

**A procession of change: Argument for the  
use of the processual approach in examining  
school based organisational change**

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**Abstract**

Change is a regular feature of life. Few would argue that the school environment provides any exception. However, the way that change, and particularly organisational change, is studied is significant to the understanding which is derived. Examinations of school based organisational change have traditionally favoured structural lenses despite alternative approaches having the potential to offer greater value. The outcome plays into the hands of those imposing change, where power and politics might well be exhibited through covert efforts to limit understanding, particularly with regard to the ramifications of the required action.

This paper highlights one alternative to the structural approaches; the processual lens. Here there is acknowledgement that any single change is part of a larger framework of activities. The processual approach does not reflect the simplicity of structural lenses, but it does echo the dynamism found in the school based context. Identifying the link between robust examination of organisational change and use of the processual approach, argument is presented that a failure to consider the validity of the approach in the examination of school based organisational change has ramifications both for understanding and practice.

**Keywords**

Processual; organisational change; innovation; reconfiguration; resistance; research; method; lens.

**Introduction**

Organisational change is acknowledged to have become a regular feature of school life (Fullan, 2009, 2014), with the leadership of that change argued to be high on the research agenda (Riley and Seashore Louis, 2013). The frequency with which this subject is discussed is illustrated by the number of results revealed by a simple Google search on the term 'school change'. It is not, therefore, surprising that with teachers being encouraged to become research practitioners (Burton and Bartlett, 2004; McLaughlin, 2012), not least because of the strength of the argument surrounding the value of site based research to school improvement (Middlewood et al, 1999), that organisational change is regarded to be a popular area of study.

As a supervisor of Masters in Education dissertation studies, I have witnessed the increasing popularity of this subject area over a number of years. However, whilst the value to be derived from examining change appears to be accepted, how such an examination should be conducted is a matter of contention. At the heart of this issue appears to be the choice of the examination lens. A favouring of historical ways of operating, selected regardless of whether an alternative approach might offer new insight and greater value, is apparent.

Contributing to the highlighted contention are forays into innovative research practice. The work of Wallace and Hoyle (2012) provides one example of this innovation. Through a reanalysis of data using the focal perspective of irony, the Wallace and Hoyle work offers new insight on the merger

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between two English primary sector schools. Specifically, Wallace and Hoyle (2012: 976) argue that 'the ironic perspective offers a general heuristic for organizational analysis, a probe which foregrounds disjunction in meanings'. However, the difficulties of the approach, that it requires the toleration of 'cognitive discomforts' (ibid: 997), and the fact that it is 'open to the same contestation as the phenomena under investigation' (ibid: 995), are also acknowledged.

The purpose of this position paper is to identify how one of the more recently popularised theoretical lenses, the processual approach, has the potential to add to the insight to be gained in the study of organisational change and thus why it should be actively considered for use by the school based research practitioner. Specifically, this paper provides an explanation of the processual perspective and, after briefly considering the context of school based change, there is consideration of the functionality of the processual approach in the school based research setting.

### **The processual perspective**

As the processual term indicates, it is the examination of process which is at the core of the perspective. Pettigrew is regarded as having been a key proponent of the processual approach, with publication of his 'The Awakening Giant: Continuity and Change in ICI' text in 1985 stirring interest beyond its original industrial application. That publication was the result of a 10-year study which connected 'economic business research with a broader sociological approach' (Said Business School, 2016).

Pettigrew was not the only person to demonstrate interest in the processual approach as other writers were exploring similar interests at the same time. Willmott, for example, was working to overcome the limitations of research lenses structured around 'opposed vectors' (Fincham, 1992: 748). Furthermore, before Pettigrew's seminal text was published, the approach was regarded to have already established a legacy of popularity within the field of political anthropology (Kurtz, 2001).

