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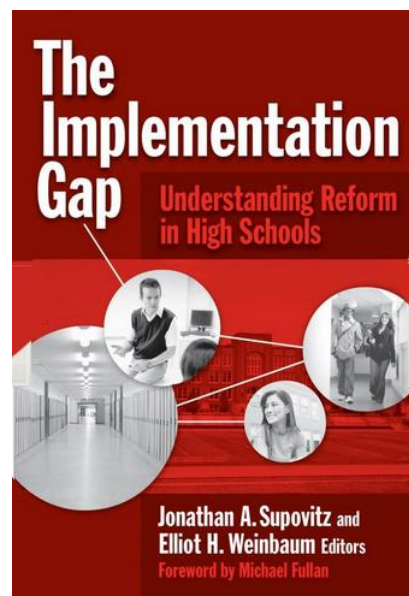
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Supovitz, Jonathan A. & Weinbaum, Elliot H. (Eds.) (2008) *The Implementation Gap: Understanding Reform in High Schools*

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Since “A Nation at Risk” was released in the 1980s, standards-based reforms have been the most dominant trend in American educational policy, and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) pushed the trend further by requiring states to develop rigorous curriculum standards. The movement of standards-based reform has been expected to play crucial roles for changing American education, especially to improve student performance. Although reform programs have been suggested with ambitious intentions (e.g., to improve student performance in math through rigorous curriculum standards), the results of these programs have deviated from the initial intentions (Swanson & Stevenson, 2002) for a variety of reasons: the relationship between districts and school administrators (Coburn &



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Russel, 2008), the roles of school districts, communications between stakeholders (e.g., district policy makers and teachers) (Spillane, 2004), understanding and interpretation of policy languages (Hill, 2001), etc. Thus, what policy makers intend can be different from how reform programs are implemented in classrooms.

The Implementation Gap: Understanding Reform in High Schools addresses the gap between what reform programs have intended and how schools implemented those programs. The book is composed of seven chapters. In chapter 1, **Supovitz and Weinbaum** laid out the background of the study, research questions, design, and methodology; chapter 2 explained the five reform programs examined in the study. The authors then reported variations in policy implementation at the school level using four codes¹: reform design in chapter 3, school district support in chapter 4, school leadership in chapter 5, and communication patterns in chapter 6. In the last chapter, based on the results of these codes, Supovitz constructed the theory of iterative refraction, which means that once a reform program is implemented, the implementation of reform programs takes place repeatedly at multiple levels (individual, social, and organizational), and these repeated implementations make teaching practices deviate from what the original reform programs intended.

While there is a large body of research on the discrepancies between what educational policies initially intend and how schools implement them, there is only a small body of research examining why these discrepancies or variations occur. Based on their recognition of this lack of research on the implementation process, the authors developed two research questions: 1) “How do the reform ideas and practices of external change agents interact with school environments and teacher attributes to change instructional and organizational practices in high schools?” and 2) “What factors both within and outside high schools explain differing levels of understanding and enactment of programs?” (p. 10). The study was conducted by researchers from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) from 2002 to 2004, and they used



¹ The authors used the term “code” to explain factors influencing policy implementation at the school level.

interviews, surveys, and document analysis to address these research questions.

The study focused on five reform programs that were implemented in fifteen schools (each program for three schools). High Schools That Work (HSTW) and First Things First (FTF) focused on whole school reform, Ramp-Up to Literacy (RU) and Penn Literacy Network (PLN) intended to improve literacy, and SchoolNet (SN) aimed especially at encouraging data use. Muller and Hovde described the features of these programs (the purpose of a program, its source of funding, activities to achieve that purpose, etc), and variations in program implementation at the school level. Variations in the implementation of programs were largely explained by who made decisions and how school staff interpreted the goals of these programs.

Shiffman, Riggan, Massell, Goldwasser, and Anderson addressed four aspects of program design: 1) design emphasis, 2) level of complexity posed to enacting teachers and administrators, 3) strategies for engagement, and 4) implementation supports; they showed how these aspects influenced program implementation. Design emphasis (i.e. the purposes of programs) had impact on the ways goals and activities were sequenced. The level of complexity (i.e., how abstract concepts and goals were) was also influential in that abstract concepts and goals of the programs hindered school staff from clearly interpreting and understanding the programs' purposes. In addition, teachers and school administrators complained about the lack of technical support to enact the programs. The more implementation supports were provided, the more teachers and school administrators were likely to align with the goals of the programs. Moreover, the engagement level of teachers and administrators depended heavily on the degree to which the designs were related to teachers' recognition of the importance and effectiveness of the programs.

