Resistance to Change Among Veteran Teachers:

Providing Voice for More Effective Engagement

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Abstract

Effective implementation of change remains a crucial concern for educational leaders in the 21st Century. One of the factors affecting effective implementation of reform is resistance to change. Veteran teachers in particular present unique challenges, and stereotypically the greatest resistance, for effective implementation of change. This study provided voice to veteran teachers to help educational leaders gain insight for more effective engagement with resistance. Teachers frequently act in ways that protect their "psychic rewards" (Lortie, 1975). Teachers also strive to protect social nostalgia and political nostalgia (Goodson, Moore, & Hargreaves, 2006). By engaging veteran teachers in clarifying conversations (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008) educational leaders increase engagement and build organizational trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Keywords: resistance, change, psychic rewards, veteran, nostalgia, engagement

Resistance to change among *any* teacher slows the implementation of educational reform. In spite of hopeful prescriptions from researchers, policymakers, and educational leaders, effective implementation of educational reform remains inconsistent (Payne & Kaba, 2007; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). This research focused on front-line individuals who seem to provide a particularly unique challenge to the implementation of change: veteran teachers. Gaining insight from their specific reasons for resistance provides opportunities for meaningful conversations and deeper engagement from these seasoned educators.

At the outset, it is important to note that the goal of this work is learning from veteran teachers for insight and understanding rather than manipulation. Change agents – those initiating change – frequently assume an objective, superior view when initiating change (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008). Rather than adding to the illusion of objectivity on the part of change agents, the goal is to set the stage for meaningful conversations and engagement (Ford & Ford, 2009a; Ford & Ford, 2009b). Educational leaders need to realize the extent to which *their approach toward* resistance can play an inhibitory role in effectively engaging change recipients.

Through semi-structured interviews, this phenomenological, qualitative research provides voice for veteran teachers (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Implications of this research suggest that effective engagement with resistant teachers might strengthen ownership of initiatives among those working directly with students in the classroom while building organizational trust (Hargreaves, 2005; Tchannen-Moran, 2009). Understanding the complexity of resistance among veteran teachers validates their mission and memory (Goodson, Moore, & Hargreaves, 2006) while strengthening the implementation of initiatives at the local level (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

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<div align="center">Veteran Teachers</div>

Few would deny the impact and influence of veteran teachers within any school building (Fibkins, 2012; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Formally, and informally, their presence and voice can be powerful. Veteran teachers inclined toward resistance can significantly curtail the implementation of change (Goodson et al., 2006). Resistant teachers can undermine change initiatives by spreading their negative opinions to others, and ultimately postpone what is in the best interest of students (Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2011).

Teacher career authors tend to divide the teaching experience into early, mid, and later-career (Hargreaves, 2005; Huberman, 1988). Huberman (1988) identified veteran teachers as those with six or more years of experience. Yet Huberman also recognized that teachers' proximity to retirement greatly increased their tendency to resist change. Sikes, Measor and Woods (1985) distinguished "Phase 5" teachers as those who are 50 – 55 years old or older. Indeed, it would seem that the 45-year old, and the 55-year old veteran teacher experience could be significantly different. Use of the term "veteran" in this work refers to those late career teachers with 20 or more years of experience who are also more than 50 years old.

The nine Iowa veteran teachers in this qualitative study were all over 50 years old and averaged 31 years of experience. They taught in a range of small rural and large urban districts, and worked with students ranging from kindergarten to high school. They represented Schools in Need of Assistance (SINA) as well as schools recognized for academic achievement. One participant taught in the same district for over 35 years, while others spent portions of their teaching careers in others states and even overseas. Six of the nine attained their masters' degrees as a reflection of their desire to continue growing intellectually and professionally. All participants clearly remained vested in their labor of love: making a lifelong impact on students.

