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An Exploratory Study of Reading in Urban and Suburban Middle Schools: Implications for At-Risk and Special Education Learners

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Abstract

Fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, school achievement remains segregated by both race and class. Despite an emphasis on reading achievement as required by No Child Left Behind, many students have serious literacy needs, even into the middle and upper grades. The purpose of this study was to ascertain ways in which middle school reading instruction is coordinated to improve academic outcomes for at-risk students. In-depth interviews were conducted with professionals from five urban and five suburban middle schools surrounding five components of reading programming. While both align their curriculum with state expectations, they differ in terms of program continuity and stability. Overall, systemic coherence in schools was a rarity. Implications for literacy programming and systemic reform are presented.

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Introduction

The achievement gap between various groups of students remains of great concern. Literacy is seen as a crucial area in which to attack this gap. Although No Child Left Behind and other national initiatives have focused attention on early reading achievement, less is known about reading in the middle and upper grades. This study presents a three-part conceptual framework that is used in examining the systemic coherence of literacy programs in selected urban and suburban middle schools in Michigan.

Statistics show significant achievement gaps between racial and socioeconomic groups regardless of level (NCES, 2004). These differences are manifested across schools that are largely divided by race and socioeconomic status (SES). National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data indicated that 67% of nonurban students score at a “basic” level or higher whereas only 40% of urban students achieve these same levels (NCES, 2004). Although SES is recognized as a contributing factor, Brown, Anfar, and Roney (2004) have also attributed differences in school achievement between suburban and urban middle schools to several school-based factors, including leadership, collaboration, the distribution of resources and time, and level of involvement in developing and implementing curriculum.

Although literacy skills among adolescents are notoriously poor with as many as one-quarter of all teens unable to read at the basic level (McCardle & Chhabra, 2004), middle-level instruction has been largely ignored in the professional literature surrounding literacy and school reform (Balfanz, Ruby, & MacIver, 2002; McCardle & Chhabra, 2004). The majority of recent research in this area has focused on early intervention and the role of phonemic awareness in decoding abilities of beginning readers (Lyon, 2002). Much less is known about appropriate reading curricula for struggling readers at the middle school level, particularly in the areas of building fluency and comprehension. In addition, available research suggests discontinuities in what counts as reading instruction for these students (Greene, 1998; Morocco, Hindin, Mata-Aguilar, & Mott, 2002).

Federal legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Reauthorizations of 1997 and 2004 and the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) have shifted educational thought and practice toward improving student outcomes through more rigorous curriculum standards for students with disabilities (Thurlow, 2002). In conjunction with the focus on curriculum is

the need for improved literacy skills among students with disabilities (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). An estimated 80% of all students with learning disabilities have been placed in special education because they have not learned to read (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). Traditionally, special education programming has de-emphasized the general education curriculum in favor of teaching basic skills and a variety of social skills and learning strategies, resulting in an "a-curricular" approach to teaching students with disabilities (Pugach & Warger, 1996; Winzer, 2000). In fact, issues regarding efficiency and effectiveness of program delivery in special education can be found throughout the professional literature (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Winzer, 2000).

There is scant knowledge about whether and how middle schools meet the dual obligations of teaching basic reading skills to at-risk learners and helping such students access standards-based content through accommodations and modifications. Differences in achievement profiles of students in urban and suburban classrooms further complicate the development and implementation of literacy programs uniquely suited to the diverse needs of students in these settings. Research and reform efforts in these areas are of paramount importance (Balfanz et al., 2003).

Conceptual Framework

It is known that systemic coherence contributes greatly to the development and sustenance of effective literacy programs. Balfanz, Ruby, and MacIver (2002) indicated the need for a "sustained, multifaceted, and well-coordinated course of action" (p. 128). Such coherence involves curriculum development and instructional support in addition to needed structural changes. For example, successful high-performing schools have regular opportunities for professional development and collaboration, increased quantities and quality of time for instruction, and have aligned curricula with state standards and assessment (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999).

Supporting the findings of Balfanz et al. (2002) and Brown et al. (2004), two separate long-term studies of school reculturing conducted by Mariage and Garmon (2003) and Patriarca and Ziazi (2003), and a subsequent follow-up study of the school buildings (Mariage & Patriarca, 2004, 2005) a year after the long-term partnerships ended revealed that there were five subsystems integral to cultivating and sustaining reculturing efforts. What was necessary for meaningful change to occur was not simply the presence or absence of the subsystems, but whether they were used coherently to support

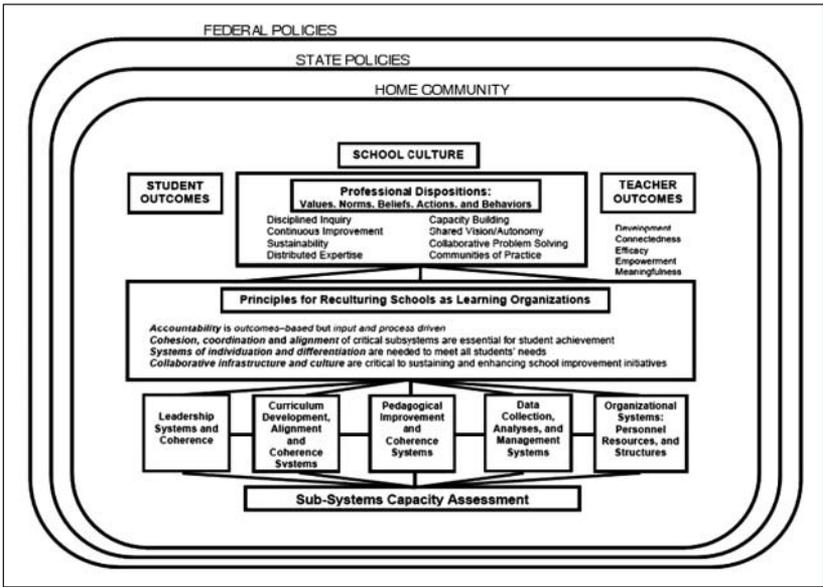


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of schools as learning organizations

the change effort and reflected the underlying values, beliefs, and norms that supported schools as learning organizations (Little, 1999). The five subsystems, as shown in Figure 1, include (1) leadership systems and coherence, (2) curriculum development, alignment, and coherence systems, (3) pedagogical improvement and coherence systems, (4) data collection, analyses, and management systems, and (5) organizational systems: personnel, resources, and structures (See Mariage & Patriarca, 2005 for description of these subsystems.).

