ADAPTING TO EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINTS: CLASSROOM TEACHERS' STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT. To assess the current status of external constraints on teachers and the types of adaptation strategies they utilize, the researcher approached eight teachers, two from each division, teaching elementary and secondary schools in four school divisions located in metropolitan, urban, rural, and northern areas in a western prairie province of Canada. In-depth interviews and questionnaires revealed that these teachers experienced a high level of stress associated with external constraints arising from political, economic, social, and cultural sectors. While the coping strategies adopted by the sampled teachers suggested that they had not compromised their efforts at a time of high external constraints, there were troublesome signs denoting some erosion in their belief of general efficacy. The dissonance between the current emphasis on decentralization and their actual feelings of powerlessness seemed to pinpoint a disturbing area in the present effort of improving school performance.

RÉSUMÉ. Pour évaluer l'état actuel des contraintes extérieures qui s'exercent sur les professeurs et les types de stratégies d'adaptation qu'ils utilisent, le chercheur s'est adressé à huit enseignants, deux de chaque division, qui enseignent au primaire et au secondaire dans quatre commissions scolaires situées en secteur métropolitain, urbain, rural et nordique d'une province des prairies de l'Ouest du Canada. Les entrevues et les questionnaires ont révélé que ces enseignants éprouvent un fort niveau de stress se rattachant à des contraintes extérieures d'origine politique, économique, sociale, et culturelle. Même si les stratégies d'adaptation adoptées par les professeurs échantillonnés incitent à croire qu'ils n'ont pas compromis leurs efforts à une époque de fortes contraintes extérieures, on a noté des signes troublants dénotant une certaine érosion de leur croyance dans l'efficacité genérale. La dissonance entre l'importance actuelle attachée à la décentralisation et leurs sentiments actuels d'impuissance semble souligner un élément inquiétant dans les efforts actuellement déployés pour améliorer le rendement scolaire.

Deeply embedded in the current effort of school reform is the widespread conviction that if trust, confidence, and greater decision-making power are bestowed upon our front-line educators – teachers (e. g., Epp, 1992; Gitlin & Price, 1992) – fundamental changes and improvement in school and students' performance will follow. In one sense, the proponents of this belief see this as a logical outcome of the ongoing professionalization of the teaching force. In another sense, this same group feels that empowerment of the teachers is the most effective means of breaking down the growing bureaucratization of the public school system that has stifled and stagnated earlier attempts of revitalizing the system.

While the basic assumptions of this perspective remain convincing and unchallenged, there are signs pointing to a growing complexity of teachers' roles, which potentially cloud and burden teachers. As suggested elsewhere (Lam, 1984), the declining influence of the church and the radical changes in the family structure have deprived the school of its traditional allies in educating the young, and have broadened the scope and responsibilities of teachers. Over the past three decades, added to teachers' four traditional roles as professional educator, curriculum specialist, child psychologist, and administrative supervisor (Bennett & Falk, 1970) are new responsibilities as the technical expert (Stanchfield, 1974), the law-enforcing agent (Mackay & Sutherland), 1990), social worker (Szaz, 1970), and child advocate (Staff, 1992). Job-related pressure on teachers has been mounting ever since these new responsibilities have been delegated to them.

A casual perusal of literature on teachers' stress indicates that a majority of the research has focused on their internal working conditions (Hiebert, 1985; Jackson, Schwab, & Schueler, 1986; Dworkin, Haney, Dworkin, & Telschow, 1990). It is only recently that the search for sources of stress has broadened to the larger social context, as Farber (1991) articulates, which provides a more comprehensive view of the types of pressures teachers face in their work.

In this context, the changing environment within which the public school system operates becomes a critical area for further investigation. Lam's theoretical postulation (1985) regarding how public schools were affected by a turbulent environment offers an appropriate starting point. Based on the work of Hall and Mansfield (1971), Lam elaborated the ripple effects that external stress created on internal organizations, and the subsequent internal changes that trigger individual stress and strain,

and ultimately lead to individual responses to the internal and external changes.