Study of the research literature surrounding the processual lens identifies two factors. Firstly, that although there has been significant generic interest surrounding use of the processual approach, the lens has received minimal attention within the body of schools based research literature. This is despite acknowledgement by writers within the education sector (e.g. Fullan, 2008, 2009) of the successful application of other cross sector practices, particularly those drawn from a business domain. Secondly, that where a processual focus is evident, significant heed (e.g. Dawson, 2005; Buchanan et al, 2005; Chia and MacKay, 2007) is paid to the work of Pettigrew.

Despite the identified lack of focus in the schools sector, it was in the 1990s that the processual approach started to be regarded as a key tool in the examination of organisational change. The argument being put forward at that time was that the functionality of the processual approach has the ability to overcome the shortfalls of other lenses (Dawson, 1997; Pettigrew, 1997).

Pettigrew (1997: 338) defines process as 'a sequence of individual and collective events, actions, and activities unfolding over time in context'. The definition emphasises that the processual lens is more extensive than a simple focus on, in the context of schools, the policy which might inform practice albeit that the presence of policy may, indeed, be a factor which contributes towards organisational change. Additionally, Pettigrew (1997:338) places emphasis on the process being dynamic; as illustrated by his use of the 'reality in flight' phraseology. The processual perspective involves temporarily fixing 'the flow of reality: to artificially stabilize it in order that we may better locate, simplify and understand it' (McMurray, 2010: 727).

Pettigrew (1985) highlights 'the limitations of theories that view change either as a single event or as a discrete series of episodes that can be decontextualised'. Change within the context of a school, for example, is rarely a self contained event, any more than there are 'heroic individuals' who, working alone, can turn around the fortunes of doomed educational institutions (MacBeath and MacDonald, 2013; Coffield et al, 2007). Indeed, with some commonality of authorship identified, Hodgson and Spours (2006) are seen to stress the multi-faceted nature of the broader schools context. They highlight, for example, that the use of a framework which responds to this nature within the 14-19 age sector might have value in being applied more broadly.

The reality is that even small initiatives, either externally imposed or internally devised, take place in the context of, and have ramifications for, other processes or influences. In the presence of a genuine intention to examine change, acknowledging that change has the potential to be the result of more than the simple implementation of a prescribed policy, the argument surrounding the processual approach is one which emphasises the value of metaphorically 'slicing through' the action in order to examine that initiative and the implicating factors whilst they are at work.

At an operational level the gap between the intention or theory underpinning change in the school context and the way that it is encountered or experienced by teaching staff is often bemoaned. This has been evidenced, for example, in research relating to the use by school professionals of the social media platform Twitter (Beadle, 2014). That study identified that what were perceived as being 'the trials and tribulations surrounding school life' were a feature of online postings and that, at times, the postings being made on the Twitter platform reflected the content of the more generically termed 'gripe sites'.

There might well be a gap between intention and the way change is encountered; the unfolding reality. With the pace of change which appears to have become commonplace in the contemporary school context, what Brookes (2006) speaks of in terms of offering a 'ceaseless reform agenda that has been promulgated with almost evangelistic zeal', it is difficult to conceptualise any one person having a complete understanding of the intention and ramifications of all the changes to which a school, and those working within it, may be exposed. It is, therefore, inevitable that many teachers find themselves to be working with an incomplete understanding and that, at times, those in leadership positions may consider themselves as possessing little more clarity than those they supervise.

It is thus the desire to understand operational processes, usually processes associated with organisational change, together with a realisation that any single change is part of a larger framework of activities also requiring examination, which is at the heart of the processual approach. The processual perspective also acknowledges a need to be able to effectively convey the arising detail; that understanding has little value unless it is shared, with that sharing igniting the potential for informed action to be taken. Proponents of the approach have explained this desire in terms of a bridging of the gap between artefact and context (Scarborough et al, 2008), resulting in 'the relational dynamic as a structural configuration' (Jack et al, 2008: 125).

