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Power Dimensions of School Reform: The Limitations of Governance Systems

Dimensiones del poder de la reforma escolar: las limitaciones de los sistemas de gobernanza

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Abstract

Using a social constructivist approach, this research paper focuses on principals' and superintendents' actions and beliefs to understand how these leaders engaged with the Linked Learning high school reform initiative in California. We found that struggles to implement the reform were due in part to unequal power relationships across the key stakeholders. Power is a central feature of the education reform process both in development and in implementation, yet it has not been given the research consideration it deserves. Our investigation of relationships among educational leaders as they went about adopting, implementing, and sustaining this particular reform draws attention to how differences in leaders' perceptions and use of power can affect reform outcomes.

Keywords: educational reform, leadership, governance

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Resumen

Con un enfoque constructivista social, este estudio se enfoca en las creencias y medidas que tomaron los directores de escuela y los superintendentes, a fin de entender cómo estos líderes participaron en la iniciativa de reforma de Aprendizaje vinculado (*Linked Learning*) en escuelas de educación secundaria en California. Descubrimos que las dificultades al momento de implementar la reforma se debían a relaciones de poder desiguales entre las partes interesadas claves. El poder es una característica central del proceso de reforma educativa, tanto en su desarrollo como en su implementación. No obstante, este punto no se ha estudiado tanto como lo merece. Nuestra investigación de las relaciones entre los líderes de la educación en el proceso de adoptar, implementar y sostener esta reforma en particular recalca cómo las diferencias entre las percepciones de los líderes y su uso del poder pueden afectar los resultados de la reforma.

Palabras clave: reforma educacional, liderazgo, gobernanza

Internationally, countries struggle to create and put in place educational policies and practices that best support student achievement. In the United States, in an era of increased accountability, teachers and educational leaders face pressure to adopt and implement reform initiatives, yet efforts designed to remedy underachievement continue to fail (Darling-Hammond, 2010 Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Even when reforms have proven to be successful in some districts, educators and policymakers face disappointing results when these same reforms are applied in other locales (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002).

Prior research has offered many possible reasons for reform failure. Structurally, for example, insufficient funding streams, large school and class sizes, and high student mobility have all undermined educators' efforts to reform urban schools. Such conditions often amplify racial and social class learning differentials and present challenges for under-prepared school teachers (Chubb & Loveless, 2002; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007; Ream & Stanton-Salazar, 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2002). Likewise, teacher quality is often pointed to as a significant factor in weakening school change efforts (Darling-Hammond, 2010), so much so that in the United States the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law embedded provisions aimed at ensuring that students in all states would have access to "highly qualified teachers."[1]

Some studies of reform outcomes have faulted teachers for holding low expectations for certain students, thus compromising opportunities for academic improvement and constraining opportunities for change (Bol & Berry, 2005). Students' ethnic, linguistic, and/or social class backgrounds have been linked to failure of some kinds of school reform (Valenzuela, 1999). And theories of cultural discontinuity (Lareau & Horvat, 1999) and of students' resistance to education (Ogbu, 2003) have been put forth to explain why reforms have been unsuccessful.

These studies have provided many useful insights. But there is also a significant body of research that directs our attention to the role the attitudes and actions of school and district leaders play in shaping reform outcomes (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006). Effective leaders—those most able to support school reform—are those who establish a clear vision, set a moral purpose, engage in distributive leadership, and establish trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Fullan, 1999; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Hatch, 2002; Spillane, 2006). We know from past studies, however, that these qualities and abilities are not always present (Fullan, 1999). Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, and McLaughlin (2002) argue that how principals and superintendents understand reform and the degree and focus of support they provide can profoundly affect reform results.

Leaders' influence on educational reform is complex and often subtle as well. The use of a social constructivist perspective—one that directs attention to the interactional encounters in which policy decisions are made (Hubbard et al., 2006)—is particularly effective for understanding reform outcomes.

[1] The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is a United States Act of Congress that reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which included Title I, the government's flagship aid program for disadvantaged students. NCLB supports standards-based education reform based on the premise that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve individual outcomes for students. See: http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html.

With this approach, the focus is on "social life as it is generated in face-to-face interactions among real people who are confronting real problems in concrete social settings" (Mehan, 2013, p. 157). The analysis we present here draws on this theoretical tradition in order to understand the dynamics of school improvement from the perspective of school leaders in the United States who were involved in a high school reform effort called Linked Learning.[2]

Overview of linked learning

The Linked Learning (LL) reform was designed to provide students with a stimulating course pathway connected to a career that is of interest to them. Students select a career path from an array of possibilities, including engineering, agriculture, digital media design, health science, and others, and pursue that path while simultaneously engaging in a rigorous college preparatory program.[3] In addition to its focus on changing students' attitudes toward school, the LL program seeks to alter the traditional structural and cultural arrangements within public high schools, which frequently disadvantage low-income and minority students. They also are very difficult for school principals to change in any meaningful way.

