11-3-2019

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Abstract

Research on school reform highlights challenges school leaders face in implementing and sustaining reforms. While some efforts fade away, others are intentionally dismantled, or "undone" as schools revert back to their traditional model of schooling. Considering how often reforms fail to sustain, there is value in understanding why school leaders decide undo reforms, and how leaders support staff through the undoing process. Utilizing path-goal theory as a framework, this paper I examined the case of one elementary school principal who planned in this undoing of a competency-based reform she had previously championed. Analysis reveals that the shift back to a traditional approach to instruction was in response to changes in state policies and district resource allocations, and that the type of support the school leader provided to teachers during the undoing was strongly influenced by the characteristics of the each stage of the process.

Keywords

Path-Goal Theory, School Leadership, School Reform, Semi-Structured Interview, Thematic Analysis

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Research on school reform highlights challenges school leaders face in implementing and sustaining reforms. While some efforts fade away, others are intentionally dismantled, or "undone" as schools revert back to their traditional model of schooling. Considering how often reforms fail to sustain, there is value in understanding why school leaders decide undo reforms, and how leaders support staff through the undoing process. Utilizing path-goal theory as a framework, this paper I examined the case of one elementary school principal who planned in this undoing of a competency-based reform she had previously championed. Analysis reveals that the shift back to a traditional approach to instruction was in response to changes in state policies and district resource allocations, and that the type of support the school leader provided to teachers during the undoing was strongly influenced by the characteristics of the each stage of the process. Keywords: Path-Goal Theory, School Leadership, School Reform, Semi-Structured Interview, Thematic Analysis

The education reform literature is full of examples of efforts that fade away, lose support, or fail to become sustained or institutionalized (Cohen & Mehta, 2017; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; McDonald, 2014; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Within schools and districts, school leadership is critical to the success of school reform implementation (Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson, & Daly, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Honig, 2009; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010). However, how a school leader navigates the process of retracting, dismantling, or otherwise "undoing" a reform has not been examined in the research literature.

It is likely that the process of undoing a reform poses unique leadership challenges. Considering how often reforms fail to be institutionalized, there is value in understanding how school leaders navigate the "undoing" process. This study aims to address this gap. Using path-goal theory as a framework, I explore how one school leader made the decision to undo a previously supported competency-based learning reform and how she guided her staff through the process.

Literature Review

Reform sustainability has long been a concern of researchers, policy makers and practitioners. In this section I highlight some of the major challenges to reform sustainability that researchers have uncovered. While many of these challenges are found within schools, there is compelling research on the impact of outside-of-school factors, such as policy changes at the state and/or district level, as well as misalignment between state accountability mandates and school reform efforts, which I discuss here.

Within-School Challenges to Reform Sustainability

One strand of reform implementation research focuses on factors within a school organization that impact the sustainability of reform efforts. For example, there is a rich

literature base regarding the impact of leadership and leadership turnover on reform initiatives (Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). Lack of teacher buy-in, or hasty implementation that fails to build teacher capacity can also stymie reform efforts (Goodson, Moore, & Hargreaves, 2006; Steans, 2012; Levin, 2010). There may be financial reasons that reforms fail to become institutionalized, including the lack of available resources to sustain the reform when external grant funding ends (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2011). All of these issues are internal to schools, although the amount of control a school leader may have over addressing these challenges varies from district to district.

Outside of School Challenges to Reform Sustainability

Another strand of reform implementation research examines factors beyond the control of school leaders that can impact reform sustainability. Two such factors are changing state and district contexts (Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Levin, 2010; Levin & Wiens, 2003) and an emphasis on high-stakes accountability systems (Datnow, 2006; McDonald, 2014). This strand of research identifies school leaders as being situated within a larger education system which includes district and state-level actors, policies and expectations (Honig, 2006). For example, a review by Cuban and Usdan (2003) of reform efforts in six major US cities revealed reform efforts are vulnerable to changing political contexts. The authors found that changes in district and/or state policies negatively impacted reform implementation. In addition, Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) found, in their historical review of change theory research examining long-term school reforms, that most mainstream educational change theory and research on practice neglected the political as well as historical and longitudinal aspects of change.

Changing state and district polices. The concept of state and district policies hindering reform efforts is supported by a longitudinal case study by Datnow where she examined six comprehensive school reform (CSR) models in 13 schools within one urban district (Datnow, 2005). Findings indicated that after three years, only five schools continued their models with moderate to high levels of intensity, suggesting that changes at the district and state levels affected the sustainability of the CSR models differently, depending on each school's strategy for dealing with the changes, their local conditions and capacity (Datnow, 2005). Datnow concluded that those reform models that helped meet (or did not conflict with) district and state demands were sustained over the course of the study. The comprehensive school reform examined in Datnow's study is similar to the competency-based learning reform examined in the present study in that both require changes in traditional school structures (such as the composition of classrooms) as well as changes in how teachers and administrators approach their work (Sturgis, 2015).

