Theorizing Teacher Agency and Reform: How Institutionalized Instructional Practices Change and Persist

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Abstract

One reason reform does not dramatically change public schools is because instructional practices are highly institutionalized. This article advances a theory for how teacher agency can both change and maintain institutionalized instructional practices in schools. Based on findings from one U.S. urban public school undergoing state-mandated reform, I assert that three mechanisms drive a particular form of teacher agency. Whether these three mechanisms change or maintain institutionalized instructional practices depends on a set of counterbalancing forces that determine how much innovation versus socialization exists in peer learning; how much cohesion versus diversity is involved in community interactions; and how much cognitive and normative divergence versus convergence characterizes teachers’ shared understandings, aims, and practices. The theory provides a generalizable framework for the activities that help teachers drive outcomes in their schools and for the cognitive and social conditions that may be more likely to result in the effective implementation of reform.

Keywords

teacher agency, institutional change, school reform, theory generation

Since 2002, No Child Left Behind has become emblematic of accountability-driven school reform in the United States. However, state-level school reform set the precedent for federal intervention. In 1989, New Jersey became the first state to take over a local city school. An increasing trend of state takeover, accreditation removal, and closure of underperforming schools followed (Education Commission of the States 2002). Despite nearly 30 years of such reforms, outmoded but deeply ingrained curriculum standards, instructional practices, and student expectations persist (Payne 2008; Ravitch 2000).

The limited success of reform should perhaps be expected. Researchers who study institutions, such as public schools, have long argued that institutions “are maintained over long periods of time without further justification or elaboration, and are highly resistant to change” (Zucker 1987:446). Still, reform does sometimes take hold. Many factors are involved in effective reform, including the coherence of reform policies and the activities of district and school leaders (Honig and Hatch 2004; Leithwood and Jantzi 2006). One increasingly recognized but less explored factor is the role of teachers as institutional agents (DiMaggio 1988).

Existing research on teacher agency suggests that institutionalized instructional practices are
maintained or changed by two distinct sets of teacher activities. One set of more oppositional activities is characterized as maintaining institutions; another set of more cooperative activities is characterized as changing institutions (Gitlin and Margonis 1995; Robinson 2012). Yet, this research stops short of explaining the conditions under which teacher agency will foster or inhibit reform.

In the current work, I use findings from an in-depth qualitative case study of one U.S. urban public school to propose a theory that explains how a similar set of teacher activities can encourage or undermine mandated state reform. The theory also provides a generalizable framework for understanding how particular forms of agency manifest and when they are likely to bring about reform. In addition to offering testable predictions for future research, this theory suggests a set of principles for the kinds of teacher activities that may result in more successful implementation of reform.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Institutional Agency and Change

Institutional agents are actors whose understandings, interests, decisions, and actions create, maintain, transform, or dismantle institutions (DiMaggio 1988; Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009). Teachers are institutional agents because their day-to-day instructional choices shape the implementation of reform and thus persistence or change in institutionalized instructional practices (Coburn 2006; Robinson 2012; Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002). Successful reform at the school level exemplifies micro-institutional change, meaning a shift in deeply ingrained, taken-for-granted, value-laden, and often loosely decoupled practices inside an organization rather than in the field or sector (Selznick 1996; Weick 1976). Micro-institutional change thus depends, in part, on teachers’ ending their habitual use of long-held instructional practices, teachers’ questioning the meaning and value of existing practices, and teachers’ using new practices rather than shielding existing practices from external intervention.

Current research on micro-institutional change in schools focuses on two main roles for teacher agency. On the one hand, teacher activities involving interests, micro-politics, and social conflict are how teachers resist reform (Ball 2012; Gitlin and Margonis 1995). On the other hand, teacher activities involving policy interpretation, community collaboration, and practice adaptation are how teachers enact reform (Coburn 2001; Louis and Marks 1998; Priestley et al. 2012; Robinson 2012). These two accounts of teacher agency are consistent with depictions of agency in the broader sociological literature. However, the effect of teacher agency on institutional persistence and change may not be so straightforward.

Projective versus Practical Evaluative Agency. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that agency can result from “projective” or “practical evaluative” activities. The projective element of agency refers to individuals’ reconfiguring existing understandings and actions to create future possible trajectories that will achieve their desired outcomes. This means individuals invent, orchestrate, and pursue a desired path for the future, “receiving their driving impetus from the conflicts and challenges of social life” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:984). In other words, agency is instantiated through micro-political dynamics that arise when individuals try to actualize their competing interests.

The instrumental pursuit of desired outcomes through social conflict and challenge is the assumption underlying accounts of teachers’ resistance to reform. For example, Gitlin and Margonis (1995) argue that reform fundamentally restructures teachers’ work, triggering issues of authority, discretion, and resistance—the result being a push-pull cycle that leaves schools fundamentally unchanged. Ball (2012) argues that schools are fundamentally characterized by the social conflict and challenge of micro-political processes—even more during reform “because change or the possibility of change brings to the surface those subterranean conflicts and differences that are otherwise glossed over in the daily routine of school life” (Ball 2012:28). The resulting dissonance, negotiations, and compromise may result in little change at all.

In contrast to the projective element of agency, the practical evaluative element of agency refers to “the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations” (Emirbayer and Mische...
Rather than inventing, orchestrating, and aiming to project their own ideas and interests, practical evaluative agents’ primary aim is making everyday decisions about appropriate practice to resolve immediate work dilemmas. Because such decisions necessarily privilege some beliefs and practices over others, practical evaluative agents shape the taken-for-granted bases of institutions (Scott 1994).

Practical evaluative action is the assumption underlying accounts of policy interpretation, community collaboration, and practice adaptation, which enact reform. For example, in explaining how teachers in a California elementary school implemented reading policy, Coburn (2001) demonstrates that teachers’ interpretations and interactions influence their understanding of classroom work requirements (see also Coburn 2006). Louis and colleagues (Louis, Febey, and Schroeder 2005; Louis and Marks 1998) show how reform implementation is influenced by collective sense-making among teachers who share particular norms and beliefs given their disciplinary groups and degree of collaboration. Other studies of policy implementation similarly argue that strong collegial interactions help teachers interpret, adopt, and adapt policy requirement and so instantiate agency (Datnow 2012; Priestley et al. 2012; Robinson 2012).

These two approaches illuminate the important role of teacher agency in reform, but they also mischaracterize how teacher agency affects reform. On the one hand, teacher agency grounded in projective action is characterized as a source of institutional persistence with social conflict and challenge maintaining the status quo. On the other hand, teacher agency grounded in practical evaluative action is characterized as a source of institutional change with teachers’ interpretations, collaboration, and adaptations of reform shifting the status quo.

