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Reform in Small Places: Examining Two Rural Schools' Implementation of State Reform

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This study examines two rural schools' efforts to implement a state instructional reform and compares these schools' actions with two urban schools' efforts. It explores the difference between urban and rural schools' responses and raises the question of whether the differences can be explained by the schools' "ruralness."

> Deborah Meier talked about the control by distant experts and my immediate thought is how do rural communities have an effect on what those distant experts do? I'm particularly concerned, for example, about state accountability measures that are really dependent on a single test score to tell communities how good their schools are and I'm curious whether rural communities are applying that definition of what is good and what is not good. Deborah talked about the habits of democracy [that] have to be learned by experiencing them and part of [this] is trust . . . I'm wondering what small, rural schools have to say to urban communities. . . as to how to build that trust with your parents and your communities? (Lewis, 1999)

Anne Lewis raised the above questions in her response to Deborah Meier's opening comments at a recent rural education symposium sponsored by the Annenburg Rural Challenge Project. Underlying her comments are certain beliefs about rural schools. The first is that rural educators and community members have different, perhaps more legitimate, ideas about what makes a good school than "distant experts" like state policymakers or educational scholars who set policies for *all schools* to meet. The other is that educators in rural schools know more than their urban counterparts about building strong communities and trusting relationships with parents and community members. These underlying beliefs reflect if not the reality of rural communities, the hopes of rural education advocates for how rural schools and their communities should interact (Haas & Lambert, 1995; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Howley, 1997). Secretary of Education Richard Riley in a recent speech to the American Institute of Architects called for building small schools that are centers for community learning and activities. He cited rural communities' efforts to block consolidation because they understood that schools are "an elemental part of the community" (Riley, October 13, 1999). Rural schools, once seen as backwater and inefficient, are being rehabilitated as researchers tout the value of such traits as smallness, a "sense of place," and close knowledge of students and parents (Meier, 1995; Sizer, 1996; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Local knowledge and expertise in rural communities are thought to be valuable resources in determining school goals and standards rather than hindrances to progressive and "correct" ways of thinking (Howley, 1997; Perrone, 1999).

It is in the context of this current rhetoric that I studied two rural schools' responses to comprehensive state reform policies in South Carolina. This was not the original intent of the study. The initial research question concerned how schools of poverty adopt extensive instructional and governance reforms. I collected data in four schools, two urban and two rural. Originally, I paid little attention to the location of the schools. I was merely interested in finding schools of poverty, in the throes of implementing state policies, that would be willing to have me study them. Over the 6 years of the project differences between urban and rural schools' responses to state policies became apparent. There were big differences in how local practitioners in the two types of schools interpreted state reforms—what they saw the state asking them to do—and how they carried out the reform ideas. Because the differences could not be explained by common demographic measures of the student populations (socioeconomic status, race, gender,

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raised in single-parent homes) which were similar across the four schools, I wondered whether there was something unique to rural schools that made their implementation efforts look so different from their urban counterparts. Were features like smallness and greater community involvement shaping these rural educators' interpretation and implementation of the state reforms? Was local knowledge challenging reform ideas in the rural schools?

What I found was that the rural schools were complex places, perhaps more complex than current rhetoric implies. Features such as small size and closeness to community which are often touted as important in fostering effective and responsive schools both aided and hindered these schools' change efforts. Local knowledge and needs were rarely mentioned by practitioners as they responded to the state agenda—rather their efforts were grounded in the much more fundamental concern of meeting state requirements and complying to mandates.

This paper explores the ways in which rural educators in these two schools enacted what they saw state reformers asking them to do. It examines the rural educators' interpretations and efforts and contrasts them to educators' responses in the two urban schools. In addition, the paper raises questions about why these differences exist. The aim of the paper is to examine how, if at all, features often connected to rural schools, such ones as close school/community relationships and familiarity, play out in their implementation efforts. I make no claims to speak about reform efforts in rural schools writ large. Rather I hope to show some examples of how rural schools are coping with policies that call for dramatic change in order to contribute to a broader discussion of what may be unique to policy implementation in rural schools.

Theoretical Frame and Method

In 1992 I began a study of teachers in two urban and two rural elementary schools of poverty in South Carolina. This work was framed by the view that policymakers' ideas about instruction get filtered through practitioners' beliefs about students, learning, subject matter, and the context in which they teach. Practitioners' knowledge and beliefs shape the reform ideas they construe from policy and the changes in practice they see as possible in response to these ideas (Cohen & Ball, 1990; Elmore, 1996; Jennings, 1996; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1993). For instance, researchers have long suggested that teachers in schools of poverty often believe that their traditionally disadvantaged students are not capable of grasping demanding content nor of sustaining active engagement in their own learning (Anyon, 1981; Knapp and Associates, 1995; Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997). These beliefs commonly lead teachers to use rote instruction in discrete skills rather than adopting the challenging pedagogy policymakers and reformers may advocate (Brophy & Good, 1987; Knapp and Associates, 1995). Teachers in schools of poverty suggest that they would adopt more complex and challenging instructional practices if they taught in more affluent settings (Spillane & Jennings, 1998). So the context in which these teachers teach and their beliefs about students shape what they do in their classrooms and how they make sense of calls for more ambitious instruction. Because practitioners interpret policies through their own beliefs and choose to enact or not enact what they interpret policies to mean, understanding how and why policy gets implemented requires an understanding of what sense practitioners make of policy ideas.

This work follows an approach undertaken by the Educational Policy and Practice Study (EPPS) in Michigan and California which began in 1988 to investigate relations between state policy and local practice by examining practice and practitioners. Explaining this approach in a commentary on one of EPPS's early studies of implementation of a new state mathematics framework, Cohen and Ball (1990) write:

> One might summarize our argument by saying that teachers do not simply assimilate new texts and curriculum guides, altering their practice in response to externally envisioned principles. Rather, they apprehend and enact new instructional policies in light of inherited knowledge, belief and practice. (p. 253)

Using this frame, a colleague and I[1] observed and interviewed 35 teachers and administrators in four elementary schools in three school districts. Two schools, Forest and Macdonald, were in the same urban school district. Two rural schools, Butler and Browning, were in separate districts which are comprised of two schools each, one elementary and one secondary. Forest and Butler are similar demographically, with 99% of their students on free or reduced lunch and almost all students African-American. Macdonald and Browning are similar to each other as well with 65% of their students on free or reduced lunch and 55% African American.

