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Why School Culture Both Attracts and Resists Whole School Reform Models

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Abstract

This paper uses the metaphor of "grafting" to describe the relationship of comprehensive school reform designs to the work culture of schools. One school reform model that has widespread implementation is the Success for All (SFA) reading program. The new practice provided in the SFA reading program offered a compatible "graft" onto the existing culture found in low achieving schools. The grafting on of a new program can only occur as long as its requirements do not stray from the existing traditions of the system. Schools adopt reform programs that offer procedural or curricular changes that fit within their existing systems. However, in schools, as in gardening, the graft cannot repair a damaged root. Rather, the growth of a successful graft is strengthened by a hearty rootstock, and the best "rootstock" is a healthy and supportive culture.

Introduction

Schools are struggling to meet the demands of high stakes testing and to identify interventions that can improve student performance. Consequently, more schools are looking to outside experts for help to meet these demands. Schools have been in a state of restructuring or reform since the 1980's. The changes made in schools, however, have been incremental, are not linked to student success and do not last (Patterson, 2000). These changes barely disturb conventional roles and practices in schools. Some school reform models work to improve structural variables, such as governance and assignment of personnel, while others work on procedures like schedules and learning environment. Still others focus on instruction by working on content and teaching strategies. Regardless of the approach, piecemeal interventions have not significantly increased the productivity or effectiveness of our schools (Kaufman & Hirumi, 1992). School reform is a complex process and appears to be less successful than we would like it to be. Much of the explanation of why reform efforts are so difficult to implement has to do with the school's work culture, so it is incumbent upon us to understand more about the interaction of culture and school reform, and to identify, if possible, what the elements of culture might be that would truly facilitate school improvement.

Comprehensive schoolwide reform, aimed specifically, but not exclusively, at Title 1 schools has been given wide acclaim along with monetary incentives for schools to pursue this

model of reform. Schoolwide programs permit a school, with at least 50 percent poverty, to use Title I funds to upgrade the entire educational program in order to raise academic achievement for all students. Expanding the use of Title I funds gives schools the option to build their own research-based schoolwide programs or adopt and implement researched-based whole school models available. The intent is to ensure that all children regardless of their background can reap the benefit of comprehensive school reforms. Studies have suggested that enriching all students' educational experiences is a reasonable alternative to Title I targeted assistance programs, where Title I funds were used only for supplementary educational services for eligible children who were failing or at risk of failing to meet required state standards (U. S. Department of Education, 1990, 1993; Schenck & Beckstrom, 1993; Stringfield, Milsap, Yoda, Brigham, Nesselrost, Schaffer, Karweit, Dolan, Levin, Smith, Gamse, Puma, Rosenblum, Herman, Bedinger, Randall, & Stevens, 1997).

The emphasis on schoolwide programs responds to the research about what makes schools work for disadvantaged students. Schoolwide Title I programs can use funds as they choose, as long as they engage in reform strategies that help provide a high-quality curriculum and instruction for all children, according to a comprehensive plan to help children meet the State's standards. With the passage of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (CSRDP), passed in 1997, Representatives Obey and Porter's bill gave specific examples of whole school reform models that they perceived as "successful, externally developed, comprehensive school-reform approaches backed by rigorous research (Viadero, 1999). Since that time, the U. S. Department of Education, some states, and courts have essentially steered high poverty schools toward selecting schoolwide reform models from the "list." Title I policy favors these comprehensive schoolwide reform models and have essentially mandated the use of such programs in schools with high percentages of disadvantaged students (Pogrow, 2000).

The primary purposes of this paper were: 1) to explore the characteristics of school work culture that embrace externally developed whole school reform models; 2) to examine a school reform model that is compatible with existing work cultures in low achieving schools; and 3) consider the possibility that the selected model itself promotes a culture of conformity and compliance in low achieving schools and therefore sustains low student performance.

This investigation looks at the comprehensive school reform model Success for All (SFA) and the work culture of three elementary Title I schools that selected to implement this program. School work culture is defined as the psychological and social forces that influence the direction and the quality of work of the adults within the school (Snyder, 1988). Bruner and Greenlee (2000) found that schools grouped by student achievement have significantly different work cultures. High performing schools were found to be more collaborative than low performing schools. Also these high performing schools had environments that supported the design and redesign of programs to meet the needs of students.

