

# Reflections on Reform: A Former Teacher Looks at School Change and the Factors that Shape It

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*This paper discusses literature on the factors that contribute to and detract from reforms being implemented in schools from the perspective of a former teacher. The effects of school culture, the emotional and relational aspects of teaching and the change process, the importance of professional development, the need for time in teachers' professional lives, and school leadership are analyzed. Also considered are the reasons various school reform efforts succeed or fail. The paper also considers the impact of social and political factors on schools and discusses the effects of "best practice" research on teachers' decisions to change.*

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## Executive Summary

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Being an elementary school teacher for many years, the author experienced many reforms and attempts at reforms that various schools in which she taught underwent. In considering these various reform efforts and processes, the author reviews the research literature on school change as a conceptual framework. This paper provides a synopsis of how change is brought about in schools. It also considers research findings on the effects of social and political factors on the change process together with the effects of best practice research on teachers' decisions to change to present one teacher's perspective on school reform.

In considering the factors involved in reform efforts, the author discusses five areas: 1) School Culture, 2) Emotional and Relational Aspects of Teaching, 3) The Need for Time and Professional Development, 4) The Role of Leadership in the Change Process, and 5) Why Reforms Fail.

### SCHOOL CULTURE

School culture develops as staff members interact with each other, the students, and the community at large. If the staff members are committed to the reform introduced, then the culture will be conducive to change. In order for change to occur, schools should be places that stimulate and support teachers. This may involve a new outlook on school governance and organization. Traditionally, schools do not have the organizational capacity to formulate the goals and vision necessary to bring about an effective change in a culture. The input of practitioners in schools is crucial in creating lasting change. However, typically, policy-makers set the conditions for the administration of change, without allowing teachers and other staff a voice in the policy-making. In this case, a "re-culturing" of schools attempting to initiate change is in order. This re-culturing may need to extend to the school district as well.

### EMOTIONAL AND RELATIONAL ASPECTS OF CHANGE

The emotional aspect of change cannot be ignored, and, in fact, should be taken into account when initiating reform. This facet of change is often overlooked when a reform is initiated, which has often led to the reform's undoing. When upsetting feelings associated with change are managed and given credibility, then change is more likely to proceed.

Vital to the emotional aspect of change is the nurturing of relationships among school personnel. Teaching is not only an emotional profession; it is a social one as well. Teachers need to relate to colleagues who are in

similar situations and involved in similar (if not the same) reforms in order for the change to be discussed in practical, classroom verbiage and not in the theoretical or hypothetical terms that non-practitioners employ.

## THE NEED FOR TIME AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Schools may have a culture that is conducive to change, and the emotional/relational aspects of reform may be taken into account. However, if teachers do not have time to learn about, implement, and reflect on the change, then the effects will be questionable. In order to change teacher thinking and behavior, training is required. This takes time, especially at the outset of the process. Not only is some sort of professional development necessary for teachers to understand the introduced reform, but they also need time to understand what is expected of them and time to reflect on it. Teachers need opportunities to share their success stories concerning the reform initiative if they are to maintain momentum and “sell” the idea to colleagues and even to students. The time element is a crucial, but often overlooked aspect of school change.

## THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN THE CHANGE PROCESS

The importance of leaders in the change process cannot be overstated. Many reforms have failed because of lack of quality leadership. It is important to note that school leadership is found in a variety of places throughout a school; the principal or chief administrator is only one source of school leadership within a school. In fact, a respected and articulate colleague who supports the reform initiative can serve to keep teachers refreshed and enthusiastic about the change. Principals are vital to the change process, but teacher leaders are no less important. A competent principal in collaboration with respected teacher leaders is a crucial ingredient in any change initiative.

## WHY REFORMS FAIL

There is a large body of research literature describing school reforms that have failed. In this section of the paper, the author provides a synopsis of the literature discussing the reasons for failed reform initiatives. Some researchers chose to do case studies of schools where reforms persisted, while others provided explanations for reforms that failed. In the final analysis, school change does not endure when any of the previously described elements is lacking or inadequate.

## THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS ON THE CHANGE PROCESS

Schools are often viewed as either the cause for society’s problems, or the cure for them. Either way the schools are a reflection of society; they are a cross-section of society. The enigmas as well as the blessings of our society are evident in our schools. Schools reel when society does; schools rejoice when society does. Schools and society are symbiotic and cannot be separated healthily. Therefore, when a major occurrence shocks society the schools change in one way or another.

Consider the effects of the Columbine massacre on schools. The repercussions from Columbine were immediate and enduring. They ranged from strict zero-tolerance policies to discussions analyzing youth culture. Schools were reeling as a result of the shootings. Administrators, teachers, legislators, parents, and society in general began examining the ways in which students treat each other, schools’ weapons policies, the clothes adolescents wear, the music they listen to, and all other aspects of youth culture in an effort to explain what happened at Columbine. This analysis of youth and safety as a result of Columbine has caused some reforms in the administration, curriculum, and the pedagogical practices of schools.

The effects of the 9-11 tragedy are also causing changes in the schools. As the aftershocks of 9-11 reverberate throughout the country, the climate of our society is changing, and our schools are surely responding. The full effects of 9-11 on the schools are yet to be realized, but just as our society has changed, so will the schools.

