

# GROUP POLARIZATION AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM\*

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## Abstract

Although educational leaders may be optimistic about initiating change, lasting reforms are rare. The group polarization literature, although dated, provides an important explanation for a very current problem. The theory holds that when there are differences of opinion to begin with, a counter-conformity effect works among members of groups. Rather than descending upon some group consensus, individuals and factions within the larger group become more divided with time. Such 'group polarization' works against maintaining the critical mass that any reform requires and offers at least one explanation for why educational reforms at the local level fail.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

## 1 Introduction

The bottom line in education is student achievement and when there is a perception that progress is inadequate, calls for education reform gain momentum. This is certainly the case when international comparisons indicate that domestic students are falling short of what students from other nations accomplish. Whatever the merits of such comparisons, they arouse concerns about educational progress and invite more direct government involvement in the schools. Interest in reform has become a driving force in many nations, but particularly in the United States.

In the midst of educational reform, educational administrators' roles have been effectively redefined. Perceived less strictly as managers, educational leaders have come to be held more directly responsible for students' academic progress (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). Unflattering educational outcomes fuel a public

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discontent which directly impacts principals and school superintendents. They are expected to bring about the changes that will right the educational ship. However, their track record for achieving lasting educational reform isn't encouraging (Sarason, 1990). With few notable exceptions such as the education of students with disabilities, fundamental changes in education in recent decades are rare in spite of the continuing reform agenda. When virtually all stakeholders agree on the need for change, and with a clear national mandate for improvement, why do educational reforms so often fall short? At least a partial explanation may lie in the dynamics of groups.

## 2 Group Polarization

When members of a group disagree about something it is logical to expect that open discussion will bring about some measure of social conformity. As positions are aired, a 'convergence[nce] on the central tendency of the group' (Fitzpatrick, 1989, p. 316) seems likely, but this often does not happen. Fitzpatrick noted that rather than adopting a middle ground, continuing discussion and debate often result in more extreme positions. In such a condition, consensus building is difficult and temporary when it is achieved at all because individual group members tend to shift away from an average attitude rather than toward it. The implications of such a phenomenon threaten anyone's effort to lead change in the school or the district.

The counter-conformity effect was first documented in the business literature. In an unpublished masters thesis Stoner (1961) described a 'risky shift' that can take place as a result of group interaction. He noted that the decisions people make after discussions with others tend to be more extreme than initial tendencies. Testing for this effect elsewhere, Myers and Bishop (1970) put students with racial biases together to discuss racial issues and found that biases became more pronounced (see also Myers & Arenson, 1972). The resulting 'group polarization' (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969) has been used to explain a variety of decisions in, and out of the business world. Bray and Noble (1978) noted that group polarization explains jury deliberations and decisions (see also MacCoun & Kerr, 1988). The effects appear not limited to face-to-face exchanges. Vinze & El-Shinnawy (2002) noted the effects of group polarization in computer-mediated, virtual meetings.

## 3 Implications for Education

In any institutional setting, reforms are more likely to succeed if there is fundamental agreement among interested parties about the nature of the problem and the likely efficacy of a proposed solution. More directly for the school district, educational reform has a better chance if there is a spirit of cooperation and common purpose between those in administrative positions, and those who must implement the changes in the classrooms. However, group-polarization theory suggests that if there is initial disagreement, any consensus is probably forged only temporarily. The theory implies that over time opinions about how to effect change and even about what should be changed will become more divided. If this occurs, the willingness to cooperate will diminish and so, it seems, will the likelihood of meaningful educational change.

## 4 A Case Study

In 2004, personnel from two low-performing schools in a central California school district collaborated with personnel from their district central office to apply for a reading and mathematics reform grant. A centerpiece of the proposal was an effort to enhance the cooperation between the curriculum and resource specialists in the district office, and the educators at the school site. Examining the views of these two groups during the project provides an opportunity to study group-polarization. According to the theory, differences between school site educators and the personnel from the district office will become more pronounced during the project. Should differences not change or even moderate with time, the theory isn't supported.

## 5 Method

Instrumentation

In order to gauge participants' perceptions of the progress of reform an instrument was created in Likert format. The items were statements about the effect of the various roles and initiatives taken by the educators, some of them central office personnel and others site-based educators. The instruments<sup>1</sup> were reviewed for content validity by the district officials who wrote the original grant proposal. Internal consistency reliability (coefficient alpha) was determined for both of first and second year administrations.

In each of the first two years of the project, the instrument was administered to the certificated staff at the two elementary schools and to the personnel at the central office. The instrument allowed educators from each group to evaluate their own contributions to reform as well as the contributions of members of the other group.

#### Analysis

Because the data are opinions, and the issue is differences in opinion between the central office and the school site personnel, the statistical test is Mann-Whitney U. The test yields a value of z. The greater the value of z, the greater the magnitude of the opinion differences between the two groups.

## 6 Results

Table 1 indicates that 44 people completed the questionnaire during first year, 43 the second year. The difference reflects some minor turnover in one of the elementary schools. The table also indicates the participants' group assignments.

Reliability analysis produced coefficient alpha values of  $\alpha = .848$  and  $\alpha = .845$  for the first and second year data, respectively. With maximum values of 1.0, these measures suggest substantial internal consistency in the items.

Table 1

Number and Location of Respondents

Site	1st Year	2nd Year
District Office	9	9
Primary School #1	20	22
Primary School #2	15	12

**Table 1**

Table 2 lists the items for which district office educators' and school-site educators' responses were significantly different ( $p = .05$ ) in the first year. In addition to the value of the test statistic (z) and the probability (p) that such a difference could have occurred by chance, the table indicates which group most agreed with the statement.

