

## **Challenges to Education Change and Reform**

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### **Bio**

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Abstract

There is no more compelling discourse in education policy, and indeed practice, than the discourse around education change. For once, this is a challenge for both developed and developing country systems. There is thus no ready made template for successful change. The other interesting feature is that in spite of resources and effort put into facilitating change, the results have been largely disappointing. In this paper we will explore and seek to better understand why change has been slow and what, going forward, we need to do. We will, among other aspects, look at the relevance and role of research, the impact of the economic competitiveness rhetoric that is used to justify change, the links between policy formulation and implementation, and finally, the role of teachers.

## Introduction

There is more compelling discourse in education today than the discourse around education change and reform. From developed to developing countries, from the United States to Zambia, from Finland to Chile, policy elites are busy figuring out how to reform their education system. Even in countries where economic pressures are not severe, as in the Gulf states in the Middle East, the rhetoric is about change.

There are several questions that will frame and guide this discussion:

1. Is the concern with the education change new? If not, is there some fundamental difference in the ways we view change?
2. Given that we have seen a half century of rapid modernisation in education provision and increased research sophistication, why are we struggling with change?
3. The most extensive body of empirical research is in the developed countries. Could Asia-Pacific education problems be better dealt with if we 'borrowed' more from the West?
4. Most reform agendas are driven by and rationalised on economic grounds. Is this a problem, and if yes, why? What sort of a balance should there be between education values and market values in considering reform agendas?
5. Most reform initiatives are initiated by civil servants in ministries of education. Do they know enough of the processes of schooling, of teachers' work, of school culture and institutional imperatives? Would better policy be made if there was wider consultation and involvement?
6. Since teachers are the key implementers of the reform agenda, how can they be better involved, supported?

***1. Is the concern with the education change new? If not, is there some fundamental difference in the ways we view change?***

It is often assumed that education change is a new, untested process. But that is not the case. At all major transformations in human history e.g. when agricultural economies moved towards industrial economies, new skill sets and dispositions were required. This was the trigger for the emergence of mass-oriented industrial models of schooling. A trigger, in

the United States case, was the USSR's launch of Sputnik which resulted in a new emphasis on science, technology and mathematics in the school curriculum. Today, with China's emergence as the world's second largest economy, home to the world's fastest supercomputer and (very) high speed trains, President Obama is calling this the United States' second Sputnik moment.

2. ***Given that we have seen a half century of rapid modernisation in education provision and increased research sophistication, why are we struggling with change?***

So while change, major or minor, in one shape or the other has always been with us, is the present different? I believe it is. The world's economy is more extensively transnational-global than ever before. National segments remain - some countries refuse non-national control over strategic assets and industries, like mineral resources in Australia. However the production, distribution and marketing processes are truly global. Advances in communication technology have facilitated this change, both in the nature of the production processes, and the nature of goods and services produced.

It is these changes that make the present context for education change different.

3. ***The most extensive body of empirical research is in the developed countries. Could Asia-Pacific education problems be better dealt with if we 'borrowed' more from the West?***

So, if change is not new, and as a learning species, we must have learnt from previous occasions, why are we facing difficulties in the change process? There are many possible explanations. One is that, unlike previous eras where one could borrow from developed systems, today both developed and developing countries are facing similar challenges - another example of globalisation. Indeed, we are already seeing policy makers from the West travel to Japan, Korea, China, Singapore to 'learn how you do it'. A second reason may be that while the West took almost two centuries to develop the industrial model education system - and through the process of colonising exported it to the colonies - today our

experience in understanding what the global socio-economic-cultural environments are all about and fashioning education responses is at most a three-decade endeavour. We are being rushed into making changes.

It is true that there is a considerable body of education research. Over time, this research has grown in sophistication, even borrowing some ideas from medical research. There is now more capacity for the analysis of large data sets. There is also more cross-national sharing of research findings. And yet, even in the developed West, it would appear that research has little impact on policy formulation and classroom practice. At the policy level, the imperatives that drive policy formulation may have more to do with ideology, resource constraints, political expediency, inability to reach consensus with key stakeholders etc. Research also seems to have little impact on classroom practice; researches often do not draw out implications for practice nor seem to accord much importance to the constraints implicit in many classroom settings. But perhaps, the most important reason for avoiding extensive uncritical borrowing from the West is that education is a social enterprise, and history, culture, national characteristics play a major role in the formulation of policy and how teachers view their responsibilities and relations with students. If research knowledge is to be used to facilitate change, then an indigenous knowledge base that reflects national realities is needed.

**4. *Most reform agendas are driven by and rationalised on economic grounds. Is this a problem, and if yes, why? What sort of a balance should there be between education values and market values in considering reform agendas?***

A major feature of the globalised world is heightened economic competitiveness between nations. Increased mobility of capital and talent puts pressure on nations to be attractive locations for capital and talent. The increased importance of knowledge in the production process requires a highly skilled workforce. Thus, it is not surprising that a market-oriented ideology is becoming apparent in policy discourses and formulation.

Increased willingness to privatise education provision, to develop performance targets, use financial incentives like vouchers, gain international recognition through branding exercises are all examples of such an orientation. But this process is problematic, it treats both individuals (students) and the aims of education in purely instrumental terms, as means to an end. Education values, such as respect for the rights and dignity of individuals, inclusiveness, collegiality, etc. are unimportant if it impedes academic, and later economic success. Even though there may be short term gains, they are unlikely to be sustained over the long term.

5. ***Most reform initiatives are initiated by civil servants in ministries of education. Do they know enough of the processes of schooling, of teachers' work, of school culture and institutional imperatives? Would better policy be made if there was wider consultation and involvement?***

Policies for reform are typically formulated at a central HQ level and intended to be implemented in a range of school settings. This is understandable but probably not a very effective way to pursue sustainable reform. There are 'two cultures' at work here. At the policy maker level, there is the preoccupation with stakeholders, resourcing limitations, the political salience of proposed changes, and limited knowledge and understanding of life in classrooms. Policy, by definition, is conceived of in system-wide terms. But at the teacher-implementer level, a different set of conditions and imperatives prevail. Teachers have to make sense of new policy requirements in the context of their everyday routines. They may lack the skills, and the schools the resources to make the change. They may not fully understand the rationale for the change, and/or they may disagree with the change proposals. These differences mean that if teachers are not brought early into discussions when policy changes are being considered, they will run a greater risk of failure.

6. ***Since teachers are the key implementers of the reform agenda, how can they be better involved, supported?***

Teachers' primary concerns are with the day-to-day challenges of instruction and general pupil welfare, often in difficult circumstances, in under resourced schools, often in communities with a range of problems caused by poverty. Some have not had adequate preparation and have difficulty in helping their students achieve national literacy and numeracy standards. Yet the reform agenda calls for preparing students to be independent learners, be problem solvers, use technology, be effective communicators, etc. While teachers can understand the rationales for change, they need capacity building to change their pedagogies, time and resources to implement these new technologies and leadership and community support to implement the changes. These are often promised but seldom effectively delivered.

It is important to understand that teacher dominated classrooms, a transmissive pedagogy and rote learning on the part of students are functional responses to a set of schooling challenges. They cannot be removed at the stroke of a (policy) pen. Change will take time, effort, persistence, and above all sustained encouragement and support.

The only successful change strategy is to understand what teachers do and help them to do what they (and we, as policy makers) want.