In addition, many change initiatives that have persisted have come from court decisions, social upheavals, or real or perceived threats. In other words, changes in schools that have persisted have often been the reaction to various societal problems. These problems that are perceived by teachers and by the public at large feed into individual school's cultures and induce change initiatives that both teachers and administrators endorse. Response to societal problems is often the spark that begins the change process.

## THE EFFECTS OF BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH ON TEACHERS' DECISIONS TO CHANGE

Although defining the effects of best practices research on teachers' decisions to change is an indefinite science, it is clear that classroom teachers often change their practices as a result of workshops or classes that they attend where they are given information on best practices. There is a pronounced relationship between specific teaching practices and student achievement, and these practices are related to teacher learning opportunities. At the risk of pointing out the obvious, teachers cannot change their practices if they do not learn new ones.

Research suggests that teachers will adjust their pedagogy as a result of professional development opportunities that reflect best practices research. However, change occurs only when the teachers can directly apply what they learn to the contexts (and students) in which they are teaching. In other words, if the teachers cannot conceptualize themselves applying what they are learning to their students or to their current or projected teaching circumstance, they tend to dismiss the research.

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### Main Article

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In the early 1980s, the author of this paper was a young woman beginning a teaching career at the elementary level that would span almost 20 years. In those years, she witnessed and participated in the various changes that her schools underwent. Some of the so-called reforms endured; others have been long forgotten. Even though her days as an elementary school teacher are over, the processes and effects of school change are still at the forefront of her pedagogical considerations. Now, as a college professor, this author has been able to reflect back on various reform efforts and processes in schools where she taught, using the literature on school change as a conceptual framework. This paper provides a synopsis of how change is created in schools. It also considers research findings on the effects of social and political factors on the change process together with the effects of best practice research on teachers' decisions to change to present one teacher's perspective on school reform.

Three phrases come to mind when attempting to grasp a deeper understanding of change in schools:

*The only thing constant in life is change.*

*The more things change, the more they stay the same.*

*Anybody got change for a dollar?*

Even though the third phrase sounds facetious, all three have a ring of truth in the educational arena. As for the first adage, humanity is in a constant state of flux. In her treatise on *Chaotic Reflexivity*, Gunter (1997) reflects the belief that everything changes. Her premise is that there are so many variables affecting all aspects of life that change is not only inevitable; it is unpredictable. This point applies to schools in that they are not well-ordered and predictable machines; they cannot be taken apart and put back together again without damage (Gunter, p.92). Schools are living systems that are based on relationships. Fullan (1997b) reiterates this relational aspect of schools by contending that the focus of educational change should be on relationships within the school rather than on management structures and tasks. Schools inevitably change since they are human institutions, and humans are constantly changing. Therefore, as the saying goes: the only thing constant is

change.

On the other hand, the second phrase rings true as well. It is obvious that things and people change, but do systems? Of course, students change, and aspects of the curriculum change from year to year, but the overall educational system remains the same. There are many facets of schools that change from year to year (for instance, policies and procedures regarding discipline or movement of students), but substantive changes happen less frequently. Examples of substantive changes include a change in school governance or introducing a total school reform such as Success for All or the program of the Coalition of Essential Schools.

As for the third saying (“Anybody got change for a dollar?”) it is possible to change a dollar bill for four quarters, but it is still a dollar. It may feel and look different, but it is still the same amount and has the same effect on purchasing power; there is only so much a person can buy with a dollar. There may be different methods or procedures or policies offered to teachers each year, but the effects on teaching are remarkably similar to previous years. Therefore, nothing ever changes as long as the structures and perspectives of curriculum, students, and/or schooling in general remain the same. Effective reform can take place only when our conceptualization of systems and structures change. As Fullan (1991) asserts, “Ultimately, the transformation of subjective realities is the essence of change” (p. 36). Returning to the change for a dollar metaphor, this means that instead of changing a dollar one would reconceptualize the whole economy. This is no easy task, as this paper will examine.

## FACTORS INVOLVED IN SCHOOL CHANGE

### **CULTURE IS EVERYTHING**

There is a substantial body of research that supports the contention that in order for successful reform to occur, practitioners must establish a culture of change (Sarason, 1996; Hollins, 1996; Hargreaves, 1997b; Hampel, 1999; Aness, 2000). Culture is the “substantive attitudes, beliefs, values and ways of life that members of an organization, or a subgroup within it, hold in common” (Hargreaves, 1997a). Culture influences all aspects of schools, including such things as how the staff dresses (Peterson & Deal, 1998), what staff talk about in the teachers’ lounge (Kottler, 1997), how teachers decorate their classrooms, their emphasis on certain aspects of the curriculum, and teachers’ willingness to change (Hargreaves, 1997a). In fact, as Donahoe (1997) states, “If culture changes, everything changes” (p. 245).

In order for change to be effected, the research indicates that form must correspond to the culture of the school (Finnan, 2000), and the staff must be committed to the change (Peterson, McCarthey, & Elmore, 1997). School culture develops as staff members interact with each other, the students, and the community at large. If the staff members are committed to the introduced reform, then the culture will be conducive to change. This necessitates, as Hargreaves (1997b) calls it, “reculturing” the schools. By this, he means that we should be concerned with making schools the kinds of places that stimulate and support teachers in order for them to make changes themselves. This may involve a new outlook on school governance and organization.

