The Mesquite ‘MicroSociety’ school: identifying organizational factors that facilitate successful adoption of an innovative program

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Abstract

A ‘MicroSociety’ School includes time during all or most days for students to take on roles in developing and operating a miniature society, including, for example, such ‘institutions’ as businesses, consumers, elected officials, a money system, a tax collection system, police and courts. This case study, conducted by the first author, looks in detail at Mesquite, a school with a highly effective MicroSociety program, to discover the organizational factors and processes that appear to account for its success. This case is part of a larger, formative evaluation project, sponsored by MICROSOCIETY, Inc., the national organization that provides support for individual MicroSociety programs. The case took place in the context of the first author’s multiyear relationship as a type of ‘developmental evaluator’ for MICROSOCIETY, Inc., combining both evaluation and organizational consultation functions. The findings of the case study and the potentials and challenges of the author’s developmental evaluation role are described and discussed.

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1. Organizational site and context of the case

1.1. Background on the MicroSociety program


Richmond’s idea was first implemented on a school-wide basis in 1981. In 1992, he founded the non-profit MICROSOCIETY, Inc. (MSI), a national organization whose mission is to provide support, materials, training, technical assistance and networking for educators implementing MicroSociety (www.microsociety.org). As of June 20, 2003, MSI’s website describes the program as follows:

Presently in over 200 schools in 40 states nationwide and approved by the Northwest Regional Testing Laboratory, the MicroSociety program is an innovative school design where children create a microcosm of the real world inside the school house. Each student has a role in running that world. Young entrepreneurs produce goods and services, elected officials establish laws, Crime-Stoppers keep the peace, judges arbitrate disputes, reporters track down stories. All citizens earn wages in the school’s ‘micro’ currency, invest in product ideas, deposit and borrow money from ‘Micro’ banks, and pay taxes, tuition and rent.

Generally, a MicroSociety (‘Micro’) program runs for three to five class periods per week. The overall goal of a Micro program is to prepare students to become active, caring, responsible citizens by multiplying opportunities for success (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003). Some of the more specific details of a MicroSociety program include the following:

- When fully implemented, the MicroSociety has six strands: technology, economy, academy, citizenship and government, humanities and arts, and heart (volunteerism and the ethical aspects of society). The MicroSociety also has 12 essential elements: an internal currency; a retail labor market; private property; public property;
organizations such as ventures, agencies and non-profits; agreement on a common purpose; definition of personal goals by teachers and students; meaningful contact with parents; meaningful contact with community partners; teacher planning time for the program; and a technology strand. (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003).

Independent evaluations of Micro programs have led to some very promising results. For example,

In 1998, an outside evaluator conducted a study of 15 schools in six states that began implementing the program in 1993 or 1994 and had two or three years of comparable, nationally normed post-intervention test data. Analysis of this data showed a 25% increase over baseline performance in math; 11% for language arts; and 7% for reading. When gains were compared to those of the district as a whole, MicroSociety schools on average outperformed the district in all three subject areas. Due to the small sample, however, results were statistically significant only in mathematics.

A 1997 developer survey of 29 MicroSociety schools found that most reported significant increases in test scores as well as increased attendance and reduced disciplinary infractions. [Three] individual schools had (particularly impressive)...results. [School 1]...increased the number of students passing the state math standards by 52%, writing by 36%, and reading by 11%; [School 2]...increased average daily attendance from 74 to 98% and reduced disciplinary infractions from 6234 to 1802; [and School 3]...raised its (academic) district ranking from 126th out of 156 schools to 37th. (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003).

1.2. Specific context of the case

Starting in 1995 the first author (Cherniss) approached MSI and said that he would like to study the implementation of the MicroSociety program. He then negotiated with MSI to come up with the following agreement: MSI would pay for all the research expenses, and he would consult with them on their training and technical assistance efforts in addition to writing a book about MicroSociety. ‘Evaluation’ per se was never part of the contract.

Over the years, he has developed a close working relationship with the organization. The context of the present case study was a request by the organization for Cherniss to study a variety of individual schools that employ the MicroSociety program and to derive from them guidelines for best practice. As with most educational innovations, there is a wide variation across individual schools in the degree to which the program is successfully and effectively implemented. One component of the larger study was an evaluative case study of ‘Mesquite’, a MicroSociety elementary school that had a reputation, supported by impressive student test scores, as one of the most successful implementations of the program in the country. Specifically, the purpose of the Mesquite case study was to systematically document the implementation process of the MicroSociety in that school, with a special emphasis upon identifying the leadership, organizational, and school climate factors in Mesquite that seemed to account for its success.