Teachers’ projective agency might help change institutionalized instructional practices, as is depicted in many accounts of teachers’ grassroots efforts to change their schools (Huberman and Miles 1994). Likewise, teachers’ interactions and interpretations are depicted as having a key role in reform; yet reform frequently fails, which suggests teachers’ practical evaluative agency might also be a source of institutional persistence (Payne 2008; Ravitch 2000). Because both projective and practical evaluative agency might result in institutional persistence or change, it is important to understand when each form of agency results in each outcome. Thus, my aim here is to develop “middle zone” theory to explain when teachers’ practical evaluative agency maintains or changes institutionalized instructional practices (Glaser and Strauss 1967:5). Similar theorization for teachers’ projective agency is an important area for future research.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

**Case Selection and Data Collection**

I develop a theory of teachers’ practical evaluative agency based on teachers’ experiences at Turnaround Elementary (Turnaround) (a pseudonym). Turnaround was part of a larger study examining how teacher interpretations and interactions mediated reform at 31 schools undergoing mandated reform in a major U.S. city in a large northeastern state. Because Turnaround was making atypical progress implementing state-mandated reform, it was selected as a case of “exceptional success,” which uniquely illuminates dynamics that do not exist, and therefore cannot be observed, in more representative cases (Starbuck 1993:890). One consequence of using a single case to generate rather than test theory is that the findings cannot entirely rule out alternative explanations for the theorized relationships. Instead, the findings can be used to generate propositions about likely relationships, which must be systematically tested in future research.

**Observations.** I conducted eight months of nonparticipant observations at Turnaround, during which all staff members were aware I was conducting academic research. I followed previous qualitative studies of social relationships to systematically observe teachers’ interactions (Coburn, Choi, and Mata 2010). It was not possible to systematically sample social spaces, so I instead conducted observations in a variety of locations where I observed teachers interacting. These spaces included (1) formal meetings and trainings, (2) teacher classrooms (by invitation), (3) corridors, (4) waiting areas for administrators and student service specialists, (5) the professional development/resource room, (6) the school grounds/entryways and security desk, (7) the school library, and (8) the student and teacher cafeterias. I used field notes to record descriptions of
the spaces, individuals, interactions, activities, and conversations that took place.

**Interviews.** During observations at the field site, I conducted numerous informal interviews during ongoing exchanges with staff. As a secondary data collection strategy to contextualize the observations, I conducted semistructured formal interviews with 21 of Turnaround’s 31 staff members. Whereas informal interviews relied on key informants, I selected formal interview respondents to sample five role types: (1) teachers, (2) administrators, (3) student service specialists, (4) clerical support staff, and (5) nonclerical support staff, such as security guards and cafeteria workers. All invited respondents, except one, agreed to be interviewed. Interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes, were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, and relied on interview prompts designed to engage respondents in general conversations about the changes taking place at their school (Weiss 1994).

**Analysis**

In the first phase of analysis, I used NVivo to code teachers’ school activities—that is, what teachers were doing, where, and with whom—into emic categories relevant to cultural understandings of the field (Headland, Pike, and Harris 1990). I refined the coding system as it evolved, so code-names and definitions could be applied consistently across interview transcripts and field notes. By iterating between the textual content of the data and the evolving codes, I assigned all text in the field notes and transcripts to 283 emic codes. Table 1 illustrates this assignment of text to emic codes and the assignment of emic codes to etic categories as described below.

My review and constant comparative analysis of the emic codes suggested three overarching themes regarding how teachers interpreted state prescriptions for instructional practice: (1) social comparisons, (2) feedback through observation and conversation, and (3) social influence resulting in adjustments to instructional attitudes and practices. The literature on organization theory, the researcher’s disciplinary background, indicates these themes are fundamental social and cognitive mechanisms involved in peer learning, especially under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity (Festinger 1954; Pfeffer, Salancik, and Leblebici 1976; Sherif 1966). These themes are also reflected in organizational research on institutional work, which describes how agents’ social learning and meaning making can create, maintain, disrupt, and transform institutions (Lawrence et al. 2009).

Because these themes match the empirical phenomena and existing literature, I used them to define three etic categories relevant to the emerging theory (Headland et al. 1990). I reassigned 197 of the initial 283 emic codes to the three etic categories based on the relevance of their content. Because incongruous data can tell their own story, I repeatedly reviewed the content of the 86 unassigned codes. I was unable to identify a salient pattern for these data and therefore did not consider them for further analysis. However, assignment of emic codes to etic categories did reveal three themes suggesting a distinct pattern in teachers’ interactions, which became the basis of three additional etic categories: (1) the size of teachers’ collegial communities, (2) community composition in terms of diversity within and across communities, and (3) the degree of cohesion within and across communities. Table 2 illustrates the assignment of text to these three broad themes.

One limitation of the analytic strategy is that I validated the coding scheme by constantly comparing emerging findings to data and phenomena on the ground and the existing literature (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2013; Strauss and Corbin 1998). This contrasts with other validation methods, such as member checking, which is particularly appropriate when conclusions depend on the researcher’s interpretations’ being accurate and credible with respect to participants’ interpretations (Cho and Trent 2006). The findings should be interpreted in light of the selected approach.

