Existing Ways of Thinking About Implementation

1. Early research on implementation and its challenges
   (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973, Weick 1976)

2. Teacher sense-making, opportunities for teacher learning, importance of district and school leadership

3. Is implementation the right paradigm?
   (Lipsky 1980, Bryk et al. 2015, Mehta 2013)

4. Perhaps better to see as question of building a workable system across levels
   (Johnson et al. 2015, Cohen et al. 2014, Supovitz 2006)
Context for Discussion

- Research on implementation has emphasized the **cognitive** and **behavioral** to the neglect of the **emotional** and **affective**
  - Cognitive: Teachers (re)construct policies consistent with pre-existing understandings
    (e.g. Spillane 2002, Coburn 2004, Cohen 1990)
  - Behavioral: How teachers and schools respond to incentives
    (e.g. Booher-Jennings 2005)
Context for Discussion

- Existing research has emphasized the cognitive and behavioral to the neglect of the emotional and affective
  - Less on how teachers feel about reforms and reformers
  - If improvement requires “skill” and “will” (Elmore 2004), motivation is critical
  - Sustainable school reform requires ongoing teacher commitment to work and learning; affective dimension is key (Levin 2008, Darling-Hammond 2010)
  - Particularly true if goal is to scale with depth and sustainability (Coburn 2003)
For multi-level policies to work and be sustained, mutual understanding and trust across levels is key.

Understanding the “human side of reform” is critical to examining breakdowns in policy design and implementation.

Building on social psychology literature on “empathy” and “perspective-taking”; moving from lab to real world.

Our contribution: Interview-based study of vertical chain of actors; how they understand reforms and each other.
Our Study

- Interviews with a “vertical slice” of 44 actors within one reform-oriented state
  - 10 State-level policy leaders
  - 8 District leaders
  - 6 School leaders
  - 20 Teachers
- Two policy domains: Teacher evaluation and Response to Intervention (RTI)
- Also asked them about one another
- Interviews recorded, transcribed, and analyzed
- More coding continuing; second “less reform” state up next
Defining Terms

• **Perspective-taking**: The process by which an individual views a situation from another's point of view.

• **Empathy**: The feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions.
Three Key Findings

1. Asymmetry in how people understand others in the system:
   - Teachers know little about system actors;
   - System actors do think about teachers

2. System leaders: Two types of empathy/perspective taking
   - Instrumental perspective-taking
   - Deeper, identity-based empathy

3. Significant structural and relational barriers to building positive, trusting relationships across organizational levels
Asymmetric Empathy & Perspective Taking

- Teachers had difficulty empathizing with or taking the perspectives of those in higher levels.

- When asked to think about how state policy leaders felt about their work, teachers responded with:
  - “I couldn’t tell you.”
  - “I’d have even less of a clue.”
  - “I think it’s hard because there may be politics involved.”
Teachers Know Little About State Officials

When asked what image came to mind when they pictured someone from “the state”:

- “A business person. A person behind a desk. Um, that looks at numbers and makes decisions based on… generalizations and number… I don’t know. I feel… I just, I see… a person… just, you know, I don’t know. I don’t see anybody.” – School assistant principal

- “Suits and tie. The politician head nod. Shake. ‘How’s it going? See ya later.’” – Teacher
Teachers See Policymakers As Disconnected

When asked whether they thought people at the state had been teachers:

- Bridget: “My initial instinct is to say no.”
- Jennifer: “Yeah, I would say no.”
- Sara: “Yeah.”
- Interviewer: What makes you say that?
- Bridget: “Because some of the things that they think of...[laughs]...is not something that I would ever...”
- Jennifer: “I just feel like if it was someone from our shoes going to the top then things would be aligned with our ideas. If it’s coming from us, then it would be in line from us. If that makes sense.”
Teachers Distrust Policymakers

Teachers do not think the state understands them.

When asked whether they would like people from the state to come and see what their lives are like:

- **Max:** “I’m not particularly interested in seeing the state department come down. I mean, I think it would make it…”

- **Mark:** “Very tense around here.”

- **Elliot:** “Kinda like the, ‘I’m from the IRS and I’m here to help you.’”
State Officials Do Express Empathy With Districts, Principals, and Teachers

State-level policy leaders were comparatively more empathetic and able to take the perspectives of district leaders, school leaders, and teachers

“I think that district folks were in an incredibly difficult situation at the beginning because so much of the information just wasn’t ready to go.”

“Principals, I think, feel more pressure than ever. Principals are now charged with being leaders and not managers. And, so the bar has been raised for all of them. You know, and, so I think they’re struggling.”