Interviews with the 35 practitioners were tape-recorded and transcribed. They ranged from 60-90 minutes. The interviews focused on a common set of concerns and issues which included the following: how educators viewed practice proposed by policymakers; what they saw as the key

[1]Jim Spillane began this work with me in South Carolina and interviewed and observed a few of the teachers in both the rural and urban schools for the first few years of the project. I am deeply indebted to Jim for the use of his interview transcripts and observation fieldnotes, as well as his insights on my interpretations of what I was uncovering.

deterrents and promoters of reform in classrooms; how they constructed their teaching practices; what changes, if any, they had made in their practices, and what they experienced in terms of learning opportunities. In the four schools, 12 teachers and 32 informants were interviewed over a 6-year period. The 12 teachers were also observed in their classrooms. Because some teachers left and others were hired within the 6-years of the study, not all teachers were interviewed and observed the same amount of times. But I interviewed and observed teachers every year of the study. Some teachers who were in the schools for the length of the study were interviewed and observed as many as 12 times. Teachers were chosen by school principals. The primary consideration was that they were interested and willing to participate in the study.

I altered interview questions systematically in each round of interviews as I became more familiar with the contexts of the schools and as new issues arose at the state or district level relevant to the reforms. For instance, the theme of differences between urban and rural schools emerged from my on-going analysis of the data and it became the primary focus of my last 2 years of data collection. To get at practitioners' sense of the effect of school location and context on their interpretations and actions, I asked practitioners questions such as, "Do you think you would think differently about the new standards or do different things in your classroom if you taught in a small, rural school [to urban teachers]?" or "How, if at all, does the community influence your ideas about the changes in decision-making which Act 135 calls for or the changes in instruction called for by the standards?" Although interview questions changed over the years of the study, all those interviewed were asked the same questions in each round of interviews.

In addition to interviews and observations, I analyzed school and state documents such as Act 135 legislation, the schools' Act 135 plans, the state curriculum frameworks, and the state's new curriculum standards.

Classroom observations were guided by a protocol that focused on categories that included the nature of instructional tasks and discourse, grouping arrangements, student talk, and use of text. These protocols were used for all classroom observations. Although some questions changed in the protocols each year, the same protocols were used in all sites for each round of observations.

Collection and analysis of data were integrated (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Analyzing interviews, documents and observational data early in the study allowed me to notice issues which I later pursued in subsequent data collection rounds. By continually considering the interaction of data analysis and collection, I clarified and strengthened my understanding of practitioners' ideas through searching for confirming and disconfirming evidence.

I coded interview transcripts and classroom field-notes using four categories: practitioners' understanding of state reforms; changes in practice connected to reforms; practitioners' perceptions of challenges to reforms; practitioners' opportunities to learn about state reforms and reforms in general.

In addition to interviews and observations of school practitioners, I interviewed district-level administrators in Cedarville, Butler, and Browning. I also interviewed state policymakers who were instrumental in designing the curriculum frameworks and Act 135. These interviews were guided by protocols as well which focused on administrators' and policymakers' actions and decisions connected to the state policies, and their intentions and ideas about how to implement changes in practice.

All interviews and observations were conducted between Fall 1992 and Spring 1998. Statements used in this paper are from transcripts of these interviews taken during this time period. Pseudonyms are used for all districts, schools, and people.

State Policies

All four schools were involved in efforts to implement state instructional and governance reforms. The cornerstone of the instructional reforms was curriculum frameworks in all core subject areas which policymakers began adopting in 1992. These frameworks echo the instructional visions of national curriculum standards such at National Council of Teachers of Mathematics *Standards* and National Council of Teachers' of English *Standards for the English Language.* The frameworks suggest such practices as actively engaging students in constructing meaning of ideas, integrating subject area instruction around themes and engaging students in authentic tasks. For example, the science framework suggests teaching third graders about fish by setting up an aquarium and asking students to observe the fish and write about their observations rather than just telling students about the behaviors and habits of fish. Framework authors suggest that teachers "guide the children's thinking with open-ended questions" (South Carolina State Department of Education, 1995, p. 11). These frameworks were accompanied a few years later by standards that provided more detailed descriptions of what framework writers intended for students to learn in the various subjects. And finally, to put pressure on all schools to carry out these reform ideas, the state approved new state assessments (Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests or PACT) to be given to all students in grades 3-8 for the first time in the spring of 1999. These tests are based on curriculum frameworks and standards, requiring students to respond to open-ended questions, to show the strategies they use to solve problems and, in some cases, to write lengthy compositions

(Manzo, 1998; for more detailed review of South Carolina educational policies see Jennings & Spillane, 1996).

In addition to these instructional reforms, in 1993 the state legislature adopted a bill designed to improve early childhood education and instructional programs for at-risk students, but that also required each school and school district to design mission statements and plans to revise their instructional programs so that they offered the kind of challenging instruction being called for in the frameworks and standards. In this legislation, schools and districts were given expanded authority to establish curricular goals and instructional methods. In drawing up the mission statements and plans, schools and districts were required to involve teachers, parents and community members. School and school district plans had to be submitted to a state review panel for approval.

These reforms were huge changes for South Carolina. Although *mandated* by state legislators and educational policymakers, the reforms sought to devolve authority over many curricular and instructional decisions from the state to local schools and their communities. They also advocated conceptual understanding as an instructional goal over basic skills. In the decade prior to these reforms then-Governor Riley had instituted a round of comprehensive reforms which advocated just the opposite. They focused instruction on basic skills and tightly controlled decisions about curriculum and instruction—and everything else—at the state level. So the latest round of reforms required a great deal of change from modal practice both in what was taught in schools and how schools operated. Practitioners had much to learn in order to understand and implement these new policies.