### **The context of school based change**

Power and politics are generally regarded to be key influences in organisational change. Indeed, it is argued that an appreciation of the effect of power and politics is central to an understanding of processes which, through an incremental effect, result in the reconfiguration of the organisation (Pettigrew, 1985; Dawson, 2005). It is difficult to see where this might be more apparent than in the context of the contemporary educational environment, where those in school leadership positions can find themselves to be at the forefront of an embittered battle with change.

Anecdotal stories circulating within the teaching community have been found to emphasise why change cannot, or should not, be introduced (Beadle, 2014). Evident is the effect of change fatigue. Thus, when the need to effect change becomes apparent, those charged with actioning that change can find the difficulties associated with change management to be compounded by the effect of resisting manoeuvres. Indeed, the effort deployed in political manoeuvring can be significant. Empirical research (e.g. Beadle 2016a, 2016b) identifies that both those exerting the resisting force, as well as those commentating on that resistance, consider the effort deployed in thwarting the implementation of change can be greater than that which would have been required to be exerted in simply accepting any proposed initiative. These resistant efforts can be identified within an examination through the use of a processual lens.

What anticipation of resisting effort often fails to accommodate is what may be termed the emotional investment made by those who choose to exert that influence (Brooks, 2012; Severinsson and Markstrom, 2015). Change has a multi-faceted impact and it is here that the processual approach offers particular value since it can be used to establish a clearer understanding. A simple focus on resistance, for example, will highlight any pervading undercurrent and is, in its own right, informative. However, it is just one element of the change context and it risks offering, akin to the effect of the more traditionally used structural lenses regularly adopted in the examination of organisational change both within and outside the school setting, limited insight.

#### **Functionality of the processual approach**

In considering the functionality of the processual approach there is a need to focus on the potential user of the research output. It is acknowledged that the complexity of embracing material where a processual lens has been used can prove problematic, for example for those in management roles who are simply seeking a fleeting engagement with that material in order to locate 'practical tools for action' (Dawson, 2005: 389). Many in the schools sector openly align themselves with this approach, not through a failure to grasp the underpinning purpose of research activities (Yazdifar et al, 2012), although that cannot be entirely discounted, but rather as a consequence of the sector's increasing focus on the 'here and now' wherein the immediacy of a return on the investment made is emphasised (Cooper, 2011; Eckermann et al, 2014). More broadly this has been seen where individuals fail to grasp that there is a difference between training and professional development; albeit that each has the potential to influence the other. Here the impact of the 'how to' approach associated with IN-Service Training days (INSET) is acknowledged to have ramifications.

The desire for immediacy is particularly apparent in the context of postgraduate study in the field of education where an underpinning engagement with academic literature, and a requirement to evidence reflection on the relevance of that literature to the teaching professional's context, is apparent. Much of this development is undertaken in the professional's own time and, particularly for those new to postgraduate study, an unanticipated and additional need to engage in reflective academic critique can prove problematic. At the heart of the difficulty is the perception that the material offers limited parallels to the activities undertaken within the bounded context of their classroom.

It is for this reason that some Higher Education Institutions have endeavoured to introduce an informal mentoring relationship into their provision (Bentham and Beadle, 2016). Here academically experienced students are encouraged to provide for the benefit of newer students 'warts and all' accounts of their academic learning journeys. The purpose of this input is to narrow the perceived gap between theory and practice. This may not entirely remove the mystique which the newcomer to postgraduate study finds themselves encountering, but there are reports of reassurance being garnered (ibid).

Assurance is of particular note in the context of processual understandings for, as Sergi and Hallin (2011) identify, processual research 'involves challenging institutionalized norms'. Sergi and Hallin (2011) write in the context of academic life and their focus is not on the disruption caused to the institution per se, but on how those within the setting have become accustomed to think. In the context of their focus, there is pressure to conform and action is taken to extinguish non-compliant behaviour. A similar approach is exhibited within the school based community when support for structural approaches to school based enquiry are pursued out of habit, rather than as the result of any conviction with regard to their contemporary value. If those within the academic community struggle to embrace processual approaches, it is not surprising that this struggle should be identified beyond that boundary.