Linked Learning was specifically designed to avoid the problems associated with now discredited "vocational education" tracks, which prevented students who were interested in preparing for a trade from simultaneously enrolling in college preparatory classes. Moreover, students in vocational education tracks, who were typically low-income and minority students, rarely had the opportunity to change tracks and join the white and/or Asian students who generally dominated the courses needed for college eligibility (Shannon & Bylsma, 2002). With the implementation of Linked Learning, principals had to abandon ability grouping and tracking or alter these structures to prevent them from reinforcing learning problems. Likewise, they had to end the mis-education or under-education of minority students, stop practices that exacerbated racial, ethnic and social class differences in minority and majority school outcomes, and alter other conditions that contributed to unequal educational opportunities (Mickelson & Heath, 1999; Murphy, 2010; Oakes, 1985).

School leaders were expected to direct the LL pathway programs in place at their school sites and support teachers in doing whatever was necessary to ensure that all courses offered within the schools' Linked Learning pathways would ready students for entrance into the California university system.

Success of the LL reform relied heavily on effective leadership. Principals who were charged with leading the implementation of the reform at their school sites were expected to work with their district superintendents to support LL teachers and students. As will be described in greater detail later, some LL principals received coaching to lead the reform. Hubbard was initially asked to study these principals to understand their experiences with this coaching (see Hubbard, 2012, for details).

Although the principals indicated that working with leadership coaches offered tremendous support, across sites and contexts they expressed concern over the role that power played in undermining their reform efforts. The current study grew out of this finding and was specifically designed to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between power and reform. Specifically, using a social constructivist approach, we focused on principals' and superintendents' actions and beliefs in order to understand how these leaders engaged with the Linked Learning reform. The following research questions guided this study:

- How does the relationship between district and school leaders affect principals' ability to lead the Linked Learning reform at their site?
- What are the barriers to effective relationships between district leaders and school principals as they implement a reform initiative?
- What role does power play in these relationships?

[2] High schools in the United States serve students 14–18 years of age. A comprehensive high school can offer both academic courses and specialized trade or technical subjects.

[3] Students follow California's "A–G" requirements, which comprise a set of academic courses that must be completed successfully in order to qualify for admission to the State and University of California educational college system.

As previously pointed out by Mehan (2013), "power is a central feature of the education policy process both in development and in implementation" (p. 161). In spite of this, power has not been given the research consideration it deserves as a layer of influence in school reform. Because Linked Learning requires school leaders to interact with district leaders—those who have positional authority above them—and because power was an emergent theme from the first study, we believe this reform provides an ideal lens through which to investigate the relationship between power and reform. Our investigation of relationships among educational leaders as they went about adopting, implementing, and sustaining Linked Learning draws attention to the way differences in leaders' degree and use of power can affect reform outcomes.

Next we provide a review of the relevant literature and then turn to an explanation of the methodology we used and a description of the study. After a detailed discussion of our findings, we conclude with a consideration of their implications.

Review of the literature

Prior research on power, governance, and the role of leadership in adopting and implementing reform provided the framework for our investigation. Studies in these areas helped expand our awareness of the kinds of issues principals and superintendents in districts throughout the state of California may have faced as they implemented the Linked Learning (LL) reform.

Power, governance, and reform

Broadly speaking, education's governance system ascribes authority to those at the top and often marginalizes those near or at the bottom.[4] Thus, one possible common element that has interpretive strength in explaining superintendent/principal relationships and their impact on efforts to reform education is *power*. Quijano's (2000) theory of "coloniality of power" identifies racial, political, and social hierarchies imposed by European colonialism and points out the advantages these hierarchies award to certain peoples/societies, along with the disadvantages they press on others. In the context of investigations of educational reform, this theory translates into the idea that there exists a well-defined social order that allocates power and control in a strictly hierarchical manner.

Although many metaphors have been used to describe governance, including "the nervous system, the control center, [and] the steering mechanism," Plecki, McCleery, and Knapp (2006) offer a particularly useful one that draws on sports terminology: "Governance defines the size of the [playing] field, establish[es] the rules of the game, determin[es] the composition of the teams, provid[es] the referees [and] creates and maintains the policy structure within which public schooling takes place" (p. 3). The individual at the top of this governance system, the superintendent, has positional authority over school principals and primarily defines the "playing field." For urban superintendents, this can mean directing the actions of as many as 200 or more school principals.[5] How principals interact with their superintendents arguably affects what happens at the school site level and can potentially determine reform outcomes.

It is unlikely that leaders take up their authority in identical ways; it is more probable that in fact they would differ considerably based on the specific contexts in which they are embedded (Hubbard et al., 2006). Prior research on schooling reminds us, however, that "power is asymmetrically distributed within and between different communities" (Benne, 1970, p. 392). This common condition has prompted a call for educators to focus on *authority* as a critical element in understanding the "theory of school" (Giroux, 1997; Plecki et al., 2006). When voices are unequal within the school governance structure, unequal outcomes are likely to result (Orr, 2006; Orr, O'Dogherty, & Barber, 2012).

