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EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reform stall: An ecological analysis of the efficacy of an urban school reform initiative to improve students' reading and mathematics achievement

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Abstract: This article examines the efficacy of the implementation of a program titled Consensus Initiative [pseudonym] in an urban school district that served 20,000 linguistically, economically, and racially diverse students situated in the northeast region of the United States. Using a research derived ecological framework from the school reform literature, the present study explored how inefficiencies within and across schooling ecologies culminated in what we term as *reform stall*. This article concludes with a discussion of recommendations that reformers, and districts should consider to increase the prospect of effective implementation of urban school reforms and minimize the likelihood of a reform stall.

Subjects: Education & Training; Primary Education - Teacher Education & Training; Primary Education - Teaching Practice; Race Education; Secondary Education; Teacher Education & Training; Teaching Practice - Education

Keywords: urban school reform; reform stall; ecological theory; educational reform US; reading; mathematics; school reform success

1. Introduction

There is now another new educational reform in United States' public education. The latest reform signed into law is Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). This act is intended to return back to the states and school districts more flexibility and local accountability by allowing them to determine their own "challenging State academic standards" (School Improvement Network, 2016). Thus with ESSA, states no longer have to submit their standards to the federal government for approval.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

We are a group of educators seeking to enhance the quality of education for all students in the United States. Our expertise ranges from effective instructional strategies in reading, writing, and speaking to professional development interests in large school urban settings. Our research focuses on malleable features of both teacher instruction and students' learning. In the final analysis, our group hopes to make a positive impact on public schools, higher education, and students' learning achievement.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

As researchers concerned with promoting equity in education and sound reform measures, we wanted to write a piece that added some common sense to the over-researched and over-theorized field of urban school reform. Our article, *Reform Stall* seeks to add an idea to the conversation that we hope can help everyone work more thoughtfully together to build great schools for all children. Reform stall results when we attempt school reform without first listening to individuals such as teachers who are charged with carrying out reforms. Despite the purity of intent, reforms devoid of common sense strategies focused on listening and questioning tend to promote division among change agents, and are destined for ineffectiveness.

Learning outcomes that are challenging are now defined by individual states. While it is now left to individual states to determine students' success, acquisition of standards by students will still rely on testing. States are required to test students in reading or language arts and math annually in grades 3–8, once in grades 10–12, and in science once in each of the following grade spans: 3–5, 6–9, and 10–12. Assessments for elementary schools must be the same statewide at the public school levels. However, at the high school levels, states may also choose to offer a nationally recognized assessment (e.g. SAT or ACT) as long as assessments are reliable, valid, and comparable. In summary, ESSA will provide more state and local public education autonomy; however, testing remains central to verifying students' acquisition of "challenging learning outcomes." This latest attempt to usher in school reform is too new to offer any robust evaluation, yet there are ecological factors that must be considered to affect change in schools.

2. Literature review

The struggle to reform United States urban schools is nested within complex ecologies and confounded by past promising federal government reforms and local initiatives. Legislative acts such as, No Child Left Behind (2002), Race to the Top (2009) and Common Core State Standards (National Governors' Association, 2010) reflect the US Government's desire to enhance the quality of teaching and the learning outcomes of all students. However, these reforms provided minimal measurable impact on the quality of learning and teaching in urban schools (Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) collects and analyzes data regarding education in the United States and other countries. Based on the analysis of data it collected on the National Assessment on Educational Progress (NAEP), it was concluded that neither No Child Left Behind (NCLB) nor Race to the Top (RTTT) made much of a difference in improving standardized test scores of US students.

For example, eighth-grade reading and math scores from 2003 to 2013 revealed only a 5-point average scale score increase on the reading test and a 7-point increase on the math test. The percentage of eighth-grade students that scored at the proficient level on the same tests, during the same years, increased from 19 to 26% for reading and from 16 to 27% for math (U. S. Department of Education, 2014, p. 4). These gains are minimal at best, and despite the attempts at innovating public schools throughout the twentieth and now into the twenty-first-century reform has proven far too elusive. Unfortunately, none of these reforms resulted in improvements in a variety of educational outcomes (high school graduation, college entrance, and graduation rates (see NCES, *The Condition of Education*). We contend progress has been slowed because these measures have been unable to change the fundamental structure of public education away from a factory model (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kliebard, 2002).

2.1. A closer look at urban schools

The NCES has disaggregated the NAEP data from 21 participating large urban school districts in the US, which educate the majority of US students. These 21 districts form the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) which focuses attention on urban education and measures educational progress of the students in these districts. Of the 21 cities in the TUBA report, only 2, Charlotte, NC and Hillsborough County, FL, scored at or slightly above the national average NAEP scores for eighth-grade reading and math. The scores of the students from Austin, TX were one point above the national average in math. The other 19 urban school districts scored below the national average in both reading and mathematics. Students from Cleveland, Ohio, and Detroit, Michigan scored 31 and 44 points below in math, and 27 points below the national average in reading. Clearly, NCLB and RTTT were not as effective regarding the education of students in urban schools compared to the improvements, albeit modest, that districts around the country experienced.