School Responses to State Reforms

Butler

Butler is located in the middle of the state. For many years, dairy farms surrounded the town and provided, along with a small factory and some independent logging, employment for most inhabitants. Within the last 10 years, the factory closed and dairy farms downsized or shut down. Many people now travel to a city 25 miles away to work, or eke out an existence on off-the-books employment and government assistance.

Butler bears the marks of hard desegregation efforts. The town is 60% African-American and 40% white, but almost all children in the public schools are African-American. The night before the desegregation court order was to take place in Butler, a "white flight" academy sprung up in town, funded by local churches, to provide an alternative to white students.. Almost all of the white children in town still attend this K-12 academy. Butler's public schools have had a predominantly African-American administration, although until recently, have had almost all white school boards. The teaching staff is the only racially mixed group. There is a cadre of older, African-American teachers who originally taught in the "black school" in the district and stayed on after desegregation. There is also a group of younger, white teachers who tend to stay in Butler for 1-2 years before getting more lucrative jobs in urban or suburban areas. Butler's elementary school (K-5) draws students from a region slightly bigger than the town limits and had an enrollment in 1994 was 456 students.

Butler students have never done well on state or national tests. It was one of the first districts to be labeled as "severely impaired" by state policymakers for low scores on the state-mandated assessments (BSAP). This designation meant increased state scrutiny and regulations, and a limited increase in state dollars. In 1994, only 27% of Butler's fourth graders scored above the 2nd quartile on the Stanford assessment.

Mr. Edwards, principal in Butler's only elementary school, grew up in a community very similar to Butler and identifies with the lives of many of his students. He says his ticket out of poverty was the military that he entered after high school and which, through the GI Bill, made college a possibility. Edwards is weary of testing. He has worried about, and been held accountable for, his students' low testing performance since he came to the school 7 years ago. On the day of my last visit in 1998, he received test results on South Carolina's new state assessments—the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests— that Butler was piloting. Students did poorly and Edwards was very discouraged, blaming the low results on lack of parent involvement ("We would be a top school in this entire state if we would get the help and backing of the parents,") and South Carolina's constant tinkering with assessment ("Once we get used to one thing, then they change it."). Edwards has had his own rough experiences with testing. During the time of this study, he failed the National Teachers' Exam twice. He needed to pass the exam to keep his principalship, so to prepare for his third and final try, he took a workshop in which he said he learned "tricks" to pass the exam. He was successful.

When Edwards heard about Act 135, he attended a state workshop designed to inform administrators about the legislation. The workshop lasted 3 days and consisted of talks by state department coordinators on such things as writing a school plan to meet state guidelines, creating a planning committee, and developing innovative instructional programs for at-risk students. Often one of the problems with rural school reform is limited staff development opportunities for teachers and administrators, (Stern, 1994) and it was a rare occurrence for Edwards to attend a state workshop on a new policy.

When he returned from the state program, Edwards said about carrying out the plans for Act 135:

> It's just writing down what we had planned on doing and getting state funds for it. There's nothing that they [state policymakers] said to us that I haven't started working on. You know, they—state policymakers—just come like Johnny Comelatelies and you know. . . . I sat down and mapped out a long time ago what we should do.

Mr. Edwards took a mission statement and school goals—which he had written a few years before—and "add[ed] and stretch[ed] them a bit" to develop a plan which met the guidelines that he learned about in the state workshop on Act 135. He presented this new plan in a daylong meeting to a committee of teachers, parents and community members for their approval. Edwards admitted that there was little comment from parents or teachers on the plan during this meeting. He described community members and parents as "withdrawn" and said "they said one or two things the whole meeting—most didn't say anything at all." All participants in the meeting signed the school plan as members of the planning committee and Edwards submitted the plan for state approval, which it received. Seeing little new in Act 135 in terms of governance other than a new format and new procedures for school planning, Edwards regarded the policy as business as usual. The state policy was "just something else to do." In explaining the lack of community involvement Edwards commented:

> Maybe they're not used to having input [or] maybe their educational level isn't as sophisticated or as high as it should be to know what they are talking about—to understand, you know, what's involved.

Teachers said they remembered the daylong meeting Edwards called and remembered that everyone in the school, including custodians, attended. No teacher had seen the school plan prior to the meeting nor had they seen the earlier versions of the mission statement or goals. One teacher said about the meeting, "we looked at the plan Mr. Edwards gave us, voted on it and sent it to the office." Teachers voiced little surprise or concern over these circumstances, even though they were familiar with Act 135 and its intent to garner greater teacher and parent involvement in school planning. According to teachers, writing a mission statement and developing school goals were in Edward's domain and they felt little desire to challenge that. They also doubted the genuineness of Edward's efforts to get them involved. As to Edwards, Act 135 seemed like business as usual to teachers. As one second grade teacher put it, "It's a shame to say. I know everyone was there, but really not much happened."

Butler's response to the state's instructional reforms—i.e. curriculum frameworks and new assessments—was more visible and sustained than its response to Act 135, but, like the response to governance reforms was led by the principal. When the curriculum frameworks were first introduced, Edwards was skeptical of their vision. He commented, referring to the fine arts framework that calls for instruction in all fine arts areas:

> They need a lot of work. . . . They want us to teach ballet. We have more important things to worry about.