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Nostalgia and That "One Thing"

Over the course of interviewing the nine participating teachers, it became apparent that all of them worked to protect the "psychic rewards" – the internal feelings of fulfillment – for which they entered the teaching profession. Lortie (1975) found that while psychic rewards vary from teacher to teacher, all teachers work to preserve what is of ultimate importance to them. In fact, teachers resist changes and initiatives that threaten what they deem to be their primary reason for teaching.

After meeting with each participant two times and listening to our conversations for hours during transcription, it took little time to identify various elements of utmost importance for each of them. Mr. Booker, an upper-level teacher in a large, high-achieving school, valued his daily interaction with students. "The part that hasn't changed is that teaching is a one-to-one proposition. One, you know, a teacher connecting with a student. Uh, and that's the part I've always loved about it." Moreover, when working with students, Mr. Booker's goal was to help those students see, "Those intangible things that kind of allow kids to see that intellectual discourse can be fun, and important."

Mr. Booker's frustration stemmed from schedule changes that decreased his time to connect with students, as well as recommended strategies that threatened the intellectual discourse.

For Mr. Schmidt, an upper-level instructor with experience in several districts, his point of emphasis was teacher freedom and creativity allowed by a minimalist curriculum. This freedom enabled educators to teach to their passions and strengths. He explained, "I just loved that when I walked in there and saw that 4-page document… It gave me what I needed to do. But it also gave me leverage to get into areas that were not necessarily a definite part of that

curriculum." With that professional freedom, Mr. Schmidt noted, "And I felt I sent kids on that

went on and were successful at the college level."

Mr. Schmidt felt frustration with the growing curriculum prescribed by the state, as well

as the time lost to frequent assessment. He explained, "Uh, I, I just felt rushed all the time. I

didn't like the Common Core." With respect to assessment, Mr. Schmidt noted, "Um, we got

into writing formative and summative assessments. Hate it. Time wasted. You can't, you might

want to quote this, "You can't put weight on a hog by weighing it all the time."

Mrs. Rittmeyer, a veteran elementary teacher with over 30 years of experience, valued

the professional freedom to teach in her own style. She stated, "To me it's a joy to teach kids.

And you know this. You do it best when you teach in your style. And your style's going to be

different than mine." Yet, Mrs. Rittmeyer noted how the presence of AEA consultants now

curtailed her creativity and professional independence. She said, "And, but we all have to teach

the same way. We all have to teach the exact same thing, and it has to be so scripted, so to-the-

test."

Mrs. Klinger, an elementary teacher in a rural school setting, spent several days at

beginning of the year developing the classroom environment while sacrificing time on content.

When asked about her reasons for doing so, she replied,

> But then I always think, you know I think my first job is to help these children be good
> people. And "good people" to me means that they're wanting to continue to learn, that I
> don't turn off that curiosity. And um, I think having a caring and enriched environment
> helps to achieve that.

Mrs. Klinger's frustrations grew from the growing curricular expectations that challenged

her time developing the culture of her classroom. She stated, "Well, because not all students in

Iowa are the same. You know? …it doesn't take into account our knowledge and our expertise

of how to reach our students. And um, it's kind of a cookie cutter education, and I worry about that."

Ms. Johnson, an elementary teacher with over 35 years of experience, similarly prides herself on creating a caring environment that sets the stage for learning.

> I think they [the students] see it almost as their second home. They would say it's a caring, I mean if they would use those words, a caring environment. But at the end of the year they're amazed at how much they've learned. I don't think they realize as we're doing things that they're actually learning.

Yet again, the growing curricular expectations and time dedicated to assessing individual students challenged her desire to realize that caring environment. Ms. Johnson expressed, "Well I think with the Common Core, what has happened is there's more and more. When you think that I have a 6-page report card, if I want to get all the Common Core, that there's just so much more."

Mrs. Smith, a middle-level literacy teacher, works hard to guarantee that her students get the skills they need.

> Because I go with, I come here every day trying to do what's best for kids. And I certainly won't intentionally just do something because I like it. You know, I don't have that favorite dinosaur unit, or um, I don't hold on to those things… I know that kids need this and that's the reason that I do what I do.

