Appendix E - A Study of Educational Change in Alberta

D. Garry McKinnon

Abstract

The problem addressed in this research study is that the change process in an educational setting is not generally well understood and often, therefore, attempts to bring about change are not successful.

A learning and teaching initiative involving a group of fifteen teachers and administrators and a university resource team in a rural Alberta school system, was used as a focal point for a naturalistic inquiry study to develop a better understanding of the change process.

Three major themes emerged, with each of the themes having facilitators and inhibitors. The themes involved the importance of understanding personal perspective, contextual factors and change processes. It was concluded that, as well as considering the personal perspective, the individual desiring change must understand the context for change in order to provide a supportive setting. This minimizes the inhibiting personal and contextual factors and maximizes the facilitative processes. The three themes provide a new frame of reference of educational change.

Many reform proposals have been brought forward in recent decades pertaining to Canadian education. Representative of some of the proposed reforms are Alberta's, "Vision for the Nineties" (1991) and British Columbia's, "Year 2000: A framework for reaming" (1989). In each case, the reforms have been generated by a negative view of the quality of education currently offered students in Canada. There is an almost desperate determination to overhaul education, as we now know it. Canadian legislators and education officials base the impetus for change in the need to become more competitive with nations such as Korea, Japan and Germany which are perceived as having superior educational systems. What enthusiasm there may be for reform in education is dampened by the realities of the dismal record of reform in the past three or four decades. Gibboney (1991) documents the lack of success in a study of over thirty school reform efforts between 1960 and 1990. He concluded that in all these reform efforts, there was no fundamental reform. He observes, "There has been no pendulum swing in reform because the clock that the pendulum drives has yet to be invented" (p. 687). Goodlad (1984) concluded, in a comprehensive report on school reform of the 1980's, that reform was failing to produce an impact at the most critical level–in the classroom. Gibboney (1991) prescribes a shift in perspective, if real change is to be achieved, because as he observes: "Fundamental reform in schools is blocked by a habit of the mind, the tendency to view education from the narrow perspective of the technological mindset. The mindset is the single most important obstacle to reform that is within the power of educators and school boards to change and it must be changed if fundamental reform is ever to come to even a quarter of our public schools." (p. 683)

In this light, a number of innovative approaches have been suggested which do seem to take into account a bolder look at reform than is typically the case. Peters and Waterman (1982), for example, have proposed replacing the rational top-down approach with a social management model, which provides for ownership and involvement in the change process. Also, Deal and Kennedy (1985) and Rosenholtz (1987), have described the importance of culture and the need to build a culture for change. Other educational scholars have prescribed a knowledge of reaming and change that is rooted in action (Petrie 1981; Schon, 1987). Petrie (1991) has described a "second wave" of reform where teachers are reflective practitioners, with a focus in reaming and teaching on meaning making and meaningfulness (p. 27). Fullan (1991), has observed, "The message to those involved in the change process is to understand the subjective world–the phenomenology-as a necessary precondition for engaging in any change effort" (p. 131).

The Study

To develop a better understanding of the phenomenology of change, a study was undertaken in a rural Alberta school jurisdiction. The project involved a group of fifteen teachers who came together to consider an Alberta Department of Education document, Teaching Thinking. as well as to consider, in more general terms, teaching practices and beliefs.

A naturalistic inquiry approach was used in examining the experiences of the teachers who voluntarily responded to an invitation to meet informally as members of what became known as the "Learning and Teaching Group." Particular attention was given to four of the group members who volunteered to become members of a steering committee for the Learning and Teaching Group, as well as to become primary informants for the study.

The study took place in the County of Wheatland School System where the principal author of this article is Superintendent of Schools. There are twenty-one schools, 2,600 students, and 165 teachers in the rural school system, which is located 25 miles east of Calgary, Alberta.

The four primary research informants included: an upper elementary classroom teacher, an elementary teacher/vice-principal, a senior high school social studies teacher and a senior high school social studies teacher/librarian. The other teacher informants, the members of the Learning and Teaching Group, represent a variety of teaching assignments and schools. As well, there were three school administrators and four school system administrators and consultants who participated in the Group.