1.3. Mesquite school

Mesquite is a relatively large elementary school located in the southwestern part of the United States. Almost all of the 580 students are from disadvantaged backgrounds: 89% are in the free or reduced lunch program. Ninety-four percent of the students are Latino, with 3% African–American and 3% Anglo. The school was built around 1960. There are 12 other elementary schools in the district, which has an open-enrollment policy for all schools. Just over one-third of the students at Mesquite take advantage of this policy and come from outside of the neighborhood.

The school is located in a clean, stable neighborhood made up predominantly of families that own their own homes and have been living in the neighborhood for several decades. The parents of many of the children who attend the school have lived in the neighborhood and went to the school themselves. A number of the grandparents still live there and a number of the children go home to their grandparents’ houses after school.

2. Program evaluated

2.1. History and schedule

The MicroSociety program at Mesquite began in the spring of 1992, and it was still going strong when Cherniss visited the school 10 years later. In most respects, the program is like the basic model outlined by MICROSOCIETY, Inc. and briefly described above. Until the year 2001, the program took place 5 days a week and ran almost the entire academic year. At the end of the 2001 school year, the teachers voted to cut back to 4 days per week because the state had extended the school day the year before and, as a result, the teachers lost some planning time. (Note that even when cut back to 4 days a week, Mesquite’s level of implementation is high relative to many MicroSociety schools. For example, some schools do not start until well into the fall and then run the program only 3 days a week.)

2.2. The role of teachers

Over the years Mesquite teachers have shown a high level of commitment to the program. Like other schools, the Mesquite teachers struggled initially with the problem of...
covering the regular curriculum when they had an hour less each day in class. Eventually, they decided that Micro was so important that they would voluntarily work longer. They received permission from the district to add 45 min to the day so that Micro could be added without taking time away from other teaching. And the teachers agreed to work the extra time without any increase in pay.

A distinctive feature of the Micro at Mesquite is that the teachers receive Micro money as well as the students. The money is seen as a salary for their work as facilitators of the ventures. The teachers use the Micro money to purchase things for their classrooms. For instance, they can use it to ‘rent a reader,’ which is one of the ventures in which older students receive Micro money to come to classes and read to the other children. Community partners also receive Micro money when they contribute time or material to the Micro, and they can keep this money in an account at the Micro bank. This practice helps integrate community partners more fully into the program.

2.3. The role of students

Children from all grade levels at Mesquite participate in the Micro. The older students (grades 4–6) actually run the Micro. Children in the lower grades are the ‘consumers.’ They receive Micro money for attending school regularly and doing their work, and then they pay the teacher back part of their ‘salary’ for rent, tuition and taxes. The rest of their money they can spend in the marketplace or save. The marketplace is open 2 days a week. During the other 2 days, the bank, court, and other non-marketplace ventures are in operation, and the students involved in marketplace ventures use the time to restock their merchandise and plan new products. They also can use the time to attend to personal business, such as going to the bank or going to court.

Students also have time to plan at the beginning of the year. During the first 8 weeks of the year the kids have a chance to learn their new jobs. This time also is used for ‘team building,’ as kids in each venture get to know each other and their facilitators, and they develop into a well-functioning team. It also is during this start-up period that the kids develop business plans and go to the bank to secure loans for their businesses.

Another distinctive feature of the Mesquite Micro program is that the students receive a grade for their participation. For many of the students the grade is meaningful because if they fail Micro, they cannot be on the honor roll. The kids also can be docked pay or lose a day off if they ‘mess up’ in their Micro jobs. Perhaps for these reasons (as well as the relatively high teacher–student ratio), the students behave particularly well in this Micro. In fact, there was not much business for the lawyers or judges, and teachers indicated that the ‘Crime Stoppers’ do not give out many citations.

2.4. The role of parents

Parents also are a valuable resource. The schedule encourages the parents of the younger children to participate because they would normally be picking up their children at school at the beginning of Micro time. For many, it is relatively easy to come at the usual time and remain 45 min while their children go to the marketplace to spend their Micro money. According to the parent coordinator, the parents are encouraged to do this and they enjoy it. ‘It is like going shopping together.’

