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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that examined the effect of school restructuring, particularly increased teacher participative decision-making, on classroom teaching practices are presented in this paper. Data were derived from: (1) classroom observations of 33 elementary and senior high schools, which matched pilot with nonpilot schools, and (2) a questionnaire administered to 1,654 teachers in the 33 schools, which elicited 637 responses, or a 39 percent response rate. A comparison of teaching strategies, student learning activities, and classroom environment of schools with high and low levels of teacher participation suggests that restructuring has not influenced classroom activities despite verbal support from top-level district administrators. Recommendations are made for focusing on teachers' work with their students and devising alternative student assessment methods. One table is included. (23 references) (LMI)

Restructuring and the Classroom: A View from a Reform District

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Running Head: Restructuring and the Classroom

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Abstract

Optimistic discourse that ushered in the restructuring movement predicted substantial changes in the way teachers teach. Despite such predictions, teaching practice is an area of investigation that has not been actively pursued in the restructuring research. The present paper addresses this issue by analyzing classroom observation data from a restructured district. Despite verbal support from top level administrators in this district, evidence indicated that restructuring had not influenced classroom activities. Possible obstacles include the need for focusing restructuring efforts on teacher' work with students and on devising alternative methods for assessing student learning. Both of these obstacles are discussed.

Current efforts to restructure education tend to target policy issues, particularly, the redistribution of decision making authority. In this respect, the present reform movement differs from those of the past 30 years, many of which tended to emphasize innovations in teaching methods. This prior focus was not misplaced; teaching practices do have a direct and significant effect on student learning (Bourke, 1986; Elmore, 1987). However, these earlier reforms failed to create pervasive and enduring change in the way teachers conduct their practice (Richardson, 1990). As a result, the net effect of several decades of reform is that teaching strategies today are substantially similar to those of a century ago (Cuban, 1990; Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969) - teacher talk dominates; student talk is generally limited to answering recall level questions (Goodlad, 1984; McNeil, 1988).

Optimistic discourse that ushered in the restructuring movement, particularly that of the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (1986), predicted substantial changes in the way teachers teach. As envisioned by Carnegie, restructuring classroom activities includes redefining roles so that teachers become less directive and more akin to coaches, while students assume active roles as learner-workers. Despite such predictions, teaching practice is an area of investigation that has not been actively pursued in the restructuring research. It is critically important for researchers and school personnel to ask whether restructuring efforts produce a positive effect on classroom activities.

The present paper addresses this issue by analyzing classroom observation data from larger study on the effects of teachers' participation in decision making, a major element in restructuring. Classrooms were observed in a number of schools in a large southeastern district actively involved in restructuring. The observations focused on the learning environment, particularly, the teaching techniques chosen by teachers and the types of learning activities planned for students. The premise was that in schools where teachers reported a higher incidence of decisional participation, teaching strategies and classroom activities would reflect the restructuring effort as anticipated by the Carnegie Task Force (1986).

Restructuring and Teaching

Advocates of restructuring suggest that increasing teachers' involvement in decision making will lead to the development and application of different teaching strategies and more engaging activities for students. The Carnegie Task Force provides an extensive description of a hypothetical high school serving low income, urban students. According to the scenario, students actively direct much of their own learning with teachers supervising as guides, coaches, and advisors.

For example, in one scene described by Carnegie, a small group of students in a hypothetical science class studied pollutants found in a nearby area. Their study was guided by a team of teachers with expertise in biology, chemistry, and social studies who developed an assignment requiring the group to propose a

resolution to the pollution problem. Students would have to defend the viability of their plan before these teachers.

Similarly, other students in an imaginary social studies class, had studied political issues and served internships in local government. Reports prepared for their teacher on the internship experience "included some rather interesting analyses of the role of local government" (Carnegie Task Force, 1986, p. 45). As a result of these experiences, the students had honed their analytical skills sufficiently that they were able to convince a city newspaper columnist that "he had misunderstood the real nature of a key issue in [a] recent election" (Carnegie Task Force, 1986, p. 46). The columnist in the vignette planned to write a second assessment of the election, giving credit to these students for their insight.

