

## Tracking “Untracking”: Evaluating the Effectiveness of an Educational Innovation

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Tracking contributes significantly to the achievement gap between low-income, minority students and their more affluent peers. Ethnic and linguistic minority students from low-income backgrounds frequently remain in general and vocational education classes. As a result, they do not become eligible for college enrollment. Achievement Via Individual Determination (AVID), an educational reform program based in San Diego, “untracks” low-achieving ethnic and language minority students by placing both low- and high-achieving students in the same rigorous academic program. The program gives students explicit instruction in the hidden curriculum of the school—the implicit educational rules and expectations, such as knowledge about what courses to take for the college-bound, what teachers to take or avoid, the importance of tests, and how to study—and helps the students make the transition to college. The AVID program has successfully prepared under-represented students for college: from 1988 to 1992, 94% of AVID students enrolled in college, compared to 56% of all high school graduates (AVID Center, 1999). African Americans and Latinos enrolled in college in numbers that exceeded local and national averages (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Mehan, Hubbard, Lintz, & Villanueva, 1994).

As AVID is being adopted by school districts throughout the country, researchers at the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) are examining the process by which a “design team,” in this case AVID Center, exports its prototype of educational reform to new settings—three schools in California, two in Kentucky and two in Virginia. This “scaling up” study focuses on a) the interrelationship between multiple contexts of implementation, b) the degree of variation in the implementations of AVID guidelines at the new sites, and c) the contribution of institutional processes that facilitate or inhibit academic success.

This research builds upon work in the sociocultural tradition, especially Rogoff (1995) and Tharp (1997), who identify personal, interpersonal, and community levels or “planes” of interaction, and McLaughlin & Talbert (1993), who depict organizations in concentric circles, where the classroom is in the center, surrounded by the school, the district, and the community. It extends this work by explicitly calling attention to political and eco-

nommic conditions that enable possibilities and impose constraints on education in general and school reform in particular.

### 1. Educational Reform Has Many Points of Origin

The researchers have documented AVID implementation at each site, where origin stories show that change can enter the system at various points. The catalyst for change may come from “above” (e.g., Kentucky’s State government), from a charismatic entrepreneur (e.g., Virginia’s dynamic district superintendent), and from a high school English teacher (e.g., the founder of AVID). Change can be bottom-up, outside-in, or top-down; the point of origin is not important as the involvement and support of teachers, principals, superintendents, parents, students, and board members to create and sustain reform.

### 2. Educational Reform is a Co-Constructed Process

Adoption and implementation of AVID illustrates the utility of viewing the “scaling up” of educational reform as a co-constructed process, that is, teachers and principals are actively involved in generating reform (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 1998). The consequences of actions taken in one context become the conditions for actions taken in other contexts (Hall & McGinty, 1997). Reform efforts in schools do not succeed on simple technical considerations alone, nor do they proceed in a linear fashion, fixed in time and space (Oakes, Wells, Datnow, & Jones, 1997). Viewing educational reform as a co-constructed process, rather than as a unidirectional (“top down” or “bottom up”) interpretation, gives educators, policymakers, and researchers a better understanding of the complexities in implementing a successful prototype.

### 3. The Meaning of Educational Reform Varies with Participants’ Perspectives

A person’s perspective in social institutions and cultural beliefs can influence that individual’s interpretation of events (Bahktin, 1981). Researchers have found that gender, ethnicity, and social class are particularly powerful realities that shape differences in the meaning of school reform efforts (Datnow, 1998). The meaning of a reform effort is not necessarily shared by all participants in the reform process. Disagreements or conflicts over the meaning of actions, events, or even the reform model

itself, are associated with the participants' location in the reform implementation system. For example, AVID developers see the curriculum packages and San Diego-based professional development activities as essential to maintaining program fidelity. However, some of the educators in Kentucky and Virginia schools see the California-designed curriculum packages as insensitive to their local circumstances. These differences in perspective lead to tensions regarding the relationship of central control and local autonomy. While local implementation arrangements may take forms far different than designers intended, they may be necessary for sustaining reform in local contexts (Hubbard & Mehan, 1998).

#### 4. Educational Reform Actions are Shaped by Structure and Culture

Some educators initiate reform efforts, others push or sustain them, and still others resist or actively subvert reform efforts. This range of behavior shows that the agency of educators is part of a complex dynamic, shaping and shaped by structural and cultural features of school and society. AVID began in Kentucky as the result of a top-down push by state policy makers. However, subsequent actions and decisions at the district and school sites, in interactions with AVID Center, changed the AVID program's organizational structure as well as everyday practices at both AVID Center and the school sites.

Actions taken at all levels of the policy chain comment on the institutional distribution and application of power. People at different levels in the school system can change reform, derail it, or implement it as designed. To be sure, incumbents in some positions have the power to impose meaning (i.e., policy) on others. The state government's decision to initiate the Kentucky Education Reform Act clearly influenced practices and activities of educators throughout the educational system. When Virginia's legislature provided state funding to school districts that implemented AVID, it influenced activities of educators throughout that state. Yet in practice, the exercise of power and influence on reform is not reserved exclusively for those at the top.

#### 5. Local Educators Make Educational Policy

Local educators do not just passively respond to actions imposed upon them. During later stages in the implementation process, they often modify the reform from its original design. For example, AVID changed the definition of its targeted student population. Originally recruiting low-income students from ethnic minority groups, AVID now recruits "students in the middle," without mentioning race, ethnicity, or minority status. Locally-generated modifications in design team policies suggest it is necessary for educators and policymakers to

examine how people transform policy directives and to reject reform process formulations that view policy as a top-down imposition or a passive flow-through device.

#### Conclusion

This research shows it is useful to view implementation and scaling up of educational reform as a co-constructed process. The consequences of actions in one context, such as the district office, establish conditions for actions in another context, such as the school or classroom. Rather than a top-down or unidirectional process, the success or failure of AVID implementation exists in a complex web of interactions across district, state, school, and AVID design team lines.

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