In addition, the study included board of education members, school and school system administrators and a university reaming and teaching resource team. The involvement of school system administrators and trustees in leadership development programs which emphasized team building, maintaining a reaming focus and understanding the change process, provided a base of support for the Learning and Teaching Group.

Two members of a resource team from the University of Calgary (practicing teachers who had been seconded by the university) also supported the Learning and Teaching Group through their participation in the group sessions and their work with group members individually in their classrooms. In short, this was an all out attempt to foster and promote change in the face of the prevailing reaming and teaching paradigm.

Discussion

Three major themes emerged from the study. For each, there were two components; facilitators and inhibitors of change. The facilitators represent factors, which have a positive, supportive impact on change, whereas the inhibitors represent factors, which have a negative, debilitating impact on change. Naturally, the goal in fostering change is to maximize the facilitators and to minimize the inhibitors.

Theme One: Personal Perspective or “way of thinking” impacts educational change

Schelechty (1991) has described the importance of having a disposition for change and Fullan (1991) has concluded that change involves, more than anything else, a way of thinking.

Through this study, four key facilitators associated with a personal perspective or “way of thinking” about change were identified:

1. being sensitive to change through perception and intuition,
2. being aware of one’s philosophy and beliefs,
3. having confidence and being willing to take risks,
4. appreciating the power of perspective.

The teacher informants described the importance of being able to see the “big picture–being able to have a reading” of the situation and they indicated how often they know intuitively what they should be doing.

With reference to philosophy and beliefs, one teacher commented:

Before you can be a positive part of change or a facilitator of change, you have to be really sure of what you believe personally. The group has focused a great deal on the importance of operating from the essence. It is important to clearly understand and to be guided by our values and beliefs if we hope to operate beyond what could be described as a superficial level.

Frequent mention was made of the link between change and leaming and the importance of building self-confidence and helping the individual become a risk-taker.

Change has been described as involving a paradigm shift or a shift in perspective. The study confirmed that one can not foster change–bring about a shift in perspective–if the perspective, the essence of the individual, is not clearly understood.

Four key personal perspective or “way of thinking” inhibitors were also identified by the respondents:

1. having a natural resistance to change,
2. having a concern only for practical applications,
3. having an inward focus, and
4. generally having a negative response to a top-down approach to leadership.

The informants described a tendency to teach as one has been taught and to resist change, which deviates from the traditional view of the teacher as a disseminator of information.

Teachers in the study acknowledged a desire for practical ideas from staff development activities. Some decided to discontinue their involvement in the Leaming and Teaching Group because the emphasis was on values and beliefs rather than practical ideas.

An inward focus describes the impact of teacher isolation, a major inhibiting factor in the study. Typical is the teacher comment:

> *I feel very isolated. I would like to have teachers come into my classroom to see what I am doing and I would like to visit other teachers’ classrooms but it just doesn’t happen.*

The informants described an attitude toward change, which reflects the belief that most change is initiated from above. A common comment was, “I wonder what is coming down the tube next?”

In short, according to the respondents, understanding change and facilitating it requires an awareness of personal perspective or what Fullan (1991) has called a way of thinking.

Theme Two: Contextual factors impact educational change

Understanding change involves an awareness of contextual factors, which include group culture and organizational structure. Two primary contextual facilitators were identified: 1. providing a supportive setting in response to a particular need, and 2. providing opportunities for exploration and learning.

One group member commented, in support of the first facilitator, "ultimately there has to be a need which is being met when people come together." And another said, in support of the second facilitator:

> *What the group members are doing is searching for a validation of some of their educational beliefs, philosophies and ideas. It is a search that I think a lot of us are going through right now. I think it's actually very exciting to be in education.*

There were also two inhibitors to change in relation to contextual factors that were noted by respondents: 1. focusing on curriculum expectations, extemal examinations and accountability outcomes, and 2. being constrained by time.

