DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 203 530 EA 013 722

AUTHOR Corbett, H. Dickson, III
TITLE The Field Agent in School Improvement: Client Contributions to the Role.
INSTITUTION Research for Better Schools, Inc., Philadelphia, Pa.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Dec 80
NOTE 38p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association (Philadelphia, PA, March 11-14, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Change Strategies; Educational Change; Educational Improvement; *Educational Innovation; Elementary Secondary Education; Information Dissemination; *Linking Agents; *Occupational Information; Research Utilization; *Technical Assistance
IDENTIFIERS *Field Agents

ABSTRACT

The role of educational field agents was examined as part of a longitudinal study of external assistance in school change. Six employees of Research for Better Schools (RBS), working as change agents in five schools, served as subjects for the study. Data were collected through extensive observations and interviews. The field agents performed several functions in addition to the technical ones they had anticipated. These included expanding their technical responsibilities, adjusting the change process, seeking endorsements, mediating interpersonal tensions, and providing clerical services. The additional functions were necessitated by a scarcity of school resources, tension among school staff, and organizational instability. Moreover, school staff expectations for "linker" behavior tended to maintain the expanded role once assumed. The first section of the paper provides background for the study; the second section contains a description of the research procedures; the third section examines the functions that linkers had to perform at the school sites; and the fourth section identifies factors which made these functions necessary. (Author/MLF)

THE FIELD AGENT IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: CLIENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ROLE

H. Dickson Corbett, III

Field Studies Component
Research and Evaluation Division
Research for Better Schools, Inc.
444 North Third Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19123

December, 1980

The preparation of this report was supported by funds from the National Institute of Education, United States Department of Education. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of NIE, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

EERA Meeting, 1981

ABSTRACT

The contributions that schools make to determining the nature of the educational field agent role were examined in a study of cooperative planning for change between Research for Better Schools and five schools. Data were collected through extensive observation and interviewing. The field agents performed several functions in addition to the technical ones they hoped to perform. These included expanding the technical functions, adjusting the change process, endorsement seeking, mediating interpersonal tensions, and providing clerical services. The additional functions were necessitated by three school context factors: a scarcity of school resources, tension among school staff, and organizational instability. In addition, school staff expectations for linker behavior tended to maintain the functions once performed.

PREFACE

Research for Better Schools (RBS) is committed to providing a balanced program of research, development, and technical assistance to educational agencies in the Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware region. A major part of the research element consists of Field Studies projects. One of those projects focuses on two of RBS' development efforts and the local schools participating in them. The development projects are creating approaches through which external agencies can help schools improve their curricula and instructional strategies in basic skills and career preparation. Schools participating in the development hope to improve their own educational programs. RBS intends to develop approaches and knowledge which will have generalizable utility.

This is one of several reports on the Field Studies' research. The five reports being developed in the 1980-81 year are intended to be of interest to researchers, school practitioners, and those charged with the operation and staffing of development and dissemination projects throughout the country. The reports cover two years of activity in five schools. Their purpose is to identify and clarify issues related to the support of local school improvement. A complete listing of all reports available from this project is found on the inside cover of this document.

William A. Firestone

Field Studies Coordinator

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE FIELD AGENT IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:

CLIENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ROLE

The failure of efforts to change schools through the diffusion of "teacher-proof" curriculum materials has been well-documented.[1] All too often when money allocated to support new practices dried up, so did the use of the innovations. As a consequence, more recent approaches to school change have focused on adjusting innovations to fit the particular conditions of individual districts or schools. It is felt that the more compatible a change is with existing characteristics of an educational system, the more likely the change will become permanently incorporated. To assist the adaptation of an innovation to a site, field agents, similar to extension agents in agriculture, have increasingly been used.

For example, in 1977, Research for Better Schools (RBS) began developing approaches for planning and implementing change that schools could use to improve their instructional programs, primarily in the areas of basic skills and career education. The approaches initially were to involve the use of RBS staff as external agents who would assist schools going through a rational decision-making process. Later, guidance was to be supplied by agents from within the school system. Although the RBS agents were to have a highly visible presence in the schools, the determination of actual changes was left to the schools. In this way, it was hoped, changes would be compatible with the school context, and thus, become implemented and institutionalized.

To date, the literature on educational agents consists mostly of efforts to conceptualize the agent role from the perspective of the technical assistance agency. To be sure, such agencies are an important determinant of how agents interact with their clients. However, it is highly probable that clients also have considerable influence on the role. This paper examines this influence as it applied to the field agents from RBS. The first section of the paper provides background for the study; the second section contains a description of the research procedures; in the third section, the functions that linkers had to perform at the school sites are examined; and the fourth section identifies factors which made these functions necessary.

Background

The literature on knowledge diffusion and utilization in education contains several terms used to denote individuals who assist the transfer of knowledge to practitioners in the field. Referred to as field agents, change agents, external agents, or linking agents, the label "linking agent" or its derivative, "linker," seems to be the most commonly used.[2] A linking agent has formal responsibility for augmenting the information available to an educational system in attempts to improve some aspects of its operation. Although this definition is broad, it contains two important qualifications. First, by including the requirement that the linker must have "formal responsibility" for knowledge transfer, the definition refers to individuals whose job responsibility,

or a part of it, officially includes this function; the definition excludes individuals who either unwittingly or casually share knowledge with others. Formal linking agents can be either external to the educational system (e.g., information specialists at a resource center, field specialists in intermediate service agencies, or staff development consultants) or internal to the system (e.g., curriculum coordinators or individuals assigned specific responsibility for providing technical assistance to a school or group of practitioners). Second, the requirement that the transfer of information be for some purpose, namely system improvement, excludes individuals who pass information on to others only because it may be of general interest. Thus, the linking agent is a purposeful actor.

