

Introduction

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This *International Handbook of Educational Change* brings together evidence and insights on educational change issues from leading writers and researchers in the field from across the world. Many of these writers, whose chapters have been specially written for this Handbook, have been investigating, helping initiate and implementing educational change, for most or all of their lengthy careers. Others are working on the cutting edge of theory and practice in educational change, taking the field in new or even more challenging directions. And some of our contributors are more skeptical about the literature of educational change and the assumptions on which it rests. They have helped us and will help you to approach projects of understanding or initiating educational change more deeply, reflectively and realistically.

One reason why it is now more than time to commission and bring together fundamental and leading edge writing on educational change from the best minds in the field is the sheer amount of activity and interest in bringing about fundamental educational change in many different parts of the world. Educational change and reform have rarely had so much prominence within public policy, in so many different places. Educational change is ubiquitous. It figures large in Presidential and Prime Ministerial speeches. It is at or near the top of many National policy agendas. In the United States, Bill Clinton has come to be known as “the education president”. In Britain, a fundamental part of the policy platform on which the first Labour Government for almost 20 years was elected was “Education, education, education”. Everywhere, it seems, educational change is not only a policy priority but also major public news. Yet action to bring about educational change usually exceeds people’s understanding of how to do so effectively.

The sheer number and range of changes which schools are now confronting is

staggering. The changes that educators today are encountering, initiating and implementing vary in their details from place to place, but they frequently encompass most or all of the following broad features:

- new and often tightly defined curriculum targets, standards or outcomes that emphasize various kinds of higher order thinking
- more systematic and pervasive forms of standardized testing alongside more “authentic” portfolio and performance-based kinds of classroom assessment
- innovative teaching strategies such as cooperative learning, manipulative mathematics and reading recovery
- the impact and rapid spread of new technologies, especially computers, on classroom practice
- greater attention to “constructivist”-inspired forms of teaching and learning, that seek to develop teaching-for-understanding, help children grasp the deep structures of their subjects, and take into account their prior knowledge and beliefs
- more insistence on “robust” kinds of educational accountability through such strategies as rigorous external inspection, and measurements of school performance which are in turn linked to levels of funding, or are published in school-by-school league tables of results
- increased attentiveness to parents’ rights, wishes, choices of school and involvement in school governance
- an ever-increasing influence and imposition of market principles on education, where schools must compete for clients, be conscious of how they perform compared to their competitors, and manage their image with diligence and care
- more involvement of business in education through sponsorships, partnerships, curriculum innovations and the intrusion of its corporate concepts into the overall language of educational reform.
- various measures to improve the status, standing and quality of teachers from defining professional standards or competences through to compulsory re-certification of teachers on a periodic basis
- numerous efforts at local and regional levels to bring about whole-school improvement, to restructure schools and attempt to change the entire way they operate.

What is significant and daunting for educators today is not the existence of educational change as such, but the distinctive and sometimes disturbing forms it has come to take at the turn of the century.

Educators have always had to engage with educational changes of one sort or another. But other than in the last three decades or so, these changes were infrequent and episodic and they never really affected or even addressed the core of how teachers taught (Cuban, 1984). The changes were in things like how subjects were organized, how grade levels were clustered together into different school types, or how groups of students were divided between different schools or integrated within them according to ability, sex or race. Thus when educational historians

chastise contemporary change advocates for ignoring the existence of educational change in the past and for exaggerating current crises and change demands “as a marketing device to promote the new possibilities of education in a new century, designed to appeal to consumers of different kinds who are grown weary of the old familiar product” (McCulloch, 1997), they are only partially right. While educational change has always been with us in some sense or other (as also, of course, has educational continuity), many of the changes are very different now, in both their substance and their form.

Since the 1960s, educational change has become a familiar part of teachers’ work, and has more directly addressed issues of what teachers teach and how they should teach it. Following the launch of Sputnik and the emergence of post-war egalitarian ideals, public education has been treated as a crucible of technological and economic advancement and as a creator of greater social justice. In the 1960s and 70s, teachers in many countries had to deal with the rhetoric and sometimes the reality of curriculum innovation in mathematics, science and the humanities. They saw students stay in school longer, the ability ranges of their classes grow wider and the walls of their classrooms come down and then go up again just a few years later. Successive waves of different approaches to reading or mathematical learning swept through their classrooms, each one washing away the marks left by its predecessors.

It was in these times of educational expansion and optimism that educational change really began in earnest – as also did the study of it. From the late 1960s and early 1970s, researchers like Matt Miles, Per Dalin, Lou Smith, Neil Gross, Lawrence Stenhouse and Seymour Sarason studied the growing phenomenon of educational innovation – whether in the shape of large-scale curriculum projects and packages, or in the form of newly-created innovative schools. They showed how and why large-scale curriculum innovations rarely progressed beyond the phase of having their packages purchased or “adopted” to the point where they were implemented fully and faithfully, and could bring about real changes in classroom practice. At the same time, they also revealed how the promise of exceptional innovative schools usually faded over time as their staffs grew older, their charismatic leaders left, and the system withdrew permission for them to break the rules.

