

RESEARCH ON EDUCATIONAL CHANGE: CURRENT AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade research on educational change has become dramatically more action-oriented and applied. In this brief article, the author illustrates these trends at two levels: the school and the whole system level, and will conclude with identifying research priorities on educational change for the next decade.

Key-words: educational change, scholar leadership, educational reform, research.

School level reform

Research at the school level is consistent in its findings. While it is true that schools in higher socio-economic circumstances have stronger student achievement on the average there is growing evidence that certain within school characteristics make a large difference independent of social class. These qualities are few in number. Rick Dufour and his colleagues (2010) have focused their work on the development of ‘professional learning communities’. These school cultures have three main characteristics. They foster school cultures that:

1. Ensure that students learn.
2. Foster purposeful collaboration among groups of teachers.
3. Focus on results tied into the improvement of instructional practice.

In their book, Dufour *et al.* (2010) furnish chapter after chapter in which named schools and districts that have implemented PLCs have increased their student achievement over 3 to 5 year periods by some 20-40%.

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Important confirmation of these results is provided in the careful longitudinal research by Tony Bryk and his associates (2010). Bryk et al have been tracing the performance of Chicago elementary schools since 1990. Chicago is a large urban school system with some 450 elementary schools. In their latest research they identified a sample of 100 schools that had done especially well in reading and math, and matched them with a corresponding sample whose schools were stagnant or in decline. Bryk set out to discover what accounted for these differences.

They found five main differences: one they called ‘the driver’ of the reform who in turn focused relentlessly on four other elements. The so-called driver was the school principal who helped develop four other elements: the professional capacity of teachers to work together; a safe and supportive climate for students; a well supported curriculum and instruction system; and the development of close relations with parents and the community.

These findings are entirely compatible with Dufour *et al.* (2010). School leadership is certainly key. In fact the very thorough *Best Evidence Synthesis* (BES) examination of world-wide research on the role of leadership as it relates to student learning outcomes found that one factor was twice as powerful than any other variable in impacting student learning. It was, the degree to which “the school principal participates as a learner” alongside teachers in making school improvements (Robinson, 2009).

These findings are so clear and so consistent that there is no longer any debate about their validity. The real question now is how to implement the qualities in practice. Much of my own work has been on this very matter, namely, putting into practice focused collaborative cultures (Fullan, 2010a).

In order to develop collaborative schools it is necessary to alter the infrastructure so that it works on this very problem. We have been engaged in identifying and supporting school districts that in turn focus on the development of professional learning communities in all schools within the district. This has led to exciting new developments of schools learning from other schools in clusters and networks. We have also extended this work so that whole systems—provinces, states, and countries can improve the whole system.

System level reform

It is not so much that we invented the ideas in Ontario but rather that we have had the opportunity to put them into practice comprehensively since 2003 when a new government was elected. The Premier, Dalton McGuinty was deeply committed to the moral imperative of raising the bar and closing the gap for all children; and he was equally committed to implementing a focused strategy to get there. At the starting point in 2003 Ontario’s public school system was stagnant. Its 2 million students and 4900 schools in 72 districts had been stuck or flat lined in literacy, numeracy, and high school graduation for the previous 5 years. Today, 6 years later literacy has moved upwards by 13%, and high school graduation rates have climbed from 68% to 79%.

The Ontario success up to this point is based on a set of 8 interrelated components:

1. A small number of ambitious goals

The initial focus of the Ontario reform was to improve students' acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills (deeply defined to include higher-order thinking and comprehension) and increase the secondary school graduation rate (including innovations to make programs more relevant to the life interests of students). These priorities have remained intact since the outset of the reform in 2003. In 2010, a new initiative was added – early learning – which includes the provision of full-day kindergarten for all 4- and 5-year-olds, beginning with phased implementation in 2010.

2. A guiding coalition at the top

From the beginning, central leadership, especially through the Premier's personal presence, was seen as essential. The Premier chairs a group of leaders that includes the Minister, Deputy Minister, the Chief Student Achievement Officer, the Premier's Special Adviser and other key system leaders. This group, now called the "Education Results Team," monitors progress, brainstorms programs and initiatives and helps the system stay the course relative to the core priorities.

