Administrators' perceptions of outcome-based education: a case study

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An exploration of school administrators' perceptions of the impact of an outcome-based model, five years after its adoption in a Washington State school district

Introduction
Over the last decade, outcome-based education (OBE) has emerged as a major direction for educational reform in the US. OBE is a multi-faceted phenomenon, with wide variation in its implementation. Local school districts have adopted various outcome-based models with the hope of improving student achievement, and entire state systems (including Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Pennsylvania and Washington) have instituted some form of an outcomes approach. In several states, political resistance to OBE has emerged, often associated with fundamentalist Christian groups[1,2]. While this resistance has forced some policy compromises, and has led educators away from using the "O" word to label their reforms, it has not derailed the central thrust of the outcomes movement. Policy makers continue to support outcome-based reform, while avoiding OBE terminology. In Washington State, for example, the recently adopted outcome-based reform is going forward, but has been relabeled a "performance-based" system[3]. Despite its continued momentum in the field, OBE's impact has not been subject to in-depth evaluation. To date, the literature on OBE consists primarily of anecdotal "success stories" (e.g. [4-9]). Only a few exploratory studies have addressed, in a systematic way, the impact of OBE on educational processes and outcomes[10]. Given its continued grip on the field, the OBE reform movement should be analysed from a variety of critical and theoretical perspectives, and evaluated through systematic research.

The purpose of this case study is to explore the impact of a particular model of OBE in one school district, five years after its initial adoption. The impact is considered from the point of view of administrators. Administrators, especially principals, "comprise an important role group in restructuring efforts, given their considerable control over the implementation of school-level innovations"[11, p. 331]. Yet the perceptions of administrators regarding specific reforms is often overlooked. Thus, this article examines how administrators actually experienced the OBE reform effort in their district and what they considered to be its major impact.

Before presenting the study's methods and findings, it is important to bring some definition to the term "outcome-based education", to describe the specific OBE model used in the present study and to review briefly available research on OBE.

What is outcome-based education?
"Outcome-based education" is a rubric for an approach to school improvement. The basic premises of this approach are that educational improvement depends on a shift in focus from inputs to outcomes and on greater accountability for results. Once desirable student outcomes are identified, all educational practices should be aligned with these outcomes and educators should be held accountable for achieving them. These assumptions have been translated into various OBE "models", which individual school districts can adopt, and into outcomes-as-standards accountability systems at the state level[12,13].

OBE models
Two examples of OBE school improvement models are Bill Spady's "high success programme"[14] and the "outcomes-driven development model" (ODDM) from Johnson City, New York[8].
Spady articulates three guiding principles for his version of OBE:

1. a relentless focus on outcomes as a driver for the educational programme;
2. expanded opportunities and support for students to achieve these outcomes;
3. high expectations for students, frequently stated as the "success for all" claim.

In school districts that adopt Spady's model, a "design sequence" [14] is established. First, exit outcomes for the total programme are defined. These outcomes should be future-oriented, aimed at equipping students for success in a "complex, challenging, high-tech future" [15, p. 70]. Second, the entire curriculum is redesigned into "coherent, thematic" courses and units that support the outcomes. Third, instructional and assessment practices are brought into alignment with the outcomes and curriculum. Spady and Marshall [15] point out, however, that few adopting districts achieve these ideals. In practice, most districts retain the traditional curriculum, but adapt it to serve identified OBE outcomes. Spady and Marshall call this "transitional" OBE.

The second model, ODDM, was first developed in Johnson City, New York, in the early 1970s. ODDM is touted as "the only model of total, district-wide school improvement validated by the Program Effectiveness Panel of the National Diffusion Network of the US Department of Education" [16, p. 34]. John Champlin is a leading current proponent of ODDM, providing consultation on its adoption to school districts around the nation through the National Center for Outcome Based Education in Arizona. Since ODDM is the model adopted in the present case study, it will be described in some detail here.

ODDM fits into the "transitional" category of OBE models, according to Spady and Marshall [15]; that is, ODDM districts may identify outcomes that address higher-order competences, but tend to "postpone the overwhelming challenge of rethinking and restructuring everything about their curriculum and delivery structures" [15, p. 69]. The ODDM model includes three major components. The first is a 14-step "instructional process" based on mastery learning principles. The major features of the process are:

- enrichment activities for students who have mastered the unit and "correctives" for those who have not.

For summative assessment, instead of letter grades, students are "certified either as having mastered the unit's objectives or as not having completed the unit" [8, p. 53].

