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ABSTRACT

The results of a study of five midwestern school districts suggest that the abandonment of program innovations or revisions may be related to a lack of understanding of how schools work as social systems and how political processes influence change efforts, as well as a failure to appreciate the many dilemmas facing those who attempt to facilitate school improvement. The study revealed that, in each case, innovative programs were adopted because of political pressures; the assistance and training provided sites by National Diffusion Network facilitators and developers were almost exclusively technical and failed to consider local circumstances; and decisions to discontinue programs were made informally by teachers asserting their autonomy in the classroom. This information about the actors in the implementation process supports the theory that an informal covenant exists concerning the principal's prerogatives and the teacher's role and authority. The researchers conclude that successful implementation efforts must account for several factors: the organizational culture of both the schools and the change agencies involved; the type of training desired by the teachers; the importance of the principal to program adoption and of the teachers to implementation; and the need for adapting programs to local circumstances. (Author/PGD)

DISCONTINUATION OF INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS

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CONTENTS

DISCONTINUATION OF INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS

A Principal of a small rural school who had led a two-year planning and adoption process for introducing a corrective reading program into his school "sort of found out" that the program was not being used as he talked to teachers in the hall one day.

Title I teachers in a large urban school sat silently through three days of training on how to use a special program for high-risk kindergarten and first-grade students, even though they knew that the special room required for that program was not available for their use.

"We preferred the activities in our traditional program," report teachers who had discontinued a new movement physical education program that had been adopted by the superintendent and board of education upon the advice of a local doctor who also chaired the district's curriculum advisory committee.

These instances were reported to us as we studied five school districts in the mid-west that had discontinued innovative programs shortly after they had been adopted. Are these examples of stubborn resistance to change? incompetent bungling? subversive motives or bad intentions? Perhaps a little of that, but not in most cases. In fact, considerable energy and resources by many concerned people in local schools had been expended on each change effort. The programs themselves had been carefully developed and tested and had been approved by the Joint Dissemination Review Panel. Experienced disseminators and change agents from the National Diffusion Network (NDN) had provided outside assistance and money resources.

Background

Over the past two decades the American Public Schools have experienced sustained efforts aimed at making them better. They have also become a

kind of battleground for a host of reforms promoted by local, state, and federal agencies. Some changes in practice have occurred but not nearly as often or with the scope that was intended.

Dale Mann (1978) has written that innovations or revisions in programs have had only about a 20 percent success rate in education. During the past two decades many schools supported with federal, state, and local resources have attempted to implement new programs in an effort to improve schooling. While one can point to some individual school systems where these new programs are in use, Mann's estimate of 20 percent implementation can only be viewed as perhaps generous. Many studies--Lortie (1975). Miles (1978), Sarason (1971), and Fullan and Pomfret (1977), to mention a few--have concluded that successful implemention is illusive and that implementation of new programs is much more complex and difficult than once thought. They have also shown that we can learn from our efforts if we view our failures not as resulting from stubborn resistance or bad intentions but instead as ingrained in the complex set of relationships found schools.

Study of Mid-West Schools

Our study suggests that lack of success in implementing programs into schools may be related to a lack of understanding of how schools work as social systems, how political processes influence change efforts, and the many dilemmas facing those who attempt to facilitate school improvement. We identify features of the formal and informal structures of schools that can help explain the discontinuation of school improvement programs. Our information comes from interviews with teachers, administrators, and change agents in five Mid-West school districts that adopted an innovative program and discontinued its use. Each district we studied had been assisted with

its adoption and implementation efforts by State Title IV-C Adoption Grants and members of the National Diffusion Network, a federally sponsored group created in 1974 to disseminate exemplary programs to local schools.

Administrators and Politics. Kogan (1978) and House (1974) speculate that the implementation of an innovation in schools can only be understood as a political dynamic between the school and its many interested constituent groups. Meyer, Scott, and Deal (1979) go even further and suggest that it is more important for a school's survival to please its constituents, as compared to finding better ways to actually improve its technical core such as perfecting better methods for teaching children.

