

# 2 Some Guiding Principles for Planning and Implementing Large Scale Educational Change.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

As described in Chapter one, the BA Project was situated in a context of wider educational reform. It was firstly a large-scale educational change project in its own right. It represented a first stage in the development of an all-graduate Omani teaching body able to understand the rationale for and implement a transition within Basic Education from whole-class, rote learning-dominated teaching towards a more student-centred, skill development-focussed model of (language) education. As such, for the teachers involved (and less directly for all others affected by their change – see below) achievement of the desired outcomes of the project entailed a degree of what Fullan (2007) calls ‘reculturing’. I define this term (Wedell, 2009:17) as “a process of adjusting many of their established professional (and possibly personal) behaviours, and eventually also beliefs about their roles and responsibilities as (in the case of this project) teachers”.

In addition to its specific goal of graduating English teachers who would have the understandings and skills needed to implement the Basic Education reforms in English, the project was also part of the larger scale reform affecting all school subjects. Although never explicitly stated, the perceived success or otherwise of the BA Project had the potential to influence decisions about the future routes to be followed in other subjects to support the capacity building of teachers, as part of the wider educational change goal of establishing an education system able that would enable Omanis to meet the global and local challenges of the 21st century.

The planning and implementation of large scale educational reform projects is extremely complex and it is far easier to find international examples of such projects (especially ELT projects) that have been unsuccessful or partially successful than ones which have unequivocally succeeded (Wedell, 2009; Waters & Vilches, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Nunan, 2003). As readers will see in the chapters that follow, the BA Project is generally considered to have been a success. In this chapter I will briefly discuss several factors that the change literature considers to be particularly

important contributors to the success or failure of educational change. Chapter 17 of this volume will then look at some of these factors again, consider to what extent they were present or absent in the planning and/or implementation of the BA Project, and discuss how their presence or absence affected the overall success of the project.

## 2 FACTORS THAT SUPPORT SUCCESSFUL LARGE-SCALE EDUCATIONAL CHANGE.

Educational changes can come in many shapes and sizes. They may be planned to affect a single institution or a whole country. The goals of the change may be simple (changing the daily timetable in a single school) or very complex (introducing a new national curriculum that expects to see very different approaches to teaching and learning in all schools). Clearly the BA Project represents a complex large-scale educational change and in this chapter I discuss factors in terms of such scale change only. The range of factors that may influence the success or failure of the planning and/or implementation of such change in a particular place at a particular time are numerous, and the ways in which they may interrelate are very complex. This is not surprising if one thinks about just how many people and how many existing educational structures and organisations will be more or less directly affected by any significant change to a national education system. The quote below, from a recent paper by two extremely experienced educational change thinkers, identifies three main factors as being important for success, some of which imply other factors. This chapter limits itself to a discussion of these.

The central lesson of large-scale educational change that is now evident is the following: Large-scale, sustained improvement in student outcomes requires a (i) *sustained effort to change school and classroom practices, not just structures such as governance and accountability*. The heart of improvement lies in changing teaching and learning practices, (ii) *in thousands and thousands of classrooms*, and this requires focused and sustained effort by (iii) *all parts of the education system and its partners*.

(Levin & Fullan, 2008:291. My italics and numbering)

My interpretation of the three factors numbered above is as follows:

1. Educational change requires sustained effort / effort over time, if it is to change what actually happens in school classrooms rather than merely the superficial appearance of the curriculum, the materials or the manner in which schools are evaluated. The effort and time needed are likely to be affected by the degree of 'reculturing' that the change entails for those affected.
2. Since the implementation of national educational change actually takes place in numerous different classrooms, and classrooms are different, such implementation can never look identical across the whole education system.
3. Educational change does not only affect teachers or one strand of the curriculum. To varying degrees and in different ways it affects the whole.