Although the study of educational linking agents is a relatively new field, there are already several reviews on this topic available.[3] A predominant concern in the literature has been efforts to characterize the nature of the linking role, e.g., Crandall's "front-end" and "back-end" roles[4] or Piele's "resource-finder," "process-helper," and "solution-giver."[5] These conceptualizations have in common two assumptions about linking agents.[6] The first is that linkers perform distinct roles. That is, the expectations governing linker behavior are clearly bounded and closely related to a central service function. For example, Piele did not expect that a linking agent would serve as both a resource-finder and a solution-giver because the technical expertise needed

to perform the roles differed. The second assumption is that the expectations for linker behavior are mostly determined by the linking agency. This is reflected in the tendency to distinguish among roles according to how services will be provided and not according to how educational systems will use the services. Thus, the role has largely been viewed from the perspective of the assistance agency rather than the client agency.

At present there is little research which supports or contradicts the appropriateness of these assumptions. The purpose of this paper is to examine them in light of empirical data from a study of linking agents working for Research for Better Schools. The field specialists at RBS provided a unique opportunity to examine the nature of the linking role and factors which affected it. One reason was that RBS had a set of relatively clear expectations for the technical role linkers were to perform in schools. As a result, additional responsibilities linkers adopted could be readily detected. Another reason was that the linking agents were to be involved with sites for a long period of time. If site expectations for linker behavior were to weave their way into the role, then the linkers should have had extensive enough contact with the schools for this to occur.

Procedures

This paper reports on the work of six linkers in five different schools. Each of the linkers had an advanced degree in education, teaching experience in public schools, and previous involvement in field programs. They had intensive contact with the sites, averaging more two visits a month during the school year. These visits ranged in length

from two hours to all day. In addition, numerous phone calls were made between sites and RBS, and there were summer project-related workshops in three of the sites.

The schools varied according to faculty size, level, location, and student population served. Smalltown was a rural elementary school with a faculty of 13. Twenty percent of the students were from minority groups. Middleville was an elementary school located in a lower middle-class suburb of a major city. Thirty-seven faculty members served a student population of 20 percent minorities. Located in an urban school district, Patriot Elementary had 18 classroom teachers and 95 percent minority students. Green Hills was an upper middle-class suburban junior high with 45 teachers and eight percent minorities. Neighbortown was a rural high school which served no minority students. It had 49 classroom teachers.

The research reported here was a part of a longitudinal study of external assistance in school change. Data were collected through extensive observation and interviewing of linking agents and school staff. For two years research staff accompanied linkers on their visits to sites. During these visits, observations and comments of participants were recorded in written field notes. In addition, there were periodic formal and informal interviews. Although research staff collectively identified topics for interviews, questions were open-ended. Field notes from the observations and interviews were recorded on tape, transcribed, and coded using a topical index developed from the notes. Codes and their locations in the field notes were stored on computer to facilitate access to the data.

As field notes were read for analysis, instances of linking agent activities were identified. Related activities were categorized into more general functions, and then the RBS linkers reviewed the functions as a check on accuracy. Only functions which were performed at two or more sites were retained for further analysis. This analysis entailed identifying patterns in events leading to the performance of particular functions.

The Role of the RBS Linkers

In 1978 RBS began to develop approaches for planning and implementing change in two instructional areas: basic skills and career education. These approaches were characterized by an emphasis on (1) building cooperative relationships between RBS and schools and (2) using data-based planning methods.[9] RBS provided the schools with a general model for planning, knowledge about research and existing school programs which could suggest potentially successful practices, and technical assistance in obtaining school data upon which to base decisions about innovations to be implemented. All innovation decisions were to be made by school staff. In addition, the schools agreed to use the planning models and to be a source of feedback for revising them.

The RBS field agents were the major point of contact between RBS and the schools. Their primary technical functions were to assist program improvement by bringing knowledge about successful educational practices and the process of change to the schools, to help local staff develop the capability to direct the change process themselves, and to provide feedback to in-house RBS staff on needed revisions in the process. In terms of existing conceptualizations of the linking role, the RBS agents

most closely approximated Piele's process-helper. According to Piele, process-helpers become actively involved in a school's problems by helping to collect data and analyze conditions but remain neutral with respect to decisions about specific substantive problems the school wishes to address and about remedies to those problems.[10] Because of previous experience in working with schools, RBS was aware that school conditions would likely require linkers to engage in a variety of activities that fell beyond the boundaries of these technical functions; nevertheless, RBS staff hoped that the linkers would be able to limit themselves to this core of process-helping functions as much as possible.