At each of the Mid-West sites in our study, we found innovative programs (externally developed) were adopted because of political pressures. In one instance it was a local, influential doctor on a curriculum advisory committee, in another a group of parents, and in still another several dissatisfied teachers. At every site, we also found that it was an administrator (superintendent or building principal) who assumed early advocacy and leadership in response to constituency demands. They played key, and in some instances the major, role in selecting and adopting programs offered by the National Diffusion Network and in coordinating efforts to provide training and assistance to staff expected to implement new programs.

Change Agents as Technicians. The assistance provided sites by the NDN Facilitators and Developers were almost exclusively technical in nature. That is, exchanges (1) were with members of the formal decision-making structure and followed the prescribed NDN adoption process, (2) were responsive to desires of local administrators, and (3) provided information about how "to make an adoption" and receive training as contrasted to

assisting with the social system consequences of using the new program.

Training that was provided was also technical in nature and very short-term. The purpose of the training was to provide teachers with specific skills needed for teaching the innovative program and focused on learning the language and world views of the new program. Little, if any, effort was made to deal with local issues or special circumstances that called for adaptations and were later discovered to be crucial to implementation.

Teachers and Autonomy Norms. It is well known that norms exist in schools that promote teacher autonomy and individualism. This means that most teachers cope with everyday teaching tasks and those associated with change efforts individually, that they are prone not to interfere with the work of colleagues, and that for the most part they guard carefully their right to teach in their own classrooms in ways they think best.

Teachers we interviewed reported a willingness to consider new programs, particularly if requested to do so by administrators. They viewed attending awareness conferences, inservices, and training events as part of their professional duty. However, when it came to actual implementation and use of the new programs, we found universal agreement among teachers that a new program had to fit their way of teaching. Each teacher believed that they had the right to determine, on their own, what would happen in "their classrooms with their children."

Teacher autonomy not only influenced the aspects of the various programs that would be used, it also decided its ultimate fate. At all five sites in our study, the decision to discontinue was made by teachers and made outside the formal decision-making structure of the school. Administrators were informally informed later of that decision. In every instance

administrators who were the key decision-makers in adoptions accepted the non-implementation decisions of their teachers. The change agents (developers and facilitators) left everything up to those at the local level.

The Informal Covenant. This information about administrators, teachers, and change agent behavior has led us to use the concept of "informal covenant" to help explain what happened to the innovative programs in our discontinuation sites. The informal covenant as we define it is an informal agreement created to deal with instances when external solutions are used to solve problems of local schools. The informal covenant is characterized by three critical features:

1. Agreements about the principal's role specify that (a) the principal as manager speaks for the school concerning needs and is entitled to negotiate with outsiders and make adoption decisions for the school, (b) the principal is entitled to select materials and arrange for inservice he or she believes appropriate.

2. Agreements about the teacher's role specify that (a) teachers will support administrative decisions made by the principal or others and attend inservice events if requested, (b) teachers will maintain final authority about if and in what manner a new program will be used in their classrooms, and (c) teachers expect principals to support program decisions they make and not to interfere with instructional decisions.

3. The covenant it 'f remains informal, is adhered to, and allows people in schools (principals and teachers) to maintain important control over day-to-day operations without confronting authority. It

allows outsiders to interact and to penetrate the system at the formal level during adoption stages of an innovation but not at the more important informal level where critical implementation decisions are made.

For example, at one of the sites where a new physical education movement program was being tested, teachers were informed that over the summer a decision had been made to field test a new physical education program and that their principal had volunteered "their school." Teachers were provided training that was technical and somewhat confrontive to their traditional approaches. They were given detailed teachers manuals, a physical education specialist with whom to team, and extensive new equipment and materials. However, within two months, according to several of our respondents, the "lounge talk" was all negative. The few teachers who were comfortable with the new approach did not want to risk the displeasure of their fellow workers by saying good things about the program. Most believed the new program was not working. And subsequently even though the program had some very strong community support, it was discontinued by teachers who decided to develop their own programs which interestingly included a considerable proportion of the movement program.

