# From Fidelity to Integrity: Navigating Flexibility in Scaling Up a Statewide Initiative

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Abstract

This paper is a case study of how educators made sense of the core ideas of a new statewide initiative intentionally designed to foster local flexibility. We trace the initiative’s core elements through 1) communication materials, 2) school principals’ understandings of the initiative and reasons for participation, and 3) teachers’ understandings of what the initiative required of them. Using interviews from principals and teachers, this paper sheds light on tensions between providing flexibility and ensuring integrity to core components. Overall, our findings suggest that while principals understood the core elements of the initiative, some elements were pushed to the front and others were pushed to the back.

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# From Fidelity to Integrity: Navigating Flexibility in Scaling Up a Statewide Initiative

Variation in local context is the core challenge of scaling up school reforms, whether a lack of local capacity, lack of buy-in, or lack of alignment to local policies and procedures (Berends, Bodilly, and Kirby 2002; Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan 2002; McDonald, Klein, and Riordan 2009). Given this variation, adaptation has long been recognized as part of implementation and scaling reforms (Datnow and Park 2009; McLaughlin 1976). Adaptation is particularly important for achieving scale because innovations must be able to fit into varied district, school, and classroom contexts, all while coping with change, promoting ownership, building capacity, and enabling effective decision-making (Castro, Barrera, and Martinez 2004; Clarke and Dede 2009; Cannata and Rutledge 2017; Cohen et al. 2013). Emerging efforts to achieve scale are incorporating the reality of adaptation and shifting from an exclusive focus on *fidelity of implementation* to one of *integrity in implementation*. (Morel et al. 2019; LeMahieu 2011). Whereas fidelity of implementation can be thought of as “do exactly what they say to do,” integrity in implementation has been described as “remain true to what matters most and works best while accommodating local needs and circumstances” (LeMahieu 2011, 2).

It was in this context of seeking adaptable large-scale reforms that the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) adopted the Instructional Partnership Initiative (IPI). IPI is a professional learning experience that uses evaluation data to match teachers in the same school to foster instructional improvement, and provides substantial flexibility to principals around specific IPI practices. This paper uses data from the first year of the statewide scale-up to demonstrate how principals understood the core theory of action of IPI, how principals adapted IPI for their local context, and the implications of these school-level adaptations for teacher understanding. Using interviews from principals and teachers in schools that participated in this initiative, interviews with non-participating principals, and analysis of TDOE communication materials about IPI, this paper sheds light on tensions between intended flexibility and its relationship to integrity to the core components of the initiative. By highlighting the role of local context in the interpretation and enactment of a statewide instructional improvement initiative, this paper contributes to an understanding of how to support the productive adaptation and alignment to context at scale, thus furthering our understanding of how to support integrity in implementation.

Reforms are most effectively implemented and have larger impacts on student learning when they have a well-specified design and provide visible markers for how practice should change (Cohen et al. 2013; Rowan et al. 2009). Indeed, implementation is more successful when expectations are detailed, explicit, and supported by adequate training (Cohen et al. 2013; Fullan 2016; Rowan et al. 2009). For example, Rowan and colleagues (2009) describe how comprehensive reform designs that were less explicit about their expected instructional changes saw fewer changes in classroom instruction. In fact, a substantial body of evidence suggests that implementation with fidelity to the reform is associated with changes in student outcomes (Dane and Schneider 1998; Hulleman and Cordray 2009). Yet, fidelity at scale is difficult to achieve and somewhat illusory because of differences in the local contexts of various implementation sites. As such, school reform developers face a tension: how to support implementation while also allowing for adaptation to context.

This tension is reflected in the scholarship on scale, which is beginning to shift from focusing solely on replication, with its emphasis on fidelity of implementation, to adaptation and integrity in implementation (Morel et al. 2019; Cannata and Rutledge 2017). Indeed, several emerging approaches to scaling up—such as continuous improvement, network-based improvement, and design-based implementation research—offer mechanisms to foster local adaptation to build educator ownership and enable adaptation to allow for alignment to local context (Cohen-Vogel et al. 2016; Bryk et al. 2013; Penuel et al. 2011). These approaches have shifted to emphasize a goal of integrity, rather than fidelity, of implementation, where educators make adaptations that reflect local exigencies, while remaining true to the core theory of action of the reform (LeMahieu 2011).This is difficult because it requires those tasked with leading implementation to have both a clear understanding of the core ideas of the reform and the capacity to differentiate between more and less productive adaptations to realize deep change at scale (Russell et al. 2019; Dede 2006).

The scholarship on how to achieve integrity in implementation at scale is beginning to converge on the importance of educator understanding of the core features of the reform. That is, scaling up an initiative requires focusing less on presctiptive to-do’s, but rather on the central ideas and theory of change that undergird key practices (Bradach 2003; Elmore 2016). Indeed, achieving deep change at scale requires not just replicating certain actions that ‘work,’ but affecting changes in practice aligned with the underlying principles and goals of productive initiatives (Coburn 2003; Honig 2009). Productive adaptations of reform efforts are those that are consistent with the core features of the reform (Russell et al. 2019). New approaches for successful scale-up need to have a clear theory of action that stakeholders can draw on to direct changes in practice as they integrate the reform into their local context (Russell et al. 2017).

In an effort to better understand how educators respond to reforms that are designed to allow for adaptation to accommodate local context, this paper examines interviews with principals and teachers from a study of a state initiative that was specifically designed to foster adaptation for alignment to local context. We explore the following research questions:

1. How do principals and teachers understand the core elements embedded in the state policy?
2. How does local context shape principal participation and enactment of the policy?

The design of IPI includes a theory of action that intentionally allows for flexibility in how principals establish the initiative in their schools and how teachers engage in partnership activities. These circumstances offer a fitting opportunity to explore how educators come to understand the core ideas of a new initiative, and the ways in which these understandings are inextricably bound to local contexts and shape the direction of adaptations.

# Conceptual Framework: Making Sense of Reforms

Given our interest in educator understanding of state policy, we use sensemaking theory to guide our analysis. Policy implementation research has evolved from conceptualizing implementation as a top-down process of responding to hierarchical mandates to recognizing that implementation is a multi-directional process in which educators co-construct policy meanings through their own understandings and contexts (Datnow and Park 2009). In this way, sensemaking is a process by which the meanings individuals attribute to actions, messages, and their environments are negotiated according to prior experiences and knowledge, motivation, and organizational and community contexts (Coburn 2006; Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002). Principals and teachers are social actors who co-construct meaning as they interpret environments, in light of their prior knowledge, values, and the contexts which they inhabit (Coburn 2001; Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002). The sense individual educators make of large-scale policies shapes their willingness to participate in new initiatives and the actions they take in response to the perceived expectations (Coburn 2006). Examining why educators decide to participate in new initiatives, then, requires examining implementers’ understandings of the goals and expectations of the initiative and how these embed in particular contexts. Furthermore, particularly within the context of implementation and scale, examining how educators decide to adapt and enact new initiatives requires examining implementers’ interpretations of the feasibility of practices and their perceptions of the options available to them as they naturally adapt policy requirements to their local contexts.