Traditionally, schools do not have the organizational capacity to formulate the goals and vision necessary to bring about an effective change in culture. Donahoe (1997) asserts that schools must change their organization in order to change their culture. Typically, policy-makers set the conditions for the administration of change, but leave the problem solving associated with the change up to the practitioners (Oakes, Wells, Yonezawa, & Ray, 1997). Allowing teachers and other staff a voice in the policy-making is not the usual course of action in most schools. Empowering teachers through shared decision-making and consensus building (Donahoe, 1997), for instance, instead of asserting control of reform through top-down mandates facilitates the creation of a culture of change in a school. A reculturing of the school district may be required as well. Unless the district’s culture is aligned with the school’s “any changes an individual school makes are vulnerable” (Donahoe, 1997,

p. 252). Therefore, before any successful reform can take place, the district administration, school, and teachers' cultures should be aligned so that they are all supportive of and conducive to change.

A popular reform effort of the 1980s, site-based management, is a prime example of schools' attempts to give teachers a voice in governance. Site-based management produced substantial changes in schools where the district's philosophy supported the empowerment of teachers, and where teachers thoughtfully and seriously considered their roles as change agents. In cases where the district's and the teachers' philosophies concerning change were not aligned, a culture conducive to any reforms site-based management could have produced was difficult to create and the schools became "stuck" (Joyce, Wolf, & Calhoun, 1993, p. 6). As a result, site-based management is often considered another failed attempt at school reform when the failure was actually in the creation of a district-wide culture conducive to reform.

## EMOTIONAL AND RELATIONAL CONSIDERATION OF CHANGE

The emotional aspect of change cannot be ignored, and, in fact, should be taken into account when initiating reform. Marris (cited in Fullan, 1991) notes that *all* real change involves loss, anxiety, and struggle" (emphasis in original, p. 31). This facet of change is often overlooked when a reform is initiated, which has often led to the reform's undoing. When upsetting feelings associated with change are managed and given credibility, then change is more likely to proceed. Change resisters should not be ignored or deferred; rather, their input should be encouraged. As Fullan (1997a) explains, "with greater emotional intelligence and empathy, initiators of change 'learn from resisters.' They know that emotion is energy" (p. 294). Resisters provide insight into the proposed reform that may facilitate the change and reveal otherwise overlooked hindrances. Their role can be as vital as that of the supporters.

Teaching is much more than mastering techniques, developing competencies, and understanding content. Good teaching is "emotional work" (Hargreaves, 1997b). As Hargreaves asserts (p. 12), good teaching entails creativity, passion, pleasure, joy, and challenge. Emotions are integral to reason and problem solving (p. 16) because they inform and narrow the range of choices in making decisions (Fullan, 1997a). To illustrate the affective side of teaching, a study conducted by Hargreaves (1997b) of 32 seventh and eighth grade teachers found that teachers do not approach lesson plans in a linear, calculative way. In fact, they start with their own knowledge and feelings about their students in mind. They consider such things as how to engage the students in lessons and how to excite them. They also draw on their own passions and enthusiasm in planning lessons and courses of study. Emotions combined with rational knowledge are essential parts of the teaching profession.

Vital to the emotional aspect of change is the nurturing of relationships among school personnel. Teaching is not only an emotional profession; it is a social one as well. Hampel (1999) points out that reflective discussion with colleagues is a crucial aspect of the change process. In other words, teachers need to talk with each other about reform initiatives. "Teachers like to quip that anyone can 'talk the talk' rather than 'walk the walk.' But talking the talk is a big job in itself, too easily dismissed as pointless 'philosophizing'" (Hampel, 1999, p. 2). Hampel further asserts, "Without the example of an articulate and respected colleague, the core ideas and their manifestations in action are elusive, more abstract, and harder to grasp" (p. 2). Teachers need to relate to colleagues who are in similar situations and involved in similar (if not the same) reforms in order for the change to be discussed in practical, classroom verbiage and not in the theoretical or hypothetical terms that non-practitioners employ. Schmoker (1997) affirms the importance of teacher collegiality, but warns that at times discussions among teachers dwell on the negative. The author and likely many other experienced teachers have engaged in a number of conversations that had a decidedly negative tone while chatting in the teachers' lounge or behind closed classroom doors before or after school. These conversations, like Schmoker attests, proved to be counterproductive and served to dampen the enthusiasm of all involved. Therefore, Schmoker advises that a respected colleague who keeps the focus on constructive, goal-oriented action facilitate collegial discussions.

On the other hand, as alluded to earlier, it is unproductive to associate only with like-minded individuals while in the process of change. Relationships with supporters and detractors alike are essential to the change process.

It is necessary to confront differences early in the reform process if change is to be accepted (Fullan, 1997b).

There is another side to this relational aspect of teaching that must be considered. Teachers do not always change because they agree with the philosophical underpinnings of a certain reform. They often have other motives for trying something new. Many teachers decide to participate in something new because they were enticed or convinced by a friend. Sometimes their reasons are only remotely related to educational principles. They are seduced by the possibility of obtaining another planning period, working with an old friend, and other motives that “overshadow agreement with and understanding of the ideas driving the reform” (Hampel, 1999). This can serve to undermine the reform in the long run in that the teachers were not convinced of the efficacy of the change or even cognizant of the reform philosophy when they signed on.

All of these aspects of emotions and relationships must be accounted for when introducing change into a school. However, there are more practical matters that also must be addressed. In the next section, two of the most important, yet overlooked facets of school reform are discussed.