School Work Culture

Our inquiry begins with the exploration of the characteristics of school work culture that embrace external school reform models. Schools like other organizations develop a culture of behavioral norms that respond to the environment, to the people who work in the organization,

and to those they serve (Deal & Peterson, 1998). Culture shapes a school's motivation, commitment, effort, expectations, and focus (Peterson, 1999). Purkey and Smith (1982) suggest that organizational effectiveness of a school "is distinguished by its culture: a structure, process and climate of values and norms that channel staff and students in the direction of successful teaching and learning" (p.68). In the 1992 revision of *Organization Culture and Leadership*, Edgar Schein described what an innovative culture might look like. He found from studying organizations that had been adaptive and innovative over a long period of time that they have in common: a concern for people; value learning and change in its own right; share the belief that the world around them is malleable and that they have capacity to change their environment; must not be totally pre-occupied with coping and adapting; share a commitment for full and open task related communication; share a commitment to learn to think systemically; and share beliefs that teams can and will work.

In a study that examined the features of school work culture and student achievement, Bruner (in Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, & Snyder, 2000) found that schools with more developed and responsive work cultures generate more effective school-wide responses to the changing needs of students. The study addressed the work culture patterns found in both high and low achieving schools. The achievement levels in these schools were identified by the State based on their standardized test scores in reading, writing, and math. At the time of Bruner's study, the Success for All (SFA) reading program, a whole school reform model was introduced to these low achieving schools. A vote by secret ballot showed that more than 80% of the teachers favored its adoption and the SFA program was implemented in all of these schools the year following the study.

Both qualitative and quantitative data were used in Bruner's (1997) study to examine school improvement planning, principal leadership and teachers' work. In these low achieving schools: school improvement and program development were driven by conformity to the current system; principals functioned more as managers of processes rather than leaders; and change was to come through controlling teacher work.

Bruner found that school improvement plans in the low achieving schools focused on acquiring material resources, reducing adult-pupil ratio by adding staff, and training faculty. Evaluation of the success of the plans was not tied to student performance, but rather to improved teacher performance. School improvement planning was reactionary in that it: detailed steps established in formal plans; controlled with timetables and resources; provided procedures to guide people; and created systems to monitor. These improvement plans led to an emphasis on mechanisms such as prescriptive programs, tightly specified resource allocations, and teacher performance measures as the means of improving student achievement.

The principals in the low achieving schools saw their roles as providing procedures to limit deviations from the school improvement plans. Deviations were viewed as problems, rather than opportunities. These principals delegated responsibility for carrying out the plans and then monitored their implementation. Rather than seeking innovations, principals managed the maintenance of programs and services.

Teachers in the low achieving schools were more likely to work in isolation. Working in isolation did not lend itself to the sharing of successful ideas and strategies, nor did it cultivate innovation. Rather than initiating innovations, these teachers looked to outside experts for program development in their schools. Less discussion, less sharing of knowledge translated into protecting the status quo and kept many desired improvements from becoming institutionalized. Isolationism was a barrier to new learning and change. In fact, inspecting teacher behavior and advancing school goals through teacher training were attempts to address teacher deficits as the way of improving student outcomes.

These schools with low student achievement had cultures that lacked a clear sense of purpose, had norms that reinforced inertia, blamed students for lack of progress, and discouraged collaboration. When elements of an organization's culture are dysfunctional, it is likely that the organization will seek stability, predictability, and meaning (Schein, 1994). A highly structured reform model like SFA appeared to offer this to these schools. The work cultures of these schools were ones of compliance and conformity. Work cultures that would seem to be a good fit for a prescriptive program like SFA.

A Compatible School Reform Model

The second purpose of this investigation was to examine a school reform model that was most compatible with the existing work culture in low achieving schools. One school reform model that has benefited from the CSRD legislation and has widespread implementation is the Success for All (SFA) reading program.

