

Introduction

Pushing the Boundaries of Educational Change

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INTRODUCTION

This section of the Handbook deals with the idea and necessity of extending educational change — conceptually and in action. Extending educational change matters for getting existing approaches to educational change to work more effectively in more places, and for deepening our understandings of and sensitivity to whose interests are at stake in educational change. Who benefits and who loses? How do these interests and how we address them affect what kinds of changes we pursue? What challenges does all this pose for the change process itself?

THE DIFFICULTY OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

There are many reasons why educational change is so difficult, why getting it to take in many places, for more than brief periods, can be so hard. Among them are that:

- the reason for the change is poorly conceptualized or not clearly demonstrated. It is not obvious who will benefit and how. What the change will achieve for students in particular is not spelled out;
- the change is too broad and ambitious so that teachers have to work on too many fronts, or it is too limited and specific so that little real change occurs at all;
- the change is too fast for people to cope with, or too slow so that they become impatient or bored and move on to something else;
- the change is poorly resourced or resources are withdrawn once the first flush of innovation is over. There is not enough money for materials or time for teachers to plan. The change is built on the backs of teachers, who cannot bear it for long without additional support;
- there is no long-term commitment to the change to carry people through the anxiety, frustration and despair of early experimentation and unavoidable setbacks;

- key staff who can contribute to the change, or might be affected by it, are not committed. Conversely, key staff might become overinvolved as an administrative or innovative elite, from which other teachers feel excluded. Resistance and resentment are the consequences in either case;
- students are not involved in the change, or do to have it explained to them, so they yearn for and cling to ways of learning that are familiar to them and become the school's most powerful protectors of the past;
- parents oppose the change because they are kept at a distance from it. Alternatively, influential groups or individuals among the parents can negotiate special deals with the school that protect their own children from the effects of innovation (for example, by placing them in 'gifted classes' or allocating the best teachers to them);
- leaders are either too controlling, too ineffectual, or cash in on the early success of the innovation to move on to higher things;
- the change is pursued in isolation and gets undermined by other unchanged structures (for example, when cross curricular learning standards comes are juxtaposed with subject-based report cards or standardized tests); conversely, the change may be poorly coordinated with and engulfed by a tidal wave of parallel changes that make it hard for teachers to focus their efforts.

These common causes of failure to bring about educational change have been well documented in the change literature, from the foundational period of educational change research and beyond (e.g., Sarason, 1971, 1990; Berman & McLaughlin, 1977; Fullan, 1991, 1993; Louis & Miles, 1990; Rudduck, 1991; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Stoll & Fink, 1996). As a *strategic* process of proper planning, design and structural alignment, and as a *cultural* process of building effective relationships of collaboration and consultation, educational change is something we now understand much better than a decade or more ago. Yet even with this impressive knowledge base and expertise about the strategic and cultural aspects of educational change, too many change efforts remain disappointing and ineffective. We create isolated islands of change much more than we build great continents of them. Successful school change on a widespread basis continues to be infuriatingly elusive. Why?

One reason is that educational change is not just a technical process of managerial efficiency, or a cultural one of understanding and involvement. It is political and paradoxical process as well (Handy, 1994). People fear change not just because it presents them with something new, uncertain or unclear — because it has no obvious or common meaning for them. The agenda of educational change is also contested. Education is the greatest gatekeeper of opportunity and a powerful distributor of life chances. In a socially divided and culturally diverse society, what education is and how it is defined, will always tend to favour some groups and interests over others. So attempts to change education in fundamental ways are ultimately political acts. They are attempts to redistribute power and opportunity within the wider culture. Educational change is not just a strategic puzzle. It is, and should be a moral and political struggle. Generalized theories of educational