Mitchell (1997) notes a similar pattern, stating that schools exist within a complex environment of state and district regulations and expectations. This is also supported by more recent work finding that technical and political support from beyond school walls are necessary for the sustainability of reform (Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Honig, 2009), and reinforces the conclusion drawn by Tyack and Tobin (1994) that reforms which mix student age groupings, disciplines, or otherwise challenge the "grammar of schooling" were only locally or temporarily successful.

Conflicts with accountability systems. High stakes accountability systems have also been cited as an obstacle to the full implementation or sustainability of a reform. In a study on the impact of state assessment policies on reform efforts, principals indicated that a system's use of grade-level accountability testing posed problems for multi-age/grade programs and multidisciplinary student work (Mitchell, 1997). Mitchell stated that reform efforts can be derailed by misaligned assessment, noting a "discord between conventional tests and teaching and learning in reforming schools" (Mitchell, 1997, p. 265).

Similarly, in her study on comprehensive school reform cited earlier, Datnow (2005) described teachers putting aside practices related to reform efforts in order to focus on state assessment preparation. The study concluded that political support and the "cultural logic" of reform designs—how well the reform fits within the local school context— are essential if a reform is to become a part of the daily lives of the school community, and that a "high-stakes accountability system may inhibit the sustainability of reform efforts in schools, particularly in schools that do not exhibit high capacity (and high-achievement levels and good reputations with the district) before the introduction of such a system" (p. 147). Other researchers also describe challenges with using high-stakes accountability policies as a lever for reform (Fullan, 2011; Levin, 2010). With the current prominence of high-stakes accountability policies in education (Hess & Finn, 2006), it is likely that many school leaders must navigate as the impact of these policies on reform implementation.

In sum within the school context, reforms are difficult to sustain because of leadership challenges, issues with teacher buy-in or capacity, and difficulties around securing funding to sustain the reform. There is also evidence that outside of school factors— such as changing state and district policies, and misalignment of mandated accountability systems—can also inhibit reforms. I have not encountered any empirical studies that attend to the process of ending a reform, nor did I find any studies that explored the purposeful undoing of a reform to revert to a previous system of instruction. There, an important question remains: How does a school leader lead staff through such a change process?

Theoretical Framework

To better understand how a school leader approached the dismantling of a previously supported school reform I used path-goal theory (House, 1996; House & Mitchell, 1975; Northouse, 2013) to guide my inquiry. According to this theory, the goal of the leader is to improve employee performance and satisfaction by focusing on motivation (Northouse, 2013). The central concern of this leadership theory is "how the leader influences the subordinates' perceptions of their work goals, personal goals and paths to goal attainment" (House & Mitchell, 1975, p. 1), with a focus on how leaders help employees overcome obstacles and maintain job satisfaction when in pursuit of a goal. To do this, a leader chooses behaviors that complement or supplement what is missing in the work setting from one of the following categories of behaviors: *directive* (providing specific instructions about a task including expectations and timelines; *supportive* (attending to the well-being and human needs of employees by being friendly and approachable; *participative* (shared decision-making); and *achievement-oriented* (challenging employees to perform at the highest level and demonstrating strong confidence in their ability to do so). Leaders select from these behaviors based on their perceptions of the needs of their employees, considering the employee's characteristics—in particular employee's desire for control—and the characteristic of the task, or task complexity (House, 1996; House & Mitchell, 1975; Northouse, 2013).

This theory is under-utilized in the field of education leadership, in part because education policy and politics have a tendency to shift expectations or focus, making it hard for leaders to establish clear and consistent goals and creating a culture where veteran teachers learn to resist change (Bess & Goldman, 2001). However, I believe that leaders may choose to focus on a goal that will transcend these shifts as a way of addressing staff motivation in times of turbulence. Another criticism of this theory is that it incorporates many different aspects of leadership, that its complexity makes interpretations difficult (Northouse, 2013). To address this concern, I concentrate on four of the basic, high-level elements of path-goal theory as outlined in Northouse (2013). These include; (a) defining the goal; (b) clarifying the path; (c) removing obstacles; and (d) providing support. I've selected these elements because they

describe the critical work of leadership and consequently are a good starting place for exploring this issue.

