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ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes data from two studies of educational change to describe how school contextual factors influenced teacher involvement and how principals reduced those influences. The first study, involving 14 schools representing a mixture of levels and types of areas served, began in 1979 and spanned 3 school years; the second study, which began in 1981 and is ongoing, involved 12 urban schools representing a mixture of school levels. Following a description of the study's background and methods of inquiry, which included unstructured interviewing, observation, program staff debriefing, and document review yielding approximately 5,000 pages of field notes, the author summarizes the study's findings and discusses in detail its examination of the influences of three major contextual factors: (1) the availability of time and other resources, (2) local concerns and priorities, and (3) staff perceptions of administrative commitment to change. Having described actions taken by principals in both studies and offered suggestions as to what additional measures might be undertaken, the author concludes that principals can in fact reduce the influence of the contextual factors examined, thereby encouraging teacher participation in the planning and implementation of new educational programs and facilitating progress in bringing about change. (JBM)

THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE IN FACILITATING TEACHER PARTICIPATION: MEDIATING THE INFLUENCE OF SCHOOL CONTEXT

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After several years of relative dormancy, school improvement is the subject of renewed attention. Several recent, widely publicized reports have described severe needs to improve the quality of schools; new educational initiatives have been launched or are under consideration at the local. state, and federal levels. In the meantime, research findings have emerged that add to our knowledge about the process of change (Fullan, 1982; Lehming & Kane, 1981). These findings can be used to increase the success rates of emerging efforts to improve schools and avoid repeating previous implementation failures.

Among the findings of recent research are that principals perform important and varying roles in managing change (Hall & Rutherford, 1983); that teacher involvement in developing and planning new programs increases the probability of successful implementation (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977); and that school context strongly influences the process of change (Corbett, Dawson, & Firestone, forthcoming).

The importance of school principals to successful educational change has been stressed in the literature for a number of years (for example, see Sarason, 1971). Yet, many principals play a limited role in change efforts, at least partly because they have not been prepared to manage change and because relatively little is known about the most effective roles of principals (Fullan, 1982).

This paper discusses the roles of principals in facilitating teacher participation. The analysis synthesizes data from two studies of educational change to describe how school contextual factors influenced teacher involvement and how principals reduced those influences.

Background: The Studies and Programs

Both studies have examined school-level planning for and implementation of programs developed by a regional educational laboratory. The first study focused on school improvement programs in basic skills, career education, and citizenship education. The research was designed to generate knowledge about the process of educational change. The 14 schools included in the sample represented a mixture of levels (elementary, junior high, and high schools) and types of area served (urban, suburban, and rural). The study began early in 1979 and spanned three school years.

The analysis concluded that school contextual factors interacted with the process strategies used by the external agency. As a result, the strategies were enacted differently in the various schools. For example, because more time and other resources were available, teachers could participate more extensively in the development of school improvement plans for some schools than others. Consequently, change outcomes--implementation and continuation of new programs/practices--also varied among schools.

The second study documents the use of a school climate program and is intended to help developers improve the program and describe it to sponsoring agencies and others. The 12 schools in the program also represent a mixture of school levels, but all are located in urban areas or small cities. The study began late in 1981 and is ongoing.

The school climate study has confirmed that school context substantially influences the process of change and, furthermore, has helped refine some of the first study's findings. The experiences of additional schools, which include more secondary and urban schools, have yielded more

knowledge of the context factors. Also, the study has found that principals have pivotal roles in the mediation of school context with the change process. The importance of their actions was noted in the school improvement study as well, but the external agency worked less intensely with schools in the school climate program, thereby leaving more responsibility to the principals and allowing the importance of their roles to emerge.

Methods of Inquiry

Both studies have used primarily qualitative methods of inquiry, relying heavily on unstructured interviewing. Other qualitative methods include observation, formal interviewing, program staff debriefing, and document review. Both studies have also used quantitative methods, including questionnaires and data from school records.

