

Finding Keys to School Change: A 40-Year Odyssey¹

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I've been working at understanding change in schools for more than forty years. Being given a license to reflect on my intellectual adventures in the study of school change – in public – is a delightful and faintly alarming charge. I need to avoid sheer narcissism on the one hand, and detached encyclopedic syntheses on the other. And not succumb to the old codger's temptation to claim pioneering knowledge that has been ignored by recent young upstarts! These risks bring a certain frisson to the enterprise.

This volume's metaphor of "roots" is attractive. Roots are deep, hidden, invisible. So people forget that roots exist. But from sturdy roots flow a here-and-now trunk, main branches, leaves, flowers and fruit. By analogy, effective school change efforts today need a conceptual base in work that's gone before. The problem is that some current ideas about change in schools are, to put it charitably, poorly rooted.

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM ABOUT SCHOOL CHANGE

There is no shortage of conventional wisdom about school change. Many ideas have had remarkable staying power for the past 40 years. Here are some, drawn from Fullan & Miles, 1992 (Fig. 1).

Such propositions are very limited in helping us understand what really drives school change. Although they often have a kernel – or at least a ring – of truth, they also have many intellectual and practical faults. Note, for example, the sheer, self-sealing tautology of (a) Or the abstract, unfalsifiable style of (b) Of course it's true. But (to recast Henry Murray's comments on persons) every school is also like *some* other schools in some respects, and like *all* other schools in some respects.

Maxims like (c) have a seductive husk, but are probably wrong at the core. It does strain credulity to the breaking point to say that the schools we see today are no different from those of yesteryear, or that this is just "another swing of the pendulum", or (tacitly) that all change efforts are hopeless. Rather, such *propositions* are hopeless and self-defeating.

Proposition (d) has always been useful as a handy excuse for failure in change efforts. But what evidence there is on it (Miles, 1981; Miles & Louis, 1987) leads to the verdict "not proven."

- a) Resistance is inevitable, because people resist change.
- b) Every school is unique.
- c) *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*
- d) Schools are essentially conservative institutions, harder to change than other organizations.
- e) You just have to live reform one day at a time.
- f) You need a mission, objectives and a series of tasks laid out well in advance.
- g) You can never please everyone, so just push ahead with reforms.
- h) Full participation of everyone involved in change is essential.
- i) Keep it simple, stupid: go for small, easy changes rather than big, demanding ones.
- j) Mandate change, because people won't do it otherwise.

Figure 1: Faulty maps of change.

Many propositions come in mutually-canceling pairs, like (e) and (f), or (g) and (h); A good look at the organizational literature, and a recent study of major change in urban high schools (Louis & Miles, 1990) suggests quite clearly that *neither* of the paired alternatives is valid as a guide to change in schools.

Others, like (i) and (j), are based more on “obviousness”, stereotypes and wishes than on empirical data; they often have inexplicit or untested assumptions underlying them. In the case of (i), we can infer assumptions about “economy of effort”, along with condescension about the abilities of “practitioners”. But over the years it has been repeatedly found that more-substantial change efforts addressing multiple problems are more likely to succeed than small-scale, easily-trivialized

innovations (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977; Huberman & Miles, 1984). And as against (j), we can rely on McLaughlin's (1990) well-grounded proposition that "policy can't mandate what matters", because "what matters" requires local capacity, will, expertise, resources, support, and discretionary judgment.

Finally, many propositions about school change lack an underlying causal mechanism; they have no clearly-identified "engines" or "drivers" – key variables that exert influence and lead to changes in other variables. For example, the implicit engine in (h) is probably something like "commitment"; it's assumed that participation will lead to commitment to jointly-made decisions, and thus to increased likelihood of implementation. But this is never made clear.

It would be worse than presumptuous to imply that my work over the past four decades has located *the* key variables in school change. Here I simply want to describe an odyssey – to provide a personal/historical review of projects on school change that have engaged my energy since the early 50's. I'll examine basic strategies for changing schools, and the driving ideas underlying them. I consider those ideas to be key variables for understanding the big (and small) questions of school change, both when I was first exploring them, and now. I'll place these ideas in the changing historical context, from the 50's through the 90's. After this retrospective account, I'd like to look forward and consider what the next few decades may bring us in the way of knowledge about school change.

A SCHOOL CHANGE ODYSSEY

The odyssey is summarized in Fig. 2. I'll discuss ten major school change strategies. For each strategy, I'll mention projects I was involved in, include some conceptual exhibits, identify the basic, driving variables that I believe were involved, and comment on their utilization in school change, both at the time and currently. These projects naturally involved significant colleagues. Colleague networks are always crucial in understanding how key concepts develop and become more coherent. I'll indicate my main connections, feeling unhappy that dozens of good people I've worked with will go unnamed.

1. *Training for group skills.* In the postwar ferment of 1948, Douglas McGregor, the father of "Theory Y" (the human-sciences alternative to command-and-control "Theory X") and his colleague Irving Knickerbocker were transforming Antioch College, to which I'd just returned from the Army. I have a vivid memory of sitting in an intense group training session and saying to myself, "If it makes me feel this way, I want to spend my life doing this."