2.5. The role of community partners

Community partners are an invaluable resource, especially when a venture begins. For instance, when the Micro program first established the IRS, an agent who worked for the federal Internal Revenue Service taught the teacher facilitators how to set up a viable tax collection service. The local police department, on the other hand, has been a continuing presence. One of their officers comes to the school almost every week during the year to help train the Micro’s Crime Stoppers. The local bank not only provided training and guidance in the beginning, but it also prints the checkbooks and money used in the program free of charge. And other community partners provide money for food when there is a special celebration.

3. Conceptual model guiding the program

3.1. How the MicroSociety can enhance the educational process

3.1.1. Enhancing academic learning

As described above, a MicroSociety program provides an opportunity for children to create a miniature society in the school. In the process, instruction is adapted to ‘real world’ experience, which is viewed as highly motivating for students to learn the relevant knowledge and skills required to make their community function. Since Micro is integrated into the regular curriculum, learning the basics is made
more interesting and relevant to students. In addition, the tasks the children take on in Micro provide them with opportunities to apply concepts learned in the classroom to real situations. Finally, the Micro experience rewards children for success in a broad array of intelligences, building self-esteem and motivation in those who might fail in traditional academic settings. In sum, Micro is expected to increase academic achievement in such core curriculum learning areas as reading, writing, and math by adding relevance, motivation, real world practice, and success experiences to the learning process (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003).

3.1.2. Enhancing attendance and discipline

The fun and engaging relevance that can be generated by a Micro program are viewed as increasing children’s interest in coming to school, thereby increasing attendance rates.

In addition, a Micro program is designed to reduce discipline problems.

Where most schools rely on teachers to discipline children, MicroSociety promotes development of internal self-control. Children create a legislature that makes laws, develop a court system that administers them, and launch CrimeStoppers, a group of students who enforce the laws. Because children are deeply involved in rule making and law enforcement, and want to avoid the expense and notoriety of litigation, disciplinary infractions decline. In MicroSociety schools, the peer group allies itself with law abiding interests rather than with outlaws (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003).

3.1.3. Teaching values

As mentioned above, one of the goals of a Micro program is to teach and encourage children to become caring, responsible citizens. More specifically, the proper functioning of the MicroSociety embodies the values of democratic decision-making, respect for individual differences and entrepreneurship (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003).

3.1.4. Increasing connections among school, parents and the community

By breaking down the usual barriers between school and the ‘real world,’ Micro provides an opportunity to better connect parents and other community resources to the school and its personnel. This process is illustrated by the examples provided above for the Mesquite Micro program: parents of younger children participate by going ‘shopping’ with their children; the volunteer services of an IRS agent and police officers are used, respectively, to support the tax collection and crime-stopping functions in the MicroSociety; and the local bank prints Micro money and checks. In sum, the ‘real world’ nature of Micro is a vehicle for parents and other community members to see their value and relevance in the schooling process.

3.2. Effective organizational implementation of a MicroSociety program

A Micro program is generally designed as an ‘add-on’ to the usual curriculum. As such, it demands additional resources and efforts from teaching staff and administrators who are frequently stressed and overworked before such an add-on. In addition, it places teachers in non-traditional roles in which they have much less control over the their lesson plans. Thus, the teacher is expected to switch from (a) the traditional role of the active educator in front of a generally passive group of students who are ‘curriculum consumers’ to (b) a role which is more like a resource person, consultant and coach who supports the students in running their own miniature society. The traditional role is much more consistent with what is taught in teacher training programs, and it is to be expected that some or many teachers will find the new role required of them to be unattractive and/or confusing because it is outside their skills and their professional self-concept.

In addition, a Micro program places special demands on school administrators. While it is fine in principle to view a Micro program as breaking down walls between the school and the community, administrators are frequently not trained or comfortable with effectively orchestrating this process. For example, it might happen that once such walls are broken down, certain community members gain too much power within the school and appear to pursue their own personal agendas, challenging the authority of the school administrators.

