Successful Educational Reform: Lessons for Leaders, 2(9)

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Abstract

School systems across North America are struggling to bring about educational reform in a climate of relentless change and diminishing resources. This paper presents findings from a three-year study examining how a new high school successfully implemented educational reform using innovative strategies such as creating a culture of change, valuing collaboration and shared leadership. The lessons learned from this new high school are important to educational leaders looking to implement reform in their schools.

Introduction

School systems across North America are struggling to bring about educational reform in a climate of relentless change and diminishing resources. One of the challenges educators face is that educational reform to date has not worked (Sirotnik, 1986). The literature highlights many reasons. Leiberman (1995) states that the process is difficult and fraught with challenge and conflict. Siskin and Little (1995) assert that high schools are notably resistant to change. Others claim that attempts at reform require radically new approaches to leadership, which may be new to many educators (Fullan, 1993; Leiberman, 1995).
The purpose of this paper is to present findings from a three-year study examining how a new high school successfully implemented educational reform using innovative strategies.

**Methodology**

This study takes a case-study approach to understand the experiences of a new high school implementing educational reform. This study is part of a larger intensive three-year study examining the experiences of four school boards in Ontario implementing the Common Curriculum as mandated by the Ministry of Education and Training (1995). This study was supported by a grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

The new high school we examined in this study is located in Southern Ontario and opened in the fall of 1994. It has 70 staff members and a total of 1,100 students. It is part of a large suburban district with 68 elementary schools, 18 secondary schools, and a total of approximately 44,000 students and 2,450 teachers. The school serves a largely middle-class community. It has also taken an active role in being involved in its community by undertaking many partnerships with local agencies and members of the local neighbourhood.

We conducted in-depth, unstructured interviews, guided by the work of Spradley (1979), Mischler (1986) and Seidman (1990). The theory, technique and practice of interpretative inquirers such as Bogdan and Biklin (1992), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Gleshne and Peshkin (1992) guided the inquiry process. In the first year of our study we interviewed the principal, seven teachers, and three members of the school advisory council. In year two of our study, we interviewed the principal, vice-principal and eight teachers. In the third year of the study we interviewed the principal, eight teachers, and the chair and co-chair of the school advisory council. In the second and third years of the study the researcher (first author) conducted the interviews, transcribed the data, then coded and categorized the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The data were then analyzed in detail by the research team over several meetings.

**The Findings**

The findings from this study revealed three important and interdependent strategies that appear to be critical in successfully implementing educational reform. These include creating a culture of change, valuing collaboration, and sharing leadership.

**Creating A Culture of Change**

From our observations, this school has been very successful in creating a culture which is open to change. The staff and students appear to view change as a friendly constant. Part of the reason may be that this is a new school, one where the principal and vice-principal have been able to bring together a group of teachers who share similar values and beliefs. Yet despite the positive culture of change seen at this new school, challenges do exist. One challenge involves what the principal refers to as the "pull of
the past" where "old ways of doing things still surface from time to time, and slow down the school's progress." This has been quite a challenge for the principal. He explained, "I am surprised how quickly we can revert to the traditional ways of doing things. You have to have a constant focus and understanding of how you are trying to do things differently, or you just go back. I've done it myself on a number of occasions." Even now in the third year, the principal still sees this as a constant threat to the organization. "Our greatest challenge still is not letting the system pull us back to the old ways of doing things." Therefore, even in a new school, the "pull of the past" can serve as an impediment to change.

What the principal has come to learn is what he refers to as the "the fragility of the organization," or how "significant events can alter the organization." To deal with these threats, the staff regularly takes time to review the organization's mandate and outcomes. This helps them remain vigilant in their efforts to maintain a culture that is open to change.

**Valuing Collaboration**

This school also demonstrates a fundamental valuing of collaboration. Throughout our interviews, teachers at all grade levels commented on the collaborative climate evident within the school. This collaborative climate is partly due to the principal who believes that one "can't function in the organization by being an isolate." Therefore, every effort is made to encourage collaboration among staff. One approach that has encouraged collaboration is the way in which the teacher workrooms have been organized. The teachers' desks are located in one large area instead of being organized around subject or discipline areas. This has helped teachers to interact with colleagues from outside their own specialty areas. Teachers also have gained a greater appreciation for the skills and abilities of their colleagues. One teacher said:

The workrooms in this school are integrated and that is very different. If I were in another school, I would only be with drama and art people. Here I sit beside a computer science teacher. At first, I thought, "Oh this will be interesting." Yet, I found where we differ is actually a benefit. There's a lot to gain from understanding the differences. I believe this school eliminates isolation and brings many different teachers together.

As another teacher observed, "I find the more I work with other teachers, the more I want to work with them. It's becoming natural in this school. I also find that collaboration helps me to think in a more integrated way. So as I work with other teachers, I see how we can work together to better integrate our courses." A senior level teacher has also found that, "as teachers begin to collaborate more, they see opportunities to begin to integrate aspects of their courses." It seems then that collaboration can help teachers think in a more integrated manner.