So, Mrs. Smith tended to push back against expectations that challenged her knowledge of what she deemed best for students. She expressed,

> But I am that one who says, "But wait a minute – that's not good for kids." So am I resistant to change? No. Are there times that I have resisted it? Absolutely. And when I see that a kid, or a group of students is going to lose because of the change, then I fight for that.

Mr. Stauffer, an upper-level humanities teacher in a rural district, worked hard to teach life skills to young people. In spite of increasing expectations with technology and documenting assessment results, he continued to emphasize relationships.

I, I think when I get called for references for jobs and I get a lot of those, um, they never ask about their grade point. Um, and you've probably had the same experience but it's always, "Are the courteous? Are they on time?" Um, you know, "Can they solve problems?" Um, you know, a lot of those are just being a good person.

Yet technology and increased assessment expectations pushed everyone to hurry, to limit time dedicated to developing good people.

Mr. Clauson wanted his special education students to, "…do well. I mean, you know to, be normal. Have the normal problems, the normal successes, failures that everybody else has." Yet, the frequent changes in special education led Mr. Clauson to be increasingly critical of the value of that change. He stated, "As an early-career teacher I was always trying to find, I was always trying to be that person finding the next change, and building that better mousetrap. Now I'm more set in my ways. Maybe I've got more experience of things that I know work or won't work."

Lastly, middle-level literacy teacher Ms. Nelson focused on building student skills in her classroom with the larger goal of preparing them for life. Within the context of teaching literacy she said, "Um, I felt that it was looking at writing as a whole. That it would help students be better writers – not just in a 5-paragraph essay, but, but writing in life."

Each of these teachers pursued different avenues to attain "psychic rewards." As Lortie (1975) argued, when additional curricular and professional expectations are placed on teachers, they will make sure their personal objectives are accomplished prior to any other responsibilities. Thus, when facing resistant teachers, administrators would do well to consider, "What aspect of primary importance is being threatened for the resistant teacher?"

<u>Nostalgia and the Veteran Teacher Experience</u>

While seeking to identify those values of ultimate importance to veteran teachers, the research consistently pointed to adverse effects upon student relationships (social nostalgia) or

the loss of autonomy, professional creativity, and independence (political nostalgia; Goodson et al., 2006). *Teacher nostalgia* is "the major form of memory among a demographically dominant cohort of experienced older teachers" (Goodson et al., 2006, p. 42). Understanding the memory and mission of later-career teachers can validate their experience and set the stage for positive engagement (Goodson et al., 2006).

Two types of teacher nostalgia reflect different aspects of resistance from teachers and present differing challenges for educational leaders (Goodson et al., 2006). "Social nostalgia" is the sense of family – a school's community of staff and students – that teachers knew and experienced earlier in their career. Social nostalgia occurs because of changes that take time away from, or change relationships with, colleagues and students. "Political nostalgia," on the other hand, arises from a loss of autonomy stemming from mandated, top-down initiatives. These initiatives particularly result in the loss of independence, creativity and status that veteran teachers once knew (Goodson, et al., 2006). Several major themes acquired through axial coding (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005) of the teacher interviews confirmed the participant concerns related to social and political nostalgia (Goodson et al, 2006).

Social Nostalgia

The decreasing instructional and relational time with students related to social nostalgia (Goodson et al., 2006) came about through added curricular expectations, the increased use of technology, the increased emphasis on testing and data collection, as well as societal changes. Mr. Booker related the impact of schedule changes on his instructional time.

> I felt rushed this year. It wasn't as much fun for me… to compare to the kind of things we used to be able to do with longer class periods, we miss a lot of what I think is special and important; those intangible things that kind of allow kids to see that intellectual discourse can be fun, and important.

