

Rural Teachers' Perceptions of Support for Program Change

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to examine the dynamics of change processes in a selected rural school jurisdiction over a 5-year period with emphasis upon sources of support for teachers during early stages of the implementation of multiple innovations. According to teachers, changes adopted at the system level did reach the classroom. The most important sources of support for teachers included their own professional preparation, extra effort, and autonomy. Opportunities for inservice education were ranked high but organized professional development activities at the school level were relatively infrequent. When asked specifically about support for multiple innovations, teachers reported the most common forms of assistance to be the superintendent, related teaching materials, and discussion with other teachers.

INTRODUCTION

A vital, and somewhat surprising, component of the expanding knowledge base regarding change processes in education is reported by Crandall (1983) who said, "...we discovered commitment developing after implementation, after teachers were actively engaged in using a new practice" (p. 7). Teachers, in other words, have to respond to some pressure to make a change before they really believe in it, and during that period of uncertainty they require strong support. The need for support is emphasized in that same journal by Miles (1983) who said administrative commitment must be in terms of balanced pressure and support, by Huberman (1983) who stressed concrete and continuous help at both the building and district level, and by Cox (1983) who drew attention to the need for assistance in relation to both the content of the new practice and the context in which it was happening. Traditionally schools have been considered the unit for change because individual teachers had difficulty making innovations on their own and systems included too many diverse and unique school communities. Recently, however, Crandall, Eiseman and Seashore Louis (1986) claim that schools get caught up in cross currents of local politics so other levels of the organization must become more prominent in supporting change processes. This article is

focused on rural teachers' perceptions of support during a time when they were making multiple changes in their classrooms.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

A useful review of research on educational change has been provided by Berman (1981). According to his analysis, work starting in the 1960's was concentrated upon the rational dissemination of innovations into systems. That emphasis was followed by attention to the adoption of change and characteristics of adopters. Berman identified the most recent development as concentrating on implementation of change within a particular organizational and environmental context. Another historical perspective has been provided by Fullan (1986) who notes that the study of change since 1970 has moved from documenting failure to analysis of success and presently is focused upon the management of change.

Early work in building a theory of educational change was done within an organization known as "The International Movement Towards Educational Change" (IMTEC). Through over 200 case studies of change in various countries theory began to emerge and findings were published by Dalin (1978) in a book,

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Limits to Educational Change. Dalin wrote that in order to understand the dynamics of change processes in education many interacting factors had to be considered. He categorized these factors under four headings: the educational setting, the environment (parents, the economy, etc.), the innovation itself and the change strategy (degree of participation, workshops, etc.) (p.77). In this decade writers such as Fullan (1982) emphasize that change is a process which takes place over a considerable period of time (more than one school year) and includes phases of adoption or initiation, implementation, continuation and outcome (p. 40). Studies have revealed that different combinations of factors affect each phase of the change process and that adopting a change is quite a different matter from putting it into action or implementing it. For example, Common (1981) wrote an article entitled, "Two Decades of Curriculum Innovation and So Little Change" and Charters and Jones (1973) asserted that many intended changes are "non-events." The difficulties in effectively implementing change in education have shifted the efforts of researchers from a theory of change to a theory of changing.

Two recent studies have focused on the dynamics of the change process over time. Fullan, Anderson & Newton (1986) did intensive case studies of four school systems in Ontario in order to examine how boards stimulate, support, coordinate and assess the effectiveness of curriculum changes. Data collection included print materials, questionnaires to curriculum consultants and interviews with 32 supervisory officers, 37 consultants, 16 principals and 32 teachers. Findings were organized around 10 overlapping and mutually reinforcing themes which included attention shifting from innovations to systems, integration of curriculum and professional development, integration of authority and support, school-level and district-level co-development, and teacher involvement and incentives. In a study of change processes in two rural school-communities within the same system, Newton and Wright (1987) found the influence of the principal, interactions with other teachers, community values, and parental reactions to be particularly strong predictors of levels of use of innovations. In one school the staff was "together" and the community was divided whereas in the other the community was "together" and the staff was not.