The RBS linkers were to have frequent contacts with the schools and were to work primarily with a team of school staff members that each school was to identify. Generally the teams consisted of teachers and administrators; a few included guidance counselors, students, or community members. One of these individuals, typically an administrator, was also to serve as a local coordinator for the project. Although the linker was to attend the planning meetings and occasionally model planning procedures, RBS hoped that the coordinators would begin to assume primary leadership while the linker mostly observed. The rationale for this arrangement stemmed from RBS' belief that it would promote local ownership of the project and facilitate the dissemination of the approach throughout a school system.

Additional Linker Functions

The technical functions linkers hoped to perform did not encompass all of the activities the linkers found necessary to keep the schools moving through the change process. In fact, the goal of school improvement through knowledge transfer had to be subordinated to the more immediate concerns of maintaining an individual's or site's participation in the project. Thus, the technical role was supplemented with additional functions that were largely related to obtaining the kinds of resources and social relations necessary for the planning process to continue.

In this section, five of these additional functions will be discussed: expanding process-helping, process adjusting, endorsement seeking, mediating, and providing clerical services. Although these were not the only additional functions linkers found themselves performing, they were the most frequent.

Expanding Process Helping

Originally, linkers anticipated providing special technical assistance to one or two individuals in a school to enable them to guide the change process themselves. RBS typically approached administrators about being the recipients of this assistance because it was felt that they would be the key people for making the projects successful in a district. These individuals were to conduct planning team sessions and deliver most of the technical knowledge to the rest of the participants. Thus, there was to be an internal as well as an external linker. Although the RBS linker expected to have to model certain techniques for guiding the

planning process, for the most part the linker hoped to remain in the background.

Linkers quickly realized that such passive participation was not possible. Internal linkers had their normal job responsibilities to perform in addition to coordinating the RBS projects. Carrying out their regular work meant that the internal linkers had only limited time to meet with the RBS linker. The time available was not enough for the internal linker both to be instructed in the RBS approach to the point of being fully proficient to guide the process and to be able to attend meetings. Thus, linkers became involved in project activities much more directly than they at first desired.

Although linkers feared that their direct involvement would be at the expense of school ownership of the project, school personnel had no such fear. In fact, they did not believe that it should be their responsibility to provide technical assistance or to guide project activities. As one principal said, "One cannot run an inservice and take care of everything else. What I need is for someone else to come in and do it."

Nevertheless, the RBS linkers continually attempted to increase school responsibility for the project. At Smalltown the RBS linker and the principal often met to plan the activities the planning team would perform. During these sessions assignments for directing activities would be divided. There seemed to be a continual negotiation between the two about how much responsibility the principal would have. Although early in the project the principal led a couple of meetings almost completely, the RBS linker usually handled any provision of technical

knowledge. The principal primarily would open meetings and handle school coordination matters needed to carry out project activities.

Even when administrators acknowledged that they should shoulder more of the burden of guiding the projects, they were often unable to because of the ebb and flow of school events. For example, at Middleville and Green Hills the principals frequently were called out of planning meetings to address some school crises or to attend a meeting called by the district office at the last minute. Openly acknowledging these disruptions, the Middleville team scheduled several of its meetings away from the school. Nevertheless, the principal remained severely constrained in the amount of time available to devote to project activities. Thus, responsibility for directing a project was often shifted to the RBS linker.

That the RBS linker was mostly responsible for directing the project did not escape the notice of participants. At Smalltown one teacher referred to the linker as the "director" and the "coordinator." A teacher at Neighbortown also used "director" to identify the RBS linker. Teachers at Green Hills acknowledged that there was no one at the site who could carry on the process should RBS eventually withdraw from the project. At the same time, school staff acknowledged that this active involvement was appropriate. One teacher said, "We felt more comfortable when [the linker] was conducting.... [the linker] had the expertise and it led to the committee's not floundering."

Only at Middleville was the RBS linker able to perform the technical functions mostly as RBS desired. At this site, there was an intermediate service agency (ISA) staff member who had received previous training in

the RBS approach. In addition, with the exception of proposal writing, this individual's time was allocated primarily to providing service to schools. As a result, the RBS linker had someone else available with the time and expertise needed to guide the process. The contributions of the ISA representative were considerable, to the point that one teacher said it was difficult to describe the RBS linker's role: The linker was "behind the scenes" and "just happened to be there." RBS regarded such comments as indicative of the linker's success in transferring leadership responsibilities to a school, or in this case, the ISA person.

Process Adjusting

RBS expected that by having linkers at the school sites the changes resulting from the planning approaches would be better suited to the school sites. RBS also expected to have to make adjustments in the change process itself. Such adjustments became critical at times when the planning activities required by the RBS approaches hindered the full participation of site staff. In these instances, the linker occasionally would alter aspects of the RBS approach to prevent disenchantment with the project or to remove the threat of an individual's, or a site's, withdrawing from the project. Thus, the linker not only had to assist the adoption of changes suitable to school conditions but also had to adjust the process by which these changes were to be identified.

At Smalltown there were several other projects which demanded teachers' attention in addition to the RBS project. Because all of these projects focused on classroom instruction, they competed for the same scarce planning time available to teachers. Teachers said that they saw

value in all of them, but became increasingly frustrated over the pressure they were under to fulfill the obligations of each. The principal considered withdrawing from one or more of the projects, including RBS'. To ease the time pressures and maintain the site's participation, the linker decided to slow the pace of the RBS activities. As a result, by the spring of the second project year teacher complaints about time seemed to be disappearing.

