

Problems Court Session:

WHO CONTROLS READING IMPROVEMENT? THE DILEMMA OF THE POWER-EXPERTISE GAP

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One way to understand why reading improvement programs succeed and fail is to consider how school leaders deal with the dilemma called the power-expertise gap. The gap refers to the dilemma where those who have the power to influence changes in reading programs may not have expertise in reading; while those with reading expertise may not have the power or control to put this expertise to good use. For example, Shannon (1986) reported how a standardized teaching-merit pay approach to improving reading achievement was mandated by the administration, and quickly implemented by teachers and principals. However, while test scores and public confidence appeared to improve, teachers adopted a test-score view of reading and complained that teaching reading was less fulfilling. Teachers said principals applied intolerable pressure, and other teachers were too competitive (some cheated on the test scores to obtain merit). While this example shows how those in power can quickly implement changes, it also shows the lack of reading expertise when the human relations consequences are revealed.

If those in power create problems by mandating change would it be better if teachers controlled reading improvement? Many teachers are determined to set their own goals, decide when and how and with whom they'll work toward those goals (Sharma, 1982). In short, as adults, teachers are

demanding control over their own learning. The point is well taken—teachers have been mere pawns for too long. But giving teachers full control, while well intended, is a misconception. Teachers have left reading improvement programs with a false notion about their power to change instruction. Teachers have returned to their classrooms motivated and armed with excellent new ideas only to find there is no support system (time, money, incentives, recognition, etc.) to sustain their efforts to change the status quo. Enthusiasm has changed to impotence when they encountered resistance from parents, other teachers, and administrators (Erickson, 1981).

Typically, the dilemma of who controls reading improvement is approached in one of two ways: in some instances those in power are provided training in reading, such as reading inservice training for principals. In other situations those with expertise are trained to be more powerful, such as leadership training inservice for reading specialists. While these approaches to the power-expertise gap have, in some instances, narrowed the gap, a third alternative exists. Instead of trying to transport either power or expertise across the gap an increasing number of school districts have created new structures that bring the powerful together with the experts on a continuing basis to *negotiate* improvement initiatives on a continuing basis.

For example, in district 21 in Wheeling, Illinois (1987) a school improvement team of teachers, administrators, and supervisors developed a district-wide, three year, long-range plan that features:

1.) a comprehensive, personal needs assessment based upon team interviews that focused on both professional and personal issues;

2.) personal and professional improvement topics, as well as delivery structures and learning formats;

3.) long range programs that integrated district-wide issues with staff needs and goals;

4.) community and school board dissemination and communication policies;

5.) evaluation and program revision activities.

It is significant to note that reading improvement goals and activities were a substantial, but single, piece of a larger pie that included improvement initiatives in other curricular areas.

Professional literature suggests that innovation in a school does not result from a single force. Instead, diverse committees of teachers, such as specialists, administrators, and parents should be joined together to set goals, monitor activities, fight for clarity when issues became distorted, and protect and guide improvement activities until new practices are integrated into everyday classroom practice. In Palos Hills, Illinois Barnes and Murphy (1987) described the manner in which a committee was formed. It consisted of the teacher of the year from each of the three high schools, the teacher union president, the union negotiator, the superintendent and assistant superintendent, and three high school principals. They negotiated a five year school improvement plan that featured paid summer training sessions for staff and peer coaching arrangements in each high school department. Other committees similar to the Illinois example, are the Helping Teaching Cadre in Lincoln, Nebraska and the Staff Development Academy in Jefferson, Colorado (Howey and Vaughn, 1983). As relatively new organizational structures, these committees increase the problem solving capabilities of the schools and enable schools to cope with changes in roles, duties, interpersonal relations, and to build solutions to problems with the people who

will implement them. When committees negotiated, steps were taken to:

1.) Include a variety of members who hold diverse viewpoints and come from both within and out of the school system.

2.) Give members released time and/or financial compensation to participate.

3.) Train committee members in group processes and adult learning and change.

4.) Appoint a coordinator of the committee who can work up to half time on the committee's behalf.

5.) Let the committee determine its own agenda rather than imposing an agenda upon the members.

6.) Allow the committee to have at least 10 members and give them a budget.

7.) Provide time for the committee to self-renew, recruit new members, acquire new skills, and plan for the future. (Lambour, Rostetter, Sapir, Ashaki, 1980).

How does negotiating work?

School leaders with successful committees report that because the members represented such a variety of diverse viewpoints, negotiating required special group process skills. And because educators were often trained as teachers of children, they had to learn how to negotiate and compromise with other adults in order to agree on school improvement goals and activities. Here are some adult learning activities used early in the life of school improvement committees which enabled members to work together toward common goals.

1.) At early meetings of the committee the members discussed their ideas and attitudes on school improvement. Giving adults a chance to share their values, opinions, past experiences, and concerns early in the life of the committee helps build trust and "unfreeze" communication. An example of a good activity is to have members write answers to the following question—What individual and institutional factors inhibit change in schools? After writing

alone, small groups share responses, and one member reports group responses to the entire committee. Often this "list" of ideas is used to begin the planning process.

