with broad stakeholder involvement is needed in our educational systems. While involving all stakeholders is crucial for building grass-roots community support and garnering input in order to achieve fundamental transformation in schools, community members are typically the least represented stakeholder group in most change efforts. This article's investigation of the community's involvement in a change effort in the United States reflects how important it is to harness the power of stakeholder ownership and help community members communicate and participate in learning communities. This study specifically examined the impact of community members' involvement in school-based community forums on the change effort at large.*

## Keywords

social change  
educational  
organisation  
transformation  
systemic change  
stakeholder  
involvement  
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involvement  
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perceptions on social  
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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Need for transformation of school systems

There has been a substantial number of publications discussing the shift of the global society from the industrial age into what many call the 'information age', which is an era in which social, cultural, and economic patterns reflect the decentralised, non-hierarchical flow of information (Toffler 1984; Reigeluth 1994; Senge et al. 2000). While the global society is transforming its mechanistic worldview and moving towards the information age, the field of education is also changing its perception of educational systems. Currently, there is general dissatisfaction with the educational system in the United States in terms of its ability to meet the needs of both the society as a whole and of students as individuals.

The current educational systems of many countries have emerged to fit the needs of an industrial-age society, and the United States is not an exception in this matter. This factory-model industrial-age educational system has highly compartmentalised learning into subject areas, and

students are 'treated as if they are all the same and are all expected to do the same things at the same time' (Reigeluth 1994: 204). The current educational system, with its standardisation and norm-based grading system, is not designed to meet individual learner needs; it is rather designed to sort or 'weed out' students, which was appropriate in an age when manual labour was predominant. Students in the industrial age were expected to learn the same amount of material in the same amount of time, thereby forcing the slower students to accumulate learning deficits and eventually drop out. It was important to sort learners into management or worker roles in the industrial age, and the teacher-centred, standardised paradigm of education was well suited for this purpose (Joseph and Reigeluth 2002).

However, in the current information-age global society, the majority of work entails knowledge work that requires learners to master such skills as communication, problem-solving, critical thinking and teamwork (Reigeluth 1999). Furthermore, employees are more and more expected to show initiative, manage themselves and collaborate with others. Therefore, education and training now must have a customised and learner-centred focus that the old paradigm does not offer. Systemic transformation seeks to shift from a paradigm in which time is held constant, thereby forcing achievement to vary, to a paradigm designed specifically to meet the needs of information-age learners and their communities by allowing students as much time as each needs to reach proficiency and to move on as soon as each is ready.

To achieve that goal, the educational system must move from standardisation and sorting to a completely different paradigm that supports customisation to meet individual learner's needs and prepare them for knowledge work. Over the past decade, new approaches to instruction and education have been increasingly advocated to meet these needs of the information-age society and learners (Alexander and Murphy 1993; McCombs and Whisler 1997; Reigeluth 1997; Senge et al. 2000). There is solid research about brain-based learning, learner-centred instruction, and the psychological principles of learners that provide educators with a valuable framework of the information-age paradigm of education (Alexander and Murphy 1993; Bradsford, Brown and Cocking 1999).

Nonetheless, transforming the educational system is not an easy task to achieve. While isolated changes, typically at the school level, have been attempted over the past several decades, their impact on the educational system has been negligible. It has become clear that this is not a simple job for a single person or institution. Teachers, administrators, parents, policy makers, professors, students and all stakeholder groups must work together, as they cannot change such a complex system by themselves.

In order to make a significant transformation in the educational system happen, a systems approach to transformation in school systems is fundamental. In fact, systemic transformation in school systems is essential, and, indeed, inevitable. The educational systems' inadequacies clearly

cannot be solved through piecemeal change; systemic organisational transformation is needed in our educational systems (Ackoff 1981; Banathy 1992; Squire and Reigeluth 2000; Duffy 2002).

## ***1.2. Systems theory and systems approach to educational transformation***

### **1.2.1. Systems theory**

Systems theory was formally conceived in the mid-twentieth century by a multi-disciplinary group of researchers, including Bertalanffy (1968), who shared the perspective that science had become increasingly reductionist and the various disciplines isolated (Watson, Watson and Reigeluth, 2008). Bertalanffy (1968) was among those who were the first to introduce General Systems Theory and systems law which govern organisation of the entities of a system, whether biological, mechanical, social, or other. The word system or systems has been defined in a range of different ways by many philosophers and researchers, but the fundamental concept is one of relationships among components comprising the whole. Systems theory is an interdisciplinary field with applications in both the hard and soft sciences. Hard systems thinking is often used and applied to facilitate closed, engineered systems, while soft systems thinking addresses the complexities of social systems (Checkland and Scholes 1990). Social systems researchers, Nelson and Stolterman (2003) argue that there are no set types or kinds of systems; instead the understanding of a system is a matter of perspective.