**Cross-code Analysis.** To analyze how the three themes for teacher interactions intersected with the three themes for teacher interpretation, I created a three-by-three cross-code matrix (Miles et al. 2013). As Table 3 illustrates, the cells of the matrix represent how each teacher-interaction theme relates to each teacher-interpretation theme and the theorized result. For example, the first cell on the diagonal, where social comparison and community size intersect, answers a thought experiment asking, “How does community size affect social comparison?” The remaining cells
Table 1. Coding Teacher Interpretations and Activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Segment</th>
<th>Emic Code</th>
<th>First-order Etic Code</th>
<th>Second-order Etic Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation in the teachers’ cafeteria:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher 1: I start with the calendar. Then I put the months on a pocket chart.</td>
<td>Sharing practices with peers</td>
<td>Social comparison</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher 2 (interjecting): You are also using the sight word books, right?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher 1: I found these were really good (referring to the books she pushes across the table). What you should try is.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher 2 (interjecting): What I did was have the students stack the months in order in a pile. I don’t get much better than that.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Your appearance and what you do give people an idea of your commitment. If you come into school at 8:30 and you leave at 3:00 and you have no (lesson) plans that says something. I make judgments. We always make judgments. I guess there’s always the pressure of wanting to do well, of not being left behind. Sometimes with ideas for your class, you formulate those ideas together. You know? Sometimes saying your problem out loud to someone else makes you realize something and something sparks. You get a new idea. Two heads are better than one. Three heads are even better than that.</td>
<td>Judging peers’ work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sometimes with ideas for your class, you formulate those ideas together. You know? Sometimes saying your problem out loud to someone else makes you realize something and something sparks. You get a new idea. Two heads are better than one. Three heads are even better than that.</td>
<td>Advice from peers</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Peer learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Teachers change to a new instructional approach] when they hear it from their colleagues all the time, you know, it’s like, “I’m hearing it from one person, then another, you know, the same thing over and over again.” Then they start reflecting, okay, let’s look at my accomplishments what needs to improve you know there is an honest conversation about what you really have to do.</td>
<td>Getting peers’ opinions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I think a lot of the teachers have been here for a while, and they’re stuck in this narrow-minded approach: “Just do it [instruction] this way, only this way.” If it doesn’t work, blame the kids. Eventually you have to reevaluate: “Maybe I’m doing something [wrong].” You have to reevaluate yourself to see what you can do better, especially when a lot of other teachers don’t have the same problems you do.</td>
<td>Reflecting on practice</td>
<td>Social influence and adjustments</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>This year there is more emphasis on curriculum being taught in a uniformed way instead of each teacher doing their own individual thing, instead of [instruction being] just based upon what they thought was supposed to be done. Now teachers are on the same page.</td>
<td>Agreeing on practice</td>
<td></td>
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<td>[To get a school to turn around] I think you need to get everybody on board. Everyone has to agree that it’s important for the school to recover. Everyone has to agree about instruction in classrooms. Then we have to work together.</td>
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Table 2. Coding Teacher Interactions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Emic Codes</th>
<th>Etic Codes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everybody pretty much gets together over lunch. We only have the one lunch period, so we can all meet up. A lot of the time I bring in food to share. Other people bring in food to share. It’s nice to be able to unwind like that with people you know. This is a close staff that does a lot of talking. We even socialize outside the school. This is a pretty small school. Everyone here really knows everyone else. When I used to work in [a school in a different district], there were people you’d pass in the hall and you’d recognize their face but not really know who they were. Observation in the lounge at lunch: Teachers talk to colleagues seated nearby and at other tables. Three teachers talk about which grocery store has the best bargains. Two teachers talk about their preferences between two artificial sweeteners. Many teachers talk about family dramas. One teacher talking about her daughter says, “she said they broke up and the next week he was over at my house for dinner:” I know you probably can’t use what I’m saying, but here [at Turnaround] it’s mostly middle-class white women. … This may be their first experience knowing and working with children of color or minorities or poor people. Observation in the teacher center before an afternoon meeting: Mr. Simon: Are you going to the meeting Ms. McCreedy? Ms. McCreedy: Yes. Mr. Simon: Sometimes I feel like people have their seats down in the lounge. They have their own group, you know. Ms. McCreedy: You’re right, but you can’t pay attention to that. Sometimes people seem like they are a little impolite about that. It seems immature. Observation in 2nd floor hallway: Ms. Moore is not in her room for our lunch interview but in the room three doors down with Ms. Mapp. [Reflection: These are two of the school’s three black staff members; they are having lunch together, not downstairs in the teachers’ cafeteria with most of the other teachers. Are teachers drawn to social spaces where they’ll find similar others?] I think that teachers in this school really get along. This has always been a very friendly school to work in. Even from the very first day. We all just enjoy hanging out.</td>
<td>Small school; large clique</td>
<td>Community size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female-oriented, white, suburbanized, homogeneous staff</td>
<td>Community composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outsiders and insiders; limited boundary spanning</td>
<td>Community cohesion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feelings of attachment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Learning</td>
<td>Patterns of Interaction</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social comparison</strong></td>
<td>Community Size: Single Large Clique</td>
<td>Community Composition: Limited Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparisons made to numerous others</td>
<td>Comparisons made to similar others</td>
<td>Comparisons made mainly within community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⇒ extensive exposure to collegial understandings, aims, and practices</td>
<td>⇒ exposure to consistent collegial understandings, aims, and practices</td>
<td>⇒ exposure to well-regarded colleagues' understandings, aims, and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feedback</strong></td>
<td>Multiple points of feedback</td>
<td>Largely redundant feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⇒ greater clarity about collegial understandings, aims, and practices</td>
<td>⇒ reinforcement of collegial understandings, aims, and practices</td>
<td>⇒ internalization of collegial understandings, aims, and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social influence</strong></td>
<td>Strong social pressure to conform</td>
<td>Adjustments made to relatively uniform targets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⇒ strong collegial norms for understandings, aims, and practices</td>
<td>⇒ consistent collegial norms for understandings, aims, and practices</td>
<td>⇒ rapidly and widely diffused collegial norms for understandings, aims, and practices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: [⇒] = implied/theorized result.
follow a similar pattern. Results of the cross-code analysis are the basis for the proposed theory.

To be clear, findings from Turnaround are not used as evidence to support the theory. Instead, the findings are a starting place for the reasoned speculation of theory building, or what Weick (1989:516) calls “disciplined imagination,” which abstracts from findings to generate theory (Sutton and Staw 1995). Whereas a conventional theory-testing paper relies on the findings as evidence to support the arguments, in this theory-generation paper I rely on the findings to put forth an argument that must be supported or falsified through future research.

THEORIZING PRACTICAL EVALUATIVE TEACHER AGENCY

The Context: Instructional Dilemmas of Mandated Reform

All schools in Turnaround Elementary’s state must obtain what is essentially an operating license tied to schools meeting specific operational and performance goals. Schools furthest from licensing requirements must improve within three years, or they will have their licenses revoked and be closed by the state. Turnaround faced this mandated reform and had the dominant features of most mandated-reform schools. In the year before reform began, 93 percent of students were non-white, 93 percent were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 75 percent were below grade level in English language arts, and 82 percent were below grade level in mathematics.

The school’s reading specialist, Ms. Sullivan, who had been at Turnaround for five years, summarized many teachers’ description of the school’s history: “Behavior problems were rampant. Kids were lashing out at teachers. [There was] a lot of physical violence, a lot of verbal disrespect to the teachers, as well as to the administrators and to other students. It was a very chaotic place to work.”

The school’s resource room teacher, Ms. Sinclair, who had worked at Turnaround for four years, echoed what the majority of teachers said about classroom instruction before reform:

You would go into classrooms and … what you’d see was like absolutely nothing for the kids to do, you know, just like coloring books and workbooks. And it wasn’t just the kids; the main problem wasn’t just the kids. It [instruction] was just like, it was pathetic. … There was no direction. That was why everything was so chaotic.

The initial state report on Turnaround matched teachers’ descriptions of the school’s problems: “Many, if not all of the school’s adults, have low expectations for students’ academic performance, particularly as evidenced by staff comments.”

The state’s main strategy for reform at Turnaround required teachers to use state-prescribed instructional practices viewed as closely linked to improved student achievement. Prescribed practices typically entail new and elaborate classroom routines and specialized materials, as was the case with one particular focus of state prescriptions: the workshop model. The workshop model is a style of pedagogy that can be used in multiple content areas and is designed to engage students interactively by having teachers differentiate instruction, gradually release learning responsibility to students, and incorporate a variety of materials that meet students’ diverse learning needs.