In addition, four principles of the conceptual framework are briefly described to highlight their importance in the reculturing process and how the five subsystems support change initiatives. These principles guide the meaning-making that occurs both within and across the five subsystems. Using a principled approach to understand reculturing shifts the onus away from looking primarily at changes in physical structures (e.g., new curricula, new schedules, professional development) to looking at the implicit values, beliefs, dispositions, and behaviors that are being developed through the change process.

Accountability, the first principle, is outcomes-based, but input and process driven. The legal mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) have focused attention on the role that data play in instructional decision making. While the focus of these mandates have tended to center on student achievement data and what constitutes a “highly qualified teacher,” the literature on school reform has consistently emphasized the importance of developing a professional disposition toward disciplined inquiry—a process of using information to inform decision-making (Schmoker, 1999). Using information of all kinds (e.g., absence rates, referrals, suspensions, disaggregated achievement data) provides the starting point or input for collaborative problem solving. If disciplined inquiry is to become a professional stance and skill set that is distributed among stakeholders, collaborative spaces must be created for this to occur. One goal of the organization is to build the capacity of its members to use data to inform the decision-making process. Data and information are used, not as endpoints to achieve, but as tools for promoting discussion about how to continuously improve the organization. As data are used across the many collaborative spaces that make up a school (e.g., staff meetings, improvement teams, parent/teacher groups) by a variety of stakeholders, it can become an institutional norm that is valued.

Cohesion, coordination, and alignment of subsystems are essential. This second principle refers to the ways in which the key subsystems of a school are orchestrated to support change efforts. When each of the five subsystems are coordinated and aligned, there is a greater likelihood that changes and the change process will be sustained. The five subsystems are mutually constitutive and interact with one another to support changes in the organization. Typically, when changes are implemented, there is a tendency for the changes to remain at the surface level and will not impact the deeper cultural values underlying the organization (Cuban, 1988; Fullan, 2001, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994). In contrast, in research conducted by Mariage and Patriarca (2005), these authors found that in schools that had undertaken explicit efforts to successfully reculture aspects of their buildings over a 4- or 5-year period, there was coordination of the five subsystems to support and sustain the implementation. Similarly, when change initiatives were not successful, it was possible to point to one or several of the subsystems that were not supportive of the change initiative.

Systems of individuation and differentiation are needed within each sub-system. This third principle operating in schools in the process of reculturing is the need for systems of individuation and differentiation within each subsystem. Systems of individuation reflect the school’s sensitivity for providing a coherent system or menu of supports for ensuring that each child has opportunities to be educated to their potential. When students are not successful in

the general education curriculum, there is a coherent system of support that provides alternative routes to accessing curriculum and meeting grade level benchmarks (Deshler et al., 2001; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Gersten & Dimino, 2001).

Collaborative infrastructure and culture are critical for sustaining change within and across subsystems. This final principle in the conceptual framework for the current study is recognition that simply adding new structures, policies, curricula, or activities do not automatically translate to changes in culture (Barth, 2001; Hargreaves, 1994; Pugach & Johnson, 2002). The literature on educational change have consistently pointed to the fact that changing structural elements of the organization without simultaneous changes in the underlying norms, beliefs, values, and behaviors of individuals within the organization may not result in sustainable change efforts. It is also the case, of course, that there is often a real need to create the “places and spaces” for meaningful collaboration to occur in schools that are beginning the reform process toward becoming a learning organization (Little, 1999). Without changes in the way schools think about using time, creating collaborative structures (e.g., school improvement teams, action research groups, grade level teams, content area teams) that can serve as apprenticeship spaces for modeling cultural values, and creating new roles for faculty, it will be difficult to develop the deep cultural values of distributed expertise, capacity building, disciplined inquiry, and continuous improvement (See outside bands of cultural values in Figure 1).

As shown in Figure 1, the conceptual framework for the present study consists of three related parts. These three parts include (1) the five subsystems that are believed to be operating coherently when schools are successful in implementing and sustaining a change initiative, (2) a series of principles that highlight the qualities of interactions occurring within and between the subsystems, and (3) several professional dispositions that are fostered when a principled view of educational change is undertaken (i.e., disciplined inquiry, continuous improvement, capacity building, social construction of meaning in communities of practice, and distributed expertise).

Using the Conceptual Framework to Provide a Focus for the Study

Because of the great need to understand more about what constitutes effective reading instruction for middle school students in high priority schools, this purpose of this study is to investigate reading programming for at-risk readers in middle schools in general, and to compare programming across

urban and suburban schools. The current study uses the conceptual framework detailed above which views schools as learning organizations and studies a variety of systems and reculturing principles within the school context. The study investigates each system from the perspective of three key personnel within the school, the principal, a general education teacher responsible for literacy instruction, and a special education teacher. In addition, it examines at the coherence of systems within the organizational model, as well as how the systems work together within the school at large to provide literacy programming to at-risk readers.

Three research questions guided our investigation. These were (a) to describe commonalities and variability within each of the five subsystems in urban and suburban middle schools for at-risk and special education students; (b) to describe coordination among and between key stakeholders who are responsible for literacy instruction within schools for at-risk and special education students; and (c) to examine systemic coherence *across* the five subsystems represented in urban and suburban middle schools for at-risk and special education students. In the results section, research questions 1 and 2 will be addressed for each of the five subsystems. At the conclusion of the results section, we will explore the issue of coherence and coordination across the five subsystems (research question 3). The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of systemic coherence and coordination in middle school reading instruction. Future research directions are explored.

