

The Teacher's Role in School Improvement

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In recent years, considerable attention has been focused on studying the school improvement process and identifying and describing effective schools and classrooms. Across the diverse bodies of research, one factor consistently appears to be critical: people.

School personnel, particularly teachers and principals, are a vital link in improvement efforts. At the level of classroom practice, teachers are significant, if not the paramount players. As Purkey and Smith indicate in their recent synthesis and critique of research on effective schools, change "will not take place without the support and commitment of teachers."¹ Thus, failure to understand the relationship of teachers to the school improvement process can result in a corresponding failure to improve the level of education provided by our schools.

One of the primary purposes of the Study of Dissemination Efforts Supporting School Improvement² was to gain greater insight into this relationship, by focusing on school improvement as the implementation of new curricula and instructional practices. During the course of the study, we examined efforts to implement 61 such innovative practices in schools and classrooms in 146 districts nationwide. What we found is that throughout the country, teachers are experimenting with and implementing new practices with remarkable success. More specifically, we found that new practices that have been implemented have remained in use (even though some were adopted as early as 1974) and resulted in considerable

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Teachers can successfully implement programs without altering them, if given the right kind of support and assistance.



change in classroom practice. The new practices have been implemented with a high degree of attention to accurately duplicating what the developer of the practice considers to be its key components or elements, what we label "fidelity" or "replication." Most importantly, teachers are very satisfied with the practices and report myriad benefits to themselves and to their students.

Successful implementation of new practices is occurring at a high rate—and it is in large part due to the efforts of teachers. But why and how are these changes being brought about? Without the answer to this question, we remain observers of the improvement process, unable to influence its outcomes. Fortunately, our study gave us new insight into the factors that contribute to success, especially to teachers' efforts to improve their classroom practice. Among these factors are teacher commitment, exemplary practices, training, and administrator leadership—not an uncommon list. But, we found these factors interacting in some quite uncommon ways that resulted in, among other things, highly committed teachers using with a high degree of fidelity innovations they had neither developed nor chosen. A strange, unconventional picture? In this article, we describe how it evolved.

The Development of Teacher Commitment

No one disputes the key role of commitment in school improvement. Nearly every recent research study³ confirms what school people have known for years. We, too, found that teacher commitment was correlated highly to many of the outcomes we measured. But the big question for both researchers and practitioners is, "How does commitment develop?" and, going one step further, "What can be done to develop

commitment?"

Past work and conventional wisdom concentrate on the development of commitment "up front" by involving teachers in problem solving and decision making (as in Goodlad's DDAE process⁴) and in developing new materials and strategies (as in the Rand Change Agent studies⁵). The image one gets is of teachers heavily involved in shaping what they will be doing in their classrooms, either developing new practices themselves, or adapting externally developed practices to meet their individual situations.

According to this view, then, teacher commitment is developed by the act of invention or by engagement in a bargaining process with administrators that allows teachers to make an innovation work for them. But we join many others⁶ who have observed deleterious (or, at best, nil) effects of this process—innovations losing both their punch and their effectiveness because they are changed beyond recognition. Harmony is preserved; improvement is stymied.

Our study allows us to offer an alternative image for successful improvement efforts because we discovered commitment developing *after* implementation, after teachers were actively engaged in using a new practice. We found that with clear, direct leadership from building and central office administrators, training by a credible person in the use of a practice that was known to be effective, and continued support and assistance, teachers tried the new practice, mastered it, saw results with their students, and developed a strong sense of ownership. And this with little or no early involvement in problem solving, selection, or decision making.

What actually is happening with the teacher is of paramount importance to our alternate view of school improvement. The contributions of administra-

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tor leadership and assistance are described elsewhere in this issue. Huberman, for instance, describes administrators' roles in setting expectations for teachers' use of a new practice, with little or no latitude to change it, and ensuring continued support for its use. Cox, in her article, discusses the different and necessary kinds of help that are provided as the implementation unfolds. But direction and help are external to the teacher. There are two more factors that appear to affect the teacher in more personal ways—exemplary practices and credible conveyors of those practices. Here we describe their interplay as teachers engage in the change process.

Exemplary Practices

Unless the practice is exemplary—an innovation that really works—teachers will not see results and the effort will fail. It is useful to note that many earlier studies did *not* look at teachers implementing such practices; they either studied unproven practices or they concentrated on the process of change, which in part explains their different images of successful school improvement efforts. For example, Rand⁷ examined federally funded local development efforts—responses to, among others, local needs in reading, bilingual education, and vocational education. School people did not select proven practices, but rather pieced together ideas from teachers, district specialists, and outside consultants, which separately or together did not have a proven track record. Some worked, some didn't. Likewise, the work of people such as Goodlad⁸ and Gross, Giaquinta, and Bernstein⁹ concentrated more on the process of innovation and less on what was actually implemented in teachers' classrooms.

Most of the practices we examined were validated for effectiveness by feder-

al or state panels. Others had been developed by districts or intermediate service agencies with federal funds, and their development had benefited from what their federal sponsors and the school people themselves had learned from earlier failures (reported by Rand and others). They had become more sophisticated in the art of local development, incorporating such ideas as pilot testing and evaluation into their efforts.