Veteran teachers also recognized the changing nature of their relationships with students due to the increased presence of technology. Mr. Stauffer noted,

> …of course the technology has just been incredible as far as how that's changed.   Um, I, I think uh, as far as the technology, the good and bad I guess. It uh, I'm thinking how to word this, um, I just think we've gotten in a huge hurry. I feel so much more rushed than I did before.

Mr. Stauffer also identified a change in the classroom pace due to the presence of technology. "Um, I just think it speeds us up. We're, we're so, there's so many things we can gather off technology and the Internet and so on, and I think our kids growing up in that element as well, it's just everything is now, now, now. I just, I want it now, I want it now."

Certainly one of the most significant changes in education over the past 20 years is the increased emphasis on assessment. Ms. Johnson expressed her frustrations,

> I think because some of it you're just putting it on paper so that somebody else can look at it and see that that student needs help. Where you, after you've taught awhile yourself, you know which kids need help. And you can just go and help them. So are we wasting some of our time looking at data when we should be looking at what the students need?

Mrs. Rittmeyer similarly stated, "Because we're, there's so much of this that we have to do, and then we have to customize according to our FAST [The Formative Assessment System for Teachers] assessments what more we need to do, it has become less engaging and less fun. We feel like we don't have time for that."

Societal change throughout their lengthy teaching careers also translated into changing relationships with students. Teachers cited greater social-emotional needs, exhaustion from working late or out-of-town competitions, or the increased need to play the role of a parent, as factors contributing to changes in the teacher-student relationship.

While Goodson et al. (2006) suggest that teachers work to preserve those past memories and experiences, this author found that the participants focused much more on preserving student

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relationships themselves. Teachers did not work toward preserving past conditions, but rather

the student relationships they once knew and enjoyed. Mrs. Smith illustrated this difference.

When asked if she was nostalgic for the good old days when she started teaching, she replied,

> Well I don't know that things were better, they were certainly different. And I may have
> alluded to the fact my first classroom … they all lived at home with their biological
> parents. It was different. For some of those kids it wasn't better than what they have
> now. But the change has caused them to come to us differently abled. They are more
> skeptical. Um, it takes them much longer to trust the adults that are present in the
> building, and some never do trust the adults that are present in the building. And all of
> that is the foundation for good learning.

> Mrs. Smith's focal point was not returning to the past, but her intent to "come here every

day trying to do what's best for kids…I know that kids need this and that's the reason that I do

what I do."

Political Nostalgia

The participants reflected aspects of political nostalgia (Goodson et al., 2006) with

concerns about the loss of local autonomy due to the Iowa Core Curriculum, the increased

presence of Area Education Agency (AEA) consultants in Schools in Need of Assistance, and

the loss of creativity associated with repetitive change.

Mrs. Klinger noted the decrease in local control throughout her career when she said,

"…when I started you know, it was standards and benchmarks – very much local control. And

we've seen that local control dissipate throughout my 27 years here. And the Common Core just

kind of hones that in. That it's more top-down and not local control."

Mrs. Rittmeyer expressed a similar loss of autonomy with the increasing presence of

AEA consultants.

> So now the AEA is teaching us how to teach because we don't know how to teach kids
> how to read, and learn letters and sounds, things like that… never have darkened the
> doors of our classroom, but they can meet with us once a week and tell us what to do.
> That's very frustrating.

Repetitive change (Abrahamson, 2004) was a frequent source of frustration that threatened veteran teacher experience and creativity. Mr. Stauffer said, "But yeah, I, yeah I would say I've become more frustrated, especially when I started hearing things I've heard before and spun as new." He continued, "Um, I mean with something successful there's nothing wrong with tweaking it and using it again. Um, I don't like the way we, we put brand new wrappers on things and it's the, and I sit through a pile of meetings and hear the same things I heard 15 years ago." These repetitive changes frequently marginalize teacher experience, creativity and ownership (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Mrs. Smith captured these sentiments when she said,

> You know I've been in education long enough to see the different curriculum cycles come and go. OK, let's write this curriculum and we call it standards and benchmarks, and then we call it something else like critical objectives. It's never new…And this time Iowa Core is just kind of being jammed down everybody's throat instead of the other way around.

