Chapter 2
Reinventing Principal Preparation in Illinois:
A Case Study of Policy Change in a Complex Organization

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ABSTRACT

Educational reforms are challenging and difficult with high-stakes political, economic, and societal consequences. A few years ago, the State of Illinois changed its specifications for principal preparation programs so as to better equip its school leaders to meet the contemporary learning needs of children in Illinois. In this chapter, the authors describe and analyze how the revision took place. They look for evidence of constructs presented in theories of change in complex organizations. The findings show that the complexity lens—with a focus on structures, interactions, relationships, and connectedness—contributes to an enriched appreciation of change in complex organizations like universities.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary institutions of higher education are under great pressure to change how they operate. These pressures come from such vectors as increasing globalization, government initiatives, fiscal retrenchments and reforms, and critiques of the quality of students' learning experience (e.g., Clark, 2004; Meister-Scheytt & Scheytt, 2005). However, effecting change in universities is difficult, particularly because of their complexity: they are professional service organizations that have complex governance structures, high workloads, and no single center responsible for implementing organization wide change initiatives (Clark, 2004; De la Harpe & Thomas, 2009; Eckel & Keza, 2003Meister-Scheytt & Scheytt, 2005;). Moreover, the professionals within them vary in their training, interests, and methods of working; hence faculties and programs of study operate in various ways and the differences between groups within the university are likely to be significant. Stacey (2000, p. 42) put it this way:

[A university is] a complex and adaptive system [that] consists of a large number of agents, each of which behaves according to its own principles of local interaction. No individual agent (e.g., teacher or administrator), or group of agents (e.g., teaching team or department) determines the patterns of behavior that the system as a whole displays or how these patterns evolve, and neither does anything outside the system.

Managing such diversity is a complex business (Clark, 2004; Meister-Scheytt & Scheytt, 2005) and effecting change is even more challenging. To compound the challenge, attempts to change universities must often be undertaken at times of budget cuts and with unclear objectives (Meister-Scheytt & Scheytt, 2005; Shattock, 2005).

The literature about change points to the conclusion that administrators in complex settings cannot expect to control change; at best they can guide it (Fullan, 2007). In addition, if change is to be effective and lasting it should involve all stakeholders, and it requires willingness on the part of stakeholders to accept the need for change and to change the way they do things (de la Harpe & Radloff, 2008). Further, recent developments in leadership theory point to the importance of dispersed leadership in complex situations – where problems, goals, and means are ambiguous.

A Study: Focus, Purpose, Methodology, and Method

A few years ago the State of Illinois initiated a complex process for reforming its principal preparation programs (PPPs) with the collaboration and cooperation of all interested parties. By studying the change process with complexity theory, we may gain new insights about how major reforms take place, the challenges that surface during the change process, and how they are best resolved.

The research reported here was directed at this general objective, to be attained through the pursuit of two general purposes. The first was to describe how the State of Illinois changed its prescriptions for principal preparation programs (PPPs). The second was to analyze the change process through the lenses of complexity and change theories, with the aim of determining to what extent the case evidenced constructs from the relevant theoretical literature.

In service to the first objective I elected to develop an ethnographic case study. Ethnographers look for patterns, describe local relationships (formal and informal), understandings and meanings (tacit and explicit), and try to make sense of a place and a case in relation to the entire social setting and all social relationships (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2009). The ethnographer is socially and physically immersed in the case to accumulate local knowledge. Yet, in doing so, the ethnographer must be constantly self-critical and reflexive to ensure an authentic analytical description and interpretation of the case. For my study I spent four months in Illinois as a Fulbright Scholar, engaged in formal and informal meetings with state officials while housed in the Department of Educational Administration and Foundations at Illinois State University in Bloomington/Normal. The data used for this chapter derived from semi-structured interviews with key informants who were involved in designing and implementing the new protocols, observations of meetings, and analysis of relevant documentation.

In connection with my second objective I elected to use complexity theory, a relatively new way of studying organizations. Complexity theory depicts organizations as complex adaptive systems that have the capacity to learn new behaviors (Lawrimore, 2005). Complexity theory provides insights into the dynamics of human organizations, focusing on processes rather than structures. Especially when it comes to changing parts of an organization, focusing on flexible, open, and more fluid processes and structures helps the organization adapt more quickly and increases the probability of success. As universities around the world face increasing demands to restructure their

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