This perspective of exploring social systems is further explained by Robert Flood (1990) in what he calls Liberating Systems Theory. This theory, which draws from critical systems theory and Habermas (1973), seeks emancipation of humans in systems that promote subjugation and dominance (Flood 1990). It uses a critical viewpoint to analyse social environment in order to liberate the oppressed, while also seeking to liberate systems theory from self-imposed characteristics such as insularity, cases of internal localised subjugations in discourse, and the inadequacies of binary objectivist and subjectivist approaches (Flood 1990).

Related to Flood's work on Liberating Systems Theory, Banathy (1991) applies systems theory to social systems design by examining the design of educational systems and the design of the educational systems transformation process. He suggests examining systems through three lenses: a 'still picture lens' used to understand the components comprising the system, a 'motion picture lens' used to understand the processes and dynamics of the system, and a 'bird's eye view lens' to understand the relationships between the system, its peers and suprasystems (Banathy 1992). Senge (1990) also applies the notion of systems thinking to organisational learning. According to Senge (2000), systems thinking is the fifth and most important of five qualities of a learning organisation that can help schools improve and transform, working together as interrelated parts of a system rather than as isolated pieces.

### **1.2.2. Systems approach to educational transformation**

Systemic school transformation is concerned with the creation of a completely new system, rather than a mere retooling of a current system (Banathy 1992; Squire and Reigeluth 2000; Duffy 2002). It entails a paradigm shift as opposed to piecemeal change. Repeated calls for massive reform of current educational and training practices have consistently been published over the last several decades. This has resulted in an increasing recognition of the need for systemic change in education, as numerous piecemeal approaches to education reform have been implemented and failed to significantly improve the state of education.

Systems design focuses on creating a new system to meet the new educational and training needs of the information age. It transforms the educational system through holistic collaboration of all parts of the system. It requires broad participation of stakeholders, including the community members of the school district (Jenlink et al. 1996). Systemic change can only succeed when many stakeholders have changed their thinking or mindsets about education and have developed a shared vision of the organisation. Senge (1994) points out the importance of the school system working as a 'learning organization' and engaging in a systemic change process. Systems thinking, broad stakeholder involvement, mindset and culture change, participatory leadership, shared vision and idealised design, strange attractors, and leverage points are some crucial concepts and principles of systemic transformation that learning organisations and stakeholders in education should utilise in the transformation process.

This article focuses on one of the most central of these principles of systemic change, broad stakeholder involvement. It reports on a study that investigated a public school district in the United States, the Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township, and its efforts for broad stakeholder involvement by having community members participate in school-based community forums for the district-wide systemic transformation process.

### ***1.3. Community involvement in systemic transformation of education***

Community involvement is essential for systemic transformation to be successful in school districts. Without community members' approval and dedication to change, systemic transformation efforts in schools are not likely to succeed. The community has a direct and ongoing influence on its schools, and is connected by highly relevant interactions (Banathy 1992). For this reason, as Reigeluth (1993) and Duffy, Rogerson and Blick (2000) point out, community involvement is crucial for generating the grass-roots political support of respected parents, business leaders, and other community leaders for systemic transformation in schools.

However, there has not been much involvement of community members and community institutions in most school change efforts. Community members are generally the least represented stakeholder group due to educators' uninviting attitudes, the challenges of recruiting and selecting

community members, and the time constraints of community members with families and jobs (Lee and Reigeluth 2007).

With the US society well evolved into the information age (Toffler 1984) and the impact of globalisation and social transformative forces (Castles and Miller 2003), small communities are also changing drastically. Societal change and globalisation authors highlight the importance of sensitivity towards community changes and the importance of learning (Burbules and Torres 2000; Suarez-Orozco 2002; Castles and Miller 2003). Squire and Reigeluth (2000) also point out that 'ecological systemic change' is needed as the alternative to piecemeal change; it constitutes a paradigm shift of education and requires the evolution of mental models and mindsets of all community members for successful transformation. If only a small group of change leaders in the community has transcended the traditional mindset about what constitutes a 'real school' (Tyack and Cuban 1995), the rest of the community will likely resist the change. Only through broad community involvement can a 'critical mass' of mindsets evolve to support a fundamental transformation in the paradigm of education.

Therefore, broad community involvement is one of the fundamental requirements for systemic transformation efforts in school districts (Lee and Reigeluth 2007). It is important that communities examine themselves, where they are, and where they are going, and start designing and envisioning their ideas for the future of the community in order to have a vision of where their school district should be going.