Method

Participants

Eleven public middle schools in Michigan (six urban, five suburban) were selected based on information including building size and configuration (i.e., Grades 6-8). Urban schools were included if at least 60% of their student population received free and reduced lunches, and if they had a minority enrollment of greater than 30%. In addition, the urban schools included in the study were all members of the Middle Cities Education Association (MCEA). Suburban schools were included in the study if minority enrollment was less than 25% and if less than 35% of their student population received free and reduced lunches. Demographic data about the participating urban and suburban schools is presented in Table 1.

The participating urban schools had nine times the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch as compared to the suburban schools. Urban and suburban schools were comparable in school size (average of 686

Table 1. Demographic Data of Participating Schools

Location	Free/Reduced Lunch	School Enrollment	Schools With Declining Enrollment	Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)
Urban	72%	686	100%	0% met
Suburban	8%	716	75%	100% met

for urban schools, 716 for suburban schools). Most suburban schools reported declining enrollment; however, all urban schools were facing enrollment declines. All suburban schools included in the study had met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the last 3 years; none of the urban schools had reached this goal.

As shown in Figure 2, student achievement in suburban schools included in the study well surpassed the state average on the standardized test (i.e., greater than 50% pass rate), whereas achievement in urban schools was well below the state average (i.e., less than 50% pass rate).

In addition, urban schools also had a higher percentage of African American students in special education (48% and 40% respectively) and a lower percentage of White students (38% and 47% respectively) than in the school population.

Procedures

Comprehensive semistructured interview protocols based on Mariage and Patriarca's (2005) conceptual framework, Schools as Learning Organizations, were developed and field-tested. Interviews were conducted with three school personnel (principal, special education teacher, and general education teacher) at each of the 10 selected school sites. Principals were asked to nominate a general education teacher and a special education teacher for inclusion in the study based on their level of experience with and knowledge of the school's literacy programming.

All interviews were conducted by the researchers themselves following a protocol that treated each interview situation in the same manner. Interview data were coded and analyzed using content and discourse analysis, following the canons of qualitative research; for example, constant comparison, search for outliers, check and recheck of coding by multiple researchers (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Triangulation of data was achieved through publicly available documents thereby establishing external as well as internal reliability and validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

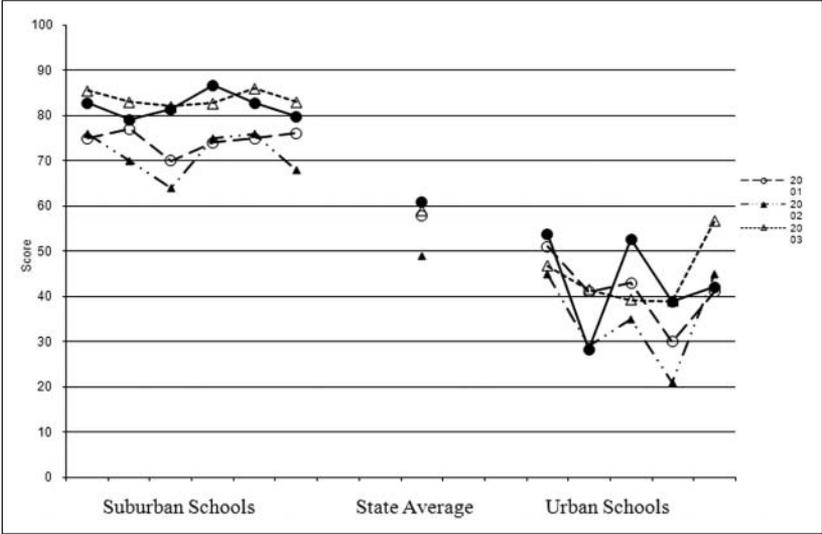


Figure 2. Participating schools' 7th grade state reading assessment scores

Instrument

The instrument was a semistructured interview protocol adapted for each participant's role. Questions focused on five areas related to design, implementation and evaluation of reading curriculum: (1) assessment procedures, (2) written curriculum, (3) support structures, (4) communication, consultation, and collaboration activities, and (5) resources. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, each section included open-ended questions surrounding each of the systems included in the conceptual framework. In addition, each section included questions surrounding formal and informal structures as well as connections between structures. At the end of each section, participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of each system on a five-point Likert-type scale. Administration of the instrument took 30 to 60 minutes, and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed in full.

Data Analysis

Content and discourse analysis was performed on each transcript. Themes and patterns within each subsection of the protocol were codified and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Inter-rater reliability was

performed on 20% of the interview protocols to achieve a minimum of 80% reliability before coding began. Triangulation methods were used to compare and contrast interview data with local and state curriculum documents and school performance data. Publicly available district and state curriculum documents were used along as well as state department of education web-based AYP and demographic reports; this information was supplemented by individual school districts as needed.

Results and Analysis

This section presents demographic data of respondents and organizes results of the interviews into the five subsystems of literacy programming: assessment; curriculum; support structures; communication, collaboration, and consultation; and resources (Mariage & Patriarca, 2005). The first two research questions are addressed within each of these subsystems. First, similarities and differences between urban and suburban schools are presented. Second, coordination among stakeholders at each school is described. Finally, the data from the five subsystems are analyzed holistically in order to examine systemic coherence in terms of the four principles of schools as learning organizations (the third research question; Mariage & Patriarca, 2004).

Demographics

Table 2 below shows the range of experience for the administrator and teacher respondents within urban and suburban schools. Suburban principals reported more experience as principals, both overall (average of 9 years for urban administrators, 16 for suburban), and in their current positions (average of 2 years for urban administrators and 8 years for suburban). Suburban special education teachers reported almost twice the average number of years teaching experience as their urban counterparts (17 and 9, respectively).