This lack of success in urban districts cries out for research to name the problem and propose solutions for effective reform. Any number of school reform initiatives and strategies have been developed for closing the test score gap, including retention of effective teachers (Prince, 2002), teacher evaluation systems (Croft, Roberts, & Stenhouse, 2016) whole school reform, standards-based

reform (Bacon, 2015), high stakes testing (Erskine, 2014), school choice options (Condliffe, Boyd, & Deluca, 2015), charter schools (Ritter, Jensen, Kisida, & Bowen, 2016), behavioral control and management systems (Flannery, Fenning, Kato, & McIntosh, 2014), the creation of smaller schools and classes (Sohn, 2015), single-gender classes and schools (James & Lewis, 2009), vouchers, data teams, professional learning communities (Rupley, Paige, Rasinski, & Slough, 2015), school-university partnerships (Pugach, Post, Anderson, Lehmann, & Donder, 2007), and parental and community engagement models (Keil, Rupley, Nichols, Nichols, Paige, & Rasinski, 2016). While these strategies have shown promise in isolated and site-based efforts, they have yet to yield widespread and sustained systemic reform, particularly in urban schools (Lewis et al., 2008).

The researchers contend that the persistent ineffectiveness of urban school reform is in part due to a failure in analytical and prescriptive frameworks. Supportively, Gould (2007) argues that reform measures have failed because they rely on market-driven theories of schooling based on linear relationships between inputs and outcomes, the factory model. In reality, schooling is perhaps the most complex of human endeavors; thus, school reform that simplifies school change to manipulating isolated inputs of schooling (e.g. classroom management, instruction, parental involvement, etc.) is ineffective when integrated with the complex realities of learning, teaching, and leading in increasingly diverse schools and communities. The following section expands this line of thought by discussing the applicable tenets of ecological theory, and its usefulness for understanding the complexities of urban school reform.

2.2. The social, school, and systemic challenges to urban school reform

An application of ecological theories to urban school reform has a powerful potential to make known the complex ways schooling environments intersect to impact educational reform. The following three strands are used to organize research detailing impediments to urban school reform: social, school, and systemic. Social factors include generational community poverty, under-resourcing of urban schools, cultural mismatch between school personnel and residents of urban communities, lack of community-school synergy, inability to meet the needs of increasing numbers of English-language learners, and prevalence of deficit thinking throughout the American educational system (Jeynes, 2015; Kinchloe, Hayes, Rose, & Anderson, 2007; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Unfortunately, changing schools via altering the social structures of society has shown little results, for these structures are designed to create stability in society; therefore, they are highly resistant to change.

Second, a consistent set of school-level impediments found to undermine reform initiatives are: (1) school boards, district and school administrators, and educators with low expectations; (2) educators with a low sense of efficacy; (3) administrators and educators' beliefs that counter new reform ideas; (4) lack of administrators' and teachers' knowledge in content areas; and (5) school board, district, and school administration that do not support reform efforts (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000). Supportively, Payne (2008) elaborates on these themes in his assessment of traditional models of school reform. He critiques the conservative theory of change that claims that if there is a penalty imposed for failure, people, in this case, students will try harder. In addition, he scrutinizes what he calls the progressive "Two Jima" model of voluntary change that calls for ownership over change and a bottom-up change process that is fully voluntary. Payne noted that both approaches are rooted in false assumptions that students are lazy and ignore the reality of teacher resistance to voluntary change, widespread low expectations, and patterns of avoidance of self-critique.

An additional factor limiting the effectiveness of urban school reform is the contextual inefficiencies between the American school system and school reform. Kliebard's (2002) essays on the shortcomings of American curriculum during the twentieth century concluded that far too often reform is introduced in a school system without also introducing the structural changes needed to make it successful. For example, Kliebard (2002) explained that curriculum change "requires for its survival a compatible organizational structure" (p. 81) that is not usually present in the reform setting. Kliebard analyzed these systemic incompatibilities in schools and curricula reform efforts from the

early 1900s to the present, and sadly reformers have not yet considered lessons from our past. Based on past models and reform acts that have had little impact on education attainment for marginalized populations Muhammad (2009) suggests that educators and reformers need to “drop their tools” or the systemically accepted philosophies, policies, practices, procedures and pedagogies that organize urban schools in order to realize change (p. 86).

Pugach et al. (2007) articulated a rationale for a systemic approach to urban school reform in the following statement considering factors external to schools:

The challenges facing urban schools are systemic, and although each individual school must certainly engage in its own improvement, reforming urban education school by school will simply not get the job done when individual schools exist within a larger education system that itself requires reform. (p. 555)

Some systemic complexities are outside the control of schools, families, and communities. For instance, the ongoing economic crisis, which began in 2008 and appears to be turning around in 2015, has forced many states to cut education expenditures, which directly impacts resources available for school improvement. Also, the quality of urban instruction largely depends upon the quality of preparation offered by teacher educators and teacher preparatory programs. It is only fair that if K-12 educators are blamed for persistent failure in urban settings that the trainers of these educators must also bear responsibility. Additionally, current funding schemes are such that suburban districts pay higher salaries in order to employ more qualified teachers, have smaller class sizes, and well-equipped facilities (Lewis et al., 2008). Schools have little to no control over such inputs, but factors such as these must be considered to reform urban schools.

