

Viewing Contemporary Educational Transitions through the Lenses of Cognitive and Organizational Science

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Abstract: Classroom teachers, building principals and district superintendents are realizing that successful past practices for fostering instructional improvement may be incongruent with the skills and knowledge students need for world class learning and successful futures in a 2.0 world. Research analysis is most informative when it fosters the juxtaposition of social constructs in a manner that brings a more complex and a more complete understanding of research intent and findings. This work shares how three experienced educators approached research challenges related to three contemporary transitions in the business of schooling. Their work serves as a platform for reformers committed to giving attention to the playing field on which both sociological and psychological elements vie for attention, affirmation and appreciation from an audience of often confused and critical spectators. All cases shared in this work reflect a cyclical, reflective, and interactive approach to keeping pace with changing social and educational circumstances. All remind us that understanding the conditions of instructional change becomes a useful window through which to assess the degree of change.

Keywords: systems thinking, distributed leadership, instructional supervision

1. Introduction

A decade prior to the transition to the 21st century John Goodlad (1990) claimed that the local school system was the site for effecting a new era of education because it was the playing field for both those who planned change and those who enacted those plans. Now, over a decade into the new millennium, I return to the significance of this critical environment suggested by Goodlad and I draw the reader's attention to how concepts from cognitive and organizational science provide useful lenses through which to view the arena of contemporary educational change.

Although I was schooled in an age of Newtonian physics, predictable outcomes, experimental design, and cause-effect relationships, I am today more intrigued by the ways in which concepts from the social sciences can serve as analytical filters through which to examine sociological transitions in organizations and psychological transitions in the beliefs and actions of individuals working within those organizations. This article considers three contemporary educational transitions and the individual and organizational challenges surrounding them. They are: (1) a systems approach to instructional innovations, (2) a distributed approach instructional leadership, and (3) a collaborative approach to instructional supervision. In three case studies, conducted by students whose research I

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directed, the integration of concepts from cognitive psychology and organizational science offered insight into understanding these educational transitions. From cognitive psychology this work reflects issues of self efficacy, emotional intelligence, creativity, and constructivist learning. From organizational science, it makes use of concepts associated with systems thinking, motivation, and human relations.

Case studies are a useful venue for examining educational challenges through an integrated format in which social concepts from different domains can be juxtaposed in an informative manner (Stake, 1995; Meriam, 1998). Case studies can enable the tracing of an organization's evolutionary path; and case studies can illuminate the alignment between espoused initiatives and enacted realities (Yin, 2006). These realities include the fact that the global economy into which students graduate has changed. The technological arena in which learning takes place continues to rapidly evolve, and the community cultures in which local schools are imbedded are politically altered with each election. Improved student learning has historically been viewed as the critical outcome within this ever-changing system; and educational research consistently affirms that improved student learning is dependent on improved instructional practices (Danielson, 2007, 2009, 2013). Such changes in instructional practice, however, most often involve changed organizational procedures. This article discusses: (1) procedural changes relative to a systems perspective on instructional innovation, (2) promises and the problems encountered in the process of moving away from traditional beliefs in labeled leadership to a distributed or shared approach to instructional decision making, and (3) modifications involved in the shift from traditional supervisory procedures to collaborative monitoring of the instruction of students and the professional development of staff.

2. Attention to a Systemic Perspective Regarding Instructional Innovations

Phillip Schlechty's (1997, 2005, 2009) research in North America suggests that educators at any level set a course for failure when they choose a sales rather than a marketing approach to school improvement. This sales mentality translates into pushing existing programs and procedures rather than a process of continuous monitoring, assessing and innovating. Research conducted by Dr. Tammy Wolickcki (2009) was grounded in Schlechty's (2005) conceptual framework of six critical systems central to innovative educational improvement.

Specifically, Dr. Wolicki (2009) identified and examined changes to the organizational and cultural systems considered critical to educational transformation. The focus of her study was the transformed leadership process experienced by two reform teams participating in one particular educational leadership initiative. The site and population included two public school districts and involved superintendents, principals, and teachers. Dr. Wolicki's data portrayal and analysis depicts how twenty first century educators deal with social pressures in accomplishing and sustaining new initiatives. Combined archival and interview data gathering procedures provided insight into the beliefs and the behaviors of individuals who were both confused and inspired on this playing field of instructional innovation. Her incorporation of the social factors central to Schlechty's (2005) defining systems in educational innovation organized the exploration of both individual and institutional changes experienced by participants holding different titles and playing different roles in the arena of educational change. As she reflected upon the meaning of her own findings and how they aligned with findings of recognized authors of change related issues, she concluded that the playing field upon which the planners and the participants involved in this initiative met, argued, and compromised most reflected Michael Fullan's (2005) perspectives on implementing and sustaining change.

