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Sharing Responsibility for the Learning of Students: A Case Study

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Introduction

The current status of educational reform issues related to general education and special education provides the opportunity for the creation of a system that encompasses the goals of both groups in a cohesive manner. Previously, these issues have been addressed separately; however, recent research identifies a progression of change in the focus of ideas in both general education and special education. The first two phases of school reform focused initially on raising standards and then on teacher empowerment and site-based management. The current phase of school reform focuses on the instructional needs of the individual student and rejects the premise that instructional needs warrant a dual system of education. Rather, current efforts are characterized by general education and special education sharing responsibility for the learning of all students as evidenced by the Response to Intervention initiative (Allington, 2009). These emerging insights pave the way for collaborative efforts when addressing the learning needs of increasingly diverse students.

Site-based management, a governance concept, is a structural mechanism that provides the opportunity for change to be generated and implemented in individual schools (Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992). According to definitions of site-based management, decisions of educational consequence are to be made by the school and none are to be compelled by regulation in the school district. The essential character of site-based managed schools is an increasing reliance on teachers and principals to assess needs of students and determine appropriate services (Covey, 1992; Odden & Wohlstetter, 1995; Sailor, 1991). Classroom teachers are the most accountable for student success and teacher participation in finding solutions is important in the process (Yero, 2002). According to Fullan (1996), if teachers are to influence the classroom they must have an influence on changing conditions surrounding the classroom.

An understanding of how site-based management can benefit a school requires the identification of the motivating conditions that enable schools to use their decision-making capabilities effectively. Improved decision-making encourages significant change leading to improved school performance (Robertson, Wohlstetter, & Morhrman, 1995). Explanations of the process of improved decision-making and school change can be conceptualized within the theoretical framework of *high-involvement management* (Lawler, 1986). Within this framework, four categories of broad change within schools have emerged.

The first category involves technology as a teaching tool with an emphasis on its use in the future workplace. The second category focuses on the development of students' abilities to address complex problems and issues through the use of interdisciplinary curricula and cooperative learning. The third category includes greater integration of the education process through teams of teachers taking responsibility for the learning of a group of students. It also encompasses external integration through the development of linkages to the community. The fourth category involves a focus on the education of students through individualized instruction, non-graded classrooms, and mainstreaming of students with special needs.

School Reform

School reform is not a new phenomenon to educators. Since the early 1980s, different educational reform efforts have emerged and disappeared frequently. These reforms have resulted from social, political, and educational forces. The conflict between these forces as well as emotional, political, and media driven responses have diverted attention from what matters most – the learning of children.

General Education Reform

The release of the National Commission on Excellence in Education's report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and the Carnegie Forum's (1986) report, *A Nation Prepared* prompted two major reform initiatives of the 1980s. The first initiative was characterized by an increase in regulation and control from the state and federal levels. These reforms were influenced by *effective schools* research (Edmonds, 1979). This research led to a view that a routine set of behaviors could achieve school improvement. This first wave of reform focused on policymaking concerning the setting of state standards related to graduation requirements, curriculum, and state-mandated testing (Spring, 2005). Overall, the priority of the first initiative was the achievement of educational excellence as an educational objective.

Intense media attention and public criticism of education led to changes in policies affecting teachers. Teacher stress and burnout were the inevitable consequences. The second wave of reform was led by efforts to improve teacher working conditions (Rowan, 1990). As national attention shifted to strategies designed to attract and retain quality teachers, the business community began to exert more influence in educational policy. The educational community began to examine those management techniques, considered efficient and successful for business, in an effort to improve educational practice. The second initiative occurred as a response to the increase in regulatory controls.

The result of the first two waves of reform was a series of inconsistent reform initiatives implemented piecemeal. Consequently, a current approach to school reform combines elements of the first and second initiatives into a third approach called *systemic reform*. This approach calls for high standards for all students. Systemic reform entails a fundamentally different way of perceiving and developing strategies for school change. It requires a generalists' knowledge of education and an understanding of various policy instruments to link them to goals (Jacobson & Berne, 1993). Fullan's (1996) caution regarding systemic reform is that educators must use an understanding of the process for successful change – not a formula for how it should occur.

Site-based Management

Site-based management is an example of a governance reform that grew out of the second reform initiative. The purpose of site-based management is to make those closest to the students more independent and consequently more responsible for student success. Through site-based management, decision-making authority is extended to stakeholders such as teachers and parents. As schools are faced with the challenges to reform education to meet the needs of each student, site-based management is recognized as one means of facilitating change (Midgley & Wood, 1993).

Shared decision-making is a component of the site-based management governance mechanism. Involvement of teachers and principals in this process requires that they have the technical information necessary to address school challenges. Under shared decision-making, school leadership is shared

among teachers with the principal. When shared-decision making occurs, it changes the balance of power in schools (Weiss & Cambone, 1994).