If (1) to (3) are thought important, they in turn suggest the need for

4. Consistent leadership and support over time at all levels of the education system to help those affected to 'sustain' the effort.
5. Change leaders who fully understand the rationale for the changes, who they will affect, and how, in order to be able to provide the above leadership.
6. The establishment and maintenance of effective communication /awareness raising systems within and between the parts of the system.
7. Appropriate capacity-building provision for all those directly affected by change, that will help them to feel supported in whatever reculturing the change entails.
8. Change planners' understanding of the interconnections between the parts of any education system and the need to maintain coherence between the parts, so that, for example, class sizes, teaching materials and assessment practices support rather than undermine the teaching and learning practices that the change is trying to introduce.

The above points are discussed more fully in the sections that follow. Although they are discussed as discrete points, it will be clear to any reader that these issues are in truth interdependent and influence one another in more or less predictable ways.

## **2.1 Educational change planning and implementation requires active effort over time**

Education systems are traditional. During the period between the introduction of compulsory education for all and the late 20th century, many traditional ideas about what teaching and learning mean and so what ought to happen in classrooms (ideas which can be very crudely stereotyped as: knowledge means largely facts – learning means largely learning facts by rote – assessment tests how well the learner remembers), remained largely intact in education systems worldwide.

Since the end of the 20th century there has however been a growing wave of educational reform/change projects worldwide aiming to introduce more student-centred, interactive, participative, 'open' approaches to teaching and learning. The extent to which such projects succeed in genuinely changing what happens in classrooms will be strongly influenced by the extent to which the many people whom the changes affect are able to cope with the 'reculturing' that is needed.

None of us find it easy to change our professional habits. Capacity building to support us to do so takes time (see below). As a result the more ambitious and demanding an educational change is, in terms of its scale, and in terms of the degree of difference it hopes to bring about in what happens in classrooms, the longer it will take. Exactly how long is difficult to judge. Fullan (2007), using examples of change mostly from North America, suggests that a large-scale change may take 5-10 years to become part of normal classroom life in the majority of schools. Polyzoi et al. (2003) suggest that in other contexts, for example many countries of East and Central Europe in the 1990s, educational changes of the kind discussed above require such an intense degree of reculturing that they may take a generation to

achieve. Berend (2007) focusing on the same region believes it takes even longer. Referring to social transformation, which I believe to be very similar to the reculturing that much educational change entails, he says

Social transformation, including the adoption of a new value system and social behavioural pattern, is not a process of one or two decades. It takes generations. (Berend, 2007:280)

Whichever view we take, it is clear that the successful implementation of educational change takes a long time. It is an ongoing process, not an event that takes place at a particular point in time. This implies that a large-scale and culturally challenging educational change initiative needs to be seen as a national not a government issue (Cox & Le Maitre, 1999). The change process will continue to need economic and political support over what may be a decade or more, and in many political contexts this can only happen if governments can be persuaded to “put educational investment beyond their own need for political survival” (Fullan 2001: 233).

## **2.2 Implementation of educational change will never take place in a uniform manner.**

There is an implicit assumption that implementation is an event, that change occurs next Tuesday or in September. (Hopkins, 1987:195)

The behaviours of many different people and the differing socio-economic, geographical and historical realities of different schools will influence how any national educational change is implemented. Local conditions, which may vary from one school or one region to another, include:

- Teachers’ current practices – what they are familiar with and do well, how difficult they are likely to find the new practices.
- Class sizes – how supportive these are of new educational practices and whether anything can be done to make them more so.
- Available resources and teaching materials – whether the new educational practices require use of particular resources /teaching materials, and whether these are present or could be provided.
- The immediate community’s expectations of learners’ performance in high stakes assessment – how will these be affected by the introduction of new practices.
- The availability of capacity-building support locally.
- The degree of awareness of, and positive attitude to, new practices on the part of institutional leaders and the wider society in the area, including the parents.
- Funding actually available to help support all aspects of the implementation process and understanding of how best to spend it.

Since all of the above (and of course other possible factors) may vary between parts of a country or even from school to school, change planners need to recognise that the ongoing process of change implementation may look quite different in different classrooms. As long as each school is trying to implement the ‘spirit’ of the

change in a manner consistent with its contextual realities, in my opinion implementation can be said to be taking place.