[4] For the purposes of this paper, we use power and authority interchangeably. We recognize, however, that Weber (1968) and other sociologists have made careful distinctions between power and authority. Power often arises from informal and non-transparent sources, not merely from positional authority.

[5] District school boards and other community constituents also play a key governance role in education. In this paper, we discuss their involvement only as it impacts the relationships between principals and superintendents.

Principals can be challenged in their efforts to bring about change at their own school sites because their power is limited. School requirements for student needs, staffing concerns, and unique cultural contexts take a back seat to compliance with district mandates or union contracts. In many instances, principals find the middle management role is untenable due to pressure from the top to comply with district directives and pressure from school constituents to support school needs. According to Adamowski and Petrilli (2007), the difference between the amount of authority that principals believe they need to be effective leaders and the amount they actually have is the "autonomy gap."

But what is power and how is it operationalized to cause this disparity? "Research on power in educational settings is typically framed within a traditional definition of power, that is, power as the ability to control or influence others at lower levels of the organization" (Mountford, 2004, p. 709). This view of power is sometimes referred to as "power over" (Brunner, 2000, 2002; Brunner & Schumaker, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1991, 2000). "Power over" is power used by those in leadership roles "to dominate, control others, oppress others, or take a singular role in decision making" (Mountford, 2004, p. 711). Increased accountability measures imposed by federal and state government present another layer of "power over." These measures can cause fear among principals and may motivate some district leaders to increase their top-down directives or "power over" principals. When principals feel that they are in a subservient position vis-à-vis their central office and that they lack sufficient autonomy, they experience high levels of stress and feel they are not able to do what they would like and/or need to do as school leaders (Derrington & Larsen, 2012; West, Peck, & Reitzuq, 2010).

There is a growing body of literature that cites a "new view" of power, termed "power with." This collaborative approach to leadership is argued to be more supportive of reform (Blasé & Blasé, 2002). As Brunner (1988) observed,

> When superintendents defined power as power with, they were more able to support and carry out collaborative decision-making. The more strictly their definitions adhered to power as coming from or with others, the more capable they were as collaborative decision makers (Brunner, 1988, p. 81, as cited in Mountford, 2004, p. 712).

Evidence from this literature suggests that instances of "power with" are difficult to create and even harder to sustain. Hargreaves & Fullan's (2012) analysis of principal leadership warned against situations in which collaboration turns into "contrived collegiality," when "management becomes manipulation," and conformity takes away opportunities for the development of "professional capital" (p. 168). Similarly, Lukes (2005), in his formulation of a "three-dimensional power," also cautioned against counting on what appears to be the compliance of others in the absence of observable conflict of interests. According to Lukes, compliance may be masking covert conflict.

There is not likely to be a perfect way to craft district-school relationships. A recent study conducted by the Education Commission of the States (2012) found that one condition that must exist if district leaders are to govern effectively is "a healthy tension between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches to governing," whereby "all staff recognize that some decisions have to come from a higher level—as long as people are given proper support." This familiar structural arrangement, however, has created what many see as unequal power relations that adversely shape reform outcomes.

Principal agency in reform implementation

Due to their position in the decision-making hierarchy, school principals may have little recourse other than to follow the directives of district authorities. Yet we know from prior research that educators are not simply compliant actors who respond passively to directives. Top-down leadership that imposes mandates and sanctions must contend with active agents, like principals who learn from experience and who make policy in their everyday lives based on pragmatic needs and the conditions that exist in their local contexts (Hubbard et al., 2006). To date, there has been little systematic investigation of how disagreements, conflict, agreement, and meaning-making are influenced by power. Adaptations, resistance, and accommodation take various forms and must be deconstructed if we are to understand how everyday events relate to school change efforts.

We examined the implementation of Linked Learning as a dynamic process resulting from the agency of district leaders and school principals, as well as the effects of the existing structure and culture of the educational system in which they interacted. In the sections that follow we describe how we explored these issues and what we found. We conclude with recommendations offered by principals and district leaders for an educational system that flattens the existing hierarchy.

Methodology

Between January and July of 2012, Hubbard (2012) conducted an initial comprehensive, qualitative study of Linked Learning aimed at understanding the unevenness of the reform's implementation. The initial study was commissioned by two agencies, ConnectEd and the James Irvine Foundation[6] that were funding the LL program in five of the nine California districts where it was being implemented. These five districts had principals who were receiving coaching through a principal preparation program associated with Mission University (a pseudonym).[7] The primary goal of the original study was to understand the coaching relationship and the support it offered to principals. Hubbard spent one to two days in each district, visiting a total of eight schools. Data collection in the first phase included observations of teacher meetings and 20 in-depth interviews. Interview participants included principals who had been involved with the program for two years or more, principal coaches affiliated with Mission University, district superintendents, coaches who worked for the district, and coaches who were employed by ConnectEd.