A synthesis of much of the research reported above has been presented by Corbett & Rossman (1986). They have started to develop a path analysis of factors affecting curriculum change in schools by considering three streams of interacting factors (cul-

tural, technical and political) to influence change as antecedent, intervening or outcome variables. The writer has combined Corbett and Rossman's (1986) categorization of factors, Miles' (1983) data-grounded model of institutionalization, and Fullan's (1982) phases of change to provide a conceptual framework for this study.

It should be noted that the conceptual framework provides for consideration of the rural school-community context in terms of socio-political, economic, cultural or demographic factors which may affect change processes. Some features of rural communities have been found to be impediments of change. For example, Sher (1977) stated that political conservatism and cultural homogeneity or rural areas support stable conditions. Change is made difficult by isolation, traditional localized values, and a shortage of resources (Boyd & Immeghart, 1977).

The literature also alerts us to some features of small schools which may be viewed as supporting or hindering change processes. Hull, for example, (1986) stated that calls for reform in education are compounded in many small schools by limited resources, restricted curriculum, and isolation; yet the tradition of sharing is well-grounded. Matthes & Carlson (1986) identified difficulties in relation to small schools being insulated and to fewer opportunities for personal and professional growth, yet many teachers choose small schools for advantages in pace of living, cost of living and smallness. Barker (1985) claimed that many problems such as finances, shortages of teachers, changing social values, and special interest groups were magnified in small high schools yet, due to smaller size, they offered the best opportunities to create a school climate conducive to the best teaching and learning. Foster & Martinez (1985) summarized their views by saying that small schools appear to experience difficulty in staffing and in offering a wide variety of curriculum options compared to larger schools, yet students seem more actively involved in activities that develop leadership qualities and close working relationships.

Some literature is devoted specifically to various forms of support for teachers in small schools. Reed & Busby (1985) state that teachers need incentives to teach in small schools and that social, monetary and psychological needs must all be considered. Trentham & Schaer (1985) found that rural teachers drew satisfaction primarily from students and peers whereas urban teachers drew satisfaction from having good facilities and opportunities for social and cultural development. In another rural-urban comparison

Matthes & Carlson (1986) summarized that teachers in rural settings highlighted support from parents and community whereas those in urban settings viewed support from the administration as important. Other writers (Fullan, 1982; Lundsgaard, 1983; Massey & Crosby, 1983; Putnam, 1986; Trentham & Schaer, 1985) have expressed the view that teachers in small schools typically have limited opportunities for professional development or to be exposed to new ideas.

Change literature highlights the importance of contextual variables that lie outside of the school system itself. Support for teachers in a rural context appears to center around quality of life, sharing and opportunities to influence. Satisfaction is related to work with students, parents and community. Professional development programs are typically minimal. Newcomers are advised to be patient and to go slowly in introducing new ideas. The management of change in rural schools is clearly a special challenge and much of it centers on the provision of concrete and continuous support for teachers.

PURPOSES AND METHODOLOGY

The general purpose of the study reported here was to examine the dynamics of change processes in a selected rural school jurisdiction over a 5-year period with emphasis upon sources of support for teachers during early phases of the change process when they typically feel "pushed." More specific objectives were:

1. to document changes since an external study of the school system was done in 1982,
2. to determine if school program changes adopted at the board level reached the classroom, according to teachers, and
3. to determine what sources of support were most important to teachers during the change process.

The case study method was chosen in order to accomplish the purposes of the investigation. According to Yin (1981) the case study is appropriate when contemporary phenomena are to be examined in their natural context and, particularly, when boundaries between phenomena and context are not clear. In the research reported here the boundary between school and community is not clear (most teachers, for example, were raised in the area) and the importance of

context to understanding change processes in schools is well established in the literature. The researcher in doing the study was guided by the values set forth by Fetterman (1982): the insiders' view, a holistic approach in keeping with the conceptual framework, and a nonjudgmental attitude. Data collection included both qualitative and quantitative information collected over a period of five years. Data collection and data analysis went on simultaneously with the latter receiving increased attention by means of peer consultation and member checks as the study proceeded.

Details of procedures are outlined below:

1. The 1982 study, conducted by the writer and two colleagues, included questionnaires to all teachers, parents and students in grades 7 to 12 inclusive, interviews with administrators and board members and study of documents such as board minutes, annual reports and budgets in order to ascertain what was going on in schools from various perspectives and to provide base-line data for long-range planning.

