

Managing in the Middle: School Leaders and the Enactment of Accountability Policy¹

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Abstract

This paper investigates how mid-level managers make sense of and mediate district accountability policy. Arguing that teachers' evolving perceptions and understanding of accountability policies are likely to be mediated by school leaders, the authors explore how school managers *enact* their policy environments focusing chiefly on the ways in which they construct district accountability policies. Adopting a cognitive or interpretive frame on implementation, the authors explore how school leaders made sense of district accountability mechanisms illuminating how their sense-making was situated in their professional biographies, building histories, and their roles as intermediaries between district office and classroom teachers.

Over the past twenty years, America's schools have been deluged with reform initiatives orchestrated by government agencies, professional associations, and for-profit and non-profit agencies. More recently, "accountability" has loomed large in reform initiatives as numerous state and local government agencies have implemented mechanisms that hold schools accountable for student performance (Clotfelter & Ladd, 1996). At the core of these initiatives is an attempt to fundamentally change authority and influence patterns in schools to motivate teachers to do a better job of educating America's children. Most research on accountability has focused on the effects of these initiatives on student achievement and, to a lesser extent, their influence on classroom instruction. Specifically, the work has centered on improvements in student test scores and the response of classroom teachers to these new accountability regimes.

Ironically, the role of principals in implementing accountability-based policies has gone largely ignored. The work of middle level management is key because accountability levers operate in and through particular schools where they are understood through existing beliefs, experiences, and ways of doing business. Such levers do not exist in a vacuum, and school managers are not passive receptors of their environments. Rather, they *enact* their environments; that is, they "construct, rearrange, single out, and demolish many objective features of their surroundings" (Weick, 1979, p. 164). In this paper, we investigate how mid-level managers make sense of accountability policies, exploring the ways in which they mediate district accountability policy. While teachers often encounter district and state accountability mechanisms through media reports, policy directives, and union newsletters (among other sources) their evolving perceptions and understanding of these policies are likely to be mediated through participation in

their school community. Hence, understanding how accountability mechanisms are mediated by school leaders is crucial to understanding how these policies influence classroom instruction and student achievement. As state governments and local school districts define standards and mobilize accountability mechanisms, while leaving schools to figure out how best to reach these standards, the mediating role of school leaders becomes increasingly salient.

Using data collected from qualitative research in 13 Chicago Public Elementary schools, we examine how school leaders mediate teachers' responses to district accountability policies. We use the term school leaders rather than school administrators intentionally because, although much of the empirical work focuses on the implications of changing policy environments for the school principal, we view school leadership for instruction as distributed among formal and informal leaders in schools (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 1999). Citing rising test scores, Chicago Public Schools are frequently upheld as a model of successful "accountability" reforms. But the manner in which such policy levers work on and in schools to increase test scores remains something of a black box. Moreover, the available evidence suggests that while student achievement has improved considerably district-wide, these improvements have not been uniform across schools. While some schools have made substantial gains others have not (with some 66 elementary schools, over 15% of the district's elementary schools, having minimal gains or losses in student achievement in the 1999-2000 school year) (Hess, 2000).

Most policy analysts invoke a relatively clear and popular causal model – rational choice theory - to explain how a state or local government agency can induce an agent (in this case teachers and schools) to change behavior if they mobilize incentives or sanctions that matter to that agent. However, even if these are the causal mechanisms at play, it is not clear what

happens once a school district manages to get a school's attention via the mobilization of rewards and sanctions. How do school leaders manage to build and sustain interest in accountability within their school community? What are the range of strategies that schools use in response to state or district accountability mechanisms in order to make improvements in student learning and/or change tests scores? Given wide variation in school resources and climate, what does it mean for accountability policies to work?

Adopting a cognitive or interpretive frame on implementation, we propose to unpack the process through which school leaders implement, and in the process mediate, accountability policies. Compared with rational-choice theory, this lens affords considerably more agency to mid-level managers and other actors at the street level who have to make sense of accountability mechanisms in order to respond to them. On the one hand, the causal theory in accountability policies is straightforward: If you mobilize tangible rewards that matter to folks they will pay attention and work on the problem you believe they should be working on. However, teaching and learning, (processes at the core of improvements in student achievement), are uncertain. Unlike agents depicted in rational choice models, teachers operate in highly uncertain and highly dynamic environments, where means and ends are not always clear. Faced with shifting, limited information, teachers do not always act as the profit or self-maximizing actors portrayed in rational choice models. Consequently, while accountability policies may define concrete outcomes with tangible rewards and sanctions, from the perspective of teachers', the means to achieving these outcomes are rarely clear.

Theoretical Frame²

Recent scholarship in a number of disciplines investigates the role of implementers' sense-making in the implementation process, underscoring that the reform ideas that implementers construct from policy influence what they do, and do not do, in implementing that policy (EEPA, 1990; Hill, 2000; Lin, 1998, 2000; Spillane, 1998a, 2000; Yanow, 1996). Implementation involves interpretation because implementers must figure out what a policy means and whether and how it applies to their school in order to decide whether and how to ignore, adapt, or adopt policy locally. A cognitive perspective accentuates implementers' interpretation of policy signals pressing us to unpack the ideas that local implementers construct from reform proposals such as state and district accountability measures.

Human cognition is complex. A key though often ignored aspect of cognition is sense-making; that is, the ways in which people make “sense” of their environments. Sense-making underscores that “people generate what they interpret” – they create the environment and select the cues and signals that they interpret. Hence, interpretation is part of sense-making (Weick, 1995). These ideas are not new, forming the basis for the social interactionist tradition in sociology (Blumer, 1969). Blumer argues that “human beings act towards things on the basis of the meaning that things have for them . . . the meaning of such things is derived from, or arise out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows . . . meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he

² The following section draws heavily from Spillane, J. *Cognition and Implementation*; and Spillane, J & Reimer, T. *Implementation: Sketching A Cognitive Model*.

encounters” (p. 2). Sense-making is essential in understanding what individuals come to understand from policy, a complex element often ignored by rational choice models.

Weick identifies seven interacting dimensions of sense-making. He argues that sense-making is “grounded in identity construction,” which influences noticing, interpretation, and the use of “extracted cues,” that is, the information that is noticed in the environment. Explanations of the environment are based on “plausibility rather than accuracy” and efforts to make “retrospective” sense of past cues. Further, sense-making is oriented toward actions in that it takes place in the context of “ongoing” projects, and it leads to behaviors that “enact” the environment that people make sense of. This sense-making process takes place in a “social” context with multiple actors.

To summarize, explanations and actions are constrained by perceptions of social appropriateness and collective meaning. While individuals have loomed large in much of cognitive science, human cognition as Weick’s model underscores, is not a solo affair. It is situated; that is, inextricably tied to the situation in which stimuli are noticed, interpreted, and subsequently acted upon (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Suchman, 1988; Resnick, 1991; Weick, 1995). We experience the world as social beings through our membership of various “thought communities” (Zerubavel, 1997). Implementers encounter public policy in a complex web of organizational structures, social networks, as well as cultural and historical traditions. And human sense-making is constituted in the interaction of individuals with these circumstances, both past and present (Drake, Spillane, & Hufferd, 2000; Lin, 1998, 2000).

We see the sense-making or cognitive perspective as a supplement rather than an alternative to more conventional perspectives – institutional and rational perspectives - on the

implementation process in that the cognitive model expands conventional models by increasing their explanatory power (Spillane & Reimer, in progress). From an institutional perspective, social agents' actions are situated in institutional sectors that provide norms, rules, and definitions of the environment that both constrain and enable action (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott & Meyer, 1991). These tacit schemata define appropriate structures and give meaning and order to action in institutional sectors (Scott, 1995). In this scheme, policy is about preserving the legitimacy of the institution in order to maintain public support for the institution. Contrary to some interpretations of the institutional perspective, institutional schemata do not determine sense-making so as to undermine human agency.³ While institutional theory emphasizes how human sense-making is constrained by the institutional sector, our cognitive perspective (while acknowledging how institutional arrangements structure human sense-making) also affords a more prominent role to human agency in the sense-making process. For its part, the rational model focuses on policy as a technical enterprise designed to achieve particular instrumental goals. In this paper, we acknowledge the significance and relevance of these conventional perspectives but press for more attention to the unpredictable, multi-directional aspects of the policy

³ Interestingly, some of the core original works in the new institutionalism (Dimaggio & Powell, 1977) did not perceive institutional sectors as all determining and gave a substantial role to human agency. Regretfully, much of the subsequent work in new institutionalism has downplayed the role of human agency, resulting in a much more structural determinist view. Some recent work is beginning to pay more attention to the role of agency and two-way interaction in institutional environments (see Burch, 2000, Burch and Coburn, 1999, Edelman, 1991; Spillane & Jennings, 1998; Suchman, 1991, Scully and Creed, 1991; Ventresca, forthcoming).

implementation process, especially the critical if often overlooked influence of school-level agents in constructing policy messages.