"External constraint" (as a concept) is defined here as any externally imposed pressure that limits, disables, or complicates incumbents from executing their responsibilities. Conceivably, constraints arising from the political, economic, social, and cultural environments, taking on the form of policy changes, shifting of locus of control, funding and resource shortage, enrollment fluctuation, interethnic tension within the student population, and conflicting demands for culturally driven curriculum, would have limiting or restrictive effects on teaching; and, in turn, this could cause teachers to experience job-related stress.

Preliminary analyses of the external constraints experienced by superintendents, principals, and teachers (Lam, 1985a, 1987, 1989) showed that educators at these three levels of the school system were susceptible to various magnitudes of pressure. Patterns of constraint also seemed to vary between urban and rural school divisions (Lam, 1991). As a follow-up of the previous large-scale quantitative studies, two major questions are raised: 1) What is (are) the nature or type(s) of external constraints that public school teachers face today? and, 2) How do teachers cope with these external constraints?

METHODOLOGY

Sample

To provide an in-depth examination of data on these questions, a qualitative study involving a sample of eight teachers was undertaken. These eight teachers were chosen from four different settings, i. e., metropolitan, urban, rural, and northern remote school divisions (in one of the western prairie provinces of Canada) to detect the unique local conditions that might affect teachers' external working environments. Furthermore, as the external impact might differ between the lower and upper grades in each setting, the choice of the two teachers from each division was made in such a way that one came from an elementary school and the other from a secondary school.

Data collection

Each of the eight teachers selected for this study was interviewed by a research team consisting of two members, using the modified form of Lam's *School Environmental Constraint Instrument* (1991). Respondents

were asked to identify major constraints from different sectors of the external environment. They were further encouraged to share with the research teams the nature of the strategies they adopted in coping with these external pressures. Summaries of the interviews were returned to the interviewees for verification so as to enhance the accuracy and validity of data obtained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Two months after the initial interviews, the sampled teachers were given another set of questionnaires in which the respondents were asked whether they experienced any changes in the external con-straints and, if so, whether they followed the same course of coping strategies. Through multiple sources, the researcher hoped to validate the data obtained prior to analyses.

FINDINGS

Background of participants

Of the eight teachers sampled, three were male and five female. Most of the male teachers taught in secondary schools and all but one female teacher taught in elementary schools. All participants had at least five years of teaching experience, and two had served their schools for over twenty years

Nature of external constraints

From the interview taping, it would seem that the level of external constraints experienced by all sampled teachers was high. Five out of eight teachers expressed some pessimistic views about their own abili-ties in being effective advocates of their students. Minor variations were detected among teachers from different settings and between elementary and secondary teachers. No noticeable differences were found between the first interviews and subsequent probing. On the whole, the external constraints were fairly constant.

External constraints arising from policies

Of the policies initiated in the past five years by the provincial govern-ment in the province where this study was conducted, integration of special-need students into the regular classroom, or mainstreaming, seemed to present the most problems for teachers, irrespective of where these teachers taught or the class levels they handled. Key concerns expressed pertained to accommodating special-needs students while ensuring that the rest of the class progressed steadily.

Another identified common type of constraint was related to the implementation of disciplinary policies, and this seemed most challenging in the metropolitan and urban schools. The metropolitan high school teacher worried about the anonymity of young offenders within student populations – a point reflecting some inaccurate interpretation of the law by the school (EduLaw Publication, 1995). This participant was concerned that no preventive measures could be possible should violence be initiated by these anonymous young offenders. The urban elementary teacher too lamented the inadequacy of the Young Offenders Act in dealing with her students, many of whom were younger than twelve, having committed serious criminal acts, but could not be dealt with by the law in the same way as if they had been adults.

The rural teachers, however, were troubled by policies related to curriculum revision and the policy of restructuring high schools. Lack of resources and logistic support mainly accounted for the problem they experienced in trying to accommodate new elements in curriculum. The inclusion of Grade 9 in the high schools, mandated by the provincial department of education, threatened to dismantle a number of rural schools in the division, and, at the same time, caused over-crowdedness in some school buildings. While the rural elementary school teacher was concerned about possible relocation, her counterpart in the high school worried about over-crowdedness of his class associated with restructuring.

