INTERGROUP DYNAMICS IN EDUCATION REFORM: HOW IDENTITY, POWER, AND EMOTION HINDER SYSTEMIC REFORM
ABSTRACT

This paper puts forth a theoretical framework to understand how actors at different levels of the U.S. public education system respond emotionally to systemic reform efforts and, in turn, how those emotional responses can hinder reform efforts. I begin with a brief overview of the three predominant ways scholars have thought about systemic reform implementation (i.e., political, organizational, and cognitive lenses). I then argue that these perspectives overlook important socio-emotional factors that influence how actors in different levels of the system understand, interpret, and respond to reforms. I draw on literature from intergroup relations (specifically identity and power dynamics) to argue that the top-down reforms within the hierarchical structure of the education system exacerbate perceptions of in-groups and out-groups. In turn, actors at the school level experience emotions of anxiety, threat, and shame. Each of these emotions elicits behavioral responses that resist and hinder systemic reforms. I conclude with a theoretical model to explain how these concepts work together to influence the outcomes of reforms and suggest directions for future research.
The American public education system exists as one of the most complex systems in our society. Layers of bureaucratic public institutions are nested within a hierarchical system whose overarching purpose is “not only to help students reach their potential as individuals but also to make them good citizens who will maintain the nation’s values and institutions, help them flourish, and pass them on to the next generation” (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003: 2).

Additionally, the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, highlighted that education was not only an integral part of the United States’ domestic policy, but also a vehicle for ensuring our national security and our position in the global economy. In response, federal and state governments have sought to improve the public education system through top-down education reform policies; however, the majority of those reforms have failed to live up to their promises of improving student outcomes and promoting greater equality of opportunity (Cohen & Mehta, 2017; Mehta, 2013). Many scholars have sought to understand why change is so difficult to accomplish, yet most of this literature has focused on the technical and cognitive aspects of reform, overlooking the impact of socio-emotional dynamics and failing to account for the underlying mechanisms that drive actors’ responses to reforms.

In this paper, I aim to build upon our current understanding of systemic reform breakdowns in education by arguing that socio-emotional dynamics have important implications for the success or failure of reforms. First, I begin with a brief overview of the various ways scholars have tried to explain why systemic reform is so difficult. Second I argue that because systemic reform efforts inherently require some level of cooperation across organizational levels in the hierarchical education system, theoretical perspectives from the literature on intergroup relations may provide valuable tools to analyze and gain new insights into these challenges. Specifically, identity and power dynamics play an important role in determining how actors at
different levels of the system think about and respond to reform efforts. Third, I review existing literature on the emotional responses of actors in the education system, paying particular attention to their experiences of anxiety, threat, and shame. I also describe how those three emotions lead to behavioral responses that hinder systemic reform efforts.

I close by arguing that if scholars, policy leaders, and practitioners do not acknowledge, understand, or pay sufficient attention to the importance of such socio-emotional and relational factors, systemic reform efforts will continually fail to live up to their ultimate goals because they do not address some of the most important root causes of their failures. I also suggest some areas for further research on this topic. While some scholars have recognized the importance of socio-emotional factors in the context of public education, we still lack a theoretical framework to explain how socio-emotional factors influence systemic reforms. By working to build a more robust theoretical framework to understand some of the deeper mechanisms that underlie concepts that we already know are important (i.e., relational trust, respect, empowerment, as examples.), we can gain new insights into the conditions that foster successful systemic reform.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Three Perspectives on Systemic Reform Implementation**

*Political.* By and large, the literature on systemic reform and implementation has focused on the challenges and limitations of reform efforts through three different lenses. The first lens takes a *political* approach, arguing that systemic reform policies in the public sector vary along two dimensions: the level of policy conflict and the level of policy ambiguity (Matland, 1995). Policy conflict exists when multiple organizations have competing interests at stake, whereas policy ambiguity refers to the clarity of the policy’s goals and the means to achieve those goals (Matland, 1995). Where a reform policy falls along these two dimensions shapes the nature of
the implementation process, meaning policies that have high levels of conflict and ambiguity face a different set of implementation challenges than policies with low levels of conflict and ambiguity (Matland, 1995). Indeed, reform policies in public education tend to have high levels of conflict and ambiguity, in which “there is no consensus about what are education problems and, consequently, which new knowledge to consider or how to use available knowledge” (Baum, 2002: 176). As such, education policy implementation is “symbolic” in that it “play[s] an important role in confirming new goals, in reaffirming a commitment to old goals, or in emphasizing important values and principles” (Matland, 1995: 168, citing Olsen, 1970). The implementation outcomes of these types of symbolic policies differ across localities, where the most powerful actors leverage their resources to support their own interests (Matland, 1995).