So the use of exemplary practices is a cornerstone of our image of successful change. But what makes teachers take the step of abandoning their well-honed strategies for something new and, in some cases, dramatically different? We believe it is the purveyor of the new practice, usually its developer.

Emulation and Replication

Teachers are, in a sense, natural emulators. Because of a variety of constraints, including limited time and resources, community expectations, federal regulations, diverse student ability, and large class size, teachers seldom have the opportunity to be innovative in the classical sense of the term. Instead, the

process they go through in changing their practice is one of "imitation or emulation under conditions of noncompetition in a profession where status rewards accrue for revealing 'trade secrets' to others."¹⁰ It is this process of emulating the "revealers of trade secrets" that provides an important clue in understanding how school improvement works.

Teachers often emulate one another on an informal basis, adapting or adopting the successful practices of peers they judge to be successful and effective. In our study, we saw more formal opportunities for emulation created by federal strategies such as the National Diffusion Network and similar state networks that have been developed to disseminate exemplary practices. Unlike most inservice opportunities for teachers, these networks do not rely primarily on university professors, consultants, or other outside experts to present the new practices. Instead, the expert is more often a natural role model for teachers—a peer, another teacher whose classroom practice has been judged exemplary and effective. As the networks for sharing



Project Catch-Up teacher and elementary



Students build math skills.

information about exemplary practices have developed and grown, so have the numbers and abilities of practitioners who choose to assume the role of disseminator. The articulate, charismatic practitioner-presenter is becoming the rule rather than the exception.

That the presenter of the new practice is another teacher, implicitly sharing similar experiences and a common collegial bond with other teachers, tends to increase credibility. This credibility is further enhanced by the fact that the teacher's practice has been formally evaluated, and then validated by an official federal or state panel. If the presenter is articulate and demonstrates an understanding of classroom reality, even more credibility is gained. And, if the presenter is sufficiently charismatic to transmit the excitement, fulfillment, and satisfaction of developing and using a successful and effective practice, it is likely that some teachers will emulate the practice.

A credible, dynamic, charismatic presenter armed with a validated, exemplary practice consistent with the values and capabilities of the adopting teacher

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can be a compelling—and effective—force behind implementation. He or she can help dissipate some of the well-founded skepticism many teachers feel about new practices. These conditions can set the cycle of emulation, and ultimately implementation and replication, in motion. This initial momentum is critical if teachers are to engage in the practices in the classroom and see results with their students, thus completing at least one cycle of the improvement process.

Completing the Picture

The ingredients of successful change are many and they are complicated. People responsible for improvement are faced with encouraging teachers to try new practices and helping them to sustain such efforts. Earlier research and much of today's accepted practices rest heavily on involving teachers early in the improvement process, negotiating what is implemented and, therefore, settling in many cases for small changes in classrooms that resemble much of what was being done before. Our alternative picture rests on the fact that solid solutions to real school classroom problems do exist—solutions that have been developed through both research and practice. Teachers are willing to implement these solutions, but to do so they need concrete and continuous help from credible people and clear direction from their building and district administrators. With these ingredients in place, the results can be strong commitment and benefits to students and teachers alike. □

¹S. C. Purkey and M. S. Smith, “Too Soon to Cheer? Synthesized Research on Effective Schools and Educational Leadership,” *Elementary School Journal* 40 (1982): 64–69.

²David P. Crandall and associates, *People, Policies, and Practices: Examining the Chain*

of *School Improvement* (Andover, Mass.: The NETWORK, Inc., 1982).

³See, for example, Paul Berman and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, *Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change. Vol. IV: Summary* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1975); Karen S. Louis and Sheila Rosenblum, *Linking R&D with Schools: A Program and Its Implications for Dissemination and School Improvement Policy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Abt Associates Inc., 1981); and John A. Emrick and Susan M. Peterson, *A Synthesis of Findings Across Five Recent Studies in Educational Dissemination and Change* (San Francisco: Far West Laboratory, 1978).

⁴Mary M. Bentzen, *Changing Schools: The Magic Feather Principle* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974).

⁵Berman and McLaughlin, *Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change. Vol. IV: Summary*.

⁶See, for example, Gene E. Hall and Susan F. Loucks, *Innovation Configurations: Analyzing the Adaptation of Innovations* (Austin, Texas: R&D Center for Teacher Education, 1978); and Emrick and Peterson, *A Synthesis of Findings Across Five Recent Studies in Educational Dissemination and Change*.

⁷Berman and McLaughlin, *Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change. Vol. IV: Summary*.

⁸Bentzen, *Changing Schools: The Magic Feather Principle*.

⁹N. Gross, J. Giacuinta, and M. Bernstein, *Implementing Organizational Innovations: A Sociological Analysis of Planned Educational Change* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

¹⁰David P. Crandall, “Emulation and Replication: The Unspoken Covenants of School Improvement,” *Teacher Education and Special Education* 4 (1981): 13–22.

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