The reality that local actors will respond to a reform as they have made sense of it, and not as conceived by the reform developer, is particularly important in the context of scaling up initiatives across a large number of schools. Sensemaking, therefore, is important for understanding how reform efforts fail because behavior that may be attributed to resistance or lack of capacity may instead be due to unclear interpretation of the initiative in a new and different context (Spillane 2000). Educators may focus only on certain elements of a new initiative that seem prudent in that context and miss deeper relationships, thus making unproductive changes in practice (Spillane 2000; Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002).

In line with these findings on the importance of sensemaking, research on scaling up has evolved to focus less on the extent to which large numbers of schools enact a highly specified set of practices, and more on demonstrating how “powerful ideas work in diverse environments” (Elmore 2016, 533). Scale involves not just spreading a reform to a large number of schools, but also deep change in practice, local ownership, and sustainability (Coburn 2003). Scaling up may even involve adaptation and reinvention (Morel et al. 2019). This shift in the research on scaling up points to two important aspects of sensemaking scholarship: (1) attention to the intent versus interpretation of core ideas of the reform, and (2) the role of local contextual elements in co-constructing interpretations of the reform and the educator’s response to it.

## Focusing on Core Ideas of the Reform

Consideration of the aforementioned literature on sensemaking and productive adaptation in scaling up underscores the importance of educators’ understandings of the theory of action behind a reform. As a core element of scale, depth requires that educators understand the assumptions about teaching, learning, and school improvement that are embedded in reform activities (Coburn 2003). As noted previously, adaptations are certain to occur, and are neither inherently good nor bad (Dede 2006). What matters is the extent to which the reform builds a deep understanding of the core ideas and pertinent practices, and is designed to effectively allow for integrity to the core ideas even when implementation conditions are different than those envisioned by the designers (Clarke and Dede 2009). Identification of the essential practices of a reform allow educators to make productive adaptations (Russell et al. 2019). Sabelli and Harris write, “It is the set of ideas or principles behind the intervention and the process of implementing those principles that will allow new implementers to do justice to the intentions of developers and researchers” (2015, 27). When educators lack a deep understanding of the theory of change embedded in the reform, or of the unstated beliefs about change within their own context, reforms often collide or collude with local practice in ways that undermine the aims of the reform. (Hatch and White 2002).

As educational reform efforts shift to focus beyond whether adaptation occurs, to supporting the successful adaptive integration of effective practices into new contexts (Hannan et al. 2015; Russell et al. 2019), there is greater need for developers of improvement efforts to ensure practitioners understand the what, how, and why of the practices that they are expected to implement, *and* the core ideas behind those practices (Thompson and Wiliam 2008). By combining the “know-how” with the “know-why”, practitioners can adapt initiatives in ways that stay true to the underlying theory of change (Thompson and Wiliam 2008). Further, supporting ongoing understanding of the theory of change can help practitioners achieve the right balance in adaptation of particular practices such that they maintain integrity to core ideas and principles of the initiative (Fullan 2016, LeMahieu 2011).

## The Role of Local Context: Principals as Sensemakers and Sensegivers

As a theoretical concept, sensemaking draws attention to two important aspects of the role of local context in shaping integrity in implementation at scale. First, it highlights how the organizational environment shapes how educators make sense of reform. Second, it emphasizes how adaptation occurs as implementers navigate local contexts and integrate the reform into the existing norms, values, and practices of the school and its stakeholders.

The role of sensemaking in policy implementation highlights how individual behavior reflects negotiation between institutional structures and routines that guide action and individual agency (Coburn 2016). Substantial research highlights how individual sensemaking is shaped in key ways by one’s institutional environment. For example, leaders in Connecticut districts interpreted a variety of messages about teacher evaluation policy and then framed a new statewide evaluation in different ways; principals within these districts came to different understandings of what the new policy meant (Woulfin, Donaldson, and Gonzales 2016). In other examples of institutional contexts shaping individual understandings, some school districts set organizational routines and expectations around how principals use various forms of data, which then shaped the data-use practices in schools (Cannata, et al 2017; Honig and Venkateswaran 2012). This study calls attention to the sensemaking that occurs as part of a natural and unavoidable adaptation process as actors weigh not only which elements of a new policy to adapt, but also the set of options they see as available in their contexts as they participate in reform efforts.

Of course, individuals’ own experiences and expectations also shape how they understand policy messages (Coburn 2001; 2006; Allen and Penuel 2015; Coburn 2005). Sensemaking also involves individual agency, as educators creatively combine and reconfigure institutional logics in their daily work as a way to push against institutional pressures (März, Kelchtermans, and Dumay 2016). For example, Lochmiller and Acker-Hocevar (2016), found that principals who lacked content knowledge in mathematics and science had to reframe their role as instructional leaders when leading change in these content areas.

Agency in sensemaking is particularly important when considering the role of principals, who are not only recipients of policy messages, but also interpreters of policy messages for teachers in their school. Sensegiving, closely related to sensemaking, concerns “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others” (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, 442). Those leading change efforts must not only make sense of the organization and change efforts, but also share that vision with those they lead (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991). Residing between a state or district policy and their schools, principals must translate policy for their teachers, and make choices about what elements to emphasize in that translation (Rouleau 2005). This sensegiving process involves agency as school leaders can selectively emphasize elements that align with their own ideas, beliefs, and perceptions of what can work in a given context (Woulfin 2016). As principals engage in sensegiving, they are shaping how their teachers will understand the policy and thus how it is enacted in their context. Sensegiving becomes an important part of reform adaptation.

Research on the implementation of comprehensive teacher evaluation systems demonstrate the importance of sensemaking, sensegiving, and corresponding attention to local context. First, principals’ own understanding of teacher evaluation shapes how they view the purposes of evaluation (Woulfin, Donaldson, and Gonzales 2016; Rigby 2015). Second, as the central figure of teacher evaluation policy in their school, principals serve as sensegivers for their teachers, shaping how teachers understand the goals of teacher evaluation reforms (Kraft and Gilmour 2016; Vekeman, Devos, and Tuytens 2015). Third, principals’ agency in enacting teacher evaluation reforms is shaped by their local context, including teacher responses to evaluation and current culture (Vekeman, Devos, and Tuytens 2015; Kraft and Gilmour 2016; Donaldson and Mavrogordato 2018; Marsh et al. 2017). For example, school leaders often had distortive responses to teacher evaluation when there were concerns about the validity and purpose of evaluation or teachers thought evaluation was mostly about catching them doing something wrong (Marsh et al. 2017; Kraft and Gilmour 2016). The present study extends teacher evaluation research beyond a focus on the implementation of the evaluation systems themselves and toward improvement initiatives that use evidence generated from teacher evaluation systems.