While principals reported feeling supported by their coaches, they expressed some concern that they had not been able to work effectively with their district leaders to implement the Linked Learning reform. Thus, the second phase of the study began in August 2012 and it was designed to focus specifically on concerns that were raised about the role that power played in principal interactions with their district superintendents —interactions that threatened reform implementation.

For this second phase of the research —the results of which are described in this paper —we recruited 50 LL principals and district leaders to participate in focus group interviews. Educators from the five districts in the original study were among the participants. They were joined by educators from two other districts supported by ConnectEd and the James Irvine Foundation.

We divided the leaders into three focus groups. The focus group arrangement allowed individuals to share ideas and led to a very deep discussion. We would have preferred to have had a smaller number of individuals in each group, but the limited time available with the educational leaders prevented us from conducting more than three sessions. The majority of the participants were principals. There were, however, three or four district leaders of LL coaches present in each focus group. Given principals' concerns with their district administration, efforts were taken to help participants feel that the focus group arrangement was a safe space to discuss their experiences with LL. All three sessions were videotaped and all interview questions and answers were transcribed verbatim.

All responses were manually coded using a two-step process. First, each researcher independently coded the responses. Then, the coding was repeated collaboratively in order to improve reliability of the codes and the analysis. The data were interrogated to determine relationships between variables and to identify patterns, themes, similarities, and possible differences between the perspectives of principals and superintendents (Charmaz, 2005, 2006; Saldana, 2010; Yin, 2003). This article presents findings only from this second phase of the study.

[6] The James Irvine Foundation is a philanthropic non-profit organization established to benefit the people of California. It seeks to promote social equity and enrich the cultural and civic life of America's most populous state through its grants in three areas: the arts; youth and education; and state governance and civic engagement. See http://irvine.org/about-us/mission.

[7] The first phase of the research was partially funded by the Irvine Foundation with the original purpose of understanding the impact of the university's coaching arrangement on LL principals. The study was later expanded to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Linked Learning program. This second phase was not funded by the foundation or by Linked Learning funds. Funding for Linked Learning reform efforts is not mandated by state or federal regulations.

The problem of power

As described elsewhere (Hubbard, 2012), principals were confronted with a wide array of problems as they implemented the Linked Learning reform. Many of these challenges were related to the quality of the relationships they had with district office administrators and the number and types of interactions they were able to have with them (Hubbard, 2012). District administrators told us that they kept in close contact with their principals and that they provided the requisite support to meet these school leaders' needs. Principals, on the other hand, told us that they did not know *how* to talk to their district superintendents, or that they were not *able* to talk to these administrators. At its core, the problem that high school principals faced in their attempts to successfully implement the Linked Learning reform was a problem of power —specifically, the power relationships that defined district-principal interactions. It is these relationships and their implications for educational reform that we explored in the focus groups, and we turn now to the findings of this phase of the research.

Perceptions of power

Principals were unanimous in suggesting that successful Linked Learning reform implementation was directly tied to the kind of relationships they had (or did not have) with their superintendents and other district leaders. As they sought to restructure their curricula and redirect resources to areas that traditionally had not been supported, the relationships a principal had with their superintendent became extremely important, yet these relationships were shaped by what one principal described as "a tremendous amount of power … a power structure that had to be respected, and that you had to learn [how to] navigate your way through" (Principal, urban high school). The principals saw themselves as part of a system that placed them in an "extremely vulnerable" position that undermined their ability to have honest and transparent interactions with their district leaders. Both aspects of the system threatened reform efforts.

During the focus groups we posed questions aimed at determining what kind of power structured the relationships between principals and their superiors and how that power was operationalized. Principals admitted that they were influenced by the kind of power associated with hierarchical rank —that is, *positional power*. As one principal explained, "There are people in the district that have positions of power and there is that respect that's automatically given because of their position, their title" (Principal, urban high school). In educational systems, principals traditionally occupy a lower rank than district officials, and this was the case in the districts we investigated. Moreover, in many districts, the boundaries between positions were rigidly drawn and conspicuously maintained. These boundaries often included a spatial component; district officials typically worked in a central office located at some distance from the school sites where principals worked. One principal noted that this separation made "having *access* to the superintendent, or even the assistant superintendent, very difficult" (Principal, urban high school).

Principals explained that in addition to positional power, they contended with another, less visible but no less potent kind of power: *interpersonal power*. Superintendents' decisions were influenced by what some principals termed the "power and privilege of various community constituents," including, in one district, "Band parents, the Football Booster leaders, and cheerleader moms."[8] These and similar groups all held sway over the superintendent and, as a result, influenced the directives issued to principals. One superintendent we spoke with confirmed the principals' perception. He explained how and why he listened to these school community leaders: "You have to make sure that parents are taken care of or you'll be gone. You'll be gone in hours" (Superintendent, rural school district).