Many Turnaround teachers doubted the efficacy of the workshop model, as expressed in the comments of Ms. Melvin, a fifth-grade teacher working at the school for 8 years. Before entering the teachers’ cafeteria, she told a colleague, “I’ve tried practices like this before. I know what happens. When I’m teaching my heart out … I have to tell Johnny 16 times to stop tapping the pencil, and Anthony to get up off the floor, or Suzy to stop calling out.” Ultimately, teachers’ day-to-day decisions about whether they would actually use the workshop model in their classroom played a pivotal role in implementation of reform. This was made clear by numerous teachers and emphasized by a third-grade teacher, Ms. Matthews, who had been at Turnaround for 11 years. When asked whether increased monitoring by Turnaround’s new principal or the threat of state closure meant teachers had to change their instruction, she said, “No, if teachers don’t want to change they don’t. They play the game but they really still do not want to change and they won’t. They talk the talk but basically do the same thing in their classroom.”

Teachers’ ability to choose between existing or alternative practices and their efforts to resolve instructional dilemmas resulting from this choice is the precondition their practical evaluative agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). The
question is which features of teachers’ practical evaluative agency determine how they choose between new practices, which they do not necessarily view as appropriate, and their existing practices, which the state deems inappropriate. In other words, the question is not whether teacher agency or other factors, such as how Turnaround’s principal framed, incentivized, or inhabited the otherwise ceremonial aspects of reform, are more important for teachers using state-prescribed practices (Coburn 2006; Hallett 2010). Instead, the question is what factors increase or decrease the likelihood that teachers’ efforts to resolve instructional dilemmas will change or maintain institutionalized instructional practices.

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical model answering this question. I will describe each component of the model in its respective subsections. In summary, high-stakes practice prescriptions and the resulting instructional dilemmas activate teachers’ practical evaluative agency. Both institutional persistence and change can result from the same three mechanisms of practical evaluative agency: (1) peer learning, (2) patterned social interactions, and (3) shared understandings, aims, and practices. Each mechanism is moderated or regulated by a set of counterbalancing forces: (1a–b) innovation versus socialization in peer learning, (2a–b) diversity versus cohesion in social interactions, and (3a–b) cognitive and normative divergence versus convergence in shared understandings, aims, and practices. The balance among these forces determines whether the dynamics of each mechanism support institutional persistence or change.

Figure 1. A Mechanisms-based Model of Practical Evaluative Teacher Agency.
Mechanism 1. Peer Learning

One way people decide which work practices are appropriate is by making comparisons to peers, receiving feedback, and then being influenced to some degree by their peers (Festinger 1954; Pfeffer et al. 1976). Social comparison, feedback, and influence are the foundation of peer learning. When Turnaround teachers had to choose between existing instructional practices and those prescribed by the state, they relied on peer learning. In collegial interactions that may have had other, more explicit functions, teachers compared their attitudes and practices and received feedback about what was appropriate.

A science teacher, Ms. Mahoney, who had been at the school for 12 years, summarized many other teachers’ feelings about how they learned from colleagues: “You know [what other teachers are doing] by talking to them, by seeing them plan. You know teachers, with communicating ‘I’m doing this, this, and this in my lesson.’” In addition to conversations, Turnaround teachers learned which instructional practices colleagues were using by observing the physical artifacts of instruction when they visited each other’s classrooms or passed open classroom doors. Desks arranged in small groups instead of rows indicated students were working in cooperative groups. Classroom materials such as books, posters, and manipulatives indicated whether students’ diverse learning styles and cultural backgrounds were being addressed.

This kind of peer learning can be ongoing in schools even when no specific reform has been prescribed. This was the point the gym teacher, Ms. McCreedy, who had taught at Turnaround for nine years, made about peer learning at Turnaround before reform. Yet she, like most other teachers, also noted how peer learning increased once reform got under way: “Once we became [a school under state review] I think that people started talking about the school’s problems a little bit more. … I mean, have we ever discussed lessons and things like that amongst our grade? Yes, but it never was as much as it has been.”

Increased peer learning was an important factor in Turnaround teachers’ decisions to adopt prescribed practices. However, the increase in peer learning was not the only important factor, because peer learning involves two opposing forces. One force, socialization, can lead teachers to rely normatively on existing practice. The second force, innovation, can lead teachers to adopt new practices.

Socialization. Peer learning involves socialization in the sense that teachers are taught colleagues’ attitudes and expectations regarding instruction. Teachers rely on these social cues to decide whether to use certain practices. Ms. Silver, Turnaround’s math coach, who had been at Turnaround for two years after being a third-grade teacher at another school for eight years, offered an insight I heard from multiple teachers: When making decisions about instruction, teachers “just need to know that the same things are happening in other classrooms.” The socialization forces involved in peer learning were also well illustrated by Turnaround’s principal, Ms. Anderson, when she said that “peer pressure” (i.e., social influence) had the greatest influence on teachers’ instruction:

I always felt that the words of the phrase “peer pressure” pertained only to children. I didn’t know peer pressure was a phrase that you could use with adults. So let’s say a teacher’s in a situation at lunchtime and the conversation is what the kids can’t do and people are giving evidence. [People are saying], “That mother really doesn’t care,” or “That child’s homework is never done.” After a while, you give in to it. You start to say … “Let me throw on that old TV. Let them color all day. Why should I spend my energy working with a difficult group of children?” I think if you are someone like Elly, subconsciously, you will slip. You will become a part of it or you’re going to leave.

Ms. Anderson described “a situation at lunchtime,” which is when most Turnaround teachers gather in the teachers’ cafeteria. This illustrates the context in which teachers learn colleagues’ expectations for student performance (e.g., “that child’s homework is never done”), parent involvement (e.g., “that mother really doesn’t care”), and the energy that should be invested in instruction (e.g., “let me throw on that old TV”). When these attitudes are expressed by enough teachers, socialization pressures can be so strong that teachers cannot help but be influenced by them (i.e., “Subconsciously, you will slip. You will become a part of it.”). These socialization
pressures normatively reinforce instructional practice at a school, and they can work against the second important force in peer learning—innovation.

**Innovation.** Peer learning involves innovation opportunities in the sense that teachers work together to develop new forms of instruction or adapt existing practices. Ms. MacDonald, a fifth-grade teacher who had worked at Turnaround for six years, succinctly stated what a number of teachers implied about innovation in peer learning: “Sometimes with ideas for your class, you formulate those ideas together. You know? Sometimes saying your problem out loud to someone else makes you realize something and something sparks. You get a new idea. Two heads are better than one. Three heads are even better than that.”

Rather than the invention of novel practices, a more common form of innovation occurs when teachers are exposed to new practices from colleagues. This happens, for example, when some teachers take the initiative to go out and learn about a new teaching technique, which then inspires other teachers to take risks to try new practices. Ms. Sinclair explained these cascading innovation effects:

Over this past summer, I was looking through a book, trying to find a way to make my kids read. And just by accident, I got this brochure from Bank Street and it had something called, “Orton-Gillingham” and I said: “Hey, just try it. Hey, maybe it’ll work.” And I just did it. … I took a chance. … I think some people are afraid to go out beyond that box where they feel safe but what makes that one person change is when another person changes. You sort of want to take risks to try something new.