Urban school administrators reported that eight percent of their teachers from the previous year had transferred to another position the current year, whereas only half a percent of suburban teachers had transferred. Suburban principals reported a higher percentage of advanced degrees with 100% having a master's degree as compared to 75% for urban school principals. In addition to knowledge and experience levels, teachers also reported different characteristics across setting. Teachers in urban schools reported more teaching periods than did suburban teachers. Teachers in suburban schools reported working with more students with learning disabilities and with other health impairments than did teachers in urban settings.

Table 2. Experience of School Personnel at Participating Schools

Location	Average Number of Years Experience
Principal: Urban	9
Principal: Suburban	16
General education teacher: Urban	22
General education teacher: Suburban	14
Special education teacher: Urban	9
Special education teacher: Suburban	17

Research Questions 1 and 2

Assessment. Several commonalities regarding assessment practices across both urban and suburban sites were found. The same assessment measures were utilized for both special and general education students with the exception of one or two schools (reports varied among the personnel interviewed in one of the schools). In addition, both urban and suburban schools used a variety of assessments. Teachers stated that they did use assessment results to improve their own teaching, but were unsure about how well or how extensively others used the data, reporting inconsistent use of test results by their colleagues. Communication between grade levels regarding assessment was relatively informal. For special education students, use of data occurred most commonly through the Individualized education program (IEP) process. In general, participants were positive about their ratings regarding assessment and its effect on teaching and professional development.

Differences across schools included that suburban respondents were more positive about the use of data to inform professional development, and that urban administrators were most positive in all of their ratings surrounding assessment and its use when compared with teachers and suburban administrators. Participants' ratings surrounding assessment also differed based on school location. The first question asked respondents to rate the effectiveness of the ways in which their school collected data. Most respondents rated data collection as effective; the ratings of suburban teachers responses averaged 4.2 on a five-point scale whereas urban teachers' ratings averaged 3.9. The second question asked participants to rate the effectiveness of the way their school used assessment data to inform professional development to improve teaching practice. Again, suburban school personnel responded slightly more positively with a mean rating of 4.2; urban personnel ratings averaged 3.8. For a full representation of the data on assessment as well as on curriculum and resources, see Table 3.

Table 3. Ratings of Participants on the Quality of Subsystems^a

Question	Principal		General Education Teacher		Special Education Teacher	
	Urban	Suburban	Urban	Suburban	Urban	Suburban
Assessment						
Data collection	3.8	4.3	3.2	3.8	4.4	3.3
Use of data to inform professional development	3.6	4.4	4.0	4.4	4.0	3.1
Curriculum						
Alignment of curriculum with state standards	4.1	4.6	3.7	4.6	4.5	4.9
Ability to work with at-risk general education readers	3.2	3.8	3.6	3.6	3.5	3.5
Ability to work with special education students in reading	3.4	4.4	4.0	3.8	4.7	2.7
Resources						
Communication between general and special education teachers	3.2	4.1	2.8	4.0	3.7	2.5
Places and spaces available for collaboration	4.2	4.5	3.5	4.2	3.4	3.5
Administrative support for special education teachers	4.0	4.5	4.4	4.5	4.0	5.0

a. Five-point scale

Another disparity that was reported both within and across schools related to what happened with the assessments after they were administered. Reports of methods used to score assessments, store the data, and communicate the results of assessments to other school personnel were often inconsistent within as well as across school. Respondents working in the same schools often reported the use of different instruments, explained different systems

for collecting and storing data, and discussed different processes of communication of test results. Across schools, assessments were scored, collected and results communicated by a range of personnel including individual special education teachers, by reading teachers, by special education supervisors, by school counselors, and/or by district-level personnel, and stored in a variety of locations. For example, responses to questions about data include “I do know they’re always calling downtown to get the data, so I don’t really know where it goes to be really honest,” “I was never asked to turn [assessment results] in to anyone, but I did use them . . . for when I had IEPs,” and “The way we used [assessment results] was pretty much for our own information.”

Curriculum. The majority of urban and suburban schools offered reading classes within the general education curriculum. All participants reported a high level of familiarity with state standards and the state curriculum framework, and special education teachers indicated that they had been asked to follow the general education curriculum or were working to align the curriculum with state standards; however, these were the only commonalities across urban and suburban schools.

The majority of classes in urban schools were focused specifically on struggling readers, whereas those classes in suburban schools did not appear to be focused on struggling readers. Most of the reading classes in suburban schools were directed at all students, regardless of reading level, at a particular grade level and ranged from a 9-week class for 7th graders to a full year class for all 6th graders. Teachers reported using a variety of materials and had been trained in a variety of methods. Thirty-four percent of administrators reported use of a specific curriculum in general education classes for struggling readers; the remainder of classes utilized a combination of methods and materials. When participants were asked to rate their school’s alignment of curriculum to state standards, differences existed in responses across urban and suburban sites. Suburban personnel responses averaged 4.9 out of 5 and urban personnel averaged 4.0.

Great variability in student placement was seen within and across schools. Students with disabilities received English/Language Arts instruction in various settings in both general and special education. Curriculum descriptions were vague; about 50% of teachers reported that the curriculum involved a literature anthology and was centered on state-level standards. Only one school reported using a formal reading curriculum in special education; the remainder indicated that their programs were based on students’ individual goals and objectives and/or employed a teacher-designed curriculum. Even fewer (11%) reported the use of specific curriculum in special education classes; again, most programs used a combination of materials and methods, including modified general education materials.

Support structures. Some support structures were common throughout all schools surveyed. Both urban and suburban schools had similar amounts and kinds of school-wide programs used to increase reading opportunities. These programs were often the coordinated efforts of media center personnel. Nearly all schools reported the use of reading management software such as Accelerated Reading or Reading Counts. Furthermore, participants' ratings of the support special education teachers receive from administration were similar across location. All participants ranked support quite highly with both suburban and urban ratings averaging about 4.2.