Another approach which has encouraged collaboration, is having teachers work together to create a new outcomes-based, integrated curriculum. When the school first opened, integrated curriculum and outcome-based learning was new to many teachers. But the staff was encouraged to work together and after a couple of years it is something that, as the principal told us, "has permeated the building."
Despite the school's success in learning to work collaboratively, there are challenges. One of the challenges which teachers frequently spoke about involved having the necessary time to build effective relationships. Many teachers commented that because of all the work that there is to do in this school, they feel they do not have the time to build meaningful working relationships with their colleagues. Therefore, lack of time impedes the collaboration process. To cope, several teachers deliberately used any opportunity to nurture relationships with their colleagues. As one teacher explained, "I really see it as a process of being proactive and building relationships with my colleagues on an ongoing basis. So if I see a teacher that I don't know that well at the photocopier, I will go up to the person and introduce myself and begin a conversation. I think that's all the kind of stuff we have to do more of here."

**Shared Leadership**

Another important strategy critical to implementing successful educational reform at this school is the focus on shared leadership. The chair of the school's advisory council states that leadership in the school is very much shared among the administrators, the teachers, the students and members of the advisory council.

One way this has been done is by creating a non-hierarchical structure. A variety of "leadership teams" have been created which are organized around several "key process areas" such as evaluation and assessment, curriculum. These teams are led by teachers and in some cases, students. These key process teams share the leadership among teachers and students. They also serve to create a school structure where decisions are made collectively among staff members rather than by traditional department heads.

Another approach to shared leadership is through the school's Teacher Advisory Groups. Every teacher leads an advisory group consisting of approximately 20 students from all grade levels. These groups meet weekly to discuss and work on issues important to the school's overall success. During these meetings, students also discuss their personal, academic or career-related concerns.

Both of these strategies have played an important part in expanding the leadership roles of both teachers and students. This is especially evident in the views held by many of the teachers. The teachers we interviewed see themselves as leaders. A drama teacher said, "I see myself very much as a leader within this school in two ways. I help students and I also seem to play an important role in helping my coworkers cope with all the change." The chair of the advisory council states that students have also been encouraged to take leadership roles. "They are very much involved in the decisions made at this school. The students therefore see the school as theirs; they don't just attend it. Everyone takes ownership in this school."

**Discussion**

The findings from this study suggest that an emphasis on creating a culture of change, valuing collaboration, and facilitating shared leadership are interdependent and interconnected processes which are critical to successfully implementing educational reform.
Creating A Culture Of Change: Reculturing And Restructuring

Overall, the success of this school has come about because it has taken a two-pronged approach to educational reform. The school has engaged in reculturing (changing the values, beliefs, and norms) by creating a school culture that is very open to change. The school has also engaged in restructuring by providing new structures to support changing practices through fostering collaboration and shared leadership.

There is support within the literature for this two-pronged approach to educational reform. For example, Fullan (1996) believes that it is reculturing that will ultimately make the difference in educational reform. He states that approaches that only change structures (like the popular move toward redefining department head roles) and leave the culture intact are doomed. This is supported by Siskin (1995) who found that when attempts are made to separate departmental subgroups by integrating workrooms, teachers tend to eventually retreat back to departments. A key part of the reason, according to Siskin and Little (1995) is that "secondary teachers do consistently frame their work in terms of subject and departments" (p. 1). This usually leads to the formation of subgroups around subject areas. It appears then that doing something different requires extraordinary resources and stamina as teachers graduate back to their comfort zones and departmental boundaries.

Leiberman (1995) also discussed the importance of reculturing by saying that comprehensive change requires focusing on issues of reculturing and the transformation of the school, rather than on specific innovations. "Changing schools demands changing practices and that the structures must be built to support these practices, [this] leads then towards cultures of colleagueship, continuous inquiry and collaborative work that may well mark the organizational path to the schools of the future" (p. 15). A policy for restructuring and reculturing that is successful needs to support participation, learning, and risk-taking, for these are essential to learning-centered teaching (Darling-Hammond, 1995). Serious restructuring must begin with how the changes will affect the students' learning. Schools that start by exploring the best practices for teaching and learning will be able to make positive changes for learners more quickly. For success, decision-making needs to be as near as possible to school and students or changes will not be applied. Ownership needs to be with all stakeholders—all teachers and parents—not just "insider groups". In this respect, "restructuring is a constructivist process" (p. 170). In other words, restructuring is a process where each teachers and parents need to be directly involved so they can come to make meaning of the changes taking place within their school settings.

