

Educational Change: Easier Said than Done

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In the opening chapter to this section of the Handbook, Fink and Stoll review the contemporary field of educational change and ask why educational change is so difficult to understand and achieve in present times. They begin by discussing the historical, social and organizational forces that create continuity in education; which sustain structures and practices that in many cases may be outliving their usefulness. They then discuss four common and widely used approaches to bringing about educational change in the face of such continuity: school effectiveness, school improvement, school restructuring, and more recent orientations to school reculturing. Each of these approaches is examined clearly and also critically.

Finally, Fink and Stoll turn to a number of agendas which they argue will continue to challenge the theory and practice of educational change in years to come – the need for a tighter connection between organizational change and developing better approaches to teaching and learning; the problem of motivating students in contexts of economic uncertainty; the difficulty of determining what kinds of leadership work best and are most practical in contexts of great complexity; the perennial problem of assessment and accountability; the relationship of change to teachers' lives, and the importance of micropolitics. Reculturing, they propose, offers one of the most hopeful ways of providing an integrated solution to these many different challenges.

A while back, the Minister of Education and Training for the Canadian province of Ontario was videotaped telling the senior officials of his department that they must spread the word that the educational scene in Ontario is much worse than it actually is. "Creating a useful crisis is part of what this will be about" (Brennan 1995, p.1), he said. By orchestrating a crisis of confidence he declared, his government's reform package could proceed more smoothly. Educators in many countries, states, and provinces will recognize the tactic. While few officials are foolish enough to admit publicly that their criticism of schools is a precondition to implementing educational reform, a fairly common governmental change strategy is to attempt to undermine the public's confidence in its schools and their teachers, and then to mandate a series of policies which effectively deskill teachers and undermine their judgments (Barlow & Robertson, 1994; Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

These reform policies have certain common features. Important decisions about

students' learning, such as what they are to learn, when they are to learn it, and how students are to demonstrate their learning have been removed from local settings and assumed by bureaucrats in distant offices. Conversely, resources have been devolved directly to schools to make local 'site based' decisions, usually accompanied by a reduction in support. In most situations, increased parental involvement has been mandated in the form of school governors or school councils. What is remarkable, is the similarity of these change strategies throughout the world and the agreement among policy makers, business communities and large segments of the various publics that education is in dire need of reform. These forces for educational change, however, are merely reflection of much more pervasive trends in society.

"Social forces are human energies which, originating in individual motivations, coalesce into collective manifestations of power" (Gustavson, 1955, p. 28). Economic forces, technological forces and political forces among others, shape our daily existence. At certain points in history, combinations of these forces merge to produce dramatic, indeed, revolutionary social changes. The Enlightenment of the 18th century is an example. With its focus on reason, science, and progress, it impacted all aspects of society and accelerated the industrial revolution, which in turn brought revolutionary economic, social and ultimately political changes to western societies. Some commentators have suggested that western societies are presently in the midst of another such period in their histories. Institutions, political, economic and social structures and indeed value systems world-wide appear to be changing or under pressure to do so. It would seem that our societies are passengers in time between a passing 'modern' age and a new complex, diverse, confusing and (some have argued) chaotic post-modern era (Stacey, 1995). The problem for educators is how to create organizations which prepare our children to engage with this changing and uncertain world and shape it for the better, while preserving their basic humanity in the midst of potentially dehumanizing principles and practices.

The forces for change are discussed in considerable detail in this 'Handbook'. In all the pressure for change, however, those forces which contribute to the maintenance of continuity in schools are often forgotten. In this chapter, therefore, we examine the forces for continuity, then describe and critique the strategies for change; and finally address some of the continuing challenges of educational change.

FORCES OF CONTINUITY

In spite of the convergence of powerful forces for change, schools appear remarkably untouched, and exhibit many structures, policies and practices of years gone by. One may well argue that without continuity with the past, positive change cannot occur. Maintaining some degree of stability or organizational equilibrium is fundamental to effective management of schools and classrooms. Unfortunately, in many situations the quest for stability has become an excuse for immobility (see