

Forty years of American education reform through the prism of the DESSI study

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Bio

Founded The NETWORK Inc., a unique nonprofit organization supporting school-based change, dissemination of proven practices, and research utilization in 1969. Over the last forty years, Crandall has been involved in major efforts to use knowledge to improve practice both in the US and internationally. He was a significant actor in the federal National Diffusion Network and Principal Investigator of the well-known Dissemination Efforts Supporting School Improvement (DESSI) study. He and Philip Hallinger created The NETWORK's Leadership Skills Series of computer simulations, including Making Change for School Improvement. More recently, he

and Louise Stoll designed an advanced leadership development simulation, Networking for Learning for England's Education Ministry.

Abstract

Once again, education reform has gained priority status, at least rhetorically, for many of America's political leaders. Sadly, the approach they have taken ignores decades of research about what is necessary to improve practice in classrooms and thus elevate achievement of children.

This paper will revisit the findings of the DESSI study [Dissemination Efforts Supporting School Improvement], a significant empirical research of large scale national efforts to bring about substantial change in school done decades ago with an eye to which of the findings and recommendations then put forward still have salience in today's policy environment. Predictions for future policy priorities will offered.

Support for primary and secondary education has been a noticeable element of US policy for at least the past fifty years. While the primary responsibility for the K-12 system of schooling resides with state and local governments, the small percentage of funds provided by the federal government has given certain priorities prominence over the decades, leveraging action that is far in excess of the actual dollars delivered. As various segments of the population – African-Americans, Hispanics, and the Handicapped - have focused attention on the education of their children through effective political action in Washington DC, funding has been targeted, increased and effectively made a permanent part of the federal budget.

It might seem self-evident from this historical vantage point to expect programs intended to improve the achievement of students to concern themselves with matters of curriculum and instruction and their execution in classrooms by teachers. However, there has been a longstanding ban against sponsoring curriculum development ever since the pictures of an elderly Eskimo grandmother on an ice floe being pushed out to sea by her family were indelibly imprinted on the minds of right-thinking Congressmen during the rollout of MACOS [Man, A Course of Study] in the late 1960s. Their persistent fears of a “national” curriculum constrain government spending on new curricula to this day. Not surprisingly, it wasn’t long before new terminology was invented to mask the true intent of some development efforts that garnered federal funding.

Commercial publishers were, of course, exempt from such restrictions, being profit-making enterprises independent of the government. They became the de facto determiners of how subject matter was captured and conveyed through print and other media. Further, given the devolved nature of the system, coupled with the practice in a few large states [e.g., Texas, Illinois] to require state review and approval of any textbooks offered to local school districts,

the actual nature of the content offered schools nationwide was subject to the decisions of a few simply as an inevitable function of market dynamics.

In addition to providing general funds for education, and in spite of letting the content of curriculum be outsourced to publishers, there have been periodic attempts to encourage innovative approaches that might improve the performance of schools, the most notable of which was ESEA Title III. The underlying philosophy of Title III was “to let a thousand flowers bloom”. Local schools were encouraged to try out creative ways of helping children learn to read, write and compute. Over its decades of funding, the program spawned innovation in virtually every state in the country.

Naturally, there was some interest on the part of the bureaucrats overseeing the program to know if any of these innovative attempts actually succeeded in improving student performance. Hence, an evaluation component was an element called for in the applications for funding that local schools submitted for funding consideration. However, the proportion of funds allocated to this task was generally minimal and the evaluations were typically meager in their reports, serving largely as administrative boxes to be checked off when renewal proposals were submitted. Nonetheless, there were exceptions among the myriad of local experiments. These were able to provide persuasive data of the effectiveness of particular approaches in realizing their improvement objectives. This data would, it turned out, serve them well when the inevitable end of ESEA Title III arrived.

Most federal education programs have limited lives and Title III was no exception. As its termination loomed in the mid-70s, its program managers in Washington formulated a grants competition that they saw as their “last hurrah”. The clumsily named “OE Diffusion-Adoption

Network”, invited applicants to propose to either become Developer-Demonstrators [aka DDs] or State Facilitators [aka SFs]. Aspiring DDs were required to pass muster with the federal Dissemination Review Panel [DRP] which used evidence of effectiveness as the primary criterion to allay concern about the quality of what would be disseminated. SFs were state-based entities charged with introducing the funded DDs to their states local education authorities. The initial plan had inadvertently built in a fundamental contradiction in that the two types of projects were funded simultaneously but the SFs were left without a roster of approved projects until all applicant DDs had come before the DRP and been deemed acceptable. This anomaly, when discovered, did serve as justification for extending the initial brief life of the enterprise.