Themes identified throughout the coding process pointed toward a loss of autonomy and increased marginalization stemming from top-down initiatives and the presence of AEA personnel. Numerous veteran teacher quotes supported the concept of political nostalgia (Goodson et al., 2006), which includes the loss of creativity through repetitive change syndrome (Abrahamson, 2004) and the marginalization of teachers due to top-down initiatives (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

Later Career Teachers

While it might seem obvious, it is important to emphasize that all veteran teachers do not resist change. Huberman (1988) and Hargreaves (2005) identify four possible later career teacher responses to change: continuing renewal, positive focusers, disenchanted, and negative focusers (Hargreaves, 2005; Huberman, 1988). Continuing renewal teachers identify ways to

stay current and relevant, adopting new strategies throughout their career. Mrs. Smith expressed this position when she said, "I like the change. I always grow when I change, when I have these new opportunities. And, and it's just more exciting. I like coming to school every day and figuring out the next thing." Mrs. Klinger expressed her continuing renewal when she stated, "…if administration would be consistent at my school, and they were able to watch me, you know, from a young 20-some to now a 54-year-old, and that growth and that passion, you know, hasn't wavered."

Positive focusers will accept change, but predominantly within the confines of their own classroom. In their wisdom and later in life, positive focusers conserve their energy while focusing upon the students who cross their threshold every day. Mr. Stauffer reflected this response to change when he said,

> Give me the objective and if I have some flexibility how I get there. Are you more concerned about how I do it? Or that we get it? You know, do the test scores go up? Is that what you're, you know, you're wondering about? Um, give me the objective, let me close my door…

Disenchanted later career teachers are those who have invested themselves in several school reform efforts, only to be let down. Optimism is gone due to the tabling of previous efforts as well as the repetition of change initiatives (Abrahamson, 2004; Hargreaves, 2005; Huberman, 1988). Though passive in their resistance to change, disenchanted veteran teachers feel marginalized (Bailey, 2000) by enthusiastic young administrators with little memory or respect for the experiences of these teachers. Ms. Johnson expressed this disenchantment when she said,

> I think we're more critical of change. When you're first beginning, I mean I was always taught what your boss said you did. But now I think I'm looking at what's best for kids. I don't mind change if it's going to improve what we do for the students. But I think we get critical because we know, we've done this before. We've tried this before. It doesn't work. In about five years we're going to swing back and go the other way. So I think

we've become more critical about is it really a good change or not. Rather than just saying, "Oh, I don't want to change," if you can show me that it's going to make a difference for my students, then I will go at it whole hog.

Disenchanted veterans can easily be confused with, but should be kept distinct from, negative focusers (Hargreaves, 2005). Negative focusers are those veterans who work aggressively to undermine change, thwart any improvements that may threaten them, and use their political power to keep their life easy. They are the most outspoken, and the stereotypical resistant veteran teacher – "the bane of administrators' lives" (Hargreaves, 2005, p. 974). While the nine participants expressed various forms of resistance to district initiatives, none provided clear examples of undermining the overall efforts of the school.

Building Organizational Trust through Conversation

The reasons, thinking and emotions that accompany resistance are complex. Behaviors educational leaders perceive to be resistance may not, in fact, be resistance (Ford & Ford, 2009b). Veteran teachers may be striving to maintain the goals of the organization. As long-time employees of a district, veteran teachers have a tremendous amount of personal commitment and psychological ownership in the organization. Veteran teachers frequently view their actions as supporting the organization's goals rather than resistant to them (Ford & Ford, 2009b). Ms. Johnson said, "The most important thing is the students' learning. And if we're going to mess them up a year to do it [a new initiative], it's not, it's not good. So you gotta show me that this actually is going to work." Mrs. Smith echoed,

> But I am that one who says, "But wait a minute – that's not good for kids." So am I resistant to change? No. Are there times that I have resisted it? Absolutely. And when I see that a kid, or a group of students is going to lose because of the change, then I fight for that.