The Situation of Mid-Level Managers. As mid-level managers, school leaders occupy a rather particular situation that may be especially relevant when it comes to their efforts to make sense of policy in general and accountability policy in particular. Their work focuses in at least two directions in the organizational hierarchy. On the one hand school leaders are dependent on both their local community stakeholders and the district office. In this respect, school leaders are street level workers responsible for implementing school policy (Lipsky, 1980). On the other hand, they are also dependent on classroom teachers. In this respect, classroom teachers are the street level workers.

Relations between mid level managers and street level workers are characterized by dependency and conflict (Lipsky, 1980). The objectives of mid-level managers and those of street level workers are often in conflict with street level workers interested in minimizing the dangers and discomfort of the job and maximizing income and personal gratification. They also have a strong desire to maintain and expand their autonomy. Mid level managers seek to achieve results consistent with agency objectives and work to restrict street level workers' autonomy and discretion. Street level workers have some important resources with which they can resist managers' desires including collective resources that strengthen their position – union policies and agreements and their critical position in the organization. As a result managers depend on street level workers for the achievement of organizational goals. Teachers' expertise and their willingness to get involved in the school's agenda are critical resources. They also can refuse to perform certain tasks or decide to work at a minimal level. Teachers have a considerable degree of

discretion and autonomy in responding to district levers. Yet, at the same time, teachers are partially dependent upon the principal and potentially other school level leaders. For example, principals and other school leaders allocate resources including some funding, curricular materials, and class assignments.

The autonomy that teachers and other street level workers exercise is in part a product of teachers' isolation and conditions which leave them to practice alone with little peer or managerial supervision (Lortie 19??) School management and teaching are "loosely coupled" (Weick, 1979). The uncertainty with respect to the means and ends of street level work also contribute to teachers' autonomy from external supervision (Cohen, 1988; Lipsky, 1980). Because of the complexity and context-dependent nature of teacher-student interactions, external attempts to standardize teachers' response rarely work. Hence, classroom teachers enjoy relatively high degrees of discretion and relative autonomy from organizational authority, contributing to school leaders dependency on teachers.

Research Methodology

This paper is based on data from the Distributed Leadership Project, a four-year longitudinal study of elementary school leadership funded by the National Science Foundation and the Spencer Foundation. The project began with a six-month pilot phase during the Winter and Spring of 1999 involving seven Chicago elementary schools, four interview only sites and three schools where we conducted interviews and extensive fieldwork. The first full year of data collection (Phase 1) began in September 1999 and focused on eight Chicago elementary schools, two of which were also part of the study's pilot phase. Year 01 data collection was completed in June 2000, and involved between 50 and 70 days of fieldwork in each of our eight sites. The

three schools that are the focus of this paper, selected because they represent important variation among schools in our study in response to accountability policies, were not part of the pilot phase of the study.

Site Selection. We used a theoretical sampling strategy (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to select schools based on five dimensions. First, all schools in our study are high poverty with a minimum of 60% of students receiving free or reduced lunch (See Table 1). Second, the schools vary in terms of student demographics, including seven schools that are predominantly African American, three that are predominantly Hispanic, and three that are mixed (See Table 1). Third, while we are chiefly interested in schools that had shown signs of improving mathematics, science, or literacy instruction (in terms of either process or outcome measures), we also wanted to study some schools that had managed little change in student outcome gains. Further, we wanted to vary schools in terms of the duration of their change efforts. We used Consortium on Chicago School Research's longitudinal database to identify elementary schools that have shown indications of improvement on measures that include "academic press," "professional community," and "instructional leadership"⁴ (process measures) and "academic productivity."⁵ Our 13 schools fall into three broad categories in terms of instructional change –change efforts in the past one or two years, tangible indicators of change over past three to five years, tangible indicators of change over the past five to ten years.

⁴ The instructional leadership measure assesses teachers' perceptions of principal and teacher leadership (e.g., questions about setting standards, communicating a clear school vision), and interviews with school personnel and observers of the system. Define other measures.

⁵ While we will use the Consortium's data on "academic productivity", a weakness with this measure is that the ITBS is inadequate to assess students' mastery of the more challenging reading and mathematics content. Further, all of these measures are proxies for a schools' engagement in instructional improvement and improvement should not be attributed to school leadership.

Data Collection. Research methodologies include observations, structured and semi-structured interviews, and videotapes of leadership practice. In four of the 13 schools (all part of the study's pilot phase), we relied entirely on structured and semi-structured interviews with teachers and school leaders. In the remaining nine schools we observed school leadership events, meetings, and classroom instruction in grades 2 and 5 in addition to interviews with teachers and school leaders. During Phase 1 of the study, researchers spent the equivalent of three to four days per week per school over a ten-week period in the Fall of 1999 and a 12 week period in the Spring of 2000. Leadership events observed in these schools to date included grade level meetings, faculty meetings, school improvement planning meetings, professional development workshops, and supervisions of teaching practice. In addition, we observed a number of other events where subject matter was discussed including homeroom conversations between teachers, lunchroom conversations, grade level meetings and subject specific workshops and meetings.

We completed interviews with teachers at the second and fifth grade levels and school leaders (including lead teachers). Interview protocols focused on school leaders' agenda and goals, their responsibilities, and the key tasks they perform as part of promoting instructional change in mathematics, science and literacy.⁶ We also selected specific instances of school leaders' practices

⁶ Our interview questions were designed to get at five core issues about the practice of leadership:

- a. Getting the leaders to identify the key goals or macro functions they work on (e.g. building a school vision, promoting teacher professional development, improving test scores, etc.)
- b. Getting them to describe what day-to-day tasks they perform to attain these goals, i.e. the micro tasks (e.g. observing classrooms, forming breakfast clubs, facilitating grade level meetings, etc.)
- c. Getting them to describe how they enact the micro tasks; that is their practice as leaders.
- d. Whether and how macro goals/functions and micro tasks are co-enacted; i.e. the extent to which their functions are executed with the help from others in the school.
- e. What tools and material resources (including designed artifacts, memos, protocols, organizational structures) the interviewees identified as important in the execution of macro and micro tasks.

to observe and then conducted post-observation interviews with these leaders about the observed practice.⁷

To explore relations between leadership practice and teachers' efforts to change their teaching we used classroom observations and interviews at grades two and five in each school. These observations and interviews focused on three subject areas – mathematics, science, and language arts. The unit of data here is the focused observation *and* the interview. Refining and developing observation protocols used in previous work (Spillane, 2000; Spillane & Zeuli, 1999), observations focused on dimensions of practice that include materials used, content of academic tasks, and task enactment. Post-observation focused on a) gauging the representativeness of the instances of practice observed; b) understanding the nature of changes in practice from the teacher's perspective; c) understanding what has facilitated and supported these changes, especially the influence of particular leadership practices. Our aim was not to establish causation, as that would require an entirely different research design. These data were supplemented with survey data from the Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Using the protocols, researchers wrote detailed fieldnotes following each observation. A total of 181 sets of fieldnotes detailing anything from 30 minute meeting observations to three hour professional development workshops were compiled thus far. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

⁷ Observation protocols focused on:

- The nature and substance of the task: what the leader(s) did and the goals of the activities including the subject matter focus of the activity, if any.
- How the task was enacted: including the artifacts/materials used and how they were used to enable practice.
- The timing and location of the task: the physical setting and context of the enactment, and the time of the year, week, or day on which the task was enacted.

