ANNUAL REPORT
Project: “The Strength of Social Influence as a Determinant of Organizational Change”
Primary Investigator: Stephen J. Mezias
Co-Primary Investigator: Ebony N. Bridwell-Mitchell
Researchers: Theresa Lant; Ray E. Reagans

Award No. SES-0433280
Proposal No. SES-0433280
Award Date: September 17, 2004

PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

The Research Team. The research team for the NSF-sponsored project, “The Strength of Social Influence as a Determinant of Organizational Change” includes Professors Stephen J. Mezias, Theresa Lant and Doctoral Candidate Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell in the Department of Management and Organizations at the New York University Stern School of Business and Professor Ray Reagans in the Management Department at the Columbia Business School.

The theoretical and empirical work of the first investigator, Stephen Mezias, has provided foundational contributions to the field of organizational learning and change (e.g. Lant & Mezias, 1990; 1992). The investigator’s depth of knowledge about existing models and processes of organizational change provide the foundation for the development and testing of new models, such as the one focused on in this project. What the first investigator brings in theoretical, empirical and methodological experience, the second investigator, Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell brings in hands–on experience in the industry context of interest for this study. With formal training in educational policy at Cornell University and Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government and ten years of experience in educational research, consulting and practice Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell is an expert on change and reform initiatives in public schools.

The primary investigators’ expertise in organizational change and the public school context is extended by the expert support of senior personnel and project participants who study the dynamics of social networks and sociocognitive models. Professor Ray Reagans brings expertise in the interplay between social network structure and performance as well as how network
structure influences the diffusion of knowledge and information (e.g. Argote, McEvily & Reagans, 2003). Professor Theresa Lant’s support provides critical knowledge in the construction of collective cognitive models and how sociocognitive models influence organizations, industries and markets (e.g. Lant, 1999).

Collaborations & Contacts. During Year 1 the team has worked with numerous school leaders to secure access to data at multiple school sites. These contacts include three representatives of the New York State Department of Education who were essential to gaining access to schools under registration review and to developing valid survey measures for teacher behaviors and school outcomes. The director and staff of the New York City Department of Education Division of Assessment and Accountability were critical contacts for obtaining the five year performance history of all New York City public schools. Other contacts include twelve school principals from interested schools and five local instructional superintendents who represent the districts and regions in which schools are situated. As part of the development of the survey instrument the team conducted a set of focus groups at two pilot sites. The focus groups included twelve teachers and the input of three administrators. In preparation for an ethnographic pilot study of two schools the team met with researchers at The Institute for Education and Social Policy which has produced numerous research and technical reports on New York City SURRE schools.

ACTIVITIES AND FINDINGS

Overview. During the past year the team has engaged in a number of activities that have resulted in the successful implementation of the research study. An abbreviated chronicle of the major activities is provided in bullet form below:

* Worked with numerous contacts in the research and practitioner community to secure data, gain access to and prepare for entry into New York City public schools.
* Launch and completion of four-month ethnographic pilot study at two school sites, resulting in 27 (30-60 minute) formal interviews with teachers and administrators and 175-plus hours of field observations.
* Hired and trained graduate student to conduct interviews and take ethnographic field notes at pilot site.
* Convened a set of two focus groups with twelve teachers to assist in development of survey instrument and clarification of key research constructs.
* Developed sample frame and implementation plan for Study 1 that would include seven NYC schools.
* Collection of school level school performance data, student demographics and regulatory authorities for 650 plus New York City K-8 public schools.
* Identified and solicited 150 K-8 NYC public schools for participation in the research study.
* Secured access for data collection at five school sites for Study 1 (two additional sites are expected to be added by the end of summer 2005).
* Conducted first survey administrations at four school sites for Study 1.
* Began data analysis from ethnographic pilot and data entry of social network and opinion data from Study 1.

The first full meeting of the team was held on September 14, 2004 to plan and prepare for the launch of three studies of organizational change in the New York City public schools. The team agreed on a three-study framework for the project, which will examine the intra, intra and extra organizational dynamics of the schools. Study one examines how the social network dynamics of professional communities in seven NYC schools affects attitudes and actions related to instructional strategies and the overall outcome of change initiatives. Study two focuses on principal networks and how the relationships they build outside their schools effect the choices they make for emphasizing specific aspects of the different reforms. Study three examines the context for change in these school organizations by mapping contemporary and historical events in the institutional environment which may have initiated various change initiatives.

Findings from the Pilot Study. In the panel review of the initial proposal, one reviewer noted that the researchers could improve the research design and findings if they were to: “spend more time in the field understanding the context for each site. For example, before doing the network survey, FUEL assessment and quantitative research, the team might spend one month studying the process of change. They might observe the patterns of behavior, decision rights, the balance of power, and the interaction of people noting contextual differences (different cultural and
among schools sites identified as SURR.” In service of the above goal, the team identified two schools as sites for an ethnographic pilot study – one recently removed from the SURR list, one recently added. Since November 4\textsuperscript{th}, 2004 over 175 hours have been spent at the sites collecting observational data and conducting interviews. The data is a rich source of contextual understandings of the micro-dynamics of organizational change, particularly in the schools context.