Special Education Reform

As each of these waves of reform was taking place in general education, there was a concurrent movement of change and reform in special education. Originally created as a part of general education, special education evolved into a parallel system. Special education has undergone many changes since the 1900s in order to meet the needs of students considered exceptional. The passage of P.L. 94-142 *The Education for all Handicapped Children Act* in 1975 focused on the provision of services and the criteria under which students with disabilities must be served. The current direction of special education is the result of the Regular Education Initiative issued in 1986. This initiative called for reform of the special education system and partnership between general education and special education. Changes in these laws focused on ensuring success for at-risk students (Allington & Walmsley, 2007).

Inclusion

The move toward inclusion is driven by respect for diversity and by a strong philosophical commitment to the rights of individuals with disabilities. This support can be found in the principle of normalization, the zero-reject policy, and the concept of partial participation. According to these concepts, persons with disabilities should participate in the same settings and activities that their peers without disabilities may access (Wisniewski & Alper, 1994). The basic principle for the reform of general and special education is that public schools should be inclusive and integrated.

Inclusionary schools often employ a teaming approach which assists in problem-solving, planning, and program implementation. This approach allows all stakeholders to recognize the complexity of their endeavor and organize personnel and resources for success. The team-based model reflects a more holistic view of the system requiring interdependency on the part of administrators, teachers, and parents. The adoption of a team approach not only changes a school's approach to education but fundamentally changes how schools operate and how decisions are made. As teams enable members to share responsibility for decision making they encourage collaboration in order that high quality solutions are attained.

School Change

The change process within the school culture is influenced by structural, human resources, political, and symbolic frames of reference that a leader employs when analyzing the organization. As leadership continues to revolve around the school principal, it is important that a clear focus is communicated along with the creation of a common cultural perspective. Creating readiness for change is a precondition for restructuring. Change is not an event; it is a process that occurs over time (Fullan, 1986). Research has shown that it takes three to five years to implement meaningful change in schools (Fullan, 1982; Gersten, Carnine, Zoref, & Cronin, 1986; Hall & Loucks, 1979). This would indicate that expectations must be clear from the beginning that effective implementation of any change initiative will not occur immediately. Individuals must react to any change by adjusting behaviors, adopting new procedures, and making actual changes. Long term planning is also necessary to anticipate the changing needs of people and organizations during implementation. Because adjustment in behaviors

and administrative arrangements takes time, the nature and quality of behaviors improve as people gain experience long range planning is essential (Loucks-Horsley & Roody, 1990). Effective leadership, whether from the principal or teachers, is also instrumental in successful change.

The complexity of the change process, coupled with the social intricacy of schools, leads to the conclusion that the process of school change is a culture building process. Past efforts to control schools by court decrees, regulation, and financial incentives have made it difficult for schools to be responsive to the constituencies they serve. Consequently, many school districts have found it difficult to identify and implement processes and structural changes that contribute to meaningful change.

Systemic reform efforts align the different parts of the system with goals and resources (Fullan, 1996). Besides identifying coherent messages about instruction, systemic reform reflects the importance of restructuring the governance system to support improvement in student learning. Because the change process is not a linear process, long-range planning with built-in flexibility that addresses the problems of overload and fragmentation is necessary (Fullan, 1996). With the principal as the instructional leader, teacher participation in the change process is essential.

Motivating Factors

An analysis of organizations in the private sector (Lawler, 1986) indicated that organizational performance improves not only when power shifts to stakeholders in an organization, but also when those empowered are: (a) trained for new decision-making roles, (b) have information to make informed decisions, and (c) are rewarded for high performance. This is the framework for what is termed *high-involvement management* (Lawler, 1986). According to this framework, efforts to improve organizational performance are more likely to be successful if employees throughout the system are actively involved in the process.

Stakeholder involvement is more likely to occur if it is supported by a decentralized approach to management and organization that focuses on four key elements. The first element is power. The mechanism for organizational decentralization involves the shift of power to lower levels of the hierarchy. This is a basic characteristic of the site-based management process. Three remaining elements must be decentralized to facilitate patterns of involvement oriented toward performance. These elements are knowledge and skills, information, and rewards (Lawler, 1986). Participants in the decision-making process need the knowledge and skills required in order to improve outcomes and achieve high performance. Technical knowledge regarding the job is required, but, in addition, knowledge relevant to managing the organization and interpersonal skills required for working together as a team are necessary. Information about organizational goals and objectives is also needed in a timely manner. Rewards must be aligned with the behaviors, outcomes, and capabilities required for high performance (Robertson, Wohlstetter, & Mohrman, 1995).

