

## Project Giant Step: Ocean Hill -Brownsville and the New York City School Strike

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This historical account is told as a narrative from my perspective and from Stephen Allen Goodman's perspective of Project Giant Step, which might be one of the most successful teaching-of-reading projects in history. There are a few purposes in telling this story. First, it is in times of chaos that real innovation can be made. It is then that people take chances and it is not business as usual. Second, we stood at the cusp of social change in the United States. Blacks were beginning to take control of heavily black communities. Third, research, no matter how academic, sometimes has unintended results. Last, we were the first to combine individualization, Precision Teaching, and group reinforcement contingencies, and this was done in a public school system. Last, it shows how school systems tend to hate and destroy effective innovation. Project Giant Step's spectacular results were overshadowed by the unintended ones because the project was the immediate trigger of events that led to the disastrous New York City School Strike. At the end of the project, the report of it was sent to the Ford Foundation. We do not know what happened to the data. This report will therefore not report the data other than the overall outcome.

### Background

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville experience was one of those non-linear events in history. The year 1968 was an extremely pivotal one in the Civil Rights movement. Blacks were beginning to take control of their own communities. The year before, an African-American was elected mayor of a large U.S. city for the first time, when Carl B. Stokes became the mayor of Cleveland, Ohio. New York City was to fall into turmoil over the school strike. New York City was nominally liberal. Even the Republicans, such as Mayor John Vliet Lindsay, were liberal, that is, liberal Republicans. The strike ensued because

of actions of a local community school board in Ocean Hill and the intransigence of the New York School Board and the Teachers Union. The strike left deep wounds for decades, not only in the black urban communities, especially in New York City, but also in the white liberal community (Kolodny, 1969, letter in Reply to Jason Epstein).

The story started in November 1967, when Mayor John V. Lindsay and McGeorge Bundy, who was the head of the Ford Foundation, worked with some members of the Brooklyn black power movement to establish a community-run set of schools in Ocean Hill -Brownsville in Brooklyn (Kahlenberg, 2007; Sewell, 2007). This was an extremely poor, almost totally black school district. It was also an unstable community. It seemed that half the students would transfer every year.

Rhody A. McCoy was made superintendent of the local community school board. Rhody McCoy was educated at Howard University and New York University. He taught in the New York City school system for 18 years before he became an acting principal. In 1987, he was chosen to serve as superintendent of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district. As an experiment in school decentralization, the district was to be run by a governing board with more representation from parents and community organizations.

### Getting the Project Started

Most of the time, one goes through a relatively difficult process of getting one's research plan approved. We had no trouble with the Ford Foundation. The community board was more difficult, but this was for extraordinarily good reason. Because of the fact that the schools were in shambles as well as the surrounding community, there was political chaos inside and out. One reads stories that it was about whites and blacks. It was and it was not. At first, most of the staff were white, something that many members of the school board were probably not happy with. The intervention team was composed of Dennis Littky, one of the principal investigators, who was a white but had a natural Afro, as well as one Lenora Bosley who was black and Dennis's partner in all this. She was not only a teacher but she had been an Ocean Hill Brownsville employee so she was very helpful in making things happen. She did all the demonstrations of group reinforcement, self pacing and

classroom management. There were also the white individuals: Steve Goodman, me, Charlene Marsh Behrens, Donald A. Cook and Ogden Lindsley. A great proportion of the teachers were black. Most of the white teachers supported the community school board. There was a loyalty issue because there was no leadership except from the community school board. No one in the Teachers Union or the New York City Board of Education cared enough about how terrible the education was to provide additional resources until Dr. McCoy was appointed. No one in the city or the union took responsibility in the City or Union. They were totally focused on the rights of the teachers and the New York City School Board. We did appear a number of times before the community board as a group of white, highly educated graduate students. We still did get approval for our project though. That is not to say that there were no black power issues. Two of us were asked to move to the background. Dennis had a red-headed Afro, and was more acceptable to the board.

### **The History of Project Giant Step**

In 1967, during my graduate school studies in psychology at Columbia University, I met Fred Schulman while consulting at the Blueberry School in Brooklyn on how to work with the children in the school using operant principles. This school might still exist as part of the city system. It had a residence. I was an undergraduate student of Ivar Lovaas at UCLA from 1962- to 1966. He was my advisor and supervised my research with autistic and brain-injured children at the Dubnoff School for Educational Therapy, now in North Hollywood. Ivar Lovaas recommended me to the Blueberry School in Brooklyn as a consultant to help them with their autistic children. When I went to Columbia University, I took some classes with Donald A. Cook, who was one of the founders of programmed instruction and later did work with the Keller System of Personalized Instruction. In 1968, while I was a consultant at Blueberry School, Fred Shulman asked me to put together some form of intervention for the new Ocean Hill -Brownsville School District, in Brooklyn.