Table 2

Significant Differences in Responses: Year One

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<sup>1</sup>The second year instrument was slightly different from that of the first year because of a few items added at the request of the administration.

Statement	Value of z	p	Group most agreeing
The support for site personnel has been adequate.	2.874	.004	District
The district office has helped reading improve.	3.117	.002	District
The district office has helped mathematics improve.	2.620	.009	District
Improvement expected by district office is appropriate.	2.718	.007	District
District office are aware of school site demographics.	2.489	.013	District
The district office allow for demographic differences.	2.412	.016	District
Central office personnel are eager to share resources.	4.008	.000	District
District interests may conflict with school site interests.	2.368	.018	School Site
School sites have adequate discretion over resources.	1.986	.047	District
New district software helps monitor student progress.	2.334	.020	District

**Table 2**

Perhaps one would expect there to be at least modest differences of opinion between groups simply because the members of the groups have different vantage points. School site personnel have a micro view of student progress, district personnel more of a macro view. The point of the statistical test is to provide a measure of whether the differences might accidentally occur between any two groups who view the same dynamic conditions from dissimilar positions. The alternative explanation is that the differences are not a random outcome but are likely to emerge whenever opinion from the two groups is sampled. During the first year of the project, there were non-random differences in the responses of central office and school site educators for 10 of the 21 items on the questionnaire, approximately 48%. For these 10 items where responses were significantly different, the mean value of the difference is  $z = 2.693$ .

By contrast, in the second year of the project (Table 3), differences between the two groups were significantly different for 19 of the items, or approximately 68%. For those 19 items, the mean value the difference measure is  $z = 3.139$ .

Table 3

Significant Differences in Responses: Year Two

Statement	z	p	Group most Agreeing
The support for site personnel has been adequate.	2.372	.018	District
The district office has helped reading improve.	2.991	.003	District
The district office has helped mathematics improve.	3.128	.002	District
Improvement expected by district office is appropriate.	3.762	.000	District
District office is aware of school site demographics.	3.436	.001	District
The district office allow for demographic differences.	2.042	.041	District
District office personnel are eager to share resources.	3.549	.000	District
District interests may conflict with school site interests.	3.509	.000	Site
New district software helps monitor student progress.	3.757	.000	District
Staff development for teaching faculty is adequate.	2.687	.016	District
District initiatives support language arts goals.	3.389	.002	District
District initiatives support mathematics goals.	2.989	.007	District
The reading program helps students meet standards.	3.565	.001	District
The new reading program allowed proper follow-up.	3.836	.000	District
The new math program allowed proper follow-up.	2.326	.042	District
I know which resources are available to teachers.	3.340	.001	District
Backgrounds keep students from reaching standards.	3.117	.002	Site
The district has expressed clear achievement goals.	3.015	.003	District
It would help teachers to have in-classroom coaches.	2.824	.005	District

**Table 3**

The items in Table 4 are those for which responses were significantly different in both years. The mean value of those items in the first year is  $z = 2.826$ . In the second year, the mean  $z = 3.099$ . Clearly, opinion became more divided with time.

Table 4

Items Common to both Year One and Year Two Questionnaires for which Responses were Significantly Different

Statement	Year 1 z	Year 2 z
The support for site personnel has been adequate.	2.874	2.372
The district office has helped reading improve.	3.117	2.991
The district office has helped math improve.	2.620	3.128
Improvement expected by district office is appropriate.	2.718	3.762
District office are aware of school site demographics.	2.489	3.436
The district office allow for demographic differences.	2.412	2.042
Central office personnel are eager to share resources.	4.008	3.549
District interests may conflict with school site interests.	2.368	3.509

**Table 4**

## 7 Discussion

Teaching, learning, and the people involved are each complex enough that any comprehensive explanation of reform difficulty must include many variables. Here we examined just the polarizing effect that time and discussion may have on two groups of educators with separate areas of responsibility. Different groups have distinct interests. Governments, for example, may be primarily interested in the technological progress that can occur with advances in mathematics and science. Parents may be more interested in seeing their children exposed to whatever universities require for admission. Within the school district there are also divisions and results here indicate that with time, they impact the way reforms are executed. The driving force for primary and secondary educators may be to protect programs and procedures which they helped create and in which they continue to have an interest. Perhaps it was this reality that prompted Cuban (1998) to observe that ‘schools change reforms as much as reforms change schools’ (p. 453).

One of the burdens of contemporary educational leadership is a very direct responsibility for improving student achievement (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). While all educators may agree on the need for change, the devil is in the details. Different groups have competing views about what exactly needs to be changed and about how well others are contributing. Data here indicate that as the reform period stretches out, the opinions become increasingly divided and the potential for meaningful change diminishes accordingly.

Certainly there were areas of agreement during the project studied here, but over two years, both the number of issues over which educators disagreed and the extent of the disagreement increased. It is a troubling combination. The need to improve student achievement may not be sufficiently compelling to maintain a common purpose between groups of people who have different views, particularly if there are fundamental disagreements about who is contributing and how to proceed.

Since group-induced polarization theory emerged from the business discipline (see, for example, Cecil, Cummings, & Chertkoff, 1973; Morgan & Beatty, 1976; Woodside, 1974), resolving the polarization may require a return to that same discipline. The management literature explains that when valued rewards are available to employees, commitment rises. A higher level of commitment is manifest in increased performance, lower absenteeism, and lower turn-over (Scholl, 1981). A logical next research step may be to determine whether consensus about education reform is easier to maintain when pay stipends, or other augmentations are available. With educators’ salaries based largely on the number of years of service and the level of one’s education, there may be insufficient inducement to abandon familiar practices and take on the increased work load involved in school reform.

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>

<sup>3</sup><http://hsb.baylor.edu/ramsower/acis/papers/elshinn.htm>