The first inhibitor is supported by Gibboney (1991) who has argued that fundamental reform in education is inhibited by the narrow perspective of the technological mindset that is common in education today. The mindset is reflected in bureaucratic organizations which prescribe curriculum and maintain a high degree of accountability through external examinations and the monitoring of the work of teachers (p. 683).

The teachers in this study described the inhibiting impact on attempts at change resulting from a concern with "covering the curriculum" and "preparing students for the departmental exams." They also described the defensive, negative reaction, which is common when it is perceived that a change has been imposed upon them.

A typical comment with regard to time constraint was, "I would really like to make some changes in what I'm doing but there just isn't enough time to try anything." And another,

"We go into a classroom and work with a teacher and so often the teacher has to rush off to a meeting or something afterward and there isn't time for the kind of discussion and reflection, which would be so worthwhile."
In sum, educational change seems to come about most readily when there is taken into account organizational and cultural influences and when there is a supportive setting for sharing, exploring and learning. As well, understanding change involves an awareness of the need to overcome the contextual inhibitors, which we have noted above.

Theme Three: Understanding change processes impacts change itself

Understanding change involves an awareness of facilitative processes including

1. establishing a supportive group culture;
2. providing leadership in facilitating change;
3. using a learning approach to change; and
4. making connections between the philosophical and the practical.

As well, understanding change involves recognizing inhibiting processes such as leaders:

1. trying to force change,
2. trying to control behavior,
3. establishing hidden agendas, and
4. trying "quick-fix" approaches to solving educational problems.

Sarason (1991) and Fullan (1991) have described their beliefs that most attempts to foster change have been superficial with little significant impact on what takes place in schools. And likewise, Clark and Meloy (1987) have

proposed an approach to change which involves people at all levels working together with a group commitment and a consensus on what is to be achieved.

In this study, in reference to having a supportive group culture, one teacher noted,

> *It is important to have shared experiences and a common focus that can be built on. We have worked through some crises together and we have survived. I think that people always expect that groups will be very smooth and everything will flow along, but really, a good group is one that can survive the external pressures, stresses, and expectations that are placed on it at different times, whether it is a time commitment or extemal goals or whatever.*

Another teacher noted with regard to the sensitive nature of providing leadership

> *When you believe that you want to go in a certain direction, there is a real tendency to make people want to go there with you and yet we're seeing some sort of realization that not everybody is at the same place in their educational practice or philosophy and that people are moving at different speeds. We've learned from our experience that you can't force people to change; you can make them want to change or help them to change; you can provide the environment for change but the change process is slow. You have to accept people where they are.*

And of particular interest to us was the strong notion that change comes about through learning. Typical of the comments made was the following:

> *Teachers can either model to students that they believe there is only one right answer to a question and only one way to do things, or they can model a search or questioning of their beliefs and a willingness to change, based on learning.*

With regard to change process inhibitors, it became obvious that when individuals attempt to take a simplistic approach to change and when they fail to appreciate the complexity of the change process, change is not likely to occur. As one teacher noted, "I think leaders who want recipe cards for change are not very realistic." And another noted, "When you are asked for your input and the end result doesn't reflect any of your input, you feel something is wrong and you don't become involved."

Unfortunately, a bad experience with an attempted change tends to carry over to other situations. When people work hard to bring about a change and it is poorly handled, it
becomes very difficult to rekindle any enthusiasm for another attempt at change. The attitude becomes one of, why bother.

Summary

The figure below provides a summary of the framework of change, which has been described in this article. It should be emphasized that it is a description of a perspective, a disposition for change–it is not a model. To attempt to present a model of change most often falls into a technological mindset, which has been identified in the literature as a major barrier to change.

If the dismal record of attempts at educational reform and mandating change, which is documented in the literature, is to be overcome, it would seem a new approach based on a better understanding of the change process is needed. Rather than attempting to mandate change at a provincial level, jurisdictional or school level, the findings of this study would indicate that the process must begin at the individual level.