From this political lens, actors at all levels of the education system, including policymakers, superintendents, principals, and teachers, exist as political actors who have different sets of interests to consider when making decisions about policy implementation (Baum, 2002). During the implementation process, the so-called “street-level bureaucrats,” or those actors who are responsible for implementing reforms on the ground, exercise great discretion as they implement reforms (Lipsky, 1983; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). For example, the GI Bill ostensibly was created to give black and white veterans equal access to postsecondary education; however, language in the bill also emphasized localized discretion (Katznelson, 2005). In many Southern states seeking to accommodate Jim Crow laws, street-level bureaucrats used their power to create barriers for blacks to access their benefits (Katznelson, 2005). This example demonstrates how the implementation of symbolic policies like public education depends on the sets of stakeholders at play and differs across contexts.
Organizational. The second lens takes an organizational approach to analyzing systemic reform and implementation, arguing that the loosely coupled structure of the education system gives rise to a unique set of challenges to systemic reform efforts (Weick, 1976). In a loosely coupled system, organizations within the system are linked, yet each maintains its own identity and distinctiveness from others (Weick, 1976). As such, policies that originate from authority figures at higher levels of the system do not always translate into meaningful changes at the “technical core” of the organization (Weick, 1976). As policies are implemented from the top-down, they undergo various forms of evolution as they pass through each level of the system (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). Because policymakers at the top of the hierarchy cannot fully anticipate what changes will take place during the evolutionary process, they cannot appropriately plan for those changes in their policy design (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). More often than not, once the policy reaches the ground-level it hardly resembles the original design or intent (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977).

In addition to the technical aspects of designing and implementing reform policies in a loosely coupled system, the structure of the system further enables actors to behave in accordance with their own political motivations, as discussed above. This has both positive and negative consequences for reform efforts in loosely coupled systems. In the example of the G.I. Bill, the loosely coupled nature of the system allowed Southerners to implement the policy in ways that discriminated against minorities and undermined the intent of the law. In addition to facilitating wide discretion at the ground level, the localized adaptations and autonomy afforded in a loosely coupled system can thwart systemic reform by enabling actors to make surface-level changes that appear to be in compliance with new reforms while, in reality, not making
meaningful changes in their everyday practice (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

However, in cases where teachers recognize reform policies as unrealistic or disconnected from the real needs of students, the loosely coupled nature of the system enables teachers to resist reforms that could be ineffective or detrimental (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995). For example, in Jaffe-Walter's (2008) study of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, she demonstrates how the schools balanced the needs of their students with the test-based culture of accountability. She argues that teachers often “must choose between trusting their own local understandings about how to best support their students, and letting accountability fears drive their classroom practices” (2052). As the high school teachers and students faced pressure to perform on the state’s Regents exams, they collaborated across the network’s schools to integrate their own priorities with the seemingly conflicting accountability mandates. They sought to resist the external accountability threats while simultaneously continuing practices that they felt supported students’ learning. In this way, teachers in the network took advantage of the loosely coupled structure of the system to make localized adaptations that were aligned with students’ and teachers’ needs.

**Cognitive.** The third lens focuses on the cognitive aspects of reform, claiming that actors in various levels of the system have different ways of talking about and understanding reforms, and these actors’ collective sensemaking efforts shape the implementation process (Coburn, 2001, 2004; Hill, 2001; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Spillane, 2000; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Actors at different organizational levels often lack a shared language with which to discuss and interpret reform messages (Hill, 2001). For example, in both Spillane’s (2000) and Hill’s (2001) studies, state and district efforts to reform mathematics curriculum failed to make meaningful
changes because actors at the state or district and school levels did not have a shared language for understanding and interpreting the reforms. Hill’s (2001) study found that several of the new state standards and objectives appeared similar to the ones the district was already using. However, nuanced differences in the policy language revealed that the state’s objectives called for a different set of practices than what the teachers understood the language to mean. As a result, when teachers adapted the reforms into their own practices, their pedagogical changes were not aligned with the reform goals. To that end, Hill (2001) also found that the districts that had a better understanding of the intention of the state’s reforms had better implementation fidelity than those that did not.

Additionally, the ways in which district leaders and others in the education system understand and interpret reform policies depends on their social, physical, and cultural contexts (Spillane, 2000; Spillane et al., 2002). When actors at different levels of the system attempt to digest and interpret information, they do so based on their own beliefs and prior experiences (Spillane, 2000). For example, district leaders’ interpretations of reform messages must be filtered through their existing knowledge structure, and in turn, they must find a way to integrate and adapt the new reform policy to the particular context of the schools in their district (Spillane, 2000). Recognizing that meaningful change depends on actors’ having shared understandings of reform messages and successful cooperation among organizational levels of the system, scholars have emphasized the need for greater coherence between reform messages and existing practices (Honig & Hatch, 2004). They argue that the answer to the implementation problem is neither that policymakers at the top simply need better information to design better policies nor that policies simply should be designed from the bottom up. Rather, meaningful change becomes possible
when district and school-level actors collectively make sense of and manage the multiple external demands of systemic reforms (Honig & Hatch, 2004).