The time needed to participate in the project was also a problem at Patriot. Although there were no other projects competing for teachers' time, the amount of time required by the information collection phase of the project bothered teachers considerably. To collect information on aspects of the organization of classrooms, teachers had to observe one another using the procedures developed by RBS. RBS suggested that as many as three days of observations of basic skills instruction for each teacher would be needed to obtain an adequate sample of classroom events. Teachers felt that doing the observations would pull them out of their classrooms too often. In the previous year, the linker had resolved the problem by performing all of the observations. Now under directions from an RBS supervisor not to do this, the linker had to find another way to prevent teachers from getting to the point that they would want to quit participating. The solution was to reduce the number of observations to one. Although the reduction caused teachers to question the adequacy of the sample of observations as a depiction of their classrooms, they reported the adjustment eased their immediate frustrations.

The linker at Neighbortown was to assist the school in following a ten-step planning model. Five of the steps pertained to collecting data upon which to base subsequent decisions at the site. The first three of these steps were surveys of project goals desired by students, faculty, and the community. The final two data collection activities were resource assessments of the faculty and community in which respondents described activities they already were conducting which seemed to fit with project goals. However, by the time the first three surveys were completed, it was summer. The team was anxious to analyze these and continue with planning the changes to be made. If they were to wait for the resource assessments to be designed, administered, and analyzed, further progress on the project would have been delayed until the middle of the fall. To prevent this delay and the concomitant frustration of site staff, the linker postponed the assessments until a later point in the ten-step model.

These three examples illustrate the role conflict which accompanied the work of individuals attempting to span the boundaries of two organizations. Even though linkers were willing to make adjustments in the process, they hoped to be able to maintain the technical integrity of the planning approach. Although this intention continued to be a commitment of the linkers, a more immediate concern was to keep the school committed to and involved in the project. As has been seen, occasionally achieving the latter conflicted with achieving the former.

When tension arose between the planning process and the school, school staff were generally unconcerned with maintaining the technical integrity of the RBS approach. As one district office staff member said,

"You have to take the research with a grain of salt." Thus, when crisis points occurred during planning, the school felt that the process should be adjusted. At the same time, several field agents perceived that technical developers at RBS felt that the school should demonstrate its commitment to the project by adjusting the practices which were incompatible with the approach. Caught between both sets of expectations, the linker had to mold a compromise.

Typically, the compromise was that in return for continued school participation some aspect of the process would be altered. That it was the process rather than the school that was adjusted makes sense when the nature of the relationship between the school and RBS is considered. The two organizations were not power equals; RBS needed the school more than the school needed RBS. To develop its approaches, RBS had to have participating sites. The amount of effort required to obtain entry to a site was great enough that a school's potential withdrawal posed a serious threat to RBS' operations. In one instance, the mood of RBS staff with respect to a site was to let it withdraw. However, on second thought, they realized that a reduction in sites would not be looked upon favorably by its funding agency. Thus, process adjustments were made to keep the site in the project.

On the other hand, RBS was only one of several agencies available to work with schools. Thus, when technical aspects of the process became at odds with the concerns of the school staff, the linker was in a weak bargaining position compared to the school School staff were cognizant of this position. One teacher remarked, "If we scream loud enough,

they'll [RBS] change it," when referring to the amount of time a planning activity required. As a result, the linker either adapted the process or advised technical staff at RBS to do so.

Endorsement Seeking

As RBS began looking for sites with which to work, RBS expected to have to obtain the approval of school administrators, first to enter the district, and then, a school. It was hoped that formal approval would pave the way for an individual school's acceptance of the project and would insure stable allocation of certain resources, primarily the time of school participants. These initial district endorsements were obtained for the sites in the study and were instrumental in facilitating the early progress of the projects.[11]

However, the need for obtaining endorsements was not limited to the initiation of the change process. In fact, linkers found themselves having to re-enter negotiations for endorsements periodically. This was necessitated primarily by the turnover of personnel in key administrative positions.

The district in which Patriot School was located contained a community group which actively debated school policy with district administrators. Partially as a consequence of this opposition and partially as a cause of it, there was a frequent turnover of superintendents. In fact, in the first two years of the RBS project, there were two new superintendents. The first new superintendent began work in the fall after the project had been in place for over half a year. Because the superintendent was not obliged to continue projects the previous superintendent

had approved, the linker at Patriot had to attempt to obtain the same sort of sanction that had been received only six months earlier. Initially the new superintendent seemed hesitant to endorse the project. It was only after several meetings that the superintendent began to see how the project could serve as a vehicle for the superintendent's own programs. Once the value of the project for furthering these initiatives was realized, endorsement was given. However, the superintendent's administration was a rocky one, and by the end of the school year, the superintendent had resigned. Thus, a new round of negotiating endorsements was begun.

The linker at Green Hills had a similar experience, although at the school building level. For two years, the principal had strongly endorsed the project and had served as the local coordinator for the planning team. However, at the end of the second year, the principal was reassigned to a central office position and was replaced by another principal in the district. Although the former principal had selected a new set of teachers to join the team and had committed the school to several days of summer workshops to facilitate this expansion, the new principal was able to suspend these commitments until time was available for reviewing the project. The linker met with the new administrator several times to gain support for the project. Although the principal indicated an interest in the project's goals, the linker was told not to proceed with any more activities in the school until notified to do so.