In the early years of framework adoption, Edwards paid little attention to them. Some teachers in the school indicated that they had heard of the frameworks but did not see them as important messages of change to their teaching practices. After the frameworks were well entrenched as a policy effort and policymakers talked of changes in state assessments to match the frameworks, though, Edwards paid more attention. He interpreted the frameworks as advocating specific changes in activities or materials rather than a fundamental shift in pedagogy. His first move was to establish a science lab in an old mobile unit because he saw the science framework calling for more hands-on learning. He required teachers to schedule students into this science lab once every other week to do school-wide experiments that he designed. In the first quarter, all students made soap. In the second quarter, all students made paper. These experiments had little to do with subjects being taught in students' science curriculum and had no connection to a broader idea or theme about science learning. When asked how he came up with this idea, he said, "I just got it out of my head. I thought students needed to see how things were made. It would give them a more hands-on experience." The principal's next move was to use state funds given to districts to institute new instructional programs to buy a set of *Hooked on Phonics* for all primary grades, thinking that this program would help his school align their reading instruction to the state's vision. In explaining this move he said:

> I was sitting down watching television on Sunday morning and guess what was on? Charles Kuralt or someone. I forget who it was. He was advertising *Hooked on Phonics.* I said, "I would like to try that. It might help."

In the 1997-1998 school year, in large measure because of continued low test scores in his school, Edwards wrote "higher-order thinking" questions to better prepare students for South Carolina's new state assessments. These questions were handed out to students every week and turned into the principal's office for a small reward—candy, a pencil, a sticker. The principal said about these questions:

> We're always trying to raise the level of awareness in academic achievement. I think we've come a long way, but I know we still have a long way to go. One of the main things instituted since you were last here is to formulate test questions and add a second component to all questions by asking why. Let me give you an example. Here are three animals. You have an elephant, snake and bird. [the question is which of these animals is a mammal?] Of course the elephant is the obvious answer, but then you have to explain why you chose the elephant. Okay, the student needs to know that elephants give live birth, feed the baby milk, have a backbone, and have hair. So if they understand that it will stick with them. A lot of times you choose A, B, or C and just choose A as a guess. So, that is one thing I'm doing that I'm really enthused about, really have high hopes of astute, higher order thinking.

Edwards defined the state's instructional reforms as these discrete, disconnected ideas—hands-on activities, higher order questioning, phonics instruction—which he attempted to add to the curriculum without fundamentally changing what got taught and how it got taught. Edwards did not see the curriculum frameworks and standards as advocating radically different practice from what previous state policies had advocated, even though policymakers cited vast changes in their new efforts. Edwards talked about the frameworks as primarily stressing "why" questions that in the past may not have been highlighted.

Edwards also saw himself completely in charge of directing changes in the curriculum. Most teachers reported little change in their own teaching and often viewed the principal's actions with a wary eye. For instance, teachers took their students to the science lab at their scheduled time, but none talked of incorporating the required activity into their regular science curriculum or changing their own science lessons to include more hands-on work. A first grade teacher said she used the *Hooked On Phonics* kit she received, but was not sure how it related to what she saw the state's language arts framework suggesting which she thought was more "whole language." When asked about Edward's latest efforts to introduce more higher-order questioning, second grade teacher Meg Potter said:

> Potter: I know Mr. Edwards wants more reasoning and critical thinking type activities and things like that.
>
> Interviewer: In any subject area in particular?
>
> Potter: All, all areas.
>
> Interviewer: What does that mean to you? How would you do that?
>
> Potter: Getting the kids to think, and to, you know, reason a little more. Why things happen. Why, why does that, why do you go next door to borrow [referring to regrouping]. You know, why?
>
> Interviewer: So do you ask more questions that you did before?
>
> Potter: Um, I think about the same. Mr. Edwards asks more.

Teachers complied with Edwards's ideas, but didn't see them as requiring changes in their own practices other than adding on the activities which Edwards advocated.

There were two first grade teachers in Butler who were changing their practices in ways which state policymakers might have seen as more aligned to the reform than the activities Edwards designed, but their changes were almost surreptitious. These two teachers had learned about a literature-based reading program from one of the teacher's sisters who was teaching in an suburban district and had attended numerous workshops on how to teach reading through literature and how to design a writing workshop. The teacher's sister shared ideas she learned from her staff development experiences and these ideas captured the two teachers' imaginations. They read some articles and books about literature-based reading programs and early writing experiences. They spent more time on literacy activities and used any instructional funds they had to buy "big books" or classroom sets of books for students to read together. Edwards knew of their efforts and did not stop them, but he did not see that their ideas were connected in any way to the state's reform efforts and did little to disseminate these teachers' ideas to other faculty members. Although the two teachers could have helped other teachers in the school learn about different ways to teach literacy, neither they nor Edwards saw what they were doing as a helpful tool in Butler's efforts to implement the state's new instructional vision. The teachers decided to keep quiet about the changes they were making because they believed many of their colleagues would not support them.

One of the crafters of the frameworks described the state's instructional reform as a "real effort to change what happens in classrooms on a daily basis to get us where we want to go and give students the kind of intellectual tools they haven't previously had access to." Another policymaker talked about Act 135 as "a total change in management thinking" . . . [that] "emphasizes rigorous curriculum with individualized instruction, parental involvement and an extension of the definition of the school to include community and business and coordinated planning." Given these

lofty notions about what their work implied for schools, it seems safe to say that policymakers would find Butler's responses to both the governance and instructional reforms wanting. There was little genuineness in Butler's efforts connected to Act 135. Edwards hardly empowered new stakeholders in school planning processes. He was more concerned with getting a new plan written that would comply with state guidelines and which the state review panel would easily approve. Edwards knew that the state was going to examine only the school's written plan and not talk with teachers or community members to ascertain the degree of their involvement. The important part was having the necessary components in the plan which the state required and "getting it right."

The response to instructional reforms was more sincere, perhaps because of the threat of continued low scores on state assessments. But because of the principal's interpretation of the policy, the response also lacked much sense of fundamental change. New activities or programs were added on to the curriculum. Although teachers talked about changes in what they *did*—going to the science lab, using phonics kit, helping students with Edward's questions—few teachers talked of questioning their everyday practices or incorporating the pedagogical ideas that underlay the changes in activities into their own thinking about teaching.