The patterns of involvement: including what the leaders/facilitators did during the enactment, whether leadership was shared or not, and role of participants.

Data Analysis. Data collection and data analysis (ongoing) are closely integrated, allowing us to examine patterns and working hypotheses as they emerged from data analysis and refine data collection strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Coding categories were developed based on the distributed leadership theoretical framework and initial analyses of our observation and interview data. A commercial computer based qualitative coding program – NUDIST - was used to code all project data. NUDIST allowed us to code the emerging ideas and concepts from the data into free nodes that can be compared and related to each other, forming larger “parent” nodes that can be stored in an index system that brings the different components of the project together. Coders worked together to code transcripts initially in order to develop a shared understanding of what each code meant. Once coders had developed a “taken as shared” understanding of these codes, they worked independently. We also used our field notes, which document the actual observed practice of leadership, to construct our case studies for this paper.

Accountability Policy: The Case of Chicago

A popular public policy strategy in recent efforts to improve America’s schools involves holding school’s accountable for student achievement. Arguing for a K-12 curriculum that is grounded in more intellectually rigorous content, reformers propose to use a variety of policy levers to hold schools accountable for students’ mastery of this content. These policy efforts involve at least two components: specific student performance outcomes and rewards and sanctions for schools (Clotfelter & Ladd, 1996; Elmore, Abelman, & Fuhrman, 1996). We identify each of these components below and use the Chicago Public School’s accountability policy, an often referred to example of a successful accountability policy in both policy and academic circles, to illuminate each component.

To begin with, student performance outcomes as measured by tests, rather than inputs (e.g., number of certified staff), are the primary mechanism that state and local government agencies use to hold school's accountable. While the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act (P.A. 85-1418) included the decentralization of decision making to the school site level and the formation of Local School Councils (LSC), the Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act of 1995 gave much authority to the chief executive officer, appointed by the mayor, who was able to place poorly performing schools in remediation or on probation based on their performance on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). Specifically, student performance on the ITBS at benchmark grades became the districts' primary measures of school accountability and progress.

The second component of most accountability measures involve the creation of a system of rewards and sanctions as well as intervention strategies designed to motivate schools to improve student achievement. In Chicago Public Schools the key sanction is the power of the Chief Executive Officer to place schools on probation because of low performance as measured by standardized test scores. For example, in 1996 the CEO placed twenty per cent of the elementary schools, 109 schools, on probation because fewer than 15% of their students performed at or above national norms on the reading and mathematics sections of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) (Hess, 2000; Wong & Anagnostopoulos, 1998). Schools on probation are required to develop a supplemental school improvement plan that outlines specific strategies the school will take to improve student achievement and defines criteria that will be used to judge the school's progress toward improvement. For technical assistance, schools use their discretionary funds to purchase the services of an external partner whom they can select from a district-

approved list. If the district decides that a school has not made adequate progress, the CEO can have the school reconstituted, ordering new LSC elections and replacing the principal and faculty.

Some efforts to transform accountability arrangements also include rewards or sanctions for students. This is important because, as some scholars note, teaching is co-produced by teachers and students (Cohen, 1996; Powell, 1991). Hence, an accountability system that targets teachers and school administrators exclusively may place them in an impossible position as they depend on their students to improve school performance. In 1996 the school district also ended social promotion, informing the students that beginning with the 1996-97 school year if they failed to achieve at a certain level on the ITBS they would have to attend summer school. Further, if by the end of the summer students still fail to achieve at the required level on the ITBS they are not promoted to the next grade level. These developments are important because the incentive structure mobilized by the school district targets students in addition to teachers and administrators.

Managing in the Middle: School Leaders and District Accountability Policy

Making Sense of Accountability Policy

Inattention and perfunctory attention on the part of implementers are pervasive problems when it comes to the implementation of public policy (Firestone, 1989). The problems of inattention are likely to decrease, however, if the policy-making agency manages to mobilize tangible incentives that matter to implementing agents and agencies. Hence, when faced with the threat of closure or probation due to unacceptable student test performance, as defined by the school district, schools are likely to pay attention to policy proposals. Still, attention is a complex matter (Spillane, 1999; 2000). While schools may attend to district accountability

measures writ large, the ways in which they come to understand and hence what they attend to in an effort to implement these policies may vary substantially across schools. The significance and meaning of policy proposals frequently look very different when viewed from the perspective of school based actors.

In an effort to explore such matters we use three mini-cases below to explore how school leaders at three Chicago public elementary schools made sense of district accountability efforts, exploring similarities and differences across schools in what school leaders do by way of implementing district accountability policy.

Baxter Elementary. Baxter Elementary has little reason to worry about student test scores and district accountability levers in general. The school has met national norms in core subject areas and at the benchmark grade levels (3rd, 5th and 8th) for at least five years, has received national recognition for academic excellence and leadership, and is locally recognized as “one of the best in the city” (personal correspondence to principal from, 3/29/00). In 1998, 60.4% of students scored at or above national norms on the ITBS in reading while 69% did so in mathematics. Baxter’s achievements have come as the neighborhood which surrounds the school undergoes dramatic demographic changes. Once a white Jewish enclave, the neighborhood is now occupied by families from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and parts of Asia. Meanwhile, the white and black student population has decreased by seven and two percent respectively, the Latino population has increased by seven percent and the Asian population by two percent over the past decade. The percentage of low-income students increased from 24% to 66% between 1990 and 1998.

Baxter has not always been in such favor with district administrators. Some ten years ago, before the current principal took over, the school was in danger of closing and losing Chapter 1 funds for failing to comply with district and state information requirements regarding equal educational opportunity data. Further, the district reprimanded the school for failing to send in standardized tests. These compliance problems “scared the faculty” and made them “more concerned and attentive” to district reporting requirements (interview, principal, 10/00). In response, the school decided to create a new staffing position, the Dean of Student Services, whose primary responsibility would be to monitor school compliance with federal, state and district programs.

Despite current successes, the principal is very much focused on test scores, as evidenced in the scope and scale of internal correspondence that the principal sends to the faculty with respect to student test score data. School leaders tend to make test score data the priority item for many meetings, often at the expense of critical operations issues. As one teacher explained about the principal, “He pumps out all these graphs and data on all kinds of figures on test scores, I mean the kind of data that we collect from him in a year is just incredible” (teacher leader interview, 5/00). The principal explains that the need for better and disaggregated data on student learning became more pressing as faculty leadership for curricular change gained momentum and faculty began to get much more assertive and active in their curriculum development needs. In response, the principal, assistant principal and new dean of students began to run trend analyses of standardized test data to give teacher teams a clearer picture of the institutional problems that the faculty teams were trying to address. Faculty assumed that Baxter was doing a lot better job

in educating its students than other schools. Trend test score analysis was intended to challenge this assumption and get faculty to recognize the problem. The principal explained it like this:

Ok, I see we have a problem, what kinds of things should this school being doing to address the problem,” explains the principal, “the analysis made clear that out of the 12 schools, Baxter was either at the bottom or really close to the bottom, in terms of the amount of actual growth that students were making. Forget about where the growth started, forget about the base. Forget about the end. Just, you know, how many months of progress, on an average were sixth graders achieving at Baxter School between 1991-1995.(interview, principal, 10/00).

Baxter’s focus on test scores is best understood in context of its transformation from, in the words of the principal, one of the most “troubled” to one of the best schools coupled with school leaders’ love of data and their interest in creating a better “infrastructure” within the school to respond to “curriculum program development services” (ibid.). For school leaders at Baxter, maintaining high standardized test scores has become an important dimension of making sure that Baxter keeps up with other high ranking neighboring schools and keeps “some of our neighbors from maybe looking down their noses at us just a little bit” (ibid.). By using disaggregated data as an on-going “reality check” on school progress, school leaders have found ways to respond to district accountability measures in ways that enable them to build momentum for on-going curricular and instructional improvement efforts. Discussion of the data has become a regular feature not only of management meetings, but grade-level meetings, helping guide discussion of curricular priorities (interview, teacher, 4/00).