2. The 1986 study, conducted by the writer and four graduate students, included basically the same questionnaires to all teachers and principals and to students in grades 7 to 12 inclusive. In addition, interviews focused upon support for change were held with each teacher. System documents were studied and the researcher attended the annual meetings and various professional development activities. Preliminary findings were discussed with division board members and checked by at least two people from each school. Extensive consultation was done with the superintendent.

3. During the time between studies, the writer visited the jurisdiction on several occasions, read local newspapers and communicated regularly with the superintendent and others. It should be noted that the author was raised in rural Saskatchewan and may have a bias in favour of small, rural schools.

THE CONTEXT

The Parkland School System covers approximately 1,500 square miles in a remote area of east, central Saskatchewan. Most people are descendants of Ukrainian settlers who came at the turn of the century to begin mixed farming. They are known to be hard working, church-going and close to the soil. Although the provision of elementary and secondary

schooling was always considered important, the region does not have a high participation rate in post-secondary education. The land is assessed at a value below the provincial average and provincial grants contribute approximately 70 percent of the annual revenue of 5.5 million dollars for K-12 schooling.

The largest towns (A and B) in the system, of 1200 and 800 people respectively, are only five miles apart and the third largest community (C) is about twenty miles east. The other tiny villages are scattered. It should be noted that early in the history of the area the second largest town had a boarding school and became known as the education centre. The school system offices are located there. The largest town surpassed its neighbouring community in population and was made the location of the hospital - a health centre. There is intense rivalry between these two communities and the one is gaining steadily over the other.

The six Division Board members were elected from school attendance areas with one from each of the three towns referred to above, one from a provincial pilot K-8 school, one representing a two-room school, and one representing three small schools of from 1 to 3 teachers each. Although there were not many people moving into these communities, there was a tradition of electing "locals" to the Board. Board members were in the habit of each looking out for their own area rather than supporting a system view. The Chair of the Board was a woman from town A and the person reported to be at least second in influence was a man from town C. The other four members were younger and newer to the Board. The spouses of the three male Board members were employed in the system. In addition to the Board, each school had an increasingly active local board of from five to seven members. In all there were approximately 50 elected board members in a system of 1300 students and 85 teachers. The central office staff was a superintendent, a secretary-treasurer and two secretaries.

In the 1982 planning study parents were asked what, in comparison to schools of the present, should be emphasized in schools of the future. Over 70 percent thought the following areas should receive more emphasis: learning to be a good manager of money, property and resources; time for teachers to provide individual attention; helping students to develop good character and self respect; programs for students with special needs; and discipline. More than 50 percent believed areas such as drug, alcohol and sex education, basic skills, computers, guidance and career counseling should receive moderate attention.

In the view of most parents religious education, contributions of various ethnic groups to our way of life, band, music, art and second languages were receiving adequate emphasis.

The Parkland area in 1982 had many of the conservative features of rural, school-communities described in the literature. Yet, after base-line data provided a description of what was happening in the schools and aspirations of the people became known, numerous changes took place. Our attention will now turn to these events and to teachers' reactions to them.

FINDINGS

In this section findings are reported under headings related to the purposes of the study: changes adopted since 1982, teachers' views of implementation and teachers' perceptions of support during the time they were involved in implementing the changes. Adoption was considered to be "change on paper" usually as a result of a motion of the school board. Implementation is the phase where teachers put adopted changes into practice. References following direct quotations refer to the interview number and lines from field notes.

Changes Adopted

After the report of the 1982 study was presented to the Board, the issues and options contained in it were discussed in each of the 8 school communities. Outcomes were not so much in organizational aspects, such as school closure, but in program. These changes were further supported by a provincial government Educational Development Fund which was designed to encourage long-range planning and school initiative. In 1985-86, for example, the Parkland Division received \$90,000 from the fund. Program initiatives included:

1. a work-study class, a special class for the educable mentally retarded, and an itinerant teacher for the gifted,
2. itinerant teachers for second languages and science,
3. computer-related programs in all schools, and
4. provincially mandated curriculum change in social studies, mathematics, health, music and language arts.