The superficial nature of Butler's implementation efforts does not necessarily reflect devious attempts of practitioners to subvert state ideas. Rather, Butler's efforts reflect a principal and teachers attempting to enact reform ideas with little help from the state, a history of not faring well by state policies, and traditional patterns of decision-making and instruction. Furthermore, it reflects practitioners' disinclination to see these reform efforts as anything but business as usual. In South Carolina business as usual means compliance with state regulations and mandates. Butler complied.

Browning

Unlike Butler's principal's ideas about the state reforms, Browning administrators saw the state asking for dramatic changes, particularly in instruction. The Browning principal, Mr. Foster, commented:

> First they asked us to do BSAP [Basic Skills Assessment Program] and we did BSAP. We did BSAP well. Now, they are telling us to do something else and I guess we'll figure out how to do that well too.

Browning is about 15 miles from Butler and similar in that most people earn livings off the land—farming or logging—or commute 30 miles to a larger, industrial town. Browning is approximately 60% white and 40% African- American, an opposite ratio from Butler. Unlike Butler, this ratio is reflected in the public schools. During desegregation, strong African-American and white leadership kept the public schools unified. No white academy sprung up in Browning. In 1994, African-American students made up 53% of the student body and whites, 47%. The elementary school had an enrollment of 380 students. The administration and most of the teaching staff are white, as is the school board. In 1994, 50% of the fourth grade students scored below the 2nd quartile on the Stanford national assessment.

Principal Foster attended the same state-run workshop on Act 135 as Edwards. Unlike Edwards, though, he interpreted the legislation as not only requiring greater community involvement in school planning, but also a re-examination of curriculum to move away from a basic skills focus. Foster at first did not support this new focus. When reflecting on his initial thinking about Act 135, he said:

> I was definitely against Act 135 and most of the changes. But, I see the fact that our end product is not what we want it to be. I get caught up teaching basic skills and I feel we have to do that and we feel successful when we do. But yet when I look at the total picture, I realize we're not producing . . . kids [who] have the right skills to get a job when they graduate from twelfth grade.

Foster said that the kind of skills the state now advocates, and those embedded in the curriculum frameworks, are skills such as conflict resolution, work ethic, cooperative learning—things beyond "just content." No where in his talk is there evidence that he sees dramatic changes necessary in what and how teachers teach the core subjects. Similar to Edwards, he sees the instructional reforms as largely being "add-ons"—new things that his school needs to teach. This view was echoed by Browning teachers. Few mentioned any changes that they had made in their practices and most stated that they still stressed basic skills. The following exemplifies typical teacher talk:

> Interviewer: When you look at the South Carolina frameworks and Act 135, there is this push for more demanding, more ambitious instruction for all students. What, if anything, does this mean to your teaching?
>
> Sixth grade teacher: I don't see how I can change. I can't get my students to do the basics, you know. How could they do anything else?

Like many teachers who see basic skills as a prerequisite for more conceptual learning (Knapp, 1995), Browning teachers interpreted Act 135 and the curriculum frameworks

as advocating practices they could only engage in *after* they had taught what they have always taught—basic skills. Because Foster also interpreted the state instructional reform as "adding on" he did not challenge his teachers' perspectives. For both Foster and the teachers, state reforms were asking them to do things that they might applaud in the abstract but that they felt their students were not necessarily able or ready to do. They would do what they could to incorporate the state's new vision, but in no way did they see that vision supplanting their focus on basic skills.

Engaging in more shared decision making and involving teachers, parents and community member in the planning process also proved difficult in Browning. After returning from the state workshop on Act 135, Foster called together the school's improvement council, a group with whom he had worked in the past to draw up school improvement plans. He told the council that he needed their help in setting new goals and methods for achieving the goals. He got little response from the committee. Their initial reaction was to say, "Mr. Foster, we don't know what changes should take place. We're not informed as to what methods are good or bad." Foster reported to have worked hard to inform this group of the new ideas he had heard about at the state workshop. He met with the group twice a month for 2 months. But, in the end, Foster felt that those involved on the council abdicated their role. He commented:

> I gave this committee the responsibility [to develop a school plan for state approval]. As chair of the committee, I gave them the responsibility. I said, "Let's make a plan." But, when we got down to the nitty gritty, they said, "Mr. Foster, what do you think? What would you do?"

Foster personally wrote the school plan and submitted it to this group for approval that they readily gave. The plan was then submitted and approved by the state review committee. Although Foster certainly made greater attempts to involve people in the planning process than Butler's principal, the outcome was the same. New stakeholders—parents, teachers and community member—did not actively participate in school decision-making and state policymakers' idea of a "total change in management thinking" was hardly evident in this school.

The lack of community and parent involvement in school decision making was not because all community members trusted Foster or felt that he was doing well by their children. There was, among African-American parents, a level of distrust of the white school administration and teachers. One African-American teacher commented that African-American parents would come to her with concerns about how their children were being treated, but would not feel comfortable confronting Foster or white teachers. This distrust seemed warranted in that Foster openly talked about the "problem" of African-American males in his school whom he thought lacked appropriate role models. He would talk about African-American adult males in the community as "congregating by themselves," not attending to their children. For Foster this translated into African-American students coming to school feeling "separate and then disrespectful" of authority.

Whether Foster's comments reflect an accurate characterization of his African-American students' lives or reflect a racist perspective on his community, is not the issue here. The important issue is that the lack of parent and community involvement in school life was not because there were no problems, rather that parents and community members did not feel free to address these problems with school administration nor competent enough to contribute to school planning. Act 135 hardly empowered them to develop a voice in how the school operated.

Butler and Browning differed on which features of the state reform efforts they focused on. Butler attempted more instructional changes, adding on new activities to align their curriculum with what they saw the state advocating, and was less concerned with understanding and enacting changes in governance. Browning, on the other hand, attempted more governance changes, establishing a committee to look at school planning and encouraging, albeit not particularly successfully, more community and parent involvement. Browning did very little in terms of instructional change. But, despite these differences in focus, there is an underlying similarity in the shallow nature of the responses. In neither school were fundamental changes attempted. Curriculum changes were added on. Committees were established, but not pushed to share decision-making. It was as though both schools felt compelled to do *something* in light of the state's reform policies, but were unsure of exactly what.