The second ODDM component is teacher teaming. In ODDM schools, teams of two to four teachers at the same grade level or in the same subject area meet regularly to plan instructional activities for the students they share. The team members "share responsibility for student behaviour, student grouping, and student learning. They provide support for each other (and accountability) when implementing new instructional processes" [17, p. 31]. The driving vision for team planning is constituted by the exit outcomes defined for the programmes.

The third ODDM component is a student discipline approach based on William Glasser's "reality therapy". "Reality therapy" is intended to help students take responsibility for their own behaviour [8]. A three-step counselling process replaces traditional punishment and discipline.

In summary, OBE as a school improvement model combines the principles of mastery learning and curriculum alignment with the philosophy that all students can achieve appropriate outcomes. In Spady's words, OBE is not a specific programme or reproducible package "but a way of designing, developing, delivering, and documenting instruction in terms of its intended goals and outcomes" [14, p. 5]. Though the principles of OBE may be translated into "packages" for dissemination (e.g. ODDM as popularized by Champlin), OBE models vary depending on the contexts in which they are implemented and the perspectives of the models' developers. Thus, the OBE approach cannot be "operationalized" in a single definition.

**Evaluation of OBE**

The OBE movement is difficult to evaluate for two main reasons. First, as just discussed, OBE cannot be defined as a specific model but is rather an overall approach to or philosophy of school improvement. This approach may be implemented in a variety of ways, making it almost impossible to generalize from one OBE model to another. Second, OBE is a complex, multi-level reform, involving changes in the curriculum, instructional methods and assessment practices. A specific model like ODDM may involve changes in other areas as well, such as requiring teachers to work together in teams. As Mitchell [18, p. 54] points out, multi-level change efforts are "exceedingly complex" to evaluate because "several different control structures are being modified at the same time". Indeed, according to John Champlin, "appropriate methods for
evaluating OBE have not yet been determined” (from a personal communication, 18 May 1992).

Given these evaluation challenges and the rapid dissemination of OBE, it is not surprising that most of the OBE literature consists of anecdotal “success stories” and advocacy pieces. A few analytical pieces and evaluation studies have been published, but these have been conducted from differing perspectives and at different levels of analysis; as a group they do not lead to any general conclusions. As Evans and King[19, p. 12] state in their recent review of OBE research:

Despite OBE’s appeal, research documenting its effects is fairly rare. An earlier literature review reported that existing evidence was largely perceptual, anecdotal, and small scale...and our recent search for additional published information led to the same conclusion.

However, a brief review will be provided here.

**Review of OBE literature**

Two recent policy studies took a thorough look at the politics of OBE reforms in two different states. Mazzoni et al[20] trace the history of OBE policy development in Minnesota from 1971 to 1992. They delineate four stages to OBE’s “policy history” in Minnesota and the actors who were most influential at each stage. The last stage of policy development required OBE advocates to compromise with opponents, leading to “scaled back versions” of statewide OBE policy. Mazzoni et al conclude that the Minnesota OBE experience illustrates the importance of “ideas, experts, and entrepreneurs in triggering policy innovation”[20, p. 45].

A second major political study was conducted by Zahorck and Boyd[21] in Pennsylvania. Zahorck and Boyd were particularly interested in the tumultuous political controversy that developed in Pennsylvania when fundamentalist Christian groups rallied to oppose OBE. The primary objection of these groups was that some OBE outcomes related to “values”. Zahorck and Boyd used a “political agenda-setting power” perspective to study the roles of various actors and interest groups in the controversy. In an ironic turn on the Mazzoni et al[20] findings in Minnesota, Zahorck and Boyd discovered that, in Pennsylvania, “entrepreneurs” were crucial actors in the opposition to OBE. As in Minnesota, the final version of the OBE reform was a compromise. However, these researchers are careful to point out that OBE was not defeated in Pennsylvania; rather, policy makers proceeded with OBE reform but modified their language to avoid further controversy:

Supporters of OBE were able to salvage most of their intended objectives in the final passage of the regulations. The Governor was able to pare down the final outcomes, removing the controversial “values” items, but...key features were still included[2, p. 17].

Turning to studies of the impact of OBE, Evans and King[19] report the accumulated results of studies in ten OBE sites conducted by Minnesota’s Office of Educational Leadership. These studies looked at impact on students, but considered only the perceptions of educators regarding this impact, since quantitative data on student achievement effects were not yet available. Evans and King report that, according to educators, OBE enhances student learning for the “average and unmotivated learner”[19, p. 12] while creating “disadvantages” for higher achieving students.

Capper[21] used a “combination of critical and post-structural theories” to analyse the issues surrounding OBE’s adoption in a rural high school. She considered how power was exercised in the OBE restructuring effort and whose values and interests were served. She concludes that some aspects of the reform were “empowering” to all students, while others, including the administration’s control over the process, were constraining. To Capper, the most disturbing aspect of this OBE adoption was that power issues were unquestioned and unexamined.