“But often I feel, myself, that, um, teachers have to feel like, you know, ‘Wait a minute, I have these thirty kids in my classroom and, that’s easy for you to tell me to differentiate, but how do I do this?’”
State officials do try to think about how teachers think about them when developing their policies.

“I do still think there’s the attitude of [seeing us] as the ivory tower, though. Like, ‘How can you tell us what to do when you’re sittin’ up there in your office…’”

“My team, we make jokes about it with them when we’re out there. We’re like, ‘Well, we know we live in the ivory tower, so you tell us what it’s really like…’”
Two Reasons for this Asymmetry

1. Many state and district officials have been teachers, but teachers have not been state and district officials.

2. District and state officials are trying to change behavior of teachers; hence understanding how teachers respond to them is an important part of their work. In contrast, teachers mostly experience district and state folks as distant and removed from their day-to-day work.
Two Kinds of Empathy/Perspective-Taking for System Leaders

- Instrumental Perspective Taking (more common)
  - Perspective-taking in service of accomplishing a larger goal
  - Seek to gain information that will further agenda
  - Consistent with how policymakers’ “see”

- Deeper Empathy (less common)
  - Seeking to really imagine/understand the world from the point of view of someone else
  - Understand how they feel as well as how they think
  - Potentially leads to reflection on limits of own position and worldview
Instrumental Perspective Taking

“Instrumental” Perspective Taking

“I think...empathy is important, right? Because, in order for something to, like, land properly, you have to try to figure out, like, what am I going to give to the next person down the chain so that they have a reason to take the action I want them to take in the way I want them to take it, to give to the next person and the next person, all the way down to someone I'm never going to meet.” -State policy leader

Perspective-taking as a means to a top-down end
Deeper Empathy

- Identity and previous experiences were critical to deeper empathy.
- Having been “in their shoes” made it easier for people to empathize with others.
  - “Like, I remember when I was evaluated, I just knew it was something we had to do. So, I think, probably teachers are so busy during the year doing all the things they need to be doing to be good at their jobs that they’re not really sitting back and pondering a lot of our initiatives and why they matter.”

–State policy leader
Reason for an Empathy Gap: Structural Barriers

1. Limited avenues for communication up and down the pipeline

- "Yeah. I mean, we try to think about them a lot. But, like I said, we just don’t have a clear way to communicate with them.” –State policy leader

- “You know, we hear, uh, we read a letter that says, ‘You all are on the front lines. You all are doin’ the job.’ Then they get the test scores and they say, ‘Must not be doin’ it.’ Um… There’s no interaction between the state and me.” –Teacher

2. The “problem of numbers”- handful of policy leaders at the state-level, tens of thousands of teachers
Reasons for an Empathy Gap: Relational Barriers

3. Reliance on stereotypes

- Policy leaders: More likely to see teachers en masse rather than as individuals

- Teachers & Principals: Less likely to have personal relationships with individuals in higher levels
  - *I mean, they’re the corporate type. A male in a suit behind a desk in a conference room makin’ those decisions.*” –School principal
Reasons for an Empathy Gap: Relational Barriers

4. Historically distrustful relationships across organizational levels

- “I think we’ve had a long history in education of lots of new ideas but not a whole lot of support. And, so, now it’s really hard to effect change. It really is.” –State policy leader
Wise leaders recognized that some conflicts in worldviews were inevitable and needed to be negotiated.

“Because someone should be thinking about what’s best for the system at large, and then someone should definitely be thinking about what’s actually happening with those kids tomorrow. Like super specifically, what’s the procedure going to be to hand out the paper so that we cut our transition time between activities from two minutes to 30 seconds. Like, that kind of granular stuff…

But at the same time you do have to make systemic decisions when you have a million kids and 50,000 teachers or however many we had. Because you have to.”
Next Steps

- Further data analysis:
  - Further sketch worldviews of people at different levels of the system, and their inter-relationships
  - Compare responses on teacher evaluation and RTI
  - Analyze positive deviants – system leaders with high levels of empathy; teachers with positive experiences with the system
  - Explore how team culture affects how people interpret experiences

- Add second non “reform” state
  - Investigate whether our findings are structural (a result of hierarchical systems) or whether they are specific to “reform” context
Conceptual Framework: What Could Underlie an Empathy Gap

District officials
- Systems & org change
- Teachers
  - Teaching students

Selection into roles
Conceptual Framework: What Could Underlie an Empathy Gap

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- Self-selection into different roles.
- Different job responsibilities.
- Social networks and worldviews: Most people spend most of their time with people in similar roles.
- Rarely have opportunities to talk and see from other perspectives.

NB: Singapore, other systems with more connections between ministry and classroom, do not have this problem to the same degree.