Several clear distinctions between urban and suburban schools in relation to school-wide programs were noted. First, nearly all urban personnel mentioned the use of sustained silent reading. Although all schools offered tutoring services to their students; however, there were qualitative differences in the kinds of tutoring support given. Whereas urban schools had more structured programming in place (e.g., Loop program, Bridges program, 21st Century), suburban schools relied mainly on informal supports (e.g., peer tutoring, teachers staying after school with students). In addition, suburban schools were more likely to rely on volunteers and organizations from within the community (e.g., local churches, PTO, helping moms, NHS) for extra literacy learning.

Personnel in schools reported a wide range of views about tutoring. Several suburban interviewees acknowledged that the main academic emphasis of tutoring was mathematics rather than reading. Personnel in urban schools indicated that funding was a major concern in their ability to offer reading supports to students over the summer. Two schools in the urban sample, for instance, have recently cancelled their summer programming due to financial issues. Surprisingly, suburban schools were not more likely to offer summer school to students. The few schools that offered summer programs for struggling students targeted instruction in reading and mathematics. Urban schools also were more likely to have reading specialists, yet personnel in these schools also appeared to have more flexible definitions of "reading specialist" than their counterparts in suburban schools. For example, a reading specialist in one school was a peer teacher with a master's degree in literacy who voluntarily took on extra work as a specialist. This person did not have the formal title or the position of "reading specialist" as in the suburban schools.

Within schools, little coordination appeared to exist among and between the key stakeholders who were responsible for literacy instruction (general education teacher, special education teacher and administrator). All schools with the exception of one suburban school evidenced inconsistencies in the

responses given by the three personnel within the building. For instance, participants gave contrasting responses regarding whether a literacy support structure was offered to students and also how this support was given. Thus, if schools offered extra support structures for literacy learning such as summer school, tutoring, or had a reading specialist in the building, it is clear that not all personnel are knowledgeable about these services. Also, there were differing opinions about the benefits of having these supports.

Communication, collaboration, and consultation. Among the participants, commonalities were found between both urban and suburban respondents with regard to communication, collaboration and consultation. For instance, all urban and suburban respondents reported that their schools were organized into teams that included teachers who taught the core subjects (language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics). In addition, the majority of teams included a special education teacher as part of their team and most felt there were places and spaces for general and special education teachers to meet and collaborate in their buildings. Responses averaged 4.0 for suburban personnel and 4.2 for urban personnel, on a five-point scale.

However, four major differences were found among urban and suburban respondents within this category. First, although special educators were part of grade-level teams, more suburban special educators shared common planning time with their team; in contrast, most urban special educators were not provided with the time to meet with their team during a common planning time. Second, when defining the purpose of their teams, responses from personnel from the two types of schools varied considerably. For example, urban school personnel indicated that the purpose of their teams was to collaborate, facilitate student learning within a smaller community, and to encourage problem solving. Suburban school personnel mentioned that the function included helping to integrate curriculum and collaborate on activities. Third, when asked to evaluate the effectiveness of teaming to solve reading problems, responses varied greatly among both urban and suburban participants ranging from extremely important to below average. One administrator summarized, "I would say they're all over the board, some teams are very good and some teams do not communicate well." Some expressed frustration with coordination surrounding teaming and collaboration: "You can't problem solve about reading, because you don't meet to talk about it . . . I don't get to meet even with my own literacy teachers. We don't have common planning times either, so we can never meet to talk about what we need to do because we're all on different lunch." Finally, when participants were asked to rate the communication around instructional issues between general education and special education, personnel in both schools rated communication quite

low in comparison to their other responses. Ratings averaged 3.4 for suburban personnel and 3.0 for urban personnel.

Within schools, there was little agreement among the key stakeholders in several areas of collaboration, communication, and consultation. One such area includes the purpose of teams and their effectiveness. Each of the key stakeholders in the school identified different purposes for teams. For example, in one urban school the special educator indicated that discussing student's strengths and challenges were the primary purpose. The administrator of the same school discussed behavior processing and behavior management as primary purposes. Furthermore, the general educator suggested that their purpose was to assist with grouping the students into smaller communities and for cross-curricular teaching. A second area in which few stakeholders agreed was the effectiveness of teams in addressing the reading problems of students on their teams. For instance, one suburban administrator noted that some of the school's teams were effective; in contrast, the special educator felt that only the special education teams were effective, yet the general educator stated that teams were invaluable for identifying students who were struggling with reading.

Resources. To learn more about the need for professional learning in literacy instruction, respondents were asked to rate their school's ability to help with literacy skills for special education students, and for at-risk general education students. Compared to their other responses about how well their schools were doing, both suburban and urban participants reported lower ratings for their schools' capacities to help with struggling readers. Suburban respondents' ratings averaged 3.5 (special education) and 3.4 (at-risk readers), and urban respondents' ratings averaged 3.6 (special education) and 3.5 (at-risk readers). Both urban and suburban educators recognized a need for ongoing professional development to improve their capacity to deliver instruction to these learners.

Professional development choice was strongly influenced by school (or district) selection of literacy curricula. Urban schools tended to select one or two curriculum packages for building-wide use, with intensive training and support during the implementation phase, followed by consultation for skill maintenance and periodic professional development at each building. Suburban schools reported using continuous school improvement processes: examining building achievement data, identifying areas in need of improvement, and determining professional development based on those needs. Individual and building-wide selection of professional development was guided by school improvement plans. Thus, urban schools offered a more uniform menu of professional development in support of literacy, focused on

effective use of curriculum packages, whereas the suburban school personnel selected their professional learning by linking their personal learning needs to school improvement goals.