A leadership professional development program was introduced for principals and vice-principals. Teachers were engaged in a series of ten video-taped in-service sessions in relation to mainstreaming, and in 1985-86, for example, 60 teachers received system support to attend various workshops. The Parkland system received further recognition when in 1986 an elementary school with an innovative timetable was selected to be one of 14 pilot schools in a provincial school improvement project. At the regional level, the Parkland School Division was considered to have been more active than most jurisdictions in adopting multiple innovations.

Implementation

A major purpose of this study was to determine if changes adopted at the system level reached the classroom. In both the 1982 and 1986 studies teachers were asked to indicate the extent to which 20 program components were provided and from these data a profile of program features was constructed. (It should be noted that there had been changes in only 7 of the 85 teaching positions). A comparison of the profiles indicated that teachers believed 16 of the 20 components improved over the 4 year period. The greatest again was in computer-related programs for which the mean was 1.1 in 1982 and 4.1 in 1986. Gains of at least one scale interval were seen in relation to programs for the gifted, the handicapped and slow learners. Two program components (business education and general preparation for post-secondary education) were considered unchanged. Guidance and career counseling were viewed less favourably. The point that needs to be emphasized is that board decisions to adopt programs in special education and computer-related areas reached the classroom according to teachers. Teachers did not report the same progress in science, second languages or provincial-mandated curriculum changes.

Teachers' Perceptions of Support

Findings reported so far indicate that multiple changes had been adopted in the Parkland System and that some at least were viewed by teachers as having had a positive impact at the classroom level. In order to gain insight into sources of support for change the teacher questionnaire included sections about opportunities for professional development, resources,

and support for new programs. In addition, each teacher was interviewed and asked what sources of support existed at the regional, system and school level. In February, 1987, findings from questionnaires and interviews were reported, checked, and discussed with a least two people from each school. Results are outlined below in relation to support services, professional development and support for program change.

Support Services

Of the 19 items shown in Table 1 the five viewed most frequently as providing support were professional preparation, teacher choice of methods and materials, extra hours in preparation, a variety of approaches to teaching and utilization of teacher talent. The items seen as providing support least frequently were the student assessment program, community resources (field trips, etc.), librarians and resource teachers, shared planning by teachers and influence on division policy. The greatest changes since 1982 were perceived improvements in relation to sufficient staff (including librarians and resource teachers), instructional materials, and a responsive Board and central office staff.

Further insight into the teachers' views of support can be gained from the following typical comments made during interviews:

"There's a lot of co-operation all round among the staff members" (15, 102-103).

"We do support each other - you share with them and they will share with you" (11, 4-42)

"There's an openness among the staff - we share highs and lows" (36, 23-24).

"I talk shop with other teachers informally - school, church, rink" (55, 12-14).

"If I have problems, I talk to one of the staff members. We get along very well" (41, 8-10).

Table 1
Teacher Views of Support Services (N=64)

Source of Support	Mean Frequency ¹
1. Adequate profession preparation	4.3
2. Teacher choice - methods materials	4.2
3. Extra hours in preparation	4.2
4. Teachers use a variety of approaches	4.0
5. My talents are utilized	4.0
6. Willingness - extra curricular	3.9
7. Paraprofessionals	3.8
8. Instructional materials	3.8
9. Influence on school decisions	3.7
10. A "say" in teaching assignment	3.6
11. Responsive Board & central office	3.6
12. Adaptation for programs	3.5
13. Sufficient staff	3.5
14. Library and A-V resources	3.5
15. Student assessment program	3.4
16. Community resources (field trips)	3.4
17. Librarians, resource teachers	3.3
18. Shared planning by teachers	3.2
19. Influence on Division policy	3.0

¹Frequency was categorized as: 1-never, 2-rarely, 3-sometimes, 4-often, 5-always

This personal contact extends to teachers throughout the Division, not just to those within the same school, as these comments show:

"I have contact with other primary teachers in the Division. We usually meet once in the fall and once in the spring, as well as at the kindergarten field meet" (29, 33-35).