Implementation Lessons

Discontinuation of new programs is not confined to the sites in our study. Others have observed and reported on the same phenomenon (Goodlad, 1970; Fullan and Pomfret, 1977; Sarason, 1971; Wolcott, 1977). At the same time, we believe that future efforts must assure fewer instances of discontinuation. Getting successful and effective implementations of new programs will become critical in the next decade (a time that will be characterized by increasing demand for effective schooling

and by declining resources) than ever before. We also believe that the experiences of the people in our study, along with research and practice by others, points the way to guidelines that can be followed as we plan and disseminate new programs.

Understanding the Culture of the School. Anthropologists have argued for many years the need for cultural adaptations if innovations are to be used. Spicer (1952) records a classic case, illustrating the importance of informal cultural norms in implementation of new technologies. A group of Southwestern Spanish-American farmers had been introduced to a new hybrid corn that was more weather and bug resistant as well as three times as productive as their traditional "red" corn. By the end of the second year over 60 percent of the farmers were using the new corn and it was more successful than expected. However, by the end of the third year, only four farmers were still using the innovation. The hybrid corn did not look like, taste like, or make tortillas like the old corn, and the farmers believed it was not worth the complaints of wives and children. They returned to the use of the "red" corn.

Meredith Wilson, in The Music Man, illustrates the same point forcefully when he declares "you gotta know the territory." In this case he meant a change agent has to know the existing norms and values of a local culture if implementation is to occur. Sarason (1971) has described the same phenomena in his study of adoption and use of new math programs in elementary schools.

For effective implementation to occur, it is essential for those in schools, such as principals and teachers, and those from outside,

developers and change agents, to understand the cultures of their own and others' organization (or culture) and plan their implementation efforts accordingly. It is important for change agents to understand the craft way things are done inside schools and for school personnel to understand the technical, more research-oriented approach of teaching and curricula that characterizes most, perhaps all, NDN programs as well as most RD&D programs. Some examples from the sites in our study will illustrate what we mean and what could be done.

The principal and some of his teachers in a large urban school district decided that they needed to do something special for a group of disadvantaged students who were having trouble in kindergarten and the first grade. They adopted an NDN program designed for high-risk students that required setting up several learning centers in a special room, having no more than 15 students in the class, and maintaining a considerably complex record and communication system for each student between teachers and teacher aides. The teachers in our site received training and quickly picked up the understanding and skills needed to use the new procedures and materials. However, the program was discontinued after the first year because of possible racial antagonism (a situation that was never discussed), the loss of the only space in the building that was suitable for the program, and the active campaign of an influential regular teacher who disagreed with the philosophy and methods of the new program.

Intervention strategies exist that would allow all of these cultural and system's issues to be addressed and resolved. They could have been employed by those within the system who worked toward implementation of the

new program or by the outside change agents.

Extend Time for Training Teachers and its Scope. The training conducted at the five sites in our study was short in duration--one to five days--and limited to specific skills teachers would need to implement the new programs in their classrooms. In only one instance did we find follow-up training to be requested or provided and specific school problems that could later get in the way of implementation were universally ignored.

Again a specific example from one of the sites helps illustrates this problem. A small rural district wanting to improve reading in JHS content classes adopted a diagnostic/prescriptive reading program that required a special reading teacher who would work with 10 to 15 students as they were released from their regular classes several times a week. Four secondary content area teachers were trained over a grueling five-day period. Three of them participated actively in the training (the fourth dropped out after the second day.), but none mentioned the fact that the program could not be used in their district because funds did not exist to provide the needed space or for a special reading teacher. Materials were purchased from the new programs with an adoption grant. During training, the teachers never mentioned the local situation and the trainers never inquired why regular subject matter teachers were taking training designed for special reading teachers.

Fullen and Park (1981) have written that "implementation will occur to the extent that each and every teacher has the opportunity to work out the meaning of the implementation in practice" (p. 27) and when they have had the opportunity to change their behavior, skills, and beliefs. From

everything we know about changing human behavior and adult learning it is unlikely that teachers will work out "new" meaning and change their behaviors and beliefs over a short period of time. It seems reasonable to assume that for most new programs extended training spread over time is a prerequisite for change and that on-site cultural adaptation assistance is required to solve the specific problems that occur during the implementation process. When discussing training, teachers at every site said, "We want training in smaller doses, not all at once. We want the chance to try things out and then discuss what happened with other teachers and people from programs. We want programs to fit the way we do things in our classrooms." None of the training at our sites used any of these approaches.