The tendency towards using structural approaches is despite that structural output resulting in what Nayak (2008: 173) terms an 'overly simplistic portrayal of theory construction'. Nevertheless, simplicity is valued and this preference has led to critique of Pettigrew's processual related work (Dawson, 2005). Responding to that debate, Dawson (2005) suggests that the underpinning critical focus is too narrow. He argues that the benefits of the processual approach are broad ranging. He purports that it is, in the light of this approach, permitting an understanding of the numerous impacting factors, often factors which are singularly focused upon by individual professions, that the value of the processual lens becomes apparent. However, whilst Dawson (2005) extends his argument by providing examples of those who might seek a greater understanding of organisational change, the absence of a direct focus on the school context is apparent. Here the profession is, at best, swept up within the broad brush 'and others' phraseology.

In presenting his argument Dawson (2005) does not deny that the processual approach is inherently complex. Furthermore, in emphasising this complexity it is almost inevitable that Dawson's work will have deterred many from exploring the potential to use a processual approach in their examination of change. However, whilst Dawson has played a significant role in publicising the complex nature of the processual approach, he is not alone in having highlighted this complexity. Others putting forward a similar perspective include Morsing (1997), Koivunen (2007) and, more recently, Fearon et al (2013).

With many difficulties apparent, why should the school based research practitioner take the trouble to consider engaging with the processual approach? Despite appearing to have taken a chequered role in furthering the use of this lens, Dawson (1997: 393) suggests that the complexities associated with use of the processual approach are little more than a reflection of 'the interconnected and dynamic processes inherent in everyday life'; a dynamism which this paper has already identified to be evident in the school based context. Furthermore, the processual approach is identified (Dawson, 2003; Fearon et al, 2013) to be cognisant of the needs and priorities of research participants, thus increasing the potential to accurately reflect their perspectives both in account and in the subsequent theorising. It is as a result of the theorising that practical application can take place and thus the value to be offered can be established.

As Yazdifar et al (2012: 46) acknowledge, there is no guarantee of success in effecting organisational change even where 'change initiatives are well established and planned, with a great deal of information, advice and assistance available'. In other words, organisational change may not prove successful even where there appears to be a sound underpinning argument for bringing that change into play. The reality of school life can be far removed from the political positions of key stakeholders. In the context of organisational change, the processual approach is one which responds to, rather glosses over, such influences (Siehl, 1986) and it is this responsive ability, that the apparent 'messiness' in effecting change in a school setting need not be the consequence of an

inherent shortfall in leadership, which contributes to the potential insight to be offered by the processual approach.

### **Finalising the argument for use of the processual approach**

This paper has identified there to be an acknowledged link between robust examination of organisational change and use of the processual approach. Indeed, the processual approach is identified as having the potential to provide a more compelling view of change than that offered by the historically favoured structural lenses of examination. The approach acknowledges the complexities of organisational life and its variant influences. As Dawson (2005: 387) claims, the approach is one which responds to 'the need for a broader understanding of the complex, untidy and messy nature of change'. This is an acknowledgement which highlights that whilst a specific element of change may be of particular focus, such as the implementation of policy, change is a multi-faceted process.

Despite the evident merits of the processual lens, the approach has been identified to be one which has yet to find significant favour within the schools sector. This shortfall, and the contention exhibited through practice that examination of school based change can be robustly addressed using the more historically favoured structural lenses, denies both the sector, the broader research community, but particularly the researching practitioner and their school, the opportunity to derive significant methodological and empirical insight.

The failure to make effective use of the processual approach within the schools sector is surprising, not least because of the extent of school related change which has, and continues to, occur. However, the effect does play into the hands of those imposing change, where power and politics might well be exhibited through covert efforts to limit understanding, particularly of the ramifications of intended or required action. As this paper has identified, understanding has little value unless it is shared. That sharing might well lead to a better informed school teaching community, with the potential ramifications for practice, and action taken, being significant.

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