In sum, there would seem many factors and processes that could lead to the undermining and failure—or at least the diminished effectiveness—of a MicroSociety program. With this in mind, and based on his reading of the organizational and educational literature and his practical experience as organizational assessor and consultant, the first author Cherniss developed an organizational model for studying the implementation of the particular Micro program at Mesquite. The model posits that a successful implementation of an innovative education reform like a MicroSociety depends upon the coming together of a number of complex and challenging organizational components and processes, such as the emotional intelligence of the school administrators, the school climate and the relevance of the innovation for the perceived goals of the school. A more specific statement of the model is provided in Table 1.

Some of the literature domains in organizational theory that undergird this model outlined in Table 1 include: (a) the role of emotional intelligence in organizational dynamics (e.g. Cherniss, 2000; Cherniss & Goleman, 2001); (b) the challenges of school reform at the individual school level (e.g. Sarason, 1990, 1996); (c) the creation of new settings
The model posits that a successful implementation of an innovative education reform like a MicroSociety depends upon the coming together of the following complex and challenging organizational components and processes:

(1) school administrators with high commitment to the program, leadership sophistication, and 'emotional intelligence' to help them in establishing and sustaining good, collaborative working relationships with teachers, parents, and other community members, and in motivating these individuals to positively contribute to the MicroSociety program.

(2) a school culture and climate that is supportive of and rewarding for innovation and change.

(3) goals of the school—as perceived by both personnel, parents, and other community members—that are congruent with the particular 'progressive' potentials embodied in the MicroSociety concept.

(e.g. Cherniss & Deegan, 2000; Sarason, 1972); and (d) ways to enhance organizational investment, involvement, and empowerment by the organization’s members, as opposed to burnout (e.g. Cherniss, 1986, 1995).

In approaching these different organizational models, Cherniss was committed to the advantages of using multiple theories to pragmatically understand and/or improve a particular case situation (Morgan, 1996). In this approach, the practitioner views different theories as alternative conceptual tools. Just like woodworking implements—a hammer, a saw, a screwdriver—different tools are appropriate to different situations, and frequently multiple tools serve complementary functions when judged against the goal of [a pragmatic] paradigm: to solve practical problems (Fishman, 1999, p. 167).

A final conceptual perspective that Cherniss brought to the case study was contingency theory, which deals with the limitations of trying to apply general theory to many different case situations.

Since the late 1960s, psychologists... searched for specific variables that could account for the successful adoption of educational reforms... The results of all this work have in effect reached the same pragmatic conclusions...—namely, that it is the interaction between the content of the innovation and the systemic and contextually based processes within the individual site that account for whether the innovation will be successfully adopted. Educational researchers have formalized this conclusion under the rubric of "contingency theory."

The educational literature is filled with lists of organizational factors purported to be associated with successful schools. While the... contingency theorist does not assume that they are valid across all settings, they are useful in suggesting promising areas to examine in a systematic case study. (Fishman, 1999, pp. 273–4)

4. Conceptual model guiding the evaluation and its process

4.1. Overall evaluation model

The systematic case study of Mesquite was part of a larger project, conducted by Cherniss and supported by MICROSOCIETY, Inc. The goal of the overall project was the formative evaluation of MicroSociety programs. The specific product of the evaluation is a book (Cherniss, in preparation), whose primary goal is to aid individual MicroSociety programs in enhancing the implementation of their programs. Thus the focus of the project has been pragmatic evaluation, to develop best practice guidelines for improving program implementation, rather than the development of new theory per se or the testing of specific, causal, theoretically derived hypotheses. This focus is consistent with the pragmatic conceptual perspectives mentioned in the above section: Morgan’s concept of using multiple theories to pragmatically understand and/or improve a particular case situation (Morgan, 1996); and contingency theory.

In the larger project, Cherniss (a) conducted intensive studies with Mesquite and five other diverse schools that had adopted the MicroSociety program; (b) conducted hour-long interviews with the principals of five other schools and with a program coordinator and teacher from a sixth; (c) attended three of MICROSOCIETY, Inc.’s national summer training conferences, during which he participated in several workshops and informally spoke with dozens of teachers and principals from other MicroSociety schools; and (d) led several workshops that focused on organizational problems associated with implementation. Thus, in approaching the Mesquite case study, Cherniss was steeped in the technology, culture and organizational challenges of MicroSociety programs.