**The Moderating Effects of Socialization and Innovation.** Socialization and innovation are counterbalancing forces in peer learning. Innovation provides the opportunity for teachers to create or share new practices; socialization generates pressure for teachers to use their peers’ practices. Peer learning increases the likelihood of institutional change when increased innovation opportunities lead teachers to talk about new practices rather than simply reinforce old ones. Yet strong socialization pressures are needed to set the expectation that colleagues generate, share, and use new practices rather than existing ones. Indeed, this social pressure to generate, share, and use new practices is what veteran sixth-grade teacher Ms. Mabel described and what I observed as the evolving expectation at Turnaround after state reform:

A lot of times teachers meet individually, you know, in little groups. … Now the problem is when someone comes to the table and there’s no sharing going on because they’re not invested. … Now there are some teachers—a lot of the new teachers—they go out and do research and find materials that will be good for teaching a specific area. It helps when there are lots of new teachers. Now when we all sit down at the table and talk, we ask, “How did it [the lesson] go?” … That’s how teachers learn.

Under weak socialization pressures, even if there are numerous innovation opportunities, new practices may be seeded but may not spread widely. Alternatively, when there are strong socialization pressures but few innovation opportunities, teachers mostly learn familiar practices, and those practices are reinforced by peers. This is exactly what Ms. Anderson described in her story about Elly. These dynamics of peer learning suggest teachers’ practical evaluative agency results in their choosing new practices over existing ones, thus encouraging institutional change, under three joint conditions (i.e., all three must be present); otherwise, institutional persistence results.

**Proposition 1a:** Teachers’ efforts to resolve instructional dilemmas are more likely to change institutionalized instructional practice when (1) the overall level of peer learning increases, (2) colleagues exert strong socializing pressure on peers, and (3) there are ample innovation opportunities in which teachers generate and share new practices.

**Proposition 1b:** Teachers’ efforts to resolve instructional dilemmas are more likely to maintain institutionalized instructional practice when (1) overall peer learning does not increase, (2) colleagues exert weak socializing pressure, or (3) there are
limited innovation opportunities in which teachers generate or share new practices.

**Mechanism 2. Patterned Social Interactions**

Peer learning depends on social interactions. Interactions within teachers’ collegial communities are more likely to result in peer learning because they occur more frequently, engender greater feelings of attachment, and more strongly influence understandings of work (Wenger 1998). The term *community* often refers to the norms and values teachers share (Louis and Marks 1998); however, *community* also refers to a specific pattern of interactions in teachers’ social networks (Datnow 2012). These interaction patterns are particularly important for peer learning because they determine who learns what from whom and how frequently.

At Turnaround, teachers’ interaction patterns created one large dominant community, which I call the mega-clique. Members of the mega-clique were primarily white, female, and between the ages of 25 and 55, and they shared similar lifestyles. During lunch, they gathered in the teachers’ cafeteria to share food, plan social events, and engage in conversations ranging from descriptions of classroom incidents to impressions of their daughters’ new boyfriends. Even when these teachers were not physically present in the lounge, handwritten notices about group activities and personalized coffee mugs claimed the space and signaled the mega-clique’s dominance. Ms. McAlister, a third-grade teacher working at Turnaround for six years, described the dynamics of the mega-clique, which were well-recognized by most teachers:

> Everybody pretty much gets together over lunch. We only have the one lunch period, so we can all meet up. A lot of the time I bring in food to share. Other people bring in food to share. It’s nice to be able to unwind like that with people you know. This is a close staff that does a lot of talking. We even socialize outside the school.

This pattern of social interactions in which teachers frequently interact means teachers can frequently engage in peer learning. This does not mean, however, that more interactions in collegial communities make teachers more likely to choose new instructional practices over existing ones. Whether teachers’ collegial interactions maintain or change institutionalized instructional practices depends on two specific features of their interactions—the degree of cohesion and the degree of diversity.

**Cohesion.** *Cohesion* refers partly to the feelings of attachment teachers share but also to the likelihood that every community member will interact with every other member. Highly cohesive communities have many overlapping relationships (Coleman 1988). The Turnaround mega-clique was very cohesive in terms of teachers interacting with every other teacher and their feelings of attachment. Above, Ms. McAlister and many other teachers reiterated this sentiment, including the eight-year mega-clique member Ms. MacDonald, who said, “This has always been a very friendly school to work in … even from the very first day.” Teachers’ sense of attachment makes them feel they want or need to interact more frequently, and their overlapping relationships mean they have a greater number of overall interactions (i.e., because interactions with one colleague involve interacting with multiple other colleagues at the same time). Greater interaction makes it easier to learn from peers because teachers have more exposure to each other’s instructional attitudes and activities.

Many teachers noted the effect of abundant, reinforcing feedback on colleagues’ instructional attitudes and activities. Ms. Mahoney, for example, explained why her colleagues adopt a new instructional approach: “[Teachers try practices] when they hear it from their colleagues all the time … from one person, then another, you know, the same thing over and over again.” Thus, cohesion is important not only because it increases the likelihood of peer learning but also because it increases socialization in the sense that having attitudes and activities repeated in overlapping interactions increases the pressure teachers feel to conform to their colleagues. In fact, as special education teacher Mr. Stark, who had been working at Turnaround for four years, explained, socialization pressures in cohesive relationships can be so strong that they suppress diverse attitudes and activities because teachers do not want to undermine community cohesion:

> You know what happened with some of the teachers [before reform]? There was a small core of teachers, they became silent. They
wouldn’t, they couldn’t argue because they got nowhere. … They were aware that what people were saying about students’ abilities was not true but [they thought to themselves], “I’m not going to fight you on this because the bottom line is we’re part of the same community.”

**Diversity.** Diversity refers to how similar or different teachers are with respect to any number of attributes (Milliken and Martins 1996). These attributes can be personal, such as gender, race, or age, or professional, such as grade and subject taught or years spent teaching. Attributes can also be less observable, such as having certain opinions, attitudes, or beliefs, including attitudes and beliefs about instruction. Diversity within a community is essential because new ideas are most likely to come from individuals who are different in some way (Burt 2004; Milliken and Martins 1996). However, it can be difficult to cultivate diversity in interpersonal interactions because people who view themselves as similar tend to be more attracted to one another (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001).

Teachers in the mega-clique had many similarities, including gender, age, and lifestyle. Turnaround teachers who did not belong to the mega-clique—namely, Turnaround’s three black female teachers, two male teachers, and female gym teacher—congregated in groups of two and three outside the cafeteria and often expressed feeling ostracized by members of the mega-clique. For example, during the lunch periods I observed, when most Turnaround teachers were in the teachers’ cafeteria, Ms. Mapp and Ms. Moore, two of the school’s African American teachers, would eat in Ms. Mapp’s classroom with music playing and student folders stacked on the desk between them (see Table 2 for a similar example of outsider status from the female gym teacher, Ms. McCreedy, and male literacy coach, Mr. Simon).

