

School restructuring efforts: lessons learned from two case studies

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In this paper I would like to present lessons learned from two case studies that I have been involved in recent years. Each one of them was carried out in one junior-high school and explored school level processes related to change and reform at the school. In both schools restructuring efforts were taking place, supported by the school leadership. The aim of these efforts was to support school level instructional processes that will respond to differential needs of students and at the same time will avoid ability grouping and segregation. Both school's curricula were organized to include a variety of learning structures, flexible groupings of students, a variety of instructional styles, and student choice.

I would like to draw lessons from these case studies related to school change and what practitioners should be aware of and do in order to improve change processes. I would also like to point to lessons learned from these case studies in relation to research approach and methodology.

Case study 1: Oranim school. The school was implementing a "heterogeneous instruction project" led by staff members from Beit Berl College (Alpert, 1997).

Case study 2: Dror school. The school was using an "opening triads" model of instruction developed at the school as part of its vision (Alpert et. al, 2004; Alpert and Bachar, 2005).

Theoretical background

School reform and restructuring efforts.

In the late 1980s the notion of restructuring was used to describe changes needed in the organizational structure of schools. The purpose of restructuring was to transform the nature of teachers` work and to reorganize governance systems. According to the central idea regarding school reform, by changing the ways in which schools are organized, educators can change how teachers teach and increase the opportunities for student learning. The assumption was that teachers can adjust their teaching to the

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differential needs of students only if they have flexibility in choosing instructional materials and methods, in using teacher and students' learning time and in using the learning environment and other resources of the school (Peterson, McCarthy, and Elmore, 1996).

The Israeli classrooms, especially those in junior-high schools are heterogeneous and diverse in their needs and achievements. A major reform in the 1970s replaced the 8+4 (elementary + secondary) school structure with a 6+3+3 (elementary + junior-high+ high school) structure (Dar and Resh, 2004). The new junior-high school was designed to integrate students with both low and high resources not only in the school but at the classroom level as well.

Ability grouping, detracking, and heterogeneous classrooms.

Tracking and ability grouping have been implemented as a way to provide education to all children while attending to the needs of various groups in the population. Critical theorists, however, have perceived differentiation, tracking and ability grouping to be expressions of dominance by the powerful over the weak ones in society and the school to be a means reproducing of social inequality.

Ability grouping has been widely explored, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, in relation to a variety of variables. Oakes, Gamoran and Page (1992) claim that the answer to the question of whether ability grouping leads to high learning gains is that it happens sometimes. Ability grouping contributes to the achievements of students in the high ability groups but since the students in the low ability groups lose on various variables, the overall picture is not positive. Ability grouping does not blur ethnic, social and economic differences and harms equality of opportunities. Hallam et al. (2003) claim that evidence from primary and secondary schools in England indicates that ability grouping, of itself, does not raise learning standards, and in some cases can lower them. It can also have detrimental effects on pupil's personal and social development. One of the main difficulties regarding ability grouping that the various studies point to is its possible contribution to stigmatizing and negative feelings involved in it for pupils in the lower-level groups.

The widespread criticism of ability grouping, and the indefinite proof of its contribution have brought many educators to examine teaching in heterogeneous settings as alternatives. Over the years a wide array of instructional strategies for heterogeneous classrooms have been offered,

In spite of the wide recognition by educational theorists, researchers and practitioners of the importance of teaching heterogeneous student populations while avoiding discrimination, differentiation, and segregation and reducing tracking and ability grouping, few studies have documented what is taking place in schools committed to equality. A few such attempts have been recently provided (Kashti et. al., 1997; Yonazawa et. al, 2002; Rubin, 2003), especially through qualitative and ethnographic modes of inquiry. It is our belief that more research in the area is needed in order to advance knowledge about ways to provide equal and just education to children of various backgrounds and thus to provide practitioners with ideas for change, reform and restructuring of schools and classrooms.

Research approach and methodology

Both studies were ethnographic case studies. In the first case (Oranim school) the researcher was a participant observer who visited the school for about a year, conducting observations and interviews. The second case study (Dror school) was carried out within the framework of a participatory action research conducted by two researchers from Beit Berl college and three teachers from the school. It took place over a period of two academic years. In this study we combined qualitative-ethnographic research methods with quantitative research instruments in a mixed method research design.

Selected findings: Unique implementations of instructional models

Case one: The model was teaching in a heterogeneous classroom. Students are supposed to learn according to learning styles and their choice of instructional materials and methods.

Observations and interviews indicated that change processes were partially taking place, though were quite dominant at the school. In spite of restructuring attempts to develop at the school a team-work and a collective identity, there were personal interpretations and unique productions of the instructional model.

Examples:

- A teaching-learning unit of two hours of individual and group work according to a variety of instructional and curricular materials, both formal texts and teacher developed materials (observations in history, Geography and Bible studies lessons).
- A teaching -learning unit of two hours divided into: one hour teacher-led, whole group instruction, followed by one hour of individual and group work, with an

occasional assistance of the special ed teacher to one or two students with special needs (Bible studies)

- The common, whole group instruction including teacher presentations, whole-group discussions, preparation for a test, introducing new material + practice using individual work (Math, Literature, Science).