South Carolina's policies, like many standards-based reforms, were underdetermined (Ball & Wilson, 1996). Reformers knew more what they did not want—basic-skills instruction and top-down authority structures—than what they did. And although providing guidelines for how to arrive at new shared decision-making constructs and new instructional practices, they left much to practitioners' imaginations about what these new ideas would look like in real classrooms and schools. The fact that Browning's and Butler's imaginations only led them ankle-deep into the pool of reform is even more apparent when contrasted with actions taken by the two urban schools.

Urban School Responses

Forest and Macdonald are two elementary schools in the Cedarville district, one of the largest urban districts in the state. Macdonald has approximately 600 students and Forest 490. Both are K-6 schools and share similar demo-

graphics to Butler and Browning. Forest and Macdonald face the same difficulties of poverty and a history of racism and racial segregation that plague Butler and Browning.

The primary difference between these two schools' and the rural schools' responses to state governance and instructional reforms was that the urban schools attached the state messages to other initiatives that they were in the process of undertaking and used state reforms to support and deepen their own efforts to reexamine instruction and governance.

The best example of this took place at Forest in response to Act 135. A year before Act 135 was passed Forest became a member of the Accelerated Schools Project.[2] This project requires schools to establish school goals and set up committees of teachers, administrators, parents and community members to examine all aspects of the school in terms of how they help meet the goals. One committee, for instance, works on school facilities. Another works on curriculum. When Act 135 was adopted, the school coordinated its efforts to address planning for both accelerated schools and the state reform by adjusting the work the committees were doing so that they could produce a plan which met state guidelines. A sizable contingent of teachers, parents, and community people who had worked on the Accelerated Schools Project shifted their work to planning for Act 135. They developed a more formal mission statement and continued the work on goals which was already underway.

The principal talked about Act 135 as giving the process started in the Accelerated Schools Project more legitimacy. Shared decision making was now not only an idea that her particular school was undertaking, but a "mandate" from the state. And those involved in the committee work took their new role in school decision making seriously. Although the principal was a key player in the planning, her voice did not dominate. At one point, the committee voted to spend state funds connected to Act 135 to hire an additional first grade teacher over the objection of the school principal who wanted to use the funds in a different way. Teachers and parents who were a part of this planning committee spoke of the empowerment they felt when this happened. Act 135 provided one more opportunity to share decision making and create new ways of governing the school.[3]

Macdonald, although not involved in a specific program to open up school decision making, had also begun to adopt some of the same procedures. They had an existing school council, which unlike Browning's, offered suggestions to the principal and reviewed existing school policies. When a committee was created to develop the school's Act 135 plan, 21 people quickly volunteered including seven parents and community members who remained active participants on the committee throughout the 4-month period it took to hammer out a plan for the school.

Macdonald and Forest were helped in these efforts to create greater community, parent, and teacher involvement in the school by the district staff development office. Macdonald's and Forest's principals did not attend state-run workshops on Act 135 as Edwards and Foster had, but rather were involved with a more extensive training program put on by the district. In this program, administrators learned about policy requirements, and experienced a shared decision-making model. Teachers were asked to attend the urban district's staff development program along with their principals. Central office administrators worked with principals and teachers to develop planning processes that would work in their individual buildings. Teams of principals and teachers from various schools collaborated with each other to develop ways to increase participation among school stakeholders. Part of the meetings were devoted to reflecting on the process of collaboration that they were engaged in and workshop facilitators explored with participants how their experiences in the workshop related to the kind of opportunities they needed to provide for teachers, parents and community members in their own schools. Unlike the rural educators, the urban principals were given an opportunity in the district workshop to learn more than the policy's regulations. They experienced as *participants* the policy's underlying ideas of shared decision making and devolution of authority by collaborating with central office administrators and teachers outside of traditional authority structure. Research suggests that teachers may need

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[2]Accelerated Schools Project was started by Henry Levin at Stanford University to help schools of poverty offer challenging instruction to all students and to create a greater connection between schools and their communities. The focus of Accelerated Schools fit well with South Carolina's governance and instructional reforms in that they both call for more shared decision making and instructional practices that go well beyond basic skills..

[3]What is interesting about Forest's embrace of Accelerated School's and Act 135's calls for shared decision making is that they represented a direct turnabout from actions taken by the principal a few years prior. When new to the school, the principal was charged with improving Forest's dismal academic achievement. She called for the abolition of numerous pull-out programs the school had adopted and classroom practices which primarily focused on rote memorization of basic facts. She forced out of the school or into retirement many teachers and teacher aides who had been in the school for many years because they did not want to help her make the changes she saw as essential. To use her words, she told the staff, "they could either get on the train and go where I was going or get out." For teachers and community members who remembered these events, an ability to have say over school decisions and to vote against the principal's ideas was new indeed. So although the culture at Forest now fostered innovative teaching and shared decision making, many teachers and community members remembered well that this was not always the case

to experience a different kind of instruction as learners in order to enact it (Duckworth, 1987) and that professional development opportunities that only offer images of new instructional practices or ideas about new instructional practices may not be sufficient for teachers to embrace authentic reform ideas (Kennedy, 1991). When Forest and Macdonald's teams of teachers and principals went back to their schools to begin work on their own school plans for Act 135 they not only drew on their work with other shared decision-making efforts (e.g., Accelerated Schools) but their experiences as participants in the district workshop. This kind of active learning about the governance reform was not available to the rural educators.

A similar sustained involvement happened with instructional reforms. During the time in which the curriculum frameworks were coming out, Macdonald teachers had begun to reexamine their literacy and mathematics practices. Many teachers were attending professional development programs on new approaches to teaching mathematics, the writing process, and literature-based reading programs. Teachers related the ideas they were learning and sharing with each other from their professional development opportunities to the state's new messages about instruction. A second grade teacher at Macdonald commented:

> I feel like from what I've heard from Barbara Neilson [the state commissioner for education] that what I'm starting to do is in the right direction. And knowing that you are moving in the direction the state wants you to is a good feeling. . . . It's funny because when you have people changing and getting rewarded for it, people who don't want to change feel the most uncomfortable. That's different!