If change is seen as being represented by a paradigm shift or a change in perspective, then one must begin with an understanding of one's personal perspective. The personal perspective can be described as the heart of the change process. As well as considering the personal perspective, there is a need to understand the context for change, and to

provide a supportive setting for change, which minimizes the inhibiting factors, which were identified. On considering the personal perspective and in providing a supportive setting for change, facilitative processes, which have been identified, should be in place.

References

Alberta Education. (1991). Vision for the nineties. Edmonton, Alta: Alberta Education.

Barth, R. S. (1991). Improving schools from within. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

British Columbia, Ministry of Education. (1991). Year 2,000: A framework for learning. Victoria, B. C.: British Columbia Ministry of Education.

Deal, T.& Kennedy A. (1982). Corporate cultures: The rites and rituals of corporate life. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.

Fullan, M. (1991). The new meaning of educational change. New York: Teachers' College Press.

Goodlad, J. I. (1984). A place called school: Prospects for the future. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Gibboney, R. A. (1991, May). The killing field of reform. Phi Delta Kappan. 682-688.

Marris, P. (1975). Loss and change. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

Peters, T. J., & Waterman, R. H. (1982). In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's best-run companies. New York: Warner Books.

Petrie, H. (1990). Reflections on the second wave of reform: restructuring the teaching profession. In J. A. Conway & S. L. Jacobson (Eds),Educational Leadership in an age of reform. New York: Longman

Rosenholtz, S. J. (1990). Educational reform strategies: Will they increase teacher commitment? In A. Leiberman (ed.), Schools as collaborative cultures: Creating the future now. New York: The Falmer Press.

Schlechty, P. (1990). Schools for the twenty-first centurY. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schon, D. (1987). Educating the reflective practitioner. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Appendix: Audit Trail

The problem addressed in the study was that the change process in an educational setting is not generally well understood and often, therefore, attempts to bring about change are not successful.

The purpose of this study was to investigate, through naturalistic inquiry, the change process associated with the approach of the County of Wheatland Learning and Teaching Committee in dealing with a Department of Education learning and teaching initiative.

An interest in a study involving reaming and teaching was generated, during the 1990-1991 school year through a thoughtful Learning and Teaching project completed by the researcher. As a result, the researcher developed a proposal to undertake a study of prevailing learning and teaching paradigms and the change process associated with a paradigm shift.

The formation of the Learning and Teaching Group and other related activities in the learning and teaching change initiative, have been described in chapters two, three and four. Once the components of the change initiative were in place, the researcher as a participant observer, attempted to avoid interfering with the process. Decisions in regard to the change initiative were made through the Learning and Teaching Group and the Steering Committee. However, the

researcher, on analyzing the data, which had been gathered and in considering his reflections as the change initiative proceeded, made decisions in regard to the study on an on-going basis. Major decisions, which affected both research projects were made collaboratively with the fellow researcher.
The audit trail inventory which follows outlines the data gathering, data analysis, and decision making process, documented in the field notes. The field notes include: transcripts from electronically-recorded audio tapes of steering committee meetings, transcripts from electronically-recorded audio tapes of informant interviews, summaries of Learning and Teaching Group sessions, observations and reflections of the two researchers, observations and other information from other data sources, such as: administrator meetings, meetings with Department of Education officials, and interactions with the university resource team.

Data reduction and analysis is also documented in the audit trail through the following: researcher notes and reflections, portrayals, code entries with date and page number, nodes and line charts, componential analysis summaries, analysis and summaries of major themes.

Although research decisions were being made throughout the study, the following would be representative of “significant events” which are documented in the audit trail.