# Context – The Initiative, its Goals, and Core Components

The Instructional Partnership Initiative (IPI) uses data from the state teacher evaluation system to match teachers in partnerships with the goal of instructional improvement to ultimately improve academic outcomes for students. The theory is that IPI can leverage data from the observation component of the state teacher evaluation to provide principals with building-level teacher matches. Teachers are first identified as a potential “target” teacher if the teacher has an overall score of 3 or below on the observation rubric, and at least one of the 19 practice indicators is less than 3 on a scale from 1-5. Using the individual indicator scores, an algorithm matches target teachers to other teachers in the same school who score a 4 or 5 on the indicators where the target teacher scores a 1 or 2. IPI provides principals with proposed teacher pairs that maximize the number of strengths-to-weaknesses matches in a single school.

Principals are invited to take up the initiative through a series of communications from the state to the principal and district. An online portal proposes several matches for each target teacher, with the expectation that principals will use local knowledge to select the final matches. Principals then introduce the partnerships to teachers and establish expectations for the partnerships. Principal and teacher guidebooks are available to support principals and teachers participating in IPI.

As established by the program designers and TDOE, IPI has three core elements that comprise the initiative’s theory of change to achieve the overarching goal of instructional improvement to better student outcomes:

1. *Individualized instructional improvement opportunities.* IPI is designed as personalized, job-embedded professional development, providing learning opportunities to improve instruction.
2. *Teacher collaboration.* IPI is designed to facilitate collaboration among peers and leverage expertise within a school.
3. *Indicator-level focus on instruction.* IPI uses data on specific indicators on the observation rubric to match teachers, with the goal of focusing collaboration in specific practice areas where target teachers need improvement and partner teachers have expertise.

Recognition that adaptation will occur as part of implementation is explicitly incorporated within these core elements. Examples include how exactly principals make matches between teachers and how teachers work together. Communication from TDOE about the initiative described it as voluntary initiative with several details about implementation left in the principals’ hands.

Prior to the launch of IPI statewide, IPI had been piloted in a small number of Tennessee schools. Results from an evaluation of this pilot indicated that IPI improved teacher performance as measured by the evaluation, student achievement, and teacher perceptions that the evaluation improves teaching (Papay et al. 2016). As a result, TDOE decided to scale IPI throughout the state. The teacher evaluation was first implemented in 2011-12, and the statewide rollout began in 2015-16. Thus, this study took place when the evaluation system had been in place for several years.

# Data and Methods

The present study is a part of a broader, mixed methods study that explores the first year of statewide IPI implementation. Data for this paper draws on (1) teacher and principal interviews in schools participating in IPI (known as participating principals/teachers); (2) interviews with principals who were invited to participate in IPI, but decided not to participate (known as non-participating principals); and (3) materials the state used to communicate about IPI to districts, schools, and teachers.

## Data

The first set of data come from fieldwork visits to 16 of the schools that participated in the first year of statewide IPI implementation in the 2015-16 school year. As of January 2016, 50 schools had submitted matches. In choosing schools for fieldwork visits, we first stratified the participating schools by treatment outreach condition,[[1]](#footnote-1) trying to achieve an equal number of participating schools in each condition. We then selected participating schools for fieldwork in a way that attempted to both mirror the characteristics of all participating schools and produce variation across schools according to a wide range of characteristics, including school level (elementary, middle, and high school), region, school size, percentage of economically disadvantaged students, and school-wide value-added score. In these categories, the fieldwork schools were broadly representative of the participating schools as a whole.

Within each fieldwork school, we aimed to conduct individual interviews with six teachers from three IPI matched pairs and an individual interview with the principal (or assistant principal if they had leadership over IPI). In selecting IPI teacher matches for interviews, we sought to maximize variation across grade levels and subjects. In total, we interviewed 16 administrators and 87 teachers participating in IPI. We designed participating principal and teacher interview guides to elicit participants’ understandings of IPI, its rationale, specifics of implementation in each school context, and information about professional development, teacher collaboration, and evaluation.

In addition to the 16 participating schools, we sought to conduct interviews with 16 non-participating principals to learn more about the reasons schools declined the initiative. To select non-participating schools, we again stratified schools into the treatment conditions and divided principals into those who logged on to the IPI portal but did not submit matches and those who never logged on, seeking to contact an even number of principals from each category. We also attempted to balance our selected non-participating schools across region and school level. We contacted 30 schools for non-participating interviews but were only able to complete interviews with 9 non-participating principals. Non-participant interview protocols were designed to explore principals’ understandings of IPI, experience with IPI outreach, reasons for non-participation, and elements of school culture such as professional development, teacher collaboration, and evaluation.

The third data source included all materials the state used to communicate about IPI to superintendents, principals, and teachers. Messaging about IPI to each of these groups came from TDOE, via email communications. These communications often linked to or attached additional resources such as principal and teacher guidebooks, a website with additional guidance including frequently asked questions (FAQs), and occasionally articles that gave more detail about IPI, particularly initial results and the rationale behind the initiative. In the case of the teacher and principal guidebooks, we analyzed the introductory sections for messaging about IPI, such as program rationale and “how to” guidance. All of the emails with embedded hyperlinks led to webpages on a designated IPI website maintained by the state. We analyzed the landing page for each embedded hyperlink. We collected and analyzed a total of 12 TDOE emails and 9 additional communication materials (e.g., website links and email attachments). Some of the resources were sent to multiple stakeholders, representing a total of 18 additional resources.

## Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and coded. We used a grounded theory approach to move between our a priori coding framework and emergent inclinations, looking for evidence that supported, negated, or further developed our initial understandings surrounding IPI (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thus, our approach to coding these data was both inductive and deductive, and we sought to identify themes as we looked across participants’ responses (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Our coding framework initially conceived only of broad categories including 1) reasons for participation/non-participation, 2) understanding of IPI, and 3) how the principal set expectations for teachers. As coding progressed, we sought to allow the data to drive the findings by narrowing categories to include subcategories of participation reasons and commonalities in understandings articulated by interviewees. For example, we sought to capture the activities in which participating teachers reported engaging, and whether and how they used the state-provided resources. Within these categories, we also sought to identify the extent to which the three core IPI elements were represented.

In this analysis, we paid particular attention to the different phases of how principals and teachers learned about IPI: messaging in formal communications from the state, principal understanding, reasons for participation/non-participation, how principals set expectations for teachers, and teacher understanding. We compared coded interview transcripts to see if patterns emerged across contexts, individuals, and respondent groups in an effort to discern patterns of program perceptions and reasons for participation. For example, we explored how descriptions of the introduction of IPI to teachers differed between principals, the patterns of which specific core ideas were emphasized or de-emphasized by principals, and how this was related to teacher understanding of the core elements. When we perceived patterns, we wrote memos with relevant evidence and tested these assertions against the larger body of data.

