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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a district perspective on efforts by a college of education and a public school system to increase student achievement in an urban environment using a field-based master's degree program as the vehicle for teacher professional development. The partnership resulted in a unique delivery system for graduate instruction that was job-embedded and was offered to a cohort of elementary teachers as a component of the district's improvement plan. An assistant superintendent served a new role as program co-director, collaborated with university faculty, and helped mediate organizational contextual variables that might otherwise negatively affect teachers' ability to apply what they learned. A theoretical model of school capacity was adapted from the literature and used to frame a qualitative analysis of the impact of the program on the school system. Although it was too soon to observe changes in student achievement measures, there was emerging evidence that the program increased participants' knowledge and skills, positively enhanced the influence of the professional learning community on instructional practice, and improved coherence within the instructional program. (Author)

Instructional and Organizational Change in a School District As the Result of a University Partnership

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Abstract

This paper provides a district perspective of efforts by a college of education and a public school system to increase student achievement in an urban environment using a field-based master's degree program as the vehicle for teacher professional development. The partnership resulted in a unique delivery system for graduate instruction that was job-embedded and offered to a cohort of elementary teachers as a component of the district's improvement plan. An assistant superintendent served a new role as program co-director, collaborated with university faculty, and helped mediate organizational contextual variables that might otherwise negatively affect teachers' ability to apply what they learned.

A theoretical model of school capacity was adapted from the literature and used to frame a qualitative analysis of the impact of the program on the school system. Although it was too soon to observe changes in student achievement measures, there was emerging evidence that the program increased participants' knowledge and skills, positively enhanced the influence of the professional learning community on instructional practice, and improved coherence within the instructional program.

Introduction

School reform continues to occupy a prominent place on the political and social agenda in America as we enter the 21st Century. In Michigan, high stakes standardized testing, school choice, and other forces of change have intensified pressure on the public schools to increase student achievement. Despite this push for improvement, school districts serving the largest percentages of African American and Hispanic children, and families of all races living in poverty, continue to perform well below the state average on the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) tests required by the Department of Education. The inability of mandates to effect change in low performing districts has been particularly frustrating for politicians and the legislature has begun to use more punitive approaches to reform as evidenced by the recent state take over of the Detroit Public Schools. For an increasing number of districts statewide, and most districts in urban areas, developing the internal capacity to improve school performance and increase student achievement has become a mater of survival.

This paper provides a district perspective of efforts by the College of Education at Western Michigan University and the Oak Park Schools to increase student achievement in an urban environment using a field-based master's degree program as the vehicle for teacher professional development. Although it is too soon to observe changes in student achievement measures, there is emerging evidence that the master's degree program had a profound effect on the instructional program in the district and the capacity of individuals and the organization itself to respond to the needs of the children in this community. The paper is not an attempt to describe what works but rather an initial attempt to document and analyze the impact of the professional development partnership implemented at this site. This preliminary assessment can serve as a source of ideas for superintendents and university faculty in other settings to use in thinking

about how a similar partnership might be integrated with their own efforts to improve public schools.

The District Context

Demographics

The Oak Park School District is located on the northern boundary of the city of Detroit and encompasses the City of Oak Park along with portions of Royal Oak Township and Southfield. The demographic composition of the District changed dramatically over the past twenty years as the migration of African Americans from the inner city and an influx of Middle Eastern and Asian immigrants created a truly diverse community. Approximately 84 percent of current students are African American, 13 percent are Caucasian and three percent are Hispanic or Asian. Seventy percent of the Caucasian population comes from Chaldean or Arabic-speaking households. Oak Park has four elementary, one middle and one high school. In 2001, the District enrolled 4,100 students from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds but nearly half were at or below the poverty level. Ten percent of students currently receive special education services and 11 percent are enrolled in a bilingual program.

The Oak Park School District is a Michigan public school system with an operating budget of $32,595,427 for fiscal year 2000-01. The District staff includes 231 teachers, 57 para-professional support positions, 124 custodial, clerical support and office workers, and 17 administrators. African Americans currently fill over 60% of administrative, para-professional, clerical and support staff positions. The instructional staff is 74% Caucasian, 26% African American and 1% Asian. About half of the administrative staff is female and women occupy almost 80% of the para-professional and instructional staff positions.