Path-goal theory has been used in several quantitative studies exploring the impact of school administrator styles on teacher effectiveness at the high school (Sirisookslip, Ariratana, & Ngang, 2015) and college levels (Awan et al., 2011). The theory has also been used to study how school principals promote and support academic performance in science among English language learners (Carrejo, Cortez, & Reinhartz, 2010). It is particularly appropriate for studying the phenomenon of a school leader dismantling a previously supported competency-based learning reform because this reform required changes beyond a new curriculum or teaching method. This reform included changes in how students were organized into classrooms, how classrooms were defined, the content teachers taught and how students were evaluated and promoted. Undoing this reform means returning to traditional classroom structures, traditional grade-level content, and traditional student evaluation and promotion practices. After five years of utilizing a competency-based approach, such extensive changes to the work of teachers requires the school leader carefully attend to how school goals are defined and how a shift in the path to goal attainment is communicated. Throughout the undoing process, issues of teacher motivation and support are likely to rise to the surface. Path-goal theory's focus on leadership behavior regarding goal clarity, as well as employee motivation, make it a valuable lens for examining leadership behavior in the context of this unexplored phenomenon of planning and carrying out the dismantling of a reform. Through this lens I will address two research questions: **"Why does a school leader make the decision to undo a previously supported whole-school reform?"** and "How does the leader maintain staff support, or manage teacher needs, during this transition?"

Statement of Positionality

At the time of this study, I was a doctoral student with an interest in the process of school change. After serving three years as the principal of an independent charter school that utilized a competency-based approach I relocated to a new area to pursue a Ph.D. I looked into schools in the region that had undergone a significant and intentional change process and learned of the school that would become the focus of this study. After contacting the school principal, I discovered the school had begun a process of transitioning teachers and students away from the reform that I had heard others speak highly of, to return to a traditional model of instruction. This intrigued me, particularly after reading all of the positive press the school had received since implementing the competency-based reform. I became even more interested in launching this study after looking into prior research on school leadership and reform dismantling, and not finding anything. Recognizing that this is likely a growing phenomenon in an era where school leaders are under constant pressure to innovate, I decided to examine the experiences of this school leader more closely.

Methods

Yin (2009) describes case study methodology as being particularly appropriate for exploring a previously unexplored phenomenon. To answer my research questions, I carried out an exploratory qualitative single-subject case study focused on one interview with the school leader of Cedar View Elementary School (pseudonym). I chose a single-subject research design because I am particularly interested in how the school leader perceives teacher needs and draws upon those perceptions to make decisions throughout the change process, (Yin, 2009). It is my interest in the school leader's perceptions that makes the single-subject case approach appropriate.

One elementary school principal is the focus of this research. She was initially recruited by me through a phone call to her office and selected for this study because of her experience with the phenomenon of interest, leading a school through the process of dismantling a previously supported reform and reverting to a traditional approach to schooling. An interview served as the primary source of data. However, I also draw from newspaper articles and district press releases identified through Google searches for contextual information regarding the reform timeline. Policy changes mentioned by the school leader in the interview were verified through a review of publicly available records at the district and state levels. I conducted a content analysis (Yin, 2016) of the archival data, and a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) of the interview data because this approach allows the researcher to gain a better understanding of a phenomenon by bringing meaning and order to a dataset through a systematic and iterative process grounded in the data (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). I used the qualitative analysis program, Dedoose 7.6.6 to manage the data and conduct the analysis. To ensure the accuracy of my interpretations, I shared my findings with the participant and responded to her feedback (Roulston, 2010).

Research Setting and Participant

Cedar View Elementary school is a small elementary school with roughly 400 students on the outskirts of a mid-sized city located in the eastern half of the United States. The majority of students are white, and roughly half receive free or reduced lunch benefits. Several years prior to this study, this school underwent a radical transformation. When the district implemented competency-based report cards for all of its elementary schools, Cedar View took things a step further. The entire school adopted a competency-based model (CBM) of schooling. The change was profound, re-defining the roles of teachers, the expectations of what it meant to be a student, the grouping of children within the school, and the pacing of content children learned during the school year. It was also successful, in that the work was celebrated by central office, received positive press locally, and achieved national recognition.

However, after several years of implementation, test scores were dropping. The district hired a new school leader, chosen in part because of her knowledge of, and proven support for CBM. Mrs. Dickerson (pseudonym) had prior classroom teaching and central office administration experience. She brought to the position an intimate knowledge of the school community, and a deep understanding of—and belief in—competency-based learning. Yet, after careful evaluation, this leader decided to undo CBM and revert the school back to the traditional model of elementary school teaching and learning. Unlike what is often described in the literature, CBM did not fail to take root within this school, nor did it fade away organically. Instead the school leader implemented a planned process to undo the reform she had once ardently supported.