To analyze communications from TDOE to superintendents, principals, and teachers, we assigned codes developed *a priori* that were aligned with the core elements of IPI. We used these codes to clarify which elements of the program were emphasized to various stakeholders. The three thematic codes captured: 1) that IPI offered an opportunity for individualized instructional improvement; 2) that IPI offered an opportunity for teacher collaboration; and 3) that pairs were matched according to specific rubric indicators from formal observations. We report below the percentage of communication materials that we coded accordingly, reflecting the degree to which IPI core elements were communicated to different stakeholders. We discuss these findings primarily in reference to the first research question, to understand one mechanism that shaped different stakeholders understanding of the goals and core elements of IPI.

# Findings

Overall, our findings indicate that principals (both participating and non-participating) largely understood all three core elements of IPI. Teachers, on the other hand, were more likely to lack a strong understanding of the role of indicators in IPI. The difference between principal and teacher understandings is related to how principals established expectations for teachers, which in turn was influenced by principals’ own concerns about how the indicator-focus would interact with the local school culture.

**Principals’ and teachers’ understandings of the core elements of IPI**

Our first research question focuses on how various stakeholders understood the core ideas embedded in IPI, ideas that included a focus on individualized instructional improvement, teacher collaboration, and instructional indicators from the observation rubric. To answer this research question, we outline how principals and teachers understood the core elements of IPI. Overall, our findings suggest that principals mostly understood all three core elements, but that teachers demonstrated less understanding of IPI’s indicator-focus.

## Principal Understanding

Table 1 shows the number of participating and non-participating principals who demonstrated understanding of each of the core elements of IPI. Nearly all participating principals (15 out of 16) and five of the nine non-participating principals demonstrated some understanding that IPI provided teachers with individualized opportunities to improve their instruction, although they varied in the depth by which this was conveyed. For example, principals tended to respond that the approach of IPI to improve individual instruction was to “pair together as mentors.” A few principals provided more detailed descriptions of IPI as a mechanism of individualized improvement. For example, one principal said she thought the state’s goal for this initiative was “to improve teacher effectiveness across the board,” and that her own approach, in line with the design of IPI, was “that some of my teachers who may need some growth in some areas…could have that mentoring relationship and that coaching relationship where …those that are stronger could help…”. Another participating principal similarly emphasized individualized professional learning when describing the goals of IPI.

I think the goal is to improve instruction so that it improves student learning, student achievement. And I think it’s by partnering two teachers that have maybe complementary areas on the rubric to where that they could both learn or grow from the experience.

Similarly, most principals understood the second core element of the initiative was to foster teacher collaboration. This was true of 12 of 16 participating principals and 7 of 9 non-participating principals. For example, one principal described IPI’s goals by saying, “It is just to give teachers…support, kind of peer partners. I don’t think that we approached it as anybody being in charge of anybody. It’s just people that I thought that would work together.” Some of the principals recognized a distinction between administrator and peer feedback on teaching and viewed IPI as an opportunity to promote peer feedback and teacher collaboration. For example, one principal emphasized an intention to separate teacher-to-teacher observation from evaluation and coaching, “To separate the two, and they’re just like, ‘I don’t want to evaluate anyone, and I don’t want a teacher evaluating me.’ …It’s not even coaching. It’s collaboration.”

As is evident in these examples, many principals articulated the interrelated nature of two of the core elements: individualized professional learning and teacher collaboration. For example, when asked to describe IPI’s goals, one participating principal said, “to get teachers to talk that may not have the opportunity to talk, and the main focus would be to learn from each other. Learn specific strategies that’s going to help them in their classroom.” Similarly, a non-participating principal said, “My understanding was that it was to link up teachers with a mentor… to basically put two teachers to work together at a yearlong process to kind of help each other and mentor each other.”

Regarding the third core element of IPI, most principals (13 participating principals and 7 non-participating principals) understood that IPI paired teachers using teacher scores on specific indicators related to their evaluation. For example, one non-participating principal said,

…you look at the different indicators on the rubric and how teachers do …somebody that’s weak in one category, in one indicator with somebody who’s a little stronger and let them collaborate and just bounce ideas off each other and try to improve their instruction.

A participating principal contrasted IPI with a district mentoring program through its use of specific indicators, “This is solely focused on classroom practice. …Don’t get me wrong, you need to know how to turn in reports on time…and all of that. … But you know, that’s not necessarily an aspect of the [observation] rubric.”

## Teacher Understanding

Table 1 also shows the number of teachers who demonstrated understanding of the three core elements of IPI. In general, most teachers demonstrated understanding of the individualized improvement and teacher collaboration elements of IPI, but fewer demonstrated understanding of IPI’s focus on instructional indicators. Further, the limited understanding of the indicator focus meant that many teachers were confused about the mechanisms by which IPI could lead to individualized improvement or how teachers should collaborate.

Of the 87 teachers interviewed, 71 understood IPI as an initiative intended to improve their instruction; although the mechanisms driving change were often unclear. For example, a typical IPI teacher described the purpose as “something that is used to help and guide areas of weakness that we can improve upon individually.” Another teacher said, “I think the goal is to help one another get better, and by getting better, that means showing more improvement, you know, through the students.” Many teachers, however, seemed unsure of exactly how improvement was supposed to happen:

I guess I didn’t know what the goals were, what [principal] hoped to get from us. I mean, I don't know. I didn’t have a clear picture of really if there was something different she was hoping for us to do, or a purpose we were supposed to be meeting.

Another teacher said, “We were flying blind the whole time. I mean, I had a great partner, and we learned something. Whether it was what we were supposed to learn or not, I have no idea.” In the interviews, teachers rarely described explicitly *how* the initiative was designed to facilitate improvement.

Regarding the second core element of IPI, 80 of the 87 teachers understood that IPI involved teacher collaboration. For example, one teacher said, “It's no different than when you were doing your student teaching or something like that. You're working with somebody then, collaborating, sharing ideas and thoughts…. two minds in there are better than one.” Nearly all were generally in favor of collaboration as an improvement mechanism. The following teacher expressed a widely held sentiment amongst those interviewed: “We all have agreed that collaboration’s the best key. That’s the key to a successful school. If you can collaborate, if you can build each other up and help each other – Then you’re going to be successful, period.”

Many teachers, however, expressed confusion about what they were supposed to do with their partners. In some cases, teachers inferred or were told that the relationship was hierarchical, and these teachers described it as a mentoring relationship. For example, one teacher explained that her partner “is up here, and I am down here.” Another teacher explained, “I have always liked to help new teachers and was honored…to mentor.” Regardless of whether teachers viewed the relationship as hierarchical or not, many expressed confusion about the nature of IPI work, a sentiment cogently expressed by the teacher who asked, “what the heck are we supposed to be doing?” A teacher in another school explained in more detail how the expectations of the collaboration were not clear:

We just kind of struggled I think in like the purpose of it. Why were we together? What were we supposed to get out of it?…I'm like, I don't know why… were we paired up because one teacher needed help and one teacher was really good? Were we paired up because we both had a struggle that was similar?