**Successful Examples of Reforms**

Throughout this paper so far, I have focused on the challenges and failures of systemic reforms. However, some empirical evidence demonstrates that reforms can be successful under certain conditions. These examples point towards important socio-emotional concepts that our current theoretical frameworks overlook. For example, in Coburn’s (2004) study of how teachers mediate institutional pressures from district reforms, she found that teachers incorporated new reforms into their instructional practices when the reform messages were highly congruent with their prior experiences, beliefs, and practices and if they saw the reforms as connected to normative pressures that were aligned with the overall values of the teaching profession. In contrast, teachers were unlikely to incorporate regulative reform messages that “mandated to teach in a particular way, toward particular ends, or using particular curricular materials” (232). What is important to note is that policymakers at the district and state level strategically relied on normative (rather than regulative) means of influencing teachers’ reading instruction, drawing on the significance of their values and emotions (Coburn, 2004). In this case, the content of the policy appeared to matter less than the means through which that policy was communicated to teachers, which suggests that a more complex set of mechanisms shaped the teachers’ responses to those reforms.

On a larger scale, other successful case studies include reform efforts in Ontario (Tucker, 2011), Montgomery County, MD (Childress, Doyle, & Thomas, 2009), Long Beach, CA (Zavadsky, 2009), and District 2 in New York City (R. F. Elmore & Burney, 1999). Common themes across these cases include concepts like relational trust, respect, empowerment,
vulnerability, and collaboration across hierarchical levels (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fullan, 1999, 2003, 2016, Hargreaves, 1998a, 1998b; Lasky, 2005; O’Connor, 2008). Emotional dynamics underpin all of these themes. In fact, some scholars have explicitly recognized and argued for the importance of emotions in the context of public education. Specifically, Fullan (2003) argues that the “moral imperative” of actors at all levels of the education system is to work towards “a system where all students learn, the gap between high and low performance becomes greatly reduced, and what people learn enables them to be successful citizens and workers in a morally based knowledge society” (29). To fulfill this moral imperative, he stresses the importance of emotion as a means of motivating change (Fullan, 2003, 2016). Similarly, Spillane et al. (2002) acknowledge that “one’s motivations, goals, and affect come into play in making sense of and reasoning about reforms” (401). Still, despite the relatively widespread recognition throughout this subset of the literature that education is an emotion-filled profession and that emotions are necessary for motivation and change, we still lack a clear theoretical framework to explain how socio-emotional factors influence systemic reforms. By working towards a more robust theoretical framework to understand the deeper mechanisms that underlie these concepts that we already know are important, we can gain new insights into the conditions that foster successful systemic reform.

AN INTERGROUP RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATION REFORM

In this section I argue that because systemic reform necessitates interaction among actors in various organizations in a hierarchical system, the human dynamics of relationships and emotions influence how actors perceive, interpret, and respond to reform efforts. Depending on how those dynamics play out during the implementation process, actors’ emotional responses can hinder reform efforts. To begin working towards this theoretical framework, I draw on
theoretical and empirical work from the literature on intergroup relations (specifically identity and power dynamics), and emotions in organizations.

**Intergroup Relations**

The U.S. public education system is organized in a nested hierarchical structure in which teachers and classrooms are nested within schools, principals and schools are nested within districts, and superintendents and their central offices are nested within states. As described in the earlier section on implementation, the distinctiveness of these organizational levels creates divisions along organizational boundaries with respect to culture, language, norms, values, beliefs, and practices. For example, while school-level actors possess empathy and personal relationships with their students, system-level actors often place a higher premium on rationality and hardline decision-making skills (Hargreaves, 1998a). These cultural and normative differences shape actors’ professional and organizational identities, creating in-groups and out-groups based on actors’ roles and values. Beyond the identity dynamics that arise in the context of top-down reforms, the hierarchical organization of the school system inherently means that power is distributed differentially among organizational levels such that system-level actors (e.g., district and state leaders) have more power and authority than school-level actors (e.g., teachers and principals). These power dynamics activate important emotional dynamics that shape the nature of relationships among actors and organizations within the system (Lasky, 2005).