## **2. Site description and research questions**

### ***2.1. Site description***

The Metropolitan School District (MSD) of Decatur Township (hereafter referred to as 'MSD Decatur') is a good case for looking into community changes and community members' participation in school district change. MSD Decatur is one of the Indianapolis area's 11 public school districts and is located in the southwest corner of the city of Indianapolis in the State of Indiana.

To understand the systemic educational transformation effort in MSD Decatur, it might be helpful to briefly mention how the United States educational system functions. Decision making for education policies and curricula in the United States is shared by the three levels of government: the US Department of Education, a state's department of education, and a local school district's school board (USDE 2003). The US Department of Education collects information and data on all aspects of education and makes recommendations at the national level, but it does not control school actions or set specific standards for schools. Public education is for the most part a state responsibility, with community involvement attained through locally elected school boards. States require a certain number of school days and course credits for graduation, but curriculum is generally determined at the district level (with some variation from state to state). More detailed decisions, such as choice of textbook and methods for classroom

instruction, are generally made at the school building level by teachers and school administrators (USDE 2003).

MSD Decatur serves roughly 5,600 students. These students attend the district's Early Childhood Center, four elementary schools, two intermediate schools, a middle school, and a high school. The total enrolment is served by approximately 380 full-time teachers, 35 administrators and 270 non-teaching staff members. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Decatur's percentage of students receiving free/reduced lunches and textbooks for the 2003–2004 school year was about 42 per cent, eclipsing the state average.

The majority of the MSD Decatur students are from the Camby, West Newton, Valley Mills, Mars Hill and Seerly Creek neighbourhoods. Along with these students, MSD Decatur's enrolment includes African-American students from the Indianapolis neighbourhood, Mapleton-Fall Creek. Its students are bussed to and from MSD Decatur under a federal court order intended to desegregate Indianapolis Public Schools, but the bussing program is now being phased out. These Mapleton-Fall Creek students make up most of the school district's minority population.

Decatur Township is now well into evolving from a heavy concentration of farming and somewhat rural characteristics to being more of a service and commercial-based locale. The population has been increasing, and with ongoing new residential construction, population will likely continue to increase in the future. With these significant changes, the schools in the Decatur community are experiencing considerable growth and change as well. The school district has been working on a construction/renovation project to meet the needs of the incoming population. It involved building two new intermediate schools and renovating the elementary schools. The school district is currently working on another construction/renovation project for the high school, which is in need of remodelling and expansion.

## ***2.2. Journey toward excellence***

In order to address the need for change, the school district is collaborating with facilitators at Indiana University to work on a district-wide systemic transformation effort, called the Journey Toward Excellence. Charles Reigeluth, a professor at Indiana University, agreed to serve as facilitator for the transformation effort along with a team of graduate students in Instructional Systems Technology, after being expressly invited by leaders of all the major stakeholder groups in the school district. The facilitators and school district have followed the guidelines suggested by the Guidance System for Transforming Education (GSTE) (Jenlink et al. 1998). Figure 1 gives a brief overview of the transformation process of GSTE that guided the Journey Toward Excellence (Lee and Reigeluth 2007).

The systemic change effort is well-timed for the school district due to the changes taking place in the community. The township is currently very much influenced by the development of AmeriPlex, the state's largest business park, and the significantly increasing population. And because of

Phase I. Initiate a Systemic Change Effort	Facilitators assess and enhance their own readiness for the process and form a Support Team.
	Facilitators establish or redefine a relationship with a school district and discuss per diem payment for Event 3.
	Facilitators assess and enhance district readiness for change.
	Negotiate and sign a contract/agreement with the superintendent and board for Phase II.
Phase II. Develop Starter Team	Facilitators and superintendent form the Starter Team.
	Hold a retreat to develop the Starter Team dynamic.
	Develop Starter Team understanding of systems, design, mental models, the systemic change process, dialogue, and small-group facilitation.
	Assess and enhance district and community capacity for change. (Identify assets and barriers, and use community forums if needed.)
	Develop an agreement/contract with the Starter Team and School Board for Phase III, scope out resource needs, and plan a budget for internal funding and a proposal for external funding.
Phase III. Develop the District-Wide Framework and Capacity for Change	Starter Team expands into the Leadership Team, Starter Team becomes facilitators, facilitator becomes an advisor and “critical friend.”
	Hold a one-day retreat to develop the Leadership Team dynamic.
	Facilitators develop Leadership Team understanding of systems, design, mental models, the systemic change process, dialogue, and small-group facilitation. (Address throughout Events 13-17.)
	Leadership Team develops a district-wide framework with broad stakeholder participation (community forums). This includes identifying changes in the community’s educational needs, and using them to develop a mission, vision, and core values for an ideal school system. It takes this opportunity to assess and enhance district and community interest in, and culture for, systemic change. It develops pyramid groups for broad stakeholder involvement.
	Leadership Team identifies current and recent change efforts and decides what relation those should have with this effort.
	Leadership Team develops a change process strategy, including capacity building and funding. Advisor’s role is defined and funded for Phase IV.
Phase IV. Create Ideal Designs for a New Educational System	Leadership Team forms and capacitates building-level Design Teams and conducts a workshop on the framework.
	Design Teams create building-level designs and systems for evaluating those designs with broad stakeholder involvement. Leadership Team supports and monitors the Design Teams.
	Leadership Team forms and capacitates a district-level Design Team.
	Design Team creates a design for ideal district administrative and governance systems, and systems for evaluating that design, with broad stakeholder involvement. Leadership Team supports and monitors this Design Team.
Phase IV. Create Ideal Designs for a New Educational System	Design teams create building-level processes for evolving as close as possible to their ideal designs. Leadership Team supports and monitors the design teams.
	Carry out implementation plans, formative evaluations, and revisions of the evolving designs and the implementation processes.
	Periodically evolve the ideal designs (building-level and district-level).

