Introduction and Application of Inquiry and Communication Tools in Planning for Systemic Educational Change

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Abstract

This paper presents key findings from a qualitative study that explored how one elementary school site council learned and adopted a set of tools to increase their collective ability to work together and lead school improvement activities. The communication and inquiry tools introduced to this site council were drawn from learning organization theory and learning organizations.

The results indicated that the tools increased the site council members' individual and collective capacity to listen, engage, trust, and work effectively with each other. These aptitudes were developed through the use of the tools in six areas: (a) becoming aware of one's own thinking, (b) making one's thinking visible and transparent to others, (c) understanding the thinking of others, (d) seeing one's interactions from a systems perspective, (e) engaging in collaborative decision-making, and (f) capturing and documenting learning. These aptitudes and activities increased the members' awareness in three capacity building dimensions: self, others, and the system.

Introduction

This paper examines how one elementary school site council learned and adopted a set of tools designed to improve patterns of communication and ability to work as a team. During a 19-month period, the site council was introduced to a selected set of communication and inquiry tools drawn from learning organization theory and organizations who are seeking to become learning organizations (see Appendix A). Council members learned the tools, practiced them, reflected on their practice, and then integrated these tools and the learning they generated into their planning and activities. The site council, made up of teachers, support personnel, the school principal, parents, and community members, requested the tools to increase their collective ability to work together as a team and lead school improvement activities.

The objective of this paper is to encourage conversations on the use of organizational learning tools to build educators, parents, and community members' capacity to implement systemic innovation in schools.

Historical Perspective - Tinkering with Utopia

Historically schools have served as the focal points in the debate about how to define the present and shape the future (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The recent wave of criticism directed at schools began in the 1980s with the release of several national reports on the state of education in the United States (cited in Fullan, 1993): National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), the

Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy (1986), and the National Governors Association (1986). Reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), *Investing in Our Children* (Committee for Economic Development, 1985), and *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986) documented low student achievement and high dropout rates (as cited in Newmann, King, & Redgon, 1997).

Though there was a growing consensus for the need for comprehensive school reform, the proposed solutions to meet this desired outcome took two different paths. One direction was intensification "which took the form of top-down solutions generated at the state level" (Fullan, 1991). Such efforts include "increased definition of curriculum, mandated textbooks, standardized tests tightly aligned with curriculum, specification of teaching and administrative methods backed up by evaluation, and monitoring" (Fullan, 1991, p. 7). The other direction was restructuring, focusing on school-based management. These efforts included:

> Enhanced roles for teachers in instruction and decision-making, integration of multiple innovations; restructured timetables, supporting collaborative work cultures; radical reorganization of teacher education; new roles such as mentors, coaches, and other teacher leadership arrangements. (Fullan, 1991, p. 7)

Studies examining the effect of intensification and restructuring show that many of these reforms fell short of the expectation of their supporters. Corbett and Wilson (1991) noted several unintended consequences of state-level reform initiatives, including moving attention away from more basic reforms and reduced teacher motivation. Taylor and Teddile's (1992, as cited in Fullan, 1993) study of 33 schools which examined the effectiveness of site-based restructuring programs altering governance procedures found no difference in teaching strategies and student learning in schools that participated in these programs and those that did not. In 1991, Easton examined the effectiveness of local school improvement plans mandated by the Chicago Reform Act of 1989. He reported that the majority of elementary teachers claimed that school reform had not changed their methods of instruction nor were they changed as a result of school improvement plans (as cited in Fullan, 1993). Odden and Marsh reported in their 1988 study that state leadership can have a positive impact on school reforms if it is coordinated with local districts and school development, the key variable being local district capacity (as cited in Fullan, 1993).

In summary, the research evaluating the reforms of intensification and restructuring reinforce the notion that change in schools is far more complex than first anticipated. Fullan (1991) noted many of the current reform initiatives are systemic in their design. He defines these structures as being "more comprehensive both vertically (across classroom, school district, and state) and horizontally (incorporating more holistic elements of reform)" (Fullan, 1991, p. 16) A systems approach to school reform views assessment, curriculum and instruction, staff development, personnel selection and promotion, and state or district school actions as linked rather than separate elements (Fullan, 1993).