In this paper I primarily define groups based on actors’ roles and positions in the system; however, it is important to note that divisions also exist within each group. In other words, although school-level actors tend to focus heavily on the social relationships in education, many system-level actors also deeply value the human side of education. Additionally, many teachers value the importance of students’ performance on quantitative outcomes like standardized tests.
One challenge of applying an intergroup relations framework to systemic education reform is that the task of defining the groups is complex and dynamic. Because the power dynamics based on organizational levels are such a salient feature of systemic reform efforts, I have chosen to define groups based on their roles in the system.

**Identity.** Within the hierarchical structure of the education system, actors who occupy different professional roles (i.e., teacher, principal, central office staff, state education agency staff) have varied sets of roles and responsibilities. Physical boundaries further distinguish one group from another; teachers are separated from principals and the administrative team who have their own offices in the front of the buildings. Central office and state education agency staff typically work in offices that are located in separate buildings with varied proximity to other schools and districts. As a result of these boundaries, actors at different levels exist as separate groups with their own sets of social, professional, and organizational identities. These different identities become increasingly important as actors from different levels must work together to design and implement systemic reforms.

Teaching is a “very humanistic kind of profession” in that teachers’ professional identities are inextricably linked with their emotional commitment to support the whole child, not merely to deliver curriculum and build knowledge (Lasky, 2005: 906). In the context of systemic reform, teachers often feel that the purposes of reforms are unclear, that reforms are inconsistent with their views about teaching, and that reforms deprofessionalize and disempower them (Lasky, 2005). For example, in response to reform efforts in Ontario, one teacher explained, “most people tie a part of their self-worth up in what they do for a living, and what they do as a career or as their life work. So as a result, if um, say our government strikes at that career or that professional life that we’ve chosen, then it strikes at the base of your self-worth”
(Lasky, 2005: 910). In this way, teachers perceive the government as an outgroup that does not value the emotional nature of their work or share their same professional identity or the norms, values, and beliefs inherent in their professional identities (Lasky, 2005; O’Connor, 2008).

Systemic reforms, especially top-down reforms, increase the salience of outgroups, which shapes teachers’ perceptions of and responses to reforms as well as their relationships with actors at other levels of the system. Consistent with social identity theory (SIT), if teachers perceive the government as an institution that does not value one of the most important aspects of their professional identity (i.e., the emotional side of the teaching profession, as one example), they are less likely to support ideas coming from policymakers in state agencies (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Furthermore, the process of social identification actually reinforces the antecedents of group identification, “including the distinctiveness of the group’s values and practices, group prestige, salience of and competition with out-groups, and the traditional causes of group formation” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989: 26). Even within organizations (as opposed to across different organizations in a system), top-level managers seeking to lead organizational change recognize that successful change hinges on their ability to gain legitimacy with key stakeholders on the ground (Bridwell-Mitchell & Mezias, 2012). One of the ways they accomplish this is by finding some sort of common identity (Bridwell-Mitchell & Mezias, 2012). Gaining this form of legitimacy includes an emotional component whereby managers appeal to the core values of key stakeholders as a way of masking potential discrepancies between upper management and key stakeholders on the ground (Bridwell-Mitchell & Mezias, 2012).

One potential challenge to this argument is that many system-level actors in central offices and state education agencies actually have been teachers at one point or another. If they retained some aspects of their teacher identities, then the differences between school-level actors
and system-level actors may not be as profound as one may perceive. However, especially in cases where one group perceives the actions of another group as a threat to their domain or resources, or when their identity is insecure, groups may have a vested interest in “provoking greater differentiation than exists and disparaging the reference group on this basis” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989: 31). In that case, even if system-level actors had been teachers at one point in their career, and even if teachers were aware of that fact, if teachers perceived reform efforts as threatening in some way, they may still have an interest in exaggerating the differences between themselves and the “higher ups.” For example, this could manifest in teachers’ claims that policymakers “don’t get it” because even if they were teachers at one point, if they are not in the classroom every day, then they unequivocally are out of touch with the demands of the profession.

**Power.** The power differences inherent in hierarchical systems further complicate the intergroup relations required for successful systemic reform efforts. In addition to the fact that school- and system-level actors may not share a common identity, system-level actors have greater power and resources than school-level actors. The power differences among teachers, principals, central office staff, and state agency staff become paramount during systemic reform efforts as top-down reforms increase the saliency of group membership. When teachers see themselves as the ones “in the trenches,” top-down reforms often leave them feeling as though they have no direct control over their own profession; their perceived powerlessness leads them to feel vulnerable, fearful, and anxious (Lasky, 2005). However, Smith and Berg (1987) argue, “when one group has more power than another, the less powerful invariably redefines its condition as *absolute powerlessness*” (198). The battle for power becomes a zero-sum scenario in which one group’s power merely exists in contrast to the power of another group (Smith &
Berg, 1987). While this may not always play out in such extreme terms in education reform, it does reinforce the notion that power relations are dynamic and often are defined in relation to the power of others.