Interview and observation data are recorded as field notes. Both studies together have yielded approximately 5,000 pages of field notes. Numerous strategies have been used to increase validity (Dawson, 1982). Analysis techniques included Yin's (1981) comparative case study methods and Miles and Huberman's (1984) data display techniques. The cross-study analysis reported here involved applying findings from the first study to the sites included in the second study; consequently, the school context factors identified in the first were refined.

Study Findings

This section will focus on the effects of three contextual factors and one change process strategy, involving teachers in decision making and planning. The three factors are (1) the availability of time and other resources, (2) local concerns and priorities, and (3) staff perceptions of administrative commitment to change. They will be described in subsequent sections about each. Other contextual factors such as school linkages and faculty tensions also influenced the change process but will not be included here because the second study has not yet produced new information about their interaction with the change process.

Teacher involvement or participation (the two terms are used synonymously here) refers to membership on committees that develop plans for new school programs or other activities. In the school improvement study, committees worked together to develop new strategies or curriculum materials to introduce in classrooms. School climate committees of the second study identified improvement needs (for example, to improve discipline or raise student expectations) and decided how to address them (for example, to develop new discipline policies or academic award systems). Those committees also became involved in more general decision making as they dealt with broader issues that principals or others brought to their attention. Special purpose sub-committees also existed, and their experiences were reported in the data used in this analysis.

The intensity of group meetings and other activities varied--across program, school, and the course of a project. Most groups met once or twice a month, although some met more or less frequently. Meetings ranged

in length from less than one hour to all day. Participation sometimes was more demanding because teachers also served on sub-committees or carried out other program-related tasks between meetings.

The school context factors primarily influenced teachers' commitment or motivation to participate. Planning committee membership was generally voluntary; although teachers may have been appointed, most could decline. When teachers felt that new programs required too much time and effort, were of lower priority than other concerns, or were not likely to receive continued support from administrators, they were less committed or motivated to participate. Under these conditions, teachers lowered their expectations and level of activities, requested a reduction in meeting time, skipped meetings, or withdrew from commictees. Thus, lack of motivation delayed progress, making it important that teachers felt committed to programs and willing to be involved in collaborative work.

Although the focus of these studies was teacher involvement in committees which developed plans for introducing new programs, this analysis applies to other kinds of participation as well. In many schools, groups of teachers work together to revise curricula, assemble information for state departments or accreditation committees, advise principals regarding school policy, or simply coordinate lessons. Such tasks usually require extra time and effort, and teacher motivation and commitment is important. This analysis may help principals mediate school context with various kinds of collaborative tasks in order to facilitate teacher participation.

The Availability of Time and Other Resources

The first contextual factor refers to the existence of time and other resources which are needed for planning new initiatives. The lack of sufficient time for teachers to work together is likely to discourage their involvement and delay progress. This occurred in virtually every school in both studies. All of the programs used a planning strategy through which groups worked together to assess needs, identify priorities, decide what types of changes to adopt, and develop implementation plans. These tasks required considerable time, a scarce commodity in most schools. Although additional time could be made available by hiring substitutes to release participants from classroom duties in order to attend meetings, resources for that purpose also tended to be in short supply. When not enough time could be obtained, meetings were held infrequently. This not only delayed progress, but lengthy time lapses between meetings also reduced teacher enthusiasm and commitment.

Sometimes other resources were also needed to support planning or implementation activities such as printing new student handbooks or purchasing academic awards. Participants who could not find the resources they needed sometimes had to postpone or cancel activities. In addition to delaying project progress and sometimes lowering morale, this discouraged participants from adopting other changes that would require additional resources.

In most schools, little time is available for teachers to work together to develop new programs, or even to improve existing curricula or other policies or programs. Teachers' days are governed by schedules.

Most of the day is designated for classroom instruction. The remainder is allocated for planning periods, lunch, before- and after-school time when teachers' presence is required, and periods when teachers are relieved by specialists such as physical education or music teachers.

The amount of non-instructional time varies across schools and districts. Wealthier districts tend to have more specialists. Secondary school schedules usually include more planning time than those of elementary schools. The length of lunch periods varies. Some districts require teachers' presence for longer periods of time before and after school than others.