The information provided in this chapter is useful for gaining a general understanding of how a reform design influences the implementation of reform programs. We learn that different features of reform design lead to variation in the process of reform implementation. However, with this chapter, it is hard to judge which

reform design was desirable to appropriately support teachers and administrators because this chapter devoted most of its attention to describing what was happening in the implementation of reform programs, but spent no time suggesting which design emphasis, which level of complexity, which degree of engagement, and what support school implementers actually needed. For instance, the authors could have described that design A offered a specific guideline while design did not but they do not present any evidence that a specific guideline is more helpful than a general one. In addition, with respect to the role of program providers, the authors could have reported that there was variation in the extent to which program providers were involved in the implementation at the school level, but no standards regarding an appropriate degree of involvement of program providers was presented. To help readers (policy makers, researchers, reform program designers, etc) utilize the information presented in this chapter, I wish the authors would have shown which program design was more supportive for achieving the goals of reform programs, and for teachers to implement reform programs at the school level, compared to other designs.

Weinbaum, Cole, Weiss, and Supovitz analyzed social networks (i.e., communication patterns) among teachers and school administrators. “Social network” was measured by the amount and distribution of communications. The authors defined two kinds of communications: professional communication and provider communication. Professional communication refers to the communications regarding professional concerns such as course content and planning, classroom management, and strategies for assisting low-performing students; provider communication refers to communications on reform implementation between program providers and reform school staff. The results indicated that the amount and patterns of both communications were varied, and there were only a few provider communications and little variation in professional communication patterns across schools and reform programs. Interestingly, there were negative associations between the amount of professional communications and provider communications. That is, as conversations for reform-related topics increased over time, professional conversations decreased, and this pattern was consistent in most of the participating schools.

The chapter entitled “The Implementation Gap” is intended to provide readers with a better understanding of the dynamics of reform implementation and how these dynamics cause variations across participating schools. The findings help readers recognize the invisible factors, such as the amount and patterns of communications closely related to the implementation reform programs, so that policy makers can take into account dynamics in communications when designing and implementing reform programs. The authors did not really say, however, why they dealt with professional communications. Unlike provider communications, professional communications did not appear to play a direct role in the implementation of reform programs. Moreover, as in previous chapters, this chapter does not show how the amount and patterns of communications influenced whether or not the purposes of reform programs were achieved.

In chapter 5, Riggan and Supovitz explored the roles of three kinds of leaders: the traditional-formal leader, the provider-formal leader, and the informal leader. Traditional-formal leaders played a strong role in that they established reform related agenda and created pressure and incentives to adopt changes. If traditional-formal leaders did not engage in reform related agenda and activities, implementation would be “superficial and limited to a small number of teachers” (p. 109). Provider-formal leaders mainly delivered reform ideas and supported teachers to implement reform activities. Most leaders of this type were advocates for reform ideas. Unlike traditional-formal leaders and provider-formal leaders, most informal leaders were teachers who supported reform ideas, rather than school administrators or reform providers. Teachers of this type often supported other teachers regarding instructional issues when implementing reform programs.

School plays a central role in enacting reform programs (Coburn & Russel, 2008; Supovitz & Weinbaum, 2008). In this sense, the results provide a meaningful recognition of the different types of leadership and how these various modes of leadership influence reform implementation. In addition, by providing specific evidence from interview data, the chapter helps us understand how leaders and teachers perceived leadership roles in the implementation

of reforms. However, it is still difficult to discern the rationale for how the authors categorized leaders in the participating schools into these three types of leadership, and there was relatively less attention to how different types of leadership created variation in reform implementation. To strengthen the arguments in this chapter, a detailed rationale and comparison of the impact of three different leadership styles would be needed. More specifically, the authors could make a list of district administrators' behaviors and, depending on the list, the leadership types could be determined more clearly and explicitly.