In perhaps the latest meta-analysis of school reform and factors contributing to closing educational gaps, (Jeynes, 2015) reviewed 30 studies on bridging achievement disparities. Moreover, this work asserts the importance of considering the complexity of educational, psychological, and sociological factors, effectively extending our perspectives and approaches to redressing achievement disparities. In this light, (Jeynes, 2015) calls for a multidisciplinary and far broader campaign for comprehensive school reform.

2.3. Ecological theory in urban school reform

Educational researchers have pressed for a multilevel contextually situated approach to urban school reform and community change, and have turned to ecological perspectives of human development to inform these efforts (Edison, 2009; Gould, 2007; Johnson, 2008; Myers, Kim, & Mandala, 2004; Schreiber, 2002; Stewart, 2007). This movement is grounded in the seminal work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), which contends that human development and socialization are informed by multiple spheres of influence or environments (i.e. relationships and interactions). Specifically, Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986, 1989, 1995) theorized that human development is informed by five interrelated environments or ecological systems. Researchers such as Brownell and Smith (1993) and Jeynes (2015) applied this theory or related understandings to school reform. Yet, Brownell and Smith (1993) approach focused on the needs of teachers rather than the school–community–reformers nexus (Keil et al., 2016).

Applications of Bronfenbrenner’s approach can illuminate inefficiencies within and between schools, communities, and reform organizations that compromise reform efforts. First, Bronfenbrenner theorized that a *microsystem* is a social space characterized by sustained patterns of meaningful relationships and interactions that are informed and reciprocally shaped by an individual. Additionally, research confirms that home and community organizations, such as churches and Scouts, are sites of socialization and learning, and therefore should be considered *microsystems* of schooling (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Second, the *mesosystem* describes a series of mutually affective interactions between *microsystems*. This is perhaps most evident within classrooms, hallways, and shared activities (e.g. clubs and teams) within schools, and the interactions between home and school. This wider perspective is appropriate given that all of these social networks (peers, parents, and teachers/staff) participate in the learning, teaching, and leadership of schools. However, normative confusion results from socio-cultural variations across the *microsystems*. Supportively, Gonzalez et al. (2005) contend that socialization processes within families and communities may differ from normative patterns within classrooms and schools.

The third level in ecological theory describes how individuals are influenced by forces, systems, mandates, trends, policies, laws, and institutions. Such components are largely outside of individuals' control; however, collectively these institutional forces form the social structure or *exosystem* of a society. In schools, *exosystem* represents a set of policy initiatives and established ways of schooling that dictate the pace, rate, and direction of everyday schooling and change.

Fourth, Bronfenbrenner postulates that the *macrosystem* describes the wider cultural fabric, which is reflected in a set of shared values, norms, customs, and roles. It is through this *macrosystem* that the other systems within a society are expressed. Comparable to societies, schools have *macrosystems* that socialize members of the schooling community, and inform teaching, leading, and learning patterns. In fact, one of the primary socialization features of schools is a shared language of learning (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 2002). If the language of the learners varies from that of the school, then acculturation into the school society is inhibited. Noguera and Wing (2006) assert that schools create and sustain a culture that organizes daily processes and practices that undermine the potential of diverse learners and does not support their learning development. Furthermore, this *macrosystem* works in concert with family and community resources such that parents whose assets are valued are able to add additional learning supports for their children. Parents whose social capital is not valued often find that the schools' systems result in further marginalization of their children. Viable reform must address both internal and external systems and shared values in order to promote change.

Lastly, the *chronosystem* represents life span development for an individual within a socio-historical era of a society. This level represents the wider unfolding political, educational, and economic context within which current school reform efforts are situated. The current study includes such factors as the economic downturn of 2008, the No Child Left Behind Act, the comprehensive school reform movement, and the introduction of the School Improvement Grant (SIG) from President Obama's Race to the Top education initiative. For example, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) is a group of states developing an assessment to replace previous standardized tests.

3. Research background

As noted in the review of research, the persistent ineffectiveness of urban school reform is in part due to a failure in analytical and prescriptive frameworks. Our framework took into account that both the *exosystem* and *macrosystem* are external policy environments and internal organizational cultures, climates, and shared values. These larger pieces of framework have to work in concert with family and community resources such that parents whose assets are valued are able to add additional learning supports for their children. Parents whose value in the school is not recognized results in further ostracism of their children. A workable and sustainable school reform must attend to both internal and external systems and microcosmic shared values in order to promote change.