Some of this non-instructional time can be used for planning new programs, and was in the sites reported here. Groups met before or after school or during lunch periods. Small groups met during common planning periods. However, using non-instructional time had several disadvantages. The length of time available was usually brief--one hour or less. Teachers felt rushed, could not block out other concerns and concentrate on planning, or were tired. Consequently, some planning sessions were relatively unproductive. Furthermore, teachers considered this non-instructional time discretionary and sometimes resented being asked to relinquish it. Not only did this impinge on their freedom, but it forced them to neglect other work or take it home, thereby imposing on their personal lives. Innovations became increasingly burdensome as they consumed time which teachers considered discretionary.

Schools and districts can also make non-discretionary time available for planning activities--time initially scheduled for classroom instruction, faculty or department meetings, inservice workshops, or other

activities. Teachers expect to spend this non-discretionary time either in classrooms or attending meetings or other events that have been scheduled for them. They do not perceive it as time they can use for classroom preparation or other tasks of their own choosing.

Administrators in most of the schools were able to release at least some non-discretionary time for innovation planning. Substitutes were hired so that committee members could be released from classroom duties to attend full- or half-day planning sessions. Inservice time was designated for planning, as were regularly-scheduled faculty or other (e.g., departmental or district) meetings. Non-participating teachers were asked to cover participants' classes while they attended meetings. Schools--or, in one site, selected classes--were dismissed early. Participants were relieved of some non-instructional duties, such as conducting homeroom classes.

Using non-discretionary time for planning required more resources, but had several advantages. Usually, longer blocks of time were available for uninterrupted work. Participants were often more relaxed and productive. Teachers perceived the allocation of time to a new project as evidence of administrator commitment and were encouraged to continue their involvement.

However, non-discretionary time had to be used judiciously. Committee members who were frequently replaced by substitutes became concerned about neglecting their responsibilities to students and were reluctant to continue participating at the same level. Little project work occurred during faculty meetings when routine announcements and other matters consumed much of the time scheduled for the meetings. In at least one school, faculty meetings were scheduled for Mondays which coincided

with holidays and were not re-scheduled. Nonparticipants sometimes resented being asked to relinquish their discretionary time to cover classes; subsequently, they were less receptive to later becoming involved in the programs. When schools were repeatedly dismissed early, teachers objected to frequently losing the same class period and administrators feared having to deal with community reactions.

Several strategies were used to adjust the planning process so that less time would be required. The process was spread out over longer periods of time by simply reducing meeting frequency or by extending a weekend workshop out over a several-week period. The extent of participation was reduced: initial planning was conducted largely by a core participant group, special-purpose committees were convened for short-term tasks, and selected work was performed centrally by members of the external agency or principals. Multiple small groups which could meet at separate times replaced larger groups. School personnel with more flexible schedules than regular classroom teachers (for example, specialists, counselors, department heads, and assistant principals) were selected as participants.

Local Concerns and Priorities

The compatibility between a new program and local concerns and priorities produces positive or negative incentives for teachers, depending on the nature of local conditions and the demands of participation. If a new program addresses issues or topics that teachers are concerned about or consider particularly important, they are likely to be more highly committed to working on it. However, this contextual factor has a negative influence if the new program addresses an area that is not very important

locally, especially when the planning process is demanding on teachers. Local concerns and priorities compete with new programs, reducing teachers' motivation to participate, when local problems divert attention from innovations that do not address them.

The local concerns and priorities which influenced teacher motivation to participate varied. Some were formal school goals; others were informal. They referred to such factors as curriculum content or policies (for example, basic skills or promotion standards), other school policies and practices (discipline codes, equitable treatment of teachers), and physical plant conditions. Concerns and priorities sometimes varied within schools, particularly across departments or between teachers and administrators. For example, citizenship education fit into the curricula of some departments (e.g., social studies) more than others. Administrators felt more responsibility than teachers to respond to state initiatives such as developing school improvement plans or adding career education graduation requirements.