The survey also addressed availability of personnel and finances to support literacy development. Administrators in urban settings indicated that a number of building level and district staff members were available to support teachers with literacy instruction; outside consultant services were purchased as needed to implement curriculum. Urban special education teachers appeared to be unaware of these supports; they reported sparse help available. General educators in the urban schools identified a broader range of support than special educators but less than their administrators. If support was available in the building, teachers knew about it. They were less likely to know of, or take advantage of, resource personnel outside of their buildings. Funds were budgeted to purchase material resources (books and other support materials) in the urban districts, however some teachers indicated that not everyone knew how to access these funds. Even so, urban respondents agreed that both general and special education teachers had been given access to general education curriculum materials. Urban general educators had class sets of materials at grade level; urban special educators had grade level textbooks, supplemented by texts from lower grade levels to support access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities.

Suburban administrators reported a range of support from district consultants to new teacher mentors. These were resources shared by more than one building. Like their urban counterparts, suburban special educators identified fewer resources (district consultants) than either the suburban administrators or general educators. General educators identified both district and building support personnel. Funding for materials and other supplemental resources was available for both general and special educators in suburban schools. Suburban administrators verified that special educators had general education texts to provide access to the curriculum. Both general and special educators had some funding to purchase additional materials, although general educators indicated decreasing budgets. One suburban general educator indicated that professional book and enrichment material purchases were determined by the collaborative decision-making processes in the district.

When asked whether teachers met regularly, and whether meetings addressed issues of reading instruction, urban administrators were somewhat unspecific as to the content, frequency, and level of attendance at district meetings. Two reported that special educators spent some time on literacy and one administrator indicated that special educators had met with the literacy specialist. Of the urban general educators, all of whom were Language

Arts teachers, three indicated that they met regularly as Language Arts teachers discussing literacy, reading, and writing; however two others could not recall any discussions specific to literacy. Among urban special educators, meetings were rare, and none indicated that reading issues were a priority.

Suburban administrators said that there were regular or monthly district meetings, but reading was not the focus of these meetings. Suburban general educators reported some discussions of literacy in departmental meetings, but one indicated that teachers in science, social studies, and math did not see literacy as part of their instructional responsibilities. Finally, suburban special educators did not indicate that meetings covered literacy.

Finally, when asked to describe the status of special education and special educators in their schools, six urban administrators indicated their support for both teachers and students in special education as evidenced by the positive relationships general education teachers had with students with disabilities, and by their seeking the advice of special educators before acting on behavioral issues. Urban general educators said that their administrators supported placement of special education students in some general education settings, and that they handled discipline problems for all students. They regarded special educators as collaborators. In contrast, urban special educators reported much more varied responses to their presence in the building. Some said they were welcome members of the staff. Others felt that the general educators had little understanding of the role disability played in behavior, and the role that special educators could realistically play in helping students succeed.

In the suburban schools, administrators valued their special educators, and the contributions that they made as consultants in their schools. Suburban general educators regarded special educators as members of the building team, peers, and collaborators. Suburban special educators did not respond to this question in sufficient numbers to identify a trend: a deaf educator indicated that the number of students with hearing impairments was so small that their program wasn't seen as vital to the school.

Research Question 3

An explicit goal of the study was to interrogate how each of the five subsystems was utilized, understood, and coordinated to support reading instruction in the middle grades for at-risk and special education students. The third research question uses the data from the first two questions to examine systemic coherence and coordination of the five subsystems in the previous section. The four principles of the conceptual framework guided the results for this question.

The data revealed that every school had one or more subsystems that were operating to support reading instruction in the middle grades. A surprise in the study was that every school collected some form of assessment data on their students in the area of reading. Also surprising was the attention given to teaching reading to middle grade students.

While there appeared to be islands of quality in each school, it was also the case that there were threats to systemic coherence in every school, regardless of location (urban or suburban). An examination of the data across all five subsystems revealed that there were threats to coherence in each of the five subsystems.

Threats to coherence in coordination and alignment. The data revealed that middle school reading curricula was generally aligned to Michigan Core Curriculum Framework Standards identified by the Michigan Department of Education. Though this alignment to state standards was evident in most schools, other data revealed that there was also curricular confusion and uncertainty especially as it related to the enactment of curriculum for students at-risk for school failure and those in special education. This confusion took at least two forms including (1) uneven and/or unclear school wide structures for supporting and extending reading opportunities, and (2) confusion on the role that curriculum plays in the special education program.

Middle schools frequently indicated that they used a variety of activities to support reading beyond the core curriculum. Schools in both urban and suburban settings reported using computer-supported reading instruction (e.g., Accelerated Reader), tutoring, and motivational programs that focused on external rewards for increasing reading to support literacy development. Although these programs existed to support literacy efforts, the data suggested that these programs were not well understood by teachers, nor were they integrally related to support at-risk readers. Instead, these supplemental reading programs were seen as “add-ons” to the core curriculum. These programs appeared to exist in relative isolation, did not have clear or universal procedures for identifying who was to receive the program, and typically did not utilize assessment data to impact student placement or monitor performance over time. Having programs available for students may be a necessary but insufficient condition for improving reading programming. Moreover, in no case was there explicit data to support the usage or impact of the supplemental reading programs on reading achievement.

A second threat to coordination and alignment was the role the curriculum played in reading programming for students in special education. Most special education teachers reported that they did not use a formal (published?) reading curriculum but instead created their own. This lack of reading curriculum

may make communicating information to future teachers problematic. It also calls into question whether students are receiving a balanced, systematic reading program that cuts across key areas of word identification, sight vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, cognitive strategy instruction, and personal response to literature. Although there was some attention to meeting the general education standards, special education faculty in some buildings reported that they did not have access to general education curricular texts. Coupled with the fact that both general and special education teachers reported that communication between the general education and special education teachers was a significant barrier, it appears that reading instruction for special education students is highly variable.