1. decision to extend an open invitation to teachers in the school systems to become involved in the Learning and Teaching project (April, 1991).
2. decision to develop and administer a reaming and teaching paradigm survey (April, 1991).
3. decision to involve the University of Calgary team as resource persons and secondary informants (June 1991).
4. decision to minimize the use of the Learning and Teaching Paradigm survey results (September, 1991).
5. decision to focus primary informant interviews on their perspective of learning and teaching and their essence as teachers (October, 1991).
6. decision to consider the administrator perspective and role in the change initiative (November, 1991).
7. summary of experiences, domain, taxonomic, componential and emerging patterns (December, 1991).
8. summary of reflections and outline of an action plan for the remainder of the study (December, 1991).
9. decision to shift informant interviews from essence to experiences with changes in teaching beliefs and practices (January 1992).
10. decision to readminister the Learning and Teaching Paradigm survey (April, 1992).
11. sharing themes, member checking, negative case analysis with primary infommants and university resource team (May, June, 1992).

Audit Trail – Summary of Events

Learning and Teaching Project overview

1. Learning and Teaching Group Meeting, April 17, 1991- 9 pages
2. Learning and Teaching Group Meeting, April 30,1991- 14 pages
3. Learning and Teaching Group Meeting, May 28,1991- 5 pages
4. Steering Committee Meeting, September 12,1991- 44 pages
5. Meeting with University Personnel to discuss analysis of the Learning and Teaching Paradigm Survey, September 17,1991- 2 pages
6. Learning and Teaching Group Meeting, September 26,1991- 13 pages
7. Meeting with Ellen in her classroom, October 2, 1991 – 2 pages
8. Learning and Teaching Group Meeting, October 7, 1991- 6 pages
9. Interview with Ellen, October 9, 1991- 40 pages
10. Summary of Reflections, October 11,1991- 1 page
11. Summary of Discussion at the Educational Issues Session at School System Staff Development Day, October 18,1991- 2 pages
12. Peer Debriefing check with Judy Kandace October 19, 1991- 2 pages
13. Interview with Elaine, October 24, 1991 – 29 pages
14. Fostering Change – A Formidable Task~ – Report to Dr. Shute, December 13, 1991- 32 pages
15. Learning and Teaching Steering Committee Meeting, November 7, 1991- 25 pages
16. Interview with Yvonne, November 13, 1991- 14 pages
17. Jordan's Reflections on her meeting with the Consultants, November 16, 1991 – 3 pages
18. Jordan's Reflections on the Group Process, November 19,1991- 3 pages
19. Notes from the Administrators' Meeting Discussion Group, November 26, 1991 – 6 pages
20. Steering Group Committee Meeting, December 1, 1991 – 23 pages
21. Interview with Bill, December 5, 1991 – 19 pages
22. Interview with Ellen, December 5, 1991 – 20 pages
23. Interview with Yvonne, December 11, 1991 – 20 pages
24. Interview with Elaine, December 18, 1991 – 4 pages
25. Action Plan Diagram and Summary of Reflections, and Action Plan for Further Consideration, December 20, 1991 – 8 pages
26. Junior High Staff Team Meeting at Standard School, January 7, 1992 – 5 pages
27. Observation of Standard School Junior High Discipline Team, January 8, 1992 – 8 pages
28. Interview with Bill, January 15, 1992 – 14 pages
29. Learning and Teaching Group Meeting, January 20, 1992 4 pages
30. Reflections on the Project, January 20, 1992 – 2 pages
31. Steering Committee Meeting, February 13, 1992- 41 pages
32. Interview with Bill, February 19, 1992 – 28 pages
33. Learning and Teaching Group Meeting, February 20, 1992 – 6 pages
34. Interview with Yvonne, February 25, 1992 – 19 pages
35. Interview with Ellen, March 4, 1992 – 5 pages
36. Analysis of Presentation on Change by Jim Graham, March 6, 1992 Teachers' Convention – 2 pages
37. Reflections on the Vision for the Nineties Document, March }2, 1992 – I page
38. Interview with University of Calgary Gifted Centre Teacher Collaborators March 13, 1992 – 55 pages
39. Interview with Bill, March 11, 1992 – 15 pages
40. Meeting with Reno Bosetti, Deputy Minister of Education, in regard to the Minister's Vision Statement, March 13, 1992- 1 page
41. Meeting with Jordan and Hehr – Peer Debriefing, March 14, 1992 – 3 pages
42. Interview with Elaine, March 17, 1992 – 33 pages
43. Interview with Yvonne, March 20, 1992 – 22 pages