Note. From Reigeluth, C.M. and Duffy F.M. (2007), “Trends and Issues in p-12 Educational Change”, in R.A. Reiser and J.V. Dempsey (eds.), *Trends and Issues in Instructional Design and Technology*, 2nd edn., Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, Merris Prentice Hall.

Figure 1: Revised discrete events in the GSTE.

these changes, the community is experiencing new educational needs related to the shift to a knowledge-work economy.

The Journey Toward Excellence, strives to transform the schools through a district-wide ecological systemic transformation (Squire and Reigeluth 2000) to better meet each student's individual needs and help every student reach his or her potential. Piecemeal reform attempts, usually at the school level, have taken place over the past several decades; however, their impact on the educational system has been insignificant. The Journey Toward Excellence is a response to the increasing recognition of the need for a systemic approach to school transformation, and is concerned with creating a completely new system, rather than a mere retooling of the current system. It entails a paradigm shift, as opposed to piecemeal change. This Journey is intended to address the new educational needs of the community and its information-age learners. As stated in MSD Decatur's new mission, the purpose of this Journey is to transform their schools into learning communities where all stakeholders are empowered to achieve excellence.

While the MSD of Decatur Township has been working towards transforming its educational system, various community members have become involved. Because of the broad participation emphasis of the GSTE (Jenlink et al. 1998), the school district invited all community members to six district-wide community forums, in order to build broad stakeholder participation and stakeholder understanding of the need for educational change, gather input and ideas for designing a better educational system for the Decatur community, and help participants evolve their thinking about education.

### ***2.3. Research questions***

This study investigated the community members' involvement and participation in the community forums and their impact on Decatur's systemic change process by investigating these six community forums. The study examined what societal and cultural changes community members saw in their community, and what attitudes the members expressed about how the school district should respond to those changes, along with their mindsets about education in general. This report also provides some reflections and observations on the impact of community members' involvement in the community forums on the change effort at large.

The following were the guiding questions for this study:

1. What kinds of socio-cultural changes did Decatur community members see in their community, and what did they see as important in the school district in order to get ready for those changes?
2. What kinds of mindsets, mental models, value commitments, and ideologies about the school district's future and transformation effort are implied in community members' responses?
3. What impact did the community forums have in the school district and change effort?

### 3. Process and methods

#### 3.1. Participants' information and data sources

The school district held six widely publicised meetings at six different schools between January and April, 2002. At the time, these were the biggest and most influential events in community involvement within the school district and the Journey Toward Excellence. The purposes of these community meetings were: (1) to receive a broader array of ideas about what participants believe their schools should be like, (2) to help evolve participants' thinking (or mindsets) about what their schools should be like, (3) to build broader stakeholder understanding of the need for educational change and commitment to the change process, and (4) to build broader stakeholder participation in the educational change process.

Lee and Reigeluth (2007) identified three different levels at which the community members have been participating in the Journey Toward Excellence. The first level is one-way communication, where community members are mainly receiving information from the school district about how the change effort has been proceeding. The second level is two-way communication, where community members give input and feedback on the change process and the prospective changes, in addition to receiving information from the school district. The third level is change team member, where community members participate as active team members on one of the many change teams. Figure 2 gives a brief overview of the change teams in the Journey Toward Excellence (Lee and Reigeluth 2007). The community forums discussed in this study were second-level community involvement events, where community members participated in a set of discussion forums on the community's social and cultural changes and discussed their influence on the schools in the community.