In portraying these and other scenes, the Task Force makes it clear that their scenario of classroom activities is hypothetical, but they quickly point out that "this is not a utopian vision. There are schools in the United states whose staffs would recognize this description as being very like what they do now" (Carnegie Task Force, 1986, p. 51).

Although the theoretical scenario described by Carnegie does not subscribe to a particular line of research, it embodies some attributes of a productive learning environment identified by effective schools research as well as techniques typically associated with cooperative learning. A high degree of student engagement in the assigned task, protection of instructional time,

and high expectations for student work, commonly cited as elements of effective schools (see Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; McCormack-Larkin, 1985), come through as intrinsic characteristics of classrooms in the Carnegie scenario. Carnegie also depicted a collaborative atmosphere among teachers, another feature identified in school effectiveness studies (Little, 1982).

Findings from the research on cooperative learning are reflected in the Carnegie scenario through the portrayal of students who are engaged in learning through group projects. According to Sharan (1980), cooperative learning changes the role of the teacher from director of classroom activities to guide, with interaction among students in the group assuming importance. Grouping strategies can be used to structure students' work in such a way that group members are dependent upon one another to accomplish tasks (Johnson & Johnson, 1978; Hawkins, Doueck, & Lishner, 1988), as occurred in the classes described by the Carnegie Task Force. Further, research indicates that cooperative grouping strategies foster the acquisition of higher order cognitive skills without an associated loss of recall level knowledge (Sharan, Lazarowitz, & Akerman, 1980), another characteristic suggested in the vignettes developed by Carnegie.

The Study

Selection of the Sample

The present paper focuses on the extent to which selected classrooms in a district widely acclaimed as a model of restructuring reflect the predictions of the Carnegie Task Force

concerning teaching practices and student activities. This district piloted a school-based management (SBM) program in the mid-1980s. Schools could optionally apply for inclusion in SBM during each year of operation. The sample of schools for the present study was chosen from a pool composed (a) of schools which had participated in SBM since the pilot year, and (b) of non-pilot schools, which either enrolled in the district program after the initial year or chose to remain uninvolved with SBM.

From the pool, 33 schools were selected; 16 from the cohort of pilot schools (14 elementary and 2 senior high schools), and 17 from among the non-pilot group (14 elementary and 3 senior high schools)[1]. An attempt was made to match the pilot and non-pilot schools on the basis of organizational level, student body size, and percentage of free lunch participants. Difficulty in obtaining the sample required that matching be foregone in some cases; however, 24 of the schools were matched.

To identify teachers for observation, each principal was asked to nominate a teacher who, in the principal's opinion, used teaching strategies typical of those at the school. To clarify, principals were told that if teachers typically used a whole-class approach, the teacher chosen should also use whole-class strategies. On the other hand, if teachers typically taught using small, cooperative work groups, the observed teacher should also work with students in such groups.

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[1]Middle and junior high schools were not included in the study because a recent reorganization at that level might have confounded the results.

Observations occurred in kindergarten through fifth grade at the elementary level, and tenth through twelfth grade at the senior high level. The period of observation ranged from 30 - 70 minutes. Although the design of the study did not include collecting interview data, interviews were conducted with the observed teachers when possible. Circumstances in 15 schools allowed for short unstructured interviews which included a question concerning the extent to which teachers at the school planned collaboratively.

Instrumentation and Data Gathering Techniques

Quantitative measure. Because the extent of involvement with SBM at a school did not necessarily predict teachers' perceptions about their participation in decision making, schools were sorted into a high participation group and a low participation group based on teachers' responses to a questionnaire on decisional participation (Bacharach, Bauer, & Shedd, 1986; Bacharach, Bamberger, Conley, & Bauer, 1990). The questionnaire measured teachers' involvement in 19 decision areas and was distributed to 1,654 regular education teachers in the 33 schools. A total of 637 usable surveys were returned, representing a response rate of 39%. Although a higher response rate would have been preferred, this was a volunteer sample. In addition, teachers in this district had been the subjects of numerous studies during the years since SBM was initiated, were tired of the research process, and therefore, were less willing to respond in the current study.