To the extent that teachers who are demographically different also have different instructional attitudes and activities, limited demographic diversity in cohesive communities means a limited set of instructional attitudes and activities. Ms. Magee, for example, a young mega-clique member, described how she, unlike her longer-tenured colleagues, had already been using many state-prescribed practices in her third-grade classroom. The prescribed state practices were similar to those she learned in graduate school two years before coming to Turnaround. However, my interviews revealed that many mega-clique members were unaware of Ms. Magee’s practices, likely because of expectations of community conformity and the de facto silence about alternative instructional approaches described by Mr. Stark. Due to high levels of community cohesion, the latent diversity in Turnaround’s mega-clique was not the force for innovation that it could have been. This tension between cohesion and diversity illustrates how the two forces have counterbalancing effects that moderate patterns of social interaction and the likelihood of institutional change.

**Moderating Effects of Cohesion and Diversity.** Cohesion increases and reinforces teachers’ social interactions and increases the degree of socialization in peer learning. However, because cohesion limits diversity, peer learning in cohesive communities tends to occur between individuals with a more limited set of perspectives. Conversely, diversity can make social interactions more difficult but expose teachers to alternative perspectives and thus is a source of innovation. Yet the effects of diversity on innovation are limited because individuals with different views might remain silent about their alternative perspectives or interactions may be less frequent. Recall, for example, how few teachers knew about Ms. Magee’s practices or how Ms. Mapp and Ms. Moore rarely interacted with the mega-clique but had a lunchtime routine that involved going over student work.

This suggests that the effect of teacher agency on institutional change depends on increasing cohesion across diverse sets of interactions, meaning that teachers who have different instructional attitudes and activities must interact more frequently or increase their feelings of attachment. Alternatively, diversity would need to increase within an existing set of cohesive relationships. This means that individuals who already interact frequently and feel strongly attached must become more diverse in some way. For example, when state-mandated reform was announced at Turnaround, 6 out of 31 teachers opted for early retirement. Ms. Mattel, a third-grade math teacher who had worked at Turnaround for six years, noted, as did many other teachers, the attrition of veteran teachers:

It’s hard, especially for the older teachers, to have somebody like the state come in
and critique their lesson, to critique their whole career in five minutes. It’s pretty insulting. I think for a lot of older teachers that makes them just want to leave the school, leave the profession.

The exit of nearly 20 percent of the veteran staff is a proportion similar to what researchers in economics, sociology, and organizational management have documented as the tipping point from tokenism in proportional representation (Kanter 1977; Pareto 2014; Schelling 1971). This tipping proportion at Turnaround resulted in teachers with alternative instructional approaches, namely, new teachers, becoming more prominent in the community, in terms of their proportional representation and their status, given the state’s validation of their teaching methods. Equally important, however, even as diversity in instructional attitudes and activities increased, there were still high levels of cohesion because new teachers remained well-integrated and well-liked members of the mega-clique. New instructional approaches were seeded by trusted community members and spread rapidly through strong socialization pressures. Before reform, these same levels of high cohesion but more limited diversity reinforced existing practices.

Proposition 2a: Teachers’ efforts to resolve instructional dilemmas are more likely to change institutionalized instructional practice when (1) social interactions occur in collegial communities, (2) interactions within and between communities have a high level of cohesion, and (3) a tipping proportion of interactions involves others who express diverse instructional attitudes, aims, and activities.

Proposition 2b: Teachers’ efforts to resolve instructional dilemmas are more likely to maintain institutionalized instructional practice when (1) social interactions are irregular or fragmented, (2) interactions have a low level of cohesion, or (3) a null or token proportion of interactions involve others who express diverse instructional attitudes, aims, and activities.

Mechanism 3. Shared Instructional Understandings, Aims, and Practices

The combination of peer learning and patterns of social interaction determines how much teachers share the same instructional understandings, aims, and practices, which some researchers call collective sensemaking. Coburn (2001:147), for example, explains that “people make sense of messages in the environment in conversation and interaction with their colleagues, constructing what I call ‘shared understandings.’” Multiple Turnaround teachers emphasized the importance of teachers’ shared instructional understandings, aims, and practices for reform when they described what it took for their school to change.

Ms. Sweeny, a guidance counselor who had worked at Turnaround for three years, said, “I think [that to change] you need to get everybody on board. … Everyone has to agree about instruction in classrooms. Then we have to work together.” Ms. McCreedy described how she would know change was occurring at Turnaround: “[When] the curriculum is being taught in a uniformed way instead of each teacher doing their own individual thing. … [When] teachers are on the same page.” Ms. Mabel emphasized the importance of teachers’ having the same interpretations and expectations of instruction: “Everyone in the building has to be clear about what the focus is. … It’s taking every constituency and joining them together so we’re all going down this same path. When people are flying in different directions, then nothing happens.”

These sentiments make it easy to conclude that the more teachers share the same instructional understandings, aims, and practices, the more likely reform is to occur. However, shared instructional understandings, aims, and practices might just as easily undermine reform as encourage it. Indeed, in the years preceding reform, Turnaround teachers had widely shared instructional understandings, aims, and practices centered on low student expectations and nonrigorous instruction. Just as reform does not depend simply on peer learning or teachers’ interactions in collegial communities, neither does reform depend simply on teachers’ having shared understandings, aims, and practices. Instead, whether teachers’ practical evaluative agency results in the adoption of prescribed practices depends on a set of counterbalancing forces that determine exactly how teachers come to share understandings, aims, and practices.

Cognitive and Normative Convergence.

Cognitive convergence refers to teachers’ interpretations’ (i.e., what teachers know about
instruction) moving closer to their colleagues’ ideas. Normative convergence refers to teachers’ expectations’ (i.e., what teachers think they should teach in their classrooms) moving closer to their colleagues’ practices. When teachers’ own interpretations and expectations move closer together and closer to their colleagues’ understandings and practices, the effect is cognitive and normative convergence.

Cognitive and normative convergence makes teachers confident that they know how to teach and that the practices they are using in their classrooms are the right ones. Ms. MacAfee, who had been teaching reading, math, and social studies at Turnaround for 15 years, explained this sense of confidence resulting from cognitive and normative convergence: “You know, teachers get very comfortable. How I was before, I’d just roll out of bed and go to work. It was so routine. I had been teaching so long I didn’t need to prepare anymore.” Ms. Mattel (see Table 1), for example, argued that “a lot of the teachers have been here for a while and they’re stuck in this narrow-minded approach: ‘Just do it [instruction] this way, only this way.’ If it doesn’t work, blame the kids.”

As these quotes suggest, when cognitive and normative convergence in shared understandings, aims, and practices is high, teachers have little reason to doubt their existing practices and thus little reason to explore new methods. When teachers interact in highly cohesive communities with colleagues who have similar instructional attitudes and activities, the resulting strong socialization pressures and limited innovation reinforce cognitive and normative convergence. In contrast, the more teachers have cohesive interactions with colleagues whose diverse instructional attitudes and activities generate innovation opportunities, the more teachers will experience cognitive and normative divergence.