Undoing this reform meant that teachers would no longer be subject matter specialists focused on teaching specific skills (or competencies) to students of a variety of ages. Instead they would teach all subject areas to students of the same age (grade-level), but with different levels of ability in the content areas. The change was profound, and the change process, complex. Mrs. Dickerson's strong alignment to CBM and the fact that she initiated and planned the reversal of this reform makes her an ideal subject for helping researchers to better understand why school leaders intentionally undo a reform and how they support teachers through this change process.

Data Collection

After receiving IRB approval to conduct this study, I used a semi-structured interview protocol to ask Mrs. Dickerson about the process she underwent to shift her school away from CBM, back to the traditional approach to schooling, and how she supported her teaching staff through the transition (see Appendix A). The interview lasted about an hour and took place in her office after school hours when interruptions would be minimized. I recorded the interview, and later personally transcribed the complete interview verbatim. Through follow-up communications with the participant via email and telephone, I engaged in member-checking, asking the participant clarifying questions regarding her responses and sharing my interpretations of her perceptions and decision-making process.

Archival documents used to verify the timeline and nature of the reform effort were collected through the school and district web sites, and by using internet searches of the school name, city and state. Press releases, news articles and text from the school, district and state web sites were included for examination if they referenced CBM, and/or described the substance and timing of state and district policy changes as identified by the participant.

Analysis

To begin my analysis, I used a-priori codes (Yin, 2016) derived from my theoretical framework, path-goal theory, and from the literature on obstacles to sustaining education reform which identify changing state and district policy contexts, as well as accountability policies as potential obstacles to reform. For a list of initial a-priori codes, see appendix B. Using Dedoose, I labeled passages from the interview transcript with the appropriate codes and noted these segments and codes in a data table as recommended by Lochmiller and Lester (2017). Codes that did not appear in the interview data were dropped. I then reviewed the transcript again, looking for repeating concepts not identified in the a priori code. I used descriptive codes to identify these segments added these codes to the data table. Using an iterative process of review, notation and reflection I made several passes through the data until I began to assemble categories of codes that shared similar characteristics in how they related to concepts from the literature and/or leadership behavior. After reviewing and examining coded sentences within and across categories, I identified broad themes which related to my research questions. In the end I utilized 16 different codes within six categories which represented two broad themes: state and district influences, and stages of transition as dictating supportive behavior. For a chart detailing these codes, categories and themes at different stages of the analytical process see appendix B.

The archival data was reviewed for content that described the CBM reform as implemented in the school, and the changes to state policy over the past five years. I also examined the archival data for language that situated in time the initiation of the CBM reform in the school, changes to state accountability systems, and the accountability ratings of the school to verify the information provided by the school principal.

Findings

My analysis resulted in two overarching themes in the data relating to my research questions. First, state and district policies strongly influenced how this school leader identified and evaluated school goals, leading to her decision to transition away from the CBM reform and back to the traditional approach to schooling. A second theme was the presence of distinct phases in the undoing process. This school leader responded differently to the needs of her

teachers across time, as the undoing process unfolded. In this section I discuss each of these findings.

State and District Policy Influence

State and district policies strongly influenced how this school leader defined her goal. Shortly after Mrs. Dickerson took on the role of principal, the state mandated new standards to align with the Common Core State Standards. When she was first hired, Mrs. Dickerson's goal had been to support the CBM reform, which meant enabling students to achieve mastery of skills before moving on to a more advanced learning objective and advance as soon as they attained mastery. However, according to Mrs. Dickerson, these new state standards "were more rigorous than the previous standards had been." This led to a sharp drop in state accountability test scores, a drop that was realized in schools across the state. State policy uses accountability test scores as the primary source of a school's state-assigned letter grade. They also impact teacher evaluations. Thus, Mrs. Dickerson re-defined her goal as improving the school's evaluative rating by increasing the scores on these high-stakes assessments required by state law.

Soon after the stronger standards were introduced, the district announced that budget concerns would require a cut in the number of paraprofessionals allotted to the school. Mrs. Dickerson stressed the impact of this confluence of outside factors on her decision to revert to the traditional approach. Here is how Mrs. Dickerson explained the situation:

> [Students] weren't getting exposure to the on-grade-level content. I mean that is what was happening. So I think it was a combination of those things as to why our data started to slip. I think those standards shifting was a *huge* piece of it. I think the not grade level exposure, not actually being at the grade level exposure—either being above or below— hurt us too, in terms of testing.