The primary objective was to further expand the literature on the efficacy of US urban school reform sustainability. CI formed the basis of reform and was a partnership among stakeholders to promote reform across five urban districts and eight select schools in a state located in the Northwest region of the US. CI is a system-to-system reform model (Pugach et al., 2007), because it included representatives from the teacher's union, urban superintendents' organization, administrators'

Table 1. 2007–2008 achievement data pre-CI

% meeting state standards	3rd grade	5th grade	6th grade	8th grade	Average in subject
Reading	6.5	9.8	8.3	10.3	8.7
Writing	26.2	14	11.1	5.1	14.1
Math	23.5	10.9	15	12.8	15.5
Average in grade averages	18.7	11.5	11.4	9.4	

professional organizations, state legislators, and Northeastern University (pseudonym). A defining feature of this innovative partnership was based upon a series of negotiated “gives and takes” among stakeholders: (1) districts granted CI schools control of budgeting, governance, and curriculum development; (2) CI schools remained accountable to their home districts for improving academic outcomes; (3) teacher unions granted schools the right to amend existing teaching contracts in the best interest of school improvement; (4) teachers took active leadership responsibilities during the change process; (5) Northeastern University agreed to provide CI reform coaches from a recognized comprehensive school reform model and access to other research-based interventions for eight elementary–middle schools across five urban districts; and (6) Northeastern University’s state grant (\$500,000) to support part of the reform initiative. However, our objective shifted due to the stall of this urban school reform, and we were driven to undercover information and events that led to the stall of this comprehensive urban school reform initiative.

The initiative began in the Fall of 2008, and the present work centers on Valley West School, in Central City School District that serves 20,000 linguistically, economically, and racially diverse students. Table 1 presents an overview of Valley West students’ performance.

While no one was expecting to see significant improvement in scores following the first year of this initiative, complexities emerged that affected the sustainability of the CI at Valley West School. Unearthing and better understanding the factors that resulted in this stall is at the heart of this research.

3.1. Data collection

For this case study, we collected multiple sources of data including teacher, administrator, and parent interviews, and a school climate survey. Data collected were part of the larger research in the implementation and progress of CI throughout the state, and included a team of six culturally diverse faculty members from Northeastern University. Fieldwork at Valley West consisted of 1 comprehensive round of semi-structured interviews of the principal, assistant principal, teacher leaders, 15 teachers, and 7 parents. Researchers supplemented interviews with informal observations of classrooms, teacher meetings, school events, open houses, and district events pertaining to the reform initiative. Additionally, the research team examined past and present district and school improvement plans. Researchers also interviewed the superintendent, district administrators, the teachers’ union president, the director of CS, the director of the state-level administrators’ association, the directors of the two state-level teachers’ unions, and key informants within the state Department of Education. All interviews were tape-recorded and key themes were captured in a thematic analysis for each interview. Additionally, researchers reviewed Valley West’s schedule, list of initiatives, their application submitted to become a CI school, and other relevant public documents. Following the interviews and document review, a comprehensive school climate survey adapted from the *Teaching and Learning Conditions* survey (New Teachers Center, 2012) was administered to all teachers at Valley West. This 100-item survey measured educators’ perceptions of school leadership, professional development, empowerment/decision-making, facilities/resources, and time and mentoring/induction.

3.2. Data analyses

Analyses first began by constructing thematic summaries for interviews, field notes, and observational data. These were shared with participants to ensure the accuracy of our initial summaries from fieldwork. Each interview was audio recorded then transcribed by a private firm. These transcripts were then coded using open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Subsequently, the researchers used the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify emerging, cross-cutting themes across all sources of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Throughout this process, the researchers provided a check on each other's interpretations to establish inter-rater reliability. Valley West's fieldwork began six months into the initiative, but its data-set was singled out because multiple sources of data suggested that compared to the other schools' little to no progress toward the goals of the initiative had taken hold. An ecological framework was employed to make sense of themes and trends from various sources of data that initially seemed disjointed and unrelated. This prompted several rounds of fieldwork consisting classroom observations, follow-up interviews with key administrators, and analyzing schedules, goals and daily routines for two years. A comparative analysis between initial themes, and themes from each subsequent round of data collection was conducted yielding the upcoming findings. The following section details the complexities encountered schooling ecologies that led to a "stalling" of the CI at Valley West, and concludes with a series of nuanced recommendations for promoting sustainable urban reform.

4. Findings

This section details the three complexities that emerged from and how each contributed to *reform stall* at Valley West School. *Reform stall* is a construct synthesized from the case study of Valley West's implementation of the CI. *Reform stall* is defined as:

A state of organizational malaise brought on by the difficulties achieving synergy between the intents of a reform and its effective implementation within and between complex systems, social institutions and schooling ecologies.

