Teacher Collaboration and Perceptions of Control

By Charles W. Carter

Many of the best vocational opportunities for teacher education students will be in urban schools. Teachers in urban high schools are faced with problems such as students who are several grade levels below the norm, students with low motivation, little parent involvement, financial problems, negative behavior of students, and little student respect for teachers (Corcoran, Walker, & White, 1988). These conditions can complicate already difficult teaching tasks and create uncertainty. Teachers may become discouraged and feel they are totally powerless with respect to control over the educational outcomes of their students. Losing the capacity to control the terms of work causes one to disassociate oneself from the products of the work (Rosenholtz, 1989).

Susan J. Rosenholtz (1989) indicates that teachers who attribute instructional outcomes to noncontrollable factors avoid new challenges. This is especially pertinent for teachers in urban, low socioeconomic settings. On the other hand, teachers who attribute instructional outcomes to controllable factors "confront new challenges...with greater optimism and promise"(p. 143).

One innovative urban program is the Scott High Accelerated Program in Education (SHAPE) in Toledo, Ohio. This study attempted to determine whether

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the teachers participating in SHAPE had improved perceptions of control over educational outcomes. The research also investigated changes in teaching practice. Finally, suggestions were made for ways teacher education faculty could prepare their students for teacher collaboration opportunities.

Literature Review

The field of teaching is one that entails unplanned and complex circumstances. The challenge for teachers in education today, and especially those in urban schools, is well documented (Passow, 1982; Maeroff, 1988). There are conflicts between the culture of the school and that of the students in areas such as "...learning styles, relational styles, communication styles, and perceptions of involvement" (Gilbert & Gay, 1985, p. 171).

These uncertainties potentially present a threat to one's self-esteem. There is a need to maintain control. Attempts are made to avoid situations (limit risk taking) if there is doubt concerning one's ability to maintain control (Rosenholtz, 1989).

This disassociation influences the classroom performance of teachers. The uncertainty causes many to "lower their professional aspirations; become less involved with students; absent themselves more frequently and defect more often from the workforce"(Rosenholtz, 1989, p 143). Teachers with a low sense of efficacy do not think they are able to influence student learning. They reduce efforts or give up completely in difficult situations. Teaching effectiveness is reduced because of their perceived inadequacies (Ashton & Webb, 1986).

One question for this research was whether the teachers involved in the SHAPE program gained a greater sense of control over the educational outcomes of their students. Two important aspects of control in the workplace are control over the use of one's time and physical movement and freedom from hierarchical authority (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). As teachers believe more strongly in their teaching practices and are encouraged to pursue alternative and successful methods, they should experience themselves as causal agents.

Project SHAPE

When teachers volunteer for the SHAPE program, they are required to make a three-year commitment. During the initial year, they are provided regular teaching assignments, except for a common planning period that is used to plan the program for the next year and for professional development. The next two years, they teach one group of students as those students progress through the ninth and tenth grades. Incoming students volunteer for the program. Up to 100 students are split into four classes. Each group of students remains together for their four basic courses. Four teachers (math, science, English, and social studies) teach these four classes of students. There were two teams (pods) of four teachers involved in this study.

Research Methods

The method employed for this research was a case study. Data were gathered from participant observation records, interviews, and classroom observations. The participants were eight teachers involved in the freshman SHAPE program at Scott High School in Toledo, Ohio. The teachers accepted both the legitimacy of my role as researcher and my membership in the group (Lancy,1993). Therefore, the teachers were totally candid.

During the school year, these teachers were observed during approximately 75 percent of their common planning periods or a total of 125 sessions between September and June. During these sessions, notations were made of all the significant proceedings.

The teachers were interviewed twice. Both interviews lasted approximately one hour. All the interviews were taped. The tapes were transcribed and condensed. Condensed versions were provided to the teachers and their input was solicited (Lancy, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Participants were observed teaching two different classes of students. All significant activities were recorded.

The first step in data analysis was to establish "units of analysis" to both guide the collection of data and to help reduce the raw data to manageable divisions (Goetz and LeCompte 1984). All the data collected during participant observation and the teacher interviews was categorized. Next, "Data are massed and scanned through systematic content analysis" (p. 170).

Triangulation is an important procedure in qualitative research (Lancy, 1993; Miles & Huberman 1984; Yin 1984). The information gathered from classroom observations and interviews was used to support the participant-observer data.

Results

One effect of SHAPE was a perceived increase in teacher autonomy. One teacher reported that they were able to circumvent bureaucratic procedures and exert more authority:

> In this situation, we have control over the curriculum. We have control of the policies as long as we keep within the school rules...the teachers in SHAPE have a change process available so that adjustments can be made if techniques and structures are not appropriate. On the other hand, traditional settings breed complacency since teachers don't feel that they have any chance to make significant changes...as a group we're able to get more autonomy from the system.