Indeed, power is more relative than fixed in the context of education reform, as actors at different levels of the system retain autonomy over certain tasks and responsibilities germane to their roles (Smith, 1982). Even though system-level actors may have more power and resources in a bureaucratic sense, teachers maintain power when it comes to leading their classrooms. Furthermore, in characterizing the power dynamics within a school district, Smith (1982) categorizes actors as “uppers,” “middles,” and “lowers.” For example, he explains that in his study, “the principals were in an upper position when relating to the teachers and students, in a middle position between the superintendent’s office and the teachers, and they were in a lower position with respect to the board of education and the superintendent’s office” (Smith, 1982: 144). In the context of systemic reform, however, teachers almost always occupy the lowest rung on the implementation ladder because they are the ones ultimately responsible for implementing changes in their classrooms. Simultaneously, however, this also means that teachers play an incredibly powerful and important role in determining the outcome of reforms (Elmore, 2004). In this way, the power structure inherent in hierarchical organizations and systems shapes the way actors interact with and respond to actors in other levels because “power relations directly mediate interpretive processes within organizations” (Vince, 2001: 1329, citing Coopey, 1995; Coopey & Burgoyne, 1999).

**Emotions in Systemic Education Reform**

Dynamics of identity and power lay the groundwork for the emotional responses actors in the education system have in response to reform (Hargreaves, 1998a). For example, when top-
down reforms reinforce group identities and power dynamics, they can provoke us versus them mindsets accompanied by feelings of anxiety, threat, and shame among teachers as they try to navigate the new changes.\(^1\) In this section I describe how anxiety, threat, and shame arise in the context of systemic education reform and explain how these emotions lead to behavioral responses that hinder meaningful change. While these three emotions certainly are not the only emotions actors experience in response to change, I have chosen to focus on them for three reasons. First, these three emotions are commonly referenced in studies that document emotions actors in the education system (typically teachers) experience in the context of change. Second, they have important connections to identity and power dynamics. In many cases, identity and power serve as levers that drive and/or exacerbate these emotional responses. Finally, all three emotions lead to behavioral responses that hinder change.

**Anxiety.** Systemic educational change, especially unwelcome change that is incongruent with teachers’ values and beliefs systems, often evokes feelings of anxiety among teachers and even principals (Dale & James, 2015). In response to accountability reforms, Jaffe-Walter (2008) argues that output-based policies cause emotional damage to teachers and incite high levels of anxiety. In her study she cited one principal’s observation that “new teachers panic that they won’t be able to cover everything on the tests and they pull back from deep inquiry” (Jaffe-Walter, 2008: 2052). Within the school context, and related to the power dynamics inherent in a hierarchical system, teachers may experience anxiety when they feel that principals apply rules inconsistently or when they use scare tactics to motivate teachers (Hargreaves, 1998a). However, because actors in the education system occupy dynamic power positions in relation to actors in

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\(^1\) In this section I have paid more attention to teachers’ emotions in the context of reform compared to those of principals, central office and state agency staff. This is partly because far more research has attended to the emotional aspects of the teaching profession and partly because teachers are the usually the actors responsible for implementing reforms on the ground. Therefore, their emotional responses are particularly important when trying to understand the root causes of systemic reform breakdowns.
other roles, external pressures (from the school board, for example) can also cause principals to experience anxiety in the face of change (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; James & Jones, 2007). In turn, principals’ anxieties can lead them to make decisions that ultimately reinforce anxieties among teachers.

For example, in James and Jones’s (2007) study of school leadership teams (SLT) implementing new teacher observation policies in the United Kingdom, they explain that although the SLT valued collaborative relationships with teachers, the anxiety they felt in response to “forces wider in the system” led them to adopt formal teacher observation practices using a “hierarchical, line management model” (9). Teachers, on the other hand, perceived the new policy as a “judgmental and inspectorial system” (9). This perception led the teachers to experience anxiety of their own, which manifested in their resistance to the new policy. In turn, this exacerbated the SLT’s anxiety because they feared that the new observation policy would not lead to the desired outcomes that spurred the changes in the first place. As James and Jones (2007) explain, “this anxiety had not been brought to the surface and reflected upon during the policy development but had been suppressed only to emerge, perhaps more strongly, when the implementation finally took place” (11). In other words, as the SLT sought to manage their own anxiety in response to a top-down reform, they ended up designing a policy that heightened teachers’ anxieties and exacerbated their own anxieties—the very anxieties they attempted to avoid in the first place.