Robert Slavin, Nancy Madden, and a team of developers from Johns Hopkins University created the Success for All reading program (SFA) in 1986. SFA restructures elementary schools (usually high poverty Title I schools) to ensure that all students learn to read. The program uses a research-based reading curriculum, effective practices for beginning reading (Adams, 1990) and cooperative learning strategies (Slavin, 1995). SFA prescribes specific curricular and instructional strategies for teaching reading including shared story reading, listening comprehension, vocabulary building, sound blending exercises, and writing. School personnel are provided with detailed materials for use in the classroom and receive intensive training prior to implementation that prepares all certified staff to teach a daily 90-minute reading class. Reduced class size is achieved by having all certified teachers - media specialists, music teachers, art teachers, special education teachers, and the like - trained to teach reading (Slavin & Madden, 2001).

SFA requires strict adherence to a structured reading curriculum with supervision and coordination by a reading facilitator. Each session is highly scripted, so that at any given minute, an observer should be able to hear virtually the same thing in every class from both teachers and students (Slavin & Madden, 2001). The school's reading facilitator works to oversee the operation of the SFA model and helps teachers with implementation.

A prepackaged program like SFA allows the schools to incorporate instructional change without fundamentally changing the organization. It is prescriptive, not creative and offers structures to schools that are already relying on conformity and compliance. The focus is not

about improving teachers' capacity to teach reading, but rather about teacher compliance to a scripted program.

SFA fit into the cultures of compliance and predictability found in the low achieving schools and offered a way to standardize teaching. The allure of ready-made materials and lesson plans used in the program eased demands on teachers' time. Teachers only had to learn how to implement the program and follow its components. The success of the program depended upon a teacher's willingness and ability to implement it. The responsibility for student learning was then shifted from the teacher to the program since compliance with the script was expected to improve achievement.

It was easy for these schools to adopt the training model provided in SFA. SFA training provided detailed manuals and sessions that focused on the implementation of the reading program (Slavin & Madden, 2001). The SFA experts made the decisions regarding the workshop design and the knowledge base needed by the teachers. The role of the teacher was to listen, learn and implement.

Fidelity to the SFA program shaped any decisions the teachers might make while teaching the program. Teachers were required to limit deviations and become implementers of the program. They all followed the same lesson plan and used the same materials.

By purchasing an off-the-shelf program, overburdened administrators hoped they would gain relief from some of the pressures to perform well on state-mandated tests. SFA offered these schools a "complete" package – a research-based, scripted, teacher-proof curriculum and training. It structured the use of personnel and schedules, monitored the implementation, and assessed the progress of students. The program was not really a significant change from the way these schools had been operating. It was whole-group instruction that followed a textbook, was time driven, and subject specific. Teachers grafted on what they considered appropriate strategies for change within the context of their own school's culture. It was easier to encourage what grew naturally within the school than to radically alter the environment.

Grafting Onto Existing Rootstock

With increasingly more schools "shopping" around for the best model, we must ask do schools choose reform models that are most compatible with their existing work cultures? If the selected model itself promotes a culture of conformity and compliance in low achieving schools might it sustain low student performance?

We use the metaphor of "grafting" to describe the relationship of comprehensive school reform designs to the established work culture of the schools. A metaphor is a figure of speech where a comparison is made between two seemingly unrelated objects. It is transference of one object's characteristics onto another. Metaphors are used to actively construct meaning and influence thinking. Several works in qualitative research methodology (Miles & Huberman 1994; Darling-Hammond & Snyder 2000; Janesick 2000) mention the importance of looking at metaphorical constructs in interpretation. The "grafting" metaphor constructs and clarifies the

comprehensive school reform design concepts allowing us to reason about them in different ways.

Grafting involves attaching the cutting of a desired plant to the rootstock of another vigorous plant. It introduces a new or different “shoot” onto a healthy plant that has grown naturally in another environment. The purposes for grafting plants are: to boost productivity, to increase resistance to pests, to facilitate reproduction, to repair damage, or to grow a plant in an unfamiliar environment by combining it with a host that is well-adapted to that environment. The practices of gardeners in grafting help clarify and structure this discussion of school work culture and school-wide reform models.

Success for All reading program, like other reform models, can only be grafted onto existing systems. Grafting combines the strength and persistence of the old and the energy and hope of the new. As in gardening, there must be compatibility with the existing root system in order for the new graft to thrive. The new practices provided in the SFA reading program offered a compatible graft onto the existing cultures of the low achieving schools in Bruner’s study.

