
Organizational climate and teacher autonomy: implications for educational reform

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Shows how educational reform has been a persistent concern in the USA for decades. Recent reform initiatives have focused on teacher autonomy and teacher participation in school-based decision making. Private sector and school research identify the importance of worker/teacher autonomy. This autonomy leads to a sense of ownership and empowerment where workers aim to grow within their profession and seek increased responsibility. Believes real education reform must provide teachers with decision-making responsibility and autonomy in educational matters including choice with respect to professional development. This can only be accomplished in a supportive and nurturing organization.

Concern about the USA's ability to compete in a global marketplace has increased public demand for educational reform (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; National Governors Association, 1990). Many believe that legal mandates would reverse declining enrolments and test scores rather than school-based leadership. Legislative reformers focused on educational improvements by increasing the length of the school day, school year, and time-on-task while stressing accountability and basic skills (Frymier, 1987). Placing good intentions aside, reformers failed to see the real problems as student and teacher centred. Problems of illiteracy, declining test scores, dropout rates, and substance abuse continue to increase and become more ingrained in school communities (Henley, 1987).

The Carnegie Task Force (1986) emphasized the importance of teachers being central to educational reform. The premiss was that if schools were to improve, creative and innovative teachers must be recruited into the profession and must remain in the schools (Frymier, 1987; Henley, 1987). However, many policy makers and administrators wax philosophical about the importance of teachers and teaching, only to undercut teachers by creating work conditions that stifle enthusiasm and creativity.

Educational reform measures in the 1990s emphasize teacher empowerment. With teacher professionalism and participation in the decision-making process being described as goals, the end results often find teachers as passive recipients of reform initiatives (Maeroff, 1988). Negatively affecting the organizational climate is increased centralization and bureaucratization which reduces the empowerment central to educational reform (Cuban, 1990). Mandated reforms that do not take into account input of grassroots educators do not reflect the importance of educators as professionals capable of making decisions beneficial to the students they serve. Centralized mandates reduce the freedom of teachers to deal with diverse student abilities and the needs of the community (Wise, 1988).

As far back as 1904, John Dewey affirmed the important role of classroom teachers with respect to effective school change.

The tendency of educational development to proceed by reaction from one thing to another, to adopt for one year, or for the term of seven years, this or that new study or method teaching, and then as abruptly to swing over to some new educational gospel, is a result which would be impossible if teachers were adequately moved by their own intelligence (Dewey, 1904, p. 16).

A common thread that appears both in private sector research (Drucker, 1980; Naisbitt, 1984; Peters and Waterman, 1982) and in school research (Boyer, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Tierney *et al.*, 1991) is the importance of autonomy to the individual worker/teacher. Individuals need a sense of ownership within the organization. Workers need to explore and feel confident in testing alternatives. This, in turn, leads individuals to empowerment and responsibility for their efforts. When an organization employs only hard-nosed approaches where workers are denied autonomy, they become frustrated and professional growth is limited (Wildman and Niles, 1987). Individual autonomy is therefore crucial to the success of the educational reform movement.

Organizational climate

The environment in which a teacher works is closely linked to the organizational climate of the school. Organizational climate is strongly related to the amount of control over individual workers and the manner in which this control is exercised is directly affected by management style. Teachers see schools as effectively functioning organizations when there is more professionalism and when decision making is more participative and less centralized.

Site-based management is critical to providing environmental changes conducive to organizational effectiveness. Site-based management values the importance of shared decision making at the local school level. A participative environment fosters new relationships among staff members and students and is critical to organizational effectiveness (White, 1989).

The effect of the environment on individuals is dependent on the present psychological state of the individuals. Each individual is unique and how the environment will actually affect the individual is dependent on the firmness of the boundary between the environment and the individual.

Meyers (1986) suggests that autonomous behaviour occurs in degrees (i.e. given certain situations, people will act more or less autonomously). To have the ability to act autonomously does not guarantee that the behaviour will occur; individuals will only act autonomously if the situation is appropriate to them.

Freedom to work within one's area of expertise is critical to the success of the organization. Overall effectiveness of the organization is based on the autonomy of the individual worker and that worker's effectiveness is linked to the freedom provided within the organizational climate of the system (Drucker, 1980). Creativity, innovation, and good worker morale are the keys to organizational effectiveness (Drucker, 1985):

Autonomy in schools is crucial to educational effectiveness. Autonomy empowers individuals within the system to teach to the changing needs of the students and the community (Sergiovanni and Moore, 1985):

The morale of public school teachers is only partially related to salary and welfare benefits. Three factors have greater effect on teacher morale: whether teachers are given a role in managing their professional functions; the extent to which they are helped to perform better; and the degree to which they are provided with information about what is expected of them and whether they meet these expectations (p. 5)

Participatory management is one measure on which teachers and administrators agree in large part. Taking part in educational management has been embodied into practice in scores of school districts. Shared governance has helped to replace communication barriers with openness, honesty and trust.