- 2.) The committee studied and discussed materials on adult learning and change, and a consultant who is an "expert" in school improvement helped the group plan out steps for long range change. This training was often carried out by a local educator although a carefully selected "outsider" can be effective.
- 3.) The group leadership was often assumed by someone other than a high status school official. An articulate teacher, department head, or a curriculum staff specialist can lead sessions. Skill in group processes and consensus decision making is more important than high status due to expertise or position.
- 4.) Effective committees followed carefully planned agendas. Open discussion "free for alls" were controlled by time limitations and some consultants and administrators report that an agenda that features some writing in each phase has helped committee members communicate as they negotiate.

When writing was successfully used three things happened: First, each person perceived that everyone else had considered their thoughts because they were recorded for everyone to read; second, each person read (and therefore considered) everyone else's recorded ideas; and third, as the group generated lists, members could see some evidence that they were making progress toward a goal. School leaders report that the following agenda is useful for committee decision making (Erickson, 1983; See *Second Opinions, Executive Educator*, 1984, p. 2). It should be noted that although the following ideas focus on a process that applies to general school improvement initiative, reading improvement is specified to fit the audience for this article.

Step One: Define Roles

In order for members to act collectively they agreed on common issues and defined goals. They did this by collecting written responses to questions such as: What reading improvement issues will this group deal with? What product will we produce? Are we expected to develop policy, carry out policy? Who does this committee report to? Responses to such questions were recorded and discussed at initial meetings and the group recorded their final statements for everyone to use in future work.

Step Two: Define Authority

This is related to step one, but after the group began work, it was necessary to clarify the power and influence role of the group. Confusion about this caused some members to believe that the group only recommended initiatives, while others were prepared to lead an implementation activity. Also, when alternate actions were proposed it was necessary to check on legal and contractual restrictions concerning staff time and money. Obtaining written answers to these questions also helped: Where does this group fit into the formal structure of the school district? What are the time, money, and staff policy limitations to consider?

Step Three: Get Facts

Reading improvement planning requires the use of both fact and opinion. Separating the two was not easy, but one way that seemed to work was to collect written information based upon the following questions: What current policies or data are relevant to reading improvement? Is this information valid and confirmable? Does this information alter the committee's original goals? Sources of data included interviews with administrators, teachers, experts, or reports of test data, or reports of questionnaire data from students and/or the community. Charts, reports, and diagrams were useful to report data to a committee.

Step Four: Develop Policies

In order to expedite decision-making and reach agreement on negotiated issues it was necessary to test reading improvement policies and future activities against written standards. For example, consider how decision-making became clearer and more direct when members shaped their deliberations around the following agreed-upon guidelines:

1.) the program must help teachers meet the range of reading needs found among their students;

2.) the program must provide practical classroom techniques;

3.) teachers must have time and support while they try out the ideas and discuss successes and concerns;

4.) teachers must have financial and social incentives to implement the new techniques;

5.) the program must use the resources of staff members who are already working in the system;

6.) only outside consultants who have a proven success record will be used.

Statements like this helped the groups reach consensus and have a way to evaluate the effectiveness of the reading improvement initiatives that were finally agreed upon.

School leaders who have used this agenda report that the process helped the adults to collaborate and not be dominated by authority figures or vocal members. Negotiating was easier when plenty of writing materials such as flip charts, markers, paper, ballots, allowed people to read each other's ideas. Reading each other's written responses, as opposed to open discussion, was a way of preserving each adult's perceptions about solutions to reading improvement issues, while at the same time linking thought processes so that the committee could close the gap between the power and expertise that often plagues reading improvement initiatives.

An examination of the Wheeling, Illinois committee's agendas, documents, and reports supports the notion that putting a group in control makes sense because serious school business is rarely entrusted to any one individual or segment of the school community anyway. The formal establishment of a committee, whose members collectively have the power and expertise to both control and support change through adult learning has been the first step in nearly all of the highly successful school improvement programs in California (Odden and Anderson, 1986).

The impetus to engage in school improvement in general and reading improvement in particular has resulted in mandates and money. Some

districts choose a power model and mandate changes from the top while others try an expertise model such as hiring consultants to train teachers and principals. Both of these approaches sometimes reflect the common, but naive, belief that school improvement is an "extra" after school affair that is peripheral to the main business of school (Griffin, 1983). The formal establishment of a school improvement committee that successfully negotiates reading initiatives is evidence that reading improvement is not a simple after-school affair. Negotiating reading initiatives may be the only way to deal with all of the factors that comprise the power-expertise gap. And finally, negotiation works because school leaders recognize that changing schools is an ongoing developmental process that requires as much, if not more, work than running the schools. Given the obvious need for school improvement, negotiation is proof that rather than just being organized to run, schools are becoming better organized to change.

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