As the limitations of large-scale curriculum innovations became apparent, educators began to treat the individual school as the centre or focal point of educational change efforts. School-based curriculum development, and school-based staff development initiatives proliferated in many places, instead of development being imposed or initiated from faraway.

Research on what made teachers effective in their classrooms also expanded to address what made schools effective or ineffective as a whole, and as lists of effective schools characteristics were discovered (such as creating a safe and orderly environment for learning, or setting and checking homework regularly), these were sometimes then used as administrative blueprints to try and make particular schools become more effective over time. Many districts or other administrative authorities initiated “effective schools” projects on this basis. Some schools and

districts supplemented and sometimes supplanted this science of school effectiveness with a more loosely defined and humanistically interpreted art of school improvement – the process of how to help schools and their staffs become more effective through setting clear goals, creating staff involvement, measuring progress over time and so forth.

Ironically, this approach to school improvement was then translated back into a rational science by many educational systems. It was treated as a process of planned or managed change that schools could be moved through step-by-step, stage-by-stage, guided by the school's improvement team that its region or district mandated it to have.

When these various school-centred changes and improvements didn't work well enough or fast enough (and sometimes even when they did), impatient educational administrators (and American urban school superintendents with an average job tenure of less than two years can be very impatient indeed), imposed their own reform requirements instead. So too did ideologically driven politicians, whose agendas of educational reform have often been shaped by the desire to create public indignation (which they promise their measures will then answer), or by the private idiosyncrasies of their own educational pasts, (which their reforms are meant to cherish or purge).

This quarter century or more of educational change processes and initiatives that have been meant to alter learning and teaching in our schools, has left us with a mixed legacy. On the one hand, studies of what works and what doesn't across all the different change strategies have created a truly powerful knowledge base about the processes, practices and consequences of educational change. During this period, research studies have shown, for example, how educational change moves through distinctive stages of initiation, implementation and institutionalization; how people who encounter changes go through successive "stages of concern" about how those changes will affect them; and how people respond very differently to educational change initiatives depending on what point they have reached in their own lives and careers.

Some of the research findings on educational change have even been accorded the status of generalizable rules or 'lessons' of change. These include the maxims that practice changes before beliefs, that successful change is a product of both pressure and support, that evolutionary planning works better than linear planning and so forth (these 'lessons' have been synthesized especially effectively by Michael Fullan, 1991, 1993).

So extensive is the current knowledge base of educational change that it has virtually come to constitute a field of study in its own right – drawing on and transcending the disciplines of sociology, psychology, history and philosophy, as well as the fields of curriculum and educational administration. In a way, educational change has now really come of age – but while this is a significant academic achievement, it is also where the problems of the field – the second part of its legacy – also begin.

Our experience of educational change today is stretching far beyond our experience, knowledge and investigations of it in times gone by. While the existing

knowledge-base of educational change is impressive, it is no longer really sufficient to address the unique change problems and challenges that educators confront today.

Contemporary patterns of educational change present educators with changes that are multiple, complex and sometimes contradictory. And the change demands with which educators have to deal, seem to follow one another at an increasingly frenetic speed. A typical primary or elementary school these days may be considering a new reading program, developing cooperative learning strategies, thinking about how to implement new computers, designing a better parent newsletter, and trialling portfolio assessments all at the same time. The portfolio assessments favoured by the region or the district may have to be reconciled with imposed standardized test requirements by the nation or the state. A push to develop a more integrated curriculum and to recognize children's multiple intelligences may be reversed by a newly elected government's commitments to more conventionally defined learning standards within existing academic subjects.

All this can make teachers and administrators feel that the systems in which they are working aren't just complex but downright chaotic. This chaos is partly inherent in societies and organizations where information circulates and decisions are made with increasing speed. It is also the result of educational policy constantly being shaped and altered by different and competing interest groups in an ideological battle for the minds of the young. And sometimes it even results from a kind of *manufactured uncertainty* that more than a few governments wilfully create to arouse panic, to set pretexts for their policy interventions and to keep educators and everyone else off-balance.

Few of the existing theories and strategies of educational change equip educators to cope effectively with these complex, chaotic and contradictory environments

- Rational theories of planned change that move through predictable stages of implementation or 'growth' are poorly suited to schools where unexpected twists and turns are the norm rather than the exception in the ways they operate.
- The conventional academic and behavioural outcomes that defined the core of what an effective school should produce in the past are outdated in an age where many people now clamour for schools to develop higher-order thinking skills, problem-solving capacities, and the habits of collaboration and teamwork. Complex as the world of education is, people expect more and more from it, and the effective schools of the past cannot deliver what many expect of schools today.
- Theories and models that helped educators know how (and how not) to implement single curriculum innovations are of little use to schools where innovations are multiple and priorities compete.
- While we have learned a lot about how to improve individual schools or small clusters of schools with additional resources, exceptional leaders, the ability to attract or shed particular kinds of staff members, and discretion to break the