Qualitative measure. Classroom observation data were analyzed through qualitative procedures. Because observer bias could affect

the results, steps were taken to protect against this possibility. As one precaution, the sampling pool of schools was developed by university personnel who were not involved in the study. Thus, at the time of data collection, the observer did not know which schools were pilot and non-pilot school-based management schools. Further, the composition of the two participation groups was not determined until after all observations had been completed, again protecting against possible observer bias.

Classroom observations combined a focused-questionnaire observation approach (Glickman, 1985) with a wide-lens technique (Acheson & Gall, 1984). These two strategies not only allowed the recording of information on specific topics, but also permitted other noteworthy classroom events to be registered. A qualitatively designed, high inference classroom observation protocol developed for and used previously in the Louisiana School Effectiveness Study (Teddlie, Kirby, & Stringfield, 1989) was modified and used to focus the observations.

This protocol includes fourteen indicators: time on task, grouping of students, presentation of new material, teacher command of subject matter, interdisciplinary teaching, innovative student work activities, independent practice, teacher expectations, positive academic reinforcement, number of interruptions, discipline, ambience, and physical characteristics of the room which is subdivided into display of student work and appearance of the room. The aim of the observations was to record data about the

"typical" teaching strategies, student learning activities, and classroom environment in each of the sample schools.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive statistics rather than substantive results from the questionnaire on teachers' participation in decision making are useful for this paper, although substantive results are available from Taylor and Bogotch (1992). The mean for each school formed the basis for assigning the school to one of the two participation groups. Scores on the questionnaire could range from 19 to 76, with higher scores representing greater participation. The overall mean for the sample was 40. For schools in the high participation group, the mean ranged from 54 to 40; in the low participation group, the mean ranged from 39 to 33. As is common in dichotomous groupings, there was little difference near the middle of the distribution. The school means are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Sixteen schools formed the high participation group. Of these, 13 were pilot school-based management schools, 1 entered the SBM program after the initial year, and 2 did not participate in SBM. The group of low participation schools, which also included 16 schools, consisted of 2 pilot SBM schools, 6 schools that entered the program after the initial year, and 8 schools that were not involved in SBM. One outlier elementary school was dropped from

the study because of a low response rate on the participation questionnaire.

Although the composition of two participation groups indicates that the district's program had the effect of increasing teachers' decisional participation in schools piloting SBM, this was not uniformly true. Three schools in the high participation group were not pilot schools, while two of the low participation schools were.

Qualitative Analysis

Teaching strategies, student learning activities, and the classroom environment for the classroom in each school were analyzed and the two participation groups were compared. Data obtained both through direct observation of classroom activities and through the unstructured interviews are presented below.

Teaching strategies used. Instructional strategies chosen by teachers were consistent both within and between participation groups. Unless a special event had been planned, such as student presentations, instruction was teacher-directed, using a whole-class approach in which the students initiated little communication aimed at lesson content. No instances of team teaching were observed, even though some teachers indicated they had team taught in the past. In some cases, teachers noted that others team taught at their school, but this arrangement was not typical.

Although teachers did not appear to have adopted alternative instructional strategies, interviews in 15 cases pursued the issue of collaborative planning. The common theme was one of minimal collaboration, with teachers at two low participation schools

saying that collaboration was extensive at their schools. In the case of seven other schools, teachers indicated that some degree of collaboration existed. Of these seven schools, four were from the high participation group. On the other hand, where teachers said joint planning did not occur, five were from the high participation group and one was from the low participation group. Further evidence that collaboration was not widespread came from teachers' descriptions of the extent of collaboration at their schools. In both groups collaboration was typically characterized as (a) teachers from one or two grade levels who planned jointly, or (b) collaboration between two teachers who regrouped their classes homogeneously and shared teaching responsibilities. Clearly, teachers in this study did not alter their practice as anticipated by the Carnegie Task Force, and increasing their participation in decision making did not overcome norms of autonomy so that teachers would feel empowered to collaborate with their colleagues.