History of school reform efforts

When the current superintendent came to Oak Park in 1992, only 15% of the District's 4th-grade students performed satisfactorily on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) tests in reading and mathematics. Twelve percent of 7th-graders had satisfactory MEAP reading scores and only 5% of 10th graders had satisfactory mathematics scores. In response, the Board and Superintendent developed a formal partnership with Consumers Energy, a major Michigan utility, to help with improvement efforts. Together they implemented a system-wide reform initiative, The Sixteen-Step Strategic Planning Process (See Porter, (1995) and Marx, Hunter & Johnson, (1997)). In accordance with the model, the district established performance standards for a set of success indicators identified by a group of education stakeholders from the community and then developed a long-range Improvement Plan that responded to those areas where the baseline status was less than satisfactory. The plan set forth performance goals for students and teachers as well as for administrators. District and school building organizational structures were aligned with the performance goals and profiles of achievement data were used to track performance at regular intervals. Implementation of the Process was funded by a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and included intensive training programs for administrators and teachers in data-driven decision making.

Oak Park Schools demonstrated impressive gains in achievement after the initial implementation of its Improvement Plan. At all levels, MEAP scores more than doubled, fiscal integrity was restored, high school graduation rates increased and the most recent community survey showed a majority of respondents were satisfied with the district's performance. Although programs implemented early in the process resulted in dramatic gains, recent progress

has slowed and in some cases results have declined. Current MEAP scores for the district remain below the state average for most grades and content areas.

Establishing a University Partnership

Analyses of student performance and program effectiveness data hinted that much of the early successes in Oak Park resulted from sharpening up existing practices and procedures that had a positive impact on students who were borderline satisfactory performers. Most building and district interventions were focused on student remediation and little had been done to initiate changes in administrative or teaching practices that might be required to meet the needs of students who were struggling. District administrators concluded that providing meaningful professional development opportunities for teachers designed to increase their content knowledge and instructional skills should be included as a key component of future initiatives intended to raise student achievement to higher levels. The possibility of utilizing a master's degree program as a means to support teacher learning emerged from discussions about available alternatives. From the district perspective, the main problem with traditional graduate programs was the inconsistency in the ability of participants to transfer new knowledge and skills to the school and classroom. It was our belief that if a university would collaborate with district staff to ground educational experiences required for a master's degree in the district curriculum and the daily work of the teachers, student achievement would increase. We recognized this would require major changes in the way graduate school instruction was delivered but saw this arrangement as a cost effective way to engage teachers in an intensive professional development experience that would benefit the district. Oak Park established two conditions as the basis for negotiating with universities to deliver the program. First, the university and school district would need to agree that the success of the program depended on our joint ability to ultimately

demonstrate increases in student achievement. The second condition was that course content must be presented in a way that was perceived as relevant to teachers. In the words of the superintendent, "...what was discussed in class one night should be something teachers can use in their classroom within a week." The first condition was intended to keep the focus of activity on improving student learning while the second reinforced the job-imbedded nature of the delivery system envisioned.

In 1999, Oak Park Schools entered into a partnership with the College of Education at Western Michigan University to offer a field-based graduate degree program to a cohort of 32 employees of the district. Twenty four of these teachers were relatively new in the system. The remaining eight were more experienced teachers and administrators who were interested in completing the degree program. The school district provided the participants with required textbooks and paid all tuition and fees. The expenses incurred were slightly higher, but still comparable to the hourly stipends that would have been paid to engage these people in workshops for the amount of class time required of a 36 hour degree program.

Framework for analysis

Regardless of the model for school reform, success hinges on the ability and willingness of teachers and administrators to change practice in some way. King and Newmann (2000) assert that improving teacher knowledge, skills and dispositions through professional development is a critical part of the change process needed to improve student achievement. They conclude however, that teaching has not been substantially improved through professional development because the conventional delivery system usually violates a number of key conditions for teacher learning. These conditions include allowing teachers to concentrate on instruction and student outcomes in the specific contexts in which they teach; providing sustained opportunities to study,

experiment with and to receive helpful feedback on specific innovations; collaborating with professional peers both within and outside of their schools; and, having influence over the substance and process of professional development.

Hawley & Valli (1999) identified a similar set of characteristics for professional development that foster teacher learning. Their list included the provision of job-embedded opportunities for educators to learn collaboratively, practice what they learn, and evaluate the consequences of their action in light of established goals. These authors argue that a new consensus has emerged regarding what constitutes effective professional development. They go on to say this consensus "...has significant implications for the way professional development is conceptualized and provided for in schools, (and) calls into question the role that colleges and universities have been playing in the continuing education of teachers" (p. 145).

In addition to violating principles that support individual learning, critics of the the market driven delivery system for professional development common in most school districts contend it provides little or no support for what Senge (1990) and others have called "organizational learning." Michael Huberman (1995) described the typical approach to in service professional development as a "lone wolf scenario" in which teachers are left on their own to decide what works and what additional knowledge, skill, or insight would best serve them and their students. Sikes (1999) portrayed teachers as "...independent artisans exercising choice in a loosely structured market place of (professional development) offerings, variably influenced by characteristics of the school workplace" (p. 158). He further states that independence and loose structure may provide teachers with considerable freedom in directing their own learning and development but seriously limits the ability to direct activity to organizational priorities, lacks accountability, and appears largely ineffective in improving instruction in any systemic way.