4.2. Method

Cherniss describes his method in all the six case studies as follows:

In each of the case study schools I interviewed a wide variety of individuals. This usually included the principal, the program coordinator, a cross-section of teachers, the school secretary, paraprofessional staff, at least one staff member from the central office, several parents and community partners, and a number of students. In some instances I also interviewed teachers and principals who had been key figures in the past but were no longer at the school. Interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes, and key people such as principals and program coordinators usually were interviewed two or more times. I also interviewed two university-based consultants and one private management consultant who were familiar with one or more of the schools.
Information also came from several conversations that I had during the course of the project with...[major leaders in MICROSOCIETY, Inc.].

The teachers I interviewed were selected to represent wide diversity in grade taught, attitude towards program, age and length of time teaching in the school, race, ethnicity and gender. The principals usually selected the initial group of people to be interviewed. I tried to confirm that the selected people met the criteria by showing the list to at least two other informants and asking whether the people selected for interviews included the mix I desired. In every case, my informants stated that the principals’ selections met the criteria and did not seem to represent a bias. However, in several instances I asked to interview others based on my growing understanding of the setting. For instance, in one school that was 50% African–American, the principal selected three parents for interviews, all of whom were white. I asked if I could interview an African–American parent, and the principal arranged for me to do so. In another instance, I discovered that the teacher with the most seniority and considerable influence in the school had not been selected. I asked to have her added to the list, and the principal readily agreed. (The principal had not included this teacher initially because she believed the teacher would not be interested in participating. The teacher, as the principal had predicted, was reluctant, but she eventually agreed to participate.)

I spent 2–5 days in each school. Data came from multiple sources: individual and group interviews; observation of one or more MicroSociety sessions; observation of classrooms during periods of the day when the MicroSociety was not in operation; observation in non-classroom settings such as the cafeteria, playground, halls, media center or library, main office and teachers’ lounge; observation of faculty planning meetings and study of archival materials (which included minutes of faculty planning meetings; principal’s notes, grant proposals, newspaper articles, etc.).

I tried to conduct interviews in a private location within the school. On a few occasions I interviewed two or more teachers together. I interviewed students individually and in groups of varying sizes. The interviews were tape recorded, but I also took notes during the interview. In addition, I kept detailed field notes in which I recorded observations and reflections.

I told people in the schools that I was interested in writing a book on the MicroSociety program. I also explained that my primary interest was in learning about the implementation process so that those who wanted to adopt the program in the future would have some guidance. I encouraged informants, therefore, to tell me about the problems and difficulties they had encountered as well as the achievements. I also said that I was especially interested in the strategies they had used to overcome obstacles (Cherniss, in preparation).

4.3. Data analysis and hypothesis generation

Overall, Cherniss’s approach to deriving best practice principles from his case studies followed the grounded theory model. That is, while he brought to the case studies a variety of theoretical perspectives (described above), he did not begin with specific hypotheses based on this literature. Rather, he began by immersing himself in the case studies, with his theoretical perspectives as a less conscious framework in the background. At the end of each visit to the first two schools, Cherniss wrote a memo summarizing his observations and impressions. He shared these memos with the MICROSOCIETY, Inc. stakeholders and received their feedback. He describes how he then proceeded:

After I had studied two schools, I began to develop an initial set of hypotheses about the implementation factors that were most important. When I had finished collecting data in all the schools, I went back to each case looking for data that both confirmed and disconfirmed each hypothesis. Finally, I examined the literature on implementation to see how the findings fit other views. These procedures incorporated the guidelines for increasing reliability and internal validity in case study research put forth by Eisenhardt (1989): multiple perspectives and a divergent approach to verification in which one looks for disconfirmation as well as confirmation from the data. The other validation procedure employed has been to support any propositions included in the case study with ample examples from the data (Cherniss, in preparation).

5. Program results at Mesquite

5.1. Program outcomes

The MicroSociety program at Mesquite began in the spring of 1992, and it was still functioning effectively when Cherniss visited 10 years later. Many of the teachers, parents and administrators described the positive impact the program had had upon the students. A teacher who was familiar with other schools in the district said,

This school is different from the others. You see it in the physical appearance of the building and the kids. The kids take more ownership here. They seem better behaved. They say ‘hi’ to you here. Kids in other schools barely even look at you…

People here work together more as a result of Micro. For instance, in Micro the older kids work with the younger ones. Teachers work with kids from different classes and grades. The kids see all adults as authorities because they work with several different adults in Micro. (All quotes in this section are from Cherniss, in preparation.)
Informants also saw participation in Micro as helping the children to develop poise and self-confidence. The assistant principal, who had worked in several other schools in the district before coming to Mesquite, observed that her niece, who attended Mesquite, had become less obstinate and aggressive at home since participating in Micro. She added:

Kids here are more self-confident. They are encouraged to speak up if something is wrong... [In Micro, kids learn how to] assert their opinions in more respectful ways.