This example highlights the ways in which anxiety can inhibit change in organizations and systems. When groups collectively experience anxiety, their natural—albeit often unconscious—response is to defend themselves and divert their attention away from the source of anxiety and other emotionally unpleasant experiences (Jaques, 1955; Long, 2006; Menzies,
1960). Perhaps the most widely cited example of this type of social defense is Menzies’s (1960) empirical study of nurses, in which nurses depersonalized their patients in order to manage their anxieties about dealing with sick patients. While this strategy may have successfully mitigated the anxiety they felt about their patients, it also undermined their ability to care for patients on a deeper, more emotional level.

In the context of educational change, actors may “have unconscious interests that matter more to them than using knowledge to educate children or even persuade the public that, in any case, they are doing so” (Baum, 2002). Actors at all levels have their own defensive strategies for protecting themselves against unpleasant experiences and emotions, and systemic reform often disrupts those defensive strategies (James, 2009). This cyclical process “can be strong and can overwhelm adaptive capacity, which is the readiness and capability to learn and change” (James, 2009: 49). In this way, systemic education reform efforts that reinforce identity and power battles can exacerbate feelings of anxiety, which, in turn, lead actors to react (often unconsciously) in ways that hinder and undermine reform.

A potential counterargument to this perspective is that because systemic reforms have become so ubiquitous in the education system, school-level actors feel more apathetic than anxious about changes. There is some evidence that teachers, in particular, have an attitude of “this too shall pass,” which makes them feel less concerned about the changes (Kohn, 2001; McNeil, 2000). Many reforms are tied to political leaders who face term limits of a few short years, and teachers recognize that changes come and go. However, some have argued that school systems have become more tightly coupled since the enactment of No Child Left Behind and that top-down reforms have included stronger accountability measures that pose significant threats to teachers’ job security and the status quo practices (Fusarelli, 2002; Hallett, 2010). Furthermore,
because top-down reforms heighten identity and power dynamics within the school system and pose challenges to relationships between principals, teachers, and students, it is likely that school-level actors do experience anxiety in response to systemic reforms and that their anxiety shapes their behaviors.

**Threat.** Numerous studies have shown that teachers feel threat in response to top-down reforms. In addition to the ever-present perceptions of threats to their job security and their relationships with students and parents, teachers often perceive systemic reform policies like accountability and evaluation as threats to their emotional bonds with students and their moral purpose to teach the whole child (Baum, 2002; Conley & Glasman, 2008; Day, 2002; Hargreaves, 1998; Jaffe-Walter, 2008; Olsen & Sexon, 2009; Van Veen & Sleegers, 2006). Overall, Van Veen and Sleegars argue, “the manner in which teachers react to educational reforms is largely determined by whether teachers perceive their professional identities as being reinforced or threatened by reforms” (106). Here again, we see identity as a foundational component of teachers’ emotional responses to reforms.

From a theoretical and psychological perspective, when individuals experience threat, they tend to display the practices and behaviors they know best (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981), thereby reinforcing the status quo. Staw et al. (1981) argue that individuals, groups, and organizations behave rigidly in the face of a threat. At the individual level, threat evokes psychological stress, anxiety, and physiological arousal (Staw et al., 1981). Both individuals and organizations cognitively respond to threat by restricting information processing and constricting control (Staw et al., 1981). When individuals and organizations restrict information processing, they tend to rely and focus attention on internal hypotheses, prior expectations, and stereotypes rather than considering all pieces of information (Staw et al., 1981). By constricting control,
individuals and organizations tend to demonstrate dominant or well-learned responses and behaviors (Staw et al., 1981). From a behavioral perspective, this leads to behavioral increments if the dominant or well-learned responses are appropriate for the setting and behavior decrements if they are inappropriate (Staw et al., 1981).

Given that teachers do feel threatened by some top-down reform policies, it is important to understand what types of prior expectations, internal hypotheses, and stereotypes teachers may already have regarding reform efforts. For example, if teachers have previously had negative experiences with reform policies, they may have low expectations for the value of the reform. Similarly, teachers who work in an environment that holds a negative view of reform policies may have created internal hypotheses that the state is “out to get them.” Teachers also may have stereotypes of the state as a “faceless bureaucracy” that is out of touch with the realities of being a classroom teacher. Each of these perspectives would have an important impact on the ways teachers interpret and respond to systemic reform efforts. Additionally, the fact that threat leads individuals to exhibit dominant and well-learned responses provides compelling evidence for why teachers’ responses of threat may actually inhibit systemic reform efforts. Particularly for veteran teachers who have developed habits and routines in their instructional practice, new reform policies can seem threatening and lead teachers to doubt whether they are up to the task. Unfortunately for those teachers, their perceptions of threat also hinder their ability to comply with the new policies, as threat perceptions push them toward the very types of practices that are no longer appropriate for the new standards.