The forthcoming section details three interrelated analysis informed by Bronfenbrenner (1989) ecological theory, and includes an analysis of:

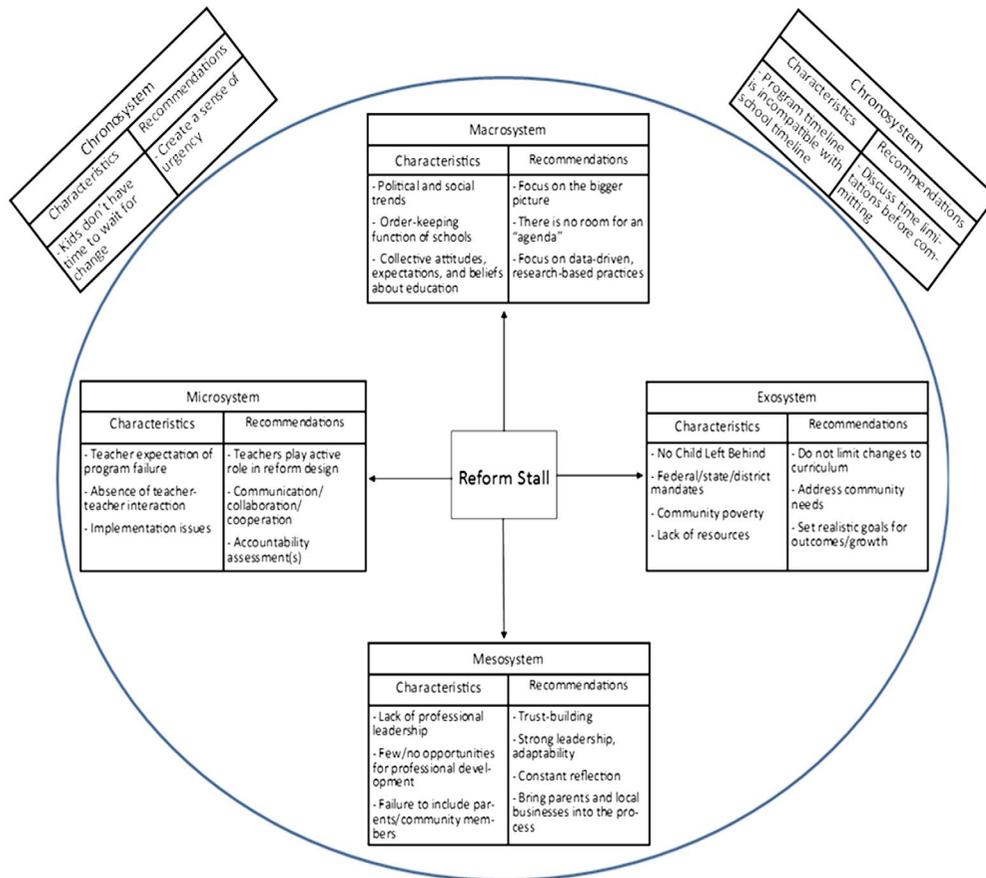
- (1) The *exosystem* or the wider systemic trends that shape local educational practice, but are largely out of the control of individual schools. This analysis revealed that national and state cuts to educational funding compromised the capacity of CI and Valley West to enact reform. Also, the *exosystem* analysis revealed that a second district-wide reform undermined staff morale at Valley West resulting in reform stall.
- (2) Valley West's *macrosystem* or the shared values and norms revealed signs of a diminished school culture and climate compromising the capacity of Valley West's staff to implement the tenets of the Consensus Initiative.
- (3) The *mesosystem* analysis of interactions across organizations uncovered a lack of synergy between Valley West School, Central City School District, and Northeastern University (pseudonym) resulted in reform overload, ultimately undermining the vitality of the initiative.

A detailed explanation of these analysis is forthcoming, and will be presented in the same order outlined above. We conclude with recommendations for districts and university-based reformers in the hopes of minimizing reform stall in urban schools.

4.1. Reform synergy in the exosystem

School reform never takes place in a vacuum, thus careful attention to how shifts in systemic trends like the health of the economy, shifts in educational funding, and district reform environments are critical for sustainable change in urban schools. As we detailed in Figure 1, there are multiple, interactive components that contribute to the success of educational public school reform. However, two of these key environments contributed to the reform stall at Valley West: (1) the economic downturn

Figure 1. Framework for reform stall when recommendations within each system are ignored.



and its impact on local school funding and (2) the disconnect between the expected rate of change established by the CI reform leaders and the local district's reform agenda.

The first systemic issue came on the heels of the economic collapse of 2008, when 25 states made cuts to K-12 education and 34 states reduced supports for higher education (Johnson, Olif, & Williams, 2011). Interviews with CI designers confirmed an initial state allocation of \$5,000,000 to support the implementation before the economic downturn forced the state to allot only \$500,000 each year for three years. The initial funding was more than adequate to support coaches at eight schools, and to promise participating high need schools additional funding for: additional teachers, substitutes, and administrators, support for a magnet school music program at Valley West, and funding for other research-based programs when schools could demonstrate the need and potential impact of such resources. Interviews with stakeholders confirmed that this funding stream as a key driving force that made CI possible.