Some of the programs in this study were especially compatible with major local concerns and priorities, and produced incentives for participation. For example, the innovation on school climate was introduced into urban schools which had severe climate problems such as low teacher morale, student apathy, disorderliness and misbehavior, and strained relationships between teachers and administrators. Teachers knew that the new program would deal with these problems and, furthermore, was flexible enough to allow them to decide which specific problems to attack and how to do so. Consequently, they were highly motivated to participate. In one secondary school, English teachers were especially eager to become

involved. Their workloads had been increased substantially by a district requirement that students submit weekly writing assignments. Furthermore, staffing cuts had increased class size. Those teachers saw the project as an opportunity to alleviate their problems--for example, by integrating writing instruction into the curricula of other departments. Teachers in several schools that adopted the basic skills innovation were quite aware of a need to improve student achievement and of community pressure to improve test scores.

Teachers had few incentives to help plan new programs in topical areas that were of relatively little concern to them. For example, teachers in one career education school were concerned about meeting departmental expectations for curriculum coverage and considered teaching that curriculum of higher priority than attending meetings to develop career education plans or later implementing them. Citizenship education was relatively unimportant to many teachers and was considered worthy of attention by only a few who taught history or thought patriotism was declining. The school climate program was placed in one school where teachers were satisfied with the climate and saw no need to improve it; not only did those teachers have little motivation to participate, they were offended by what they interpreted as the program's assumption that the school was "bad."

Teachers in some schools had serious concerns or priorities which the programs did not address. Those teachers were not willing/able to devote time to the programs. The size and composition of one school's student population changed dramatically after redistricting. The new student body was much larger and academically weaker than the previous one. Staff mem-

bers had to help the students adjust to the new school and acquire orderly behaviors, modify curricula, and obtain additional supplies and materials. Teachers thought they had to resolve these more basic problems before resuming work on what now seemed rather lofty improvement plans. In another school, an unresolved contract and severe interpersonal tensions aggravated a pre-existing morale problem and left the staff with little emotional energy or desire to work on the innovation.

School concerns and priorities as well as their compatibility with the new program sometimes changed over the course of a project. That occurred in both of the cases cited above; one school's student population changed at the beginning of the project's second year and the other school's contract resolution issue arose at the same time. Innovation planning occasionally became more burdensome, as project meetings or school work increased. At such times, participants often made it clear that the innovations were of lower priority than their other work and threatened to withdraw.

To mediate the influence of local concerns and priorities on teacher motivation to participate, principals can manipulate those concerns and priorities or adjust the innovation to them. When attempting to influence local concerns and priorities, school administrators need to be sensitive to differences in perception between themselves and teachers and among teachers. In some sites in these studies, for example, administrators adopted new programs that were important to them but of much less concern to teachers. One district adopted a citizenship education program to alleviate problems surrounding desegregation and another adopted a career education program to help improve low achievement on a state test. In the

first school, teachers were more concerned about what they considered more basic problems while in the second, teachers were more anxious to meet departmental expectations regarding curriculum coverage. One district, which was faced with a state requirement to prepare school improvement plans, adopted a program that would provide a structure for teachers to use in developing the plans as well as free technical assistance from the external agency. Two schools in another state were under a state mandate to develop curricula for new graduation requirements in career education.

Administrators in all of these schools and districts were more concerned about complying with state requirements than were teachers. Perhaps administrators could have developed more teacher commitment by publicly asserting the importance of meeting the requirements or by assigning the tasks required to meet them to teachers. Public statements about local priorities are very important and are likely to facilitate teacher involvement. However, such statements are not likely to remain effective unless they are repeated periodically and are supported with actions such as allocating money to the priority. Also, principals should remain alert to competing issues or concerns and should attempt to resolve them before they become urgent.

Attempting to manipulate local concerns and priorities may be a less effective way to mediate their influences than modifying a new program. Principals can use several strategies to increase the extent to which a program addresses important issues. When thinking about whether to adopt an innovation that will require extensive teacher involvement, principals should consider whether it will address their major concerns or priorities. Teacher involvement in adopting a program and identifying the areas it will

address can help increase the likelihood that programs will be compatible with teachers' interests. Principals can monitor the situation throughout the duration of program planning. If new issues arise which threaten to detract attention from the program, it can be modified or redefined so that teachers can use planning time to deal with the new issues. This strategy could be used relatively easy in the school climate innovation; at the beginning of each school year, planning committees could assess the local situation to decide which previous efforts to continue and to identify new issues to address. Another strategy is to allow teachers to select what tasks they will work on; even when participation is voluntary, teachers' willingness to devote time to it is influenced by their perceptions of whether it contributes to improvements they consider important.