### **2.3 Large scale educational change affects the whole of the existing education system**

Educational change does not become visible in classrooms as a direct result of any written change policy document. Whether it occurs in classrooms or not, and what form it ultimately takes depends on how people understand what is written down and how they behave in response to that understanding. One reason for the failure of so many change initiatives is that policymakers forget this fundamental point.

Many attempts at policy and programme change have concentrated on product development, legislation and other on-paper changes in a way that ignored the fact that what *people* did or did not do was the crucial variable. (Fullan, 2001:70 – My italics)

When thinking about which people need to ‘do’ or ‘not do’ certain things in order for an educational change to succeed, the first people most of us think about are teachers. As Leithwood et al. (2002) point out, how teachers think about knowledge and learners’ roles, and how their ideas translate into classroom teaching and learning is central to any concept of education. However while teachers are central figures in any change implementation process they cannot succeed alone.

Real reform requires sustained attention from many people at all levels of the education system. It is not enough for a state or national government to be fully committed, difficult as this is in itself. Many if not most schools, and, where they exist, districts or regional authorities, must also share the goals and purposes of reform and improvement. It is even better when the efforts of the school system are understood and supported by external groups such as community agencies, since this is important to the political legitimacy of the education system. There can be — indeed, there should be — room for a variety of strategies to achieve the goals, but there cannot be substantial dissent on the main purposes themselves. (Levin & Fullan, 2008:294)

If educational planners expect teachers to feel motivated to invest the effort over time that is often required for them to understand and become familiar and comfortable with the practices introduced by a particular change, they need to recognise that any large-scale change affects the whole education system. Thus if a change requires teachers to change their practices (and perhaps later beliefs), they will need to be helped to get to know and be able to work with new ways of thinking about knowledge, the teaching-learning process, and teacher / learner roles in that process. Teaching approaches that are thought to help learners to learn and know in different ways will need to be introduced. Teacher education, teaching materials and methods of assessment will all be affected and need to be linked and connected into a coherent curriculum document and a coherent plan to guide and support the change process.

In addition, all the other the people more or less directly affected by change, the educational leaders and administrators at many levels, the teacher educators, inspectors and supervisors, the test and textbook writers, the headteachers, the learners, and even the parents, may also need to be helped to change some of their practices and expectations, if the system as a whole is to be able to work collaboratively to make the change a success (Wedell, 2003).

#### **2.4 Educational change needs informed, consistent leadership**

If change planning and implementation takes as long and involves as many people and educational components as suggested above, then the scope for the process to lose its focus is extremely great. Consistent change leadership over time at national and local levels is a critical factor in making success more likely. For such leadership to be effective, 'leaders' themselves (to differing degrees at different leadership levels) need to be clear about the rationale for the proposed changes, and about whom their implementation will affect in significant ways. If leaders are unclear they will not be able to communicate the rationale to others (see below), and/or are unlikely to appreciate the degree of 'reculturing' that the change planning and implementation will entail for different change participants, and so will be unable to develop appropriate capacity building systems (see below) to support different types of participant. Leaders additionally need to understand their existing systems and how its features (for example, resources, class sizes, teacher workloads, assessment methods) may facilitate or obstruct the implementation of the desired changes. Remembering that the 'whole system' is usually affected by educational change (see above), and planning with that in mind, is a major leadership challenge. However, failure to do so can mean that much of the significant financial and human investment made in planning and preparation to respond to needs in one part of the system is wasted, as a result of failure to recognise that other parts of the system also require attention (see Wedell, 2005).

#### **2.5 Communicating about and raising awareness of educational change**

If learners and parents are included among those affected by national educational change, it is probably true to say that national educational changes affect a majority (or at least a very large minority) of any population. Consequently, to be able to justify the launch of such a complex, long term, expensive and potentially disrupting process, change leaders need to have considered how to explain it to people at a range of different levels in a convincing manner.