King and Newmann (2000) contend that effective professional development programs must take into consideration both the individual and the organization. It is their position that a focus on the learning of individual teachers would be insufficient to advance student achievement unless the design of professional development was also grounded in a conception of how schools as organizations affect teachers' learning, teachers' practice, and student achievement. They proposed that "...viewing school capacity as the key to improved instruction offers a parsimonious way of understanding how a long list of otherwise discrete factors affect instruction" (p. 577). King and Newmann identified three dimensions of school capacity that seem susceptible to improvement through professional development. Each component of capacity is necessary but not sufficient for improvement by itself. The first dimension includes the individual knowledge, skills and dispositions of teachers, the human resource capacity available to the school. In order to effect improvement in instruction, the individual competences of teachers must be applied within the second dimension of capacity, a professional community of learners. Finally, a school's capacity is enhanced when its programs for student and staff learning are coherent. In addition, attention must be given to the fact that school capacity is affected by contexts and by policies and programs initiated by the school itself and by external agencies, especially the district.

Because the primary reason for initiating a field-based master's degree program in Oak Park was to improve student achievement, the conceptualization of school capacity as the key to improved instruction summarized above offers a theoretical framework from which to examine the impact of the program at the district level. Figure 1 is a graphic representation developed by the author of this paper to illustrate King and Newmann's three components of school capacity and place them within the organizational context of a school district. The graphic can be used to

visualize how the master's degree program influenced the district's capacity to improve instruction. In Oak Park, "Cohort" emerged as the term that is used by faculty and administrative staff to describe both the field based master's degree program and the participants in that program as a collective group. This identifier will be used in a similar way throughout the remainder of this paper. The Cohort is depicted in Figure 1as a new subset of the professional learning community within the school district.

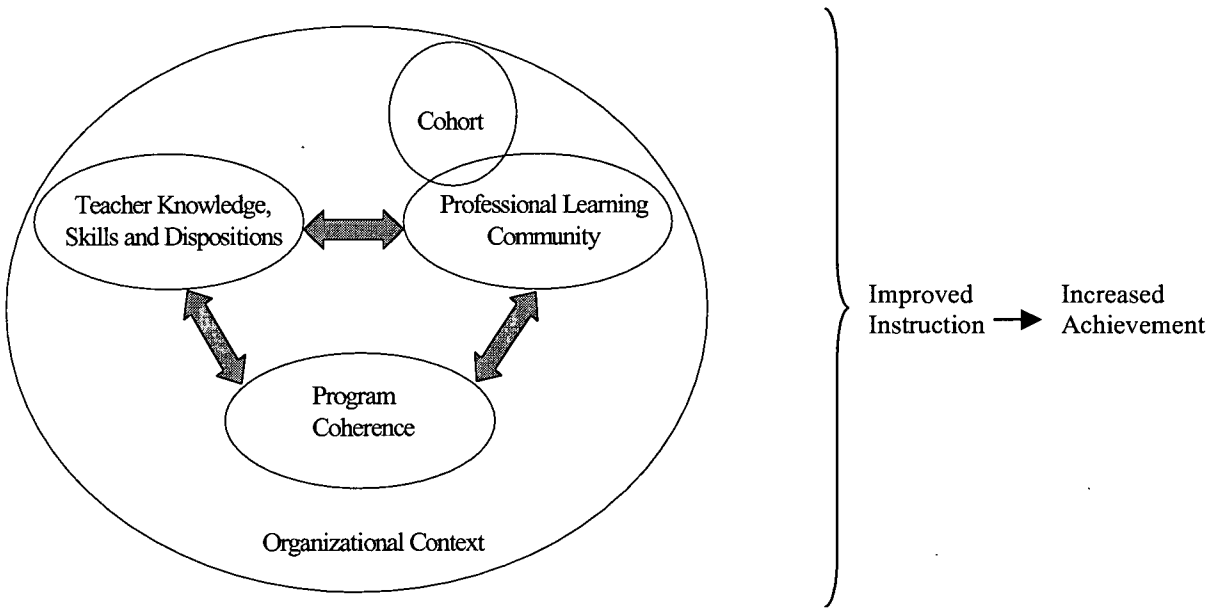

Figure 1: Components of system capacity affected by professional development (Adapted from King & Newmann)

Unique Aspects of the Program

The Cohort was different from a traditional site-based master's degree program involving a group of students from the same school system in a number of ways. First, it was offered as a specific component of the district improvement plan with the expectation that the project would lead to changes in administrative procedures and teaching practices within the organization.