The school’s focus on and response to standardized test data seems very much rooted in the individual and collective identities of school community members. Mr. P, the principal, is described by other faculty and by himself as “very much of a data guy.” According to the assistant principal this means he enjoys numbers and working with numbers and is very good at

it (field notes, assistant principal shadowing, 10/00). We rarely think of school-level leaders as “data crunchers”, but at a school like Baxter, where meetings typically begin with the question, “what information do we have on this problem?”, Mr. P is in good company. In 1999-2000, staff members (including the assistant principal, the dean of students, literacy specialist and grade-level teacher leaders) volunteered to develop the school’s annual district-mandated improvement plan. The group decided early in the process that the data collected by external state monitors the previous year was insufficient. To address this problem, they designed their own survey and classroom teacher interview protocol, a protocol designed to collect comparable data across teachers on classroom practice and staff development needs. After months of work, this data was compiled, carefully analyzed for cross –grade and grade-level patterns and then compiled into a 20 page report complete with bar graphs. Indeed, as an organizational community, the school could rival a modern day corporation in its complex layered decision-making structure and highly regulated systems for making sure every teacher has input and that the input is gathered and aggregated. Every grade is part of a cycle; every cycle has an operations and a curriculum chair and these chairs in turn make-up the membership of the school’s leadership committee. It was the leadership committee that was responsible, among other things, for reviewing the report compiled by the school improvement planning team. As part of this process, the grade-level leaders who composed the team reviewed and discussed the report’s findings at one of the school’s weekly grade-level meetings to cross-check for accuracy and gather supplemental data.

In a school system that often appears weary of decentralization, Baxter leadership appears highly energized and committed to school-level autonomy, particularly around curriculum. Indeed, the principal resigned a “plum principalship” to work at Baxter, a school

very much in trouble but located in Chicago, a district that had devolved much authority to local schools in 1988 when he took over. Mr. P explains, “professionally speaking, what interested me here was just this very exciting concept of being able to function as a principal working for a local board, having total accountability to that local board and also being able to work with them to set our own personnel and program policy.” When asked what they like most about working at the school, several teachers talked about the structures that allowed grade-levels to define their curricular approach.

At Baxter, school leaders’ efforts to maintain credibility and distinction as a star school is a powerful motivator for attending to district accountability levers. While the principal is fondly known in the school for ignoring the more mundane of district requests for school-level information, he and other leaders are also described as highly active in employing data on Baxter’s improvements on test scores to win funds and build local support for his initiatives. For example, school leaders have compiled their comprehensive longitudinal breakdown of school test score improvements [described above] and included it in proposals and presentations with potential granters, researching organizations and local governance councils (artifacts, 10/00; 3/00).

School leaders also take pains to repackage standardized test data in ways that will capture teachers’ attention. Standardized test scores from the district typically arrive via cardboard box and massive spreadsheet. At a recent faculty meeting, this same information was reorganized into relatively easy to read charts and color-coded by grade-level. Mr. P and other school leaders use district standardized test data as a lever to not only to motivate faculty to work for improvements on standardized tests but to build momentum into the school’s distinct and collective vision for reform. A typical Chicago approach to school improvement planning,

explains a 7/8 grade teacher who has spent several decades working as a teacher in the system, is to simply take last year's school improvement plan and tweak it, making minor alterations in focus and substance (interview, teacher 4/00). In contrast, at Baxter, standardized test data released in the spring is used as the focal point for grade-level and school-wide discussions around the plan. For example, spearheaded by the principal, Baxter's leadership committee undertook careful study of school standardized test data in math. They wanted to know how and whether high math scores in grade 3 were being sustained or not through grade 5. Through longitudinal analysis, the team determined that somewhere in grade 6, students' scores started to slump. Suspending school convention, the leadership committee convened a joint task force of two groups that traditionally had little interaction: the third and fourth grade teachers and the fifth and sixth grade teachers. This joint committee met for the good part of a year and as a result of their work tried to build greater alignment in math topic coverage across grade levels.

The product of these efforts, by one teachers' report, was a curriculum that "is getting closer and closer to a standards-based approach and teaching students what they need to know"(interview, teacher, 4/00). And in a school district that is moving towards standards-based indicators in its standardized tests, this may increase the likelihood of maintaining good test scores. However, while Baxter's administrators and teachers leaders tend to view standardized test data as a helpful tool in school's improvement efforts, Baxter's teachers do not necessarily share these views. The majority view the tests as an annual inconvenience, with some teachers reporting that they try simply to ignore them and structure course content as though the tests do not exist. Other Baxter teachers display more strong and negative reactions. In the spring of 2000, when the district began requiring 2nd grade teachers to pilot a new standardized test, a

group of Baxter's second grade teachers wrote a searing letter to central office management. The letter argued, among other things, that administration of the test (which in this instance was individualized) prevented them from covering topics the second graders would need to succeed in third grade.

Teachers' skeptical views of the tests make it critical for Baxter's leadership to frame district's accountability pressures in the right light – not as a recipe or blueprint for action but as starting point for school staff to reflect on their practices and develop alternative strategies. Indeed, Mr. P, in describing his ingredients for school success, is quick to critique those aspects of the district's accountability policies that he feels undercut teacher autonomy. In large and small group meetings, he and other Baxter leaders frequently identify teacher leadership and input into the curriculum as the primary source and influence on Baxter's improved test scores. The principal explained, "The more chances people have to talk, and not just talk in circles but talk about common ground problems, the more comfortable they feel with change, and the better they get in their practice" (interview, 04/00). They do this not only with outside audiences but in the context of internal faculty meetings and school-wide memorandum (field notes, faculty meeting, 3/00; artifact, 11/00). In these and other ways, they try to answer to the district and use district pressures to pursue leadership goals without compromising the principles of their vision and their relationships with faculty. So Mr. P, though openly critical of many aspects of district policy with his teachers, reframes accountability policy for his staff and manages to use district test score data as the basis for a dialogue about improving instruction.

Dodge Elementary. Located within a ten-minute drive of Baxter Elementary, Dodge Elementary serves a similarly diverse student population, with numerous immigrant groups

settling in the neighborhood. The school has bilingual programs in Spanish, Russian, Urdu, and in the past Korean, and numerous other students receive ESL pull out instruction. While Dodge has an especially large white immigrant population, as these new families gain prosperity, they often move out of the area. The population is constantly changing, and recently the percentage of African-American and Hispanic students has been on the rise. Similar to Baxter, over 50% of students at Dodge score at or above the national norm on the ITBS. Despite a recent decline in mathematics and reading scores in the 1999-00 school year, the staff has little reason to worry about district accountability levers in general. ITBS reading and mathematics scores increased gradually between 1995 and 1999, with 42.4 % of the students scoring at national average in reading in 1995 and 53.3% in 1999.

Despite these similarities, the manner in which district accountability policy is constructed at Dodge is strikingly different compared to Baxter. As with Baxter, district accountability policies are not ignored, and constantly loom in the background. But the policy elements that are found to be meaningful can only be understood by paying careful attention to the sense-making context at Dodge, a sense-making context quite different from Baxter. In particular, there are four features of the sense-making context at Dodge to consider:

- 1) Ms. C's recent appointment to the principalship and her efforts to develop legitimacy among staff and peers in the school system,
- 2) the LSC and staff's interpretation of changing student demographics,
- 3) the individualism that characterizes work in the school, and
- 4) the staff perception that district accountability policies are not relevant to schools with Dodge's success.

Part of the sense-making context involves shifting neighborhood demographics or, more specifically, how school staff and the Local School Council (LSC) construct these demographics in relation to district accountability mechanisms. Over the past decade the Caucasian student population dropped from 51% to 40%, while the African-American, Latino, and Asian populations grew 2%, 6%, and 3%, respectively. By far the most dramatic demographic shift, however, has been in the percentage of low income students, which changed from 44% in 1990 to 73% in 1998. For example, when the scores on the ITBS dropped in both reading and mathematics, the LSC was content to accept an interpretation that the drop in the scores was insignificant and could be explained by changing student demographics. The neighborhood and its changing demographics provided a plausible explanation for a decline in test scores and may have helped account for the rather limited school-wide efforts at Dodge to get test scores up and resistance from many teachers to such endeavors at least as spearheaded by the school's leadership.