Approximately 20 participants attended each community forum, which added up to six meetings and about 120 participants. These participants all voluntarily attended the community forums. Open invitations

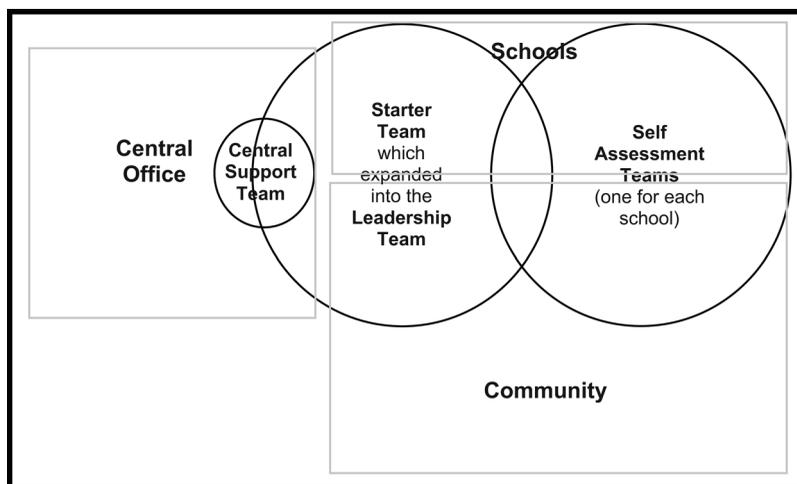


Figure 2: View of teams in the Journey Toward Excellence.

were sent to all students' homes, and flyers were distributed to encourage other community members' involvement. Most of the community members were parents of the students of the schools; some were invited as church leaders or business people of the community. School teachers and district administrators, such as the superintendent, principals of the schools, and some central office administrators were also voluntarily present at the forums. Community members were dressed casually and were in a relaxed environment. Pizza and soft drinks were provided prior to the meeting, in order to provide a comfortable atmosphere for talking and exchanging ideas openly about the community and school district.

Community members first heard a brief presentation on the current societal change into the information age, the need for systemic change, and how community members' participation was invaluable in the systemic change process. Participants were then asked to engage in discussion about the current educational needs of the Decatur Township students and community and about how the educational needs had changed over the past 30 years or so. They were asked to discuss four specific issues – not to reach consensus on them, but to understand why others believed what they did, to make them more receptive to others' thinking. The issues included: (1) how society and Decatur Township in particular had changed over the previous 30 years, (2) how the Decatur community should change, (3) what skills and personal qualities students should acquire in order to succeed in the event of both actual and desired future changes, and (4) how Decatur Township schools were doing then in helping students to acquire those important skills and qualities.

### ***3.2. Data collection and data analysis***

Data for investigating the research questions were collected through three processes. First of all, background information and the history of MSD Decatur were collected through document review and interviews with school administrators. Second, the six community forums were video taped or audio taped for analysis. Finally, field notes regarding both background information and community forums were written during the community forums, conversations and interviews with school district administrators, the school district change effort leaders, teachers and parents.

Data and content of the video tapes and audio tapes from the six community forums were analysed using constructivist grounded theory guidelines and method of inquiry (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2005). The two researchers engaged in this study examined the discussions held at the community forums in schools by adopting the grounded theory guidelines as tools; we explored the emerging themes in the discussions.

Using the constructivist grounded theory approach encouraged the researchers to synthesise and interpret the discussion data to portray our understanding of the community forum participants' speech and actions, offer abstract interpretations of relationships, create statements about the implications of our analyses, and ultimately helped us to take a reflexive

stance on the studied phenomenon of community involvement in systemic educational transformation (Charmaz 2005; Denzin and Lincoln 2005). As Charmaz (2005) suggests, we paid close attention to understanding the empirical realities, expressing our collected representation of them and locating ourselves as facilitators in these realities.

In addition, general field notes and interview notes were analysed in order to obtain confirmation of the main community forum data and also acquire support across different forms of data.

The data collected and analysed consisted of two major sources: (1) the six community forums and (2) the field notes and information gathered from school district administrators and change effort leaders on MSD Decatur's use of the opinions and comments collected from the community forums.

The next section discusses the community members' participation in the six community forums and its impact on the school district and systemic transformation process.

## **4. Results and analysis**

### ***4.1. Change of family structure in the community***

As the forum organisers suggested, the participants started their discussions with how the family structure in Decatur Township had changed in the past 30 years or so. They talked about how it had been gradually changing to more single-parent households, two-working-parent homes, smaller family size in general, and blended families in the community. One Hispanic parent talked about the diversity of families in the Decatur Township: 'For families, both parents work, we have blended families, smaller families and Hispanic and White mixed families; we have a lot [of different families] . . . .'

The participants also expressed their concerns about less family time due to longer commutes and workload, and that more parents wanted to be friends to their children instead of taking responsibility to discipline and teach morals. They talked about how families were much less functional at the present. 'There is just less family support now than before; . . . we need to have them learn self responsibility from parents'.