Hargreaves (1997) research reinforced the importance of viewing school reform from a systems perspective. After his review of the literature on educational reform from the last decade (Berman & McLaughlin, 1997; Fullan, 1991, 1993; Fullan & Hargreaves 1996; Hargreaves, 1994; Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996; Louis & Miles, 1990; McLaughlin, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Rudduck, 1991; Sarason, 1990; Stoll & Fink 1996), Hargreaves (1997) cites the following reasons for educational change initiatives failing or faltering:

1. The reason for the change is poorly conceived or not clearly demonstrated. It is not obvious who will benefit and how. What the change will achieve for students is not spelled out.
2. The change is too broad and ambitious so that teachers have to work on too many fronts, or it is too limited and specific so that little change occurs at all.
3. The change is too fast for people to cope with, or too slow so they become either impatient or bored and move on to something else.
4. The change is poorly resourced or resources are withdrawn once the first phase of innovation is over. Often there is not enough money for materials or time for teachers to plan.
5. There is no long-term commitment to the change that will carry people through the anxiety, frustration, and despair of early experimentation and unavoidable setbacks.
6. Key staff members who can contribute to the change, or might be affected by it, are not committed. Conversely, key staff might become over involved as can administrative or innovative elite, from which other teachers feel excluded
7. Parents oppose the change because they are kept at a distance from it. Professionals can collaborate enthusiastically, yet isolate themselves that they involve the community too little or too late, and lose a vital form of support that successful schoolwide change depends.
8. Leaders are either too controlling, use ineffectual tools, or cash in on the early success of the innovation and then move on to higher things.
9. The change is pursued in isolation and gets undermined by other unchanged structures. . . . Conversely, the change may be poorly coordinated with and engulfed by a tidal wave of parallel changes that make it hard for teachers to focus their efforts. (p. viii)

Hargreaves' (1997) reasons for failure of change efforts in schools support Peter Senge's research on learning organizations (Senge, 1990a, 1990b; Senge et al., 1994). The fourth, seventh, and ninth findings articulate systems problems: inadequate funding, premature withdrawal of resources, the lack of materials and financial resources to supporting planning, the distancing of parents from reforms, the undermining of change efforts by existing structures, and failure to deeply involve the community in change projects. The first finding articulate the consequences of not understanding how our mental models influence how we understand the world and how we take action: our inability to conceptualize and

explain the reason behind reforms and how these will affect students. The fifth and sixth findings note the consequences of failing to have a shared vision: lack of a long-term commitment to the organizational change, the inability to contain the anxiety associated with experimentation, and the resentment triggered by reforms lead by isolated leaders. The second and third findings detect the problems associated with team learning: the difficulties of coordinating and implementing ambitious changes across disciplines and the challenges of working with divergent responses to the pace of changes. The eighth finding discerns the challenges associated with lack of personal mastery: ineffectual leadership skills or the inability to understand how personal needs interact with institutional needs.

Hargreaves' (1997) findings challenge educators to gain skills to better understand how the parts of educational systems relate to the whole (systems thinking), how our internal beliefs and assumptions (mental models) influence how "we understand the world and how we take action" (Senge, 1990a, p.6), how we can collectively learn together (team learning), and, how we can develop clarity in what is most important to us and master skills to achieve them (personal mastery). This study the paper reports on was the examination of set of communication and inquiry tools

This paper presents a set of tools that develops those skills that Hargreaves' research finds lacking in educational change initiatives. It examines the transfer of learning organization tools used in leading edge corporations into a school setting.

Methodology

The researcher used a qualitative case study method to examine an elementary use of a specific set of communication and inquiry tools. The tools were introduced to the site council through a learning contract with the Change. The elementary school site council initiated the contract, identified the areas of learning, and concluded the contract when it felt members had achieved the skills desired. The Change Institute, a program directed by the researcher, had used a variety of tools in other learning contracts with public schools and non-profit organizations. Based on previous experience, the researcher unilaterally chose an initial set of tools to use in the site council's learning sessions. As the site council's needs developed, additional tools were selected and introduced.

The researcher met with the site council 23 times over a 19-month period. During these 2-hour sessions, he facilitated group meetings, introduced one or two communication or inquiry tools through interactive exercises, provided feedback to the site council about their application of the tools, and/or observed their use of the tools. After each tool was introduced, the participants chose an area of interest and practiced using that tool in their work or personal contexts. They also were asked to analyze the application of the tools and to articulate any insights gained about themselves and others by their use.