"Two other teachers in the Division and I meet once a month to share ideas and prepare a joint test. The three of us drive back and forth to Yorkton when we go for inservice and we also get together at convention for a few minutes" (67, 35-39).

". . . I checked with other teachers in other schools who had tried various programs" (42, 14-15).

Professional Development

Table 2 indicates that opportunities for inservice education averaged a 4.0, or "often", on the scale. Elements in a "sometimes" category in order are leave policy, time, teacher input into planning, focus on

teaching strategies, use of outside personnel, effective division meetings, attention to development and implementation, use of local personnel, school-level inservice and inservice about evaluation. Although school-level inservice is still ranked low, it showed average improvement from 1.7 to 3.0 since 1982.

Table 2
Teacher Views of Professional Development (N=64)

Source of Support Activity	Mean Frequency ¹
1. Opportunities for inservice	4.0
2. Division leave policy	3.8
3. Time for inservice	3.8
4. Teacher input into planning	3.7
5. Focus on teaching strategies	3.6
6. Use of outside personnel	3.6
7. Effective Division meetings	3.3
8. Attention to development and implementation	3.3
9. Use of local personnel	3.0
10. School-level inservice	3.0
11. Inservice about evaluation	2.9

¹Frequency was categorized as: 1-never, 2-rarely, 3-sometimes, 4-often, 5-always

Representative remarks from teachers are again revealing:

"In January those of us in the Division who teach grade VIII Social Studies gathered for a one-day workshop. I was delighted because I thought I was so far behind, but I got there and found others were in the same place. It reassures you that maybe you are doing things right" (37, 22-30).

"Kindergarten workshops help - at least you know you were on the right track" (53, 7-10).

"I've gone to some pretty good workshops. I jot down ideas, usually follow-up . . . give them a try" (60, 38-42).

The regional curriculum co-ordinator observed, "Teachers are definitely responsive to new ideas. They want professional development on it - especially at kindergarten-primary - Division IV math even want it, too. They are talking and they like it."

Support for Program Change

A new section was added to the 1986 questionnaire in order to focus teacher attention on this topic. Results are reported in Table 3. It can be seen that the top five items involve the superintendent and teachers whereas parents, community, principal and board to less frequently provide support.

Table 3
Teacher Views of Specific Support for Program Change (N=64)

Source of Support	Average on a 5-point scale ¹
The Superintendent supports us	3.9
Teachers informal talk	3.8
Teachers talk about instruction	3.7
Materials are provided	3.6
Teacher workshops, meetings	3.6
Parents and community are supportive	3.5
Teachers talk with the principal	3.4
The principal helps us	3.3
Assistance from itinerant teachers, consultants	3.7
"I am left pretty much on my own"	3.1

¹Frequency was categorized as: 1-never, 2-rarely, 3-sometimes, 4-often, 5-always

Comments pertaining to interaction among teachers have been reported earlier. An indication of wide variation in the perception of and role of principals can be noted in the following statements.

"He is very involved - wants to be involved" (42, 37).

"The principal sits in on every parent-teacher conference . . . He totally supports me and the staff. He believes he should solve things here if he can . . . He's formal and informal after school - relaxing and beneficial" (60, 51-54).

"The Principal, the other teacher and I will decide regarding '*Journeys*' in Language Arts next year" (39, 39-40).

"He lets you go ahead and do whatever. He does what the division wants him to do - he himself is not an innovator" (1, 95-97).

"No pats, he leaves you wondering if you're appreciated" (74, 4).

"Has ability to organize . . . He fails to communicate and keep the staff informed . . . He's a good listener" (45, 2-5).

It must be noted that perceptions of the principals as a support for change vary greatly not only from school to school but also within a school. Some are seen to be more interested in some grade levels than others. As the comments indicate, some are central figures in the change process.

Teachers' views of the superintendent were consistently positive. Typical reactions are shared below:

"He has given us lots of support for the use of the computer. He copied the software himself . . . He gives ideas to the Board. He's giving a talk on 'Computers in the Elementary School' at SCEA Conference" (43, 15-20).

"He is very supportive" (56, 75-77).

"He is very easy to talk to . . . some slough you off a lot because they're not interested in you and your classroom" (15, 13-16).