Once a decision to proceed with a change has been taken, an important aspect of initial planning will be to agree how to raise awareness of the change among those who will sooner or later feel its effects. Different levels of detail and different means of communication may be appropriate for different groups of people. However, since a change implementation process takes such a long time, if it is ever to become institutionalised, it is extremely important to establish initial awareness of and social consensus about the need for and desirability of change. Shared consensus

among such a large proportion of the population provides a potential bedrock of support for all those who will be actively involved, once change implementation begins in classrooms across the country. Conversely, lack of at least some understanding of the change among the different affected groups will only increase the complexity of implementation.

The above has implications for the range of people whom it is desirable to see represented in any change planning process. Education systems are extremely hierarchical in most contexts. Consequently those involved in the initial discussions about the need for and the forms of any educational change tend to be drawn from a very small subset of those whom the change will ultimately affect. They rarely have direct, up-to-date experience of existing classroom reality. Wedell (2009) suggests that involving a broad range of representatives from those affected at different levels of the education system, from the very beginning of the change planning process, will make it easier to communicate the change appropriately at different levels. It also makes it more likely that any eventual implementation plans will take existing grassroots realities into account.

The need for national policy makers to be aware of the 'whole' change context, and so the need for good communication across the parts of the education system becomes even more critical when, as is often the case, the change process entails a multiplicity of change initiatives often implemented by different departments which may be at more or less different stages of being planned and implemented. In such circumstances, if there is insufficient oversight of the 'whole', planning and implementation of the different 'parts' may result in inconsistencies and contradictions at local and/or institutional level. The confusion among institutional leaders and their staff that such inconsistencies engender is likely to lessen or nullify the impact of any earlier awareness activity raising that may have taken place.

## **2.6 Developing the capacity of those affected by educational change.**

Section 2.3 pointed out that educational changes more or less directly affect a large number of people. The desired outcomes of educational change often entail the need for a degree of personal / professional 'reculturing' for many of these people. Such a reculturing process, which may involve learning very different professional skills and ways of behaving, can make many of us feel uncomfortable and concerned about our professional identity, and so resistant to change. Consequently, developing systems that will genuinely help people to feel more confident about whatever new understandings, techniques or skills the changes demand is absolutely essential, if classroom implementation of change is not to be impeded or resisted by feelings of insecurity.

While it has long been recognised that teachers need support in order to develop new capacities, it is only now beginning to be recognised that others affected by change (for example school heads, local educational administrators, school inspectors) also need support for their reculturing. Human and financial investment in capacity-building is often significant, and there is a growing consensus regarding the relationship between the form and structure of such

support and its likely effectiveness. Some important issues (summarised from Malderez & Wedell, 2007, and Wedell, 2009) that those responsible for providing support might wish to bear in mind, include the need to:

1. begin by helping participants to identify some of the existing principles and practices that guide their work and the constraints that affect them, and to compare these to the principles and practices introduced by the change. Personal and contextual issues that may hinder the implementation of change practices provide a starting point for trainers and participants to make decisions about how best to use the (often limited) training time. If trainers do not really know what participants' existing ideas and concerns are, how can they know whether what they are doing is in fact what participants will find useful?
2. provide an appropriate balance between telling participants about the theory underpinning the change, and/or the teaching-learning techniques associated with it, and enabling them to actually experience change. Theory is in many ways easier to 'teach' than practice. However, if the figure of 20-25 practice cycles (cited at '5.' below) is even approximately correct, providing opportunities for participants to see the new practices in action, to practise them in their own classrooms or work environments, and to learn how to adjust them to their own reality if necessary, is very important.
3. try to provide at least some of the support within the participants' normal working context, and structure support in a way that encourages sharing, collaboration and teamwork. Change implementation usually involves people altering aspects of their familiar professional practice. If at all possible it makes sense for them to begin trying to do so in their normal work setting, since it is here that they will be most concerned about performing well. Real practice opportunities of this kind during a formal training can provide participants with chances to see what happens when they try to implement change in their classroom. The training environment also provides a supportive setting in which to discuss their early implementation experiences with colleagues who are trying to do the same, while still having access to a (hopefully) more expert trainer.
4. recognise that developing confidence in new practices takes time. To begin with, most participants will probably only be able to see the change goals through the lenses of their existing beliefs and understandings. For example, if we think of teachers participating in a change process that involves a move away from a teacher-centred, rote learning form of teaching, then participants who are used to thinking of educational knowledge as mainly a series of facts may begin the change implementation process thinking that the change will involve the learning and teaching of new and different facts. For them to move to an understanding that this is not all that is involved, and then to develop confidence in their personal ability to behave in a different manner, will be a long-term process. The exact stages of this process will be different for each individual teacher, but simply put, in some form or another it probably involves