Second, the teachers who joined the program were told that instruction would be job-embedded and therefore different from the traditional university class structure. Participants came with the expectation that this would be a unique experience, one that would begin to help them immediately in the classroom. Instructors were challenged to meet these expectations while addressing the content requirements of an existing graduate degree. The third unique factor was that the Cohort drew its membership from all four elementary schools in the district and included representatives from various levels of administration. As a result, the Cohort had a more systemic impact than the approach taken in Professional Development Schools where a single site is usually the point of intervention. The fourth and final factor that made the Cohort unique was the assignment of an Oak Park assistant superintendent as a program co-director to help align course instruction with district, school and teacher needs; collaborate with university faculty on program planning and implementation; and facilitate systemic change.

Impact Analysis

Holistic Overview

When the adaptation of King and Newmann's model was applied to the Cohort, it became evident that all of the key components of capacity were engaged in some way each time a class met and the structure of the program created optimal conditions for teacher learning. The Cohort served as a temporary learning community for teachers who gathered weekly to acquire new knowledge and skills grounded in the issues and problems facing them within the organizational context of the schools and the district. As individual teachers acquired knowledge and skills it was usually necessary to reconcile new thinking with existing district programs and curriculua. Multiple levels of the organization were represented at every class session so theory and implications for practice were critically examined from a variety of perspectives that

included central office administrator, building administrator, curriculum director, kindergarten through high school teacher, university professor and, at various times, external consultant. The diverse views of participants made it easier for people involved with the Cohort to identify such things as unintended organizational barriers, disconnects in the articulation and alignment of existing curriculua, and fragmentation in instructional practice. Not only could these inhibitors be identified but they could also be brought to the attention of others in the district as Cohort participants returned to their work groups following class meetings. Therefore, the Cohort served not only as a vehicle for professional development, but also became a mechanism for mediating the organizational context in ways that supported and enhanced capacity building within the system.

In the sections that follow, some specific examples of ways the Cohort has increased the capacity of individuals, the community of learners, and the instructional program in the district will be examined. The role this writer played as a process facilitator within the district will also be explained. It is important to note that the graphic in Figure 1 is limited in its ability to communicate the dynamic nature of interrelationships among the key components in the model implied by the above overview. In practice, it was almost impossible to examine impact in one area without considering the implications for impact on other components within the system.

Qualitative data on impact analyzed for this study came primarily from the field notes and written reflections of this author who acted as a participant observer while serving as co-director for the program. Site documents, some written reflections shared by Cohort teachers and a transcription of a Cohort class session where members were asked to share their perceptions about program impact were also included in the data set. From this point on, the analysis is

written in the first person in order to take maximum advantage of the data and provide a more realistic description of the Cohort's impact from the perspective of this writer.

The Unique Role of the District Co-Director

From the beginning, the district was committed to improve student achievement as an ultimate goal of the Cohort and I was given the task of making this happen. My role as a school administrator is unique and was created by the superintendent, Dr. Alexander Bailey, in 1993 when Oak Park was working on an educational reform initiative in partnership with Consumers Energy. Consumers had hired Dr. John Porter as a consultant to help the district implement his Sixteen-Step Strategic Planning Process (Porter, 1995) as a strategy for systemic reform. At the urging of Consumers, Dr. Bailey agreed to release me from my duties as high school principal and assign me full time to work with the business partner and Dr. Porter to implement the model. For the next five years I worked from an office in the regional headquarters of Consumers Energy while assisting the superintendent on this project. I returned to an office in the district two years ago to continue facilitating the change process. My title was changed from Director of Student Performance Analysis to Assistant Superintendent in 1999.

I report directly to the superintendent and have no supervisory or program responsibilities for day-to-day operations in the organization. My primary role is to ensure that school and district improvement efforts result in continuous growth in student achievement. Due to the access to the superintendent that the position affords, I gained a high degree of referent authority over the years even though I operate outside of the normal chain of command. It is now common knowledge in the district that I am one person who thoroughly understands the superintendent's vision and expectations and it is common for other administrators to ask me for clarification on

directives or to support their proposals. In addition to process facilitation, I manage major district initiatives implemented as part of the District Improvement Plan and I interveign in other areas on a short term basis when disconnects that might impede progress are noted.

I was personally involved in the analyses and discussions that led to the idea of offering a master's degree program to elementary teachers in Oak Park and conducted most of the negotiations with universities we pursued as partners for the project. Once the partnership was formed with Western Michigan University, I helped recruit participants, facilitated the mechanics of implementation for the school district, and collaborated with university staff in developing the instructional program. Because of the short time available for planning prior to the start date for the Cohort, instructor resources were problematic; so I agreed to teach the initial class offered to participants.