Two organizational characteristics of the schools in the study seemed to contribute heavily to the importance of linkers' obtaining

administrators' endorsements. First, there was a zoning of authority to make decisions.[12] That is, individuals were able to make decisions within relatively specified spheres, and these decisions were binding only on individuals whose activities placed them within these spheres. For example, teachers were mostly responsible for deciding what kind of day-to-day classroom activities occurred in their individual classrooms. One teacher's decisions were binding for students in the class but not for other teachers or other students. Principals made decisions about scheduling teachers and students, providing teacher release time, and the school's initial participation in projects with outside agencies. Thus, although a principal could structure the time teachers had to perform certain tasks, (s)he could not determine how the time would be used within that structure. A superintendent, or someone from the superintendent's office, allocated money to school programs and granted permission to outside agencies to contact individual schools. The superintendent, then, could affect certain resources available to a school, but could not specifically determine how these resources should be used.

What this distribution of authority meant for the change projects was that, as several project participants contended, the approval of the next individual up in the hierarchy was not necessary for a project to survive once it had initially begun. Nevertheless, without such approval, the project would be severely constrained. For example, teachers could still design and use activities based on what they had learned in the project. However, without the principal's approval, there would not be time to meet to coordinate these activities with other teachers. Even if

the principal did approve, the availability of funds to release teachers at other than already provided planning times (planning periods or after school) would be limited unless the superintendent also approved. Thus, the combined endorsement of school and district administrators was needed to ensure a stable flow of resources that would, in turn, enable a systematic, rather than a sporadic, change effort.

Second, within an individual's zone of authority, decisions were not binding on future occupants of that individual's position. Consequently, a new teacher was not obliged to perform in the manner of a teacher being replaced; a principal was not constrained by a previous principal's schedule for school meetings; and a superintendent was not obligated to continue a former superintendent's district-level programs. Of course, each new occupant was subject to informal pressure groups which could cause the individual to continue a particularly popular practice. However, the non-binding character of the previous incumbent's decisions required that the pressure group reassert its interests with each position turnover. Thus, with each administrative change, the linker had to seek once again endorsements which had previously been obtained.

Mediating

At several sites there was tension between teachers and administrators. Occasionally this tension would impinge upon the smooth progress of the RBS projects. At these times, the linker would be forced to intervene or would risk the chance of the project grinding to a halt.

Tensions arose primarily because the role behavior of an individual, or individuals, did not conform to others' expectations for that role. For example, teachers at Neighbortown resented the discrepancy between what they felt was the public stance versus the private face of administrators. According to the teachers, in public the administrators professed a leadership style which resembled that which teachers desired; in private confrontations the teachers felt that administrative behavior belied the public image. In Patriot school, teachers felt that the principal's enforcement of rules for students was not strict or consistent enough and that the enforcement of rules for teachers was too rigid.

For their part, administrators, particularly in three of the schools, believed that many teachers did not conform to the image of a "professional." To these administrators, a part of being professional was making wise use of the time available to plan and carry out job responsibilities. However, they felt teachers wasted time and, thus, were not willing to heed teacher complaints that they did not have enough time to perform duties ancillary to actually instructing students.

Tension seemed to lead to a restricted flow of communication between the two parties. Teachers would interact with administrators to clarify aspects of job-related duties but would not freely express their opinions about these duties or about how administrative behavior affected teacher performance. This reluctance to express opinions frequently carried over into planning team meetings where teachers would not openly discuss their teaching practices for fear of reprisal from the administrators present. For their part, administrators would often announce a decision as a fait

accompli but would not explain reasons for the decision. These reasons were often not readily apparent to teachers, making administrators seem capricious. For example, teachers at Neighbortown complained to the linker that administrators did not seem strongly supportive of the project. The linker suggested to an administrator that several simple steps could be taken that would communicate to the teachers the same overwhelming support that the administrator communicated to the linker. As a result, the administrator decided to call a meeting of the planning team without the linker in attendance as an indicator of the administrator's interest in the project. This intention was not stated to teachers, and teachers suspected the administrator of attempting to wrestle leadership from the linker. Thus, the tension remained.

Linkers at sites where tension was particularly high discovered that tension often would affect the projects. Typically the tension would surface in an incident outside of planning team meetings which would threaten or directly affect participation in the project. For example, at Neighbortown a teacher had delivered a description of a student activity to the school office to be mimeographed, as was the custom in the school. The principal happened to see the activity, failed to see its relevance to the particular class in which it would be used, and went to confront the teacher. The teacher became angry and suspected that the principal was attempting to tell the teacher how classes should be conducted. The teacher then expressed to the linker reservations about participating in a project designed to alter classroom activities if the principal was going to interfere in decisions about those activities.

In Patriot, a principal and a teacher had an altercation about substitutes for release time just prior to a meeting of the RBS planning team. The teacher became very upset and cried throughout the meeting. Other teachers on the team were aware of the source of the teacher's discomfort, and all of them were extremely reticent to participate, particularly with the administrator present.