As part of a critique of OBE’s research base, Evans and King[19] consider evidence on the ODDM model from Johnson City, New York. Johnson City provides the only case where longitudinal data on student achievement under OBE have been collected. Under OBE, Johnson City students showed marked improvement on standardized tests results and on the proportion of students who passed the New York State Regents examination. For example, on the California achievement tests, the percentage of students scoring above grade level in reading increased from 44 per cent in 1976 to 75 per cent in 1984. However, the Evans and King report does not make clear how these data were collected—whether by objective outside evaluators or through self-report of the district.

Finally, Schwarz and Cavener[22] consider problems surrounding OBE implementation in one high school, based on one teacher’s perspective. These problems included the inordinate amount of time required to implement mastery learning, various management glitches with the OBE grading system, and students’ tendency to procrastinate when eventual mastery was the criterion for success. Schwarz and Cavener conclude that OBE “failed” at this high school because both the complexity of the reform and the time and energy demanded of teachers were not taken into account.

Certainly, no conclusions regarding OBE’s impact can be drawn from this thin and disparate set of studies. Only two published studies[21, 22] purport to explore OBE’s impact at the school building level, and these focus primarily on implementation issues. The present study aims to contribute to this sparse research base by
considering the impact of an OBE model in one school district from the perspective of the district's administrators.

The context of the present study
This is a case study of "Riverview" (a pseudonym), a small city school district in an agricultural region of Washington State. The district's student population of 7,350 is 53 per cent minority (44 per cent Hispanic, 5 per cent African-American and 4 per cent other). These students are housed in 12 schools: one high school; one alternative high school; two middle schools; and eight elementary schools. Five years before the study, Riverview took the lead in OBE reform in Washington State by adopting the ODDM model described in the previous section of this article. In short order, the district became known throughout the state as an "exemplary" outcome-based site, with district personnel serving as OBE consultants to other school districts and state agencies.

During the decade prior to adopting OBE, Riverview had its share of political problems. Conflict between the growing Hispanic population and the entrenched white (non-Hispanic) school leadership led to teacher strikes, board recalls, state investigations and even a "race riot," according to the former superintendent. It was clear to district leaders that "change" was needed. In political terms, school leaders felt compelled to demonstrate to the community that the schools were not adrift, but were headed in a positive new direction.

Coincidentally, the superintendent became interested in outcome-based education. He invited John Champlin, a leading promoter of the ODDM model, to come to Riverview as a consultant. The superintendent became a zealous ODDM advocate; he promoted buy-in among the administrative staff and school board, and convinced the board to adopt the ODDM as school policy in 1988. As part of ODDM, the board identified five, rather broad, exit outcomes for students, quoted here from the "Mission Statement" incorporated into the district's policy manual:

Students in the [Riverview] School District will (a) develop and demonstrate high self esteem; (b) learn using cognitive skills which range from simple to complex; (c) use process skills to solve problems, communicate, make decisions, and interact in groups; (d) show concern for others; and (e) show self direction in learning.

The board also mandated three major district-wide changes:

1. universal use by teachers of the ODDM mastery learning "instructional process";
2. teacher/principal teaming for instructional decision making;
3. adoption of "reality therapy" as the district's student discipline approach.

Riverview then took an incremental approach to implementation. During the 1988-89 school year, three pilot elementary schools implemented ODDM; the following year all elementary schools were involved; during 1990-91, the secondary schools implemented the model; and in 1991-92, the middle schools completed their implementation. Data were collected for this study during the 1993-94 school year.

Methods
To explore administrators' perceptions of OBE, the primary source of the data were open-ended interviews with district administrators. Thirteen persons were interviewed: the former superintendent, who had led the ODDM adoption; the directors of staff development and special education; a high-school principal; seven elementary-school principals; and an elementary-school assistant principal. Only those administrators who had been in the district for at least two years during ODDM implementation were included. All who met this criterion agreed to participate. Thus, while the sample is relatively small, it is comprehensive for this district. Interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. To supplement the interviews, a variety of documents were collected, including board minutes, district goal/philosophy statements, reports of outside evaluators and internal memoranda.

In general, the constant comparative method for qualitative data analysis[23] was followed. Data were read several times and coded according to emerging themes. The themes were continually revised as the analysis progressed.

Finally, the themes were grouped according to a framework which emerged from the data. The product of the analysis represents administrators' perceptions regarding the impact of the ODDM model. To understand the results more fully, the findings are linked to recent discussions in the literature on professional accountability in education.