I deliberately designed the first class in a way that was different from any graduate class I had previously taught because I felt pressured to deliver on the promise that this would be a unique experience. During one week in the summer, the Cohort teachers and I spent time reflecting on the state of our professional careers with an emphasis on our ability as teachers to effect positive changes in the performance of our students. We began with case studies of students we were able to help and those who we wished we could have helped more. Together we examined patterns of performance from the classes we most recently taught to identify our strengths and weaknesses in content expertise and considered how factors like student behavior and attendance affected our work. Finally, we looked at standardized test scores for our students and compared these results with the grades we had given students for performance in the content areas tested. Class sessions were structured in a way that systematically engaged teachers in conversations about their reflections on prior experience with an eye toward building a sense of

community within the group and establishing individual learning goals for the master's program they were just beginning. At the end of the week, the Dean of the College of Education and the faculty assigned to work with the Cohort joined us. Together, we conducted an interactive needs assessment and reached a consensus decision that the content area of reading would be the focus for study over the next two years.

My personal involvement and participation with the Cohort and my role in the district are important factors to consider when judging the validity of data I collected as a participant observer. Whenever possible, in both class sessions and individual conversations, I emphasized the fact my position existed outside of superordinate relationships in the school system. As the teachers and I shared the highs and lows of our professional careers during the summer class, we developed a personal relationship that has continued to grow. However, there will still be a tendency for people to say things they believe an assistant superintendent would want to hear and to show themselves in the best light regardless of the informal relationships that exist. Therefore, the process of analysis was guided by the acknowledgement that data I obtained in this study were limited to what people considered appropriate behavior or information to share in the presence of a university teacher of record or a central office administrator.

Individual knowledge, skills and dispositions

As an instructor for some and a participant in all classes to date, I can attest to the fact the Cohort increased the individual knowledge and skills of the participants although, as one would expect, the degree to which people have acquired new knowledge and the level of conceptual understanding achieved varied by individual. In like manner, the current implementation levels of a balanced literacy program in the classrooms of Cohort teachers falls on a continuum from experimentation to adaptation. These conclusions were supported by the content of papers, class

discussions, informal conversations, and observations during Cohort meetings and in the daily work setting. The written reflections of individual teachers also document perceptions of growth as learners.

When formal class sessions for the Cohort first began, the lack of a common language about literacy and the variance in the prior knowledge of participants made it difficult for instructors to communicate with teachers. This was particularly frustrating for the teachers who expected to acquire "new strategies," "practical applications," and "effective techniques." It was also frustrating for the professors who recognized the importance of process rather than superficial activity when teaching students to read. One of the first professors from Western Michigan University to work with the Cohort commented on the "...apparent need by some members to get the right information or answer" when, in fact, what works in teaching one student to read may not work for another. Early experiences with the fragmentation of knowledge that existed in the group underscored the need to establish a common framework from which to examine the process of literacy acquisition. Using formal and informal feedback from the teachers and instructors, the co-directors monitored progress and adjusted the schedule of future instructional experiences to match the emerging needs of the group.

Within seven months, the Cohort's collective scholarship was evident to outsiders like the university professor who taught a session on using leveled texts in literacy instruction and told one of his colleagues afterward "...the questions (teachers asked) were clearly based on a good knowledge base." Although they had to deal with initial levels of confusion, teachers have generally developed a deeper understanding of theoretical concepts and processes as the program progressed. Beth's comment, made one night in class, is one illustration of how Cohort teachers recognized the changes that occurred in their own learning. "There were just so many things that

...we were exposed to last year. ...In the beginning, it was like, what is the purpose of all of this stuff? But as we go along you can make the connection and can see the bigger picture."

Because the Cohort emphasized the application of knowledge and the use of new skills in the participant's classrooms, it was not unusual to hear statements about the positive impact teachers' new learning had on students and how this affected their own attitudes about teaching.

John:

> "Last year I liked teaching. This year, my second year, I love teaching because I can see how much my students are learning."

Kathy:

> "For the first time in my teaching career the reading program is supporting all levels of readers. Students are acquiring more knowledge through reading than I have ever experienced. They do not stop at what is required of them. They are now going above and beyond...and so am I."

Karen:

> "I feel special because I have been trained to do things that other teachers have not been trained to do and my kids like it and are learning more from it. I have changed. I have grown a lot from it. I find the teaching aspect of it to be a lot more fun."