At Forest a group of teachers had been working on adopting new practices in mathematics as part of the Accelerated Schools project. They had looked at the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics *Standards* and books on constructivist pedagogy. The state framework in mathematics seemed in line to these other ideas with which they were dealing and supported their efforts to change. With funds provided by Act 135 to establish innovative instructional practices, Forest teachers decided they needed to learn more mathematics themselves if they were effectively to make the changes in their teaching that they wanted. They hired a mathematics professor to come to the school to help teachers relearn in a conceptual way the mathematics they taught.

These examples of the urban schools' responses suggest not the pro forma, add-on responses that were evident in the rural schools. Rather, they demonstrate genuine attempts to change both instruction and school governance. State efforts "fit" with what was already happening in the schools and added or deepened the schools' attempts to change.

What accounts for this difference? And what, if anything, can be explained by the "ruralness" of two of the schools?

Possible Explanations

Differences in Intellectual Resources

Practitioners interpret policies through their existing ideas and beliefs about practice (Cohen & Ball, 1990; Hollingsworth, 1989; Jennings, 1996; Johnson & O'Connor, 1979). Clearly practitioners in the two urban schools drew upon a richer set of beliefs, ideas, experiences and knowledge to make sense of the state reforms than rural practitioners. The urban teachers and administrators linked state efforts to other reform ideas in which they were already engaged and therefore saw the state's agenda as part of a sea of ideas about instruction and governance rather than a unique perspective being put forth by state policymakers.

In the two rural schools, the reforms were clearly identified only with the state. Seeing the state agenda as something discrete and particular to South Carolina may have contributed to rural educators' view of the reforms as things to add on to existing practices rather than as messages about fundamental change in instruction and governance. It also may have contributed to their notion that the reforms were things to comply with rather than learn from or use to change existing practices—just one more thing the state made them do. South Carolina in recent years has put forth an enormous number of state mandates. As one state policymaker said, her office ought to be renamed "Reforms R Us." Teachers and administrators in the state have become jaded by the onslaught. Butler's and Browning's practitioners had no sense that the state reforms had some grounding in something bigger than current policymakers' ideas, or perhaps whims, of how schools ought to run and what should get taught. Thus, it was reasonable that these rural educators would feel obliged to do what they needed to do to fulfill state expectations, and not see state reforms as opportunities to engage in serious reexamination of current practices.

This piece of Butler's and Browning's story is commonplace. Rural educators have fewer staff development opportunities and are less well educated in their teaching fields than their urban counterparts (DeYoung, 1987; Sterns, 1994). What is less known is differences in how rural and urban educators marshal internal intellectual resources. In these four schools, differences in how and whether practitioners learned from each other contributed greatly to how schools responded to the reforms. Macdonald and Forest teachers set up ways in which individual teachers' ideas and experience with changes in practice were shared among colleagues. Macdonald teachers worked together to exam-

ine new ideas about teaching literacy and mathematics. Forest teachers decided to learn mathematics together as a way of collectively changing how and what got taught. The culture of these schools supported efforts to change, or at least to explore possibilities of change, and set up opportunities for teachers to talk with each other and use each other as resources for change. This was in marked contrast to Butler's first grade teachers who hid their changes from colleagues. So not only were rural educators in these two schools less likely to learn from external professional development experiences, but they were not open to and did not foster opportunities for teachers to learn from each other.

The staff development experiences that introduced the reforms also provided different intellectual resources to rural and urban practitioners. Rural principals learned about the state policy primarily through the state-run workshop that focused on the guidelines and procedures necessary to produce school plans which would meet state requirements. The inservice also *told* administrators about some interesting new curricular ideas. At no point did the inservice engage participants in the underlying ideas which the reforms sought to promote—shared decision making, devolution of authority, conceptual understanding of knowledge. The inservice was, somewhat ironically, the standard, authoritarian fare of talking heads telling participants to be "empowered" and then instructing them how their empowerment should work and what they needed to do. In contrast, urban administrators attended a series of district inservices which both informed them about the provisions of the policy and provided them an opportunity to participate in the shared decision-making model which the policy called for.

Given these differences in opportunities to learn about the governance reform, it is not surprising that rural and urban educators interpreted the policy differently. There was nothing in the way in which rural educators were taught about the policy that would help them see it as anything other than one more state mandate with which they had to comply. Although few practitioners are given rich and engaging opportunities to learn about state policy ideas (Jennings & Spillane, 1996; Spillane, 1993), for rural practitioners shallow learning opportunities are particularly problematic in that they may be the only opportunity rural educators have to learn about a policy or reform idea. Forest and Macdonald practitioners drew upon the ideas and experiences of many colleagues, multiple and engaging staff development opportunities, and many other outside influences to interpret and implement Act 135 and the curriculum frameworks. Foster and Edwards drew almost exclusively on their own personal experiences in the one state workshop they attended. State policymakers would have had to understand that more than information of policy guidelines was necessary for practitioners to engage seriously with the reform's intentions. They would have had to act like the Cedarville's staff development administrators who constructed opportunities for practitioners to *learn* about the reform ideas by experiencing them. This story points out that the issue of limited professional development opportunities for rural educators is not only an issue of numbers but of quality. More standard fare would not have helped Butler and Browning engaged more genuinely in these reform ideas.