## **THE NEED FOR TIME AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Schools may have a culture that is conducive to change and the emotional/relational aspects of reform may be taken into account. However, if teachers do not have time to learn about, implement, and reflect on the change, effects remain questionable. In their study of time and school reform, Adelman and Walking-Eagle (1997) assert that there are three stages to the reform process that are time-related. The first stage occurs at the outset of the change. At this point, Adelman and Walking-Eagle state, “Teachers need time to *learn about and practice* (emphasis in original) the new behaviors that will be expected of them” (p. 93). The second stage is the implementation stage. Teachers need time to “*introduce and institutionalize* the new strategies fully into ongoing daily life in the school and classroom” (p. 93). The final stage is the one that is rarely implemented in schools. It involves giving teachers time to “*reflect* on the reform initiative, assess its outcomes, and keep moving on the school improvement continuum” (p. 93).

In order to change teacher thinking and behavior, training is required. This takes time, especially at the outset of the process. Donahoe (1997) succinctly pinpoints the time dilemma in his statement: “I’m sure the most radical and politically difficult element of school restructuring is what needs to be done with the use of time in schools so that teachers can expand their role” (p.242). Teachers need time to understand what is expected of them and time to reflect on it. Unfortunately, “Opportunities for training and practice are frequently inadequate or ill-structured for the serious business of changing ingrained behaviors” (Adelman & Walking-Eagle, 1997). In addition, the researchers found that the training is often offered at times and in ways that produce more stress for teachers. Taking up a teacher’s planning periods or free time in order to train him or her on a reform effort about which he or she is not enthusiastic tends to cripple the reform process from the beginning. Speaking from the perspective of a veteran elementary classroom teacher, being required to undergo inservicing without a reduction of normal teaching responsibilities serves only to build resentment no matter how wonderful the proposed reform might be.

Professional development is crucial for the beginning stages of reform. In order for a reform to be enacted, the change should be connected to teacher learning and practice (Anness, 2000). Some sort of professional development is necessary. In summarizing professional development research, Little (1997) offers six statements concerning effective professional development:

1. Professional development offers meaningful intellectual, social, and emotional engagement with ideas, with materials, and with colleagues both in and out of teaching.
2. Professional development takes explicit account of the contexts of teaching and the experience of

teachers.

3. Professional development offers support for informed dissent.
4. Professional development places classroom practice in the larger contexts of school practice and the educational careers of children. It is grounded in a big-picture perspective on the purposes and practices of schooling, providing teachers a means of seeing and acting upon the connections among students' experiences, teachers' classroom practice, and schoolwide structures and cultures.
5. Professional development prepares teachers (as well as students and their parents) to employ the techniques and perspectives of inquiry.....It acknowledges that the existing knowledge base is relatively slim and that our strength may derive less from teachers' willingness to *consume* research knowledge than from their capacity to *generate* knowledge and to *access* the knowledge claimed by others (emphasis in original).
6. The governance of professional development ensures bureaucratic restraint and a balance between the interests of individuals and the interests of institutions (pp. 153-154).

When professional development embraces these elements, according to Little, it is more likely to be productive and conducive to change.

When formal professional development is complete and teachers enter the middle stage of the change process (according to Adelman and Walking-Eagle's framework), it is critical that reformers be careful to allow time for teachers to implement and discuss the reform. It is at this stage that teacher-led discussions are crucial. Teachers need time to share their success stories if they are to maintain momentum and "sell" the idea to colleagues and even to students. Very often teachers attend an inservice workshop that motivates them and gives resources and ideas for implementation. However, without continued support and encouragement, teachers fall back into familiar patterns and routines. Wasley (1994) found that teachers receive plenty of professional development opportunities, but are rarely given time to implement the strategies they learn, and are rarely coached while trying something new. Not only should teachers be given instruction on the implementation of the reform, they should be helped and advised throughout the year. This leads to the final stage.

At this stage it is important to manage time in such a way that the vision is maintained. As Adelman & Walking-Eagle point out:

...the passage of time, in combination with demonstrated success with students, can be as hazardous to mature reform efforts as a shortage of time is in the early stage of change efforts. Time to assess and adjust to changing conditions and circumstances must be built into the change system to avoid backsliding. Even institutionalized reform efforts require vigilance to ensure their continued success (p. 104).

This stage of reflecting and assessing is actually not the final step in the process; it is ongoing throughout the process. However, there is need to spend time at the end of the year to reflect and evaluate as well. As Donahoe (1997) explains:

A basic requirement for all schools is that the full staff meet for at least three days before the start of school to set the agenda and the calendar for the year, to organize teams, and to elect leaders. Nearly as vital is a full staff meeting for a couple of days at the end of the school year to assess results, to set preliminary objectives for the next year, and to designate staff members who will do those things that need to be done over the summer, such as compiling research and receiving training (p. 249).

These meetings should be structured in ways that reduce rather than produce stress on teachers.

School reform is a process and not an event (Fullan, as cited in Oakes, Wells, Yonezawa, & Ray, 1997). This process requires constant reflection and vigilance in order to ensure that teachers actually do change their behavior and do not resume former comfortable habits or tendencies. Furthermore, change requires one other element: leadership.

## THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN THE CHANGE PROCESS

The importance of leaders in the change process cannot be overstated. Many reforms have failed because of lack of quality leadership. Unfortunately, it is not unusual for a teacher to return from a conference or workshop excited about a new method, idea, or approach to the curriculum only to have a principal or department chair snub his or her nose at it. By the same token, it is not unusual for a principal to attempt to initiate a change, only to have faculty or community members effectively stifle it.

It is important to note that school leadership is found in a variety of places throughout a school; the principal or chief administrator is only one source of school leadership within a school. In fact, as previously suggested, a respected and articulate colleague who supports the reform initiative can serve to keep teachers refreshed and enthusiastic about the change. Principals are vital to the change process, but teacher leaders are no less important. As Schmoker (1997) points out, “unless the administrator expresses pride and interest in the success of the project, unless the teacher leader is carefully selected and given support and encouragement, the effort will probably die” (p. 145).

The author’s own experiences of teaching in a school in a state of flux serve to illustrate the principle that an effective leader is a vital factor in school change. This particular elementary school had five different principals in six consecutive years. The faculty considered leadership during those years as tenuous and suspect. The faculty adopted the attitude that any reform or new policy suggested by the office would not remain (since the principals rarely did). Once the principal left or the reform lost its vitality, the faculty could resume doing things as they always had. In addition, the staff was divided because of strong personalities among faculty members who had opposing philosophies. It was truly an environment not conducive to reform.

A new principal who assured everyone in the school and community that he was committed to the school and was not going to leave any time soon was subsequently hired. He recruited faculty members who were aligned to his philosophy, and he enlisted the support of prominent community members. Within a year the culture of the school had changed. The teachers knew and respected the school leaders. Faculty members were encouraged to collaborate, and were allotted time to plan and have meaningful discourse. Professional development was also strongly endorsed. The principal initiated curricular changes that endured. However, none of them would have taken effect without the teacher leaders whom he identified.

This experience supports Macmillan’s contention (cited in Hargreaves, 1997a) that staff cultures tend to resist the change efforts of leaders who are perceived as uncommitted or just passing through. Hargreaves (1997a) explains, “The robust cultures that teachers are often able to create frequently enable them to survive their principals and successfully ‘wait them out’” (p. 71). However, it must be noted that the staff cultures that are created in the absence of an effective principal are not always conducive to reform efforts. A competent principal in collaboration with respected teacher leaders is a crucial ingredient in any change initiative. For the purposes of this paper, a competent principal is defined as a person well versed in district and state policies with a grasp on learning principles, and knowledge of the general curricular requirements of the school. A competent principal is also a leader who is knowledgeable about the elements involved in the change process, knows the strengths and weaknesses of the staff, and has a certain charisma or ineffable quality that entices others to follow, or at least to listen. In addition, Fullan (1997c) notes that effective principals express their values and extend them to others. Not only that, he adds, they enable the teachers to collaborate to find solutions, and they support the teachers in their reform commitments and capacities.



It is indisputable that leadership is essential for reform to succeed. However, there is a danger in charismatic leadership. A uniquely inspiring leader may instill dependence on that individual, and the program will falter without him or her. Wang (1998) points out that “programs must be able to be replicated even without a colossus at their helm” (p. 3). In order to prevent this dependence on a single leader from occurring, it is necessary to provide staff members with ongoing training and feedback (as previously noted). Competence must be instilled in the faculty if the reform is to be resilient.

## **WHY REFORMS FAIL**

In summarizing the literature on why reforms fail, Schwahn and Spady (1998) cite five reasons. (1) The purpose is not compelling enough. They remark that if the staff is unable to restate the purpose of the reform in their own words and with enthusiasm, then the purpose is lost to them. (2) The reform effort was developed without the stakeholders’ involvement. People involved in and affected by the reform must have a sense of ownership in the effort if the change is going to last. (3) The change was not immediately implemented. The vision of the proposed reform must be integrated into all decisions and actions, and the principal and other school leaders must model it throughout the year. (4) Everyone in the school was not aligned to the vision or purpose of the reform initiative. People involved in the change must have a clear picture of what the change will look like for them personally. Finally, (5) organizational support for the change was not there. Teachers will not change if there are not structures, policies, and procedures in place that support them in their reform efforts.

In addition to Schwahn and Spady’s list, Fullan (1997a) reported that there are three main reasons that the reforms he has studied have failed. He noted that they often failed because of (1) a growing sense of alienation among teachers, (2) the balkanization and burnout of the most reform-minded teachers, and (3) “the overwhelming multiplicity of unconnected, fragmented change initiatives” (p. 288). These can be prevented by the implementation of the elements of change discussed previously.

On the other hand, there are numerous case studies of schools where reform has lasted. In particular, Peterson, McCarthy, and Elmore (1997) studied three schools where reform efforts endured. They found that in all cases the following four qualities were apparent: (1) the vision or philosophy was related to student learning, (2) teachers were afforded opportunities to meet together and engage in meaningful discussion about the reform, (3) teachers were involved in shared decision making concerning the reform, and (4) teachers had access to new ideas about reforming their practices. In other words, most of the elements of successful reform that were noted in the previous sections were employed in schools where reform efforts succeeded.

As can be concluded by the preceding discussion, the elements necessary for successful implementation of change in schools are well documented. However, social and political pressures often force change onto schools in general and teachers in particular.