In both cases, the linker had to soften the impact of the incidents to maintain the full participation of school staff. Most often this was accomplished by providing information to individuals that would not have been available otherwise. In the Neighbortown instance, the linker had known that the principal had had a particularly trying morning with community relations. The linker explained to the teacher that because the activity involved a controversial issue; perhaps it appeared more threatening than it may otherwise have been. By providing a rival interpretation for the principal's action, the linker managed to mollify the teacher somewhat. In the latter case, at a break in the meeting, teachers complained to the linker that obtaining substitutes and finding time to orient them to the teachers' classrooms were acute problems at Patriot. This problem was the source of the teacher-principal altercation and would likely lead to others if not resolved. The teachers asked the linker to discuss this with the principal. Instead, the linker asked a district administrator to do so. The district administrator was in a position to ease the problem, and with the information provided by the linker, the administrator was able to make some of the necessary adjustments.

Linkers seemed to be useful receivers of complaints about school practices because they were neutral parties, having no stake in furthering one side's interests. The ability to remain neutral was enhanced by being external to schools. Because linkers were not a part of the districts with which they worked, they had no authority to sanction individuals and thus were not a threat to use information against those it concerned. By the same token, it was not necessary for the linker to respond to the influence attempts of others within the system to reveal certain bits of information.

This neutrality also facilitated discussions in planning team meetings. Advocates of joint participation in decision-making argue that it increases participant ownership of decisions through power equalization.[13] However, in the RBS projects, power was equalized more by the linker than by joint participation. In fact, participants seemed to feel that the same distribution of power which obtained in the system existed within planning team meetings. This meant that teachers did not consider their opinions as "equal" as administrators' opinions. Thus, they were not very sanguine about the potential impact of their ideas. However, by being the actor to whom ideas were expressed and by clarifying ideas once stated, the linker mediated this power differential and caused the team to consider all opinions with equal seriousness. As one teacher explained, "My opinions carried weight....[the linker] was running the meeting, calling the shots and served as a spokesperson....[the linker] could summarize things....[the linker] had control of the situation although not control of the decision-making....As RBS gets out, this will no longer be the case and the project may die." Another teacher expressed

the same sentiment: "The outside influence helps to mainline communication....it keeps the focus on the opinion rather than who gave it."

Providing Clerical Services

The functions discussed above were critical to the success of the projects. Without taking more direct involvement in guiding the process, adjusting the activities dictated by the process, obtaining the endorsements of key site personnel, and mediating between conflicting factions of the school staff, more serious problems concerning the continuance of the projects would have arisen. A less obviously critical function that linkers performed was obtaining and occasionally providing clerical services for the planning team. Nevertheless, this function also contributed heavily to the smoothness with which the school team was able to progress through planning.

For example, by the middle of the second year the planning team at Green Hills was ready to write a document explaining the nature of the changes to be made. However, in less than two months the team had also promised to begin a pilot test of changes concerning teaching activities in classrooms. Because the actual activities to be tested were not yet formalized, the team found itself in a bind. The intended changes needed to be formalized in a public document for presentation to various constituencies, such as the school board and faculty; yet, to fit the pilot in during the current school year, activities had to be developed. The linker debated whether to use a team meeting or two to write the document or to compile team comments into a document and use only a part of a meeting to approve the work. The latter course was chosen, and although the linker had more to do, the team was able to design the pilot in the required time.

Linkers also had to arrange for clerical tasks other than compiling information to be performed. In Smalltown the linker had to travel to another school in the district to locate a videotape machine the linker had assumed the school would obtain. The district in which Patriot School was located had had all of its videotape equipment stolen. Thus, the linker had to arrange for RBS to provide the necessary equipment. At both Neighbortown and Green Hills the teams had considerable typing and production of materials to be done. This work included producing surveys, compiling goal statements, xeroxing materials, and cleaning up hand-written classroom activities. Because neither school had staff available to do a great amount of typing in a short time or the equipment to reproduce large amounts of materials quickly and efficiently, the linkers had to arrange for these services to be accomplished at RBS.

In each instance in which the linker performed or obtained clerical services for the school, a delay in moving to the next step of the planning process was avoided. Although linkers expressed concern that by not performing these tasks themselves the schools were not demonstrating a high commitment to the project, it was also apparent that schools did not have the resources to do these tasks quickly. School secretaries performed many tasks other than typing or locating audio-visual equipment, and teachers placed frequent demands on often-antiquated production equipment to get copies of daily activities and materials. Consequently, relying on schools to perform these services would have meant that considerable time would have elapsed between assigning the task and having materials ready for team use.