A lack of clarity on the purpose of collaboration was especially prevalent when teacher partnerships spanned grade level or lacked a common subject area. For example, one social studies teacher explained that she had little to offer after watching a calculus lesson:

[We] discuss strengths, discuss weaknesses, what we can do to make ourselves better, what we can do to be a better teacher…the only problem is that we were at completely opposite ends of the subject spectrum…I could not grasp her lesson.

Teachers with a shared subject/grade level expressed more certainty about how to collaborate with their IPI partner, but they too were confused about what they were expected to do for IPI in comparison to what they already did in subject or grade-level collaborative meetings.

This confusion around how IPI contributed to individualized instructional improvement, or what the teacher collaboration was supposed to entail is closely related to the fact that that fewer teachers understood IPI’s third core element: the focus on specific indicators from the evaluation. Of the 87 teachers interviewed, only 38 understood that they were matched on specific instructional indicators and that those indicators should be the focus of their work. An additional 8 teachers understood that IPI had something to do with the evaluation, but were less clear that they should focus on specific indicators with their partner. For example, one teacher who did not understand that IPI was focused on indicators recognized a disconnect between what they thought IPI entailed and the research team’s questions about evaluation indicators:

We’re always supposed to be improving and learning and honing our craft… I know that I’m getting good things out of it, but some of [your interview] questions make me think that I haven’t been focusing on the right things… since we haven’t been talking about the evaluation rubric.

Further, teacher descriptions of how to engage in IPI collaboration were most clear when they demonstrated an understanding the indicator-focus of the partnership. For example, one teacher pointed to a specific indicator (questioning) from the rubric and explained that the partners were supposed “to work on ways to improve questioning with the students and student involvement and how to raise their level of questioning.” As noted below, however, teachers in many schools were not provided a focal indicator, or they were expected to choose one on their own. For example, one teacher explained that she and her partner knew they were supposed to work on “a specific area of teaching,” but they did not know what it was:

…we were paired up because some teachers had strengths in areas that others had weaknesses… and we weren’t told what those were. … once we got in our pairs, we had to sort of decide what we wanted to work on.

Confusion about the indicator-focus of IPI often emerged as teachers discussed the rationale for partnership matching. Some teachers, like the one above, believed that they were matched based on strengths and weaknesses but were not given the additional information about a target indicator from the rubric. Some were completely at a loss, as one teacher said, “I don't know if they pulled names out of a hat … I don't know if our principal matched us, if the state matched us…. I honestly do not have any idea.”

## Communication Materials as Sources of Information on IPI’s Core Elements

As described above, principals’ descriptions of IPI suggested they had a relatively clear understanding of its three core elements. At the same time, several principals and teachers reported the communication was not clear. To further explore elements that contributed to principal and teacher understanding of IPI, we turn to an analysis of the communication materials sent by TDOE to superintendents, principals, and teachers.

TDOE sent 12 emails about IPI. Of these, three went to superintendents, five to principals, and four to teachers. Those emails also provided additional resources, either as website links or attachments. Table 2 includes the number of email communications and other resources sent by the state. Table 3 shows how the text in the body of each email and the additional resources emphasized each of the three core elements of IPI. When considering the emphasis of the three core elements of IPI in the communications, superintendents and principals received a relatively even message, with all core elements being mentioned in at least 60% of all communications sent to superintendents and principals. For example, the first email sent to superintendents described IPI by saying,

Through this initiative, participating teachers will be paired in one-on-one, collaborative partnerships based on complementary areas of strength and growth. We will provide them with resources and suggested structures, but they will establish an action plan tailored to their needs. The IPI is a vehicle for helping teachers translate their evaluation feedback into tangible instructional improvement.

The first email sent to principals had a similar message,

Teachers need structured support in order to translate their evaluation feedback into meaningful instructional improvement.  IPI is a flexible structure that can help you fuel continuous improvement by pairing teachers in one-on-one, collaborative partnerships. This is a no-cost, voluntary strategy that will help you use the teacher evaluation process to provide data-driven, tailored professional learning for your teachers.

Superintendents and principals also received a variety of different additional resources, including an introductory letter from the TDOE Commissioner, a detailed two-page explanation about IPI, a list of Frequently Asked Questions, and principal and teacher guidebooks. Across these resources, most mentioned all three core elements.

For teachers, however, direct messaging from the state was almost entirely about collaboration; each email teachers received spoke of collaboration, but none mentioned the other core elements of IPI. For example, the first email sent to teachers said,

We believe that working with your partner this year will be a valuable experience for you both, and we’re looking forward to supporting you in any way we can.

You should have already received all the materials you need to begin working with your partner. If you desire further support, you can find extra resources and partnership guidance at our website [link]. We have also attached the guidebook to this email, and encourage you to use it to structure your experience and track your partnership activities.

Teachers were provided fewer additional resources than superintendents and principals. They received two unique website links and the teacher guidebook, but did not receive the introductory letter, program description, or FAQ directly from the state. The teacher guidebook was distributed to teachers two months after it was sent to principals, and, as seen in the text above, there was an assumption that the principal had already provided it to teachers.

Both in how the state distributed materials (sending the guidebook to principals two months before teachers), as well as the differences in the number of the communications sent to various stakeholders suggests that the state positioned principals as the key lever in implementing IPI in schools. Principals were provided with the richest, most comprehensive information about the initiative. Principals were thus positioned as pivotal sources of information about IPI, especially for teachers who may not have investigated web links. This made it more likely that principals’ own understandings of IPI, as well as how they introduced IPI to teachers, would prove fundamental to how IPI would take shape in schools.

# Context and the shaping of local enactment of IPI

The second research question focuses on how the local contexts shaped educator participation and enactment of IPI. Though findings from the first research question demonstrate most principals understood the overarching goal of IPI and its core components, this does not mean that principals valued or emphasized all of these elements equally. We first outline how principal decisions to participate in IPI were influenced by IPI’s core elements, and then consider the expectations principals set for teachers in their school.

## Decision to Participate in IPI

Principals’ reasons for participating in IPI were multifaceted but were overwhelmingly related to the cultural and institutional contexts in which they operated. Across participating and non-participating principals, there were two dominant themes that shaped their decisions about whether to participate. The first was the overarching institutional context. Many principals were unsure if participation was voluntary. For example, one participating principal said, “I thought it was because we had had a dip in the value added, that we were being told to do this program.” Another participating principal described the influence of the district over his decision: “Our director said, basically, I want you to do this … It was voluntary and I didn’t volunteer us for it. But …we’re going to do it because he asked us to do it.” Conversely, a non-participating principal noted that the absence of district encouragement contributed to his decision not to participate. This principal said, “I called central office, and I asked… ‘what is this?’ She's like, ‘I don't have any idea,’ … and I said well, then I'm not going to mess with it… that was the end of it.”