Dr. Wolicki's (2009) carefully recorded experiences about how contemporary educators addressed an array of challenges surrounding changed instructional innovations provides insight to others seeking a more connective context for envisioning and for enacting systemic reform. In order to further examine the human relations element foundational to any redistribution of roles, responsibilities and authoritative power, we turn now to a second transformative initiative in education — that of distributed leadership.

3. Attention to Shared Decision Making Relative to Instructional Improvement

A longstanding obstacle to school reform is connecting that which is legally required with that which is locally restricted by the mind set of individuals upon whom a new definition of success depends. Today's challenges involve not only closing student achievement gaps but engaging teachers and administrators in meaningful conversation and shared decision making regarding instructional strategies. Although approaches to improve problem solving and decision making have been vast and varied, one current initiative involves a shift from viewing instructional leadership as the responsibility and role of a single labeled individual to a focus on the multiple contributors to student success. This contemporary transformation involves the reorganization of educators with different job descriptions and compartmental niches into collaborative teams committed to the benefit of students. Distributed problem solving promotes an atmosphere in which leadership opportunities may emerge not only from the top-down, but also from within the trenches where student needs are first observed by teachers who recognize the need for data to help drive instruction, for new resources or for the opportunity to work in partnership with their peers to propose new instructional strategies. Within this transformed model, the principal or building administrator is able to step-back, when appropriate, and to allow those who have the contextual knowledge base to assume the primary role in instructional decision-making (Spillane, 2001, 2005, 2006). Dr. Matthew Curci's (2012) research addresses the developmental evolution of individuals in moving toward this distributed leadership approach. His use of Hall and Hord's (1997, 2001, 2004) framework of different levels of concern presents a useful way to depict teacher perceptions relative to their progression toward transformed beliefs and actions.

Like Dr. Wolicki, Dr. Curci used a case study approach focused on a local playing field. He employed interviews a primary source of data gathering and centered his analysis of data in a framework of social psychology relative to individual readiness and motivation to embrace organizational initiatives. In phenomenological tradition, Curci specifically focused on the meaning that teachers and administrators attributed to this redistribution of power relative to problem identification and problem solving. Drawing upon the work of Marzano, Frontier, and Livingston (2011), this redistribution placed the building leader/principal at the center of a distributive focused organizational model rather than the top of the hierarchy, in which he or she was seen as one element in instructional improvement, but not the controlling factor.

The reality of this procedural change, nonetheless, presents challenges for teacher leaders. While administrators may seek the input of staff, teachers still question the impact of their input. Issues of compensation exist as well as questions regarding how teachers are selected to fill these instructional leadership roles. By identifying and examining teacher leadership from the perspective of both teachers and administrators, Dr. Curci's research (2012) offers a conversational platform for exploring both the problems and the promises involved in expanding the boundaries of instructional leadership.

4. Attention to Collective and Collaborative Approaches to Instructional Supervision

Citizens and policy makers alike express decreased confidence in educational systems and threaten decreased funding unless educational organizations produce improved results. High stakes testing and increased academic performance expectations are matched by raised expectations for teacher performance. Historically that performance was verified by administrators' ratings of teachers as part of their responsibilities for the supervision of instruction. Such inspection oriented approaches, however, have failed to impact the quality of teachers' professional competence or confidence. Instructional supervision via a clinical observation model has more often inspired cynicism and criticism as opposed to being viewed as a supportive process for students or for their teachers (Danielson, 2007; Danielson & McGreal, 2000). In recognition of the inadequacies of traditional procedures, Dr. Ronald Yasher (2013) focused his research on studying procedural transformations involving a more collaborative, communicative, and accountable approach to instructional supervision. Recognizing the principal as a connective change agent, Yasher built upon the significance of human relations and administrators supporting teachers in accomplishing their instructional responsibilities. Like Curci, he proposed that these roles and responsibilities could no longer rest on the shoulders of single individuals. Like Wolicki, he recognized the centrality of a larger system, what some call learning organizations (Senge, 2000, 2006) and others call learning communities (DuFour et al., 2005, 2008, 2010).

Principals are charged with the supervisory process of evaluating teachers as a mandated role and they use a variety of supervisory tools to observe teachers. Two popular models that are used in schools today are clinical and differentiated supervision. Due to the extensive amount of time required to complete traditional clinical observations, principals are limited in opportunities to pay multiple visits to classroom and engage in ongoing discussions with teachers to jointly explore the effectiveness of various practices. A supervisory approach that has gained prominence as a result of this long term dilemma is differentiated supervision. Glatthorn (1997) claims that clinical observation is a top-down model where the supervisor has the solution for a teacher who has the problem. Glatthorn (2008, 2100) argues that teaching is a profession in which teachers need more control over their own professional development as they progress through intensive, cooperative and self-directed components of a differentiated approach to instructional supervision.