Many of the community members also agreed that family values and morals were not as valued as they were before. One participant shared some specific examples for improvements in families. 'For family, we need to have more family involvement; [a] caring and loving environment is needed'.

### ***4.2. Realisation of diversity and different cultures in the community***

Another recurring topic of the forum discussions was an awareness of diverse cultures and different groups of people coming together in the school district. Participants of the community forums acknowledged the various cultures, different people, and complexities that existed in the Decatur community. Suarez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard (2004) support this trend by talking about how globalisation defines our era and hence has a huge impact on education and schools.

A couple of community members mentioned the need for and importance of multilingual education in schools for the students and also expressed their personal interest in being able to learn different languages themselves in order to adjust to the changing community. They showed an awareness of globalisation and international migration influencing the Decatur community and acknowledged the importance of multicultural education in schools. For example, some community members made very specific suggestions, such as that various cultural activities be held by the schools and community. They pointed out that some new abilities that were not taught in the past would be needed in the future community, such as respectful communication with different community members and respectful attitude towards different cultures and languages. Tolerance and sensitivity were some other qualities that the community members talked about along the lines of diversity and communication. One community member stressed the importance of discovering the diverse identities of the community: 'In terms of community . . . understanding of others and of course first understanding who we are is really important'.

Another parent community member who was passionately taking the lead in one discussion group stressed the importance of language barriers in the Decatur Township community: 'We feel that the language barrier should be broken, . . . that wherever you want to come to, whatever language you'll be dealing with, you should be able to know that language, rather [than] having to cater back and forth [with your first language]; we feel that a problem [is present] right now, here [in our community]. And we feel a need to learn their language, and we feel that we all need to learn another language, that we should be required to learn another than their native tongue'.

### ***4.3. Importance of collaboration and communication in the community***

Related to the idea of the importance of diversity and understanding other cultures, the notion of communication was very well explored in the discussions of community members. Community members talked about the importance of communication skills in a diverse context. The community members' recent experiences in schools, at workplaces, and cultural institutions were all examples of how collaboration and communication were key to performing well in the information-age society. Parents stressed that for the Decatur community to succeed in education, collaboration and communication skills should be heavily emphasised in schools. The following are some of the participants' statements on the importance of collaboration and communication:

[There is] a lot less sense of community now. Kids don't play outside as much in the neighborhood like 30, 40 years ago. It's just not the same anymore. . . . They all just watch TV and are more sensitive about national issues [compared to neighborhood news].

There's just not enough social interaction [in our Decatur Township community]. Before you knew everyone on the block; now you only talk to your family. There needs to be more social interaction.

There are people communicating through email and all sorts of different ways these days . . .

Students need to learn to communicate and work with others . . . [along with other required skills for the new society].

#### ***4.4. Customisation and individualised support in the community***

The notion of customisation and individualised support was another topic of interest for community members. Especially in terms of educational experiences and opportunities, participants seemed to consider the importance of Reigeluth's (1997) notion of customised learning and individualised instruction rather than standardised education for students, as presented at the beginning of the forum. The community members pointed out that the need for individualisation and customisation were well shown in the customer-centred corporate environment also. The participants agreed that the students of the community should learn in schools as very valued individuals and also learn to value other individuals as well. One participant articulated the idea well by stating: 'We want our children to be what they *really are*. Not just force them to learn anything in schools'. Another parent followed up this statement by responding with the following specific ideas for schools to engage in. 'We need to have fewer activities, to focus on what they really are. They can't focus on the talent that they really have if they have to be engaged in everything that is offered as activities'.

At the end of the discussion, a member brought up the issue of testing in schools, which stimulated many of the participants to respond:

I think there should be another way of testing the capabilities of the students. Being so strict on certain tests, it's just so unfair.

What about kids with learning disabilities? They feel like they are not capable because they don't get [any] support. It's so intense for them.

Yes, we know, they think that test . . . you know like I-STEP [Indiana's standardized test], test taking skills is the ultimate goal, and it's just wrong.

The discussion progression of these members showed a clear formation of a community opinion, that they were frustrated with the current paradigm of the educational system, and they desperately felt the need for customised learning and personalised instruction.