44. Learning and Teaching Group Meeting, March 24, 1992 – Transcripts to follow
45. Trustees' Leadership Session, March 26, 1992- 6 pages
46. Summary of the Administrators' Practical Leadership Program 1990-91 School Year – 8 pages
47. Learning and Teaching Group Meeting, April 6, 1992
48. Interview with Bill, April 10, 1992 – 22 pages
49. Steering Committee Meeting, April 13, 1992 – 32 pages
50. Interview with Elaine, May 14, 1992 – 43 pages
51. Learning and Teaching Group – Teacher Interview, May 14, 1992 – 25 pages
52. Interview with Bill, May 27, 1992 – 12 pages
53. Memories on Session Lost, June 3, 1992 – 26 pages
54. Steering Committee Meeting, June 4, 1992 – 28 pages
55. Interview with Elaine, June 9, 1992 – 20 pages
56. Interview with Ellen, June 9, 1992 – 12 pages
57. Interview with Yvonne, June 9, 1992 – 11 pages
58. Interview with Elaine, June 10, 1992 -9 pages
59. Trying to Regain Thoughts from the Project, June 11,1992 – 19 pages.
60. June 9, 1992 – 12 pages

Interviews with Elaine

1. October 24, 1991 – 29 pages
2. December 18, 1991 – 4 pages
3. March 17, 1992 – 33 pages
4. May 14, 1992- 43 pages
5. June 9, 1992 – 20 pages
6. June 10, 1992 – 9 pages

Interviews with Yvonne

1. November 13, 1991 – 14 pages
2. December 11, 1991 – 13 pages
3. February 25, 1992 – 19 pages
4. March 20,1992 – 22 pages
5. June 9, 1992- 11 pages

Interviews with Bill

1. December 5, 1991 – 19 pages
2. January 15, 1992 – 14 pages
3. February 10, 1992 – 28 pages
4. March 11, 1992 – 15 pages
5. April 10, 1992- 22 pages
6. May 27,.1992 – 12 pages

Researcher’s Reflections

1. Meeting with University personnel to discuss the analysis of the learning and teaching paradigm survey, September 17, 1991
2. Summary of reflections, October 11, 1991
3. Summary of discussion from the October 18, 1991 school system staff development day
4. "Fostering change – a Formidable Task" – report to Dr. Shute December 13, 1991
5. Notes from the administrators meeting discussion group November 26, 1991
6. Action plan, diagram, and summary of reflections and action plan for further consideration December 20, 1991
7. Reflections on the project January 20, 1992
8. Analysis of presentation on change by Jim Graham March 6, 1992 Teachers Convention
9. Reflections on the Vision for the Nineties document March 12, 1992
10. Meeting with Reno Bosetti, Deputy Minister of Education in regard to the Minister’s Vision Statement March 13, 1992

Reflections of Fellow Researcher-Kandace Jordan

1. Reflections on Kandace’s meeting with the consultants, November 16, 1991
2. Kandace’s reflections on the group process, November 9,1991
3. Notes from administrators’ meeting discussion group, November 26, 1991
4. Junior High Staff Team Meeting at Standard School, January 7, 1992
5. Observations of Standard School Junior High Discipline Team, January 8, 1992
6. Personal Reflections re: change and efficacy, June 18, 1992

Peer Debriefing

1. Meetings with Kandace Jordan and Judy Hehr, October 19, 1991 and March 14, 1992
2. Discussions with fellow doctoral students, July and August, 1992

Administrators Leadership

1. Summary of the Administrators’ Practical Leadership Program 1990-91 – 8 pages

Summary of the Trustee’s Leadership Program 1991-92

1. Trustees’ Leadership Session March 26, 1992 – 6 pages

University of Calgary Team

1. Interview with University of Calgary Gifted Centre Collaborators March13, 1992 – 55 pages
2. Report of University Resource Team, June 29, 1992

D. Garry McKinnon