Under this new funding scheme, access to these additional resources was no longer available, which ultimately reduced the capacity of Northeastern University to deliver a comprehensive reform at Valley West. For instance, the primary resource granted to Valley West to implement this school reform model was a Northeastern CI coach responsible for a mere 2–4 visits per month. This coach was charged with analyzing achievement data, developing a school vision and core values, setting three critical goals to address, and organizing teachers into teams to address each critical goal. The coach would conduct professional development on how to improve instruction through action research, and these research-based practices would then be brought to scale within the school. Additionally, to improve the school culture and climate, and mostly to address perceived challenges with student discipline Northeastern University provided training in implementing a school-wide behavioral medication system.

Unfortunately, after repeated visits to the school in the first year of the initiative, the research team found that the implementation was not progressing at a similar rate when compared to other CI schools. For instance, during their first year, Valley West hosted a community kick off, completed the visioning process, and began implementing the school-wide behavioral management system. Yet, teacher teams were not formed until midway into the second year, when most other schools were well into the improving teaching and learning phase.

The lethargic nature of the CI at Valley West raised several questions, but perhaps most pressing was: Were additional resources needed to effectively implement the CI in Valley West? In response, a review of Valley West's application for becoming a CI school detailed concerns about meeting the needs of the increasing number of Spanish speaking families in Central City. Valley West's student population is a reflection of this demographic shift, with 60% of students coming from homes where Spanish is the primary language spoken and 32% of students are identified as English-language learners. Additionally, during an interview, the third-year African-American male principal of Valley West, described the challenges facing his school:

I think it's very difficult, because we're in a high poverty school, high crime, difficult. We have a high mobility rate. Staff members are very young, not really used to an urban environment, and it shows with regards to discipline. Oh, boy. The school is in its eighth year known as a failing school.

He later added:

The fact that we have a high bilingual population; we as a school need to figure out how do we move that population along.

An additional, challenge that the principal articulated is the stigma attached to being a "failing school:"

I think it's so ingrained that we've been a failing school for so long, even the growth that we've made, you still have people tell you you're a failing school...

In sum, Valley West typifies the complexities of urban education: persistent underachievement, high poverty, crime, mobility, student disciplinary referrals, and increasing rates of English-language learners, primarily taught by a white, middle class, female teaching force, ill-equipped to use the culture of the children as strengths and not deficits (Lewis et al., 2008). Yet, neither the Consensus leadership, nor the district addressed these concerns that were clearly articulated in the school's application and later supported in interviews with the principal. Furthermore, the lack of resources did not allow CI leadership to employ the expertise of ESL, urban teacher educators, nor a multicultural education specialist at Northeastern University. In essence, the lack of responsiveness to the economic and educational funding environments created an initiative whose scope far exceeded its capacity to meet the expressed needs of Valley West School.

The lack of synergy with regard to the expected pace of change is the second ecosystem phenomenon that prompted reform stall. A critical aspect of CI schools' theory of change is that the pace of school improvement is slow, so schools and districts were required to make a 3–5-year commitment to this change process. Yet, this measure was not in line with the desired pace of local school reform in Central City. Central City was a progressive community, and at the beginning of year 2 (2009) of the CI initiative the district was recognized for a sweeping reform effort unrelated to CI. This wider reform supported by the local teacher's union required the teachers of persistently low performing schools such as Valley West to reapply for their jobs starting in the Summer of 2010 (New York Times, 2009). Furthermore, the principal of Valley West learned that he would also be reassigned.

The magnitude of this district-wide reform weighed heavy on the principal as he shared his thoughts during a follow-up interview:

I just don't think we are moving fast enough. I need to show progress. Or that we have a plan or what I really want is for CI to get to helping the teachers teach better. I still believe that this can work. I need to show them a plan to buy some time after this ... the new plan the teachers union approved. I'm concerned about if the teachers will stay motivated if I can't protect their jobs.

The pace of implementation conceptualized by Northeastern University was progressing too slowly in a fast-paced educational climate. In fact, the principal expressed a similar concern in an interview during the first year of the initiative when asked "Tell me how the CI is going so far?"

To be honest I thought that we would be further along than where we are. The year is almost over and besides a couple of visioning meetings and workshops we have not done much. I'm hoping that next year is better.

Not only should school reforms consider how economic shifts impact local reform funding, but also how best to match the pace of an initiative with the local district reform environment to prevent *reform stall*.

4.2. Diminished school culture in the macrosystem

The second analysis we consider relates to the macrosystem or the shared values and beliefs of schools that animate learning, teaching, and leading. Diamond et al. (2004) conceptualized school culture as *organizational habitus*, or a set of shared values, beliefs, and practices that inform teachers' low expectations and low sense of responsibility for urban American-African learners. James and Lewis (2009) extended their organizational habitus conception to include: (1) Expectations; (2) Efficacy; (3) Culture of Effort/responsibility; (4) Engagement; (5) Evidence-based practices and (6) Educational Justice philosophy. The Six "E" Model provides an assessable framework for understanding and measuring school culture, which was considered when analyzing Valley West's culture. It is critical to note that a diminished school culture can resist organizational changes and have been linked to unsuccessful reform efforts (Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000).

