

Comments on the School Improvement Study: The Whole Is More Than The Sum of The Parts

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In other research we have done, we suggest that attempts to implement programs using approaches that have proven successful in such technical-oriented systems as engineering, agriculture, and medicine have not fared as well as in craft-oriented school settings. As we reviewed the Dissemination Efforts Supporting School Improvement articles, however, we were impressed to find the emergence of a dissemination approach that works in schools rather than technical organizations.

The "technical" approach to school change is based on scientific research, using a planned problem-solving technique. It is concerned with outputs in relation to goals, and information about improvements is shared via well-developed technical information systems. In contrast, the craft-oriented approach to change uses technology according to custom and tradition. Day-to-day decisions are based on nonrational, intuitive, subjective data. The craft-oriented approach is concerned with processes rather than outputs; and information is passed along through trusted, informal networks.

What is needed is a craft dissemination system that can fit the bureaucratic hierarchy of school structures, as well as the loosely coupled craft of teaching. And this is exactly what we found in the Study of Dissemination Efforts.

We strongly believe that the articles must be read as a whole. Selecting one or two articles as reference, or to stand on their own, results in an incomplete, possibly even distorted, understanding. The whole of these articles is much more than the sum of the parts.

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For example, one could read the Huberman and Miles articles and probably conclude (1) that successful implementation and institutionalization occur when administrators announce loud and clear that a program will be implemented; (2) that administrators must remain firm, insisting on developer fidelity and holding teachers' feet close to the fire, while at the same time providing lots of support to them. If, however, the Loucks, Cox, Crandall, and Loucks/Zacchei articles are considered *with* the Huberman and Miles articles, a somewhat different view emerges—one that provides the contexts for the successes described by Miles and Huberman. Four of these contexts, or interactive sets of relationships, are important to effective implementation and institutionalization. These are:

1. You gotta know the territory
2. Loosely coupled and it's only politics
3. Choosing a program to fit, or fitting the program you choose
4. Providing craft support.

You Gotta Know the Territory

Change agents in schools must learn very early that "you gotta know the territory." There is a way of doing things, a history of change, as well as informal craft networks of teachers and administrators in every school and school district. Without knowledge and information about these "territories," one enters the mine field of school improvement without a map.

The School Improvement Study articles identify these concerns in such teacher comments, as, "Things keep going here unless there's a big wave" or "We're always changing things here." In the first situation, the history suggests that unless other things are done first, the likelihood of success is minimal—



no matter how good the project, how smart the people, or how much administrative muscle is applied. In the second, the history suggests that if people are smart in how they approach implementation, there is likelihood of success. Huberman's organizational "scripts" are enduring and difficult to overcome. To know your organizational history and to understand your organizational culture is to begin to know how to change that culture. Thus, "know thyself" is good advice for organizations as well as people.

Loosely Coupled and It's Only Politics

Many researchers have described schools as loosely coupled systems,

Successful programs manage to meet the needs of both loosely coupled schools and the formal bureaucratic structure.

Project Catch-Up



which give individuals a high degree of autonomy in how they carry out their work (Weick, 1976; Cohen and March, 1974; Scott, Meyer, and Deal, 1980). Schools are often used as models of loosely coupled systems because their continued support and survival appear to depend on their ability to respond to divergent constituent groups. One natural characteristic of the school as a loosely coupled system, then, is the difficulty of establishing any sort of standardized practice. An informal covenant exists between teachers and principals in relation to implementing new programs; these informal agreements about roles are the glue that holds loosely coupled systems together.

Change is a largely political process. Principals and central office administrators are given the role of interacting with constituents and determining what goal and need responses are required. Teachers respond to administrator requests but retain major control over what they actually implement in their classrooms. These articles take such informal covenants one step further. How administrators announce the importance of new programs and the intensity of their later support send a message to teachers about the political context—how important it is that a meaningful response is required. The six articles indicate that administrators send these messages by (1) making public announcements, (2)

providing personnel and fiscal resources, (3) identifying an extended time period for implementation, (4) regular monitoring and checking on progress, (5) supporting craft ways of learning, and (6) providing recognition and status to those who excel with the new program.

When teachers receive all these messages, the School Improvement Study suggests, their response is akin to, "This must be important if they're putting this much time and money into it." Without this administrative emphasis, the message to teachers is that the importance of the implementation is less crucial and, therefore, that program adaptations (and loss of fidelity) are possible. The authors do not suggest that a directive position with heavy accountability and monitoring will by itself accomplish implementation. They suggest that administrators and teachers have informally worked out ways to be sure everyone understands the level of implementation required. Administrators are expected to be authoritative as part of their role. How seriously this authority is to be taken by teachers depends on the additional messages they receive.