The CBM reform had students working on achieving mastery on learning outcomes based on their own learning needs, which might be below, at, or above grade-level. Thus, Mrs. Dickerson determined that students who were not working on grade-level content, but instead were either above or below grade-level, were at a disadvantage because they would be tested on content that was not necessarily a part of their daily experience in school. The pressure of the state accountability policies was such that test outcomes were prioritized over student mastery attainment in the competency-based model. The increased rigor of the new state standards, and district policies that reduced the number of instructional aids at the school put additional strains on the school's ability to meet state targets. Whether or not students were benefiting from the reform in terms of working on skills that matched their learning level, the reform wasn't helping test scores or the school's state-assigned grade. Failure to achieve this new goal led her to determine that CBM was not the correct path for goal attainment.

Additional evidence that the state accountability system strongly influenced this school leader's goal setting—and subsequent examination of the path to goal attainment—comes through in her description of a discussion with parents regarding the shift away from CBM.

> The high kids, their parents were like, 'well are they still going to be challenged? Are they really going to be getting as much? They were getting ready to do 7th grade math and they're in 5th grade. Are they still going to have that opportunity?' And that, to be honest, yeah, that was hard. Making sure then that I am trusting the teachers, to make sure they *do* differentiate. Because you've got to see growth. The way our state standardized tests are measured, they are

looking for growth, so that is scary, to think, what if they don't grow as much anymore? What if we get dinged on growth points?

While it was clear in our conversation that this school leader felt a sincere obligation to the parents and students in her school, this quote illustrates that the state accountability system continued to have a large influence on her thinking about the change process. Even after making the decision, she continued to evaluate whether the school was on the correct path for achieving the goal of increased state assessment scores. This outside-of-school factor played a primary role not only in the goal-setting process, but also in this principal's evaluation of potential obstacles on the path to goal attainment.

Stages of Undoing and Leadership Support

The second major theme identified in my analysis was that this school leader's response to teacher needs was strongly influence by whether a need was expressed in the early stages, middle stages or later stages of the reform-undoing process. With the school's path to goal attainment being a return to the traditional approach to instruction (where students remain with the same group of grade-level peers in a general education classroom with all subjects taught by one homeroom teacher) this school leader indicated that her priority was to maintain staff motivation and support throughout the undoing process. Mrs. Dickerson decided to phase out the CBM in stages, beginning with reading language arts. The following year—the year of this study—math instruction returned to the traditional model.

The school leader described the initiation of the undoing of the CBM reform as a participative process, detailing staff meetings where she reviewed school testing data with the teachers and had discussions that led to the decision to undo the reform. However, the new path (traditional schooling) required the heavy use of differentiated instruction, and therefore significantly more planning and preparation on the part of the teachers. Mrs. Dickerson anticipated that teachers would need support with this and implemented mandatory professional development, and also ensured teachers had access to interventionists and remediation aids. The task of restructuring classrooms, altering the schedule of the school day, and re-defining teacher roles and expectations—including addressing the needs of all students in more heterogeneous classrooms—was a complex task for all involved. Mrs. Dickerson described supporting her teachers early on by "giving them the interventionists, remediation aids, paraprofessionals, trying to support them in that way…. We also give a [mandatory] professional development every Friday morning." A new shortened student school day had been initiated by the district and this freed up teacher time for these Friday professional development sessions. During this early stage of the new path Mrs. Dickerson perceived that the complexity of providing differentiated instruction to a classroom of students at a variety of different skill levels would be a major obstacle for her teachers. In response, the support she provided was directive and centered on building differentiation skills.

As the year progressed, managing the various opportunities for students to receive differentiated instruction continue to be a complex task. For example, Mrs. Dickerson created a 30-minute block of time, which she called an intervention/enrichment block, where all of the paraprofessionals in the building "blitz a grade level," delivering teacher-created lessons to support either enrichment activities or intervention strategies in small, skill-based groups. At this point in time, the English Language Arts accountability test scores, the first subject area to move back to the traditional model of schooling, had been released and were improved. Professional development Fridays remained intact. However, Mrs. Dickerson described utilizing some supportive leadership behaviors. She described using the improved test scores to provide an emotional boost to her staff, "I try to encourage them with that—listen, we are

making a difference; I know it's hard work." This quote exemplifies a new focus on the emotional needs of her teachers and represents a shift in her approach to addressing teacher needs. Though the task continued to be complex, the teachers had been engaged with the task for most of an academic year. It had become a routine of hard work, and she felt a need to provide emotional support. I identified this shift in what Mrs. Dickerson perceived to be the needs of her teachers as marking a second stage of the undoing process.