A related part of the sense-making context involves Ms. C, the principal, and her recent tenure at Dodge. She came to Dodge just over a year ago, her first post as a school principal, and has spent the past year working to gain legitimacy as a school leader, an oft times difficult process involving direct confrontation with some of Dodge's more seasoned teaching staff. Unlike the LSC and some of her staff, Ms. C, is not convinced that changing student demographics is an acceptable explanation for any decline in student test scores, in part because other schools in the neighborhood serving similar populations have managed to get better results. Nor is she content that with the fact that half of Dodge's students score at national norms on standardized tests. She explained:

But when I look at the test results – and I happen to be one that believes that the test results do tell you something about curriculum –Fifty percent are succeeding, I look at it the other way, fifty percent of our children are not succeeding. . . . Bottom line is the kids have to bring those grades up to apply for the best high schools. They’re not going to be considered if they don’t have the scores in their hands.

Hopefully our scores will go a notch up. You know, even one percent to show that there is some effort and some results. Because bottom line is the kids have to bring those grades up to apply for the best high schools. They’re not going to be considered if they don’t have the scores in their hands.

For Ms. C, test scores matter, especially in relation to the opportunities provided for students heading into high school.

Ms. C’s concern about test scores at Dodge is often expressed in terms of comparison to other schools in the neighborhood. These other schools, especially Baxter, must be considered in order to understand how school leaders at Dodge make sense of district accountability measures. After all, one important reference group for a principal is other principals, especially principals at similar types of schools. Take this interaction between Ms. C and some 2nd grade teachers at a grade level meeting:

C___ tells them the school needs to do something to improve reading, because their scores are down “1.3” on the IOWA tests. In contrast, the reading scores at the other neighborhood school are at 70, “I have to go over there.” Teacher—“I’ll go with you,” and “They must be teaching to the test” because the two schools are “servicing the same population.” (Field notes).

Although Ms. C lends weight to the test scores where the LSC does not, she does so in regards to the scores at another area school, which in turn affects how she presents the material to the 2nd grade teachers. A similar interpretation was evident during a staff meeting where she stated: “Dodge is a good school. The former administration did a good job, but we can’t take it for granted. Society is changing” and “we are putting those preventative resources in place, why

should we wait for a disaster” and later “our students are changing, and we want to insure that everyone [student test scores] is going up.” Cognizant of her peers in other schools and the fact that her success will be gauged to some extent based on comparisons to schools that serve similar student populations, Ms. C’s attention to other schools is not surprising.

To understand the response of Dodge’s administration to district accountability mechanisms it is also important to take into account Ms. C’s rather difficult transition into the role of principal and her attempts to maintain legitimacy not only with peers but also with her staff. While the LSC has the power to hire and renew her contract, the teachers have the ability to make Ms. C’s daily life miserable and many who are unhappy with her appointment have made such attempts. Ms. C referred more than once to the difficulties she has encountered in her role as principal:

I think that this [principal] is probably the most difficult task that I have ever taken on.

So I just try to survive everyday. I just look at everyday as a new day . . . as we gone through the change processes, I said what are our challenges? So I begin to look at teachers. And I think there was some positive things come out of it. I begin to look at teachers a little differently. I think I take into – in account of how they view things a little bit more. And try to find ways to work with them and try to look into ways that motivate them and let them see that yes they are allowed to have input when there is room for it. But it’s just not in everything that I do that will involve the [teacher] input.

Ms. C’s comments underscore the difficulties she has encountered working with teachers and her efforts to manage these challenges to her leadership and win the support of staff. Still, despite these efforts she is well aware that some teachers at Dodge are out to get her and she is prepared to take no chances. Ms. C explained:

But I say the best thing is if you do everything by the book no matter how people complain and go to the investigator, there’s nothing they can find.

Recently, some teachers at the school managed to get the school district to appoint an external evaluator to the school based on their formal complaints about Ms. C.

These circumstances in part reflect the *lassie faire* style of previous administrations and efforts by Ms. C and her colleagues to provide more structured and centralized leadership for the school. Ms. C explained:

One teacher said to me one day in the corner, and I think it really gives you a lot of information, she told me that . . . they'd [teachers] been running the school without principal for six months. So when the interim principal was here, everyone took full advantage of running in every direction that they choose to. . . . Well that's not going to happen with this administration. If you want to make any purchases with a reason, you submit a roster of what you need to purchase and you get approved and then you get reimbursed. I mean if you allow no system in place, 100 people out there doing shopping on their own and bring the bill back and expect to be reimbursed – can't – can't function that way. But a lot of people have gotten really what I call . . . bad practice from the previous experience. And of course they tried to – and they expect the new administration to comply.

So I think some of the resentment come from the change of requiring teachers to take a little bit more of a step of complying – doing things. So I think some of them are legitimate concerns that we can streamline, but some of them are just vicious attack because they are not getting what they want. And there are a lot of things that need to be changed in the school. (interview)

The school counselor offered a similar explanation:

She's [the school principal] very concerned about her kids in her school. And she wants to make sure that things move along smoothly. When she came in, there were a lot of things that were not done according to _____ and she's trying to make sure that they now are. Reports go in, in a timely fashion. Reports go in correctly. Same thing with Ms. T_____ [the school assistant principal] She – she basically is the disciplinarian in school. (interview)

As these quotes indicate, the teachers, who were used to considerable freedom, resisted efforts by Mrs. C to establish more structure in the school.

Further, the school does not have the same collaborative approach to instructional decision-making evident in Baxter. At Dodge, teachers seem to work very much on their own to craft

instructional approaches for their classrooms and develop strategies that might enable students to do well on the ITBS. Consider the following remarks from teachers:

We tried to also work out of the IGAP or ISAT books. The test books. They are just preparation for the ISAT and Iowas. So a lot of it was making up my own kinds of work for the students. Their own kinds of ways to gather data. I came up with a lot of the other lessons.

They are just preparation for the ISAT and IOWAs. So a lot of it was making up my own (teacher interview)

As much as I hate to say it I am teaching towards the test. Not something I like, but when come the end of the year and the students need to get a 7.8 in order to graduate if they don't then they don't graduate and they have to got to the bridge program. That's something that I'm concerned with, so if I don't teach towards the test their scores are not going to be as high as they should. Until that changes, I don't see anyone not teaching towards the test. Especially, on a bench marked grade, 8th grade is a benched marked grade. Until that changes it's teaching towards the Illinois standards. How you do that is the big question. How I do that, I like to get the students involved in groups and I think that grouping them up with one student that might be the group leader helps out a lot. From what I noticed these kids work very well in groups. (teacher leader interview)

These comments underscore the individualized nature of the work of teaching at Dodge, where efforts to work together to devise instructional strategies, despite Ms. C's efforts and desire for such work practices, were rare compared with Baxter.

These circumstances make efforts by Dodge administrators to respond to district accountability mechanisms all the more challenging. Concerned about students' performance, Ms. C believes that the key to improvement has to do with transforming teaching practice rather than in introducing new curricula. She remarked, "I think a lot of time is wasted in deciding what curriculum should be taught and more emphasis should be put on refining the _____ way of teaching . . ." But, Ms. C's desire to use district accountability levers to improve test scores have to be understood in the context of the attempts by many teachers to undermine her

leadership. Further, these circumstances are further complicated because some teachers agree with the Local School Council's take on the neighborhood. At a staff meeting one teacher stated "We're getting more and more kids now with problems at home," and she went on to give an example of a student being raised by his older brother: "There's no discipline in the household, and I can model things here, but if they don't get it at home. . ." Many teachers at Dodge understand declining test scores as a function of shifting demographics beyond their control. Hence, for these teachers developing alternative teaching strategies are unlikely to remedy the situation.

However, Ms. C and her administration are trying to press change in instruction without alienating teachers, many of whom question her legitimacy as a school leader and many of whom believe that the fall in test scores is due to a changing student population. In contrast, Ms. C believes that scores would improve if teachers' reconsidering their teaching approach and wasted less time:

So I'm not pleased. And I think we can all tighten up. A lot of time are wasted in the hall. A lot of time is wasted in not focused instructions in this school. But there is some good teaching going on. But the problem is there's not much of collaboration so teachers tend to deal with the closed door and do what they do.