The Assistant Principal also gave an example of how people outside the school noticed the differences as well. She described a trip she had taken with nine kids to a conference to talk about Micro. Others at the conference thought all the kids were gifted, even though they were in fact special education students.

The Assistant Principal also described other positive effects of Micro on the kids

The kids here really understand the responsibility of going to work, producing quality goods and services... Kids also are more excited about learning.

In a similar vein, a child who had been in trouble said, 'I need to learn how to add because in the 4th grade I will have to have a checking account.'

Mesquite’s Micro also had an important impact on what went on in the school during other parts of the day, leading to changes in the teacher–student relationship and the ‘behavioral regularities’ of the classroom (Sarason, 1996).

Cherniss writes:

A sixth grade teacher, who had been at the school since the mid-80s, was a good example of how the program transformed teachers as well as kids. She said that she was a “pretty traditional teacher” before the Micro-Society program was introduced to the school. As she described it, her role was more a “commander-in-chief.” She made all the decisions. However, as a result of participating in Micro, she came to see her role in the classroom as that of a “facilitator.” For instance, she would begin by asking the children, “What do you need to do today?” When they responded, she would then ask, “What do you need in order to accomplish that?” She noted that the change in her role from commander-in-chief to facilitator initially was restricted to Micro time. She continued to teach in the traditional way in the classroom. “But then the children started taking more initiative in class. I tried initially to remain traditional in the classroom, but I felt a tension in being different ways in Micro and in class.” Eventually, she adopted the same kind of facilitative role in the classroom that she used in the MicroSociety (Cherniss, in preparation).

The impact of Micro in the classroom came through in Cherniss’s own observations.

In one sixth grade class I saw kids busy working on different projects on their own or in small groups. The teacher pointed out the class ‘menu’ through which the kids are given a choice of activities to work on for that period. The students had asked for this menu arrangement themselves. This class seemed to be a good example of the autonomy and critical thinking that many adults at the school thought had resulted from participation in the MicroSociety at Mesquite (Cherniss, in preparation).

Quantitative results also suggest that the MicroSociety program has had a very positive academic impact. This can be seen by looking at three time points: 1991–92, before Micro was implemented, 2 years after Micro was implemented, and 4 years after implementation. Over these times

- Math scores went from the 62nd to the 60th to the 92nd percentile.
- Reading scores went from the 60th to the 75th to the 83rd percentile.
- Writing scores went from the 35th to the 70th to the 95th percentile.

5.2. Program implementation and process

The implementation data from the case study is usefully arranged into three chronologically sequential categories about how the MicroSociety program organizationally developed at Mesquite, and two categories about organizational factors that help to sustain the program. These include

- Before-the-Beginning: Providing a Favorable Context.
- Introducing the Program to the School.
- A Supportive Organization Context: The Principal and School Climate.

(A detailed summary of Cherniss’s qualitative findings within these five categories of organizational factors is available from the first author by emailing him at: cherniss@rci.rutgers.edu.)

6. Evaluation process results

All in all, Cherniss was successful in conducting his case study in such a manner as to enlist open, active, honest and engaged involvement of the participants. Two particular
issues emerged as part of the process, and each is described below.

6.1. Trust and the research relationships

The issue of trust between Cherniss and the project’s stakeholders was a crucial one throughout the project. The leaders of MICROSOCIETY Inc. wanted the MicroSociety program to thrive, and so they took a risk in allowing Cherniss very open access to schools that were implementing the program. He writes

I assured them that they would be able to read the book and any papers that I would eventually write, which helped to allay some of their concern. However, they surely realized that once they read a draft and gave me feedback, their influence over what would appear in print would be limited (Cherniss, in preparation).

A crucial factor in the MICROSOCIETY, Inc. leaders taking the risk was that Cherniss had a long history of close collegial relationships with and consultation with a number of these leaders.