We theorized that Valley West's *macrosystem*, or their shared values and norms, revealed signs of a diminished school culture and climate that greatly compromised the capacity of Valley West's staff to implement the tenets of the CI. For this discussion, we relied on both interviews with the principal and a descriptive analysis of the comprehensive school climate survey that was administered to all teachers at Valley West following their first year as a CI school. Our attention focused on the *expectations network* of the school, which consisted of a set of shared beliefs among teachers who largely saw the students and parents of Valley West as dysfunctional components in the educational process. Table 2 details the teachers' perceptions of children, the community, and the school. The most telling findings were that only 1 in 10 teachers felt that students were "ready" to learn, 2 in 10 felt that the community supported the school, and 3 in 10 felt that Valley West was a good place to work and learn.

Table 2. Teachers' perceptions: Children, community, and school

% of teachers who agree that:	Agree (%)
Children are caring toward one another?	29
Students come to school ready to learn on a regular basis?	12
Students in this school are being prepared for success in the twenty-first century?	31
The community we serve is supportive of this school?	19
This school does a good job encouraging parental involvement?	29
My school is a good place to work and learn?	28

These results were especially troubling because they represent teacher's views after a year of being a Consensus school and implemented a school-wide behavioral modification initiative. Both initiatives are designed to improve such shared attitudes, but apparently had little impact on this diminished school culture.

Moreover, in an interview that took place six months before the climate survey, the principal provided his insights into the expectations network of Valley West in response to the question: What percentage of teachers do you believe expect students here to achieve a college education?

A part of me wants to believe that 100% of my staff. See, this is my perception. But, I talk to teachers and they talk about kids, you know, I think it's very low. If I had half I'd be happy, but I don't think I have half. I want to say at the most about 20 or 30%.

When asked, how he came to that assessment, he replied:

This is soft data; it's my conversations with teachers; being at meetings, the team meetings. I think those are the two things that help me to understand what they expect of students. I think they more complain and say things like "The kids are just too low, they're never goanna become proficient". And even if you look at some of the lesson plans, even if you do a walkthrough and look at their instruction ... You will see more worksheets, you'll see low-level instruction. Even questioning, right? You'll see low-level questioning, even after we had professional development on questioning. I think it's so ingrained that we've been a failing school for so long, you know, even the growth that we've made, you still have people tell you, "you're a failing school," I think that has the biggest impact on why we have low expectations.

Teachers not only demonstrated characteristics of a negative expectations network, but also perceived that the professional development, the school leadership, and each other were ineffective. Table 3 details teachers' views relative to these issues. Professional development was particularly seen as ineffective at preparing teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners and developing partnerships with parents. Approximately, 20% of teachers felt the school leadership effectively created a trusting school climate and communicated expectations to parents and students. Finally, only 20% teachers felt that they made effective group decisions or trusted each other.

In sum, the *microsystem* of Valley West School runs counter to the very tenets of the Consensus Reform Initiative, thus contributing to the slow progress made during the first two years of the program. Two of the major tenets of the CI model are teacher empowerment and collaboration, but is it wise to empower teachers with critically low expectations? Additionally, Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2010) conclude that collaboration is a byproduct of a healthy and effective school, thus greater efforts should have been made to foster a genuine culture of collaboration as a prerequisite for becoming a CI school.

Table 3. Teachers' perceptions: Professional development, leadership, and colleagues

% of teachers who agree that:	Agree (%)
Profession development helps them to meet the needs of diverse learners?	39
Profession development provides strategies to partner with parents?	21
School leadership facilitates an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect?	17
School leadership communicates clear expectations to student and parents?	19
Teachers have an effective way of making group decisions?	19
Teachers in this school trust each other?	21
Teachers are effective leaders at this school?	38

4.3. Reform overload and the mesosystem

The third analysis highlights how Valley West School, Central City School District, and Northeastern University are all individual *microsystems*, or social spaces characterized by sustained patterns of meaningful relationships and interactions that inform institutional philosophies, policies, and practices (Johnson, 2008). A *mesosystem* emerged during the implementation of the CI, which promoted sustained patterns of interaction, collaboration, and integration of reform efforts among these three institutions. It is within this shared context that the final complexity, reform overload will be situated and described.

Reform overload revisits and reconceptualizes Reeves (2006) idea of *initiative fatigue*:

Educators are drowning under the weight of initiative fatigue—attempting to use the same amount of time, money, and emotional energy to accomplish more and more objectives. That strategy, fueled by various mixtures of adrenaline, enthusiasm, and intimidation, might work in the short term. But eventually, each initiative added to the pile creates a dramatic decline in organizational effectiveness. (p. 89)

Reeves (2006) further contends that with the introduction of a new reform initiative, teachers are first generally enthusiastic. Yet, as the number of present, new, and pending initiatives mount while at the same time holding constant resources, time, and focus, teachers experience a state of *overload* that eventually leads to burnout, or diminished organizational effectiveness. While we agree with the general principles of *initiative fatigue*, Valley West provides a unique opportunity to highlight how this process unfolds in a struggling urban school.