The point here is that most teachers in the program have been able to translate theory into practice to some degree and the instructional strategies they now use in the classroom have resulted in observable improvements in the performance of students. These initial successes seem to have increased some teachers' sense of professional efficacy and job satisfaction. Seeing improvements in student learning has encouraged teachers in the Cohort to continue learning and growing themselves. Dan, a second year teacher in the district told the Cohort, "I find my thinking constantly changing. I find my methods constantly changing (and) I find myself not being uncomfortable with that change."

In addition to increasing the human resource capacity of teachers, my own experience with the Cohort resulted in a tremendous growth in knowledge and understanding regarding the complex process involved in teaching students to read. As an educator trained to teach at the secondary level, this learning was instrumental in my ability to communicate with others outside of the Cohort and to support capacity building within the organization.

Research is on-going at this site to determine the impact of the Cohort on teachers' beliefs, teacher practices, and teacher efficacy. In this section, I have only attempted to show that the program enhanced individual capacity and imply some of the ways this was exhibited over the past two years. The final results of the research project will provide more rigorous empirical evidence of the Cohort's impact in this area.

Professional Community of Learners

During the interactive needs assessment conducted at the end of the first summer session, teachers unanimously agreed that one of the goals of the Cohort was to maintain the high degree of collaboration and support they had experienced during the previous five-day session. Some of the newer teachers commented that this was the first time they felt supported since they were in a pre-service intern position and stated that it seemed like most teachers in their buildings were unwilling to share materials or even advice. Thus, by design, the Cohort became a vehicle that provided a collaborative setting intended to foster teacher learning. The amount of time spent together as a group, the common experiences of the classes, and the long term relationship established with a few key university faculty members contributed to the communal bond that developed over time. Teachers distinctly remembered the change in their focus from individual to group affiliation.

Fran:

> "I know when we first started off there was a very limited view. I know it does go back to what can I do for me, what can I do to change my classes, how can I... And we discovered that that is just so limited. I mean, we have moved just so much further than I ever thought we would get to. ...We are not afraid to go to one of our partners and say ...I am not sure about this, can you help me, can you give me some ideas, then both of us sharing that and moving on. I think this is a great benefit."

Brian:

> "When I first started the program, I wanted to see what I could do or what I could learn to make myself a better teacher . I think we all learned that is was...more exciting because we all worked together and we all came to where we are right now as a team. It wasn't what can I do for myself now. ...we are changing (together) and it's not just me in my room or this is what works for me."

The Cohort has never become completely comfortable with the presence of the two elementary principals who participated, probably because of their role as supervisors and key players in the district evaluation process. There were a number of times in class sessions where principals were not present that teachers stated, "I would never say what I said if a principal were here." On at least two occasions, the principal who was present in a class session left the room because they became aware their presence was inhibiting the discussion of issues of concern to the teachers. They told me directly of the reason for their departure and the shift in content of the discussion in their absence confirmed their assessment on each occasion. In addition to the fact that principals were alienated from total participation, there were a few teachers who were never completely integrated into the collegial subgroups that formed. However, the other participants treated these outliers in a cordial, albeit formal manner.

As indicated in the previous section, the Cohort developed a common knowledge base and frame of reference that was evident to outsiders within the first eight months. By that time, teachers were beginning to experiment with some of the skills and strategies they had been studying in class. They soon discovered it was difficult to talk about their experiences with the

teachers in their work site with whom they interacted on a regular basis because non-Cohort teachers lacked the frame of reference and common set of experiences shared by members of the Cohort. Therefore, Cohort members sought out other Cohort members in their building or at class to share their excitement about what was happening to them in their classrooms and to seek advice. The comments made by George and Louise illustrate this disconnect from the experience of colleagues and the role the Cohort played in reinforcing and expanding experimentation.

George:

> "...When you put all the pieces together you can really envision yourself as being an agent of change or just on the cutting edge of doing things, and when you try to explain to people (in your school), you get their stunned silence because it is so different."

Louise:

> "In September (when) all the frustrations started, I said my God; I have no idea if I am doing this right. Then when you see the kids are reacting and it is clicking and it is working, it is so exciting; and you want to share it with everybody, and you (come to the Cohort) and you get to share it. ...You share what worked and what didn't work, and if I have a kink or something that I need to work out, I know that there are other people I can turn to who will say, well try this; or see if this will work; or maybe you should do this."

The disconnect from the larger professional learning community caused by a knowledge gap and the rate of change in practice exhibited by the Cohort has been somewhat problematic for the district. Accusations of favoritism and special treatment were quite common by the beginning of the second year but these have diminished as the district began to offer parallel opportunities for other teachers to learn more about a balanced literacy program. Many of these opportunities have combined Cohort and non-Cohort teachers in the same activities. Louise and Marlene are Cohort teachers who work in the same school. Their comments, made during a group reflection session in class, show how the areas of overlap between the Cohort and the overall professional learning community at that site are expanding.