Administrators' perceptions of outcome-based education
The themes that emerged during data analysis were in two areas: issues related to implementation of ODDM as a district-wide reform; and the impact of the model once it was in place. Implementation issues included:

- staff resistance to what was perceived as a "top-down" decision to adopt ODDM;
- the "trauma" and stress of attempting to implement many changes simultaneously;

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poor communication with parents/community as to the nature of ODDM and what changes parents might expect to see;

- the exodus of many experienced teachers who did not agree with the outcomes approach.

While these implementation issues are helpful in understanding the history of the OBE reform in this district, they offer little that is new in respect of implementation of reform policies. For the most part, these themes reflect the classic problems of top-down policy implementation, which have been explored and documented by a number of researchers over the years (e.g., [24-27]). For example, both the Rand Change Agent study[24] and Smith and Keith's[27] study of the experimental Kensington School pointed out the problems associated with ambitious reform projects which require many simultaneous changes in educational organizations. Thus, these implementation themes will not be further developed in this report. It is worth noting, however, that OBE promoters and consultants, in pushing for sweeping changes through OBE model adoption, have done little to help districts avoid these pitfalls of large-scale, top-down, restructuring efforts.

The second major category that emerged during data analysis was the impact of ODDM as perceived by administrators. Administrators were unanimous that ODDM had produced major changes in Riverview. ODDM's impact involved both changes in practice, that is, in how administrators and teachers did their work, and to the outcomes linked to these changes. In the following sections, changes in practice will be discussed first.

**Changes in practice**

According to administrators, ODDM produced changes in practice for both teachers and principals. The changes in practice identified for teachers must be accepted with caution, however, because they are based on administrators' perceptions.

**Changes in teacher practice**

Administrators saw changes in practice for teachers in the areas of instruction and planning. These two changes are not surprising in that they reflect two mandates of the ODD model – that teachers would use the mastery learning instructional process, and that teachers would work in teams to plan instruction. However, what was especially interesting about these changes was how differently they were viewed in terms of intensity and impact. Teaming involved the most actual change and created the greatest impact for teachers.

**Instructional changes.** According to administrators, getting teachers to “buy in” to ODDM’s instructional process was the easiest part of the ODDM adoption. All teachers in the district participated in staff development that provided training in ODDM's mastery learning approach: “best shot” whole class instruction; guided practice; “extension” activities for students who have mastered the lesson; and “correctives” for those who have not. Administrators did not claim 100 per cent compliance with mastery learning, but the general consensus was that “most” teachers were “on board”, particularly at the elementary level. The reason for this relatively smooth acceptance, according to administrators, was that ODDM’s instructional process represented “good teaching” that most teachers could identify with. One principal stated: “The instructional process was commonsensical ... Teachers were easily convinced that they had been doing this all the time”. Thus, according to administrators, the transition to mastery learning did not represent a radical change for teachers and was relatively easy to implement.

However, the data indicate two qualifications to this picture. First, administrators could not know for sure the level of implementation of the instructional process. Principals had a good feel for the instructional methods used in their buildings, but the district did not have a monitoring system in place to evaluate teachers on level of ODDM implementation. The director of staff development stated: “The instructional process should be monitored all the time, but until you are really clear in actual practice ... some people have tried to put the instructional process in a checklist form, but it won’t fit in a checklist form”. A principal stated: “There’s no proof on paper that we’re doing it this way. But principals see it and team members keep it on task”.

Second, the picture of relatively harmonious implementation was clouded by the fact that many teachers had left the district rather than accept OBE, including the mastery learning approach. One principal estimated that as many as 100 teachers out of a total of about 455 had left over the previous five years. As these teachers were replaced, new recruits were hired only if they were willing to use mastery learning. Acceptance of OBE gradually became a condition of employment in Riverview. Naturally, newly-hired teachers were careful at least to appear to implement mastery learning.

According to administrators, then, ODDM produced a widespread change in teachers’ instructional practices. Teachers adopted the 14-step mastery learning instructional process. Though administrators had constructed an understanding that teachers readily accepted this change, its implementation was not without costs, including a major turnover in the teaching staff.

**Teaming**

The second major change for teachers was teaming for planning purposes. The typical teaming model was for teachers who “shared the same students” to meet regularly, perhaps once or twice a week, to discuss and plan instruction. At the elementary level, teams might
consist of same-grade level teachers along with specialists serving those grades; at the middle and high schools, teams might comprise teachers across disciplines who would look for ways to integrate instruction. School-building principals were considered part of the teams as well, and their involvement will be discussed in a later section. Team planning activities were to be guided by the central “vision” of ODDM—that all students can learn. According to administrators, teachers used teams to question constantly their teaching and planning activities around the question: “Are we doing everything we can to ensure success for these students?” In the eyes of administrators, teaming thus became an accountability mechanism for planning and for use of the mastery learning approach.