One principal of a rural high school referred to the impact of a variant of interpersonal power, namely, "the power of people that have been [in the district] for a long, long time. And … everybody's related or married to someone" (Principal, rural high school). According to this principal, it was important to be aware of this kind of power because although certain individuals did not have positional power themselves, the relationships they had with district leaders gave them an enormous amount of influence

[8] Booster Clubs and other support organizations are parent groups that represent themselves to the community as raising funds on behalf of or in support of schools. These groups align themselves with athletics, alumni associations, band boosters, and the arts.

on superintendents' attitudes, policies, and practices. This point was affirmed by a district leader who explained that, despite his strong desire for equitable decision-making, he found it nearly impossible to overcome the power and privilege wielded by certain community members:

> What I see in my district is a real honest effort to improve the educational experience of students who come from families *without* power and privilege, but when the families *with* power and privilege step in, they are very quickly deferred to. It's like it's very difficult to escape from it and it's also very hard. To be really honest about it, I think these issues around equity are huge—race, class, wealth, power, and personal agency. We struggle mightily with them. They create barriers to change (Principal, rural high school).

Principals who tried to "push [or influence] people who [were] higher than them on the hierarchy" (such as their superintendents) did so because they doubted that their best thinking would be accepted for what it was because as one principal said, "it becomes much more complicated by issues of gender and race, and privilege" (Principal, rural high school).

In district meetings, all constituents worked hard to be heard and to give voice to their perspectives. Nevertheless, it appeared to principals that the playing field was unequal. Everyone's ideas were not given the respectful attention they deserved. Principals struggled to have their perspectives valued, and they did so in a context in which they were further disadvantaged by the power certain constituencies could exert over even the highest-ranking district officials. They felt that superintendents were responding to the voices of "privileged" parents at the expense of equity concerns.

Feeling the influence of "Power Over"

Uncertainty of employment and differential power relationships defined interactions between principals and their superintendents and affected principals' abilities to lead reform. More precisely, the influence of "power over" was immediately visible to principals when superintendents made decisions about which principals would be hired into the district, what schools they would be assigned to, and whether current principals would be retained or let go. This is how one principal explained the process in his district:

> Straight out, principals work at the pleasure of the superintendent and the [school] board. Period. It can be political even at the larger stage or at the smaller stage. The principal is chosen by somebody—maybe a committee—but ultimately that [decision] has to be approved by the board. I never lose sight of how the board or [the superintendent] voted (Principal, rural high school).

Indeed, the anxious comment of one principal, "I could be moved at any time," (Principal, urban high school) captures the sense of extreme vulnerability we heard expressed among all groups of principals we interviewed.

District leaders, rather than principals, made key decisions about the Linked Learning reform. They contracted to adopt and implement the program and they decided which Linked Learning pathway(s) (engineering, health, agriculture, etc.) would be implemented at each high school in their district. The pathway decision was extremely important because it affected the number of students that principals could attract to their school, what teachers they needed to hire, and what changes they would have to make to their master schedule of classes. Principals complained that these top-down decisions were not always in the best interests of reform efforts at their school sites, yet they had little recourse since the "power over" exerted by district leaders took decision-making in these areas out of principals' hands.

Perhaps of most concern was the way in which "power over" shaped interactions between principals and district leaders. Specifically, the increasing pressure on principals led many to become extremely vigilant in monitoring their daily interactions and in guarding how much they revealed to their superintendents. A principal with nine years of experience described the growing tendency to self-monitor this way: "If you go into a meeting [at the district office] feeling that you can be transparent and that you can speak freely, *be careful*! Because, as you know, you have to measure your words" (Principal, urban high school). Principals felt they could not "speak freely"; they believed that they needed to "filter" their comments when speaking to district personnel. They preferred to meet with other principals with no one from the district present because, as one principal explained, "The divisions are too wide and the risk is too great

[to talk to our superintendent]. The problems are messy, the conversations can get messy, and someone outside the school or the district would really need to facilitate" (Principal, urban high school). This inability to draw on their superintendents as a resource undoubtedly hindered the principals' abilities to implement the Linked Learning reform.

Both groups of leaders recognized how separated they were. District administrators knew that principals got together to have conversations on their own. "So, [the principals] are having a great old time, having these conversations or sharing what their barriers are, or what their concerns are, or their suggestions. But we [the district administrators] don't interact with them that way" (Assistant Superintendent, urban school district). Even when they did interact, there was a discouraging lack of transparency, which exacted a greater cost on principals than on district leaders. Because principals were unable to have honest "authentic conversations" and were unable to express their real concerns, ask for advice, or offer their own opinions, many important conversations never happened. These conditions had significant effects not only for the individuals involved, but also for the Linked Learning reform they were leading at their sites. Unequal power relations, especially those that shut principals out of the decision-making process, adversely affected their ability to lead their staff and bring about change. Principals expressed concern that they were unable to put their full knowledge and capacity behind the decisions their superiors had made for them.