Trust was also important at the school level

Two of the schools were leery about being identified in written reports. I told the principals that they could review the draft of the book that I hoped to eventually write in order to insure that there was nothing that would harm their school’s reputation. This method of insuring confidentiality reassured the principals (Cherniss, in preparation).

6.2. The evaluator’s personal views

These arrangements with the MicroSociety stakeholders were consistent with a formative evaluation approach, in which the focus was on helping the stakeholders improve their programs rather than on an independent, ‘objective’ evaluation. On the other hand, Cherniss had to be careful not to shape his book simply as a promotional statement. He describes his own personal perspective during the project as follows

My own views about the MicroSociety program undoubtedly affected the results as well. In the beginning, the MicroSociety program intrigued me, and it seemed to incorporate many of my own educational values. But I tried to retain as much of a neutral and disinterested stance as possible. Over time, however, my views towards the program became even more positive, and I became less concerned about remaining neutral. I hope that as one who was sympathetic towards the program, I was better able to do my job, which was to learn how best to implement it.

At this point, my view is that the MicroSociety program is a valuable approach to making schools more interesting and productive places for both teachers and children. But like any innovation, the effectiveness of the program depends on how it is implemented. Also, it is not a panacea, and it is not for everyone. For some children and teachers, other approaches may well be more appropriate. However, one of the strengths of the program is that it can accommodate so many different interests and learning styles. It can be as varied as society itself in the opportunities that it provides for exploration, learning, and growth (Cherniss, in preparation).

7. Discussion, lessons learned, conclusions

7.1. Success factors in the implementation of MicroSociety in Mesquite school

Table 2 summarizes many of the major factors and processes that are embodied in the above case description

Table 2
MicroSociety implementation success factors in the Mesquite school: results from the case study (based on Cherniss, in preparation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Success Factor</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Before-the-Beginning: Providing a Favorable Context</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Positive relationship between principal and teachers.</td>
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<td>2. Positive relationships among teachers (i.e. positive climate, sense of community).</td>
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<td>3. Prior history of community partnerships and parent involvement.</td>
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<td>4. Micro meeting a specific need especially well, i.e. there is a good fit between Micro and the perceived needs of the school curriculum by the school, the school system, the parents, and the other members of the community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Community resource people with background in business or economics.</td>
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<td>6. Teachers with a more student-centered approach to teaching.</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Introducing the Program to the School</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Respected and influential teachers take active leadership roles.</td>
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<td>8. True ‘informed consent’ by teachers in the adoption process.</td>
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<td>9. Realistic goals and time perspective.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Adequate time for planning and staff development (especially visits to other Micro schools, staff attendance at summer conferences, etc.).</td>
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<td>11. A realistic pilot run.</td>
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<td>12. Matching teachers with ventures to make a good fit.</td>
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<td>C. Keeping it running</td>
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<td>13. Meaningful participation and autonomy in decision-making for teachers and students.</td>
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<td>14. Time for ongoing planning and staff development.</td>
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<td>15. Effective utilization of students, parents, and community partners as resources.</td>
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<td>D. A Supportive Organizational Context</td>
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<td>17. Principal provides strong political backing, encouragement and recognition, and logistical support.</td>
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<td>18. Principal and other key leaders (e.g. coordinator) are particularly strong in certain emotional intelligence competencies.</td>
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<td>19. There is an organizational climate that encourages innovation, risk taking, commitment, and reflection.</td>
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19. There is an organizational climate that encourages innovation, risk taking, commitment, and reflection.
and that seem to account for the success of the Mesquite MicroSociety program. As can be seen, these factors are quite congruent with the original conceptual framework that Cherniss brought to the case study, as outlined in Table 1.

Cherniss summarizes the playing out of these guidelines in Mesquite as follows:

First, there were a few ways in which the school provided a favorable context before the program was introduced: there was a history of good relationships among the teachers and between the teachers and the previous principals. There also was a history of parent involvement. And the strong value placed on student field trips made the Micro program a good fit.

Second, the program was introduced to the school in a way that minimized resistance. The idea originally came from teachers, not the principal, which enhanced teacher buy-in. The principal insisted that all the teachers have an opportunity to learn about the program and reflect on it before they voted on whether to adopt it. The initial expectations and time perspective were realistic: the principal was prepared to wait for at least 3 years before seeing any positive impact on the school. After almost a year of planning, there was a 6-week pilot run, followed by a summer of retooling.