As the undoing of CBM advanced through its second year, Mrs. Dickerson's leadership approach experienced another shift, marking a third phase in the undoing process. Teachers began advocating more strongly for greater flexibility, and for the first time, Mrs. Dickerson responded by providing that flexibility—particularly regarding the use of paraprofessionals during the grade-level intervention and enrichment block. The intervention/enrichment block required teachers to create ability-based groups across classrooms in a grade-level, so that paraprofessionals would be working with a group of students from different classrooms. Teachers wanted flexibility to assign specific paraprofessionals to each classroom and keep the grouping of children limited to within one classroom as well. Mrs. Dickerson had been resistant to this, worried that it would reduce the number of ability groups and make it more difficult for student skill needs to be met. Here she described her changed response to this request:

> Some of the grades have divvied up the aides and they like that better, and again, in the beginning I was kind of resistant to that, but I found through conversation, that's meeting the needs better for the kids and the teachers in some grade levels. It depends on the grade level.

Again, the task of providing differentiated instruction to students in the traditional model of schooling continues to be complex, yet the school leader's perceptions of teacher needs for accomplish this task shift again. Path-goal theory dictates that a leader will use a more participative approach when the leader perceives that employees have a strong desire for control or need for clarity, and the task is unstructured or ambiguous (Northouse, 2013). While it appears that here, the teachers did have a strong desire for control, in this situation, the task continued to be complex and well defined.

Through this interview with Mrs. Dickerson I found that many of the decisions this school leader made regarding how to best support what she perceived to be the needs of her staff as they navigated the new path to goal attainment were informed more by whether the transition process was in its infancy, or further along on the implementation continuum. During the first stage of the undoing process, Mrs. Dickerson relied on a directive approach to supporting teachers. However, as the new path became more established, Mrs. Dickerson's approach evolved, first becoming increasingly supportive and later, more participative.

Discussion

The findings in this single-subject case study support prior research on the negative impact that changing state and district policy contexts can have on reform sustainability (Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Levin, 2010; McDonald, 2014; Mitchell, 1997). In addition, the findings suggest that the process of undoing a reform is a complex task in its own right, in that the type of support this school leader provided appeared to be in response to the characteristics of the overall process as it moved through various phases over time, and the characteristics of the teacher's responses to the process during each stage.

State and District Policy Influence on Goal Setting

The decision this school leader made to undo the CBM reform was strongly influenced by policy changes at both the district and state levels that resulted in a change in how the leader defined her goal for the school. Focused on a new goal, this school leader determined the CBM reform was not the appropriate path for goal attainment. Two external factors had a major influence on this school leader's judgement that continuing with CBM would not be an appropriate path for achieving the new goal; the changes in state standards and the new district policy regarding the number of instructional assistants assigned to the school. This is consistent with research indicating the importance of central office support for school reforms (Honig et al., 2010). This finding also supports the conclusions of reform researchers that changes in state and local policy contexts can be a significant barrier to the sustainability of reforms (Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Levin, 2010; McDonald, 2014; Mitchell, 1997); particularly the assertions of Fullan (2011) that high-stakes accountability measures are the wrong drivers for educational change.

Path-Goal Theory and Leadership Behavior

In regards to how this school leader supported her teachers during the undoing of the CBM and transition to a new path to goal attainment, my findings did not always match what path-goal theory dictates when I focused on the leader's supportive behaviors in relationship to the specific task of providing differentiated instruction for students. However, if the entire undoing process is viewed as a task, the support this leader provided to teachers in relation to this broad task, is in line with path-goal theory.

When examining whether or not CBM was the appropriate path to achieving the new goal of increased state assessment scores, the school leader utilized staff meetings—a participative approach for addressing the staff need to understand the problem. This aligns with path-goal theory which anticipates that in situations where the task is ambiguous—how can we do things differently to reach our goals? —effective leaders will select a participative approach (Northouse, 2013).

Once the school embarked on the path of undoing CBM to return to the traditional model, teachers faced a variety of tasks. According to path-goal theory, the school leader considers the nature of the task and the characteristics of the teacher in order to provide the appropriate support for that individual (Northouse, 2013). My findings indicate that the type of support this school leader provided to her staff regarding the task of differentiating instruction was more strongly influenced by where within the timeline of the undoing process the task was situated. When the transition to traditional classroom structures were first introduced, Mrs. Dickerson's leadership behavior was directive towards all of her teachers, without regard to individual teacher characteristics—requiring attendance at weekly professional development sessions, maintaining firm expectations regarding teacher use of paraprofessionals during the 30-minute intervention and enrichment block, structuring daily planning blocks for teachers before the start of the student school day. Using the same approach with all teachers is a deviation from the norms of path-goal theory. However, if one considers the complexities involved with the early stage of dismantling CBM, and its associated classroom structures and teacher roles, and transitioning to a new approach with new classroom structures and new teacher roles, the entire early phase of this reform could be characterized as a complex process/task. With this perspective, a directive approach towards all teachers does align with path-goal theory.