Northern teachers were confronted with high absenteeism among elementary and high school students on the one hand and the adherence to "no failure policies" approved by the school board. The two sets of policies at times were conflicting; high absenteeism hampered students' learning while the "no failure policy" assured that students be given chances to move on to the next grade irrespective of their performance. The secondary teacher was concerned about the academic standard of her students and about their not being able to meet university entrance requirements should they pursue their studies further.

External constraints arising from shifting control

With various models of the school-based or site-based management in full force, the teachers from urban and rural schools did have a greater control over their working environment. The increased involvement in decision-making, while adding extra responsibility on these teachers, did have a positive effect on them.

This was not the case with respect to the metropolitan, northern elementary and secondary teachers. Distrust on the part of their principals hampered meaningful involvement. One metropolitan teacher stated,

> There has been such a deep-seated distrust between the administration and the teaching staff that we don't want to share our concerns or views, or be treated as persons who are upsetting the apple cart. . . .

The northern elementary teacher said,

> We'd deliberately ignore the policy change as far as we can go unless challenged by the administration. . . .

Apparently, the lack of administrators' support was deeply felt by these teachers and their sense of powerlessness and frustration led them to exhibit avoidance behaviours of one kind or another to the extent of abandoning the mandated policy change.

External constraint on funding

All of the respondents of the interview indicated that much as they were aware of the constraints imposed on their school divisions and schools, funding at the classroom level was mostly adequate and there was equitable and fair distribution of dollars among staff. Only the northern high school teacher felt some uncertainty in the amount of funding for her course.

External constraint on resources

In terms of resources, there was some consensus among the eight sampled teachers that manpower resources, notably teacher assistants (TAs), were in short supply. Apparently, this shortage was closely related to the needs arising from the effort of implementing all-inclusive programs.

Aside from the general lack of TAs, the teacher in an urban secondary school indicated an inadequacy in enrichment curriculum resources. The teacher in the rural elementary school stated that there was a shortage of textbooks for students.

Constraints arising from social values

The impression derived from all the interviews was that the traditional sources of influence that affected their students' social values, namely, families and churches, were losing their importance. Peer influence seemed to be the most important source of influence for students in the

four locations. Additionally, the urban secondary school teacher also pointed out the mass media (e.g., television) and part-time jobs that students held profoundly affected their outlook. As such, his students were highly materialistic and this created motivational problems in academic areas which they deemed would have little utility in advancing their materialistic objectives.

External constraints arising from enrollment fluctuation

Regional differences in migration and the shifts between the elementary and secondary schools caused more problems for some than for others. Generally, there had been some slight decrease in the elementary schools in the metropolitan, urban, and rural areas while there had been an increase of high school student population in all three areas. In the north, however, enrollment for both elementary and secondary schools was relatively steady. The main concern was the drastic reduction of students through attrition and dropouts between the beginning and the end of an academic year.

Irrespective of the direction of enrollment changes, over half of the sampled teachers were saddled with an increased class size. One rural elementary teacher commented:

> While our school continues to lose kids, we end up with multi-grade classes.

Both rural and northern school teachers felt that the enrollment instability created staffing problems and logistic problems for program offerings.

Constraints arising from the interethnic relationships within the student population

The secondary teachers in the metropolitan, urban, and rural schools all reported having experiences of racial incidents in their schools. In the case of the metropolitan secondary schools, rival gangs of Vietnamese and Filipinoes were identified as creating incidents from time to time. In the urban secondary school, racial incidents occurred between native and white students. In rural secondary school, the incidents involved Chinese and white students. In northern schools, at both elementary and secondary levels, racial incidents between whites and natives were reported. All these incidents placed further demands on teachers in supervision.

Constraints arising from culturally driven programs

Aside from the French Immersion (FI) program, which has continued to be popular in urban, rural, and northern schools, there have been changing fortunes in the heritage programs in the metropolitan settings. Portuguese heritage programs have been on the decline while the Filipino heritage program has been on the rise. In the metropolitan elementary school, the demand for the English as a Second Language (ESL) program has been much greater than the FI program. The situation was reported to be similar with respect to the urban and northern elementary schools. Apparently, the arrival of immigrant children and the urban migration of natives in rural and northern areas has translated into a heavier demand for the ESL program. In the northern remote schools, this was viewed by teachers as a problem in view of the lack of resources in the area.