"Very supportive . . . Couldn't ask for a better person - he's very interested" (15, 13-16).

"He's usually very modern - tries to bring in new ideas. He's also very well informed himself" (1, 18-19).

"He's right in there. He supports any teacher who might want to broaden their horizons" (9, 8-9).

Many of the teachers in the Division were teaching in multi-graded classrooms, so the only time that they had to prepare for a new course or method of teaching was after hours. The inability to make change a part and parcel of the job was seen as one of the major barriers to implementing the change. Teachers are under pressure to meet all the demands of teaching day-by-day and to keep abreast of the times by presenting new and relevant materials and methods of delivery. The comments below are typical:

"You dig around for materials - beat your head - once in a while someone comes around and says, 'Hey, they (students) are doing really well . . .'" (31, 47-50).

"As enrollment gets smaller, we get less time for an aide" (34, 29).

". . . 3 weeks ago, I had to make a decision regarding priorities; I was feeling so exhausted. I asked the superintendent if we had to do every thing that we were doing before a teacher was cut" (55, 55-58).

"Time is my greatest shortage . . . the pressure of multi-grade - 4 groups" (30, 20-22).

One other barrier is worth mentioning because it was seen to make enormous demands on the time and energy of some teachers. One stated that, "my position is more than a full time job - 100% effort is required for fund raising, cooking, etc. We are constantly doing a fund raising for the school."

A special effort was made to interview the teachers in the four schools which had from 1 to 3 teachers. Some of the pressures and supports for

making changes in small schools are reflected in their remarks:

"I seem to get priority in getting materials - I don't think I've ever been turned down" (29, 16-17).

"Time is my greatest shortage and there is pressure with multi-grades yet kids support you by helping each other" (33, 18-21).

"The principal and I don't formally watch one another teach yet we know what one another does - so we ask each other, 'Gee, I don't know what to do . . .'" (30, 50-60).

"I don't feel isolated but you could isolate yourself - I ride back and forth to class with teachers - I phone them too" (30, 61-64).

"I've seen the Division Board member at least half a dozen times since October . . ." (39, 20-21).

The community was not mentioned by teachers very often as a source of support. However, the following quotations indicate that community factors did have some impact:

"A good community. Very supportive of the school" (35, 87-88).

"School can't run without the community" (12, 17).

"Parents help in a small community. Piano player from the community comes in . . ." (32, 45 and 75).

"Some of the community did not want a computer in the school, but once the parents saw that students were benefiting from it then it was accepted" (36, 106-108).

"Some concern from parents . . . Sit down with them - some of them several times . . . now have their support" (40, 18-20).

"You'd hear comments from parents like, 'It's about time . . . the old book was around when I was in school'" (37, 49-50).

Space does not permit the detailed reporting of questionnaire data which indicate that most teachers believed they were more effective in 1986 than they had been in 1982. Their general view was that they were supported and that they were engaged in a process of continuous professional development.

DISCUSSION

While this study was concentrated on teacher perceptions of support for the implementation of multiple program changes, it is important to realize that the changes were *adopted* as a result of numerous organizational and socio-political factors at both the system and provincial levels. Particularly important was provincial financial support for rural jurisdictions experiencing enrollment decline and an alert superintendent who took initiative. During *implementation*, teachers indicated that they were supported more from their own preparation and from system activities than they were from school-community factors. This result supports the position of Crandall, Eiseman and Seashore-Louis (1986) who are dubious about the appropriateness of the school as the unit of change. Low school level support is surprising in view of the literature about advantages of smallness such as a feeling of family and small schools being known for co-operation. The teacher interviews did not reveal parental and community support to the extent reported by Matthes & Carlson (1986), nor the dissatisfaction with system management found by Kleinfeld and McDiarmid (1986). Neither do these results support concerns about the preparation of rural teachers and the lack of professional development activities. The major concerns which surfaced in this investigation are the relatively rare support from principals and infrequent professional development activities at the school level. Both are key considerations in change literature and in school effectiveness research.

It must be pointed out that the changes under investigation were only in early stages of implementation. Full implementation and *continuation* are seriously threatened by worsening economic conditions in the province and by a lack of integrated, continuous support for teachers at all levels of the school system.

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