Finding that teachers did not plan collaboratively, in addition to being inconsistent with the predictions of Carnegie, is also puzzling because district policy provided for early student release one day each week in the elementary schools to allow for two hours of professional time beyond that afforded through daily 30 minute planning periods. Possible explanations were offered by two teachers from low participation schools who observed that teachers subscribed to norms of autonomy and were sometimes reluctant to share their ideas and lessons. One of these teachers

also noted that the rapid annual growth in student body size experienced in most schools might have been a factor as well. Teachers were coping with a mushrooming school-age population that caused tremendous over-crowding.

While whole-class instructional strategies and norms of autonomy remained unchanged by the SBM program at these schools, teachers in both groups were in accord with other characteristics alluded to by Carnegie and stated explicitly in the effective schools research. For example, teachers at schools in both participation groups were in command of their academic subjects, tended to start class promptly, protected instructional time by limiting interruptions, and were able to keep the class on-task and moving. For example, at Polk, a high participation school, high achieving second grade students presented brief reports on stories they read and introduced student-made hand puppets representing the student's favorite character. These youngsters knew the routine and moved quickly from their desks to the front of the room for their presentation without prompting from the teacher.

On the other hand, a few exceptions were found. One of the most notable was at Washington, also a high participation elementary school. Students at this school worked individually and independently throughout the 50 minutes of observation. The teacher explained that during the second hour of the two hour language arts block, these top level students always worked independently. Although independent practice is an attribute of effective schools, it should be of limited duration and it should

be monitored. At Washington, monitoring was infrequently and students were inattentive to the assignment.

Independent practice was a characteristic noted in all classes observed and was a variable that differentiated the two groups of schools. In this study independent practice was defined as seatwork, monitored to ensure student engagement, and taking less than 35% of the period. At three of the high participation schools, teachers either did not provide for independent practice or did not monitor it. On the other hand, teachers in nearly half of the low participation schools either did not assign independent practice or did not monitor it.

As described above, the instructional techniques chosen by teachers was one focus of the classroom observations. Another was the learning activities developed for students. The Carnegie Task Force predicted that students in restructured settings would work on complex problems which would likely be interdisciplinary in nature. Often this work would be pursued in intradependent small groups. An analysis of students' academic activities follows.

Student learning activities. As might be surmised from the instructional techniques utilized, no instances were found of cooperative small grouping where collaboration with peers was necessary for achieving a goal or completing a lesson successfully. Five teachers, two of whom were from the high participation group, included pairing students as part of their activity plan. In four of these cases, however, the assignment was structured so that collaboration between students made completing the assignment more

difficult rather than less (for example, working problems in arithmetic), and students tended to work independently despite frequent teacher monitoring to remind students to work together.

Lesson content was also noted during the observations. Typical lessons at schools in both participation groups involved such content as vocabulary and spelling words; syllabication, prefixes, and suffixes; and addition, fractions, and word problems. Occasional exceptions to this traditional content were observed at schools in both participation groups. For example, at Filmore Senior High, a high participation school, students in a sophomore biology class practiced a technique for increasing long term memory. This technique had been used in former Eastern Block countries and was being explored at Filmore High as a way of curbing the high rate at which students failed courses each marking period. Similarly, at Cleveland Senior High, a low participation school, senior English students were concluding a study of ballads. The culminating activity was for students to compose ballads of their own regarding some event at the school and present the ballads to the class. In both of these classes student interest and involvement was high.

As noted, the Carnegie Task Force portrayed students working on cross-disciplinary activities as well as within one subject area, hence, it was of interest in this research to determine whether knowledge and skills were integrated across disciplines in the classes observed. Integration was seldom found. When

exceptions occurred, they tended to be instances in elementary schools where a new textbook series using a whole language approach was adopted. The minimal interest in developing cross-disciplinary lessons was offset somewhat by the fact that teachers were optionally able to use a new whole language series.