COPING STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY TEACHERS

Most of the coping strategies adopted to combat the external constraints were primarily *defensive, reactive, generalized,* and *personalized.* The strategies were defensive and reactive because most teachers felt that they were not informed by their superiors of critical information in advance so that proactive measures could be taken. One remark typified such a general feeling:

> *Being at the bottom of the totem pole, we're always the last to receive the information that requires radical change on our part. . . .*

The apparent internal communication gap made most interviewees feel powerless to counteract the changes. Adaptation strategies were generalized because they blended across different types of external constraints rather than aiming at any one specific type. Further, their strategies required personal efforts to accommodate the emerging challenges. There are few distinct patterns of strategies that can segregate teachers by location or level. In this respect, five types of strategies were identified:

Upgrading of instructional skills

In meeting policy implementation of mainstreaming and other curriculum changes, all teachers accepted the challenges as given, and indicated that they attempted to deal with these by continuing to upgrade themselves in terms of instructional skills. These skills encompassed reorganization of existing curriculum, better time management,

preplanning, and diversified instructional techniques. Most sampled teachers acquired the new skills through various workshops and in-service activities, and some acquired them from closer liaison, collaboration, and support from their colleagues. As one of the interviewees reasoned,

> *Given the tough time we now are in, and the complexity we face in teaching, the one positive thing that seems to arise from the situation is [that] we seem to get closer to each other and we develop a greater solidarity among our colleagues.*

Informal restructuring

Tough challenges call for imaginative and innovative responses on the part of teachers. To tackle the emerging problems that continue to have an impact on teaching, about half of the interviewees indicated that they had assembled a few colleagues to constitute an informal "problem-solving team" as a means of tackling the emerging problems that continue to have an impact on teaching. One teacher indicated:

> *We need collective wisdom to deal with thorny problems as they arise. . . .*
> *It's just too much for any one individual to handle.*

To tackle emerging problems, e. g., increasing incidents of anti-social behaviours of students or school violence, which drain teachers' energies, the sampled teachers indicated that they assembled colleagues together to provide a sort of "consulting team" to provide assistance to each other.

That teachers tended to organize informal groups for mutual support was not new. In the 1980s when the teaching force was hard hit with layoffs and an enrollment decline, Lam (1983) found teachers depended on their colleagues for moral support and mutual encouragement in order to maintain their morale and professional perspectives.

Negotiated order

Six out of the eight sampled teachers would, from time to time, negotiate with the administration in prioritizing the implementation of change. By bargaining with the school administration that the most difficult demand be placed as the last item for implementation, the sampled teachers and their colleagues gained some breathing space to reorient themselves to changes without displaying signs of insubordination.

When the teachers were in open disagreement with the school administration, and when verbal bargaining did not bear any concrete results,

one coping strategy shared among the interviewees was that of developing an alternate proposal which was different from what the administration intended to follow. By focusing on the alternate proposal, rational rather than emotional reaction to the situation would result. As one teacher from the urban elementary school said,

> Writing a counter-proposal is a psychological safety valve for us to vent our frustration without becoming subversive. . . .

In this fashion, teachers utilized written proposals as a means of retaining their emotional stability and of keeping the psychological dissatisfaction at bay.

Boundary spanning activities

In view of a wider spectrum of student problems with which the teachers were confronted, all of the eight interviewees reported that they realized the school could not handle the problems single-handedly. They became more involved in outreaching activities to seek external assistance. This is particularly true for those teaching in the metropolitan and urban areas. They came to rely regularly on the outside agencies, such as the family and social services, police and the like, to lend them a hand in dealing with students' problems. Six out of the eight interviewed (except the Northern Division teachers) indicated that they had engaged in some type of interagency meetings on a bi-weekly or monthly basis to deal with complex social problems that their students inherited from families. In addition, they scheduled almost daily meetings with parents whose children were in trouble, to map out coordinated home-school attempts at problem solving.

While more modest in their profiles and scales than their school-division office administrators (Lam, 1994, 1996 [in press]), teachers saw the need to step beyond their traditional boundaries (i. e., boundary spanning activities) and to work closely with social units that have a vested interest in their problem children. On the other hand, most interviewed teachers admitted that they were still uncomfortable to assume this new role as it surpassed their training and experiences.