The foundation of the high-involvement management framework is the premise that the empowerment of stakeholders is enhanced when there is an emphasis on increasing knowledge and skills, information, and rewards. The establishment of these factors would facilitate the conditions necessary for creating an organization that would have the capability to transform itself into a new organizational culture (Wohlstetter et al., 1994).

The high-involvement management framework serves as a useful model with which to analyze the

conditions necessary for site-based management to be used effectively (Robertson et al., 1995). The model is used to view site-based management not as a simple transfer of power, but as a change in organizational design (Mohrman et al., 1994).

SUMMARY

It is clear that the Regular Education Initiative provided the impetus for the merger of general education and special education. However, the Regular Education Initiative was not a civil rights movement demanding access to mainstream education for special education students. It was a call for the alignment of programs to achieve better academic outcomes than had been achieved with fragmented programs (Zigmond & Baker, 1995). The call for the rethinking of curriculum and instruction, as well as the reconsideration of common practices and widely held assumptions about the best way to educate all students is apparent in the reform initiatives in general education and special education (Wisniewski & Alper, 1994).

Site-based management as a governance mechanism includes more than delegating decision-making to the school site (Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992). The critical question focuses on what conditions are necessary for site based management to improve the quality of education. Therefore, it is important to differentiate between site based management as a governance mechanism through which decisions get made, and the process of using the governance mechanism to generate practices that will improve the quality of education for all students (Robertson et al.,; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992).

The effective use of site-based management governance requires the development of high quality decision-making structures and processes at school. The implementation of site-based management can initiate the process of school improvement, but unless school decision-makers effectively use their power to introduce meaningful change they are not likely to achieve improved educational quality. Because all site-based managed schools are not able to generate such changes, it is important to understand the conditions required to generate significant reforms intended to enhance teaching and learning (Robertson et al., 1995).

The high-involvement management framework, used in business and schools, establishes motivating conditions that enable schools to use their decision-making capabilities more effectively. The empowerment of stakeholders, along with an emphasis on increasing their knowledge and skills, information, and rewards facilitate the conditions necessary for creating organizational change.

METHOD

The questions in this case study probed the circumstances that led one middle school (grades 6, 7, and 9) to change from a non-inclusionary school to a school that practices inclusion. The history of the school and the current status of the school with respect to inclusion was a consideration in the development of the goals of the study. Using the literature on restructuring efforts in general education and special education and the process of change, guiding questions were formulated. The major research question guiding this study was: Do site-based management processes enable schools to change their organizational culture with respect to the merger of general education and special education? The study explored the degree to which a school that practices site-based management can facilitate the process of change. The study examined factors leading to change efforts and assessed the current status of inclusion. The extent to which the school moved from a non-inclusionary

school to an inclusionary model was examined.

The study also examined the following questions about effective organizational mechanisms:

1. Under what circumstances did the stakeholders determine the need/desire for a change in the organizational culture of the school with respect to inclusion?
2. How was the decision to introduce change, regarding a policy of inclusion, communicated through site-based management?
3. How was the decision implemented?
4. What circumstances promoted and inhibited change efforts within the site-based management process with regard to the decision to implement inclusion?

Design Features

This study employed a qualitative design using the single-unit case study that permitted an in-depth analysis of the process of change that occurs as inclusion was implemented in a site-based school. Because this study was an examination of a contemporary series of events, I selected the case study in order to retain the holistic characteristics of organizational and managerial processes (Yin, 1994). I used a variety of evidence such as documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations to strengthen the validity of the case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Yin, 1994). Specifically, in data collection I employed multiple research techniques: observation, semi-structured individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document and artifact review (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Yin, 1994). Data analysis began with the collection of the data and continued throughout the process. The general strategy I used in data analysis was to build an explanation about the case (Yin, 1994) based on the theoretical proposition that site-based management as a governance mechanism fosters the process of change.

The validity of this study was protected by the use of multiple sources of evidence: document and artifact review, individual and focus-group interviews, and observations (Yin, 1994). In addition, the use of these multiple sources allowed for a broader investigation. The process of triangulation of the data was addressed through the use of the multiple sources of evidence which provided multiple explanations of the same phenomenon (Yin, 1994). A second tactic used to increase the validity of the study was the establishment of a chain of evidence (Yin, 1994). The database includes the field notes, tapes, and transcriptions of interviews. The third tactic was to have drafts of the case study read by key informants: (a) one special education teacher, (b) one general education teacher, and (c) one administrator (Yin, 1994).