Here again a difference between the participation groups emerged. Teachers in eight of the high participation schools and one low participation school chose the whole language series. The teacher at the low participation school indicated that making the change required a great deal of extra work, in part because training was not adequate. This comment was not offered by any of the teachers in the high participation schools, suggesting that there may have been more collegial support than was acknowledged.

Although teachers' report of collegiality does not support this conclusion, if teachers thought of collaboration in a formal sense, they might discount conversations that occur over lunch or at other chance meetings during the school year. Such exchanges, while informal and unplanned, can be important sources of support during the testing of new teaching techniques. Nevertheless, training issues and collegial support aside, none of the teachers using the whole language series expressed a desire to return to the old series. To the contrary, six commented that they liked the new approach and felt that it was more engaging for the students.

Given that student learning activities did not appear to involve cooperative learning, the physical arrangement of most classrooms in the elementary schools across participation groups

is puzzling. Regardless of participation group, in the elementary schools students sat in clusters around tables, or in rows of contiguous tables. Although students sat in the traditional rows of desks at each of the high schools, this arrangement was found at only one elementary school, a school that was in the high participation group. Despite seating configurations in the elementary schools, the activities in which students were engaged, the style of lesson presentation, and the lesson format could have been as easily pursued were the students in separate, individual desks.

Classroom environment. The final element assessed during the observations was classroom climate. One attribute of climate considered in this study was ambience, or the presence of a friendly atmosphere. Another attribute was the physical characteristics of the room, other than seating configurations. Overall, classrooms in both participation groups tended to have a friendly ambience; however, exceptions occurred in four classes in each group. In three of the classes in the high participation group, the friendly ambience was replaced by a stern atmosphere in which the teacher demanded effort and achievement of the students. By contrast, teachers in the low participation group did not exhibit particular concern for effort and accomplishment. Hence, schools in the two participation groups differed on this characteristic. Similar differences were found between the two participation groups regarding the display of students' work, a second characteristic of the physical environment. Teachers in

four of the high participation schools did not have students' work displayed or displayed very little of it. On the other hand, students' work was not displayed in seven of the low participation schools.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if restructuring, particularly increasing teachers' participation in decision making, resulted in observable effects in the classroom. The observations reported here reconfirm Goodlad's (1984) assessment that teacher-directed, whole-class teaching predominates. Such a finding would not be especially noteworthy under most circumstances, however, these results take on considerable importance by virtue of the fact that the study occurred in a district recognized nationally as a leader in implementing restructuring reforms.

Given the predictions of the Carnegie Task Force that restructuring and increasing teachers' decisional participation would lead to substantive changes in pedagogy, and given the apparent initial commitment to restructuring by top level administrators, the findings reported above should be viewed as consequential by reformers. Determining why the anticipated changes did not ensue is essential to furthering the knowledge base about restructuring and to informing future reform endeavors. Some possible causes are addressed.

Conceptualizing schools as bureaucratic, rather than professional, workplaces is not new in the organizational literature. Indeed, the thinking that undergirds much of the

vision offered by Carnegie is aimed toward fostering a more professional view of schools. The ideal of professionalism was incorporated into the rhetoric in this district. According to Dreyfuss (1988), the 1986 contractual agreement, which provided the impetus for restructuring, signified agreement between the school board and the teachers' union regarding "the desirability and urgency of developing a wide range of educational and managerial strategies to form a comprehensive professionalization program for implementation throughout the school district" (p. vii-viii).

One characteristic of a profession is the authority to make decisions in accordance with standards in the field. This district actively pursued augmenting teachers' role in decision making, particularly in areas beyond the classroom. Another characteristic of a profession, however, is a transcending obligation to the client. Despite what appeared to be a genuine desire to professionalize teaching, it appears that the focus of the efforts did not shift from the teacher to the student, the client. Among the seven goals of the district's restructuring program listed by Dreyfuss (1988), students and teaching practices are mentioned in two.