Factors Affecting the Linking Role

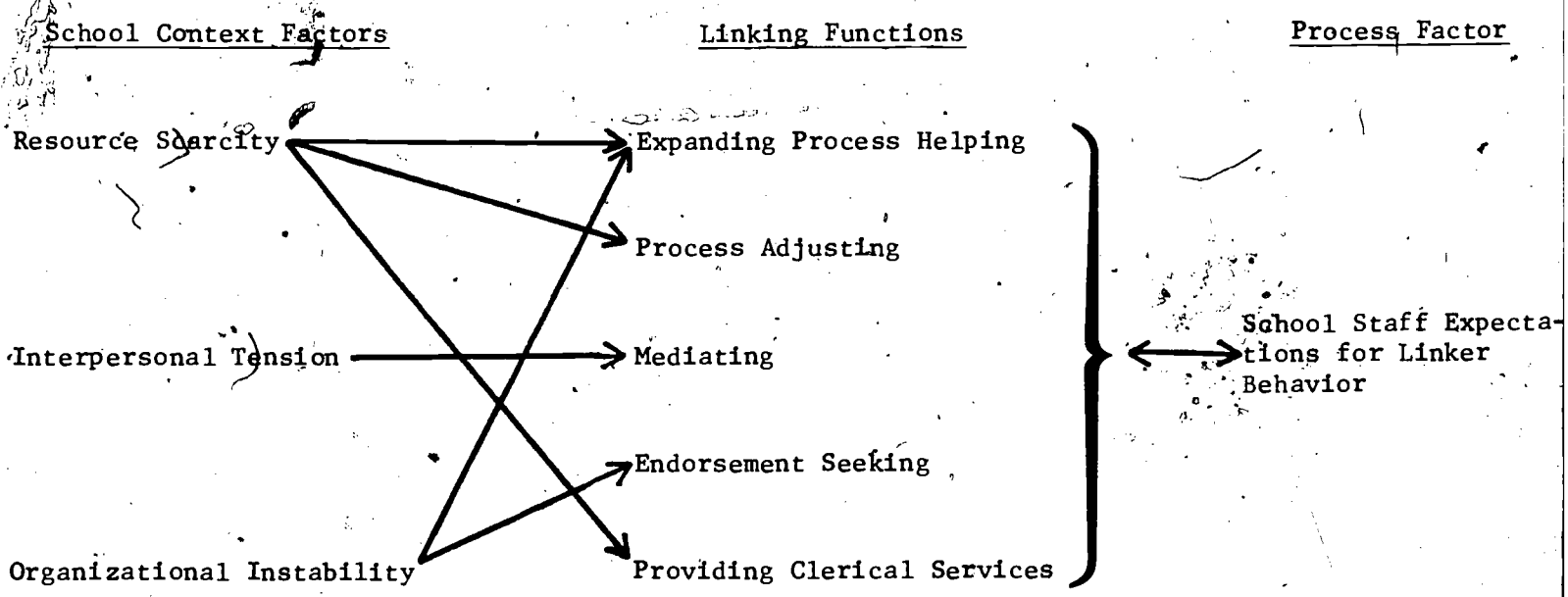
RBS intended for linkers to assist the schools' use of the RBS approaches by providing knowledge about successful educational practices and the process of planning for change. Although RBS hoped that linkers would be able to focus primarily on these technical functions, it was recognized that other functions would become necessary as responses to school context factors. The data indicated that linkers did perform a variety of additional functions. These functions were largely intended to remove barriers that obstructed smooth progress in planning or threatened participants' participation in the project. Thus, performing the technical linking role was often subordinated to addressing these more immediate concerns.

Although RBS defined the expectations for the technical functions linkers performed, aspects of the school context were the primary factors which necessitated the additional functions. There were three major categories of school context factors which affected the linker role: school resources, interpersonal relations, and organizational stability. A fourth factor, school staff expectations for linker behavior, was primarily a process factor in that expectations tended to maintain functions once performed rather than to instigate new behavior. The relationships among these factors and the additional linker functions are depicted in Figure 1.

The resources needed to support project activities were the time of administrators to plan team meetings and participate in the meetings, the time of teachers to carry out project activities and to attend team meetings, clerical services, and individuals with the necessary expertise to guide the planning process. A scarcity of any of these resources meant that the planning process would in some way be hindered. The lack of resources like clerical services threatened to slow the process down; the

Figure 1

Factors, Linking Functions, and Their Relationships



lack of staff time to perform certain activities often led to staff frustration with the project and to a void in project leadership. To surmount these barriers, linkers had to redefine their role. In the case of resource scarcity, linkers typically expanded the extent to which they guided the process, adjusted the process itself, or provided clerical assistance.

Interpersonal relations became a problem when there was high tension between subunits of individuals in the school, particularly between teachers and administrators. Because RBS included both teachers and administrators on the planning teams, interpersonal tension often had serious implications for school participation. In some instances teachers did not want to continue the project; in other cases the teachers felt constrained in the extent to which they could freely participate. In any event, linkers found it necessary to mediate between the two groups to maintain the kind of school cooperation needed for planning.

Unstable schools were those which had frequent disruptions in the continuity of their daily routines and overall programs. Disruptions in the daily routine were often caused by outbreaks of severe student discipline problems or unannounced visits from parents. These events demanded the attention of administrators, frequently pulling them away from a planning meeting or reducing the time available to meet. Disruptions in overall programs were often caused by turnover in administrative positions because new administrators rarely were obliged to continue the initiatives of a predecessor. Even if successors to positions continued existing projects, there was typically a period of delay while these projects were under review.

Such instability had two effects on linkers. Disruptions to the daily routine meant that the linkers could not rely consistently on administrators to take major responsibility for directing project activities. Consequently, the linker had to guide planning more directly than desired. Turnover in administrative personnel meant that the linkers periodically had to seek renewed endorsements of the projects.

Resource scarcity, interpersonal tension, and organizational instability were not problems in all of the schools. In fact, two schools were relatively free of these kinds of problems, and the linkers were able to perform the technical process-helping role mostly as RBS hoped. For example, at Middleville none of the three factors was significant. There was an intermediate service agency representative with the expertise and the time to take over some of the leadership responsibility the principal could not assume; teachers and administrators had a cordial relationship; and there were few major disruptions. Consequently, the linker came the closest of any of the RBS linkers to being solely a process-helper. Smalltown was also free of most of these problems, except that there was no one available with the expertise of Middleville's ISA representative. As a result, principal absences were not compensated for, and the linker at Smalltown had to expand process-helping more than the Middleville linker.