More conceptually, the potential of group dynamics for human learning and social change struck me as very large. In 1952, I was halfway through graduate school at Teachers College, studying social psychology with Goodwin Watson and working as a research assistant at the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute. With Max Corey and Harry Passow, I worked on a series of workshops based on the "action research" ideas of Kurt Lewin, with teams of principals and teachers (Passow,

Strategy and targets	Illustrative Projects	Key variables
1. Train individuals (principals and teachers) in group skills.	Leadership Training Project 1953 - 1958 NTL Laboratories, 1954-1973 Encounter Group Study, 1968 - 1972	Process analysis
2. Clarify concepts of innovation diffusion and adoption	Innovation in Education, 1961-64	Technical rationality Choice Temporary system.
3. Engage schools as organizations in self-renewing activities	Organization Development in Schools, 1962-66 COPEd (Cooperative Project in Educational Development) 1964-1967 OD State of the Art Study, 1978 Effective Schools Adoption Study, 1983	Organization health (as vision) Data feedback. Normative change
4. Transfer knowledge of effective practice to users	AERA Research Utilization Committee, 1967 Experience-Based Career Education, 1973-75 Documentation and Technical Assistance Project, 1976-79	Knowledge utilization Networking Capacity-building
5. Create new schools	Project on Social Architecture Education, 1974-78	Legitimacy for plan- ing and design Social/educational design
6. Support implementation	R&D Utilization Project, 1976-79 Study of Dissemination Efforts Supporting School Improvement, 1979-82	Causally configured sequences: assistance, mastery, commitment, stabilization
7. Lead and manage local reform	Project on Improving the Urban High School, 1984-89	Empowerment Evolutionary planning Resourcing Problem-coping
8. Train change agents	Educational Consulting Skills Training, 1974-82 Patterns of Successful Assistance Study, 1983-86	Trust and rapport- building Organizational diagnosis
9. Manage large-scale reform	International School Im- provement Project, 1982-86 How Schools Improve Study, 1988-92 NET Study (Ontario), 1988	Local strategic grounding Institutionalization
10. Restructure schools	Mapping Restructuring Study, 1991-93	Shared cognitive maps of content & process

Figure 2: A school change odyssey.

Miles, Corey, & Draper, 1955). This led to my Leadership Training Project, devoted to teaching school people fundamental skills of group behavior.

Beginning in 1954, I worked in National Training Laboratories programs at Bethel, Maine, a relationship that lasted for nearly twenty years. At Bethel each summer, thoughtful colleagues from psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science and education from dozens of universities in this country and Europe³

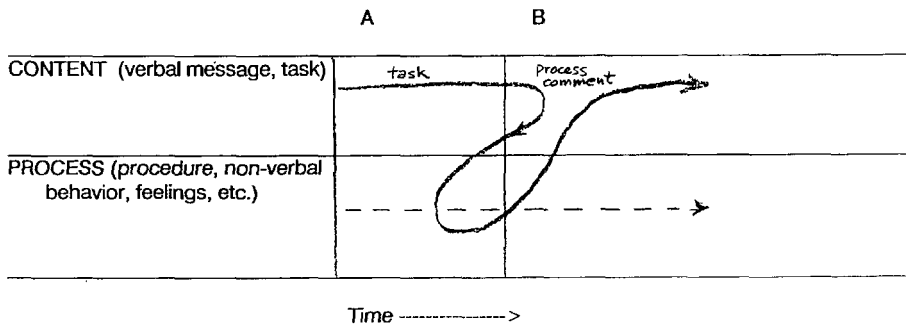
met to invent and refine intensive learning methods. The most famous was the T-group, a high-intensity learning environment where group members discussed and reflected on their own behavior in the group. My T-group experiences impressed me deeply. I felt that the educational world needed a good compendium of experiential learning methods, and wrote *Learning to work in groups* (1959, revised 1980). It was a utilization success; in the burgeoning of group training in the context of the 60's and 70's, the book reached over a hundred thousand users in four languages.

What was the key variable here? It seemed to be *process analysis*, the deceptively simple activity of talking directly about what is going on in a situation (Miles, 1969a), rather than staying on the official task or content level. In an article called "On naming the here and now", I said,

Like many great ideas, it seems primitive, even stupid, mindless. . . .yet it forms a central component of most interaction designed to benefit or liberate people: therapy, human relations training, encounter groups, much religious and some educational practice. . . . it triggers self-awareness, catharsis, re-orientation. . . . in some unexplained, near-magical way. (Miles, 1969a, pp. 1-2).

Figure 3 illustrates what's involved. There's a content stream (explicit words conveying substantive meaning about a nominal task), and a process stream (working procedures, nonverbal behavior, unvoiced feelings and perceptions). A "process comment" such as "When we were trying to decide, two people didn't say why they opposed it, and that made me uncomfortable," made in the content stream at time B, alludes to some immediately prior events at time A in the process stream. Such a comment may be ignored in favor of other content, acknowledged briefly and acted on, or lead to an extended discussion of process. (Meanwhile, of course, the here-and-now process stream continues on its inexorable way.)

Process analysis is thus essentially shared self-analytic behavior including awareness, communication, and usually evaluation, a sort of "sustained mindfulness"



From Miles, 1969

Figure 3: Process-analytic behavior.