Differences in Community

Certainly the rural educators' perspective that the foremost goal was to comply with state policies accounts for some of the lack of genuine effort to involve community members, parents and teachers in school planning. But more seems to be in play here. In both Butler and Browning, teachers, parents and community members resisted even the limited opportunities offered to them to become involved in school decision making. These groups explicitly deferred to the principals' greater expertise in establishing school goals. A first grade teacher in Butler, talking about a reading program that Edwards was starting, said that although she did not understand why the program was being adopted, she believed that it must be good if Edwards thought it would help improve students' reading achievement. A Browning parent who had been asked to discuss the school plan with Foster said she thought she would have little to contribute that Foster would not have already thought of. This kind of deference was common in all conversations with rural teachers and parents, but not at all common in the language and actions in the urban schools. At Forest, community members challenged the principal and teachers frequently in drawing up the school plan. Teachers in Macdonald openly questioned and resisted the principal's authority. One second grade teacher I observed made quite a show of throwing away a directive the principal sent out. In Macdonald and Forest it seemed quite clear to administrators and to teachers that their decisions easily could be questioned by each other and by community members.

Researchers often highlight the intertwining connections between rural school educators and parents, the important role that schools play in rural communities, and the value of familiarity of parents and community members by school practitioners (DeYoung, 1987; McClelland, 1997; Peshkin, 1987; Sher, 1995). It seems, then, particularly troublesome in this case that a reform which called for sharing decision making among school and community members would find the two urban schools more hospitable environments than the two rural schools. Clearly in these two rural schools the common rhetoric that school is the heart of a rural community and that because everyone knows everyone else, rural schools respond better to parents and community members than urban or suburban schools was

not evident. Less romantic beliefs were. Beliefs about authority and hierarchy—who has the right and who has the knowledge to make decisions about schools—made the rural schools less receptive to empowerment ideas than might be expected. To overcome these beliefs, rural communities similar to Butler and Browning may need more than the state *telling* them to include more people in school governance. They may need to learn how to create productive opportunities for involvement. And most importantly, they may need to figure out for themselves, with support from the state perhaps, what kind of shared decision-making models would work best for them. As was evident in Browning and Butler, empowerment is not something that can be easily mandated from above.

Conclusion

It would be easy to dismiss Butler's and Browning's stories of policy implementation as sad anomalies—as two isolated examples of dysfunctional school/community relationships and of administrators who act like petty-tyrants ruling their schools in paternalistic ways. Certainly most rural administrators are not as authoritarian as Edwards and Foster. Not all rural practitioners are as isolated from learning opportunities as ones in these two schools. Not most rural communities exhibit such deferential attitudes toward school administrators, and not all school administrators would allow the deferential attitudes to continue. The fact that these features exist in Butler and Browning may not be because of their "ruralness" but because of other factors in the culture of these communities.

I have recently begun a study of rural schools in Maine, looking at how they are implementing a similar state-level instructional reform and I have seen quite different practices. I have talked with teachers who are very current with not only the state reform but a wide range of current instructional ideas. I have seen school/community groups hash out mission statements in a truly collaborative and educative way. I have watched school principals and teachers work together to set school goals and develop school plans in a democratic and genuinely open manner. I have only just begun this study and have not analyzed carefully what I have seen and heard, but although I have seen different practices and behaviors in Maine rural schools, there are issues raised in Butler and Browning which resonate in two ways with things I am seeing in the Maine sites. These "resonances" serve as obstacles to genuine efforts to enact state instructional policies.

By discussing possible, and possibly unique, obstacles to rural schools' efforts to implement state policy, I do not mean to suggest that rural schools should mimic their urban counterparts, either by consolidating and becoming bigger or by institutionalizing practices that "work" in those settings. Although the two resonances I will discuss may not be commonplace in all rural schools, they may be in some, and to some degree in others. Therefore, they need to be considered if we are to understand better rural schools' responses to state instructional mandates. I offer these as contributions to the conversation about policy implementation in rural schools.

First, rural schools suffer a severe lack of resources in terms of people to undertake comprehensive reforms. Butler and Browning were hampered in their implementation of these reforms because practitioners were not well informed or insightful about changing practice. But even if all of them brought enormous amounts of intellectual resources to the implementation efforts—all of them represents a very limited number. How can the only first grade teacher in a district examine curriculum in 10 different subject areas in any reasonable amount of time? How can rural teachers already taking on a great deal of work because there is no district curriculum coordinator, special education director, or assessment or technology specialist, also share in making decisions in a wide range of areas? How can principals already asked to run buildings, deal with transportation, handle discipline, consult about curriculum, and even teach some classes also be asked to explore the possibility of rich staff development opportunities? When policymakers think of the capacity building that might be necessary to enact their ideas, they may need to think not only about what practitioners may need to learn to engage in the reforms, but think about the number of people who might be necessary just to get the work done. And researchers touting the glories of small schools, may also need to think about the pressures that smallness brings to practitioners when they engage in anything beyond their daily work. It may well be that the superficial nature of Butler's and Browning's interpretation of the instructional and governance reforms was designed to preserve their sanity. Attempting more fundamental and complex changes may have stretched practitioners to an unbearable point.

Second, in some rural settings there may be too much familiarity between school and community members and among school practitioners. In Butler and Browning, school administrators' familiarity with community members and community members' familiarity with administrators resulted in limited involvement and voice from public stakeholders in school planning rather than more. Familiarity among faculty did not produce great collaboration. Although familiarity may not always lead to a lack of communication, it may hinder rather than facilitate open discussion of ideas. Practitioners, parents, and community members may hold beliefs about each other and about how each other works that get in the way of productive collaborative work. These beliefs shape what happens in classrooms as well as what happens between schools and communities. I have heard many teachers in rural schools say that they do not have to write down what they do in the

classrooms or what a student does because everyone knows these things. These unstated understandings and informal connections are difficult to examine—a task necessary in a change process. So although close and familiar connections have many benefits, they also may have some negative consequences which need to be analyzed.

How does a state bent on enriching the lives of students bring the resources to bear in these very small settings to built consensus for change? How does it attract and retain the talented people to take on the multiple roles of teacher/reformer/learner and still stay grounded in the values of a community? Not much is known about this, but it is clear that a simple, single-minded, and overwhelming urban view of how to change schools and improve students' lives is not enough.

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