Alternate resource generation

In response to the perceived shortages in resources for instructional purposes, many innovative devices had been tried. Where there was a shortage of funds for purchasing instructional materials, both northern high school teachers and rural elementary teachers would "stretch the budget as much as possible". All six metropolitan, urban, and rural

teachers, from time to time resorted to school "garage sales" to replace obsolete instructional materials and generate additional revenue to purchase needy materials for their students. At the risk of violating copyright laws, urban and northern teachers would tape programs from television to supplement instructional materials.

In running laboratory sessions or organizing field trips, all teachers sought permission from their principals to charge "user fees". Where the schools were engaged in fund-raising, all interviewees indicated that they followed the lead of their principals.

To meet the fluctuating enrollment and changing program needs, the metropolitan and rural respondents would exchange teaching responsibilities, utilize movable dividers to shift around their classes. The metropolitan high school teacher indicated that in some desperate situations, scheduling classes in the evening was done to ensure that his students completed their academic work in time. When they ran into a shortage of time to cover the curriculum in light of additional new programs, they resorted to "borrowing" time from those courses where steady progress was made.

GENERAL REFLECTIONS

In comparing the nature and types of constraints experienced by teachers in different localities in their province, one would note that teaching is far more complicated in metropolitan and urban areas where students are coming from diverse ethnic backgrounds and have different levels of English-language proficiency. However, the succession of policies dealing with mainstreaming and restructuring of high schools, the diffused locus of control, inadequate curriculum resources, and the need to monitor interethnic relationships with the arrival of immigrants and native students has created substantial job-related stress for all the sampled teachers.

Approaching the external constraints from another angle, there are few patterns of differences that exist between elementary and secondary schools. The only noted exception is to be found in the enrollment fluctuation that exists between the elementary schools and the high schools, creating logistical problems for program delivery.

All of the above findings should not be surprising, given the fact that the external work environment for the public school is becoming less predictable, less orderly, and more turbulent (Lam, 1991; Terreberry, 1984; Wirt & Kirst, 1982). While the technical core of the organization

(or the teaching force) may be somewhat sheltered from the direct pressures arising from the political wrangling of interest groups when compared with their school and division administrators (e. g., Lam, 1991), they are nonetheless subject to similar external constraints.

When assessing their coping strategies, one detects both positive and negative features associated with their adaptation strategies. Of those strategies that can be viewed as positive or constructive, we take comfort to note that their adaptation strategies are not completely passive. Indeed, the sampled teachers seem to follow some logical sequence of defense within and without the school organization. To equip themselves with the new challenges, they recognize the need to continue upgrading their skills and training. To surmount resource shortage, they develop innovative and ingenuous ways of generating new revenues. When the problems are too overwhelming, as in the case of curriculum or policy changes, they negotiate with the school administration to buy time and to regain their mental balance. Failing to reach a satisfactory conclusion, they resorted to writing counter-proposals as a means of venting their frustration.

Furthermore, to deal constructively with problem students saddled with family and social ills, they regroup themselves into support teams within the school and search for alliances among parents and social agencies outside the school. This marks an important starting point of breaking away from the traditional isolation and of harnessing external resources to maximize problem-solving abilities.

On the other hand, we also detect two interrelated worrisome signs among those from whom we collected information. One is the weakening of the sampled teachers' belief that the teaching profession can make a difference in educational outcomes (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). The other is the disillusion about their own empowerment in the restructuring of school governance.

That the teachers should feel some loss of general efficacy seems to relate to the fact that they were working under extreme pressure because external constraints continued to hamper their teaching responsibilities. Such a loss is reinforced by their experience that teacher empowerment is still more rhetoric than real. Likely, quite a few principals, while witnessing their organizations under radical transformation, are still deeply entrenched with the traditional perspectives of organizational control (Kshensky & Muth, 1991).

The present findings therefore provide, albeit limited, evidence of incompatibility between a transformed school without a transformational leader (Murphy & Louis, 1993). Adaptation to the external constraints could trigger intensification of territorial protection among members of the public school, and a sharper internal division between administration and teachers. All these could spell disaster to the current effort of improving school performance.