Though teaming was seen by administrators as “entrenched” at the time of this study (five years after the ODDM adoption), they also reported that it was widely resisted by teachers at first. Most administrators attributed this resistance to simple fear of change. However, the data suggest an elaboration of this explanation. Apparently, the scope and intensity of this mandated change in practice contributed to this resistance. Teaming involved changes in both working relationships and the way in which teachers did a core part of their work—planning. First, teaming required teachers to work collaboratively with both their peers (other teachers) and their direct supervisor (the principal). This was a new experience for most, and a lengthy “learning curve” was involved. Second, teaming required adaptations to daily schedules for the entire school staff. Sometimes individual teachers’ planning time was sacrificed for team meetings. And, third, teaming was a public event. The principal attended most team meetings, and all teachers were required to participate. Thus, a core part of teachers’ work, which used to be private and autonomous—planning, came under public scrutiny.

The intensity of the teaming change can be contrasted to the change in instructional process. Teachers were used to cyclical changes in the popularity of different instructional methods and to the idea that a district would promote and even mandate one particular teaching approach. Further, teachers were always free to modify any “new” teaching method once they closed the doors to their classrooms. In contrast, teachers had always had the prerogative to plan instruction autonomously and privately; and though their “plan books” might be monitored by the principal, their planning decisions were their own. With teaming, planning became a collaborative and somewhat public activity.

For me, teaming is a major piece of outcome-based education. It’s a major piece to me at both the elementary and the middle-school levels of creating that success for kids, of talking about making it a continuous progress for kids. And if we do away with teaming… I’m concerned about that. Concerned about that we go back to that free-market model where everybody’s back in their classrooms doing their thing. And you know they’re not necessarily talking or connecting with each other… That’s a piece that keeps people connected and keeps people talking about success and one student at a time.

Teachers wouldn’t want to give up teams now. It’s their source of support. People said that teaming was absolutely essential, that people had bonded with each other, had gained self-esteem; they gained concern for others as adults. They said that they didn’t want to do away with that.

As these statements from the interview data suggest, administrators felt that teaming was entrenched and highly valued by themselves and by teachers and that it contributed to both collegiality and adherence to ODDM’s philosophy and practices.

Changes in principal practice
For principals, three changes in practice were identified:

1. 
participating in team meetings;

2. 
greater emphasis on the role of instructional leader;

3. 
serving as change agents. While team participation was mandated by ODDM, the changes related to instructional leadership and change agency were somewhat unanticipated aspects of ODDM.

Teaming. Under ODDM, principals were expected to participate in two types of teams—teacher planning teams and building “core teams”. The teacher planning teams were just discussed, and their impact on the principal’s role will be addressed in the next section. The building “core team” had originally been established in each building in the district to help the principal implement ODDM. For example, the core team could help determine which staff development activities related to ODDM were most appropriate for the staff. Gradually, according to administrators, these teams evolved into administrative “cabinets”. Principals found themselves in a shared decision-making mode in working with these teams. This was a challenge for many. As one principal stated:

Principals reorganized themselves from having just faculty meetings to having leadership teams to help make a lot of decisions that were more consensus-based versus a top-down type of model… People even struggled with when you make a top-down decision? When do you make a consensus decision?… Because there was that feeling for a long time that in the organization every decision had to be a consensus decision. All the way to the point, and I’m not exaggerating when I say this, if I’m going to change the hours the janitor works because of whatever. Principals...
were scratching their heads and saying, “Gee, do I need to bring the people together and talk about this, because this may impact when their garbage cans are dumped?”

For more “authoritarian” principals, this adjustment was especially difficult.

For most principals, ODDM’s teaming mandate meant two or more team meetings per day. Principals reported that, since these meetings involved so much small group contact with teachers, their overall approach to communicating with the teaching staff changed. They came to rely less on the traditional “hallway” interactions with individual teachers, and needed to hold fewer full faculty meetings.

Teaming, then, had a significant impact on principals’ work. Principals had to let go of some of their decision-making power; learned to distribute their time differently; and adapted their methods for communicating with teachers. Teaming also influenced the principals’ role in instructional leadership, to be discussed next.