## **THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS ON THE CHANGE PROCESS**

How could they do this to this place that is my life? I spend more hours here than I do in my own home. It’s been such a part of my life. I grew up here. I went from being a 21-year-old graduate to being in my late 30s and having children and going into a whole new life stage... How dare those little ...

*Columbine High School Teacher*

This quote is an extreme example of a teacher who had change thrust upon her. As is well documented at this point in history, the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999 forced our schools in a direction that no one anticipated. It caused society in general to scrutinize our youth and to question the nature and policies of schools. For the first time, schools were propelled into the national spotlight not because of test scores or academic failures and achievements, but because some of our white, middle-class youth were killing each other.

The repercussions from Columbine were immediate and enduring. They ranged from strict zero-tolerance policies to discussions analyzing youth culture. Schools were reeling as a result of the shootings. Administrators, teachers, legislators, parents, and society in general began examining the wayS in which students treat each other, schools' weapons policies, the clothes adolescents wear, the music they listen to, and all other aspects of youth culture in an effort to explain what happened at Columbine. This analysis of youth and safety as a result of Columbine has caused some reforms in the administration, curriculum, and the pedagogical practices of schools. While this paper is not intended to be a diatribe on Columbine or youth violence, what happened at Columbine can be placed within a framework that describes the effects of social and political issues on the change process.

Various curriculum philosophies provide lenses for viewing social and political effects on change. In his analysis of curricular reform, Schubert (1993) identifies four overarching philosophies of curriculum: traditionalist, behaviorist, experientialist, and conciliators. He concludes that the way reformers view social effects on schools depends on their perspectives on curriculum. Traditionalists espouse the notion that social problems should be addressed through the wisdom derived from the classics and the disciplines of knowledge. A liberal education is the best method to understand societal forces. Behaviorists, on the other hand, see societal forces as objects of research. The problems should be studied in order to predict and control them. Therefore, a scientific, logical curriculum should be pursued. Experientialists say, "reform is situated in and largely created by societal forces" (p. 88). As a result, schools tend to perpetuate the inequities that are prevalent in society. Therefore, there is a great need for democratic action and the opening of channels of dialogue from all realms of society, especially from those who have traditionally been silenced. Finally, conciliators view societal pressures from all four vantages and address them in terms of the philosophy that is most expedient for their uses. In any consideration of the effects of social and political factors on reform, these perspectives should be considered.

Schools are often viewed as either the cause for society's problems, or the cure for them. Either way the schools are a reflection of society; they are a cross-section of society. The enigmas as well as the blessings of our society are evident in our schools. Schools reel when society does; schools rejoice when society does. Schools and society are symbiotic and cannot be separated healthily. Therefore, when a major occurrence shocks society the schools change in one way or another. In fact, Hargreaves (1997b, p. 4) states, "In the face of mounting social problems, schools have often been made the sole public response."

Consider the changes schools are currently undergoing in response to 9-11. Patriotism is in vogue in the curriculum. Teaching about religion has gained importance, as has the notion of understanding other cultures (especially Arabic). As the aftershocks of 9-11 reverberate throughout the country, the climate of our society is changing, and our schools are surely responding. The full effects of 9-11 on the schools are yet to be realized, but just as our society has changed, so will the schools.

Columbine and 9-11 are extreme examples of factors outside the realm of schooling that had a profound impact on schools. However, there are many less poignant examples of change that have occurred as a result of social or political factors. In fact, it can be argued that many change initiatives that have persisted have come from court decisions (such as *Brown v. the School Board of Topeka, Kansas* which resulted in de-segregation of schools), social upheavals (such as race riots and school shootings), or real or perceived threats (i.e., the way the U. S. mobilized its resources for schools as a result of Sputnik). It can be further argued that government-mandated changes in the schools that have lasted have been the results of society's responses to social upheavals and various perceived or real threats. In other words, changes in schools that have persisted have often been the reaction to various societal problems. These problems that are perceived by teachers and by the public at large feed into individual school's cultures and induce change initiatives that both teachers and administrators endorse. Response to societal problems is often the spark that begins the change process described in the preceding sections of this paper.

Change also results when school leaders perceive inequity or other hindrances to education, as in the study done by Oakes, Wells, Yonezawa, and Ray (1997). In their study of 10 schools attempting to de-track their students,

the researchers learned that the educators involved in the reform initiated the change because they realized that tracking was a “major impediment to their equity goals” (p. 46). They also found that local and national social and political pressures hindered the reform that these schools were attempting. “The course that individuals took to effect change and the response to their efforts were deeply affected by the local community culture and politics, as well as national patterns of race, social class, and gender” (p. 45). In addition, the reform effort was impeded because the traditional view of education was embedded in the local communities. That is, classes had always been tracked in the schools being studied, and this change in philosophy was opposed to that traditional procedure. After all, as Sarason (1996) notes, a major hindrance to reform is the common notion that “the way things are is the way things should or could be” (p. 137). Overcoming this commonly held notion is a major undertaking in any reform effort.

In the de-tracking study noted above, Oakes, Wells, Yonezawa, and Ray (1997) concluded that even though the reform was considered successful in the schools they observed, the reform itself was modified in response to the culture and politics of the school. They remark:

The task of marshaling commitment and capacity for any particular school reform is complicated by the fact that those who are expected to change (teachers and students) and those who are expected to accept the changes (parents and other community members) assign their own meanings to changes and respond to them in ways that are consistent with their existing knowledge, beliefs, and practices. Consequently, even when change agents are ‘successful,’ reforms are transformed as they make their way into the cultures and political milieu of particular schools (p. 65).