The problem is complicated further by the fact that teachers at Dodge believe that the district's probation policies are intended for schools that are performing poorly, not for Dodge where despite a decline in test scores over 50% of students score above the district/national norm. Under these circumstances, many teachers at Dodge find it difficult to see the need for change. As one teacher explained:

They've [the district] come up with a very structured curriculum that's really meant for schools on probation. I have a boxful of binders that were handed to me . . . every school got so many but I have the for every grade level and every subject I teach. So I have 5th through 8th, the structured language arts curriculum in a box over there and I have the 5th and the 6th social studies. I have looked at them and they're nicely done but I need great flexibility in what I do because I choose to focus on either a season or the unit might be based on what we're doing in future problem solving like with amateur sports. (interview teacher 5th and 6th grades).

A similar sentiment emerged during faculty meetings. Consider the following excerpt from a staff meeting:

Then Mrs. C. turned the floor to Mrs. D [upper grade literacy teacher] who had gone to the staff development on this and would tell them about it. Mrs. D stood up at her table and began "First of all, people were really angry at the meeting because they spend so much materials on this, but basically" it's just lesson plans aligned with state goals. Then a teacher asked "I thought this was just for schools on probation." And another teacher who had been to the staff development answered "It's not mandated except for school that are on probation." Then the first teacher repeated her feelings "for those of you who have been in CPS before," "its just like the old punch cards" for CRTS and a "waste." But Mr. W disagrees, saying "I don't think it's a waste," that during summer school it laid everything out and you can still "work creativity in to place", and "from a social studies point of view, everything is a hodge podge today, so I appreciate it," and "they'll add to it every year." Mrs. D agreed saying "yes, it is a good resource," (not a total waste), and Mrs. C. said "It's not mandated, we are told it is for the first year teachers (next to me a first year teacher makes a "hrmph" sound). So how do you use it? It's up to you," and the teachers should "take some time to review and share at grade level meetings." (Field notes, staff meeting)

At Dodge many teachers' understanding of the district accountability effort is influenced by their perception that these policies are for schools on probation, not for a school like Dodge where 50% of students perform at or above national norms. Cognizant of this, Ms. C and other school leaders are reluctant to use district accountability policy and test scores to leverage change at the school. For example, in the excerpt above Ms. C towards the end of the meeting, agrees with teachers that the district material is indeed optional, for first year teachers, and it is up to other teachers whether and how they use it. Cognizant of her teachers' resistance coupled with her

dependency on teachers for her legitimacy as a leader, Ms. C has to manage a delicate balance between district policies and her desire to improve test scores, on the one hand, and classroom teachers on the other.

In sum, the sense that Dodge's administration makes of district accountability is a function of multiple overlapping contexts including Chicago School Board policies, the demographics of the neighborhood, the local school counsel (LSC), as well as the administration and teaching staff's practice and beliefs. Each of these elements make up a portion of the "sense-making context" at Dodge school. Nestled inside this context, Mrs. C and her colleagues attempt to make sense of policy initiatives.

Waxton Elementary. District accountability policies figure prominently at Waxton. That is not surprising when one considers Waxton's test scores and the fact that it was on probation until this past Fall. In 1993, fewer than 8% of the students at Waxton scored at or above the national norm on the ITBS reading test. Only 11% of the student population managed to do so in mathematics. In 1999, the situation had improved some with 17.6% of the students scoring at or above the national norm in reading and 23.7% of the student population doing so in mathematics. The policy elements that are found to be meaningful at Waxton can only be understood by also paying careful attention to another feature of the sense-making context: the new principal's efforts to establish legitimacy with her peers and the school district as well as with Waxton's teachers. The student population at Waxton is 100% African American and in 1998 97% of the students came from low income families as measure in terms of their eligibility for free or reduced lunches. Waxton Elementary has an annual student mobility rate of just above 40%.

Although student test scores have increased marginally over the last few years, the increase has not been large enough until this past year to make the cut off point for getting Waxton off probation, a key goal for its administration. As the principal explained, “the obvious goal is to get off probation! Now that’s it in a nutshell.” In an effort to boost achievement and get the school off the probation list, Dr. S., whose tenure as principal began less than a year ago, has worked to improve academics and student behavior, by providing assistance and support to teachers. When asked about her reasons for taking the Waxton principalship, in spite of the “negative publicity” and advice from friends not to, she explained it as a challenge; that is, taking the helm at a school on probation and trying to turn it around. Probation thus figured prominently for her, because of her awareness that people’s evaluation of her as an effective leader would hinge on turning around the negative image of Waxton through improved test scores.

Test scores and skills figure very prominently in the talk and work of Waxton’s administration. As the school’s language arts coordinator explained,

The system is assessment driven . . . The whole Chicago School System. That’s all you hear about on the media. You know, the tests scores. The test scores. So naturally the teachers are . . . Focusing on, you know, on making sure their children do as well as possible. So anything that’s going to help along that process is useful.

Testing and probation loom large in Waxton’s administration menu of professional development for teachers. Some 50% of the eight professional development meetings we observed over the year were largely or entirely focused on some aspect of testing including topics such as skills tested in language arts; skills tested in mathematics; constructing multiple test items; and preparing students for the ITBS. Professional development and other efforts to improve testing, however, tended to be targeted to particular grades (those that took the test) and subject areas.

Waxton's administration provided the grade levels that were tested with more attention. For example, while Waxton's probation partner provided a few general professional development sessions that targeted the whole faculty at Waxton, their one on one mentoring efforts were focused entirely on teachers at grades levels 3, 5 and 8 – testing grades. The language arts coordinator explained, “our external partner, M_____ School, teachers from those grades 3, 5, and 8 are coming here today and they're going to observe in those rooms to see how they can assist the teachers in preparing for the test.” Further, the teachers of grades 3, 5 and 8 were given a set of test preparation books to use to prepare their students for the IGAP test.

In addition to the grade level focus Waxton's central administration were also putting much of their efforts into language arts. As the principal explained:

Being very honest, language arts specifically reading is one area that could impact probation and since the school had been on probation for so long we felt a need to address that curriculum area. And the mathematics scores were slightly higher than the reading so that gave us the second reason. Science seemingly had taken a back seat except during what is known as science fair season and we wanted to address that. In fact, when I looked at the lesson plan the first week there was no science period and because the model that had been used in previous years was five weeks science, five weeks social studies and I knew that had to be addressed because the chances of the children passing the IGAP test in science and social studies would be almost impossible. But I do agree that reading did take a front seat.

Waxton long-term probation status, has contributed to putting test and test scores front and central in the school's improvement efforts.

Waxton's administration has two main strategies for getting the school off probation. School leaders use district accountability policy as a “stick” to teachers' attention to their instructional priorities. The principal explained:

When I looked at records, when I studied trends, when I looked at units and lesson plans, it . . . just felt that something different was needed and more desirable. This might not work either but we know that what we'd had been, uh, in process for four years hadn't worked

so, and that was my uh, logic to the staff. . . . And the staff has bought into all that has been presented. Sure there's some questions, there's some hesitations but I don't think at this point they can afford not to because no one wants to be told if they had, so they're going to do it and if it doesn't they can say," well we did it."

Dr. S, the principal made a point throughout the year to remind the teachers about her prerogative to replace teachers who were not pulling their weight, couching this prerogative as a "requirement" she would have to reluctantly enforce. In one of the meetings, for example, she told teachers about how she had been asked by the probation manager (and the central office) to begin the process of noting down some names of people who might potentially be replaced at Waxton. She explained to the teachers that, although she "could no longer ignore" these requests by the probation manager, she would drag the process along to give each one of them "a chance" to improve.