Serving as instructional leaders. Principals talked of stronger roles as “instructional leaders” or “facilitators” under ODDM. The data suggest that two aspects of ODDM influenced this change. First, principals were participating with teachers as regular members of planning teams. Through these teams, they gained a great deal of information about teachers’ classroom practices and preferences, and about the level of implementation of OBE. They gained a more authentic knowledge base for interacting with teachers about instruction than they had under the traditional supervision-evaluation model which was in place before ODDM. Further, these teams provided principals with a forum for direct contributions to instructional decisions.

Second, the homogeneity of training under ODDM contributed to principals’ credibility as instructional leaders. All principals and teachers had been trained in the same mastery learning process and in the principles of “reality therapy”. Teachers knew that principals were educated in the methods they were using and had more confidence in the principal’s “expertise”. Principals felt more comfortable in classrooms and, according to principals, teachers were more willing to have them there.

One principal contrasted the ODDM context with a typical “flea-market” school, in which a variety of teaching approaches are used by teachers. The principal’s credibility as instructional leader in a “flea-market” school is weaker, because the principal cannot possibly be expert in so many different approaches. Another principal stated: “Principals complain about time to be instructional leaders. In places without homogeneity of focus, this expectation goes away. People fall back into management. Here, we can do it [instructional leadership].” Under ODDM, then, principals were more confident about their instructional leadership role, seemed to have more credibility with teachers and spent more time as instructional facilitators both within the teams and through individual classroom visits.

Serving as change agents. In retrospect, principals recognized that they had served as key “change agents” during the five-year period of ODDM’s adoption and implementation. Principals felt that their role was to articulate the ODDM “vision” for their staff and get teachers to buy in. One principal stated:

My perception was that we were to articulate what we were doing...It was easy for me to do that because of the basic premisse of outcome driven – that all kids can learn... We were expected to articulate the vision...facilitate it, move it, go with it and nurture the changes in the building and identify the changes...There were other changes that started cropping up so the administrator needed to be perceptive and sense all those and nurture slowly but surely in a way that teachers and staff would buy into it so they could move the process along.

To do this, principals had to “listen to what people needed for support” and try to provide “the concrete interpretation of what the outcome will look like”. Another principal believed that “people find it easier to adopt if they know what the outcome will look like” and thus provided concrete modelling of ODDM’s instructional process for his staff.

Certainly, principals serving as change agents would not be unique to OBE. It is recognized that the principal’s role is crucial in the success of any reform at the building level[11]. However, as has been discussed, OBE is a complex reform, requiring simultaneous changes in curriculum, instruction and assessment. And, with the ODD model adopted in Riverview, teaming also became a major change. Thus, Riverview principals had the challenge of leading implementation of a complex and multi-faceted change effort. The challenge was not without its benefits. As one principal stated: “The professional growth for me personally has been tremendous”.

Outcomes of ODDM

For the purpose of this analysis, “outcomes” are defined as the effects brought about by the ODDM adoption in Riverview, as perceived by administrators. To develop an accurate “picture” of ODDM’s impact, only those effects that could be linked to actual changes in practice under ODDM were included as outcomes. The effects which were most apparent related to the culture of the school district – specifically, to the work lives of teachers and administrators. These included ODDM’s creation of an inspirational vision for education in Riverview, enhanced collegiality among Riverview educators, and professional growth for principals. Ironically, given the OBE motto, “success for all students”, outcomes for students were
uncertain and undocumented. These “non-outcomes” for students will be discussed first.

**Uncertain student outcomes**

Two sources of data addressed ODDM’s impact on students: *interview* data included administrators’ opinions as to ODDM’s effect on student achievement with some references to achievement test results under ODDM; *document* data included the report of an outside evaluator on student progress with regard to ODDM’s five exit outcomes. In general, administrators differed in their opinions regarding ODDM’s impact on students. Some seemed to be uncomfortable with the topic. One principal claimed “tremendous growth” in reading skills for all students in his building. According to the building’s own criterion-referenced assessment, grades two-through-five had each shown a gain of at least 7 per cent in goal attainment over one year. Similarly, another principal stated:

> I think the students benefit, because teachers are more intentional in terms of how I get this information across in ways that fit this child. Now that is not new, but that process helped us, encouraged us to think more about the modalities, the presentations, the learning styles, all of those things we had talked about prior to ODDM. Like I said, it’s not new, but it served as a way to bring these things to a focus, on what was best for the child.

In contrast, another administrator stated:

> The reality is that, after four or five years of it, what the bottom line is is our reading scores have dropped and so, looking at the thousands of hours that we’ve put into training, changes in the curriculum, we see no discernible benefits in reading. We have more kids in the lower quartile in reading now than we did before we started ... We haven’t seen the changes in performance.

And according to one disgruntled former principal: “As a principal we are in the business of not being honest with the public and telling them that this is the worst thing in the world that we have ever done. No, I don’t think it is effective [for students].”