Furthermore, these types of behavioral responses demonstrate the ways in which cognitive explanations for teacher resistance fall short of explaining teachers’ behaviors. From a cognitive perspective, reform policies would have a greater likelihood of succeeding if policy
leaders could make the case for change in a way that resonated with teachers. If teachers understood *why* change needed to happen and *how* they needed to implement the change, then reforms would have a greater likelihood of success. However, it is possible that teachers could cognitively understand—and perhaps, even agree with—the need for change, yet still experience feelings of threat in response to the policies. This is especially true in cases where actors in different organizational levels have historically negative, mistrusting relationships. In this example, teachers’ emotional responses of threat would still manifest in behavioral responses consistent with existing practices, despite the fact that they cognitively understand the need for change.

One potential counterargument to this perspective is the fact that, as previously discussed, Coburn’s (2004) study showed that new practices that are congruent with teachers’ existing practices and beliefs are more likely to be incorporated into their practice. One could argue that this provides evidence that cognitive explanations for how teachers mediate reform are sufficient. However, because congruent messages were often connected to normative pressures, and policy makers strategically attached new regulative reforms to normative pressures, I would argue that cognition alone could not fully explain teachers’ responses. The fact that policy makers recognized that they had a greater chance of impacting classroom practices by attaching reforms to normative pressures might hint a more nuanced aspect of teachers’ responses to policy.

**Shame.** In the context of education reform policies, shame also is rooted in identity and power struggles between actors from different status groups. Actors with greater power and status can use rhetoric and shaming attempts to “induce compliance with institutionalized community prescriptions” (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014: 284) In this
manner, system-level actors can impose their own ideas, values, and goals onto others (De Clercq & Voronov, 2009; Everett, 2002). As I argued earlier in this paper, school-level and system-level actors have different, often competing, sets of professional values and goals that are inextricably linked to their identities. School-level actors value the human, emotional, and individual dimensions, whereas system-level actors value quantitative outputs on a broader scale. In these different roles, actors develop a sort of “habitus” in which they instinctively draw upon cognitions and emotions that are valued in their field and related to their own positions within the field (Voronov & Vince, 2012). This is important because the power dynamics inherent to the hierarchical nature of the education system and system-level actors' shaming efforts reinforce us versus them mindsets. When high-power groups use shaming tactics to motivate compliance with changes, low power groups respond by resisting the changes to avoid giving legitimacy to the shamers (Creed et al., 2014; Voronov & Vince, 2012). This is especially true in cases where the high power and low power groups hold contrasting values and identities. As a result, this cycle of shaming and resisting motivates individuals to maintain social bonds with their own group and protect their status within the field.

In practice, teachers do perceive the rhetoric around such reforms as accountability and teacher evaluation as shaming attempts that engender feelings of fear, hopelessness, and demoralization (Hargreaves, 1998; Olsen & Sexon, 2009; Segall, 2003; M. L. Smith, 1991). Teachers protect themselves from these types of shaming tactics “by joining in and supporting the moral outrage, resistance and protest actions of other teachers against governments who move in educationally questionable directions [and] push their initiatives too far” (Hargreaves, 1998a:327). By banding together to protect their collective interests and status
from external shaming rhetoric, teachers resist systemic reform policies and preserve the status quo.

Beyond the rhetorical shaming tactics used to encourage compliance with specific norms and practices, other types of shame play an important role in shaping school-level actors’ responses to shaming attempts. Felt shame, which is “a discrete emotion experienced by a person based on negative self-evaluations stemming from the perceived or actual depreciation by others owing to a failure to meet standards of behavior” is closely linked to individuals’ desires to maintain social bonds (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014: 280). Teachers are highly motivated by relationships. In fact, when they receive information about new programs or policies, their initial reaction is to think about how those policies might impact their relationships with their students and colleagues (Hargreaves, 1998a). Therefore, teachers are likely to experience rather strong emotional responses to system level actors’ shaming rhetoric.

One potential counterargument is that shame does, in fact, motivate behavioral changes under certain conditions (Gausel, Vignoles, & Leach, 2016). However, because of the deep emotional connections teachers have to their profession and the fact that identity and power dynamics involved in shaming tactics exacerbate us versus them mindsets, it is more likely that teachers do experience defensive emotional responses to shaming tactics. Perhaps more important, it is also likely that these emotional responses occur somewhat below the surface at an unconscious level. Teachers may attempt to cover up or mask their emotions as yet another way to avoid giving legitimacy to the higher-powered system-level decision makers. If that is the case, as evidenced in this example, shaming tactics that do motivate behavioral changes are only likely to do so at the surface level. In other words, even if shaming does lead to behavioral
changes, school-level actors will engage in myth and ceremony to make it look like they are complying with the new changes.