One advantage mentioned by all SHAPE teachers was the ability to revise curriculum, schedules, and grades. Another innovation that impressed all teachers was the power to determine disciplinary policy. The traditional approach to

discipline, similar to many urban schools, involved an inflexible set of rules that were administered by the dean's office. For example, students who were tardy to class without a valid excuse slip were automatically administered demerits. However, the SHAPE teachers intervened for their students:

> We can refer students to the office and they don't receive demerits. Most teachers don't do that, they just play the game. There's a board policy and they let the board policy run itself.

The SHAPE teachers also indicated receiving much encouragement from the examples of others. One teacher reported the fact that the other teachers were still trying helped her avoid becoming despondent. The collaboration in SHAPE increased greatly the support among the teachers.

Another change resulting from SHAPE was an increase in opportunities for reflection. One teacher indicated that she felt uncertain less often because there were always three teachers off whom to bounce ideas. This reflection also improved teachers' attitudes concerning their job:

> One can feel really bad when things are going bad, but if you have other teachers to talk to, and compare with, and get new ideas from, you feel that you have better control over the situation.

The teachers did believe they had a greater sense of control over the educational outcomes of the students. One teacher indicated that previously she felt she had to adapt to the existing structure. She now has confidence in her own expertise with respect to students and subject area:

> Just let me and my group make my decisions. I want to be able to control my classroom.

Another indicated that she had never considered teacher empowerment prior to SHAPE. She had just accepted the hierarchy but now felt that teachers can do it better. The teachers now feel more responsible for a student's successes or failures. The teachers also feel a greater accountability for student behavior: "...the people in the office call us when a kid gets in trouble." One teacher indicated that this was a change from the past when social, economic, and cultural factors had been used as excuses for not being in control.

There were numerous examples of how this perception of control was reflected in classroom practice. Several teachers indicated that they were now using a mastery approach to education. A science teacher reported that there was no longer pressure to move through a book at a certain rate. Therefore, more students were being thoroughly taught concepts since enough time was available to insure that they were learned. The structure of the program allowed teachers more freedom to use this approach, since they had students for two straight years and also ran their own summer school programs. Teachers were able to work individually with students more effectively because of the feedback they shared concerning their

common students.

While student outcomes were difficult to compare given the circumstances (students volunteered for the program, more professional development and mentoring was provided), teacher reports after the students left the program indicated that a larger number of students were able to master a greater amount of material. For example, the chemistry teacher indicated that she could tell the difference between the SHAPE and other students. One significant result was the change students reported in their attitudes. They were more enthusiastic about school, attended more regularly, and studied more. The bonds formed with the students in one's own class were one of the most important factors. For example, the 11th grade students formed study groups with their former classmates.

Cross-curricular approaches were employed in many instances. For example, at the beginning of each quarter a common theme was established and all teachers coordinated lessons. Also, field trips would revolve around interdisciplinary themes. Teachers cooperated in such areas as teaching study skills, note taking, and coordinating schedules.

The teachers agreed to modify assessment practices. One example of this was having final exams represent less than the traditional 20 percent of the semester grade. Another was including an effort component in the grading process.

There were also significant classroom changes as a result of improvements in communication. Teachers shared with one another successful strategies for working with certain students, effective techniques, and many other suggestions.

Discussion

The SHAPE program did provide conditions which allowed the perception that teachers had more control over the educational outcomes of their students. This in turn resulted in changes in classroom practice.

One reason for this perception of control was that the teachers believed that as a group they had opportunities to circumvent bureaucratic procedures and exert more authority. They also felt they had more opportunities to make changes in areas such as curriculum, schedules, and assessment practices.

The teachers gained encouragement from the examples of others. There was an increase in opportunities for reflection since other teachers were always available as consultants. Thus, they did begin to attribute instructional outcomes to controllable factors leading to greater optimism toward teaching (Rosenholtz, 1989). They also perceived that they were capable of influencing student learning and thus were looking for more challenges and experiencing a greater amount of pride in their accomplishments (Ashton & Webb, 1986).

These changes were attributed primarily to the teacher collaborative units. Many attitudinal changes occurred because of the teachers' improved confidence as a result of working as a group. Other aspects of the program such as professional

development and the provision of additional resources, while valuable, did not seem to influence the perceptions of teacher control significantly.

Obviously, this was only one program at one urban high school. However, it is felt that similar results would generalize to other urban schools.

How can teacher educators apply this information to preservice education students? One way is to provide examples of programs, such as SHAPE, in order to promote an interest and enthusiasm for teacher collaboration.

Another is to prepare students for teacher collaboration opportunities. Previously, I investigated the literature to determine reasons why teachers are reluctant to collaborate. School structure and administrative attitudes are obviously significant barriers to effective teacher collaboration (students do need to be encouraged to become change agents). However, other barriers are directly related to teachers. One is the attitude that teaching is easy and therefore anyone asking for assistance is incompetent. Another is the belief that offering and accepting assistance implies status differences and therefore is insulting to the recipient. There is also the perception of the private sanctity of a teacher's classroom and the reluctance of teachers to interfere with another's "domain." Another factor includes a lack of trust between teachers. Also one (especially a new teacher) may believe that none of the other teachers have the same interests and concerns. All these issues can be covered in preservice education courses in order to promote a greater understanding of the dynamics behind successful collaboration.

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