Becoming part of the conversation

When principals were given an opportunity to voice their opinions to district leaders, they wondered, "Who is really listening?" Although some principals felt their district leadership did listen, they also noted that they had to "go over there and *scream* a little bit." Clearly a two-way conversation was not always available. A principal in one of our focus groups discussed the problem this way:

> Maybe you [superintendents and district administrators] can help us principals sitting here around the room … [We'd like you] to please share, include us in the discussion if you are going to make a decision that's going to impact our staff, our students, or our families so that we're well versed enough that we can speak to it. It doesn't mean that we have to necessarily agree with it 100 percent, but at least we have some information that we can share. That's the hardest thing as a principal—to try to be [a] representative of the district when you haven't been included in the discussion or in the decision-making. And, that's probably one of the biggest things I see principals struggle [with] (Principal, urban high school).

For the principals in our study, being repeatedly required to adopt and implement new reform initiatives was common; some referred to this as a "reform mill." Much of the impetus for reform originated from state and federal mandates. District administrators often imposed the newest and latest reform ideas on their districts with the hopes that the reforms would provide the "magic bullet" that would raise test scores and attract more students to their districts. And, while principals in general shared their hopes, they had the responsibility of "selling" the initiatives to their staff. It was their charge to convince teachers to support the implementation of reform programs, even when these initiatives required sweeping changes that deliberately challenged the status quo by, for example, upending existing ideologies, beliefs, and long-standing practices that sustained inequality. The already difficult problem of changing entrenched attitudes and behaviors was made even more difficult when principals were not armed with the requisite knowledge to convince their staff of the benefits of the reform —a result of having been excluded from district conversations. One principal explained the consequences as follows:

> Decisions that are going to impact some of those cultural or traditional institutional items … If we're not well-versed and do not have a clear understanding, how can we try to sell it or explain it? If it's not genuine, if it's not sincere, if it's not something that you truly understand why we're doing it, people see through it and that carries down to your teaching staff (Principal, urban high school).

When principals were expected to implement a new initiative like Linked Learning and to be genuine advocates, but were not given the opportunity to be meaningful partners in district discussions, much of the key reform knowledge and support remained at the district level.

According to these educational leaders, power dynamics shaped relations between principals and district administrators in ways that undermined reform efforts. When the principals were not allowed to

engage in discussions, ask questions (for fear they might display weakness), and/or when the discussions were "shallow" and non-transparent, the real work that could best support principals and the district did not get accomplished. How do we account for the unequal power relations that arguably plagued the principals who were trying to implement Linked Learning? We take up the reasons next.

Accounting for the effects of power relations

By all accounts, the persistent and destructive effects of power were related to *individual, structural* and *cultural* factors. Addressing the *individual level*, one principal offered this insight:

> I think some of the barriers are ourselves; thoughts of territory and ownership at our site, and not wanting to give some of that up. Sometimes it's hard to let go of your school vision, to have a system vision, just as it's hard for a teacher to let go of that classroom vision to help the school's vision (Principal, rural high school).

Some principals recognized that in attempting to hang on to the power they still had, they may have contributed to making the conversations with their district superintendents non-productive (or non-existent). It is likely that principals' sense of great vulnerability contributed to this situation. As one principal stated, "We don't like to admit that we don't quite understand, or that we don't know how to articulate what we need" (Principal, urban school district). Remaining silent may have helped school leaders avoid criticism from their superiors, but it also helped perpetuate the arguably dysfunctional, ineffective, and marginalizing relationships they had with these same high-ranking individuals.

Principals struggled to learn how to communicate effectively with superintendents and how to use the power they had as school leaders. Some of the leadership coaches (veteran principals who worked to support the principals as they undertook the LL reform) observed that principals did not make full use of their authority: "Principals need to learn how to use their power. Even though the [superintendent] has positional authority, the principal really has a lot of power but they don't know how to use it. They lack confidence and skills" (Principal coach, urban school district).

Structural arrangements also created and sustained unequal power relations. Positional authority, as mentioned earlier, exacerbated the problem of "silos"—separate, independently functioning units, with little or no cross-communication, that form within a larger, hierarchically defined system.[9] Those at the top did not "communicate a clear set of expectations to school site leadership," and in some cases those at the top did not even give the same messages to the school leaders. Inconsistencies between the messages given by superintendents and those given by other district leaders were common. The result was "a lot of confusion at the site level, and then mixed priorities depending on which random district office person showed up at their site and want[ed] them to do something else different" (Principal, urban high school). District fragmentation undermined a coherent and unified vision between principals and superintendents and sometimes between superintendents and their district administrators as well.