Fullan (1991) also reminds us that until teachers have subjective meaning for a change, it will be impossible to mandate changed values, beliefs, and norms. Teachers must arrive at a personal meaning of what the change means to them and how it will impact their teaching practices. In coming to subjective meaning, teachers need sustained support to try out new practices and learn new theory when they are asked to make fundamental changes in what they teach and how they teach it—if they are to effectively make the change their own (Shepard, 1995). However, to Fullan (1996), the challenge is that most change efforts carried out by schools involve only 5% of those who need to become involved. He argues that a critical mass working toward reform--
suggesting that the involvement of 30% to 40% of teachers--could make a significant difference to the restructuring movement.

Based on this discussion, teacher involvement is at the crux of reculturing and restructuring. The success of the school is largely due to the support for change among the teachers. From our observation, the majority of staff at this school supports change and is involved in creating a culture of change. The experience of this school indicates that there is always a threat to revert to old ways of working. So far, the staff at the school has managed to continue to work in innovative ways. Yet, it remains to be seen how they will fare in the future.

**Valuing Collaboration**

Hargreaves (1994) says that collaboration is a critical issue in reculturing. By his definition, collaboration at this school does not seem contrived; rather, the school has developed a culture of "collaborative collegiality" (Hargreaves, 1994). Clark and Clark (1996) state that, "cultures that support change are built around collegial relationships that emphasize school improvement through collaboration" (p. 1). The literature also states that collaborative work patterns are highly dependent on school structure (Clift, Veal, Holland, Johnson & McCarthy, 1995). Schools that are highly structured and hierarchical limit opportunities for collaboration. Schools that are flatter, facilitate collaboration among teachers.

A particular strength of this school is the fundamental valuing of collaboration as seen among the teachers. Teachers at all grade levels have commented on the high collaborative climate evident within the school. Teachers are involved in a variety of levels of collaboration (Ross, 1995) from information exchange, joint planning and participation, to concurrent implementation and joint implementation. Several teachers report that the more they collaborate with their colleagues the more they want to collaborate. Furthermore, we found that as teachers begin to collaborate with each other, they begin to see more opportunities for integration. Therefore, collaboration is an important part of creating integrated curriculum.

The findings from this study also suggest that the role of teachers as learners lies at the heart of collaboration (Morgan & Morgan, 1992). The willingness and a commitment on the part of teachers to learn is a foundation for continuous improvement (Nias, Southworth, & Campbell, 1992). Peterson, McCarthey and Elmore (1996) state that changing structures alone will not produce new processes. "Changing practice is primarily a problem of learning, not a problem of organization. Teachers who see themselves as learners work continuously to develop new understanding and improve practices (p. 148)". The teachers at this school see themselves as learners. They learned to assume leadership roles through their involvement in the Teacher Advisory Groups. They also learned how to work together in a collaborative way with their fellow teachers, and with the community.

**Shared Leadership**

Fullan (1993) states that the role of the principal must change in the face of a rapidly changing educational context. Leaders must possess exceptional abilities to nurture relationships with others. Leaders must also be able to "learn to influence and coordinate non-linear, dynamically complex, change
processes" (p. 75). In reality, the new work of leaders is to ensure that everyone in the organization becomes a leader. Leiberman (1995) found a shift from principal as instructional leader of the 1980s to "principals as active partners with teachers involved in a collaborative quest to examine school practices to see how they can improve what the school is doing for all of its students. Principals do not control, but rather support teachers, helping to create opportunities for them to grow and develop" (p.9).

The principal and vice-principal at this school have done several innovative things that go beyond merely supporting to actually empowering staff and students (Reitzug, 1994; Reitzug & Burrello, 1995). They demonstrate a leadership style that focuses on providing support, freedom to learn and sharing of leadership. The necessity of administration support is widely reported in the literature (Reitzug & Burrello, 1995; Schlecty, 1991). Reitzug (1994) suggests that empowering principal behaviour goes beyond traditional concepts of a supportive administration. The supportive and empowering principal provides autonomy over instructional practice, shifts problem-solving responsibility to teachers, communicates trust, encourages risk-taking, and models inquiry. This principal facilitates critical reflection and provides teachers with tangible resources.

**Conclusion**

Underlying successful educational reform is the courage to approach the process of education in very different ways. This process is based on three interdependent processes: creating a culture of change, valuing collaboration, and sharing leadership among all stakeholders. This school's success has come about because it recognized that teachers are at the crux of successful educational reform. As a result, teachers have been given the freedom to grow and develop. They have been given the opportunity to work collaboratively with their colleagues. Teachers and students are also seen as leaders within the school and the community. Despite the successes, our findings also suggest that implementing educational reform is not easy. It is a "collaborative quest" filled with challenges. To deal with these challenges, all the school's stakeholders require strong commitment and perseverance. The experiences of this new high school have provided us with one example of how to implement educational reform using innovative strategies. It is hoped that these lessons will be helpful to leaders of other schools undertaking similar reforms.

**References**


Author Notes

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