Once the projects were funded and it became clear that educators from all over the country were involved, the basis for a persuasive grassroots lobbying effort was obvious and soon followed. Once organized, it sustained what had been envisioned as a one year, one time celebration and reward for past success into a robust and renamed National Diffusion Network [aka NDN] for twenty years. What was, and remains to this day, perhaps the most successful federal effort to bring effective classroom practices to schools nationwide was ended in 1995 as part of the cutbacks made by the Republican Congress led by the crafty Newt Gingrich, who has just launched his most recent “scampaign” purporting to be about gaining the Republican Presidential nomination.

[Note: I cannot claim a lack of self-interest when it comes to the NDN as I and/or my organization, The NETWORK Inc., served as the SF for Massachusetts, hosted a DD project, provided technical assistance to DDs nationally and led the Dissemination Efforts Supporting School Improvement [DESSI] research effort though not the NDN component. Also, I claim some personal credit for giving the enterprise a name that looked better on a letterhead or bumper sticker than the original.]

The DESSI study was a multi-faceted inquiry that examined alternate approaches to getting innovative practices and/or materials into the hands of local educators. Among the approaches that had enjoyed support, if not success of mission, from the federal Office of Education were those that believed commercial publishers were the best medium to deliver new materials to schools; those that believed state education agencies, given their legal responsibilities, were best positioned to take on an assistance role to help local schools improve; and those that felt the sunk investment in innovation projects could best be leveraged by providing additional resources to support the development of training materials and travel outside their home location to locally created and proven projects.

DESSI faced many methodological challenges, particularly in finding a way to gather valid data on projects that ran the gamut from tiny single ingredient successes to total school transformations. The breakthrough creation was the Practice Profile methodology that enabled the core components of an innovation to be specified in behaviorally observable terms allowing comparison of the disparate innovations using advanced statistical methods. The real world test of these profiles, which were formulated in collaboration with the original developers, was “If you were in a helicopter hovering over this classroom/school, what would you need to see happening for you to affirm that that new site was indeed enacting your practices/project as you intend?” The profiles offered a means of assigning not only correctness and completeness, but also fidelity. More than sixty projects were thus recast into formats that could be used for comparison to prior practice, extent of implementation, degree of fidelity, etc.

At the heart of the practice profile methodology was a recognition that previous studies of innovations had revealed numerous examples of false positives where reports of successful implementation of a new practice were subsequently revealed to have been instances where the

language and lexicon of the new had become the new normal while the behaviors that were the change-inducing elements of the innovation were absent. This phenomenon was given humorous life in the depiction of a fictitious Mrs. Oublier, a prototypic research subject who had perfected all the relevant buzz words of the new practice but upon observation was carrying on as before, however competently.

Another variant found that in many instances the everyday practices were already those advocated by the innovation, but with new descriptions. This all too typical case results in scarce professional development time and resources being squandered on those who are already accomplished the desired outcomes while depriving those who hadn't of more focused assistance. None of these were instances of intentional masquerading; the teachers sincerely believed they had taken the innovation on board and incorporated the desired new practices.

Thus, for future efforts, a way of assessing the probable fit between an innovation and an intended adopter is crucial. Further, because only big changes are worth doing in a resource constrained environment, and demanding changes call for extensive and intensive pressure and support, careful thought needs to be given to what gets supported by initiatives intended to lead to impressive improvements in performance.

If DESSI proved anything, it proved that it is possible to take well-developed classroom practices, tease out the critical ingredients which, if implemented with relative fidelity hold reasonable promise of yielding comparable improvements in student performance, and transfer those practices from an originating site to many adopting sites. However, the greater the “magnitude of practice change” or how different the new is from the old, as well as how demanding the implementation requirements are, will determine the nature and extent of

assistance needed in new settings. Further, we discovered that external assistance working in concert with internal actors offers the most sure-fire support approach and, if the changes called for are truly significant, continuing commitment to the new practice [aka pressure] by formal leaders is imperative.