The de-tracking study is an example of change that was initiated in some schools as a result of various educators’ disillusionment with certain status quo aspects of the system. However, Schubert (1993) points out that some of the major educational reforms of recent generations have come about because of political and social upheavals. He notes that science education was changed forever as a result of Sputnik. Americans wanted the United States to be competitive with the Russians, and the onus fell on the schools to provide the best science education possible so that the U.S. could outperform the Russians. Therefore, millions of dollars were committed to science education programs, and science education research proliferated.

Schubert (1993) also notes that special education and bilingual education reforms began as grass roots movements and grew to a national level. These reforms began as a response to certain facets of society feeling that current curricula were not meeting the needs of these populations. Legislation and revisions of teacher preparation programs were instituted as a result.

Perceived crises in education are notorious for spurring legislative action leading to school reform (Fuhrman, 1994). For example, the repercussions from the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s 1983 landmark study, *A Nation at Risk*, are still reverberating in schools today. This study gave reform movements across the country energy and momentum because it warned that an economic collapse was imminent as a result of the poor quality of the education being provided by our schools. Therefore, there was a public outcry for wholesale changes. Even though the study has been criticized as being fraught with misleading information (Berliner & Biddle, 1995), reforms are still being initiated in response to the fear of the demise of our society that this study predicted.

Political sophistication is required to make one’s influence felt in any reform initiative (Elmore & Fuhrman, 1994). Whether the reform is proposed as a result of kids shooting one another or because of perceived inequities or threats, political savvy is necessary in order for reform to be introduced and sustained. After all, schools cannot be divorced from the political context in which they are embedded since they are interwoven into the social and political web that envelops our society as a whole.

Thus far, this paper has examined school change at a conceptual level and has largely ignored the role of teaching practice in the mix. While the purpose of this article is not to determine why teachers change, the

effects of best practices research on teacher's decisions to change will be analyzed in the following section. In other words, do teachers generally change as a result of research that informs best practices?

## THE EFFECTS OF BEST PRACTICES RESEARCH ON TEACHERS' DECISIONS TO CHANGE

Classroom teachers often change their practices as a result of workshops or classes that they attend where they are given information on best practices (Hinde, 2002). For instance, in the 1980s when there was a plethora of workshops and conferences on the implementation of cooperative learning in the classroom, teachers (including the author) adjusted their styles and methods to implement cooperative learning procedures into their teaching. Also, when they learned of the research regarding time on task and various questioning techniques, many teachers again adjusted their pedagogy. Although there are numerous incidents that teachers relate as to how they may have changed practices over the years, it is important to note that they can only express how they think they may have changed. Their memories and perspectives are all they have in analyzing their own experiences in most cases. It is unclear if they adjusted their pedagogy just because they learned of research that informed good practice. They may have changed because of political and even peer pressure (all the other teachers were doing it) so they felt the need to learn new methods or procedures. Speaking from experience, the actual process of teaching is a very personal and private endeavor. The effects of teaching can be noted, but the effects of various change agents on teachers are often indefinable. A teacher may change his or her pedagogy as a result of numerous agents working simultaneously in that teacher's life. Pinpointing the effects of one agent (in this case, best practices research) is an indefinite endeavor.

Peterson, McCarthey, and Elmore (1997) found that changing teachers' classroom practices is not an issue of organization; it is a problem of learning. Very often reforms are initiated that reorganize the school in one way or another with the mistaken assumption that teachers will change as well. However, in the safety of their own classrooms teachers perform in ways that they always have regardless of the proposed reform. Changing the structures of schools has little effect on teachers' practices because, as the above researchers state, "teaching practice is tightly bound to the context of the classroom, in the sense that what is real to the teachers and students is what goes on in the classrooms" (Peterson, McCarthey, and Elmore, 1997, p. 207). Change in structure has no substantial effect on change in teaching practices because teaching and learning occur as a "function of beliefs, understandings, and behaviors in the context of the specific problems of the classroom" (p. 226).

Restructuring schools is related to teacher change, however. Restructuring flows from good teacher practice and not vice versa (Acess, 2000; Peterson, McCarthey, & Elmore, 1997). Restructuring schools and good practice seem to have a reciprocal effect. While restructuring flows from good practice, good practice and improved student outcomes are supported by the structure of the school (Acess, 2000). Successful reform requires a combination of these two elements.

In order for teachers to change, they must be afforded opportunities to learn. Professional development is a necessity in order for true reform to occur (Little, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1999). In a review of studies on the effects of reading and mathematics professional development opportunities, Darling-Hammond found that higher levels of student achievement were achieved by teachers who had opportunities to participate in "sustained professional development grounded in content-specific pedagogy linked to the new curriculum they are learning to teach" (p. 9). She also notes that there is a pronounced relationship between specific teaching practices and student achievement and that these practices are related to teacher learning opportunities. At the risk of pointing out the obvious, teachers cannot change their practices if they do not learn new ones.

It is important to note that Darling-Hammond's analysis found strong evidence that professional development that emphasized teaching strategies and pedagogical implications and not just content knowledge led to improved student achievement. In other words, teacher preparation programs and training lead to higher student achievement than programs that emphasize content knowledge.

