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ABSTRACT

Despite lack of money and time, schools in the eighties are going to make changes. For this reason, educators are being forced to look again at the lessons of the innovations of the seventies. This paper discusses research done on those innovations, both the ones that succeeded and the ones that failed. A discussion of costs is followed by a summary of implications of research. The paper concludes that if educational innovation is going to succeed, educators will need to focus their work and time on communication, training, feedback mechanisms, and teacher support. (Author/LD)

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RESEARCH ACTION BRIEF

Each *Research Action Brief* reports the findings of significant empirical research studies on a topic in educational management. From these findings implications are drawn for the operation of today's schools, thus serving as a guide for enlightened administrative action.

This *Research Action Brief* was prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management in cooperation with the National School Boards Association.

How Schools Change

A cynic might contend that one lesson of the seventies is that significant educational change is impossible. It is true that many educational innovations of the previous decade were dismal failures. Many more were attempted but were never actually implemented at all.

As the eighties unfold, it seems likely that the seventies' failures in educational innovation are going to make even the least cynical educators extremely wary of trying to make fundamental changes in the schools. In an era of decline and financial pinch, when school administrators are overwhelmed by paperwork, nobody can afford to waste a penny or a minute on unsuccessful educational innovations.

Yet contemporary educational critics on both the right and the left agree on one thing: all is not well in the schools. Sweeping changes still need to be made. Not only are schools not going to be allowed to rest on their laurels, but in a time when public education is being attacked from every side, there are no laurels left to rest on. Even educational philosophies that appear reactionary (like some forms of the "back to basics" movement) demand that school people do things in ways fundamentally different from the way they do now. Despite lack of money and time, schools in the eighties are going to make changes.

For this reason, educators are being forced to look again at the lessons of the innovations of the seventies. What can these innovations teach us about educational change? Is it indeed impossible—or only much more difficult than we previously thought?

Innovations That Failed

In the early seventies, Gross, Giacquinta, and Bernstein headed a team of researchers who virtually immersed themselves in an elementary school to study an attempt at instituting greater student autonomy. Called the "catalytic role model," the program emphasized the teacher's role as "catalyst" rather than director and aimed at making students responsible for their own learning.

The change program was a flop; at least it was only "minimally implemented." The researchers, after a year of extensive schoolwide and class observations together with formal interviews, were in a position to examine why. Although a number of findings emerged, one stands out: program administrators failed to identify difficulties teachers might have and also failed to bring them out into the open where they could be dealt with. Problems, instead of being solved, were swept under the rug. Difficulties were ignored and glossed over.

These difficulties included a number of things. First, teachers did not really understand the innovation or what it entailed. Second, program administrators didn't seem to realize that teachers lacked necessary capabilities, and the training was not provided. Too, the required instructional materials were unavailable. Toward the end of the first year, these problems produced a significant lack of staff motivation. Most of all, no feedback mechanisms were established that could uncover the difficulties. Teachers

were afraid to voice their problems and confusion and, instead, just quietly returned to doing things the same old way.

Charters and Pellegrin conducted a year-long study of educational change through onsite observations, interviews, and questionnaire administrations. This time the innovation was differentiated staffing, but the outcome was similarly disappointing. At the end of the year, Charters and Pellegrin tactfully stated that "no monumental strides" had been made toward implementation.

They pinpointed at least a dozen reasons why, and these reasons add up to a conclusion similar to that made by Gross, Giacquinta, and Bernstein. Perhaps most importantly, Charters and Pellegrin found "a fallacious assumption" that general and abstract program objectives could be easily translated into behavior. Thus these researchers learned that it can be a very long way between theory and practice. Implementing the innovation presented difficulties that were unanticipated and not sufficiently dealt with.

Like Gross and his colleagues, Charters and Pellegrin found that the meaning of the innovation was not very clear to anyone involved. Differentiated staffing seemed to have many different meanings to those implementing it. Even program managers were not able to clearly state what it meant.

Charters and Pellegrin found, too, that there was a lack of "monitoring procedures" for the innovation. There were no established ways to continually evaluate the project, to judge whether it was succeeding or failing, and to determine what alterations needed to be made. It was simply assumed that things would move smoothly along.

There was also a failure to recognize that teachers were experiencing "role overload." They were being expected to learn to do too many new things in too short a time. When teachers had difficulty fulfilling the duties expected of them, they began to feel overwhelmed and unable to cope.

Charters and Pellegrin believed that because of all these difficulties, innovations take much longer to implement than most innovators had previously thought. They felt that most innovators have "unrealistic time perspectives." No magician can point a wand that calls an innovation immediately into being. Innovations cannot be instituted overnight, nor even over a few weeks or a few months. Many take years to implement.

The Successes

What about the other side of the coin? Not every attempt at educational change made in the seventies was a failure. What about the successes, and how do they differ from the failures?

Berman and McLaughlin enumerated the results of a four-year study by the Rand Corporation that looked at 293 innovation attempts. They tried to identify innovations that not only were adopted successfully but also continued for a significant time. Many of the results were surprising, and many others echoed the findings already presented here.

The first question to come to mind of course concerns which innovations were the best. Can we pick out the successful techniques and leave the others by the wayside? The findings of Berman and McLaughlin suggest that the answer is "no." No particular educational methods were implemented more successfully than any other methods. What worked and lasted in one school or district failed in another. No pattern emerged.

What did emerge was the finding that it very much mattered *how* the implementation was undertaken. Berman and McLaughlin put it: "In short, what the project *was* mattered less than how it was done."