District administrators acknowledged that structural factors hampered effective interactions and clear communications between administrators within the central office. One administrator noted:

> Up at the district office, it's very, very much about silos … There's this kind of culture piece that goes on there in our district because we're kind of born, we live there, we breathe there. It's so well engrained and the silos have been inhibitors before (District Administrator, urban school district).

Another administrator agreed, but also seemed to consider this an intractable aspect of the system:

> Silos are hard to break down because we're designed to be silos by credential, by department, by year in school, by semester, by quarter, by program, right? We say, "Let's not live in silos," yet we live in silos. "Let's think out of the box," but we are the box (Superintendent, urban school district).

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[9] The term "silo" is used frequently to explain the isolation that operates in management. The Compact Oxford English Dictionary Online defines "silo" as: "A system, process, department, etc., that operates in isolation from others." (See http://www.grammarphobia.com/blog/2013/04/silo.html).

According to some of the education leaders who participated in the study, structural arrangements were held in place largely for *cultural* reasons. They pointed out that there is a persistent view of education as an "institution [that] is designed not to change, or to change slowly, to maintain, to conserve something" (Superintendent, urban school district). Although many agree that change is essential in order to improve academic achievement for students, one principal remarked that school leaders had "become kind of [their] own worst enemy around it" (Principal, rural high school). Reforms, including Linked Learning, often require an immediate cultural change. The "de-tracking" approach associated with Linked Learning, for instance, demanded major changes in schools' master schedules and it necessitated moving students who previously had been in non-academic tracks into courses taught by teachers who had no prior experience with this population. Change this broad, undertaken at top speed, challenged traditional high school culture.

To be successful, principals needed to convince teachers, some of whom the school leaders described as "toxic" educators, to set aside certain of their long-standing beliefs and accept new ways of viewing students' abilities and new attitudes about the potential of all students, even those who had been disengaged from school, to become college eligible. Bringing about this kind of structural and cultural change placed significant responsibility on principals and required consistent district support. It is not surprising, then, that given the power structure described above and its negative effects on interactions across hierarchical boundaries, principals struggled to accomplish change at their schools.

Our study participants offered several recommendations to remedy the problem of power that threatened their leadership and efforts to implement LL. We discuss their recommendations next.

Unlocking potential

The need for "Power With"

The principals expressed a great willingness to bring about change, but they were ineffectual in being able to build a satisfactory relationship with their district leaders. Without directly naming it as such, these school principals sought "power with"—a more collaborative, connected set of relationships that would make it possible for them to conduct truthful conversations in which they could share their leadership challenges with their superintendents. They wanted superintendents to become active agents in trying to understand their specific circumstances instead of being "district leaders [who] spent more time walking around [the school] looking at classrooms than sitting down and having a discussion with the principal" (Principal, urban high school).

Principals wanted opportunities for superintendents to engage with them and to ask them such questions as, "What are you thinking about? Where are you headed? Where do you want to take your school? Here are some of *my* expectations …" (Principal, rural high school). Principals complained that without this kind of one-on-one, honest, focused interaction, it was hard for them to know what their superintendents really wanted and hard for the superintendents to know the principals' needs. As one principal stated, "I think it's really important for us as principals, somehow, some way, to have a clear understanding of what the superintendent wants ... And it's hard to get that message [across] unless you talk directly to that person" (Principal, rural high school), and that kind of direct communication does not happen.

The principals also asked for greater inclusion. They felt that not having the opportunity to share their ideas as participants in district discussions about reform initiatives in general, and LL specifically, made them less effective in implementing change at their school site. One principal, expressing this common sentiment, said, "Include us in the discussion. If you are going to make a decision that's going to impact our staff, our students, or our families, [we need to be] well versed enough that we can speak to it" (Principal, urban high school).

Principals were well aware, however, that relationship building with superintendents was only part of the solution. They knew that if they were to lead successful reform at their schools, they needed help from their districts to establish a much broader network of support. Principals unanimously

called for opportunities to collaborate with colleagues. Specifically, they wanted assistance from district administrators in creating a set of horizontal relationships connecting school principals across the schools that were implementing the LL reform. Many mentioned that they had already "begun networking amongst ourselves to build relationships," but they wanted to broaden opportunities for collaboration. One principal noted that school leaders are not "competitive" and that they could learn a lot from other LL principals. From their perspective, being able to establish relationships within and across districts would create the possibility for principal empowerment.

Shifting to this kind of collaborative approach, however, requires that district leaders think differently about who holds knowledge and the power that accompanies it. Principals felt that the top leaders perceived themselves as the owners and controllers of all the knowledge. Principals believed that if district leaders could come to understand that, in practice, knowledge is held within and across multiple layers of the system, greater collaborations could generate more knowledge and better address their main goal: to improve student learning. In fact, these principals considered collaboration essential. One principal stated, "We have our kids collaborating, we have our teachers collaborating, we're collaborating with them … How do we bring in our district people to collaborate [with us, in order to] get them back in touch with our kids" (Principal, rural high school)? Creating collaborative opportunities and dismantling silos that kept district and school leaders and teachers from authentically communicating offers the potential to better support the needs of all stakeholders.