Data Considerations

Respondents' perceptions and definitions of the term site-based management varied. This variation led to respondents spending a lot of time clarifying the term. However, anecdotal responses were consistent with reference to the factors inherent in site-based management. Furthermore, the lack of a constituent definition of inclusion among respondents also led to their efforts to clarify the term. It was evident that teachers' beliefs concerning the philosophy of inclusion varied. Although this study did not address the issue of teacher beliefs, they are a factor in the responses which is why they are included. The dynamic leadership may have truncated the data I was able to elicit concealing potential areas of

dissent.

The fact that a school is a complex social institution makes it difficult to discuss questions related to specific issues such as inclusion without including many contextual reference points. Respondents discussed questions in terms of events which had occurred in the school's history. As a result, in order to interpret the data concerning site-based management and inclusion it was also necessary to understand the school's history and culture.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Despite the theoretical basis for site-based management there is currently no consistent design or methodology for assessing site-based management processes or its outcomes (Wohlstetter, Smyer, & Mohrman, 1994). However, the factors identified in the high-involvement management framework have been used as a basis for analyzing site-based management processes because they have been identified as facilitators of change (Odden & Wohlstetter, 1995; Robertson, Wohlstetter, & Mohrman, 1995; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992; Wohlstetter, Smyer, & Mohrman, 1994).

This study examined how the middle school used the framework of site-based management to generate and implement changes in the organizational culture and instructional practices with respect to the merger of general education and special education (i.e., inclusion). The school was involved in a series of fast-paced changes; however, the focus of each change centered on improvement of student learning. The data revealed that the change process was influenced by a complex set of circumstances. Three stages of change were identified: (1) the decision-making stage, (2) the implementation stage, and (3) the refinement stage.

The discussion of themes reveals how this middle school used site-based management to transform a variety of change projects into a coherent restructuring effort with general educators and special educators sharing responsibility for student learning. Four general themes emerged from the analysis of the data: (1) the fluidity of leadership, (2) the importance of professional knowledge, (3) the capacity for professional learning, and (4) the school's readiness for change.

It was evident that the principal in this middle school was the instructional leader of the school. However, in the shared decision-making process, leadership shifted from principal to teachers with expertise. An atmosphere of personal and professional trust had been established in the process of moving to a site-based managed school. Open communication and sharing of ideas was encouraged and valued. There was an atmosphere of safety in risk-taking within the boundaries of the philosophy of the school. The school vision was the basis for the direction and subsequent decision and assisted in moving the school toward a collective understanding and commitment to the goals. Teachers discussed their feelings of being on a team that made a difference in the lives of students. The team feeling was enhanced through facilitative and supportive efforts of the principal in conjunction with teachers.

The importance of professional knowledge was apparent throughout the process of making decisions affecting students' learning. General educators and special educators brought their expertise to the team effort and decision-making processes. When necessary, professional knowledge of experts outside the school was gathered. Because of the atmosphere of trust that had developed in the school, stakeholders were comfortable in sharing knowledge. All teachers in the school were highly qualified as

required by No Child Left Behind. However, many had Master's degrees in specific areas.

The capacity for professional learning was enhanced by the fluid leadership that existed within the school and by the professional knowledge stakeholders already had. Teachers and the principal acknowledged the fact that they needed to be continual learners if they were to work together effectively for improved student outcomes. There was a sense of enthusiasm for the individual stakeholder learning process and the group learning process. Successful change involves learning how to do something, new, therefore, the process of change is essentially a learning process (Fullan, 1991). It required that the professional in the school evolve or leave. Collectively, the staff has supported each other in their efforts to improve. There was the expectation that all staff members grow and evolve with the school.

The school's readiness to merge general education and special education, therefore making all stakeholders responsible for student learning is attributable to the site-based management procedures implemented and the presence of the four factors in the high-involvement management framework: power, knowledge and skills, information, and rewards. This school's fast pace of change necessitated the development of procedures which are effective and efficient. The professional staff recognized that to achieve improved student learning, each person in the school must take individual and collective responsibility for the effort.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of data in this case study reveal that the change process of merging general education and special education was influenced by a complex set of circumstances. Fullan (1986) explained that the most detailed, sophisticated change plan will unfold in a non-linear manner due to the unplanned technical, social, and political forces at work. As evidenced by the events which occurred at this middle school during the implementation of change, the process itself cannot be reduced to a formula or series of detailed steps. However, the identification and refinement of site-based mechanisms reflected in the high-involvement management model allowed the stakeholders to deal with the forces that impacted change therefore providing them the time to focus on student learning – instead of becoming hindered by day-to-day minutia. The interrelationship of the factors in the high-involvement management model and site-based management processes is dynamic and changed daily. It became extremely important that stakeholders dealt with situations with flexibility. During this time of school change and continued focus on student improvement it becomes more important than ever that all educators accept, with enthusiasm, the responsibility of addressing the learning needs of all students regardless of their ability. This case study provides some insight to the process one school used to meet its moral responsibility.

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