3. High standards and expectations

High standards and expectations are implicit in the ambitious targets that were set for students – namely, that (a) by Grade 6, 75 per cent of students would achieve Level 3 or higher on provincial assessments in reading, writing and mathematics and (b) within five years of entering high school, 85 per cent of students would graduate. These goals are recognized as "stretch targets" – as aspirations for the system as well as expected outcomes, representing hefty increases from 54 per cent of students at Level 3 or above in 2003 and 68 per cent graduating from high school in that same year.

4. Investment in leadership and capacity building related to instruction

If there is one concept that captures the centerpiece of the Ontario strategy, it is capacity building. Capacity building was first launched by the Ministry of Education with the creation of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) and the Student Success/Learning to 18 Branch (SS/L18), now coordinated within a new Student Achievement Division. The province has made major investments in personnel (e.g., Student Achievement Officers, Student Success Leaders, School Effectiveness Leads, Student Success Teachers, additional primary and specialist teachers) and resources (e.g., professional learning institutes, webinars, instructional guides).

5. Mobilizing data and effective practices as a strategy for improvement

When the strategy began, the arms-length assessment agency, the Education and Accountability Office (EQAO), administered, collected and published annual data on student achievement from provincial assessments; however, few mechanisms existed at that time to integrate this

information with other data sources to provide a more complete picture of student achievement. LNS, for example, introduced a data query tool, Ontario Statistical Neighbours (OSN), to help both the secretariat and district school boards stimulate improvement and oversee progress.

6. *Intervention in a non-punitive manner*

A key feature of the strategy is to encourage risk-taking, learning and sharing of successful practices, while intervening in a non-punitive manner. In other words, the strategy is deliberately “light on judgment.” Even the turnaround program for elementary schools (called OFIP) and the School Support Initiative for secondary schools strike a positive tone as they identify schools and district school boards where the data show that a significant number of students are not performing to the provincial standard.

7. *Being vigilant about distracters*

From the very beginning, leaders of the Ontario strategy committed to a proactive mindset that “distracters” would be inevitable but that they would work to minimize their interference with the main priorities. A distracter is anything that takes away energy and focus from the core agenda. For example, ongoing teacher labour strife surrounding annual collective bargaining was a distracter in the period prior to 2003. The government made it a priority to establish four-year collective agreements with all federations and is now in the second cycle of four-year agreements. Other distracters would include *ad hoc* new priorities and excessive bureaucracy. It is recognized that distracters cannot always be eliminated but that protecting the focus on core priorities is crucial.

8. *Being transparent, relentless and increasingly challenging*

Although the strategy is light on judgment, there are a number of aspects that increase pressure for accountability, including transparency about results and practices, peer interaction and sharing across schools, and negotiation of targets and implementation plans between LNS, SS/L18 and schools/district school boards. More recently, new legislation strengthens the expectation that district school boards (including directors and trustees) have a responsibility to focus on student achievement. More generally, the constant emphasis from the Premier and the government on the core priorities keeps the Ontario strategy in the forefront at all times.

The next decade of research on educational change

In my view there will be two main trends in the research in the next decade: focus on deeper instructional matters and the expansion of research and developments on ‘whole system’ reform. Concerning the former we can expect to see innovations that tackle the higher order skills of creativity, problem solving, critical reasoning, use of technology and collaboration. These skills have received up to this point superficial treatment in various references to the so called “21st Century Skills”. The difference in the future will be that the work on these topics will become more defined. There will be more innovation, more specificity and precision in identifying particular instructional practices and showing their links to student learning outcomes.

The second trend will involve focused international comparisons of student achievement, and corresponding examinations of the policies, strategies and structures associated with successful countries. Unlike the research of the last decade which examined results, this new work will go deeper getting at the 'how to's', and the causal factors that produce success.

Both of these trends -deeper skills, and large-scale success- will feed on each other, and will appear globally. The foundational work of the past decade has created a firm basis for going to the next higher quality phase of research and practice in educational change.

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