Fred Shulman knew Rhody McCoy. He wanted me to introduce operant techniques to the classroom of normal students. My cousin, Stephen Allen Goodman and I put together and submitted

a grant to the Ford Foundation that was for funding the Ocean Hill school demonstration project. We thought that there should be three main differences in the pedagogy. First, we wanted to have extremely high levels of motivation. Second, we wanted to individualize the instruction. Third, we wanted to make decisions about individualization based on real daily performance.

Steve had his undergraduate education at University of California at Berkeley, and then at California State College, Hayward. Afterwards he went on to the program in Psychology and Education at the University of Michigan. In 1966, at Hayward State College, Steve met Ogden Lindsley, who had been a doctoral student of B. F. Skinner. Steve learned what Og had to say at the time about Og's brain child, Precision Teaching and Celeration. Steve also trained teachers, at both at California State Hayward as a Teaching Assistant and then at the University of Washington, Seattle, as a Visiting Assistant Professor. He instructed teachers in charting, behavioral recording, and behavior management skills. I had also met Ogden in 1966 at the American Psychological Association (APA) meeting in Los Angeles and we stayed in touch.

### **Getting All the Children to Read**

We were thinking about how to get kids really motivated to read. Hence we had to figure out what the reinforcers would be. We also looked to enhance group reinforcement contingencies. We thought the model was to look at what the kids liked best in school, a la "Premack principle". We decided it was recess. In the second grade, they liked to play group games like kick ball. We designed a pedagogy using group reinforcement contingencies, but this time for teams. Each team would get points for correct answers in a programmed reader. We had as consultants Donald A. Cook, and Ogden Lindsley. The staff included: Charlene Marsh Behrens, who was recommend by George Fargo. Both Steve and I knew George Fargo well. I had worked with him at the Dubnoff School for Educational Therapy in North Hollywood. On Steve's recommendation, we hired Dennis Littky to run the program. He was a student of John Hagen, who has more recently been Executive Officer of the Society for Research in Child Development (1989-2007). Steve knew Dennis from the University of Michigan, where both had obtained dual degrees

in psychology and education. Dennis Littky went on to found and run a series of schools based on the ideas of having the students highly motivated and the instruction individualized. There were a few other people were involved.

### **The Background of Techniques in Project Giant Step**

The three main parts to Project Giant Step had a history that we will recount: Individualization, Celeration Charting, and Group reinforcement contingencies.

### **How We Individualized Using Programmed Instruction and the Celeration Chart**

With the one-room school house, all education was individualized. In the early 20th century, this was lost and the "factory" type model became popular. On Donald A. Cook's recommendation, we decided to use McGraw-Hill's SRA programmed instruction reader and DISTAR. DISTAR is an acronym for Direct Instruction System for Teaching Arithmetic and Reading, a program of SRA/McGraw-Hill.

We used the Celeration Chart to decide where in these programmed books the child would be working. We made an adaptation to the chart to make it more teacher friendly. We did the charting. That is to say, Charlene did it. We did teach some of the teachers to do charting. We also taught classroom management.

There was essentially one method. We looked at the charted behavior and used simple rules to place the students where they would acquire skills the fastest. These rules were to have a reasonable rate of overall responses as well as correct responses (at least 80%) and to repeat an earlier lesson if the rate fell below this criterion. We also looked at the rate of performing. How many items were the students completing in a reading session? If this number dropped below a criterion level, we moved the student to an earlier lesson and provided additional practice.

### **Competition and Group Reinforcement Contingencies**

In 1963, when I was a teacher at the Dubnoff Schools for Educational Therapy, I instituted group reinforcement contingencies for the purposes of getting more cooperation among the students as well

as increasing their performance. The cooperation was to foster social interaction and the development of social behavior. Each student's points were added together with the points of all the other students. When the total reached a given goal, they would all receive some form of reinforcement. I was doing this research as an independent study with Ivar Lovaas when I was a junior and senior at the University of California, Los Angeles..