First, Valley West did not create or choose the many initiatives that have come to overload the staff and teachers. Rather, Central City School District sought to help chronically low performing schools by offering and/or mandating multiple programs, curricula, and initiatives. The principal of Valley West described this practice in the following statement:

As the school leader, I understand when schools are failing, the common approach is to pour as many resources as you can into those schools. “I’m gonna give you all these consultants, they’re gonna come help you out.” “The State’s gonna come in.” Not once has anyone sat down and said, “Okay. What issues are you seeing, and how can we help you?” So we have eight different initiatives, and the sad part is I think they’re all saying the same thing. So, to a staff that’s already overwhelmed and morale is down, to them it’s eight different people saying eight different ways to do the same thing.

Despite Reeves (2006) compelling argument that *initiative fatigue* results from the proliferation of tasks and responsibilities in a resource starved schooling environment, there were additional complexities. It is clear that the state of general enthusiasm described by Reeves (2006) did not exist in Valley West when the CI was introduced. Instead, coupled with the diminished school culture and climate described in the prior section, we suggest that the first stages of reform overload are diminished hope, cautious optimism, and constrained choice, rather than enthusiasm. Reform overload will stall reform efforts in school environments characterized by limited resources, diminished hope, constrained choice, and ineffective reform efforts to improve student outcomes.

Not only was reform overload caused by district imposed initiatives, but a lack of synergy between Valley West and CI also contributed to it this phenomenon. Our analysis of the implementation process at Northeastern University revealed that CI did not conduct an audit of programs at perspective schools before beginning the implementation of CI. The result at Valley West was a collusion between preexisting district imposed reforms and the initiatives championed by CI. The contradictory aims, theoretical foundations, and processes of each set of initiatives created fragmented approaches to transforming teaching and supporting students. More importantly, this collision between initiatives promoted distrust and confusion among staff, undermining the ability of school leaders to promote the new Census Initiative or the district’s preexisting initiatives. Through an

ecological lens, the nature of reform overload at Valley West School is revealed as a by-product of inefficiencies among collaborating organizations, not simply a school-level phenomenon. This state of organizational paralysis was brought on by the local school district and a university partner imposing numerous simultaneous and conflict initiatives without discerning the impact of such practices.

5. Discussion

The emergent findings of this study are valuable because they complicate the conversation of school reform, while providing the *reform stall* framework that is illustrated in Figure 1. Represented in this analytical tool are the authentic struggles that were identified and associated with implementing a well-intentioned school reform.

Figure 1 draws attention to the individual and combined capacity of schools, districts and reformers to enact school reform. Jaynes (2015) recommended more complex interdisciplinary approaches to understanding, designing, and implementing urban school reform. This application of Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological systems theory considered economic, political, social, cultural, and organizational sustainability perspectives to analyze a school reform effort. Without this broad theoretical framework, these seemingly unrelated phenomena would not have materialized into a collective lens through which the of a school reform can be evaluated.

However, rather than utilizing the recommended components that comprise Figure 1, American school reform ignores these and is more in line with the factory model of schooling during the present era of rapid diversification and globalization. Reformers and researchers alike most fully embrace the reality that modern US schools are not factories or business, nor are children products on an assemble line. Such a chasm between perspective and practice mitigates against successful school reform implementation (Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009).

Payne (2008) quips that “we have often been more invested in our paradigms than in solving the problems they address” (p. 192). Moreover, while research-based reform can encourage a scientific approach to school change, Kliebard (2002) warns that research-driven reform “misconstrues the relationship between social-scientific research and educational practice” (p. 129). The Censuses Initiative was grounded in solid educational research but those guiding its implementation mistakenly viewed that as enough to ensure change. Research-driven models of school reform are not clear-cut guides; rather, they should be considered starting points that must sway to fit the unique context of the school system, policy environment, and combined capacity of a reform effort, simultaneously.

5.1. Recommendations

Toward this goal, we recommend several measures for districts seeking partnerships to drive innovation and university-based reformers. Within political and policy limitations districts should routinely streamline initiatives in schools, screen district reform priorities against school improvement plans, and before implementing a school reform every attempt should be made it measure the school culture for signs of sustained low expectations, high levels of staff distrust, and dissatisfaction. Universities should approach any partnership with districts related to school reform with an intense intent to listen. This listening process is critical for determining the expertise needed for the intervention team, a theory of change that best fits the local district's political and school reform priorities, the specific capacity of a school, their readiness for change, and the initiative profile of the school. The reality is that districts process federal, state, and local school board mandates, which creates potential conflicts and competing interests in schools. Universities have to be sensitive to these realities, or despite the soundness of the research that informs their work they can do more to promote reform stall than school improvement.

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