Staff Perceptions of Administrative Commitment to Change

The third contextual factor is the extent to which staff perceive administrative commitment to change as sincere and likely to continue. Teachers often have a shared perception of an administrator's commitment to school change and improvement that is independent of any particular change project. The administrator may have a reputation for adopting new programs but failing to continue supporting them. Teachers may believe that a principal introduces new programs only in response to central office or other external pressure and is likely to provide only limited support--and that only until the pressure subsides. The principal may be viewed as having deeply entrenched behavioral patterns that will never change. Staff members who believe that administrators are unlikely to provide the support needed over a long period of time or to change their own behavior may become skeptical about educational change and reluctant to invest time and energy in a new program that will eventually fade away.

Skepticism about administrator commitment to change develops over time as staff members observe the fates of new programs. Some principals build reputations of frequently adopting innovations but failing to continue to provide support for them. This occurred in several of the schools in this study. Staff members said they had seen many programs come and go; they did not want to commit themselves to yet another. Interestingly, their perceptions of the history of prior change efforts were not always the same as those of the principals. For example, one principal suspended formal activities but expected teachers to continue to use a new program on their own, while teachers considered formal activities essential and their cessation as evidence that the principal was no longer interested in the program. Of course, teachers' beliefs influenced their behavior more than did the principal's intents, and they were hesitant to become deeply involved in another new program that might be dropped the following year.

Teachers in some schools believe that changes occur because of central office directives or other pressures more than principals' decisions. The teachers believe the principals will do no more than the minimum necessary to appear compliant until the external pressures abate. This occurred in several sites, particularly in one district, and some of the onus of responsibility for providing support--primarily time and financial support--shifted from the principals to the district. Although teachers considered principals responsible for providing the kinds of support within their power and for requesting additional assistance from the district, they applied the ultimate test of support to the district. Although the district had allocated time and money to initial planning activities,

teachers said that requests for funds to support implementation and time for further planning would provide the real test of district commitment. If the district failed to provide follow-up support, teachers would feel powerless to improve the schools and not as obliged to try to make the new program work. When the district came through with the support, teachers were willing to continue participating.

In some schools, staff members doubt that principals will ever change, despite what they say. A major component of the school climate program was that the relationships between principals and staff members would become more relaxed and collegial as participatory decision making was introduced. In some schools, however, the relationship between teachers and principals was so strained, the gulf between them so great, and the principals' authoritarian behavior so entrenched that staff doubted that substantial changes could occur even if the principals desired.

Sometimes teachers become confused about administrator commitment to change after receiving what seem to be mixed messages. Several months after beginning one process to develop school improvement plans, administrators in one district adopted another--the school climate program--which was similar but distinct. In this instance, lack of clear communication at several levels caused confusion about administrative intents. The district was undergoing a state-mandated process to develop school improvement plans when they learned that the school climate program would give planning teams a structure and process to use, as well as free technical assistance. The district adopted the program in three schools, all of which had already begun the state process. The external agency began work with each school at the initial stages of its process and,

although verbally acknowledging that the schools had already developed lists of priority needs, worked with them to develop new lists. Several months later, teachers and even principals were confused about the relationship between the two projects. Only a few perceived the external agency's process as a means to develop plans for satisfying the state requirements; others said that the two planning processes ran concurrently or that the first project had been dropped.

The effects of this contextual factor depend partially on the principal's expected role in a new program. Although principals are almost always expected to provide support such as endorsement of the program and arrangements for planning and implementation, they are not always expected to change their relationships with teachers or other important aspects of their behavior. When innovations require changes in the roles of principals, their commitment--and staff members' faith in that commitment--becomes especially crucial. In schools where teachers saw shared decision making as central to the school climate program, for example, skepticism regarding a principal's willingness to share power was especially likely to increase teachers' pessimism and reduce their motivation.