#### ***4.5. Use of technology in the community***

Community members were consistent about bringing up the trend of increasing technology use in our everyday lives. The participants pointed out how, in workplaces, families, schools, and other social areas, technology seemed to play a crucial role. Technology was not only described as

something that was already there in our everyday lives, but also viewed as a potential tool to make changes in the school district's educational system more powerful and successful. This is consistent with Battro's (2004) comments that digital skills are now embedded in many cultures at many levels, and that both formal education and social demands increasingly stress the need for digital skills. These findings also align with Jenkins' (2004) observation on technology. He claims that technology, especially the Internet, plays an integral role in the rapid flow of images and meanings across national borders and also in the increased feeling of community among teens and youth. A community member who claimed that his children were even better with technology than he, who is the one who buys the technology equipment for them, expressed his strong interest in technology use and technology education:

We hear about having to learn technology in schools with PowerPoint and computer labs in PTO; they agreed to have computers put in classrooms for presentations. We want to fight for funding for it. We hope you will bring us up to speed. Everything is much [more] automated. Even at McDonalds, you're supposed to press a button. I feel that the school system should help students with that. Somebody even volunteered to teach the parents as well, so we can understand what the students are learning in schools.

Another community member pointed out the connection between technology use in families and the introduction of multiculturalism:

There is more exposure to technology, parents and children's use of video games and Internet, and this is all increasing [in our community] . . . We feel that there are pluses and minuses to that. But I think that brings more [of] a multi-cultural society to us.

#### ***4.6. New skills and abilities needed in the community***

Participants in the community forums discussed a wide array of skills and personal qualities that they believed are important for students to develop. The participants expressed that the workplace has changed by having more service-related jobs that require strong communication skills, teamwork, and use of information technology. Hence, flexibility, problem solving skills, time management, teamwork, conflict resolution, and communication skills were identified as some of the important skills and abilities that needed to be learned.

Personal qualities that are important to develop for students were also discussed during the conversation: integrity, work ethic, responsibility, creativity, desire to balance family, faith, and work, respect for differences in others, passion for something positive, desire to learn and service orientation. There was a heavy emphasis on respecting others and communication.

It was very interesting to find that participants in the community forums discussed skills and personal qualities that were very much aligned with the six life skills Howard Gardner suggests (2004) for pre-collegiate education; although Gardner's skills were not mentioned in the forums. Gardner (2004) suggests six life skills that are critical in pre-collegiate education: (1) understanding of the global system, (2) ability to think analytically and creatively within disciplines, (3) ability to tackle problems and issues that do not respect disciplinary boundaries, (4) knowledge of other cultures and traditions, (5) knowledge of and respect for one's own cultural traditions, and finally, (6) fostering of hybrid or blended identities.

Parents strongly emphasised the importance of raising the expectations that we have for our students in our schools: 'We want to have them [involved] in team activities and socially develop. We really want to stress lower drop out [rates], higher expectations for jobs, and raise standards of expectations to get to better, higher level jobs'.

One participant pointed out a long list of skills that was indicative of other participants' responses: 'It's important to have good computer skills: multilingual, reading skills, communication skills, problem solving skills, life skills, and integrating skills where black people here [and] white people here and everybody [come] together'.

#### ***4.7. Emphasis on values and morals needed in the community***

The need for values and morals was another topic of discussion. The community members felt that the community was not quite the same as it used to be, a warm caring environment, due to the larger neighbourhoods and increasing workload for families. The members all seemed to agree that there was an urgent need to bring the community back together based on morals and values that are appropriate for the new society. They also pointed out the importance of traditional values of the community such as religion and authority. It seemed as if the community members were not only aware of the community undergoing drastic change, but also wanted to hold on to the traditional values they found useful in the past. These are some of the responses of the community members regarding the topic of values and morals in the community of Decatur Township:

They were stable back then. They were more involved with each other in the community and were more respectful before; the values are not being taught like they were. They don't help each other out like they used to before.

More violence. And slang is more accepted. One thing that I offered [to the group] was that family dinner was important in the past and [an] awful lot of stuff went around the dinner table, but not anymore.

We should have some more emphasis on religion. The children should have that as the base of the family.

The dollar sign isn't everything. We should know that.

#### ***4.8. New style of relationship and leadership in the community***

A new style of human relationships and leadership in the community was heavily discussed. Bass (1998) talks about transformational leadership where leaders motivate and stimulate their followers' thinking and are trusted, admired and respected. The community members' discussion of the change of leadership and relationships in schools and workplaces in the Decatur community was strongly aligned with Bass' (1998) notion of transformational leadership. They talked about how autocratic, centralised relationships were changing into team-based relationships in workplaces, and how caring, trusting leaderships were shown to be very much needed in society. They mentioned that in schools the administrators' and teachers' leadership styles were also changing, moving away from the centralised, autocratic leadership style. These ideas were applied to the family environment as well.

We think they [students] can be successful without being bound to traditional manners nowadays.

A focus on personality and teamwork . . . [is important], a lot of the work is based on teamwork now, training them early on to work in teams rather than having them say, here, we're doing it our way.

We should learn how to let things go a little bit, rather than having their [students] way all the time.