- a. Developing an understanding of what the change aims mean for classroom practice and why they are worth introducing.
- b. Using their current level of understanding (ideally with more expert help) to plan how to introduce new practices.
- c. Trying out new practices with learners in a classroom.
- d. Seeing what happens when doing so – obtaining explicit or implicit feedback from learners, colleagues or a more expert ‘coach’ (Joyce & Showers, 1988).
- e. Going through many more cycles of (a) to (d) slowly developing a more complete personal understanding and personal confidence in practice, through carrying it out again and again over time.

The simple words of (a) to (e) of course hide just what a difficult process ‘changing’ really is. In addition, the above simple sequence stands much more chance of ‘working’ if other important people affected by, and whose decisions affect, the change process (for example administrators, school leaders, inspectors) are also developing their own capacity to respond to the changes (and the teachers who are trying to implement them) in a supportive manner. They then too need to be supported in reinterpreting their roles and responsibilities, through opportunities to:

- f. share understandings of the changes as they affect their roles and settings,
  - g. receive more or less formal help in planning their responsibilities for the local level leadership / management of implementation,
  - h. try their plans out with the people for whom they are responsible,
  - i. remain alert and open to adjusting their plans / behaviours according to feedback received over time from inside and outside the classroom.
5. understand that since reculturing is a complex process, any training needs to provide repeated opportunities for participants to try out whatever practices/behaviours are new for them, in order to develop confidence in their new ‘culture’. Confidence building takes time. For example for teachers, Harvey (1999) suggested at least 20-25 supported cycles at (b) to (d) above were needed to develop confidence in carrying out practices that represented a change of only medium complexity. He noted that throughout this time their commitment to the change was not very strong and if support was withdrawn they were always likely to revert to their pre-existing practices.
  6. understand that, in most cases, formal training courses will only last long enough to support the beginning of an individual’s reculturing process. Consequently, during the early years of an implementation process, all those directly affected professionally by change will need further opportunities for support in their particular local or institutional contexts. In Harvey (1999) an educational ‘expert’ provided one-to-one ‘support’ for teachers over time. Such intense support will rarely be available over time in most implementation contexts. But recognition of the need for ongoing support helps make sense of the idea that organisations affected by educational change should be trying to become ‘professional learning communities’

(Fullan, 2007), in which a mutually supportive atmosphere of shared learning or peer mentoring continues to provide support for individual 'reculturing' once the formal training is over.

What forms of support will be 'appropriate' for different participants in the change process, is of course impossible to specify in detail. However, the above principles, adjusted to existing local professional abilities and cultural norms, do provide a starting point for considering the forms and structures of relevant support systems in a wide range of contexts.

### 3 CONCLUSION

As will I imagine be clear if you have reached this point, the planning and implementation of large scale educational change for national state education systems is an enormously complex endeavour. It is also very costly in terms of human and resource investment, and many people may be negatively affected if the eventual outcomes are not as desired. The factors discussed above represent those currently considered important for educational policy makers and change planners to consider.

In Chapter 17, we will return to look at the extent to which these factors appear to have been considered during the planning and implementation of the BA Project, and to try and highlight how their presence or absence affected the BA Project process.

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