To incorporate this type of approach, principals must create conditions within the school to help the teachers enact increased involvement. Although classroom observations are currently required as part of the teacher evaluation process, principals can benefit if they are able to effectively use this mandate to help build learning communities through more frequent but less formal observations focused on implementation of effective practices and evidence of student learning.

University of Pittsburgh professors Otto Graf and Joseph Werlinich (2002, 2004) advocate a variation on instructional supervision that recognizes both the strengths and needs of the professional teaching staff. Graf and Werlinich suggest a procedure that links accountability and professional growth within a culture of discipline. Their supervisory tool enables principals to supervise their faculty by rotating between a clinical observation focus and one that offers a menu of teacher options to enhance professional development. This model encourages the development of human relations in which inspection is replaced by introspection and in which social issues such as power and authority can be redirected to a focus on improved learning strategies for the adult staff as well as for children and youth.

Motivational author Daniel Pink (2009) proposes that individual and organizational progress rests on three particular elements. They are: autonomy, mastery and purpose. Autonomy involves the ability of an individual to control individual learning. Mastery involves getting better at it and purpose is marked by the desire to do something in the service of others. Dr. Yasher's (2013) study of walkthrough models for instructional supervision enables other educators to contemplate how these motivational elements contribute to the establishment or the strengthening of professional learning communities.

5. General Findings Relative to Systemic Innovation, Distributed Leadership and Collaborative Supervision of Instruction

Research is most informative when it fosters the juxtaposition of social constructs in a manner that brings a more complex and a more complete understanding of research intent and findings. Dr. Wolicki's (2009) findings regarding instructional innovations support school reform as a systemic process in which the development of a collaborative leadership team requires the commitment of the superintendent to regular communication with principals and teachers. Such ongoing dialogue facilitates the comparison of current reality to the guiding vision. Teachers who provided data for this study attributed successful transitions to the recognition of their unique skills by administrators, and to the ownership and empowerment generated in the process.

Dr. Curci's (2012) findings about instructional leadership contribute to administrative knowledge regarding how teacher leaders can be supported. Conclusions of his study show that teachers and principals both value a differentiated approach to instructional while recognizing the obstacles that prevent it from occurring. While both groups place their emphasis on student achievement, teacher responses indicate a greater emphasis on collaboration and cooperation with colleagues than building administrators, who focus more on accomplishing objectives. Findings suggest that attention to human relations and awareness of school culture help establish and sustain a distributed approach to school leadership.

Dr. Yasher (2013) advances our knowledge base about learning communities and how they may be constructed and strengthened by a transformed approach to instructional supervision. His inquiry into an alternate supervisory path draws attention to the link between professional interactions, instructional respect and a rejuvenated sense of motivation.

6. Conclusions

Classroom teachers, building principals and district superintendents are realizing that successful past practices for fostering instructional improvement may be incongruent with the skills and knowledge students need for world class learning and successful futures. This work shared the dimensions of three contemporary transitions in the business of schooling uncovered in the doctoral research of three experienced educators. Their work serves as a reference point for this look at changing structures of educational organizations and the psychology of human interactions associated with those changes. All cases shared in this work reflect a cyclical, reflective, and interactive approach to changing social and educational circumstances. All remind us that understanding the conditions of instructional change becomes a useful window through which to assess the degree of change. They affirm that improving and sustaining the learning process involves recurrent patterns of capacity building, application of new learning, and collaboration. Like Michael Fullan (2011), all concur that paying close attention to practice fosters the emergence of improved theory. Finally, findings in all three cases document that

implementing and sustaining reform initiatives is a people dependent process involving a shift:

- from random thinking to systems thinking,
- from teachers teaching in isolation to working as a community of learners,
- from perceived reality to data-driven reality, and
- from blame fixing to collective accountability.

It is a major accomplishment to design research with the potential of significant impact. And it is a significant contribution to the field of educational improvement to examine changed practices in a manner that is useful to others struggling with similar school improvement efforts. Good teaching in any subject area is a matter of ongoing learning, and learning is further informed by ongoing research. More extensive descriptions of methodology and findings can be found in the referenced works of Curci, Wolicki and Yasher. It is hoped that the case examples presented in this work assist others in strengthening their ability to evaluate more collaborative, distributed and systemic educational environments.

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