And what were the effective strategies? The findings are almost eerily close to those we have already listed. First, successful programs provided "concrete, teacher-specific, extended training." This means that project directors found out what teachers needed to know to make the program work and provided it to them throughout the project. The best training was provided by project or district staff because they could be in close touch with the ongoing immediate training needs of the teachers involved. This finding is a mirror image of the findings of the studies that began this paper: unsuccessful programs fail to provide the training teachers really need.

Berman and McLaughlin also found that successful programs provided regular project meetings that focused on practical problems. Program directors assumed that problems would arise and structured ways of dealing with them. Teachers were encouraged to reveal their problems and to work to solve them.

Although Berman and McLaughlin uncovered many other findings, these stand out, especially in the light of the other studies examined here.

Other researchers also have looked at successfully adopted innovations. Hall and other researchers in the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) Project for a number of years have had a unique perspective on innovation implementation. They believe the focus of change efforts should be primarily on the people who must make the change.

The CBAM researchers have used extensive field documentation of their experiences as adoption agents as a basis for theory concerning how innovations are adopted. They have uncovered many findings, but the one most central to their theory is the one concerning "stages of concern." Hall believes that as an innovation is being adopted, those making the changes progress through a number of stages of concern. When teachers first hear about an innovation they are concerned primarily with how the innovation affects themselves. Hall calls these "self concerns." The next stage is for "task concerns"; teachers are concerned with the many new things they must learn to do and find time for when a major educational change is being made. Finally, and not until these concerns have been resolved, do teachers develop "impact concerns" or concerns about actual effects of the innovation.

Hall and his colleagues on the CBAM Project have developed measurement instruments for assessing the stages of concern about the innovation. They have looked at such innovations as teaming, individualized instruction, and the adoption of instructional modules, and received confirmation of these stages.

Hall holds that rather than chastising teachers for having self concerns or task concerns, project directors should anticipate these concerns and help teachers to overcome them. He believes interventions can be more systematically planned if consideration is given to stages of concern.

A related finding, which echoes other findings cited here, was that "implementing even relatively simple innovations takes time" and "requires more than a one- or two-day workshop." In fact, maintains Hall, complex innovations can take three to five years.

Costs

Yet all these findings about how to implement innovation successfully may be of little interest to districts facing severe cutbacks in funds. Educational change may be simply too expensive for today's schools.

Or is it? A study by Nelson and Sieber uncovered some surprising findings concerning innovation cost. These researchers collected data on thirty-two innovations from more than five hundred principals and asked nine nationally recognized experts to rate the innovations' quality. They found that there was no relation between innovation quality and cost. Many expensive innovations were considered ineffective, whereas many excellent innovations were inexpensive to implement. The low-cost, high-quality innovations that Nelson and Sieber identified included continuous progress programs, independent study programs, and directed study programs.

Almost as surprising, Nelson and Sieber found that a number of high-cost, low-quality innovations were very popular. Many schools were using expensive techniques like television instruction, programmed instruction, and simulation or gaming programs in spite of the fact they appeared to be of little real worth.

Why would schools implement innovations that were both low-quality and expensive? The answer became clear when Nelson and Sieber's panel of experts rated innovations by "administrative difficulty." The popular low-quality innovations were easy to implement. Conversely, the researchers found that low-cost, high-quality innovations like continuous progress programs, independent study programs, and directed study programs were difficult to implement. There appeared to be a trade-off: ease of implementation for quality. Nelson and Sieber concluded that "in sum, it appears that practitioners have been constrained to adopt expensive low-impact practices by virtue of the organizational problems posed by high-impact practices."

Implications

School people who attempted innovations in the seventies learned one important lesson: it wasn't as easy as they thought it would be. This doesn't mean that they should throw up their hands and forget about innovations altogether. It does mean that school people attempting changes need to anticipate problems and begin early to institute ways to deal with them.

The research shows that from the beginning change programs need to be carefully and clearly defined and explained so that everyone involved with the change understands it well and everyone shares the same definition. Ongoing training to teach necessary skills needs to be provided. Feedback mechanisms, such as regular meetings, need to be instituted so that problems and confusion can be expressed and resolved.

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When undertaking an educational innovation, project directors must direct special concern and care at those who must make the change. This usually means teachers. Directors must realize that teachers and others attempting complex changes may experience "role overload" if they attempt too much at once. Changes must come slowly, and help must be offered.

Change agents must realize that proposed changes are going to produce anxiety and that teachers and administrators are going to be very concerned about how the change will affect them and their everyday duties. Educators must not be criticized for having these concerns but rather must be helped to resolve them. After this resolution, they can then begin to put energy into concentrating on what the changes will really mean to students.

Also, those implementing innovations must remember that innovations that cost the most money are not necessarily those that help students the most. But they must realize too that quality innovations are going to cost a lot in another precious medium of exchange: time. There is no simple way to sidestep the enormous effort that making educational change requires. If schools are truly going to change and improve, educators of the eighties, instead of trying to solve educational problems with money, are going to have to put in hours of hard work—not only because schools today can't afford expensive innovations but because costly gimmicks have consistently failed to help students.

One of the most important lessons learned as the idealism of the early seventies changed to the realism of the late seventies was that educational change takes a long time. This means to today's educators that realistic time schedules need to be set for innovation. It must be realized that major changes are going to take years to implement. It should not be assumed that an innovation is a failure if it is not fully implemented in a few months.

In sum, the research studies cited here offer far more than the cynical message that change is impossible. What they do suggest is that educational innovation, if it is going to be successful, is going to take a lot of work and a lot of time. This work and time will be focused on communication, training, feedback mechanisms, and teacher support. With careful attention to these factors, it may very well be that the lesson of the eighties will be that educational change is easier than we feared.

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