### **5. Discussion**

#### ***5.1. Community members' mindsets and perspectives on educational change***

Our analysis of these community forums shows that the participants were reluctant to take an active role at first. Although these community members showed up to the community forums because they were interested in education and the school district, they were only answering questions that were being asked, not being proactive about giving input and suggestions. They didn't seem to be used to their ideas being heard by administrators and teachers. However, as the discussion moved along with encouragement of the facilitator emphasising the importance of the community members' input in school change, the community members' developed very different attitudes towards voicing their ideas and thoughts. The members who at first were very quiet began to demonstrate leadership; they offered suggestions and were outspoken and enthusiastic.

Possibly the most fundamental challenge in having community members' participate in change efforts is helping them change their mindsets about being involved in the school district's decision making process. Community members are usually reluctant to participate because they think they do not know enough, or that their opinions do not matter and will not be taken seriously. They first need to be persuaded that their voices will be taken seriously, and that their input will be valuable for the school district to advance towards a more effective and humane system.

The findings also showed that the community members were explicating their mindsets, value commitments, and ideologies about the community and its schools. Community members were very aware of the changing society and community, perhaps influenced somewhat by the presentation at the beginning of each forum. They pointed out the weaker sense of togetherness in the community, changes in family structures, and especially the emergence of diversity and different cultures in the community. The community members also talked about: the need for a balance between new and traditional values and morals due to changes in society; how a completely different style of leadership was needed in schools; the value of using technology in teaching and learning; and the need for customised, personalised instruction in the classrooms.

It seemed as if community members' mindsets were becoming more explicit through the conversations with other community members about these changes and needs. Community members would build upon each others' thoughts, and formulate a consensus on a topic. For example, a discussion about assessment led to a consensus on wide disapproval of standardised testing and how Indiana's standardised test, I-STEP, makes students focus on test-taking skills instead of critical thinking and creative abilities that are really needed in society. The participants stimulated each other's ideas and thoughts, acknowledged and identified problems with the current system, and came up with approaches.

### ***5.2. Impact of community forums in the school district and transformation effort***

The community members' participation in the forums had a large impact on MSD Decatur and its district-wide systemic transformation effort, Journey Toward Excellence. The participants provided a great deal of information on what the 11 school buildings in Decatur should be like, the atmosphere and environment of the schools, the teaching of values in schools, and the schools' relationships with parents, families and the community. According to the community forum facilitators, 'The community members' ability to think "outside the box" and go beyond the current paradigm of education was impressive . . .'

The most important contribution of the community members in the six community forums was that they provided a comprehensive vision of where the school district should be headed. The participants' comments were all compiled and reported in the MSD Decatur newsletter, *Decatur Communicator*, in March of 2002, which was distributed to all parents in the school district. The comments and suggestions were also reported to the Leadership Team of the Journey Toward Excellence at a monthly meeting, and came to be the most important basis and source for the creation of the district's Vision-Mission-Beliefs Framework (formally adopted on 15th February 2005), which reflects the direction of the school district's transformation. The comments and suggestions were categorised and were included in sections of the Framework. Based on the community

forums, the school district took a year and a half to create the Framework, allowing all stakeholders to participate and give input during the process. If the Decatur experience is any indication, community members' involvement in community forums does have a significant impact in the later school district transformation activities.

The mission statement of this Framework illustrates much of what community members had brought up in the forums:

MSD of Decatur Township is an information-age school corporation committed to being learner centered. A focus on learning and continuous personal growth is promoted in a safe, respectful and caring environment characterized by high expectations. Learning Communities are the means to fostering collaboration and empowerment. Assessments, interventions and accommodations are used to meet the academic, social, emotional, physical, and developmental needs of all learners.

The vision, mission and beliefs are now posted in every classroom in Decatur.

## **6. Summary and future research**

Community members are typically the least represented stakeholder group in most educational systemic transformation efforts. However, as shown in this particular case of community involvement in a district-wide systemic change effort, community involvement is most helpful for building grassroots community support and garnering input in order to achieve fundamental transformation in schools. The community's involvement in the MSD of Decatur Township reflects how important it is to harness the power of stakeholder ownership and to help community members communicate and participate in learning communities. And while this particular case is bound by its context as a transformation effort in the United States, it should have significant implications for other countries' educational systems, and this case supports the calls for broader community involvement in educational transformation and decision making.

To better utilise the power of community members' ownership in educational change, it is crucial to explore and learn more about ways to enhance community members' involvement in school district systemic transformation efforts. Creating additional tasks for which community members could volunteer and transforming participating community member groups into 'learning communities' are two things that should be further investigated. Encouraging and educating others may also enhance the sustainability of community involvement over the long period of a systemic transformation process. It is crucial to find ways to encourage community members to acknowledge this responsibility and share their thinking and progress with others.

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