These comments support Ford and Ford's (2009b) position that many change recipients do not view their actions, statements or beliefs as resistant. What may appear resistant to an administrator is completely consistent in working to preserve the best interests of students and the school in the mind of the teacher. Their loyalty is to the mission of the organization, and therefore any actions to preserve that mission are justified (Ford et al., 2008).

Since change agents play an equally important role in any change initiative, they must engage in conversation with change recipients in order to clarify their perceptions (Ford & Ford, 2009a). These conversations provide insight to the response of the change recipient and remove the objective, moral high ground of the change agent. This approach similarly arrives at a proper view of resistance as an agent-recipient relationship (Ford et al., 2008).

Mrs. Smith expressed her desire for administrators to initiate conversation.

> Don't judge until you really know what's going on. And ask, don't be afraid to ask.
> Take the time, and the, time is precious in an administrative office – I get that. But take
> the time to get to know those teachers. Get to know why they do what they do. And
> have conversations that show you respect what they do.

Organizational Trust

Clarifying conversations not only identify values of utmost concern for veteran teachers, but they also serve to build organizational trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Tschannen-Moran (2004) defines "trust" as "one's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable and competent (p. 17). While it may seem counterintuitive, Tschannen-Moran (2004) suggests that conflict holds the potential to build organizational trust. If both parties maintain a commitment to the task and the relationship, conflict can have a positive impact on the organization.

Teacher participants consistently expressed their desire to have clarifying conversations about reform initiatives. Mrs. Rittmeyer said, "So, let's be real. And you know, look at the kids

for who they really are." Ms. Nelson echoed this desire to look at concerns more deeply when she said, "You know, I, I think sometimes there's a tendency to look at things too simply. And I, I would much rather get into things deeply. Let's look at the mess…"

Mr. Booker said that he wished building meetings would include, "Uh, willingness on the part of the administration to really engage in issues rather than avoid them." He regretfully recognized, "But the fact that nobody wanted to talk about the issues that teachers raised in good faith in the survey is troublesome. It hurts morale. Again, it doesn't lead to the kind of teamwork that everybody says is important."

Mrs. Klinger expressed her desire to sit down and talk about the specific implications of reform for her district in order to tailor those changes to the students in her district.

> You know, "What's wrong? How are we going to fix it?" You know, "Where do we go from here?" I think that, we seldom talk about that, just on a local level… it's more about, alright this is what the state is telling us today and so we need to learn about this. This is what, and it's not just, well look at our student base. What, what, we don't sit down and reflect on our student base very often and say, "What are we doing right? What can we improve on?" And, "Where should we go from there?"

Though they may be time-consuming and messy, clarifying conversations strengthen the ownership and implementation of change (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). These conversations validate the mission and memory of veteran teachers (Goodson et al., 2006) while legitimizing what is of primary importance to them (Lortie, 1975). In the words of Ms. Nelson, "It's messier, it's harder, it's more time-consuming. But I think you get a stronger product if, if we work together."

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research project provided voice to veteran teachers so that educational leaders might gain insight for more effective implementation of change. Analyzing the data through the lenses of psychic rewards, social and political nostalgia, later-career teacher experience, and

organizational trust, emphasized the importance of engaging teachers in clarifying conversations. Providing arenas for these conversations prior to change implementation validates teacher concerns while potentially strengthening the initiative. As educational leaders recognize their role in the change agent – recipient relationship, they will seek to engage all teachers in meaningful ways for more effective implementation of change.

The interaction of teachers and educational leaders needs ongoing research regarding the interaction of those individuals. The rise of teacher leaders, instructional coaches, and other new roles for teachers and administrators only heightens the challenge of effective interaction for school improvement. Interviews and ongoing research with each of these players in the educational system is greatly needed. Continuous improvement can only occur as teachers and leaders strive toward that goal together.

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