

The Policy Attributes Theory

Excerpt taken from C-SAIL grant proposal

Our Center’s study of standards-based reform is undergirded by the *policy attributes theory*, a simple yet powerful theoretical framework that posits the attributes that are related to successful policy implementation. Policy attributes theory (Porter 1994; Porter, Floden, Freeman, Schmidt, & Schille, 1988) relates five components to successful policy implementation: specificity, consistency, authority, power, and stability. We apply this theoretical framework to our Center’s work to guide our implementation, longitudinal, measurement, and intervention studies. See our conceptual framework in Appendix B Figure B1.

Specificity refers to how extensive and detailed a policy is. *Consistency* captures the extent to which various policies are aligned. For example, a curriculum may be tied to the school’s vision of reform through a guide that links particular parts of the curriculum to specific school goals. Policies gain *authority* through becoming law, through their consistency with social norms, through support from experts, or through promotion by charismatic leaders. *Power* is tied to the rewards and sanctions associated with policies, such as monetary incentives. *Stability* represents the extent to which people, circumstances, and policies remain constant over time.

Porter and colleagues found that policies vary in their specificity, consistency, authority, power, and stability, and that the higher a policy is on one or all of the attributes, the greater the chance of its successful implementation (Porter et al., 1988). The set of five policy attributes may vary at the school, district, and state level. The policy attributes framework has been used to analyze systemic reform efforts (Clune, 1998) and comprehensive school reforms (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002; Desimone, 2002; Desimone, Smith, Hayes, & Frisvold, 2005; Polikoff, 2012b).

What Have We Learned About Standards-based Reform?

Decades of research on the various manifestations of standards-based reform have identified successes as well as major areas where the operationalization of standards-based reform has fallen short. As a field, we have learned that the weak and mixed implementation of standards-based reform, so common to most types of reform (see McLaughlin, 1976, 1987, 1990), occurred due to weaknesses in the policies’ specificity, consistency, authority, power, and stability.

Specificity: lack of specific guidance. One major barrier to successful implementation of standards-based reform has been the lack of provision of real-time feedback to teachers that would enable them to improve their instruction (e.g., Taylor, Stecher, O’Day, Naftel, & Le Floch, 2010); thus it is no surprise that low levels of teacher change have been linked to lack of teacher capacity to change (Loeb Knapp & Elfers, 2008; Knapp, Elfers, & Plecki, 2004; Minnici & Hill, 2007; Stecher et al., 2008).

The need for more precise feedback mechanisms to facilitate instruction that is aligned to the standards is evidenced in the variation in teachers’ responses to standards-based reforms. Some studies show standards-based reform may lead to more emphasis on didactic instruction (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Diamond, 2007; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004), while others find teachers make more use of conceptual, problem-solving approaches (Firestone, Camilli, Yurecko, Monfils, & Mayrowetz, 2000; Hamilton, Stecher, Marsh, McCombs, & Robyn, 2007; Stecher, Barron, Chun, & Ross, 2000). Still others find no change in instruction (Wong et al., 2003), or alternatively, that the relative emphasis on didactic or conceptual instruction depended on the teacher’s skill and experience (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Spiegelman, 2004). Understanding how teachers are changing in terms of both what and how they teach is a fundamental component of the new standards-based reform (McCann, Jones, & Aronoff, 2010).

Consistency: tensions between instructional materials and standards and assessments.

Much of the criticism of standards-based reform is that it resulted in the narrowing of the curriculum to respond to tested content (teaching to the test) and the use of class time to practice test-taking strategies (Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Hilliard, 2000). “Teaching to the test” can mean a number of things, and it can be good or bad depending on the circumstances (Firestone & Schorr, 2004; Koretz, 2008). The alignment of standards with assessments and other instructional materials plays a critical role: when such alignment is in place, teachers can teach to the standards and not focus on the test (Polikoff, 2012a; Porter, 2000). In contrast, when alignment is absent, teachers may adapt instruction to the assessments rather than the standards or instructional materials, and this may undesirably narrow the curriculum and give teachers conflicting messages about what to teach (Stecher et al., 2000; Stecher & Chun, 2001).

Authority: teachers’ commitment to, interpretations of, and beliefs in the standards.

Teachers’ understandings and interpretations of what they are being asked to do are necessary precursors to changing practice (Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005). The considerable variation in teachers’ interpretation of standards and how they respond in terms of changes in the classroom have been well documented (Cohen & Hill, 2000; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). For some teachers, standards have served as a platform to inspire them to better serve the needs of low-achieving children (Desimone, 2013); while in other circumstances, teachers have admitted that they believe standards are too difficult for certain students (Stecher et al., 2008). Further, teachers vary in their perspectives on how much they think they need to change in order to successfully implement the standards. While some teachers reported changing their instruction to match the standards (e.g., Desimone, 2013), others have reported that their teaching was already consistent with state standards (e.g., Jennings, Swidler, & Koliba, 2005). This is problematic in most cases, as it likely reflects either a misunderstanding of the reform or a noncritical view of

their own instruction (Archbald & Porter, 1994; Cohen, 1990; Floden, Porter, Schmidt, Freeman, & Schwille, 1981; Porter et al., 1988; Porter & Brophy, 1988; Spillane et al., 2002).

Power: incentivizing attention to struggling learners. One of the most pervasive debates in standards-based reform is whether the system's rewards and sanctions (i.e., power) properly and productively incentivize a focus on lower-achieving students. The rewards and sanctions of previous waves of standards-reform were mixed in terms of whether they fulfilled their potential to act as a mechanism to improve learning opportunities for traditionally underachieving students (Hassel & Hassel, 2010), or whether they instead undermined instruction for these students (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Some studies in particular contexts show how accountability policies can exacerbate inequalities by marginalizing low-performing students (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Sandholtz et al., 2004). Documented perversions of the previous system include a focus on students who are near proficiency cut scores (bubble kids), at the cost of attention to lower-performing students (Hamilton et al., 2007; Le Floch, Martinez, O'Day, Stecher, Taylor, & Cook, 2007; Stecher et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2010). In contrast, other studies have documented an increased focus on low-achieving students in response to accountability mandates (e.g., Stecher et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2010). Furthermore, there is a lack of evidence that any subgroup has been disproportionately harmed by standards-based accountability (Gaddis & Lauen, 2014; Lauen & Gaddis, 2012).

Stability: mobility and longevity. Research on standards-based reform and school reform in general demonstrates that high mobility of students, teachers, principals, and district leaders can be detrimental to sustaining and institutionalizing reform (Berends et al., 2002; Smith & O'Day, 1991). Additionally, shifts in the curriculum, textbooks, and PD focus can also be a source of frustration to teachers (Desimone, 2002). Furthermore, educators' perceptions of how long a reform will last have a direct impact on their willingness to invest time and attention to building knowledge and skills related to the reform (Ross et al., 1997).