Additional evidence that enhancing teachers' work with students was not central to the restructuring activities can be found in the nature of the training provided to staff in the pilot schools. Again according to Dreyfuss, the training included "a great deal of sharing of ideas and emphasis on conflict resolution and various methods of shared-decision making" (p. ix). An

emphasis on training teachers in alternate methods of instruction and supporting teachers in the implementation of those methods did not appear. The comments here are not intended to diminish the importance of training in conflict management and shared-decision making as critical in an effort to shift from a bureaucratic structure to a professional model, but rather to suggest that the impetus for the shift should be enabling teachers to identify and meet the needs of students more effectively. If the goal of decisional participation is to improve instructional outcomes, then teachers' expertise in core technology decisions must also be strengthened. Training might also include ways of overcoming norms of classroom autonomy and the isolation that accompanies it, interdisciplinary approaches to subject matter, and alternative student assessment practices (David, 1991).

The SBM program in this district required a great deal of work from those committed to it. In fact, Collins and Hanson (1991) note in their summative evaluation of the SBM program that "'burnout'...seems intrinsic to active participation in the...process" (p. ix), suggesting that the investment of time and energy by those involved was great. Despite this commitment on the part of teachers and administrators, the core mission of schooling - teaching students - seemed ancillary to the SBM project. Further, by the time of the present study, there was evidence to suggest that commitment to SBM on the part of top administrators was waning, further diminishing the possibility that restructuring would have an effect in the classroom.

Another factor may also have had a mitigating effect on the impact of restructuring in the classroom. Like most districts in the United States, student progress in this district was assessed each spring using a nationally normed standardized test. This test was an important feature in the educational landscape and students were often carefully prepared for success on the test. As has been noted elsewhere (David, 1991), standardized tests primarily assess knowledge of discrete facts; these tests are not known for assessing higher cognitive skills or students' ability to propose solutions to complex, multi-disciplinary problems. In today's climate of accountability based on test scores, it is unrealistic to expect teachers to abandon the teaching of discrete facts which appear on standardized tests in favor of integrated concepts which do not.

Conclusion

The data from this study indicate that restructuring has not influenced classroom activities. Obstacles to reform not anticipated by the restructuring movement include the need for focusing efforts on teachers' work with students and on devising alternative methods for assessing student learning. Continued reliance on standardized tests which do not test a student's ability to use a multi-disciplinary approach to problem solving militate against changes in classroom practices.

It is important to realize that this study represents a single look at classroom activities in a district known for its restructuring program; the study should not be viewed as conclusive

evidence concerning the efficacy of the restructuring effort. However, if subsequent studies in other districts produce the same or similar findings, it is likely that reforms advocated by restructuring will follow their predecessors down the trail of failure.

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Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations on the
Decisional Participation Scale

Schools	Actual participation (n=637)
High participation group	
Washington	54(10)
J. Adams*	47(12)
Jefferson*	47(13)
Madison*	46(12)
Monroe*	46(12)
J. Q. Adams*	46(12)
Jackson*	45(14)
Van Buren*	45(11)
Harrison*	43(9)
Tyler*	43(9)
Polk*	43(12)
Taylor*	42(8)
Fillmore Sr.#	42(11)
Pierce#	40(11)
Buchanan*	40(9)
Lincoln*	40(11)
Low participation group	
Johnson#	39(6)
Grant#	39(11)
Hayes	39(11)
Garfield#	39(11)
Arthur Sr.#	39(12)
Cleveland Sr.*	39(10)
McKinley	38(8)
T Roosevelt Sr.*	38(10)
Taft	37(7)
Wilson	37(15)
Harding#	36(6)
Coolidge	35(8)
Hoover Sr.#	34(7)
F. D. Roosevelt	34(8)
Truman#	34(10)
Eisenhower#	33(3)
TOTAL	40(11)

* Pilots school based management schools.
# Non-school based management schools.
Schools with no designation entered the school based management program after the inception year.