The second strategy focused more on building teacher capacity, using test results as opportunities to identify, mobilize, and develop the capacities thought necessary to improve student performance on the test. Indeed, the principal negotiated with the district office so as not to have to submit any teacher evaluations for the first quarter of the school year arguing that she want to first focus on developing capacity before doing any teacher evaluations. She explained:

I received so much negative press from everyone about what this job would entail. And I'm not going to say that, much of it was incorrect but I'm going to say that we have to keep before us, our children are able to perform. And that children will rise to the level of expectations. I was given the same negative press about the staff. The staff will rise to the level of expectations if they have the skills. And for the first quarter I was concentrating with my probation manager and my external partner with providing certain skills for our staff. We didn't do any evaluation, we did a lot of assisting, a lot of supporting to make sure that it was understood what was to be done, what we expected of them and what we expected for our children.

While capacity building was the more prominent of the two strategies during the first year, there was a definite change in the principal's tone during the final meeting of the school year. At that meeting, the principal suggested that she would adopt a much tougher stance for the following year with a shifting strategy, after having legitimated herself by getting the school off probation in one year as head.

A part of this strategy focused on teacher motivation – the pep rally strategy. Consider the first meeting of Waxton's staff with the school's new probation manager:

(8:40am) There was clapping of hands as Beatrice stood up to speak. She began by saying "it is possible to get off probation" (and there was another loud applause) and "you are going to get off probation." (another loud applause). Beatrice then gave a little talk about how she thinks the staff and children at Waxton are capable and can achieve. "Sometimes", she continued, "it's only a question of knowing what to focus on, getting children to be ready for the tests" and getting the right tools (silent applause). [fieldnotes 10/15/99]

This revival meeting approach was evident again at another meeting:

8:55 Beatrice quickly read off the next activities on here list (noting that they were running out of time) "Follow up in the classrooms after discussing each strategy," "test-taking – we will do breakdown of test skills, so you focus on the right skills that are asked in the tests" "We did this at N School and found it very helpful" ("yessess" from teachers and interjections of "that's what we need!"). Beatrice's colleague language arts coordinator from N School (need to check her name) emphasized that Waxton will "get off probation" (another applause").

State standards and district frameworks have also figured prominently at Waxton though not nearly as prominently as testing and probation policies. According to the principal, the standards and frameworks played a key role in focusing the school's curriculum:

In all three areas we address the standards and the framework statements. Language arts we focused of course on all four areas but reading was number one, writing number two. We did emphasize speaking and listening but not quite as much. We plan to make more effort next year to incorporate speaking and listening. In mathematics it took a second seat to language arts. We realize that problem solving was much more difficult area than computations mainly

because problem solving and concept involve reading. So teachers were made increasingly aware of the need to critically read or to critically think as one was solving the problems.

The alignment of the school's language arts curriculum with the standards was all professional development sessions. The "School Improvement Plan" process was not as pervasive however. It only surfaced towards the submission date and involved appointing a committee to redraft the previous years' document.

Getting the school off probation in the first year of her tenure, the principal and her administrative colleagues managed to legitimate their approach with both district administration and staff. Further, by meeting teachers' requests, especially with respect to curriculum materials and requests for workshops on specific topics, during the 1999/2000 academic year as well as co-opting some of the most vocal (and contentious) people on the staff, the new administration managed to buy its legitimacy among teachers. For example, Ms. E., who has been appointed the curriculum facilitator, was once a very vocal and contentious person on the staff at Waxton. Similarly, Mr. D., the vocal union representative was upgraded to a full-time gym instructor from the half position he had occupied for years at the school. Ms. G., the technology coordinator who never bothered about the probation status of the school, was given half time teaching position and half release time to coordinate technology and supervise three new staff members.

Discussion and Conclusion

Adopting a cognitive perspective on implementation, we use three cases to investigate the implementation of district accountability policies at the school level, paying particular attention to the manner in which school leaders enact their environments and, in the process, mediate

district accountability policies. More specifically, our account illuminates how school leaders, because of their position as “middlemen” between teachers and district offices, play the role of sense-maker with respect to accountability policies. However, rather than a straightforward response to high stakes or attractive rewards, school leaders’ sense-making is influenced by the multiple overlapping contexts in which their work is nested. Therefore, schools’ responses to district policies must be understood as a function not only of individual leaders’ identities but also the multiple contexts in which their sense-making is situated. Answering to or enacting accountability policy meant something different depending on the school in question. Viewing accountability policies from this perspective underscores how the implementation of district accountability policy has to be understood in terms of a two-way interaction in which accountability policy both shapes and is shaped by the implementing agent and agency.

Making Sense of Accountability Policy: Similarities and Differences

Looking across the three cases we notice both similarities and differences among schools in the ways in which school leaders constructed district accountability policies. Beginning with the similarities, at least three patterns are evident. Schools in our study varied on several dimensions, the most important of which may have been the stakes involved in addressing test scores. However, district student assessments and assessment data, especially the ITBS, figured prominently in all three schools. At Waxton, which faced the threat of school closure unless scores were raised, we expected to find and did find heavy emphasis on raising test scores. However, even in the two schools that had nothing to fear from district probation and reconstitution policies, tests and test data figured prominently for school leaders. Even at Dodge,

where some teachers were not convinced that district accountability policies were salient considering their students' relatively successful performance on the ITBS, accountability policies figure prominently for school leaders.

Leaders clearly cared about the stakes linked to the accountability policies. For example, across schools, leaders paid careful attention to test score reports. They described probation and test taking processes with great seriousness. However, how and why district accountability policies came to assume such importance for all schools, was mediated in important ways by the wider professional and community contexts in which school leaders were situated.

A second and related pattern concerns the manner in which school leaders use test score data to gauge performance and think about their efforts to improve instruction, the core technology of schooling. More specifically, in all three schools we find evidence that the school administration translates test score improvements and declines in terms of what teachers were doing in their classroom; that is, the content they were covering and/or the ways in which they represent that content. District accountability policies and test score data in particular are being used by these school leaders to connect their leadership activities with the core technology of schooling – instruction. This is important because most previous scholarship suggests that school management and teaching are "loosely coupled" (Weick, 1979; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Our account suggests that in the implementation of district accountability policies, district leaders are attempting to connect their work as school leaders with teaching in tangible ways. Contrary to the institutional perspective, which suggests that policies are primarily designed to keep constituents content and preserve institutional legitimacy, we find that school leaders' enact accountability policies in ways that seek to transform the core technology of the

organization, rather than simply to buffer that technology from external scrutiny. In sum, while accountability policies may serve to preserve the legitimacy of the institution and its leaders these policies are also being understood and used as ways of leveraging change in instruction.

A third similarity across these three schools was manner in which district accountability policies focused school leaders thinking and work around classroom instruction on literacy and to a lesser extent mathematics. In all three schools, we found that the talk and efforts of school administrations focused chiefly on literacy and to a somewhat lesser extent on mathematics. The schools' emphasis on literacy and mathematics is not surprising given that the school system had made improvements in these particular subject areas the primary measure of school progress, suggesting that district accountability policies and practices can have direct effects on schools' instructional priorities. However, in support of our larger argument, we also found evidence of how schools' sense-making of district priorities complicated their responses. Beneath more general subject neutral statements such as "reaching benchmark levels" and "getting off probation", leaders framed and treated the test score challenge as a subject specific issue. For example, the Waxton principal determined that literacy improvements were more pressing than mathematics – although the school scores were slipping in each and their removal from probation depended on improvements in both.

The ways in which school leaders constructed district accountability policies differed among schools. Our account illuminates distinct differences among schools in the ways that district accountability policies were interpreted and enacted at the school level. There were even substantial differences between the two schools that served similar student populations and had roughly similar student test score performance. At Waxton, as one might expect, district

sanctions were front and center with the administration, and getting the school off probation through focused interventions that targeted the teaching of particular skills at particular grade levels was the central intervention. The approach might be best described as, in the words of Waxton's leaders, "assessment driven." Targeting grades that took the ITBS, the administration, together with its probation manager, developed a program of professional development for teachers that focused on the mathematics and reading skills covered by the test and test taking skills. District accountability policies were a recipe for intervention at Waxton, used by the administration to define the content of capacity building efforts at the school as well as a stick that the administration held over teachers. At Dodge, the school administration, especially Mrs. C. constructed the district's accountability policies as something of a blue print for action, a means of improving the school's performance on standardized tests. However, the nature of the problem for Mrs. C and her colleagues was not so much about teaching particular skills that were on the test as it had to do with a combination of getting teachers to spend more time on task - teaching - and improving their instructional strategies. Still, cognizant of teachers' resistance, Dodge's administration was content to treat district accountability policies as optional and did not use the policies as a stick to leverage change with staff.