Third, the program at Mesquite benefited from a stable and effective management team, an energetic and skillful coordinator, and a knowledgeable external consultant who provided ongoing training, guidance and support. The principal consistently provided resources that enabled this management group time for planning and problem solving. There also was considerable time set aside for staff development for all the teachers. Over half of the teachers attended at least one of the annual summer conferences. Students and their parents played meaningful roles in the Micro, and the school invested considerable time and effort into developing many active community partners.

Finally, an “emotionally intelligent” principal provided a high degree of support—directly through her advocacy and logistical support, and indirectly by creating a school climate that encouraged innovation, risk taking, commitment, and reflection (Cherniss, in preparation).

As one considers all the factors at Mesquite that have ‘gone right,’ it becomes clear why educational and other human service programs so frequently have either weak effects or fail (Schorr, 1997). In other words, Cherniss’s case study shows how special was the particular positive constellation of history, key players, relationships, and organizational climate in the Mesquite situation, and thus how unusual its highly successful results are likely to be. On the other hand, it is the challenge of pragmatic case studies like Cherniss’ to sample many different case contexts—from more to less successful—so as to be able to derive general, ‘best-practice’ guidelines for helping all programs to improve themselves above their base rate performance (Fishman, 1999).

7.2. Conducting an evaluative case study of worth to the case’s stakeholders

As mentioned earlier, this case study was part of a larger project to provide a formative, not a summative evaluation of the implementation of MicroSociety programs in a variety of settings. The overall goal was thus one of what Windle and Neigher (1978) call ‘amelioration,’ rather than ‘accountability,’ that is, one of helping those within the programs to enhance their effectiveness rather than to provide an outside, independent judgment of the overall success of MicroSociety programs. As reflected in Table 2 (and in the detailed qualitative results available from the first author as mentioned above), a particular focus of the Mesquite case study was (a) to try and capture—in detailed context—those organizational factors and processes that seem to account for their success; and then (b) to make the case available to MicroSociety programs in other schools as a model that can suggest ways in which they can enhance the development and operation of their own programs.

To conduct his case studies in different schools, Cherniss had to gather the trust of the stakeholders in MICROsociety, Inc. and in the individual schools. In order to do this, he had to assure them that he would not develop material that would harm their schools’ reputations. At the same time, Cherniss wanted to avoid what Windle and Neigher (1978) call an ‘advocacy’ study, in which the primary goal is to present a positive image to outside observers and commentators, and, in this instance, to schools who are thinking of adopting a MicroSociety program. Thus Cherniss wanted to strike a balance between (a) a scholarly study that was an accurate reflection of what he found from his independent perspective as a social scientist, and (b) a study that was sensitive to the concerns of the participating schools about damage to their reputation. In the case of Mesquite, this balance was relatively easy to strike because from an objective point of view, the school’s MicroSociety program was highly successful and embodied many model organizational processes.

In Cherniss’ larger study, the contrasts between the very successful Mesquite school and some of the other MicroSociety schools that were less successful added to the value of the overall findings. However, as Cherniss described above, there were tensions between the ‘advocacy’ goals of these latter schools and the ‘amelioration’ goals that Cherniss had in his role as a formative evaluator. As Cherniss has described, it is crucial for evaluation practitioners to recognize these tensions and to develop strategies for actively managing them.

The context of Cherniss’s role in conducting the Mesquite case study—and the larger project of which it was a part—involved his role over a number of years as both
a consultant and evaluator for the national MICROSOCIETY, Inc. office. In this role, Cherniss embodied what (Patton, 1997, 2002; Campbell, Patton, & Patrizzi, 2003) calls ‘developmental evaluation,’ in which

the purpose of the evaluation is ongoing learning, internal improvement and program development rather than generating reports and summative judgments for external audiences (Patton, 2002, p. 180).

While the role of developmental evaluators is not as ‘clean’ and ‘scientific’ as that of completely outside evaluators, the advantages of developmental evaluators are: (a) their deep understanding of the nature of the program being evaluated and its organizational context, and (b) their enhanced capacity to impact upon the program’s development because of a history of close, trusting, working relationships with key stakeholders and decision-makers in the program.

References