There was more agreement, however, regarding benefits for “at-risk” students. This was stated in a variety of ways: “ODDM is a godsend for LEP (limited English proficiency) students and for special education kids. They have become our kids – the ownership has increased.” “The gap would be worse” without ODDM. The special education director posited that ODDM, with its emphasis on mastery of defined outcomes, “gave us some common language to deal with regular classroom teachers”. Enhanced communication between special education and regular teachers led, in turn, to “a higher probability of inclusion” for special education students. The general understanding among administrators, then, was that ODDM was particularly beneficial for students with learning problems. This perception reflects Evans and King’s[10] findings in Minnesota that OBE was perceived to enhance student learning for “average and unmotivated” learners.

Administrator’s discomfort and imprecision in talking about student outcomes seemed to spring from a lack of data to substantiate their claims. According to administrators, achievement test scores across the district had not changed significantly since ODDM was implemented. Further, the district, at the time of the study, had not succeeded in developing an internal assessment system linked to ODDMs five outcomes. An outside evaluator had developed a “student outcomes inventory” (SOI) intended to assess a student’s mastery level in relation to these outcomes. The first year the instrument was used (1989-90) served as a baseline. The next and final year the instrument was used, it had been modified in a number of ways so that the data were not directly comparable to the baseline data from the first year. The evaluator’s report was generally considered to be too lengthy, too complex and not “useful”.

In summary, Riverview educators could not reference hard data to support their claims that ODDM was benefiting students. They continued to struggle with developing their own assessments for ODDMs student outcomes.

**An inspirational vision**

A dominant theme throughout the data was that ODDM had stimulated a new and inspirational vision for education in Riverview. One principal defined this vision as: “All students can learn and succeed if educators continually evaluate their practices toward this end”. According to administrators, this vision was widely shared by administrators and teachers. The pervasiveness of this vision was evidenced by both the language administrators used and by the zealous enthusiasm with which they spoke:

> The strong tenet of making an organization go is to create a vision. Saying one vision over and over again and going from there. Being able to say that schools create the success and success breeds success. All students can succeed. The vision should be compelling, should be emotionally evoking enough that you can go and work with some of the beliefs. That’s exactly what we did. We created, set out that vision, and kept on saying it over and over again. Putting it on paper ... Our business is education. Our business is creating success for kids. Our business is moving kids on.

There is a common vocabulary; I have seen that continue to surface. We all should be driven by the same vision. We can’t dispute the vision that all kids can learn, because all kids can learn.

This vision seemed to be created, stimulated and maintained by several aspects of ODDM. All staff received the same training in the basic premises and philosophy of ODDM, and hiring practices had led to a staff that was fairly homogeneous in its receptivity to
ODDM. But most important to the continual refinement and maintenance of the vision were ODDM's teaming practices, as previously described. Through teaming, teachers and administrators continually rearticulated the vision and examined whether their practices were supporting it.

Thus, ODDM was perceived as stimulating an inspirational vision for educators' work in Riverview. The pervasiveness of this vision and the value ascribed to it were remarkable, considering the initial resistance to many aspects of ODDM, especially teaming, and the numerous problems associated with its implementation.

**Enhanced collegiality**

Closely aligned to the vision outcome was enhanced collegiality in the teaching corps. According to administrators, teacher teaming under ODDM produced better collegial relationships, and this collegiality was continuing to evolve as teachers became more skilled at teaming: "Collegiality and morale are higher. They're teaming on a more sophisticated level – sharing, finding out, asking questions. Teachers wouldn't want to give up teams now". Similarly, another principal stated that ODDM's impact was "seen in teacher morale, teacher camaraderie, the effect of things". Apparently, ODDM created a structure through teaming that had the potential to enhance professional collegiality.

**Professional growth**

Despite the stress involved, principals credited ODDM implementation as a professional development opportunity, a chance to practise "transformational leadership". Most said they were better administrators and leaders as a result, and were gratified by this outcome: "For me personally, it has given me some confidence, it has allowed me to grow...it forced me to look at things differently". This professional growth outcome for principals was not necessarily anticipated at the beginning of ODDM's implementation. It appeared to be a product of the principal's "change agent" role and teaming participation. Principals had to get better at persuading, supporting, listening and delegating. This outcome was related, then, to both the long-term implementation/change process and to the structures established by ODDM.

**Discussion**

This study explored the impact of OBE from the perspective of administrators in one school district. This impact was seen to include both changes in practice and outcomes, or effects of these changes. The study's findings are limited in that they are based on administrators' perceptions, or common understandings, of these changes and effects. The findings are also limited in that only one OBE model was studied. Though the model exemplified the defining characteristics of the outcome-based reform movement, generalizations about the impact of other outcome-based models should be made with caution.