Choosing a Program to Fit, or Fitting the Program You Choose

Fidelity of implementation compared to teacher adaptation has generated concern, controversy, and research since the Rand study (Berman and McLaughlin, 1974). Emrick and Peterson (1979) and Hall and Loucks (1976) have identified a major problem with implementation: how to replicate a successful pro-

gram so that the successful outcomes of that program are also achieved. Mechanical use of a program cannot produce the same results for the adopter as it did for the developer. We know that teachers, left on their own, will often adapt a program so that it fits their own practice. For those in the change roles that Cox discusses, the problem is how to know for sure what has been implemented. It has been assumed that fidelity to replication has something to do with this. Implementing programs that fit the school or district situation is another aspect of this concern.

The School Improvement Study articles offer us some new and important insights. Yes, they say, you can implement with fidelity and commitment; but the fit they describe is not the one that has traditionally been identified as fitting a need (a new reading, P.E., or learning disability program, for instance). Their fit is a craft/cultural type. The most important fit is the one between the world view of the new program and the world view of the teachers. The Crandall and Cox articles focus on this aspect of the implementation process. In the situations where there is a close world-view fit, fidelity of practice often follows. The greater the discrepancy between the two world views, the more important it is for outsiders with credibility to assist with the adaptations in order to maintain fidelity of the new program and to promote a better fit between world views.

Administrators need to consider whether some programs cannot be implemented in some social systems. It is erroneous, in our view, and we believe the School Improvement Study would support this, to assume that even with the right techniques any group of teachers can successfully implement anything. For example, if teachers have a strongly held, holistic view of learning and the adoption is a directive instructional management program, the result will probably be discontinuation, regardless of the implementation techniques involved. The world views are too discrepant. As Cox indicates, administrators must consider the world-view fit when selecting new programs because the fit relates to time, resources, and processes needed to implement successfully.

Providing Craft Support

Crandall points out that the teachers must "make sense of" the new program if it is to be successfully implemented.

The articles discuss the need for providing support to teachers over time if the innovation is to be successfully implemented and institutionalized. Four articles identified specific, crucial types of support: teaming, coaching, demonstration, and restructuring the use of time. Such support is different than what has been traditionally provided to those in schools. We identify the following steps in traditional implementation:

1. The type of teacher support that is provided is all too often limited primarily to learning the technique and other "technologies" of a new program, usually in a short workshop format.

2. Teaching materials and other needed products for a new program are provided.

3. Help is offered by the principal and/or central office personnel only when a teacher requests it.

4. The principal and/or someone from the central office drops by once in a while to "see how things are going."

We call these steps "delivering the product." When such approaches have worked in the past, it has been because teachers on their own have gotten together in informal networks and helped one another, usually promoting new programs in which they believed.

What these authors—particularly Cox, Crandall, and Loucks—suggest is of a very different nature. They describe a support system that makes use of and encourages the craft ways of teaching, which teachers normally utilize. The support that is provided (1) calls for a variety of people to help at school sites; (2) promotes teacher networks through teaming, demonstrating, coaching, and similar techniques; and (3) provides time for teachers to work things out. Somehow, support seems like such an inadequate word to describe this synergistic process.

In effect, the Study authors suggest that successful implementation and institutionalization approaches support and enhance the traditional roles of teachers and principals in loosely coupled schools. Administrators are given a more visible role in the change process and are expected to control and direct decisions about what is to be improved, the selection of programs, and the providing of resources. Teachers assume control and responsibility, with considerable help, for fitting the new practice into classroom use. Both Miles and Huberman point out that when this is done in an interactive way, with continued communication among the partici-

pants over a sufficient amount of time, the likelihood of a successful implementation is enhanced. In fact, implementation is working when the success that people experience results in commitment. Therefore, commitment is an outcome variable, not necessarily something you start with.

Implications

There are at least two important implications for those who are concerned about school change:

1. A variety of new roles have to be learned if such implementations are to occur. We suspect that not only do the change roles and people Cox talks about not exist in most schools, but the training for such persons does not exist either within districts or in other organizations, except perhaps informally. We need to get about the business of helping these roles to emerge and assisting people with learning them.

2. School organizations that develop organizational patterns of implementation similar to the most successful School Improvement Study sites will evolve into very different organizations. The Study suggests that people in categories I and II also developed new organizational arrangements in schools. A series of such changes will produce a very different school structure.

Successfully implementing new effective programs may be the way schools will transform themselves in order to meet the demands of our emerging technological society. □

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