Towards the end of the first year on the new path, Mrs. Dickerson described a shift in the type of supportive behavior she provided to her teachers. The state assessment results were

improved and she actively used this information as a motivational boost for teachers as they finished up the year and planned for the year to come. The task of differentiating instruction was no less complex, but at this point, the teachers had been working on it for much of the year. The overall undoing process had become more routine. Path-goal theory predicts that leaders will provide emotional support when tasks are routine or mundane. Thus, the leader's behavior may have been in response to the emotional needs of the staff in regards to the broader transition process—a stage in which some routines had become established and encouragement was needed to stay the course, rather than to the characteristics of the specific task.

During the second year on the new path, the school leader's approach to supporting teachers shifted once more. At this point in the process teachers continued to ask for more control, particularly over the staffing and structure of the 30 minute intervention/enrichment block. Mrs. Dickerson decided to allow teachers more flexibility in structuring this block of time. Again, the task continued to be complex, but the routines of the undoing process were more established. Framing her leadership behavior in terms of the phase of the reform, this more participative approach may be reflective of the nature of this later phase. Mrs. Dickerson felt more comfortable supporting the teachers by giving them some control over this more established phase of the "undoing" process. She now perceived a less directive, more participatory approach to be feasible.

Limitations

This exploratory, single case study contributes to initial understandings of the previously under-explored phenomenon of how a school leader responds to the needs she perceives in her staff during the process of undoing a reform. My conclusions are not generalizable and have some limitations. While my central interest was in the thought process and perceptions of the school leader, extending participation to the teachers within this school, to central office administrators and to parents would have brought additional perspectives to the findings. Future research may expand our understanding of this phenomenon by broadening the focus to include the experiences of teachers and other critical school stakeholders.

Conclusion

Decades of research provide evidence that reform efforts are difficult to sustain (Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Fullan, 2011; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Levin, 2010; McDonald, 2014), yet the conditions under which a leader actively chooses to undo a previously supported reform, and how a leader supports staff through the undoing process have not been adequately explored. By using path-goal theory as a lens to examine the influences on and actions of a school leader who chooses to undo a reform she previously supported, this paper begins to shed some light on this subject.

These findings support those of other scholars (Cohen, Spillane, & Peurach, 2017; Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Fullan, 2011; Levin, 2010; McDonald, 2014) who have identified that changes in state and district policies can undermine school reform efforts and thus highlight the importance of seeking input from school leaders when contemplating changes in policy and highlight the value of school leader engagement in the district and state policy arena. The findings also suggest that in addition to looking to the characteristics of staff and specific tasks, leaders also consider the characteristics of the overall change process when evaluating how best to support staff. Each phase of the undoing process had its own unique characteristics. The early phase was marked by the ambiguity associated with identifying and clarifying a path. The second phase was defined by the complexity of bringing together all of the components required to implement a return to the traditional approach. The complex early phases required

a directive approach, but over time, as the teachers and the school leader became more comfortable with the new routines and procedures, this school leader responded to teacher needs in a more supportive, and later participative, manner. Based on these findings, it appears that path-goal theory might be improved by adding another category when considering leader behavior—the phase of an organizational change process. However, more research is needed to confirm and build on this idea.

While the literature on reform identifies reforms as failing and often explores the factors that contribute to this failure, little attention has been given to how a school leader makes the decision to stop a reform model of schooling and navigates teachers through the process of returning to a traditional model. This study advances the literature in this area, however, there is much still to learn about the conditions under which school leaders make this choice, how prevalent the phenomenon may be and how the planning of an "undoing" differs from the planning of an implementation. Future research in these areas could help school leaders who find themselves in this difficult, but possibly not uncommon situation.

In sum, not all reforms that fail to be sustained fade away. Some are carefully dismantled by the same leaders that fully supported their implementation. This dismantling may support the school's goals, particularly when school goals are heavily influence by state or district policy as is the case when state test scores are used to evaluate schools. Understanding how school leaders make these decisions and the process by which they implement a reform's "undoing", will allow us to provide better support to leaders placed in this difficult position.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Protocol

Background

- Why did the school initially decide to adopt a Competency Based Learning model?
- Why did you decide to move away from Competency Based Learning?
    - What factors led to this decision?

Influencing Teachers' Perceptions of Goals

- How did this shift change or alter school goals?
- How did you communicate the decision to move away from CBL to your teaching staff?
- How did your teachers respond to the decision to undo the CBL initiative?
- How have you adjusted your communication with school staff in response to teacher's views of the changes to the school's competency based learning model?
    - Can you give me an example?