- Some ability grouping in Math, English and some other subject areas.

Case two:

The model was "opening triads", that is - a periodical re-grouping, throughout the school year, of three classrooms of same age students and same subject- matter into three new groups.

We found different models of opening triads in the different subject areas. The following models of "Opening triads" were identified:

a. Learning levels in preparation for tests. This model appeared in math. Several times a year, before a test, three classrooms were divided into three new groups: two of the groups included students who studied basic and extended contents while one group was composed of the top students and studied at an accelerated rate.

b. Opening triads according to language skills. This model took place in English as a second language classes. The students were divided once a week (English is taught three times a week) into 4 groups: reading comprehension, writing skills, newspaper reading and an enhancement group for students who are weak or have special needs. A group of students would spend once a week for about eight weeks at the particular skill's center/class then would move to another one.

c. A specialization class. This model took place in geography. Out of three classes, the most interested students in the subject matter formed a group and received enriched instruction during the subject matter lessons. The other two groups studied according to the regular curriculum. The students in the specialization class were not necessarily the best students and also students with special needs chose to study in this group.

d. Enrichment within a "Literary club".

Students interested in literature and would like to expand their knowledge beyond the regular curriculum would form a group and receive an enriched instruction with special activities once a month. The rest of the students continued in the regular instruction.

e. Opening triads according to topics: This model was taking place in science and in Bible studies. In science, two-three times a year students could choose to study two

out of four topics that interested them, for example genetics, physics, or nutrition. In Bible, three classes would divide according to topics as a summary activity and/or in preparation for a test.

To summarize, opening triads as a structural process took various forms with not much similarity between them. The "best" model based on the teachers' reports and classroom observations was in English where the students worked according to language skills. In math, Bible, and science it looked like the teachers carried out opening triads because they acknowledged its potential but not out of a substantial need. In literature and geography opening triads was in fact related to specialization in an area for those who were interested and for the top students: in literature - a literary club was formed and in geography - a specialization class met. While those students were participating in the special curriculum, the other students continued with the regular program. The low-achieving students and those with special needs usually received their help not within the triads: in English they formed a fourth group or just stayed in the regular classrooms where they barely received any special attention.

Summary and implications

In both case studies the teachers cooperated with the models introduced at the school yet, different individual teachers (at the first case) or teams of teachers within various subject areas (at case two) carried out different models of what they perceived to be a response to the idea and the concept. Richardson and Placier (2001) have presented some studies describing how teachers construct their own understandings of the policies of "top-down" reforms and the discrepancies found between prescribed and actual curriculum and instructional innovations. These variations in carrying out change in schools, their causes and consequences need to be further explored.

One such explanation refers to physical resources and leadership support. Reforms tend to fade and schools tend to often move from one innovation to another, and host a multitude of innovations in various areas of their operations. At Dror school (case two) the teachers pointed to limited resources as main obstacles to properly carrying out opening triads: problems with scheduling, physical arrangements and leadership. Gamoran and colleagues (2000) argue that "organizational resources are the most essential aspects of the organizational context" (p. 58). When there are not enough resources, and teachers have autonomy to decide which arrangements they adopt and which ones they reject or use less (Cuban, 1990), different implementations and variations of the model emerge. The practical implication of the above is that

educational practitioners, mainly in the administration of schools, should recognize the importance for a leadership to provide the necessary resources for an optimal change to occur. In the case of Dror school, opening triads required adjusting the time schedule and the physical space for classes to be re-grouped, providing leadership and guidance, as well as sharing more knowledge among teams of teachers in order to learn from the models of one another. In Oranim school, case one, resources did not seem to be a particular problem and the variations found were related more to individual teachers' choice. Another way to look at these variations in implementation within school and one that we support, is to look at it as a positive direction that needs to be recognized and acknowledged by school leadership and provided with the needed support. Different teachers, different team of teachers teaching different subject areas, may know better what is suitable and beneficial to their students and design their production of the change accordingly.

However, in both schools, we have found that there was not enough flow of information among teachers and teams of teachers. While within the teams of teachers who were teaching same subject areas, staff members had opportunities to exchange ideas and views about various instructional ways to carry out the models (at the second case of Dror they had to cooperate and develop together the "opening triads" activities), between teams of different subject areas there was not much flow of information and sharing. More structures within schools are needed for teachers to exchange ideas and learn from each other. Such exchanges may also be a basis for school-wide evaluations to assess more and less beneficial processes.

Implication of the present study for further research may be that more alternatives to ability grouping should be explored. These should be explored from the "bottom-up": from what is going on in classrooms and schools, how teachers translate various ideas and visions into practice to an examination of these models' contributions, consequences and difficulties. Regarding restructuring we join the recommendation of Richardson and Placier (2001) and Peterson, McCarthy, and Elmore (1996) to study how restructuring is taking place in the actual lives of schools, what is happening over time to schools going through restructuring processes, what are the necessary conditions for successful change and what explains variation and differentiation in teachers enactment of changes in the organization of instruction. Looking at schools and classrooms as they develop their own agendas and learning from such cases may advance our understandings of effective instruction.

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