At Ocean Hill-Brownsville, there were some differences in applying group contingencies. First, the groups became teams that competed against each other. Second, to balance the teams so that they were all likely to win from time to time, we used a system similar to draft picks in professional sports. The worst team would get the best performer from another team. To determine which team won, we simply added up the points for each student to all the other points earned by the other students on the team. The payoff for winning the competition was free reading, Dennis's idea. We had turned academic reading into a fun sport. The competition was new. The children were always jostling for dominance or survival in class. It got so exciting, that they were helping each other. We found one curious thing. The students were not just working in groups. The students were helping the other students, i.e. that is, they were teaching each other. Normally, this would be considered cheating. But to us, it showed that they really cared, not necessarily for each other but for winning.

### **Outcomes**

Project Giant Step was a huge success. Before the project was initiated, on the average, students in the district had made 0.4 years of progress every academic year. With Project Giant Step, they made *two* years of progress in one year, on the average. Because there is no report that I could get from the Ford Foundation, the more detailed data are not available. There might also be more records among my papers.

We have since replicated the results with versions of Inhelder and Piaget's (1958) logical thinking task that required participants to discover which of four variable predicted an outcome. This was carried out at the Morse school in Cambridge, MA, with 122 5th and 6th graders. About 75% moved from the Concrete Stage (roughly normal for 8- to 11 -year -olds) to the Formal Stage on pendulum-

like problems (roughly normal for half of the 16-year-olds), up from 25% initially. We ran about 16 trials. Most of the progress came early.

### **Events Leading Up to the New York City School Strike**

To get an idea of what was going on in the schools, we administered some standard reading tests to establish a baseline. We had the results of a pre- and post-test for most of all the second grades, including those not in the treatment group. We discovered after the pre-test period in which there were no interventions, much to our horror, that six or seven classes were doing worse in overall terms at the end of the year than they were at the beginning of the year. Rhody McCoy got the results somehow. As an unintended consequence, during the fall, this led to some heated Community board meetings. Committee members even came in to observe the interventions after the program was officially under way. Their perspective was mostly political, demonstrating their concern about the educational system and by whom and how it was managed. Finally they decided to transfer the teachers whose children were doing worse as well as some others to administrative positions. We attended some governing board meetings. It was very tense. McCoy, together with the governing board, met twice with the Central Board to ask that the harmful teachers be transferred out of the classroom to some administrative positions, but the Board, in effect, turned them down (Epstein, 1968).

After doing what they could through the Central Board, the Governing Board of the Ocean-Hill Brownsville School district sent letters terminating the employment of the teachers in that district. The letter read, in part: "The Governing Board of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville School District has voted to end your employment in the schools of this district. This action was taken on the recommendation of the Personnel Committee. The termination of employment is to take effect immediately. In the event you wish to question this action, the Governing Board will receive you on Friday, May 10th at 6 PM at 1-55." Mr. McCoy added, "You will report Friday morning to Personnel, 110 Livingston Street, Brooklyn, for reassignment." (Epstein, (1969).

On May 10, 1968, the local community school board transferred 19 teachers. The Teacher's Union

fought McCoy's efforts to bring in three new principals of color and to transfer 19 teachers and administrators. This was the precipitating event that led to the famous September 1968 New York City School strike. A series of strikes ensued between September 9 and November 17, 1968.. One of the lessons is that there are unintended results from doing straightforward research. How could there be such a disastrous set of teachers in the schools in Ocean Hill- Brownsville? The arrogance of the system and its indifference to the effects it was having on the students were monumental. Amid mounting tensions and allegations of anti-Semitism by the district, the New York Board of Education rescinded McCoy's decisions and disbanded the Ocean Hill-Brownsville governing board. Much later on, Albert Shanker, the Teacher's Union leader, admitted the strike was a disaster.

### **The Strike and Its Aftermath**

The first strike shut down the New York City schools for 36 days. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment in local control came to an end. The strike exposed the fact that even the most inadequate teachers could not be removed and that the real power in education lay with the unions. The strike left deep rifts in relationships between blacks and Jews, who were most of the teachers. But the Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment also became the model for community-run schools in big cities, a major lasting effect. It firmly established the principle that teachers and administrators should be held accountable for providing a successful education of for the students.

One tragedy is that the fabulous success of Project Giant Step, based on individualizing instruction and using group reinforcement contingencies, never became known. Although many review studies have shown that these two pedagogies produce vastly superior results and huge effects, almost no schools adopt them and almost no undergraduate or graduate schools teach them.

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