Clearing the Path

- What have been some of the successes teachers have experienced (either within the school or the greater community) as they work towards undoing the CBL initiative?
- What are some of the challenges teachers have experienced (either within the school or the greater community) as they work towards undoing the CBL initiative?
- What are some of the approaches you have used to help teachers navigate these challenges?

Teacher Motivation and Sense of Value

- How have you encouraged your staff to embrace approaches that move away from CBL?
- What types of support have you found yourself giving to teachers during this transition?
    - How do you make decisions about the types of support teachers need?

- Do you sense that teacher motivation or feelings about their ability to effectively reach students has changed during this transition?

Appendix B. Development of Coding Scheme

Initial Codes (A priori)

Code	Definition	Category
Goal	Identified purpose of the work of the school	Goal
Path	Identified approach to goal attainment	Path
directive	Leader provides specific directives to accomplish task	Leadership Behavior
Supportive	Leader attends to the emotional needs of Teachers	Leadership Behavior
achievement-oriented	Leader challenges teachers to perform at the highest level and demonstrates confidence in their ability	Leadership Behavior
Participative	Leadership behavior characterized by shared decision-making with subordinates	Leadership behavior
Control	Teacher desire for control	Teacher Need
Confusion	Teachers feel uncertainty or confusion	Teacher Need
Dissatisfaction	Teachers feel unsatisfied or frustrated	Teacher Need
Task	Reference to a specific task	Task
Complex	Task has unclear guidelines or is complex	Task
Ambiguous	Task is ambiguous	Task
Routine	Task is routine	Task
Obstacle	Identified challenge to goal attainment	Obstacle
State	State policy obstacle referenced	Outside Influence
District	District policy obstacle referenced	Outside Influence
Assessment	High stakes accountability referenced	Outside Influence

Fourth Iteration of Coding Scheme

Code	Definition	Category	Theme
Goal	Identification of teacher/organizational goal	Goal	Goal identification
Path	Leader identifies a course of action	Path identification	Path
Complex	Task has unclear guidelines or is complex	Task	Path
Task	Reference to a specific task	Task	Path
T Need	Teacher identifies teacher need	Teacher voice	Providing support
Participative	Leadership behavior characterized by shared decision-making with subordinates	Leadership Behavior	Providing support
Supportive	Leader attends to the emotional needs of Teachers	Support	Providing support
Resource	Leader provides a physical resource to teachers	Support	Providing support
Space	Leader provides space to teachers to accomplish task as they choose	Support	Providing support
Directive	Leader provides specific directives to accomplish task	Support	Providing support
P Obstacle	Leader identifies obstacle	Fears	Obstacle
T Obstacle	Teacher identifies and/or removes obstacle to goal completion	Fears	Obstacle
P Need	Principal identifies teacher need	Need	Obstacle
State	State policy obstacle referenced	Obstacle	Obstacle
District	District policy obstacle referenced	Obstacle	Obstacle
Assessment	High stakes accountability referenced	Obstacle	Obstacle

Final Coding Scheme

Code	Definition	Category	Theme
Goal	Identification of teacher/organizational goal	Goal	Stages of Transition
Path ID	Leader identifies a course of action	Path	Stages of Transition
Complex	Task has unclear guidelines or is complex	Path	Stages of Transition
Task	Reference to a specific task	Path	Stages of Transition
T Need	Teacher identifies teacher need	Providing support	Stages of Transition
Participative	Leadership behavior characterized by shared decision-making with subordinates	Providing support	Stages of Transition
Supportive	Leader attends to the emotional needs of Teachers	Providing support	Stages of Transition
Resource	Leader provides a physical resource to teachers	Providing support	Stages of Transition
Space	Leader provides space to teachers to accomplish task as they choose	Providing support	Stages of Transition
Directive	Leader provides specific directives to accomplish task	Providing support	Stages of Transition
P Obstacle	Leader identifies obstacle	Obstacle	Stages of Transition
T Obstacle	Teacher identifies and/or removes obstacle to goal completion	Obstacle	Stages of Transition
P Need	Principal identifies teacher need	Obstacle	Stages of Transition
State	State policy obstacle referenced	External Challenge	State and District Influences
District	District policy obstacle referenced	External Challenge	State and District Influences
Assessment	High stakes accountability referenced	External Force	State and District Influences

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Article Citation

Karnopp, J. (2019). Undoing reform: How and why one school leader cleared a shifting path to goal attainment. *The Qualitative Report, 24*(11), 2675-2692. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss11/1