At Baxter school leaders constructed and represented district accountability policies differently. Cognizant of teachers' critical stance towards the districts' testing policy, the school administration (which had a strong commitment to site-based management and school level autonomy) understood district accountability policies as a source of data that could be used by staff to analyze and document their progress and develop school improvement strategies. Using deliberate and careful longitudinal analysis of test data, Baxter's administration

worked with teachers to identify problem areas in the curriculum and develop elaborate strategies to ameliorate these instructional problems. At Baxter, unlike Waxton, district accountability policies and test data in particular were not blueprints for instruction or school improvement; but the starting point for deliberations among staff as to the nature of their problems and the development of workable solutions.

In sum, district accountability policies were enacted in different ways by leaders in these three schools all located in the same local school system. Schools varied in the ways in which school leaders noticed and interpreted district accountability policies including test score data and district sanctions and rewards. These differences are important because they illuminate how the school level mediation of district accountability policies transformed that policy in different ways depending on the particular school community context. While there were similarities across schools, implementing or enacting district accountability policies meant different things in these three schools. Hence, the district's accountability mechanisms were transformed as they were mediated by school leaders contributing to substantial differences in the ways in which these mechanisms were represented to teachers.

While accountability policies may define concrete outcomes with tangible rewards and sanctions, these accountability policies as enacted by school level actors take on different forms and functions. Hence, accountability policy levers worked on and in schools in rather different ways suggesting that the causal theories at work are much more complex than the rational choice and institutional models would lead us to believe. The overlapping contexts of school leaders mediated the impact of district incentives and

sanctions, creating school level variation. Further, based on the evidence that school leaders used district policies to press teachers towards changes in instruction, school leaders' responses to accountability pressures represented more than "decoupling".

Sense-making as a Situated Activity

To understand these differences among schools in their enactment of district accountability policies, it is necessary to explore district leaders as sense-makers and especially how their sense-making is situated in multiple and overlapping contexts. While district leaders in all three schools were situated in the same school district, there were important differences in who these leaders were and their situations. The response of Waxton, Dodge, and Baxter suggest that to understand the implementation of district accountability policies it is essential that one attends not only to the particulars of the policy – its design, message, etc. – but also to the identity of the organizations and the key leaders in each school.

To begin with, leaders at these three schools had rather different beliefs, histories and agendas. While the identity of school leaders rarely figures in discussion of accountability policy effects, we found these differences to be highly influential in leaders' policy responses. For example, the principal at Baxter was deeply committed to site based management and involving teachers in making decisions about improving the school. These beliefs played a substantial role in the ways in which he constructed and implemented district accountability policies. Both the principal at Waxton and Dodge were new, working to establish their legitimacy with the district and peers as well as with

their staff. All of this points to the importance of a “person-centered” approach to policy analysis (Lewis & Maruna, 1999).

Situation played an important role in school leaders’ sense-making. To begin with, the three schools were at rather different stages in the reform or change process. For schools like Waxton, district accountability policies were chiefly if not exclusively about getting off probation. While at Baxter, a school that has enjoyed many successes over the past five years, there was considerably more latitude with which to interpret test data and district accountability mechanisms. District accountability policies became an occasion for developing curricula and instructional strategies that draw on the pooled expertise of Baxter teachers.

But the situation is more complex than where these schools were in the change process. These school leaders were nested in multiple overlapping and interacting contexts; contexts that influenced and were influenced by their sense-making. One important context for leaders’ work and their attempts to make sense of district policies was students. Because students are an important part of the instructional unit, which includes teachers, students, and their interactions around particular instructional materials (Cohen and Ball 1998), how school leaders and teachers understand their students influences how accountability mechanisms play out in schools. Baxter and Dodge provide an excellent example of how the demographic characteristics of students were an important context in school leaders’ and teachers’ efforts to make sense of district accountability policies. While Baxter and Dodge are located in the same neighborhood, serve roughly the same students, and have each experienced large increases in the

percentage of low-income students in the past ten years, these schools construct and responded to their students in very different ways. Baxter's leaders and staff constructed changing demographics as a challenge to be proactively addressed, while at Dodge these same changes provided a plausible explanation for declining test scores and more restrained change efforts. This demonstrates how organizational environments shape, and are shaped by, the actions of human agents. This underscores how social actors and schools as organizations infuse their environments with meaning and determine the implications of ostensibly "objective" environmental features.

Another important context in school leaders' efforts to make sense of district policy was teachers. Specifically, these three schools were rather different places when it came to teachers and school leaders' beliefs and attitudes about teachers. At Baxter, teachers had a history of working together with leaders to make decisions with respect to school improvement and their teaching practice. The situation was very different at the other two schools. At Dodge, teachers worked very much on their own and antagonism rather than collaboration characterized their relationship with school leaders, especially the principal. The situation was similar though changing at Waxton. As the cases illuminated these circumstances were especially influential when it came to district leaders' enactment of district accountability policy. For example, at Baxter, leaders used strong professional community and participatory structures to encourage teachers to deconstruct aggregated test score data. At Dodge, where such community was lacking, the principal introduced test score data to generate discussion but the result was that it

became an opportunity for faculty to resist school leaders and undermine district policy directions.

Teachers and students represented two dimensions of leaders' sense-making context. As evidenced by our data, principals' participation in other kinds of formal and informal professional networks also shaped their responses. In two schools, principals reported that their attention to test scores was partially motivated by their concerns for credibility in the eyes of neighboring schools and fellow principals. At the third school, Waxton, external partners, (in this instance a neighboring school) significantly influenced how the schools responded to district accountability mechanisms. These partners hosted symbolic assemblies aimed to raise school pride even in the face of district identification as a "failing school".

Middle Level Managers as Intermediaries.

One critical dimension in understanding how school leaders, especially the school principal, constructed accountability policies concerns their position as intermediaries between district office and teachers, intermediaries who depend on both subordinates and super-ordinates for their success as school leaders. As was evident in all three cases, gaining and maintaining legitimacy with teachers as well as with peers and district office was an important part of the sense-making context for school leaders. While their formal positions as leaders gave them some authority to define and interpret district accountability mechanisms for their staff, they also had to work at gaining the cooperation of their staff. This was important for all three principals but it was especially important for the two newer principals as they were in the process of trying to establish their legitimacy with both peers and with their staffs.

Accountability mechanisms accentuated these tensions, pulling school leaders in two directions. District accountability measures, focusing on aggregations rather than individuals, press school leaders to think about their student body in the aggregate while teachers who thought more in terms of particular students pressed for more of a focus on the individual student rather than the aggregate. Institutional theories assume that principals' responses to school-district tensions are largely symbolic. In other words, faced with competing norms and pressures, principals do things that look like they are making improvements but don't cut deep below the surface. We found, however, that leaders' efforts to balance these tensions can have very concrete implications for the curricular priorities the school sets and teachers' classroom activities.

Managing in the middle presents rather particular dilemmas, especially when it comes to policies like accountability policies that threaten the autonomy that teachers' cherish. Still, districts charge school leaders with enacting these unpopular policies with their staff while at the same time school leaders are dependent on teachers to get test scores up. Further, principals are also caught trying to meet the demands of a policy system that operates on political time and that wants quick results, and classroom teachers, aware of the fads that plague the education policy arena, who want to introduce more incremental changes. Negotiating these two worlds, as school leaders must, is not easy.

Of course managing in the middle in an era of accountability does have advantages. School leaders can use accountability policies to augment their authority with respect to instruction. For example, the principal at Waxton used the threat of probation and firing teachers openly with her staff. Hence, school leaders can interpret district accountability policies in ways that support

their own reform agendas and use them to augment their influence over staff. Because the stakes are high, they can use district accountability measures to add considerable clout to their own efforts to transform practice in particular ways.

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