The second theme concerning principals’ participation decisions focused on the role of the school context. Principals decided to participate in IPI because IPI, or one of its core components, met a particular need, or aligned with particular goals of the school. This was especially true for principals who described their participation decision in light of IPI’s individualized improvement opportunities or teacher collaboration. For 11 of the 16 participating principals, the ability to offer teachers individualized learning opportunities was an important reason for participating (see Table 1). For example, one principal called the invitation to participate in IPI “fortuitous” because it provided her with a formal approach to meet a need in her school. She had been struggling to provide opportunities for struggling teachers to improve:

It picked up some people that I really wanted to get assistance that wouldn't have gotten assistance otherwise… I couldn't get them the help that they needed. So when this came along and I saw those names were part of it, I thought okay, okay, this is going to fill a hole.

One principal who decided not to participate in IPI also valued the individual professional learning component of IPI but determined that they already had sufficient structures to meet that goal; their context was such that they believed IPI would be redundant.

The second core element of IPI aligned with ten participating principals desire to foster teacher collaboration. For example, one principal said, “I was really excited about that because it’s really something that I’ve been trying to get started here at the school before I even found out about this. I want the teachers to talk more to each other.” Similarly, another principal said IPI was consistent with her goal to help teachers make their teaching public:

I talk to them about the need to break that mentality of when you’re given a classroom that you go into that classroom and close the door … how we need to reach out and support each other…the importance of peer observations, and working as teammates, and the collaborative planning.

Like this principal, several principals spoke of their goal to encourage teachers to observe each other, as a way to foster both teacher collaboration and improvement. The collaborative element of IPI was also a factor for three principals who chose not to participate. In these cases, their schools already had a collaborative culture or initiatives to foster collaboration. One non-participating principal explained:

All of my teachers visit each other’s classrooms… We also in [County] are extremely fortunate that we have the early out Wednesdays to do PLCs together…to share teaching strategies and ideas.

The role of IPI’s third core element, indicator-focus, on principals’ decisions to participate stands in contrast to the focus on individualized professional learning or teacher collaboration, although it also shows the importance of local context in principal decision-making. Only three participating principals explicitly cited the focus on specific instructional indicators from the evaluation rubric as a reason for participation. In contrast, we heard from more principals that this component of IPI presented challenges, concerns, and unease given the culture around evaluation in their schools (described in more detail in the following section). Four non-participating principals described the indicator focus as a reason to decline participation:

I did not think that would work probably for my school. When I came into this school … there was a lot of negatives about evaluation and how it was perceived and how it affected them. … I really think that would have had a negative impact on my teachers.

Thus, while some non-participating principals attributed non-participation to IPI’s focus on professional learning and teacher collaboration, they pointed to existing programs that made IPI unnecessary. But when non-participation was due to IPI’s focus on evaluation indicators, principals saw that feature as being problematic in terms of local goals or existing norms, values, and practices.

## Context and Setting Expectations for Teachers

Beyond the decision of whether or not to participate in IPI, we also found that context played a key role in shaping how principals introduced IPI to teachers, and which components they emphasized, de-emphasized, or discarded entirely. These decisions were overwhelmingly driven by considerations of the local culture of teaching, especially around evaluation and observation. Principals used many different strategies to introduce IPI and set expectations for the partnership. Some principals met with each teacher separately, some introduced IPI to all teachers at faculty meetings, and some did a little of both. Descriptions of how IPI was introduced come from both principals and teachers and teachers largely echoed their principal’s descriptions of how IPI was introduced.

In most schools, teachers and principals described an introduction to IPI that was relatively brief. For example, one teacher said, “It was brought to us… in a faculty meeting. Just gave us a little bit of really just very simple, you know, no explanation of what it was. …And then we kind of just moved on from there.” Most principals expressly emphasized that IPI should be adaptable and flexible to the needs of teachers. As one principal described, “I gave them the packet and I said, there’s lots of ideas in here. I said, what I need is for this to be a partnership. I need for you guys to decide how best you could learn and work together.” Likewise, the expectation that IPI could be adapted to the needs of the partnership came through loud and clear to teachers. Most teachers explained that outside minimal expectations for specific activities–whether observing, meeting, or logging partnership time–they felt entirely free to participate as they saw fit. Teachers in a minority of the schools we visited explained that their principals told them exactly how to collaborate with their IPI partner. For example:

He just said, basically, during your planning time, go observe each other twice, meet and talk about it, and then we had a Google form where we listed like her areas for me for reinforcement and refinement and then reflection about the observation.

Clear expectations for how to participate in IPI, however, were not the norm in the schools we visited. Many teachers explained that their principals gave limited direction and left them to figure out IPI on their own. For example, when one teacher was asked how she learned about IPI, she responded that the principal asked her to read the guidebook: “…she said, ‘here, it’s in the manual. It tells you kind of what you need to be doing, and use these to create this opportunity to assist one another’.”

Although the introductions principals offered teachers about IPI were brief, the evidence suggests that principals emphasized two of the three core elements. In regard to the first core element, 12 of the 16 principals emphasized IPI as a form of individualized instructional improvement when they introduced IPI. For example, one principal told teachers, “this is a way to collaborate more focused in what you need, make it more individualized.” A teacher in that school described the principal’s introduction by saying, “We’re supposed to sometimes observe each other's lessons, give them feedback, give them different strategies that we can use to improve ourselves. So that’s basically how she told us it was supposed to work.” Despite most principals describing IPI to their teachers as a way for teachers to improve individually, they often masked that teachers were selected for participation because particular teachers needed to improve, even though IPI specifically identifies a lower performing teacher and matches them with a peer who has demonstrated successes. Instead, in most cases, principals emphasized that IPI was a partnership to improve both teachers, and not a coaching or mentoring relationship. One principal explained to teachers, “I said, this has nothing to do with one being better than the other. This is helping learning from each other. … Everyone in this room needs to improve.” In this way, IPI became defined by most principals as a method of improvement, from which all teachers can benefit.

Ten of the 16 principals described IPI as involving teacher collaboration. Indeed, many teachers said that principals emphasized IPI as a form of teacher collaboration. For example, one teacher described the principal’s launch by saying:

It was sort of just between two assigned people within the building to collaborate about things and discuss methods that you're using, and how things are working or not working, and sort of a support system for the other person, and to share things and gain some good knowledge from that.

Teachers knew that the initiative was intended to support collaboration and instructional improvement, but few recalled principal explanations that helped them make explicit sense of how IPI could drive improvement.

In contrast, few principals explicitly described IPI to teachers in terms of the third core element, the focus on specific indicators from the evaluation. Only 3 of the 16 principals told all teachers that they should discuss specific instructional indicators from the evaluation with their IPI partner. For example, one of these principals reportedly gave partners a chart that showed complementary strengths and weaknesses from the evaluation:

She just told us to get together and look at this little chart… see, as far as like when *questioning*, you know, she told us to maybe do a lesson on questioning and watch each other, evaluate each other and then give specific feedback.