The other schools experienced all or a combination of resource scarcity, interpersonal tension, and instability. At Neighbortown there was no administrative turnover, and thus, the linker did not have to seek additional endorsements once entry into the site was obtained. Otherwise, the linkers in these schools had to perform all five of the additional functions at one time or another. Thus, there was a relationship between

the degree and kind of problems a site experienced and the nature of the functions linkers had to perform.

Intertwined with the above three school context factors were the site staff's expectations for the linker role. These expectations did not seem to contribute to how the role initially became enacted so much as they did to maintaining certain linker behaviors once exhibited. For example, early in the project at Smalltown, the principal actually led at least two entire meetings of the local planning team, thereby conforming to the linker's expectations for internal linker behavior. However, after the principal's partial absences from meetings thrust leadership on the RBS linker, the principal expected the linker to lead more often. Similarly at Green Hills, the principal did not call upon the linker to obtain typing services until after the linker had already volunteered this service in the interest of avoiding delays in planning. Thus, what seemed to happen was that linkers responded to conditions at the site by performing one of the additional functions, and then once performed, site staff expected it to be repeated as a regular part of the linker's interaction with the site.

Summary

Resource scarcity, interpersonal tension, organizational instability, and school staff expectations hindered progress in planning for change and placed constraints on participants' participation in the projects. As linkers addressed these problems, the configuration of linking functions was altered. Thus, the goal of school improvement through knowledge transfer was occasionally temporarily displaced by more immediate concerns: avoiding prolonged delays in planning and maintaining site participation.

These findings suggest that the assumptions contained in the educational agent literature of a clearly defined linking role and of the assistance agency as the primary determinant of the role do not adequately refleot the experience of the RBS agents. Instead, their role periodically became less clearly related to the central function of helping the planning process through knowledge transfer and was expanded as additional functions had to be performed, depending upon the nature of site conditions. Although existing conceptualizations of linking agents are useful tools for characterizing technical aspects of the role as they are intended to be enacted, attention now should turn to incorporating actual instances of linker behavior into these conceptualizations. In doing so, the contributions of clients to the determination of the linking role should become more apparent.

Footnotes

[1]Paul E. Berman and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change, Vol. IV: The Findings in Review (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1975); and Wayne W. Welch, "Twenty Years of Science Curriculum Development," Review of Research in Education 7 (1979): 282-306.

[2]Karen S. Louis, "The Role of External Agents in Knowledge Utilization, Problem Solving and Implementation of New Programs in Local School Contexts (tentative title)," in Knowledge in School Change, ed. Rolf Lehming (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, forthcoming).

[3]Most notably Paul D. Hood and Carolyn S. Cates, Alternative Perspectives on Educational Dissemination and Linkage Activities (San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1978).

[4]David P. Crandall, "Training and Supporting Linking Agents," in Linking Processes in Educational Improvement: Concepts and Applications, ed. Nicholas Nash and Jack Culbertson (Columbus, OH: University Council for Education Administration, 1977), pp. 184-274.

[5]Philip Piele, Review and Analysis of the Role, Activities, and Training of Educational Linking Agents (Eugene, OR: University of Oregon, ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1975).

[6]Louis, "The Role of External Agents in Knowledge Utilization, Problem Solving and Implementation of New Programs in Local School Contexts."

[7]Piele, Review and Analysis of the Role, Activities, and Training of Educational Linking Agents.

[8]All school names are pseudonyms.

[9]John Thomas and Janet McGrail, Preliminary Investigation of the RBS Change Strategy: A Field Studies Report to the Laboratory (Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools, 1979).

[10]Piele, Review and Analysis of the Role, Activities, and Training of Educational Linking Agents.

[11]This process is examined in more detail in William A. Firestone and H. Dickson Corbett, "School vs. Linking Agent as Contributors to the Change Process," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 3, No. 1 (January-February, 1981): in press.

[12]For more on zoning of control, see Dan C. Lortie, "The Balance of Control and Autonomy in Elementary School Teaching," in The Semiprofessions and their Organizations, ed. Amitai Etzioni (New York: Free Press, 1969), pp. 1-53.

[13]See Harold J. Leavitt, "Applied Organizational Change in Industry," in Handbook of Organizations, ed. James G. March (Chicago: Rand-McNally, 1965), pp. 1144-70.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STUDY 1980 REPORTS

Degree of Coupling and Scope of Change: School Organization Effects on Implementation
H. Dickson Corbett, III

The Field Agent in School Improvement: Client Contributions to the Role
H. Dickson Corbett, III

Research into Use: The Social Contexts of Knowledge Transfer
William W. Donner

Support for Educational Change: Its Forms, Functions, and Sources
Judith A. Dawson

Teacher Participation in Educational Innovation: Some Insights into its Nature
Judith A. Dawson

For further information regarding these reports contact:

Ullik Rouk
RBS Public Information Office
Research for Better Schools, Inc.
444 North Third Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19123
(215) 574-9300