Cognitive and Normative Divergence. Cognitive divergence refers to teachers’ sense that what they know about instruction is moving further away from their colleagues’ understandings. Normative divergence refers to teachers’ sense that their expectations for classroom instruction are moving further away from their colleagues’ ideas. When teachers’ own interpretations and expectations move further apart and further from their colleagues’ practices and understandings, the effect is cognitive and normative divergence. As Ms. Silver described earlier, teachers need to know that the same things are happening in other classrooms; when they doubt that the same things are happening in other classrooms, teachers experience cognitive and normative divergence.

Cognitive and normative divergence makes teachers question their existing practices and primes them to consider new practices. Ms. Mahoney summarized the kinds of doubts cognitive and normative divergence raised for Turnaround teachers as she reflected on her own understanding of how instructional requirements were changing:

I’ve been teaching for a while; children are not the way they were 20 years ago. The world has changed. You look at some of your colleagues and you also see that what’s out there [pedagogically] has changed and you need to stay updated. … Things that I know that I’ve done 20 years ago would not work in today’s classroom. When you look around, you think, “I have to stay up to date.”

Ms. Mahoney’s comments emphasize not only the shift in her own understandings but also how her understandings and expectations were diverging from some colleagues’: “You look at some of your colleagues and … you think, ‘I have to stay up to date.’” Ms. Marple, who had been working at Turnaround for 19 years, made a similar point: “Eventually you have to reevaluate: ‘Maybe I’m doing something [wrong].’ You have to reevaluate yourself to see what you can do better, especially when a lot of other teachers don’t have the same problems you do.” Likewise, Ms. Sinclair explained how exposure to other teachers’ practices leads teachers to change their own instruction: “Everyone here does everything the same; this is the way we’ve done it [for] 20 years. … What makes one person change is one other person’s change. I had to have exposure … I mean, as a whole, it’s a whole different teaching world out there.” Taken together, Ms. Mahoney, Ms. Marple, and Ms. Sinclair all suggest that cognitive and normative divergence as well as convergence are instrumental to reform.

Moderating Effects of Cognitive and Normative Convergence and Divergence. Cognitive and normative convergence and divergence are counterbalancing forces on teachers’
shared instructional understandings, aims, and practices. Cognitive and normative convergence is important for getting teachers all on the same page to pursue the same instructional goals. When the instructional goal is the implementation of new practices, cognitive and normative convergence supports institutional change. On the other hand, cognitive and normative convergence can also keep teachers from questioning their own interpretations and expectations for instruction. When instructional goals focus on rote, nonrigorous instruction, cognitive and normative convergence helps maintain existing institutions. Conversely, cognitive and normative divergence leads teachers to reflect on their practices and question whether they are appropriate. Yet when cognitive and normative divergence is too great, meaning that teachers have many sets of interpretations and expectations for practices, and what they think they know and should do are too far apart, this can undermine institutional change. It may lead to incoherence in the implementation of prescriptions, or what Ms. Anderson described as “teachers flying in different directions.” Too much cognitive and normative divergence might also discourage teachers from engaging with reform because the gap between where they are and where they need to be is seen as too great.

Thus, institutional change depends on a careful balance between cognitive and normative convergence and divergence. First cognitive and normative divergence must increase as a growing number of teachers learn that some of their close colleagues have instructional approaches that are different from their own, leading teachers to question their existing instruction. Yet because perpetual uncertainty could undermine change, episodes of cognitive and normative divergence must be followed by an increase in cognitive and normative convergence, with teachers’ being strongly socialized to the new instructional attitudes and activities of close colleagues. Absent this U-shaped or nonmonotonically decreasing pattern in shared instructional understandings, aims, and practices, existing institutionalized practices will persist.

**Proposition 3a:** Teachers’ efforts to resolve instructional dilemmas are more likely to change institutionalized instructional practice when (1) the degree of shared instructional understandings, aims, and practices has a U-shaped pattern over the period before and after the start of reform; (2) there is increasing cognitive and normative convergence in shared instructional understandings, aims, and practices; and (3) this is punctuated by an intermittent episode of increasing cognitive and normative divergence.

**Proposition 3b:** Teachers’ efforts to resolve instructional dilemmas are more likely to maintain institutionalized instructional practice when (1) the degree of shared instructional understandings, aims, and practices has a constantly increasing or decreasing pattern over the period before and after the start of reform; (2) there is increasing cognitive and normative convergence in shared instructional understandings, aims, and practices; but (3) there is either no episode or a persistent episode of increasing cognitive and normative divergence.

**The Outcome at Turnaround: Shifting Instructional Attitudes and Activities**

Before reform began, rote instruction with little rigor was deeply ingrained and taken for granted by most Turnaround teachers as appropriate instructional practice. The use of less rigorous, rote instruction was also value laden because it reflected teachers’ beliefs about their students’ abilities and their own teaching abilities. Moreover, many Turnaround teachers had been habitually using these practices for more than 20 years. In other words, instructional practices at Turnaround before reform were highly institutionalized.

However, as reform began to unfold at the school, teachers began to question the previously taken-for-granted meaning and value of their existing practices and began using new practices in their classrooms. Ms. Mead’s reflection on teachers’ past practices illustrates the questions that reform led teachers to ask:

> Maybe a lot of the changes that are happening were needed? Some of them were tough to take. It’s hard to look at yourself and think that you weren’t doing things the best you could have been doing ... to hear you have to constantly be trained to do a better job.

Ms. Mead, a fourth-grade teacher working at Turnaround for three years, described many
teachers’ new approach to language arts: “Basically no more spelling tests are given; no more vocabulary tests are given. I don’t do a lot of the testing any more. It’s more conferencing that is done, accountable talk, which in a way is better because you become more familiar with your students.”

Likewise, Ms. McKinney explained instructional changes in math and emphasized how teachers were trying to make stronger connections to the real world: “A lot of them [the students] don’t see math in their everyday lives. They think, ‘here we’re doing math, okay, but what are we going to do with this later?’ Now, I make the connection with them, with the real world. I think they pay more attention to it.” Indeed, across the curriculum, Turnaround teachers were working harder to make their instruction more engaging, as reflected in Ms. MacDonald’s comments about her own class: “The children spend less time at their desks and they spend more time moving around the classroom. They sit at the meeting area, and they move around a lot more, so it’s a lot less boring.”

These examples illustrate a pervasive pattern of change that unfolded among Turnaround teachers. Indeed, the state quickly recognized the growing number of Turnaround teachers using new instructional practices and the associated increase in student test scores. As a result, Turnaround was removed from the list of mandated-reform schools after an atypically short two-year period. The state’s recognition that many Turnaround teachers were using new instructional practices, raising test scores, and perhaps most important, questioning the taken-for-granted meanings and value of past practice suggests institutional change was taking hold at the school.