Two additional principals made the connection to instructional indicators for some, but not all teachers participating in IPI. Five more principals made general statements that teachers could discuss “areas of refinement and reinforcement” from the evaluation. As one such principal explained,

I didn’t give them a specific indicator…in the guidebook it does say share your evaluations with each other… I said, you can share your evaluations with each other and look to see what you want to work on, but I didn’t require it. Some of them don’t feel comfortable doing that yet.

Similarly, teachers in these schools reported they were told their partnership work was supposed to focus on improvement around the evaluation rubric but also reported that they were not given any specific instructions about a particular focus. In one school, for example, a teacher described the principal’s explicit guidance about IPI activities but reportedly left open whether the partnership should focus on a specific indicator:

He had mentioned that a lot of – that the teachers had been paired together based off…I think it was their areas of refinement from their actual observations with administrators. But then…my partner and I were not told exactly what those were….(we) were asking one another, ‘oh, hey, do you know what exactly it is that we’re supposed to be looking for?’ And then we came to the consensus that no, we didn’t know.

The remaining six principals did not link IPI to the evaluation in any way. In reflecting back on the indicator-focus of IPI during the interview, one of these principal recognized they did not “set up” IPI as it was designed: “I think in the way it was originally set up, maybe not so much in how I wound up implementing it… it tended to be more focused on specific indicators. I just chose not to do it that way.” When explaining hesitancy to explicitly provide indicators on which pairs should focus, principals often discussed their local context and concerns about teachers’ reaction. One principal explained,

It’s just kind of a worry of culture-wise… I would be identifying a certain teacher as a weak teacher… I just had the worry that they would feel like I was singling them out, or picking on them, or evaluating them by saying, you have been identified due to lower evaluation scores in certain indicators.

Some principals were also worried about the confidentiality issues and said things like, “Everything is so confidential with teacher evaluations and scores…I was a little hesitant to say, okay, you were low in questioning and you were high in questioning, so I’m going to pair y'all together.”

Looking across the findings, this tendency of principals to de-emphasize IPI’s relationship to specific instructional indicators, and sometimes the evaluation more generally, helps explain the gap in teachers’ understanding concerning IPI’s link to instructional indicators. By de-emphasizing the initiative’s focus on instructional indicators, principals were adapting IPI in ways that made it more palatable in local contexts where teacher evaluation was a delicate topic. Unfortunately, this led to the lack of deep understanding among teachers concerning how teachers should collaborate, what they should focus on, and how the initiative was supposed to lead to improvement in teachers’ practice. Because many principals were not explicit about IPI’s focus on instructional indicators, teachers were confused, heavily reliant on state communications (that also under-emphasized indicators), or free to engage in forms of collaboration different from the core components designed into IPI.

# Discussion

These findings highlight several overarching themes. First, participating and non-participating principals demonstrated a cogent understanding of the core elements of IPI. Teacher understanding, however, primarily focused on the elements of individual improvement and teacher collaboration. Relatively few teachers understood that IPI was explicitly connected to specific indicators on the evaluation, despite principals’ consistent understanding of that element of the initiative. Naturally, both principal and teacher understanding of the initiative were shaped by how the initiative was described to them. Teachers’ understandings of the initiative were influenced by the expectations established by the principal and only marginally by the vague descriptions of the initiative provided to teachers by TDOE. This finding that educator understanding of IPI varied across school contexts is consistent with substantial prior research on how sensemaking processes are influenced by a range of environmental affordances in school environments (Coburn 2005; Cohen, 1990; Datnow and Park 2009).

Second, teachers reported a different message about IPI’s core elements, when compared to principals. From both their principals and the state, teachers heard messages about IPI that emphasized teacher collaboration and general improvement relative to the focus on observation indicators. When principals explained IPI to teachers, they typically emphasized some of the IPI core elements—teacher collaboration and individualized improvement— and left the indicator focus either vague or omitted completely. The blurred understanding of IPI as it was communicated from the state to principal to teacher is not simply an example of the telephone game, where messages are inadvertently misinterpreted before being passed on. Rather, by deciding how to enact IPI in their schools, principals made decisions about how to help teachers interpret IPI. Notably, principals were not confused about the key elements of IPI but made interpretive decisions about what was important, what was not, and what could be effective in their context.

In this way, principals not only engaged in their own sensemaking process as they interpreted the information from the state, but also engaged in sensegiving for teachers in their schools (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Rouleau 2005). Playing the role of sensegiver for teachers in this case demonstrates substantial opportunities for agency within the institutional environment as principals seek to, and in fact did mediate teacher understandings of certain reforms (Woulfin 2016; Coburn 2016). The agency available to sensegivers suggests that efforts to achieve integrity in implementation should consider the needs and motivations of educators in positions that foster setting expectations for other educators.

Finally, many principals’ decisions to de-emphasize the focus on indicators, as well as their decision about whether to participate at all, reflected their reported perceptions of IPI’s orientation within the local context. Many principals reported being uncomfortable with the indicator focus of the initiative and worried about upsetting the culture or betraying confidentiality. This finding that principals deemphasized indicators in light of what they saw prudent in the context is consistent with prior research on how values and emotions shape the ways individuals make sense of new initiatives (Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002) and has implications for how school leaders mediate teacher understandings of reform through sensegiving. The interaction between values, emotions, and new initiatives is particularly relevant for scaling teacher development initiatives that are associated with teacher evaluation because existing organizational ecologies will shape how any such initiatives are understood (Woulfin, Donaldson, and Gonzales 2016; Rigby 2015). Specifically, educator lack of trust around teacher evaluation systems shapes how they engage in improvement initiatives that use data from those systems (Goldring et al. 2015).

As both sensemakers and sensegivers in a uniquely bureaucratic organization, principals emerged as a key mediator of how this policy initiative was adapted. Principals interpreted messages they were receiving about IPI, considered their local context, decided whether to participate and decided how to adapt IPI within their schools. By intentionally de-emphasizing certain aspects of the initiative, principals exercised considerable agency as sensegivers (Woulfin 2016). Principals actively translated IPI, shaping the aspects of the policy that their teachers heard. Teachers, in turn, made sense of IPI in light of what was made available to them and in light of what seemed possible in their own contexts. Sensemaking and sensegiving, then, exist in a reciprocal relationship in this and similar reform examples, as organizational leaders mediate the messages for those under them in the organizational structure, while also interpreting and responding to messages from those same stakeholders (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991).

There are several implications for scholars focused on effective implementation at scale. Emerging approaches such as Networked Improvement Communities are trying to shift the focus from fidelity to integrity in implementation (LeMahieu 2011). While traditional notions of scale emphasize adoption in a large number of locations and replication with fidelity, there is increasing understanding that scale can involve adaptation and reinvention (Morel et al. 2019). Many examples of education policy implementation demonstrate that improvement at scale requires reforms that are adaptable to district, school, and classroom contexts (Castro, Barrera, and Martinez 2004; Clarke and Dede 2009; Cohen et al. 2013). Adapting to local context fosters local ownership and sustainability (Cohen et al. 2013; Cohen and Mehta 2017). At the same time, allowing unrestricted adaptation has drawbacks, as particular elements of implementation of any reform initiative are obviously are important (Dane and Schneider 1998). There may be trade-offs between fostering alignment to local context and providing enough specificity for educators to productively engage with the initiative (Cannata and Nguyen forthcoming; Fullan 2016).