There are many strategies principals can use to convince staff that their commitment to a new program is sincere and will continue. Teachers are often surprisingly willing to suspend their skepticism and accept new declarations that a program will be successfully implemented and will improve the school. However, that skepticism is only suspended; it will re-emerge just as easily. Therefore, principals must also be very careful to avoid mistakes that will undo their previous efforts.

During the introductory stages of new programs, principals can repeatedly declare their support through public statements about the program's importance. In addition to directly informing teachers of administrative commitment, principals can take advantage of opportunities to publicize a new program in local newsletters and newspapers.

Principals must also convince teachers that the commitment is sincere, however. To accomplish that, principals should reinforce their words with actions. Allocating school time and money to a new program seems to be viewed by teachers as particularly strong evidence of administrator commitment. When one or more large blocks of time (half day or longer) are used to introduce a new program, teachers know that the school or district means business; when non-discretionary time continues to be allocated to project work, that knowledge is reinforced. Setting aside a small budget for program materials and other expenses is also evidence of administrative support, especially if participating teachers are given control of the budget. Making logistical arrangements to ensure that a project runs smoothly indicates that an administrator considers it important. Such arrangements are often simple, such as making sure that everyone is aware of meetings, reserving meeting rooms, providing coffee, and having agenda and other materials typed. Principals may also need to change their own behavior toward teachers. Particularly if an innovation involves shared decision making, collaborative planning between the principal and staff, or other changes in their relationships, principals might have to become more willing to discuss school matters openly, to share information voluntarily, and to treat teachers as colleagues. These changes may be difficult but in some cases are absolutely necessary if teachers are to be convinced that time they spend planning for school improvement will not be wasted.

Principals can also attempt to persuade teachers of administrative commitment to change by convincing them that a new program is not another in a series of unsuccessful attempts at school improvement. Principals may need to acknowledge prior failures, say that this endeavor will be different, and explan why. Sometimes programs are related to previous efforts, but it may be necessary to describe that relationship very explicitly. For example, as mentioned previously, in the district which adoped the school climate program as a mechanism for developing state-mandated school improvement plans the link was mentioned briefly during introductory sessions but not described in any depth; many teachers did not get the message. When teachers and principals interpret previous instances of administrative support differently, as in the case cited earlier, they may need to clarify the matter by discussing their perceptions.

As mentioned previously, teacher skepticism about administrative commitment to new projects is not as impermeable as it often seems. In the schools in this study, teachers' attitudes often shifted from skepticism to optimism more quickly than would have been expected. However, those attitudes shifted back to skepticism just as quickly. Therefore, it is very important that principals avoid making mistakes such as saying one thing and then doing another. Despite telling teachers that decision making would be shared, several principals proceeded to continue making many decisions autocratically. Many other changes also occurred more slowly than teachers expected. Thus, participants sometimes became discouraged and suspected that their expectations had been raised unrealistically.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that school contextual factors can affect the planning and implementation of new educational programs by influencing teacher commitment and motivation to participate. That, in turn, can delay --or facilitate--progress in the planning and implementation of change. The influences of three contextual factors were described here: (1) the availability of time and other resources, (2) local concerns and priorities, and (3) staff perceptions of administrative commitment to change. Principals can reduce those influences or modify the process of change, thereby encouraging teacher participation. The actions taken by principals in the studies reported here were described above; in addition, other suggestions were offered.

This and other recent studies have helped illuminate the principal's role in managing change by describing more specifically what it is that principals do to facilitate or hinder the planning and implementation of new programs. Undoubtedly, more knowledge about the principal's role is needed. Another immediate concern, however, should be to devise ways to use existing knowledge to influence practice. The knowledge is making its way into journals read by principals (for example, Arends, 1982; Cox, 1983), but should also be included in pre-and in-service training. Finally, the developers of new educational programs need to consider providing formal training opportunities as well as personal, situation-specific advice for principals in managing change.

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