Data Collection

The collection of qualitative data for this study occurred in two phases. Phase one consisted of the introduction of the communication and inquiry tools to the site council. During this phase agendas, curriculum handouts, instruction notes made during and after training sessions, participant generated

lists of insights about tools, participant learning journals completed after each session, composite learning journals, and participants' cumulative learning journals completed after 7 months were collected. Phase two of the project consisted of the researcher observing the independent use of the tools by members at site council meetings. During this phase, the researcher completed field notes, and gathered site council agendas and members' cumulative learning journals completed after 19 months.

Data Analysis

The following questions guided the analysis of the data. Emphasizing discovery and interpretation, the questions posed were: (a) How are the communication and inquiry tools being used? (b) What result have the use of these tools produced? (c) What are the characteristics of these tools?

Findings: (a) How were the communication and inquiry tools were used?

An analysis of the data identified six categories of tool use by the members of the site council: (a) becoming aware of one's own thinking; (b) making one's thinking visible and transparent to others; (c) understanding the thinking of others; (d) seeing one's interactions from a systems perspective; and (e) engaging in collaborative decision-making; and (f) capturing and documenting learning. Each of these categories of tool usage is discussed below.

Becoming Aware of One's Own Thinking

Members of the council used the tools in an integrated manner to increase their awareness of their personal thinking process. This awareness of their own thinking crystallized in five areas: articulation, construction of meaning, self-examination, enunciation of discoveries, and consideration of new potentiality.

Articulation. The articulation of one's thinking process was triggered through speaking and writing. The tools check-in, advocacy, group guidelines, illusion, left-hand column, and learning journals (Appendix A) invited participants to identify and share their ideas, feelings, assumptions, conclusions, and beliefs with each other orally or in writing. These acts of verbalization became windows through which members could hear and then see ideas, feeling, and thoughts held inside themselves. These acts of sharing and writing, triggered by the use of the tools, increased members' awareness of their own thinking processes. Members report becoming more aware of their own thought processes by using the tools, saying things such as, "[the] ladder of inference has helped me better see how I get myself into trouble by misunderstanding others," "I have been able to express and explore my thinking more effectively," and "sharing what I'm thinking can improve the quality of my assumptions."

Construction of meaning. Participants developed a deeper understanding of how they personally build meaning from the activities of the site council by using ladder of inference, advocacy, and left-hand column (Appendix A). These tools invited them to examine and observe their internal processes of drawing meaning from words and actions. Site council members used the

tools differently. Members reported becoming more aware of how they construct meaning by using the tools, saying such things as:

> I tend to jump up my ladder very quickly. Learning about the ladder of inference has helped me understand this tendency.
>
> I have become more aware of my own thinking process by using the tools.
>
> I can monitor the way in which I am coming to some of my conclusions in dealing with children, colleagues, and parents.
>
> Having a greater understanding of my own thinking processes helps me to clear up the "illusions" I have about myself.

Examining their own construction of meaning allowed them to understand how and when they tend to "jump up the ladder of inference," helping them to examine their own assumptions as well as their interaction with others.

Self-examination. New awareness of their thinking triggered site council members to reexamine and question their current beliefs and personal capacity. "It's difficult to listen and it takes practice. It's an effort to listen. It's difficult not to judge or rate," is the insight one member drew from his self-examination. Another member's self-reflection led him to question the certainty of his belief about how he communicates: "I thought I usually say what I am thinking, but now I know I don't." The journey of self-reflection led another member to experiment with new behaviors: "I tried to ask myself what is being communicated? What is the person saying? It is easy to react before getting the facts, also easy to lose interest. . . . I am going to be aware of listening."

Enunciation of discoveries. The fourth area that emerged under the category *awareness of one's own thinking* is the articulation of new discoveries about the self. The tools encouraged site council members to examine the complexity of communication. Seeing the world with fresh eyes triggered new connection making - personal discoveries about learning and new understandings of others. The illusions tool invited site council members to re-envision their liabilities as assets. One member observed, "I'm kind of hard on myself. . . . I often get a sinking feeling about imperfections." She turned this propensity to be critical into "a positive: I am reflective and care about my quality as a teacher and a person." Another member's discovery focused on the difference between facts and assumptions. "I need facts to base my ideas and ways [sic] and not to make assumptions." The capacity of a question to surface new ideas and change the dynamics of a discussion was another member's discovery: "Asking the right question opens great ways of thinking."

Consideration of possibilities. The process of making new connections and coming to new clarity about their own thinking patterns triggered some site council members to entertain the possibility of personal changes. These new potentialities were noted in the learning journals and in the cumulative evaluations. The site council members had various insights leading to change. One said, "I often took mis-action. Maybe I need to work on slowing down my progress (and speed) up