This study contributes to our theoretical understanding of these tradeoffs around adaptation and integrity by highlighting the importance of the core ideas of the reform. Many principals in this study, recognizing local cultural concerns around evaluation, adapted the initiative in a way that obfuscated one of its core elements, perhaps the core element that drove improvement in the pilot study. It was not just that principals adapted IPI, but that they made adaptations in ways that limited teacher understanding of the initiatives theory of action. When teachers did not recognize an indicator-focus of the partnerships, they were unsure how IPI collaboration was different from other existing forms of teacher collaboration. The adaptations that many principals made in light of their interpretation of the context may have had upsides, but these came at the expense of depth of understanding for those central to the initiative’s implementation, a sign that substantive reform was unlikely (Coburn 2003).

Scholarship evaluating implementation and scale need clarity concerning the core elements and essential practices that define integrity in a school reform scale-up effort. When initiatives do not provide sufficient specificity in the principles, practices, and theory-of-action of a reform, stakeholders struggle to understand what is expected; thus little change in practice occurs (Rowan et al. 2009; Sanders 2014). While providing that specificity is sometimes considered overly-prescriptive, what is needed for achieving scale is “specificity that furnishes clarity but does not assume prescription” (Fullan 2016, 540). The hesitancy of many of the principals to be explicit about the role of evaluation indicators in IPI points to a challenge for approaches to scaling educational improvement efforts in a post-fidelity age: how do we navigate the tension between prescriptiveness and flexibility? We argue that scholars needs to pay more attention to the core ideas or theory of action that is the foundation of a reform to evaluate integrity. By attending to educator understanding of the core ideas of a reform and being explicit about both specific practices expected by the reform as well as the theory of action behind them, we can provide both the flexibility educators need to align reforms to their context while also providing enough guidance to adapt with integrity.

There are also implications of this research for policymakers and others with responsibility for designing reform initiatives. Reformers must begin with the assumption that adaptation is not merely changing the initiative to accommodate a context but, more sincerely, reflects natural sensemaking and sensegiving processes inherent in human interaction. That is, people do not implement policy; they learn about policy. That learning happens not simply by way of exchange of information but by accommodation of new concepts and practices to existing concepts and practices, all of which are thoroughly integrated into unique contexts. The question becomes what affordances do policymakers put in place to support learning the policy from one context to another (Cohen and Hill 2001)? Have reformers designed with learning in mind? Have reformers created mechanisms for formative assessment that provides feedback on how people actually understand the what and why of the policy? Sensemaking and sensegiving are not singular processes with a discrete beginnings and ends, but are enacted over time, with feedback from the sensemaking process informing future sensegiving in particular communities (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991).

Integrity in implementation, and not fidelity, should be the expectation and the goal of reform efforts at scale. Integrity allows for productive adaptations to local context in ways that reflect the core ideas. When adaptation is the expectation, policymakers and reform designers must make explicit the central ideas and theory of action embedded in the initiative. When adaptations change a program in ways that significantly stray from its core ideas or compromise the underlying theory of action, the efficacy of the approach is very likely to be hampered or negated entirely. Without integrity in implementation, implementers may in fact create something entirely different from the target reform. In such instances, designers and reformers obviously cannot expect outcomes to reflect those intended in the initial design.

Our findings highlight the dilemma that principals as sensegivers face when they are expected to enact a policy that they perceive as problematic in their local context. Do they refuse to take-up a program, as some of our non-participating principals declined to participate because of concerns about how the focus on indicators would be received within their school? Or do they adapt the program, perhaps by masking elements they perceive to be most problematic, as was the case with so many participating principals? Both of these decisions suggest lack of fidelity in implementation. Policymakers and reform designers may want to consider whether either choice is preferred and how to support educators in learning about the policy in ways that support productive adaptation to context. This may mean providing opportunities to not just hear messages about the policy, but engage in discussion about how to implement the core ideas with integrity while recognizing the challenges the policy may pose in their particular context.

**Conclusion**

With only 16 participating schools in the first year of the rollout, the findings described here are limited. Future research should examine patterns around reform adaptation and integrity with larger samples that could include variation in principal expectations for teachers. Nevertheless, this paper sheds light on tensions between providing flexibility for adaptation while ensuring integrity to core components of a school reform initiative. By demonstrating the role of local context in the interpretation and enactment of a statewide instructional improvement initiative, this paper contributes to an understanding of how to support the productive adaptation and alignment to context at scale.

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# Tables

Table 1. Principal and Teacher Understanding of the Instructional Partnership Initiative’s Core Elements

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Stakeholder | Individualized instructional improvement | Teacher collaboration | Indicator-focus | Total |
| Understanding |  |  |  |  |
| Participating principals | 15 | 12 | 13 | 16 |
| Non-participating principals | 5 | 7 | 7 | 9 |
| Teachers | 71 | 80 | 38 | 87 |
| Reason for participating/non-participation |  |  |  |  |
| Participating principals1 | 11 | 10 | 3 | 16 |
| Non-participating principals2 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 9 |
| Described in expectations for teachers | 12 | 10 | 3 for all teachers; 2 for some teachers | 16 |

1 Other reasons for participation include encouragement by district (N=7) and understood as mandatory (N=4).

2 Most non-participating principals provided other reasons for not participating: late timing of the rollout (N=1), lack of district encouragement (N=1), existing demands on teachers (N=3), and limited time (N=3).

Table 2. Number of email messages and other resources sent by the state, by recipient type

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Resource included in email communication | | | | | |
|  | Primary email communication | IPI Websites | FAQ | Program description | Principal guidebook | Teacher guidebook | Other |
| Superintendent | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Principal | 5 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Teacher | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |

Table 3. Proportion of email communications and additional resources that emphasized various IPI attributes, by stakeholder type

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Individualized improvement | Collaboration | Indicator focus |
| Superintendent |  |  |  |
| Primary email (N=3) | 0.67 | 0.67 | 0.67 |
| Additional resource (N=5) | 0.80 | 0.80 | 0.60 |
| Principal |  |  |  |
| Primary email (N=5) | 0.60 | 1.00 | 0.60 |
| Additional resource (N=5) | 1.00 | 1.00 | 0.80 |
| Teacher |  |  |  |
| Primary email (N=4) | 0.00 | 1.00 | 0.00 |
| Additional resource (N=3) | 0.67 | 0.67 | 0.67 |

1. All schools in the state were randomly assigned to be offered IPI (i.e., the treatment). Among the treatment schools, some were randomly assigned to experience one of two processes intended to enhance communication about IPI and thus encourage participation. Since overall participation in IPI was low, and the enhanced communication treatments were not salient in principal engagement with IPI, this analysis does not make further distinctions between treatment conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)