Weinbaum, Shiffman, and Goertz presented the roles of central office support, which "refers to the administrative office of the school district" (p. 148), comparing district context and norms with expectations of reform providers. Three criteria were used to evaluate district and provider expectations: coupling (the relationship between a central office and a school), capacity (financial and human capital of a school district), and alignment (whether reform ideas match with district priorities and with other reform ideas). The authors assumed that if district characteristics and provider expectations were well-matched with each other, a central office could more appropriately support reform implementation at the school level. The results indicated that there was variation in the degree to which district characteristics and provider expectations were related. Furthermore, the better a school district's support implementation matched with provider expectations, the more support schools could receive from school districts when implementing reform programs.

Since the roles of school districts have been emphasized in the context of standards-based reform (Spillane & Callahan, 2000), this chapter helps readers recognize the features of leadership at the district level. School districts play relatively less noticeable roles than school staff, who are frontline implementers of reform programs. This chapter revealed the roles of school districts and their relations with implementers at the school level so that we (especially policy makers) can recognize the importance of the relationship between stakeholders, available resources for reform program implementation, and the alignment with other programs when designing reform programs. The limitation in this study, however, is that there were

uncontrolled factors when evaluating the levels of coupling, capacity, and alignment of school districts and provider expectations. There might be several influencing factors with regard to school district characteristics and expectations of reform providers. For example, the number of students, school locations, and student performance level could affect the extent to which school districts contain fiscal and human capital, the extent to which a current reform program aligns with other reforms, and the extent to which a school has a good relationship with a school district. However, there was no apparent consideration regarding these potential factors when the authors reported the results.

In the last chapter, Supovitz outlined the theory of iterative refraction to illustrate the variations in reform program implementation at the school level. When schools implement reform programs, adaptation repeatedly occurs at multiple levels such as individual consideration, social interactions, and organizational structures. Through the process of adaptation, the results might be inconsistent with the intent of the reform due to interpretations and understandings at multiple levels. To support the theory of iterative refraction, Supovitz took examples from preceding chapters and drew implications based on the results in those chapters. First, he suggested that reform designers should consider how priorities are sequenced and what kinds of guidance and support implementers need. Second, Supovitz recommended that district leaders discern the partnerships between school districts and schools and the relationships between these partnerships and reform providers' expectations. In addition, district leaders should consider how much financial and human capital school districts have and how well priorities and practices of school districts align with reform ideas. Third, Supovitz proposed that school leaders concern themselves with the importance of informal leaders and their influences on the implementation of reform programs.

Lastly, Supovitz suggested that researchers and policymakers should look at complicated dynamics in the implementation of reform programs, specifically how reform programs are enacted at the school level, how stakeholders modify the intent of reforms, and how the results of this intent will be productive or diluted depending on variations of implementation.

Supovitz stood in a very neutral or supportive position toward variations and refractions of the implementation of reform programs, and further he regarded the deviations of implementation as useful innovations. In part, his argument is reasonable because each school and school district had its own context, environment, priorities, etc., and thus needed to adjust reform programs in accordance with these characteristics. However, variation might hinder schools from achieving the purposes of reform programs. For instance, when teachers misinterpret messages from reform programs, it might be hard to reach the initial goal of reform programs.

By and large, the authors revealed very specifically what was happening when participating schools enacted the five school reform programs, and their studies enlarge readers' knowledge about the implementation of reform programs. Especially, when enacting reform programs, stakeholders should anticipate what kinds of factors intervene in a result, what kinds of difficulties they face, and what kinds of support they need for the implementation of reform programs.

However, there are at least two limitations in the study. First, the authors did not suggest what a successful reform would look like. The description of what happened in the participating schools is not sufficient to provide feasible guidelines to achieve the purposes of reform programs. To make the results in the book more useful for readers who would like to design and implement reform programs, the authors should have provided more specific suggestions about which factors are more helpful than other factors for achieving the initial goals of reform programs. The four codes (reform design, school district support, school leadership, and communication pattern) presented in the book are good guidelines. Second, four studies presented in the book were conducted while participating schools were implementing reform programs. Considering that it might take considerable time to examine the tangible impacts of reform programs, it might be too early to draw conclusions about the deviation of reform programs.

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