In-service education is a critical factor in school environmental reform. In-service education requires a deep commitment from school boards and superintendents. When teachers attend workshops, conferences, etc., they need time to digest the material and have the opportunity to share what innovative methods or data have been learned. Teaching for the most part is done in isolation from one's peers and the precious moments teachers are together in the lounge are used for venting frustrations or discussing the latest edict from a board of education. When a school does not know where it is or where it should be going,

teachers have little basis for professional conversation. This condition makes the need for communication among teachers even more important.

A look at schools

Educational systems are loosely coupled (Weick, 1976) and, as a result, individuals operate independently more than in groups (English, 1986). The freedom to act independently is linked to the level of commitment of the teacher to teaching (Rosenholtz and Simpson, 1990).

Professionalism in teaching is characterized by a control of one's destiny (autonomy) and appropriate practice rather than the conformity and standardized practice that bureaucratic organizational approaches demand (Darling-Hammond, 1985). The problem of providing autonomy to the professional educator is based on the inherent conflict between professionalization and bureaucratization. Blau *et al.* (1966) found that professionals function more effectively in organizational settings that are less centralized in regard to decision making, provide more autonomy, provide a participative environment, have less formalization of rules and regulations in critically perceived areas, and have a high degree of technical competence and complexity.

If the professional sees the environment as conducive to productive work, the professional will function effectively in the organization. However, if the professional perceives the environment as nonconductive to work, the professional may not function effectively (Rosenholtz and Simpson, 1990).

Areas for improvement

Some school districts have well-defined, carefully prepared in-service training programmes in effect. They serve as a powerful source of continued renewal for experienced personnel and an anchor for the novice. However, teachers in some school districts find their professional development programmes as neither professional nor a source of positive development. This sad commentary can be illustrated by the following scenario as told by Carol, a teacher for 19 years in the New York City public school system:

In an attempt to save money on importing professional staff development teams to every district school, teachers were warehoused for the day at a large school facility. All the teachers from our district gathered at our premiere school (lovely building, safe

neighborhood, latest equipment) and were unceremoniously handed a slip of paper with room assignments for two morning sessions and one afternoon session. Teachers with more than 20 years of service were receiving training along with newly assigned personnel on record-keeping responsibilities. One of my colleagues, the recipient of three Outstanding Science Teacher Awards, was assigned to a Science Safety for New Teachers workshop!

Needless to say that by 3 o'clock we were angry and demoralized! Whoever assigned us to these training sessions never conducted a needs assessment survey or, heaven forbid, asked what we would have liked to have learned more about! We would have been better off reporting to our own schools that day and working with each other on developing new programs and evaluating existing ones. New teachers would have worked with us and learned about the process of designing and evaluating programs that they were actually dealing with on a daily basis. Those few hours would have afforded us a wonderful opportunity to work together for a common goal. Such is the stuff that makes for good faculty morale.

Why aren't teachers ever asked about what they need or would like in terms of professional development? You may think my response to that is sarcastic but I really don't think many staff developers care about our opinions and/or couldn't deliver the goods if they tried!

Other areas needing improvement concern budget matters, scheduling, and curriculum. These decisions should be made by staff members and parents at the individual schools. Since they are closest to the implementation of such decisions, staff members can immediately provide feedback as to decisional effectiveness.

According to Jeanne, a 15-year veteran of an urban school district:

Our school recently adopted site-based management on a limited basis. After several meetings and much discussion, we agreed that we wanted more control over budget matters. Plans were made to investigate the cost and maintenance of new equipment and workbooks. After our committee made recommendations, we purchased new overhead and slide projectors along with math and social studies workbooks that the children could write in! For years teachers were told to have the children copy all class notes and not write in the workbooks. We freely admit that copying correctly is a useful skill. But requiring children to spend a good part of their school day engaged in this activity is a waste of time.

While the children entrusted to us come first in all our decisions, a wonderful aspect of

site-based management is the collegial atmosphere and support system that has emerged. Teachers, administrators, and parents certainly benefit but our students will ultimately reap the greater rewards.

Conclusion

A climate that affects the organization in a positive manner provides an environment in which members enjoy extremely high *esprit*. The teachers work well together and are not preoccupied by busy work or routine reports. The principal facilitates the accomplishments of teacher tasks while at the same time provides an environment that permits friendly relationships. In the environment, teachers obtain job satisfaction and are sufficiently motivated to overcome difficulties and frustration, working things out, and to keep the organization moving forward. The teachers are proud to be associated with this organization.

The research of Miskel *et al.* (1979) indicates that an organization with a participative environment and less centralized control is viewed as a more effective organization by teachers. This is supported by the work of Bandura (1969) and Anderson (1982). Hersey and Blanchard (1982) emphasize the importance of management style to organizational climate. Their work is supported by Drucker (1985), Ouchi (1981), and Sergiovanni and Starratt (1988). Based on this review, organizational climate appears to be a critical factor in the study of teacher autonomy.

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