Clearly, not every school culture would embrace the Success for All reading program and expect it to thrive. Teachers who are encouraged to make their own diagnoses and judgments are not likely to welcome the new role of implementers rather than innovators. A salient predictor of success of the SFA program is teacher buy-in. The very act of voting for a prescriptive program may be an indicator of a school culture that is unable to sustain teacher involvement in curricular decisions.

When an externally developed program was grafted onto the unhealthy “rootstock” of the low achieving schools, both the schools and the program failed to produce high quality results (Greenlee & Bruner, 2001). In fact, there is now a large and consistent set of independent studies concluding that there is no effect from SFA or any other schoolwide reform model (Pogrow, 2002). In schools, as in gardening, the graft cannot repair a damaged root. Rather, the growth of a successful graft is strengthened by a hearty rootstock, and the best “rootstock” is a healthy and supportive culture.

Recent research by RAND (Berends, Bodilly & Kirby, 2002), drawing primarily on a series of reports on New American Schools, studied the implementation of whole school reform designs. Several case study analyses provided particular insight into school conditions that hindered high levels of implementation in whole school designs. Weak or stagnant implementation was reported in schools: that had low levels of teacher buy-in and support; that had inconsistent and/or ineffective leadership; that lacked trusting relationships among school, district, and union staff; and where teachers’ perceptions of students and their readiness to learn were low. These hindering school conditions are associated with the quality of the work culture. The RAND studies seem to show that implementation of whole school designs fail when they fall on an infertile school culture.

Certain fixed truths in the science of grafting persuade our understanding of the temporal nature of school reform. The growth of a successful graft is sustained by the rootstock, but the genetics of the roots will persist. In other words, if a shoot forms beneath the graft it will reflect

the genetics of the root. Unless those “wild shoots” are pruned out, the rootstock will nurture the shoots, resulting in the profusion of the parent plant and the gradual decline of the grafted plant.

When schools “graft” on the externally developed strategies of school reform models, there is usually a profusion of the “wild shoots” of teacher adaptations to the program. Some of the schoolwide models use scripted lessons and teacher-proof curriculum as a way of “pruning out” the persistent new growth from the “root.” However, reform efforts usually give way to the persistence of school culture. The dynamics of the culture alter any innovation to the point that ten years after any school implements change, regardless of the type, no trace can be found of that change except in the memories of those who were there at the time (Tye, 2000).

Schools possess a clear sense of identity, which is the values, traditions, competencies, and culture that guide the work. There is a tendency to think that isolation and strong boundaries preserve that identity. When the environment demands a change, the organization changes in a way that is consistent with what has gone on before (Wheatley, 1999). The grafting on of a new program can only occur as long as its requirements do not stray from the existing traditions of the system. Schools adopt reform programs that offer procedural or curricular changes that fit within their existing systems and culture.

It seems that guiding change can only be done by challenging the natural tendencies of the cultures in low achieving schools to new ends. Changing schools requires more than implementing a program, rather it demands creating a new work culture by redefining the roles and practices of teachers. The new work culture is information oriented and flexible with more organizational communication and participation. It is characterized by personnel who seek greater autonomy and control over their work. Sharing, collegiality, empowerment, and teacher leadership are characteristics commonly found in schools attempting to generate and sustain cultural improvement.

Studies have found compelling evidence for improving school culture. Fyans and Maehr (1990) found that students are more motivated to learn in schools with strong cultures. Thacker and McInerney (1992) found significant effects on student achievement in elementary schools when the school focused on creating a new mission statement, created goals based on outcomes for students, aligned the curriculum to meet those goals, and provided professional growth opportunities. School culture also correlates with teacher productivity and satisfaction. Cheng (1993) found that school cultures with strong commitment, shared participation, intimacy, and strong leadership had more motivated teachers.

The culture of the school must be nurtured to the point that the grafted reform initiatives will take hold and grow and produce the desired outcomes. Grafting reform efforts presume that the rootstock of school culture is prepared, willing and able to offer the nutrients required for high yields. Reform efforts require the best that the particular school context is capable of delivering. What is the best context? It is a school culture with people that have visions and expectations and contribute to the growth of new methods. The best school culture recognizes and nurtures quality. The school culture becomes the catalyst for change, and expertise for innovations is centered in the school. If a robust culture is in place, then a school can propagate

its own innovations and put together interventions that are more successful than external school reform models.

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