CONCLUSIONS

Even though institutional change had begun to take hold at Turnaround, this was not the only possible outcome of teachers’ efforts to resolve the instructional dilemmas of reform. Based on the proposed theory, Turnaround teachers’ institutional agency helped effect change because it satisfied nine joint conditions (i.e., the three conditions in Propositions 1a, 2a, and 3a). This resulted in the careful counterbalance of socialization and innovation in peer learning, cohesion and diversity in collegial interactions, and cognitive and normative convergence and divergence in teachers’ shared instructional understandings, aim, and practices. Without this careful and potentially rare counterbalance of forces, institutional persistence rather than change would have been more likely at Turnaround (as asserted in Propositions 1b, 2b, and 3b).

The mechanisms and counterbalancing forces articulated in the proposed theory of teacher agency help explain why successful reform is rare (Payne 2008; Ravitch 2000). Not only are multiple mechanisms and sets of counterbalancing forces involved; the forces in each set are in tension. High levels of cohesion can suppress diversity, high levels of socialization can limit innovation, and high levels of cognitive and normative convergence mean cognitive and normative divergence is less likely. The reverse is also true. Thus, it may be exceedingly difficult to satisfy all nine joint conditions needed for teachers’ practical evaluative agency to generate institutional change. Conversely, it may be exceedingly easy to meet any one of the nine marginal conditions argued to result in institutional persistence.

For example, research that attributes failed reform to a lack of coherence in school programs and policies illustrates one way that increasing cognitive and normative divergence plays out (Honig and Hatch 2004). Specifically, too many directives that never hang together suggest different sets of teachers will have different interpretations and expectations of instruction. In such cases, colleagues are bound to have substantial differences in their expectations and practices, making it difficult to generate widely shared understandings, aims, and practices. Indeed, too many directives may also be responsible for the token representation of any given instructional approach when teachers interact and thus for insufficient socialization around various approaches. These effects would be heightened if teachers interact in less cohesive collegial communities. Furthermore, the need to make multiple directives seem more coherent—and thus manage the moderating effects on peer learning, social interactions, and shared understanding, aims, and practices—may also help explain why principals’ framing of reform is crucial to implementation (Coburn 2006).

At Turnaround, teachers were already part of a highly cohesive community that exerted strong socialization pressures on its members, resulting in high levels of cognitive and normative
convergence. Given these preexisting conditions, increasing staff diversity with respect to tenure and instructional approaches had a cascading effect on innovation and cognitive and normative divergence. It is important to note, however, that while the exit of veteran staff at Turnaround increased diversity, innovation, and cognitive and normative divergence, this does not mean turnover in veteran staff was a necessary or sufficient condition for change at the school.

The exit of veterans happened to be the way diversity in instructional attitudes and activities increased at Turnaround. Schools could also increase diversity by having a nontoken group of teachers trained as experts in new practices. However, according to the theory, neither this kind of training nor the exit of veterans would have substantial effects on institutional change in contexts where teachers are not already engaged in peer learning in a heavily socializing, cohesive community with shared instructional understandings, aims, and practices. Furthermore, it is important to recall that I focus here on one factor that plays a role in institutional change—teachers’ practical evaluative agency. Other factors are important, including the coherence of reform policies and district and school leaders’ activities (Honig and Hatch 2004; Leithwood and Jantzi 2006). The relative effect of such factors compared to teachers’ practical evaluative agency is an important area for future research. Likewise, it is also important to understand when teachers’ projective versus practical evaluative agency may be more likely to influence reform (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Another important area for future research is the practice implications of the proposed theory. This includes determining whether manipulating any one of the counterbalancing forces has a greater effect on the likelihood of institutional change than manipulating another.

For example, a future study might be conducted in a district where schools are undergoing mandated reform. Education officials might first determine the extent to which teachers at the various schools are engaged in peer learning, interact in collegial communities, and have shared instructional understandings, aims, and practices. Based on this assessment, researchers might then be enlisted to conduct an experiment in which some of the mandated-reform schools are randomly assigned to an experimental condition in which district officials and principals focus on increasing cohesion, socialization, and cognitive and normative convergence among teachers. At the other set of schools, district officials and principals would focus on increasing diversity, innovation, and inducing an episode of cognitive and normative divergence. If the proposed theory holds, then empirical studies like this could provide a concrete way forward for assessing how reform policies can be implemented in a way that is more likely to change instructional practices that persistently underserve our students, especially those with the greatest needs.

RESEARCH ETHICS

My research protocol was reviewed and approved by the New York University Institutional Review Board where I was posted during data collection for the study. All human subjects at the field site were aware of my role as a nonparticipant observer conducting academic research. All human subjects gave their informed consent prior to participating in formal interviews. All appropriate steps were taken to protect participants’ confidentiality.

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NOTES

1. Some researchers use the term de-institutionalization when referring to the early stages of institutional change so as not to conflate the occurrence of institutional change with how long-lasting or pervasive it is (Oliver 1992). I use the term institutional change with the same meaning. Note that when changes occur in institutionalized practices inside of organizations, this constitutes both micro-institutional change.

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and organizational change. However, organizational change can occur without institutional change, such as changes in strategic components of organizations that are not necessarily deeply ingrained, taken for granted, value laden, or decoupled from technical functions (Selznick 1996).

2. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) also argue that agency is instantiated through a third set of “iterational” activities, which repeat or reiterate past patterns of thought and action. The elemental nature of agency is oriented more toward agents’ habitual or routine activities rather than forms of action that arise as agents engage with shifting or ambiguous contexts, which is my focus here.

3. Scott (2008:114) uses Strang and Sine’s (2002:502) term “naturalistic” to describe how “institutions are not created by the purposeful actions of interest-based agents but rather from the collective sensemaking and problem-solving behaviors of actors confronting similar situations.” However, Strang and Sine (2002) use the term “naturalistic” to draw a distinction between this institutional process and others they consider “agent-based.” In contrast, I claim that the less-purposive, practical evaluative actions of sensemaking and problem solving are, despite being less purposive, agent-based because individuals’ understandings and decisions influence institutional processes and outcomes by privileging some beliefs and practices over others.

4. All names are pseudonyms. The naming convention is that staff names begin with an S, M, or A to indicate student services specialist, main classroom teachers, or administrators. When each teacher is introduced, I describe his or her number of years working at Turnaround as well as other demographic information potentially relevant to the dynamics of teachers’ practical evaluative agency.

REFERENCES


Author Biography

Ebony N. Bridwell-Mitchell is an assistant professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her research builds on her three areas of study in public policy, organizations, and education to examine the organizational factors that constrain and enable U.S. public schools. Her research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, presented at numerous professional conferences, and published in high impact academic journals. Ultimately, her academic and professional interests in education, organizational change, and public policy are an extension of her desire to encourage human development, public value, and social equity through institutional and systemic reform.