Threats to coherence in the culture of collaboration. The research literature on effective leadership consistently points to the principal's role as instructional leader, cultural change agent, and as one who thoughtfully distributes leadership across stakeholders. An outcome of this study was to gain insight into how key stakeholders understood programmatic aspects of reading. Clarity and general agreement between stakeholders about the reading system would indicate that there was some level of coherence in collaboration for the delivery of reading instruction. A lack of clarity would indicate that there may be confusion in the development of a responsive reading system. This places the role of leadership as central in ensuring that the reading program is clearly articulated and shared among stakeholders.

Threats to the coherence of individuation and differentiation. One of the most difficult areas for schools was the creation of pedagogical improvement systems to build the capacity of faculty in reading. This was most pronounced in the special education programs where the vast majority of teachers did not use a formal reading curriculum but created their own curriculum. The threats to coherence in the pedagogical improvement system were impacted by threats in the other subsystems. The lack of curriculum and the lack of curricular materials for nearly all of the special education faculty made targeting pedagogical improvement difficult. When questioned about professional development opportunities, special education faculty indicated that when they met with district special education personnel, these meetings were devoted to monitoring and compliance issues, but seldom (if ever) to improving pedagogical skills. When these same teachers participated in building-level professional development, they were assigned to join a content area team even though this may not have met their own needs.

A less explicit but important threat to the pedagogical improvement system was the role confusion that existed for what constituted special education programming. Special education reading programming varied across

buildings; some buildings identified the general education benchmarks as the focus of instruction even though (presumably) many students were reading well below grade level. These conditions in the school illuminate the tension between the newly mandated requirement for “access to the general education curriculum” while existing in the shadows of the historic role of providing remedial skills instruction and helped to create confusion. This confusion exacerbates the challenges of improving pedagogical skills of special education teachers. Without clarity on the role that special education is supposed to play in the middle grades, it is difficult to identify possible curricular choices and then provide targeted professional development in that curriculum.

Threats to accountability. Data collection were a general strength in nearly all schools interviewed in the study. In contrast, data management and communication of data to inform teaching were a challenge for most schools. There was wide variation in who collected the data, where data were stored, who was responsible for scoring data, and how data were communicated to key stakeholders. The interviews revealed that faculty members seldom participated in complete cycles of disciplined inquiry where teachers would participate in the collection, analysis, and publication of data. Data analysis, if it was undertaken, was done by someone outside the core faculty. This reliance on non-faculty members to manage most aspects of the data collection process may make using information to inform decision-making a difficult normative disposition for problem-solving in the building.

Assessment can provide the baseline for communication of student achievement within a school. It is necessary in order for the other subsystems of curriculum, support structures, resources, and communication, collaboration, and consultation to have significance in terms of improving learning and student outcomes. The results of this study indicated that although many schools appear to be assessing students with the same measure(s), the reporting and the use of assessment results may be highly inconsistent and unstructured. This finding has poor implications for overall systematic coherence and could also signify problems with support structures and communication.

All schools reported assessing both general and special education students on a regular basis. For the most part, schools had formal structures for addressing needs of at-risk readers, including classes and tutoring, and formal structures for collaboration (teaming). However, their systemic coherence was poor with discrepancies within schools about how the data were scored, stored, and disseminated; great variability in placement for at-risk readers; lack of formal curricula for reading classes; and wide variation in the use of teaming to improve student learning. Participants’ ratings of their school’s

ability to work with at-risk readers and of the communication between general and special education teachers were lowest of all their ratings. They indicated that tutoring efforts were not reaching students who were most in need of remediation.

Although both urban and suburban schools reported these difficulties, participants in suburban schools rated all of the factors assessed higher than participants working in urban schools. Suburban personnel indicated better curriculum alignment, better data collection and usage, more community support for tutoring (e.g., parent volunteers), and more effective use of teaming to work on curriculum. They also reported having access to monies for use for classroom materials.

In summary, one compelling implication of the data is that urban schools might most benefit from having greater coherence across the five subsystems. Stakeholders in urban settings generally had lower ratings within each of the five subsystems but also faced demographic challenges such as higher teacher mobility, less experienced administrators, higher student mobility, and fewer resources. It remains tenable that coherence is differentially valued in urban and suburban schools. Since suburban schools are generally scoring above average on state-mandated tests and meeting AYP, there may be less attention focused on working with at-risk readers. On the other hand, urban schools face significant demographic challenges that make achieving coherence difficult even with the external pressure of failing to meet AYP. These implications are discussed in detail in the next section.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this exploratory study was to assess how middle schools in urban and suburban settings organized the delivery of reading instruction from a principled and systemic perspective. A key operating assumption was the importance of coherence and articulation among five subsystems that are implicated in the quality of effective reading practice. This study sought to examine reading instruction by assessing the extent to which schools had become learning organizations as defined by the coordination of five subsystems and a set of guiding principles that represented particular values, norms, dispositions, and behaviors. Rather than focus exclusively on a particular curricular program, intervention, or professional development approach (e.g., coaching, peer feedback), this study attempted to understand how leadership, curriculum, professional development, data management, and organizational structures were orchestrated to support reading achievement.

Both demographic information and major findings of this study were consistent with those reported by others. Many of the problems of delivery of reading curricula and system-wide supports and resources were noted in both urban and suburban schools. Implications for improving systemic coherence and targeted professional development were discussed.

The high achievement noted in suburban schools and low achievement in urban schools included in this study are not surprising, nor is the overrepresentation of minorities in special education (Artiles & Trent, 1994). The high reported rates of teacher turnover in urban schools are also to be expected (Balfanz et al., 2002). The fact that urban teachers are teaching more classes than suburban teachers raises alarm because of the great need to improve teacher retention and support in high-need schools, and high course-load is related to teacher attrition (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Hunter Quartz, 2003).