CONCLUSION

In scrutinizing the current status of external constraints on teachers and the type of adaptation strategies they utilize, one could sense from the restricted data of this study that teachers are subject to many constraints from different sectors. Job-related stress level is understandably high. The observed coping strategies registered both positive and negative characteristics. While many strategies and reactions show that the front line educators have not lost their initiative and imagination, there are also potentially troublesome signs underscoring the general absence of proactive planning as a result of inadequate internal communication. The weakening belief in general efficacy, punctuated by the lack of empowerment by their principals points to a dissonance between the current "decentralization" and the actual experience of "powerlessness" on the part of the teaching staff in taking control of the changes. Should the present limited empirical evidence be verified among the larger teaching population, the outcome for the current effort of upgrading school performance would not be too optimistic.

NOTE

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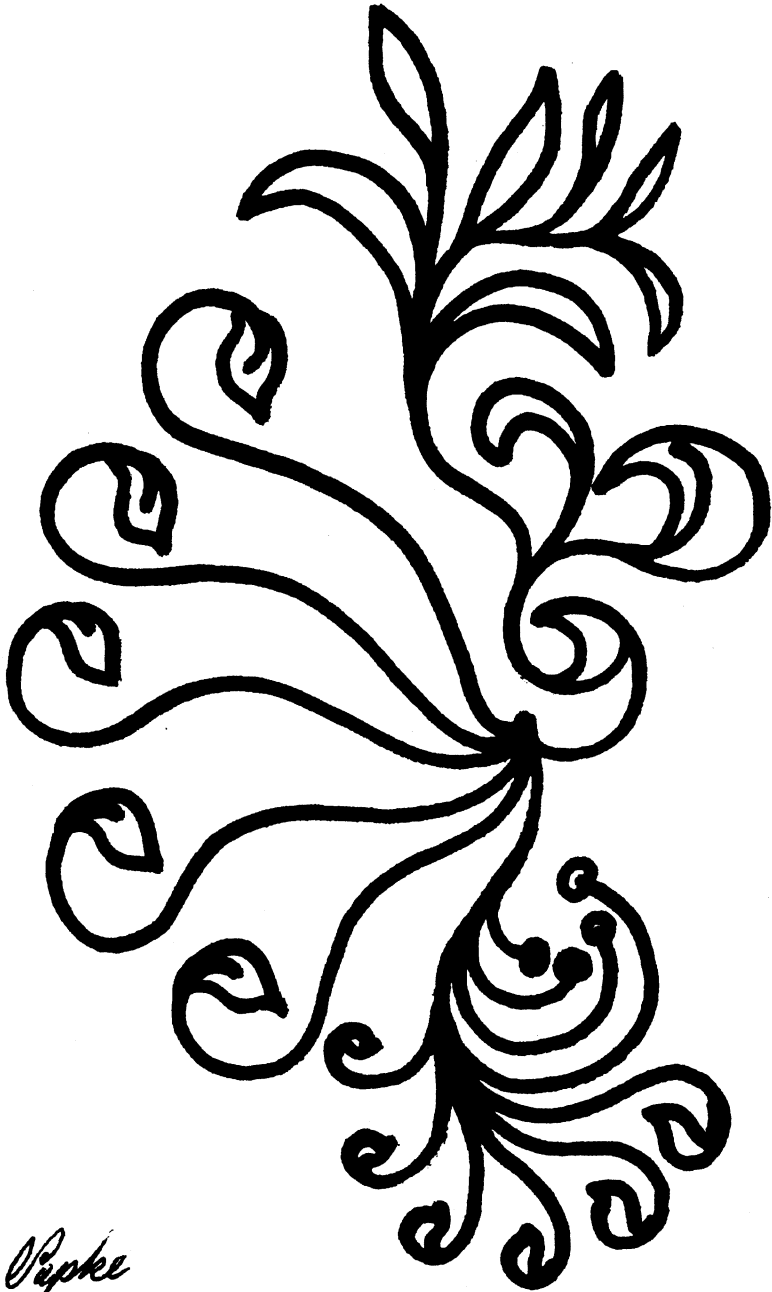
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