Marlene:

"We used to work in isolation in our individual classrooms and in our individual school buildings but I think that we are really going to turn this district upside down. I really do. I am so excited. Look how many people you have knocking on your doors, saying what are you doing? You have something working here. We want to know what you are doing and you are more than happy to share."

Louise:

"...My door has been open and I have had more people coming in and now there are people who are not in this program who I have been talking to and they ask can I use this and can I use that. I see other people getting excited about the things I am excited about using and doing so I think it is contagious in that respect."

There are emerging indications that the Cohort may have served as a primary social referent group for participating teachers, thus minimizing the impact of negative feedback from colleagues and other barriers to change, both formal and informal. Some Cohort members indicated it was more important for them to comply with the expectations of others in the Cohort than the expectations of people in their home school. George is one of the teachers whose comments led to the assertion that the Cohort helped participants mediate resistance. "...All of us (have been) supportive of each other (helping) eliminate barriers in this building, that building, and there is an overriding sense of community and a free flow of information." Bill is a support person in one of the elementary schools so he interacted with all of the teachers in that building at one time or another during the week. Because of his role and the fact everyone knew of his participation in the Cohort, Bill was the recipient of more negative feedback than other Cohort members whose interactions were limited by the constraints of a classroom schedule.

Bill:

"I think it is interesting that there is a lot more accountability in the way in which we have been working. Not only are we answering to some people in administration but to each other as well and that keeps us on the ball. It is not as if we can say we are trying

> something and (then) close our classroom door. ...The professors can walk right in and see whether or not you are doing it. ...We have accountability not just to (the professors) but to each other and to the program itself. In a traditional (graduate) classroom when you are dismissed, you are dismissed. But we are really never dismissed. We are always engaging.
>
> ...You have to toughen the hide... you cannot be concerned with what other people will be saying and what their negative attitude will be. This has something to do with what I was talking with you (this writer) in November about because I was really getting concerned with the negative responses I was getting from people not in the program. When you (told me) that authentic changes bring chaos ... it took away my anxiety right away. I think it is important to keep that right up front and know that (resistance) is going to come and all you can do is keep right on going."

What these statements show is that at least some members of the Cohort viewed me and other teachers in the group as a source of support in their efforts to resist internal organizational pressures to maintain status quo. These counteracting internal pressures peaked at the start of the second year of the program when Cohort teachers began to use things like leveled books and text sets in their classrooms. Numerous Cohort teachers have sought me out for counsel and advice regarding how to handle mandates from principals and pressure from curriculum directors and other administrators over the course of this year. Having frequent access to others involved in the Cohort both in the school settings and at regular class meetings provided a structure that has supported continued change in spite of adversity.

Program Coherence

Fullen's (1999) observation that "Coherence-making is a never-ending dynamic balancing act." (p. 40) is an apt description of my field record of experiences with the Cohort in this critical area of system capacity. It is obvious that the coherence of an instructional program is greatly influenced by the individuals who control that program within the existing power structure of the district. Because the knowledge and dispositions of program directors, principals and other administrators were often not in sync with the emerging levels of understanding about

a balanced literacy framework held by the Cohort, I spent a vast majority of my time outside of formal class sessions addressing issues related to coherence.

I was predisposed to look for problems with coherence based on feedback I received from Western Michigan University faculty after they first reviewed the description of the reading program offered by the district. The information they were given at that time contained a list of 26 individual components, programs and strategies. The list clearly emphasized the content teachers should use (lists of books to read, computer software to use, Daily Oral Language lessons to teach) and the only reference to a common process for teaching reading on a daily basis was the directive that teachers should take a "whole-language approach." One document distributed to all elementary teachers in the district contained a shorter version of the list along with the following statement, "Houghton-Mifflin Reading is the district's approved reading program."

Today, the formal description of the district reading program includes a balanced literacy approach to language arts in the lower elementary grades and the use of the research based Four Block Model developed by Patricia Cunningham as the suggested way to organize instruction. Both the literacy framework and the model emerged from the Cohort classes and provide one example of how coherence has increased in language arts. This is not to say that the Cohort caused the changes in the district reading program because these revisions were actually orchestrated by the Director of Reading. However, the activity of the Cohort within the district, and the participation of the Director as a member of the Cohort were instrumental in the outcome.