**Towards a Theoretical Model**

To begin moving towards a clear theoretical framework for this new perspective on systemic reform challenges, I have created a model that illustrates how all of these concepts work together to influence whether reforms are successful or not (see Figure 1). This model illustrates the education reform implementation process, highlighting constructs related to intergroup relations, emotions, cognitions, and behaviors. First, the reform initiative requires a division of labor, as actors in each organizational level are responsible for carrying out different aspects of the reform. At the same time, this division of labor incites identity and power dynamics among groups. Second, as actors carry out their work, they must cognitively interpret the reform and determine what it means for their jobs. Simultaneously, actors experience emotional responses that are inextricably linked to the intergroup dynamics and their own cognitive interpretations of the reform. Finally, actors’ cognitions and emotions shape their behavioral responses to reforms in ways that either lead to successful or unsuccessful implementation. The solid lines in this model represent rational and cognitive processes, whereas the dotted lines highlight the roles of intergroup dynamics and emotions.

From a rational perspective, systemic reforms are designed to solve a specific problem in the system. For example, a rational response to ineffective teachers would be to create a teacher evaluation system that measures performance and incentivizes teachers to improve. After the labor is divided and implementation begins, actors engage in cognitive processes of interpreting the reform based on their prior knowledge, experiences, and beliefs and making sense of the reforms with those around them (Hill, 2001; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Based on their
understandings and interpretations of the reforms, actors respond with behaviors that lead to successful or unsuccessful reform implementation (Coburn, 2004). For example, if the reform is congruent with teachers’ prior beliefs and experiences, they are more likely to incorporate the reform into their practices (Coburn, 2004). This would result in a successful reform implementation. If the reform is incongruent, however, teachers may outright reject the reform or decide to make surface-level changes to appear as though they are in compliance with the reform, yet choose not to make any meaningful changes to their practice (Coburn, 2004). This would result in an unsuccessful reform implementation.

The rational and cognitive implementation process is underpinned by intergroup dynamics and emotions. From this perspective, the division of labor process extends beyond questions about which actors are responsible for what work and heightens the saliency of actors’ identities and power statuses. Subsequently, these dynamics can provoke us versus them mindsets accompanied by such emotions as anxiety, threat and shame. In response, these emotions often encourage behaviors like defensive strategies (James, 2009; Menzies, 1960), the inability to adapt to new circumstances and rigid behaviors in line with well-known practices (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981), and outright resistance to changes (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014). These types of behavioral responses ultimately lead to unsuccessful reform implementation.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that the predominant perspectives currently used to analyze the failure or success of systemic reforms have not adequately examined the critically important socio-emotional factors that influence how actors at different levels of the education system respond to reforms. Specifically, my aim is to build upon these perspectives by exploring the
underlying mechanisms that, for the most part, have been overlooked for decades. The notion that emotions are an important aspect of education reform is by no means new; however, in this paper I have put forth an overarching theoretical framework to understand how these mechanisms shape the reform implementation process. Unless researchers, policy leaders, and practitioners pay closer attention to how these emotional dynamics impact systemic reform efforts, we likely will continue designing and implementing reforms using approaches and analytical tools that may misdiagnose or mischaracterize the reasons why reforms do not reach their ultimate goals.

This theoretical framework raises a multitude of research questions that should be explored in future studies. First, we need a more nuanced and robust framework that more explicitly describes and predicts the types of emotional responses different actors have under certain conditions. This would require a multilevel framework that better captures the types of emotions system-level actors at the district, state, and even federal level experience in response to reforms. Most studies that address the emotional side of education have focused on teachers and sometimes principals; only a small number have touched on the emotions of actors in higher levels (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Hargreaves, 1998a).

Additionally, since identity dynamics play an important causal role in this theoretical framework, we need more data on how actors at higher levels of the system develop their professional identities. Similarly, we need to know more about how system-level actors who have previously been classroom teachers or school administrators maintain (or not) those
professional identities and how they manage multiple, sometimes competing, professional identities. To my knowledge, no empirical studies have investigated these questions.

Moving beyond the individual as the unit of analysis, future studies should consider how internal organizational dynamics (at the group and organizational levels) impact cross-level reform efforts. For example, what kinds of strategies might actors at different levels of the system use to build successful relationships across organizational boundaries? What are the implications of such strategies? Eventually, we should aim to develop and test interventions that could leverage identity and power dynamics in ways that mitigate negative emotional responses among actors in other organizational levels.
References


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APPENDIX A

Figure 1. A Theoretical Model of Power, Identity, and Emotions in Systemic Reform