The NDN had the benefit of years of prior federal support for innovative Title III projects to draw on in building its pool of proven practices. Now, it is possible that recent decades have not produced a comparable group of potential exemplars. Indeed, the emphasis of national policy for the past ten years has been on standards, testing and accountability, not innovation in practice. However, it is at the chalk face that the most meaningful action affecting student performance takes place. One might be excused for wondering what sort of magical thinking has captured policymakers who claim to want to see improved student performance, even if it is represented by the distant proxy of a test score, but don't focus directly on what the teacher actually does. I submit that the most recent reformers are sincere and well-intentioned; they just don't understand schools and teachers very well.

But perhaps I'm being unfair. After all, the conventional wisdom guiding national policy assumes that most teachers are well-intentioned and want to do right by their students, and you establish high standards for them to teach to, and you tell them they will be punished if their students don't reach those standards, shouldn't improvement follow? Hmm, it doesn't? What's missing? Maybe teachers don't have data that tells them how well or poorly their students are doing. That's it, let's collect student data and establish data warehouses, train educators in data analysis and use, and watch the scores go up. Excuse me for being a skeptic, but I don't think so.

I challenge an advocate of the current predilection to see data analysis as a powerful tool to effect change in teacher behavior to ask a sample of teachers whether having more or better data, regardless of how clearly it's presented, if that would be a big help to them in accelerating their student's learning. Certainly, our work all across the country, in both assistance and research capacities, persuaded us that most teachers truly do want to do better by their kids. Further, they know which kids are doing well or poorly already. Most are even capable of assessing exactly what the problem areas are, especially if they've been exposed to just a fraction of what every learning disabilities teacher learns. However, they are working as hard as they can. Thus, exhorting them to do more of the same thing is not likely to change much. Motivation is not their problem. **THEY JUST DON'T KNOW HOW TO ACT DIFFERENTLY!** If they did, don't you think they'd already be doing so?

Center to periphery policies, such as tough standards coupled with high stakes testing and sanctions for poor performance can indeed produce focused behavior, as it has in the UK and many states. However, after a few years of increased attention to the basics, a performance plateau is almost inevitable. In America, where many states developed standards that were hardly world class and also established tough accountability rules that punished poor performance, all too often the result was often cheating by teachers and administrators. Indeed, the so-called "Texas Miracle" touted by former President George W. Bush, which provided a major impetus for the current test-focused policies tying teacher retention and reward to student scores, was revealed to be a hoax. Similarly, and screamingly ironic, similar disparities between the rhetoric and reality in Chicago have been uncovered. So we have the second Secretary of Education brought to Washington from the home state they and the winning candidate share whose much touted record of success has been shown to be a chimera. Yet no change in policy

has been made; the accountability train left the station too long ago and has picked up too much speed to be slowed by challenges to its underlying assumptions and damaging consequences in school after school. If anything, President Obama has doubled down on these misguided policies and additional billions are being spent, most likely for naught. Except that the big corporations who favor an education system that prioritizes work force preparation will get their way, as in so many other arenas.

The current initiatives coming out of Washington hang their hats on policy changes that attempt to influence teacher effectiveness without offering those that are willing alternatives to their current practice. The only good news is the apparent focus on teachers, although it is concentrated on the test scores they are able to wring out of their charges, not what they teach, the curriculum, or how they teach it, instruction. It is also saddled with a disabling condition, as is all policy. Namely, the well documented inevitability of policy intents being distorted as they move from superior to subordinate levels [and here we have federal to state, state to district, district to school, school to classroom levels to move through], the principal innovation that the current administration favors seems to be data use as a lever, however weak, to change classroom practice. As already noted, the odds of success are long.

But, the money has been distributed. There may well be more to follow. Proposals will be written and evaluated. Decisions will be made. Funds allocated. Teachers and principals will be fired or moved around. Reams of data will be collected, stored, retrieved, analyzed and studied by committed teachers, who will have spent precious professional development time learning to understand data about children they already understand instead of finding about alternatives that might actually give them something different to try in their classrooms. And, for most children, what will change? Nothing.