The vignette that follows illustrates how my involvement with the Cohort often inadvertently disclosed problems with coherence and gives some idea of how I used my position

to facilitate coherence-making at the district level. For one of the classes scheduled in the first month of the program we had asked a consultant from the intermediate school district to introduce some possible theoretical frameworks for literacy to the Cohort. During the presentation the consultant said that "...reading and writing should occupy at least two and one half hours of instruction each day." One of the Cohort teachers asked, "How do we find the time to do all of this in the classroom? We have to get through the basal series and I don't have time for that now." This quote was the first notation in my field notes regarding a possible coherence issue being raised by a teacher. She was having problems deciding how all of the different pieces of the reading program fit together within the time limits of the usual instructional day. It was clear to me that if people could not see how it was possible to use the framework to organize the district components it was doubtful they would consider modifying what they were currently doing in the classroom.

After conferring with my university partners, I taught the next two class sessions focused on the use of time in schools. I asked two of the veteran teachers in the Cohort to take the district's mandated time allocations for each content area and develop a model schedule for a school day showing that it was possible to organize the existing components of the district reading program into the structures and times recommended by the literacy framework. When these teachers shared the results with the class, they indicated that the task was much harder than they had expected and in order to make everything fit it had been necessary for them to integrate some items so two or more related activities counted as one in the day. I then asked the entire Cohort to develop a weekly schedule following the framework for literacy as an assignment. At the next class session, while teachers were sharing the schedules they had developed, it became obvious to me that most of them had scheduled the two and one half hours of literacy at the

expense of time allocations for other subject areas. They were able to make things work for language arts but reduced the time spent in science, for example.

As I reviewed the materials more closely after class, I discovered that no one had updated the district mandates for instructional time to reflect the additional days and resultant increases in hours of instruction required by the state. Furthermore, programs like a required computer lab had been added to the instructional day without apparent consideration for how it might affect available time. As a result, it was virtually impossible to follow the literacy framework and meet the district requirements; there were not enough minutes in the day. The fact that no one in administration knew that the time allocations were wrong until I brought it to their attention is an indication of how people in the system typically respond to such policies and mandates. Once developed and distributed, this formal mechanism for ensuring a coherent allocation of instructional time in the district was summarily ignored.

Even after increasing the time allocations, I found it almost impossible to work out a weekly literacy schedule for a typical third grade classroom that incorporated all of the existing district components for reading and met the requirements for instruction in all of the content areas. When the district instructional specialists I asked for help struggled with the task it became obvious to me that all of us in the system were making the assumption that the programmatic pieces fit into a coherent whole and the task of organizing instruction was a relatively simple one for teachers. In fact, this was not the case.

After sharing this experience with the superintendent, we began urging the district instructional specialists and building principals to develop strategies and techniques that might help elementary teachers make better sense of what they were being asked to do in the classroom. The agendas of administrative meetings for the remainder of the school year contain

references to the balanced use of instructional resources and the notes from meetings document discussions about how to avoid fragmentation and teacher overload. The superintendent began to use the phrase "more is less" when talking with instructional leaders to emphasize the impact of new programs and the training they would require on available academic time. Coordinators and directors were asked to write new program descriptions with an emphasis on organizing the components in meaningful ways. The new description of the reading program referenced above was one of the products of this request.

This sequence of events conveys a sense of how my role in working with the Cohort impacted program coherence because of the loosely structured link my position created between activity in the professional development program and the contextual variables that affected teachers' ability to apply what they learned. I provided only one example from a number of possible vignettes that show how my role in the district and my involvement with the Cohort has influenced overall coherence in the organization. In each instance where this occurred, I became aware of some disconnect as a result of my participation in Cohort activities. I then raised a question or shared an observation regarding the current status of a program, policy or procedure with people who held decision making positions in the system. My intent was to create a conscious awareness of dissonance between what existed and what might be more facilitative of adult and student learning in the district in the hope that people would initiate change.

Conclusions

This paper detailed a preliminary assessment of the impact a field-based master's degree program had on the Oak Park School District. Because the analysis was conducted prior to the conclusion of the program, this paper must be considered as part of a work in progress and any conclusions drawn from experiences to date will be tentative at best. With these conditions in

mind, and based on the evidence available to date, the assertions that follow are justified in the view of this writer.

1) The adaptation of King & Newmann's school capacity model and its application to a system-wide professional development intervention is a potentially helpful framework for understanding how teacher learning and instructional improvement are interrelated and how they are affected by the organizational context of a public school system.
2) The field-based master's degree program offered at this site increased participants' knowledge and skills, positively enhanced the influence of the professional learning community on instructional practice, and improved coherence within the instructional program.
3) The degree to which system capacity appears to have increased was greatly influenced by the active participation of a central office administrator and the role played by this person should be considered by other school systems interested in effecting school reform through the professional development of teachers.

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