Develop a Two-Level School Site Implementation Plan. Traditional wisdom and research suggest that the principal is critical to successful implementation. We found that in the five sites in our study the principal was not critical to implementation. Teachers were the critical actors in the implementation process. Principals were critical to adoption, selection of program and training. Teachers consistently talked about how they implemented or discontinued things all the time without the principal's involvement. Teachers held a world view that a principal did not have the right to impose a program on a classroom teacher and teachers would resist it if tried.

This has led us to two conclusions: (1) Principals control access and adoptions and therefore strategies for adoption and training must include interaction with the formal system. (2) Teachers control implementation and strategies must be used that involve and include the informal networks and "ways of doing things" that exist in each school site. Our suggestion to principals is that they spend time "learning the territory" of their

school and how existing informal cultural norms can best be used to promote change. Our suggestion to change agents is that any implementation plan must be developed with heavy collaborative input and involvement of teachers and principals prior to training. To teachers we suggest that perhaps some autonomy and closely held craft values may have to be mutually altered in order to promote practices that not only make a school a more productive place but enhance the survival potential of "their school."

Expect, Encourage, and Assist with Adaptations. Even though the programs we studied were discontinued, many aspects of the programs were in use during early stages of the implementation process. In each instance, however, the materials, procedures, and techniques were adapted from the original design of the program's creator. This phenomena is not unique to schools or programs in our study.

When people buy a new home, even one carefully planned by architects and professional interior designers, they normally start repainting, building additions, and adapting the overall design to their individual tastes and lifestyles. The latest technological, safety, and energy conserving devices on automobiles are removed or disconnected by owners to simplify their lives or to save money; a variety of gadgets and stickers are added to reflect personal tastes and preferences. Quite simply, we want the things around us to fit our individual views and the context within which we find ourselves.

Similarly, people in schools who wish to implement new or innovative technologies (as any new or innovative teaching method is) must gain information about the school setting into which the new technology is to be introduced. Is it loosely or closely coupled? Are the values of the teachers technical or craft oriented? About the new technology similar

cultural information concerning the territory must be discovered. Does the program require close coupling or can it fit loosely coupled situations? Are the materials and processes highly technical or craft oriented? Must a teacher follow a well defined and prescribed instructional process or is it possible to allow for individual and personalized methodology?

Having asked the above questions and found the answers, the people in school sites and the change agents who wish to help them can now begin to design training and implementation approaches that will provide for maximum opportunity for successful use.

Those who plan change efforts within schools and those of us who provide assistance from the outside have much to learn about how to maintain the essential ingredients of an innovation while allowing it to be molded to fit local situations and preferences. We suspect it will require regular and extended interaction between developers and users and a willingness by all parties to enter into further development of an innovation already judged effective. We also suspect it means some new roles in school buildings as some curriculum, in-service and staff development functions are re-defined as differentiated staffing roles in schools, whose purposes are to work with administrators and teachers in implementing new programs.

Summary

Implementing new programs that will improve our schools is more important today than it has ever been. We can provide no easy steps for those who work in schools or for those who assist from the outside. The suggestions made above are not intended to be prescriptive or diagnostic, but rather are intended to suggest ways of viewing schools in order to learn about the "territory". Once the territory of a particular school is known then collaborative plans for implementing new programs in schools

can be made that utilize the strength of the craft culture of teachers and the technical cultures of administrators and developers. From the experience of people in the five districts we studied, we believe that we need to question some traditional assumptions about accomplishing planned change by finding a fit between research and user needs; that we need to examine strategies more in tune with cultural change rather than technological change; and that we need to make our change efforts at the same time more rigorous and flexible and allow our plans, in the words of Lars Lerup (1977) to remain with a "touch of the unfinished".

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