With these limits in mind, the most significant result of this study was the value ascribed to the ODD model in stimulating an inspirational vision and, relatedly, that teaming was the most valued mechanism, or change in practice, which led to this shared vision and standards for upholding it. That an inspirational vision and the teaming mechanism which maintained it would be the most valued aspects of the model were largely unanticipated, both by those who lived the ODDM experience and by this researcher. OBE rhetoric is dominated by a focus on student outcomes and the mastery learning instructional process as the mechanism to produce these outcomes. The alignment among targeted outcomes, methods and curriculum, along with the anticipated increases in student achievement, are considered the *sine qua non* of outcome-based education. Yet, as discussed, Riverview provided equivocal data regarding improvement in student outcomes. Administrators could not back up their claims of positive outcomes for students and were uncomfortable with this lack of evidence.

This study, then, suggests a paradox in the OBE reform movement. OBE is intended to shift educators' focus from inputs to student outcomes. Yet this study demonstrated that an "input" mechanism – teaming – was the most valued aspect of this particular OBE model, and that the vision created through teaming was more inspirationally salient to educators than were student outcomes, which are difficult to document. Since ODD is a widely disseminated OBE model, these conclusions should not be dismissed as anomalous. The educators who experienced the OBE model in this study valued its perceived effects, but the valued effects were not those typically promoted in OBE rhetoric – student outcomes.

How do we understand this paradox, that student outcomes did not determine the value ascribed to OBE in Riverview? Why were the experiences of teaming and the vision promoted through teaming so valued? Some clues may be provided by recent work on professional accountability in education. Professional accountability, according to Darling-Hammond and Snyder[28], means that educators are accountable first and foremost to the "standards of their profession", not to bureaucratic rules and regulations. In contrast to bureaucratic accountability, rules for practice are determined through the context-bound professional judgement of the educator. The individualistic nature of teaching and learning is respected. Teachers have the challenging responsibility to determine best teaching
methods for individual students and unique groups of students.

Since professional accountability relies on professional judgement, it implies a number of necessary conditions to be effective. Among these are a commitment to the standards of the profession and continued professional development through collaboration and consultation with other educators. The prime “standard” of the teaching profession, according to Darling-Hammond and Snyder[28] is a commitment to the “welfare of the client”. To allow for continued professional development, organizational arrangements that allow for “collegial time needed to develop the shared norms and values that support professional practice” are necessary[28, p. 22].

The OBE model, as explored in the present study, appears to match these conditions of professional accountability in two ways. First, the teaming mechanism of the ODD model provided for the collegial time called for by Darling-Hammond and Snyder[28]. The data in this study clearly indicate that a heightened sense of collegiality emerged from the teaming experience and that Riverview educators came to value this process above all others. Second, the OBE vision, the most valued outcome of the model, seemed to provide a “standard of practice” for Riverview educators. As I have pointed out elsewhere[12], an unaddressed issue in most discussions of professional accountability is the general lack in American education of well-articulated standards of practice. While the concept of aspiring towards professional “standards of practice” is appealing, most educators would be hard-pressed to define such standards, even within their own districts let alone for the field in general. Darling-Hammond and Snyder’s suggested standard – the “welfare of the client” – is too vague to guide practice.

In contrast, ODDM’s vision of “success for all” through curriculum alignment and mastery learning gave Riverview educators a more concrete standard to guide their daily teaching decisions. One need not agree with the nature of this vision to understand that it could serve this purpose. Thus, it appears that what Riverview educators valued most about their OBE model were the effects which enhanced their sense of professionalism and collegiality.

Conclusions

In exploring the impact of one OBE model, this study provided some surprises. In spite of the problems and difficulties associated with a top-down reform, educators did value the OBE model, but not for the expected reasons. Outcomes for students were poorly documented and did not seem to drive commitment to OBE. Rather, the experience of collaborating and the direction provided by a commonly understood vision were valued and “would not be given up”. These experiences are a closer fit with the premisses of professional accountability than with the premisses of outcome-based education.

Three conclusions are suggested. First, the study points to the continuing challenge to the field to find ways to evaluate OBE’s impact on student achievement. Second, the results of this study suggest an explanation for the popularity of OBE among educators and policy makers. OBE’s vision appears to provide an appealing and inspirational “standard” for educators’ work, a standard that is more concrete than are the vagaries of most educational goals. And, third, the study provides some support for collegial, collaborative models and shared decision making within schools and, therefore, for some of the arguments for professional accountability in education.

References


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