The early learnings from the pilot study not only provided insights into the broad research question, “how do organizational members interactions and understanding affect organizational change” but they also highlighted important issues for the development of a valid survey instrument. These lessons learned from the pilot cover span general areas: 1) influences on member understandings of change; 2) influences on professional interactions and conversations; 3) influences on the relationship between member understandings, interactions and change and 4) contextual distinctions for feasibility, urgency, effectiveness and legitimacy.

Among the insights provided by the ethnographic study, our research revealed that member understanding of change are often moderated by training, experiences under old regimes, motivations, cultural schemas, demography and leader vision/expectations. Additionally, interviews with organizational members suggest that particular social spaces and social times completely structure interactions between organizational members. Also, tenure, status and expertise influence social network ties, as does school size and “morale" seems to serve as precondition for interactions among staff. Finally, findings from the study suggest that the effects of understandings and interactions on change depend on oversight versus social support as a motivator for change, perceptions about the limited effects of change efforts, starting levels of human capital and other necessary resources/inputs. A key finding relevant to the development of a valid survey instrument was that organizational members make much more fined-grained distinctions when considering resources, effectiveness and pressure. For example, member conceptions of ‘resources’ have at least three dimensions, including, support from superiors, availability of work materials and training. Similarly, ‘effectiveness’ is related to test scores, student learning and the overall school climate. The researchers used these and similar
findings to develop context specific survey items for the feasibility, urgency, effectiveness and legitimacy constructs.

Training & Outreach. The research team’s three major efforts at training and outreach include 1) working with graduate students to conduct ethnographic field observations and interviews; 2) talking to other scholars about the project and its guiding theories and 3) talking to practitioners and organizational leaders about frameworks for interpreting change processes in their organizations. Field observations and interviews for the pilot study were conducted by two graduate students, one being the co-primary investigator the other a doctoral student in comparative education at New York University’s Steinhardt School of Education. Training for the data collection effort included study and discussion of literature from a syllabus of independent reading and participation in a doctoral seminar on ethnographic methods in New York Universities Department of Anthropology. Through the training the students mastered the skills of perspective-taking, techniques for taking field notes and method for conducting interviews and focus groups.

As part of the outreach effort the team has talked with numerous scholars about the project and research initiative. These conversations and collaborations have resulted in refinement of the research ideas and design and have publicized the work to the wider research community. For example, the team’s conversations with Carol Ascher of the Institute for Educational and Social Policy provide a link to researchers with in-depth experience working with New York City public schools. Collaborations with Dorothy Shipps at Columbia University’s Teachers’ College links the research teams efforts to scholars with an interest in educational policy and the politics of school reform. The research team’s forging of links to research communities interested in management and organizations is illustrated by our discussions with Professor William Ouchi from UCLA about the overlapping themes in his new book, Making Schools Work: A Revolutionary Plan to Get Your Children the Education They Need and those of the research study.

Finally, the research team has attempted to reach out to the practitioner community by talking with school leaders about how the research frame may provide insights for thinking about change
in their schools. Specifically, at the request of school administrators at the research sites, the team has provided ‘research update memorandums’ and held discussions with school leadership which illustrate key themes in the early research findings and how those themes might be useful for directing future change efforts.

**Publications and Products**

The first year of the project has been devoted primarily to planning, early implementation and development of the first of three research studies. Consequently, publication of journal articles and book chapters is anticipated for future years. The research team has developed a number of other specific products which includes 1) a data base of all NYC K-8 public schools (for which data was available) organized by performance history and acting regulatory authorities, 2) a physical collection of the past three years of state reports of schools under registration review, which provides policy mandates for required changes in these schools, 3) a seventy-item survey instrument that collects opinion and experience data of organizational members and two social network instruments that collects information on the frequency of interaction and closeness of organizational members. A website summarizing the research project and it development is currently under-construction.

**Contributions**

One of the guiding motivations for the research study is the team’s belief that the studies positive results can empower organizational practitioners with understandings that help them better navigate organizational change. The model we test is of particular importance for organizations operating in complex, uncertain and ambiguous environments of which public schools are an example. Currently, there are multiple theories that attempt to describe the nature of organizational change but they leave one with a surprising lack of clarity about the fundamental nature of change and how to predict it. This research provides an analytical lens that unifies existing conceptions of change by examining its underlying mechanisms. This approach facilitates a much-needed dialogue between scholars of organizational change, scholars of social networks and scholars who study social cognition.
Furthermore, it is our understanding that this project is among the first to collect formal social network data in public schools. This is an important step forward since conversations about the importance of the professional community in the educational research literature are long standing (e.g. Louis & Marks, 1998; Louis & Marks, et al. 1996) yet, there have been few attempts to formally model the dynamics which result in the kinds of norms on which arguments about professional community are grounded. Ultimately, the team’s research speaks to scholars and practitioners across diverse fields and in multiple domains, providing insight to those interested in organizational change, complex systems, social networks, sociocognitive processes, professional communities and education/schools.

REFERENCES.


