LINKAGES BETWEEN FEDERAL, STATE AND LOCAL LEVELS IN EDUCATIONAL REFORM

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In this chapter, we examine key linkages between systemic levels that impact classroom and school-level educational reform. Clearly, reform requires coordinated support (Datnow & Kemper, 2002; Earl et al., 2003). There is much that policy-makers, politicians, researchers, other reform stakeholders, principals and teachers need to know in order to effectively support the development and sustaining of high quality teaching and learning. People involved in trying to improve learning for all students often find themselves having to design systems for which they know no precedent. They must problem-solve in unfamiliar ways, develop up-to-date curricula, and coordinate resources in ways they have never before done. This requires systemic inquiry and system-wide capacity building. One of the least researched, yet most salient factors in educational reform is the linkages that exist across policy domains, and understanding how various kinds of resources work to strengthen – or tear asunder – these linkages.

The specific focus of this chapter is on explicating the linkages between systemic policy levels – primarily, between school, district, and state levels. We will address the following questions:

- What systemic linkages seem to be most effective in the process of school improvement?
- What systemic linkages seem to be least effective in the process of school improvement?
- How can understanding linkages inform our understanding of school reform?

We draw upon existing research to bring to light the linkages that exist between policy domains. In identifying the salient linkages between policy domains, the impact on the school level is highlighted, as this is the arena of central interest. We conclude the chapter with implications for future policy, practice, and further research.
This chapter draws from one part of an extensive review of educational reform literature in the U.S. (Datnow, Lasky, Stringfield, & Teddlie, forthcoming). Our present analysis relies on a more limited review of research on school reform in the U.S. and on the empirical work that has evaluated the implementation of standards-based reforms in Ontario, Canada, and England. We limited our review to studies that deal with at least two levels of school systems (e.g., state and district, district and school). However, in trying to identify the linkages between the domains that comprise the policy system, it became apparent that there is a dearth of empirical research that has as its primary goal identifying or describing such linkages. Hence, in what follows we make inferences of linkages that exist across levels. We try to be clear regarding when text describes actual research as contrasted with our own inferences. We first present the theoretical framework that orients this review of research and our understanding of the linkages.

Theoretical Framework

We conceptualize the educational system as an interconnected and interdependent policy system. It is an open system, with permeable and malleable boundaries, embedded within a larger global context. When we speak of linkages, we generally focus on five enduring policy domains. These are: federal, state/provincial, district/board, school, and classroom. There are other policy domains not explicitly focused on for this analysis that are also significant arenas that shape policy processes, as a more comprehensive investigation was beyond what we could address in this chapter. These include teachers’ unions, local communities, external professional development providers, universities, and non-governmental organizations.

Each domain is a unique policy context. The educational reform process can be conceived as a web of interrelated conditions and consequences, where the consequences of actions in one context may become the conditions for the next (Hall & McGinty, 1997, p. 461, in Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002). In other words, interactions in one policy domain generate “outcomes,” such as policy statements, or new procedures, which in turn potentially condition the interactions of other actors in other domains in the policy system.

Similarly, we consider educational policy to be a social construction. Educational reform mandates represent a coalition of interests brought together under a common name at a particular point in time (Goodson, 2000). Educational policies are generated when people representing multiple interests and roles interact as they aim specific actions at a problem for announced purposes (Placer, Hall, & Benson, 2000). Ultimately, they are an expression of peoples’ values, beliefs, and political or moral purposes that are embedded in contexts of power, relationship, institutional and societal norms, and economic or political movements that are unique to the time in which policies are generated (Lasky, 2001).

A core feature of our framework is the definition of linkages. A linkage creates