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Henig, Hula, Orr, and Pedescleaux (1999) argued that failure of school reform "is less an unwillingness to try something new. . . than a fragmented, episodic effort" (p. 13). They believe that factors contributing to this failure include "insufficient resources, inadequate program design, and finally a lack of community capacity to build a genuine reform coalition" (p. 13). Efforts have clearly been made at these schools to implement reform: schools are assessing all students, they have implemented teaming and professional

development, and they have classes and tutoring opportunities for struggling readers. However, their responses to reform efforts do appear to be “fragmented” and “episodic.”

As one example of this fragmentation, one of the most revealing findings of this study is the lack of systemic coherence for providing ongoing learning opportunities to improve the pedagogical skills of special education faculty, regardless of setting. Special education teachers in both urban and suburban settings characterize their professional development opportunities as focused primarily on monitoring or compliance issues when they attend building/district special education meetings or being asked to join a general education grade level team if the professional development is organized by the building administration. While it is possible to argue, especially with recent mandates to “access general education curriculum,” that meeting with general education content teachers may be appropriate on occasion, it remains unclear what role specialized curricula and individualized instruction plays at the middle school level. One potential disadvantage of continuing to be “a-curricular” is the inherent difficulty in providing targeted professional development to improve procedural fidelity to evidenced-based interventions. Whereas the special education teachers in many of our schools indicate that they are supported by administration (leadership system), this support does not necessarily lead to improved outcomes for students when there are compromises in the curriculum cohesion, pedagogical improvement, and organization/resources systems. Special education teachers reside in a system where there is little vertical coherence in the curriculum or data management systems. Moreover, their schools have not figured out ways for these faculty to improve their pedagogical skills (though this is difficult, as there may not be a coherent curriculum).

Historically, schools have not been well organized for building the capacity of its most important members—the stakeholders (teachers, paraprofessionals, reading specialists, ancillary support personnel) who provide direct services to students. Schools that become “learning organizations” may have to rethink how they organize the use of personnel, the distribution of resources, and the structures available for learning to occur. In nearly every instance of failed educational change, it is possible to point not only to a break down in one or several of the systems but also a failure of these systems to work together in ways that impact the norms, values, beliefs, and behaviors of stakeholders. Changes in the organizational structures are not only physical changes, like creating a common planning period, a new teaming structure, or a summer school program to increase opportunities to learn; in fact, the most important organizational changes may be the dispositional values, beliefs, and practices that are invoked through the structural changes.

In this study, we used a heuristic for guiding the development of our interview protocols to better understand five key subsystems and their role in providing conceptual clarity to the educational change process. As expected, nearly every school had relative strengths and weaknesses across the five subsystems. Schools often had one or even several systems that were well developed, coordinated, and implemented (though few had evaluation data). No school in either the suburban or urban middle schools, however, demonstrated high levels of systemic coherence across the five systems. Separate subsystems created pockets or areas of excellence, but no school was able to articulate how the systems interacted to support one another.

The complexity of the change process makes it difficult for leaders to simultaneously juxtapose and orchestrate change. By raising to conscious realization the importance of each individual subsystem and how each system is necessary to sustain change over time, leaders have a tool that can guide the re-culturing process. A systems heuristic provides stakeholders with a way to better articulate why particular choices are made in the change process, to attend to allied systems that are necessary for a new change to succeed, and to communicate the vision of the organization to others.

In summary, urban middle schools clearly faced challenges that were not as prevalent in suburban middle schools. Urban middle schools had greater turnover in their faculty, less experienced administrators, higher student mobility, lower SES, and significantly lower student achievement in each of the core areas assessed by the Michigan Education Assessment Program (i.e., failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress for at least three consecutive years). The failure to meet Adequate Yearly Progress for at least three consecutive years placed each of the urban middle schools at greater levels of risk. Urban stakeholders generally reported lower levels of satisfaction within most of the five subsystems when compared to their suburban peers. The capacity to respond to external pressures may benefit from strong internal coherence within and across the five subsystems. The conventionalization of principles, procedures, routines, and structures may provide a system with coherence (e.g., institutional memory) that could help alleviate some of the challenges of working within a less stable environment. In this study, there was little data to support that urban middle schools had stronger individual subsystems, nor were these programs coherent across subsystems.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations to the study design influence the generalizability of the results. First, only five urban and five suburban middle schools were used in

this study. Second, the primary data source was an interview protocol that relied on self-reported data, though an attempt to address this limitation was to interview three different stakeholders from each building. This allowed the researchers to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the consistencies as well as the inconsistencies in the reading system. Third, each of the schools reported in this study were from a single Midwestern state, so data may not generalize to other states in the country.

The data in this study indicated that there were several strengths in collecting common data on both general education and special education personnel. This approach uncovered significant factors affecting the five subsystems of reading instruction and four principles of schools as learning organizations. However, one of the foremost implications of this study is the need to continue to study the role that coherence and coordination of the five subsystems have played in exemplary schools that have “beat the odds” (Taylor et al., 1999). Research in this area needs to combine the qualitative and the quantitative to capture both the inner complexity and the larger-scale outcomes of successful middle school reading programming.

In conclusion, an in-depth look at the similarities and differences across and within selected urban and suburban middle schools in Michigan touches upon the intricacy of examining systems of reading instruction, and the importance of investigating coherence with attention to the larger structures involved. Although on the surface, urban and suburban schools had similar structures for reading intervention in place (e.g., curriculum alignment with state standards, teaming, offering reading classes), there were many significant qualitative differences (e.g., type of tutoring and courses offered, what students were targeted) across setting. Overall, systemic coherence was uncommon. Even within school, personnel gave varying responses as to what happened with student assessment results after it was collected, what programs were offered in their schools, who was responsible for these programs, and more. Although middle schools appeared to be addressing reading problems in at-risk and special education students, the pervasive lack of consistency in responses even within school gives rise to several threats to systemic coherence. These threats align with each of the four principles of schools as learning organizations. Implications include a need for re-examination and reculturation of reading instruction within the context of larger systems, regardless of school location.

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