The need for adaptation in a new educational era

Lastly, principals recognized that they were undertaking the Linked Learning reform in a new era of education, one that demanded a new way of doing business:

> We're post-NCLB kind of folks. We don't run schools the way they used to prior to all those benchmarks you had to hit by '04, '05, '06. There are increased demands, fragmentation, less resources, less professional development. The context and the demands of schools are different. We need to think very differently (Principal, rural high school).

Acknowledging the current era of increased accountability and with extreme budget cuts limiting resources and opportunities for educators, the principals we interviewed pushed for exploring new opportunities for practice and developing new ideas about how to do things, "perhaps radically different from the way we did business before," but nevertheless effective in "get[ting] the job done."

One principal used the metaphor of a trapeze to explain the dilemma. She said, "Maybe the trapeze is different from what it was before. Maybe it's not a trapeze at all" (Principal, urban high school). In other words, the traditional, sustainable relationships that principals used to count on may be gone for good. For instance, in the past, principals could rely on their district to provide significant support for professional development. Now, "the people you used to reach out for as a trapeze buddy, they're simply not there anymore." Among the principals in our study, support now came from outside their districts and at a dramatically lower level than they had received from within their districts. The era of change in which they now found themselves prompted these school leaders to advocate for new kinds of relationships and opportunities to grow knowledge and receive support from those at the top as well as from other principals across the system.

Discussion

Concluding thoughts and implications

Our findings expose the micro-politics that characterized relations between school leaders and district administrators and challenged reform efforts among Linked Learning principals. To date, principals' leadership experiences have been shaped by district leaders' tendency to rely primarily on "power over" strategies. Individual, structural, and cultural factors contributed to unequal power relations that led principals to call for a shift to a "power with" approach that would result in more opportunities for collaborative interactions with their superintendents and with their LL colleagues. Principals described their reform efforts as hampered by common practices and structural arrangements that encouraged non-authentic communication in which some voices and perspectives were privileged over others. Although they accepted responsibility for not sufficiently asserting their own authority in interactions with district leaders, principals generally cited district leaders' greater positional authority and the existence of organizational silos as primarily responsible for the troubled or weak relationships that they had with district leaders.

Schools are complex, multi-layered and messy organizations with entrenched cultural norms (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Fullan, 2001; Hubbard et al., 2006; Sergiovanni, 2000). Yet the LL reform, like many other school reforms, calls for a major cultural change aimed at altering some of the beliefs and traditions that hold educational power structures in place. This kind of transformation raises many questions. What will happen if we dismantle the traditional sets of power relationships and break down the silos that keep people and knowledge apart? Will we see a more democratic process? Will power be more evenly distributed among the collective or will a small number of voices manage to co-opt the process? If power is more widely distributed among educational leaders, can educational systems nevertheless adequately respond to the growing demands of the state and federal government?

This research was not designed as a comprehensive examination of the leadership capacities of individual principals, nor was it designed to examine contextual and individual variations. Rather, it was designed to explore an important dimension of reform that is typically overlooked —that is, how power affects the important linkages that are needed between educational leaders. While considerable research has been focused on principal leadership (Elmore, 2004; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012; Murphy & Seashore Louis, 1999), this study goes further to expose this important and potent dimension. In so doing, it contributes in an important way to the body of knowledge on school reform and offers an important contribution to our understanding of reform implementation.

As the education community moves forward with its efforts to reform schools and increase learning opportunities for a greater number of students, unequal power relations must be considered. It is likely that a greater balance in the distribution of authority, one that supports a democratic process, will have to be constructed. It is also likely, however, that as happened with its predecessors, this new process will be vulnerable to internal and external pressures and competing interests and thus will demand our continued vigilance and a deeper understanding of power relations and the ways in which they are situated within particular contexts at the hands of unique individuals with unique leadership skills and knowledge.

Areas for future research

Although this study of Linked Learning has provided important insight into how reform implementation is impacted by power relations, we acknowledge the need for a more in-depth analysis of the actions and perceptions of principals and district leaders who are engaged in the process. Future studies should focus on variation across individuals and contexts to reveal how interpersonal relationships and rural compared to urban settings affect issues of power and reform efficacy. For example, although it was beyond the scope of this study to explore how and why some principals were more or less effective than others at negotiating linkages with superintendents, based on our observations in one rural district, family and peer networks appeared to particularly influence demands placed on principals, which added to the principal's problems with his superintendent. An ethnographic study could help to build on previous research that has helped to reveal the influence of leadership strategies and contextual factors on reform. Although

all of these issues are worthy of further exploration, the current study is an important first step because it helps to frame an important and often overlooked dimension of educational reform. Our findings point to the need to attend to power dynamics as we attempt to advance promising reform policies and practices.

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