Teachers must view themselves as learners instead of simply purveyors of knowledge. Teachers who consider themselves as learners develop new understandings and are likely to improve their practices (Peterson, McCarthy, & Elmore, 1997). In addition, when teachers are respected by professional developers for the ways they use new ideas innovatively, then reforms come full circle (Randi & Corno, 1997). This idea of teacher considering themselves as learners coincides with Lagemann's (1993) contention that the teacher's role in our society must be reinvented. Lagemann argues that the current conception of the teacher is based on the archaic idea that teaching is a low-skill, custodial job. Teachers today are considered "practitioners" and not professionals - transmitters of knowledge and not as investigators. Lagemann continues:

Teachers...have traditionally been expected to enact, or to put into practice, teaching strategies and subject matters already formulated by others for teaching purposes.... What is more, even when they have had freedom of choice in matters of pedagogy and curriculum, they have rarely had the time necessary to invent their own teaching materials or to conduct their own research. In this way among others, their roles have been defined differently from those of most other professionals, for whom problem definition has been sanctioned and essential work (pp. 2-3).

To achieve this redefinition of teachers as learners and as professionals, continuous education is necessary. Teachers need access to the knowledge that is available at universities, as well as in typical workshops or other professional development circumstances. In addition, it is necessary for research to be more practical and employ various approaches rather than the traditional positivist methodology.

In a study of teachers' conceptualizations of change in their professional lives, Hinde (2002) found that the teachers involved in her study had adjusted their pedagogy as a result of professional development opportunities that reflected best practices research. However, change occurred only when the teachers could directly apply what they were learning to the contexts (and students) in which they were teaching. In other words, if the teachers could not conceptualize themselves applying what they were learning to their students or to their current or projected teaching circumstance, they would dismiss the research (see also Randi & Corno, 1997).

As previously discussed, the key to producing changes in teacher practice is providing opportunities for teachers to learn and for teachers to view themselves as learners. Ancess (2000) discovered that much learning occurs in teachers when they examine their own practices with particular students in mind. Student-centered reflection results in improved student outcomes. The improved student outcomes in turn persuade other teachers to adopt the pedagogical and organizational innovations, Ancess found. However, these pedagogical and organizational innovations must coincide with the particular school's culture in order for the reforms to be employed. The alignment or misalignment of innovations and school culture explains why particular reforms are successful in some schools and in other schools those same reforms fail (Finann, 2000). If the professional development a teacher receives coincides with the school's culture, his or her knowledge of students, and what is known to be successful pedagogical practices in the content area being studied, then the teacher will change. However, as Fullan (1991) points out, even if all the necessary ingredients for change are in place classroom pressures still prevent the reform from occurring. Citing Huberman, Fullan notes that the daily pressures a teacher faces fall into four categories:

- (1) (1) The press for *immediacy and concreteness*. This refers to the hundreds of thousands of interchanges in which a teacher engages each school year that are usually spontaneous and require action.
- (2) (2) The press for *multidimensionality and simultaneity*. Teachers must engage in what is commonly referred as "multi-tasking." Teachers are pressured to perform many tasks simultaneously.
- (3) (3) The press for adapting to *ever-changing conditions or unpredictability*. Things change in the classroom from day to day and year to year. A lesson that worked with one class may fail miserably with another.
- (4) (4) The press for *personal involvement with the students*. Teachers realize that maintaining interpersonal contact with students is key to academic success.

These pressures have the effect of limiting teachers' personal reflections on their practices - a necessity in reforming practice. They also force teachers to focus on the here and now and not future possibilities, isolate teachers from colleagues, and exhaust their energy. All of these effects stifle learning potential.

Darling-Hammond (1997) found that another hindrance to teacher reform is certain accountability schemes that evaluate teacher behavior. She is referring to certain teacher evaluation systems in which a principal or other administrator assesses a teacher's performance by checking off certain behaviors as a teacher performs them. These evaluative strategies often have the effect of reinforcing ineffective practice because they do not take into account the iterative nature of teaching and learning. Citing Brown, Darling-Hammond notes, "Children need to study ideas in ways that connect to their motivations and prior knowledge, and teachers need to respond to the challenges and questions children raise" (p. 75). Because of various learning opportunities, a teacher may have many strategies at his or her disposal. However, if an administrator is looking for certain behaviors, a teacher is forced to employ only those strategies for which the evaluator is looking regardless of the students' needs.

Defining the effects of best practices research on teachers' decisions to change is an indefinite science. Speculation abounds as to why teachers change because the research on this aspect is sparse.

## CONCLUSION

This paper only scratches the surface of the complex and often indefinable process of school reform. And yet each area that this article addresses has been the topic of numerous papers and research endeavors. Many of the factors discussed as critical to school change are supported by good empirical evidence (e.g., the role of the principal in promoting change, the importance of professional development, and teacher collaboration). Nevertheless, from the perspective of a former teacher, it seems clear that the interplay of all the various factors that cause change remains little understood. Future research could profitably investigate questions that move in this direction such as the following that come immediately to mind. How do social upheavals like Columbine and 9-11 interact with the culture of schools to create enduring curricular and/or pedagogical changes? Do professional development opportunities offered to teachers reflect political agendas? And if so, in what ways are these agendas then translated into transformed practice?

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