
What do you see as the most pressing promising educational change innovations and what role does/should research play in relation to such innovations?

In my teaching about educational change I tell the story of an evening when, as a graduate student, I was at a dinner party sitting next to the husband of another student. I learned that he worked as a chemist at a soap manufacturing firm. He was one of 20 chemists working for this company and his job was to discover ways to improve the cleaning power of the laundry soap that they produced. Furthermore, he often had to compete with the other chemists for funding for his experiments. I left that evening with a sense of confidence that when his company advertised a new improved product it likely was “new” on the market, it likely did represent an “improvement” in its power to clean my clothes and it was likely to yield similar results in different homes and cities. That conversation got me thinking about what we mean when we talk about “innovations” and change in education. I realized that many of the common sense notions of what constitutes an innovation, as exemplified in my laundry soap story, do not necessarily apply to what are often called innovations in education, most particularly, innovations in teaching and learning.

First, they may be “new” for educators in a specific context who are trying to change what they have been doing, but represent an attempt to replicate conventional knowledge and practice elsewhere. Small group cooperative learning strategies, for example, are new for teachers in many developing countries where I have worked, but they have a long history of development, dissemination and practice in North American schools and classrooms that dates back to at least the 1970’s. New for the people doing it the first time, but not so new in the world. The current world-wide rhetoric and interest in identifying and scaling up “best practices” in education is largely about diffusion and replication of existing practices, not about the invention of “new practices” in
teaching and learning or leadership.

Second, it is important to understand what counts as “new” from the perspective of a practicing teacher. For my doctoral research more than 30 years ago I wanted to investigate how elementary school teachers and principals were managing the implementation of multiple innovations.¹ When I piloted my teacher interview I began by asking teachers what innovations in curriculum and teaching they had been implementing over the past two years. The word “innovation” elicited puzzled looks, so I rephrased the question to “What changes in curriculum and teaching….?” That elicited responses like “Well, I haven’t changed anything but I’m doing X new program or Y new teaching strategy”. These teachers were not talking about replacing past practices with others, they were talking about adding new techniques or even programs to their existing repertoire of teaching methods and existing programs. In a practical sense, innovations in teaching and learning might be partially defined as potential changes or additions to the existing practices of teachers in specific school and classroom contexts.

Whether new practices introduced in schools or classrooms result in improvements in practice and outcomes, however, cannot simply be predicted from the ardent beliefs of advocates for those practices nor even from prior experiences with those practices in other settings. The classic implementation studies of the 1970s and 1980s irrefutably demonstrated that the implementation of new policies, programs and practices is an implementation dominant, not a technology dominant, process² due to variability in contextual circumstances and implementation support and to modifications that educators inevitably make as they learn to use and adapt new knowledge into their existing patterns of beliefs and practice and workplace conditions.

In contrast to my soap suds parable, the results of transferring and implementing an educational program or practice from one setting to another are unpredictable, even for so called “best practices”. So I would amend my working definition of “innovation” in education to “changes or additions to the existing practices of teachers in specific school and classroom contexts that have the potential to improve the quality of teaching and learning based on prior use in other settings, whether under experimental or natural conditions.”

Most so-called innovations in education do not arise from formal and systematic experimentation in classrooms and schools, notwithstanding contemporary demands internationally for randomized control trials to empirically demonstrate the effectiveness of selected classroom and school practices. I do not think for a moment that “the most powerful innovations” are only those whose positive effects have been demonstrated under experimental conditions, nor should the education community wait for that. That is certainly a role that research can play on a limited basis to help confirm or disconfirm the proclaimed benefits of selected promising practices despite the fact that the challenges of replicating those practices in additional settings cannot be guaranteed when positive effects are documented.

A related role that research can play is in helping identify promising practices in the first place, which might then be subjected to some more rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental research studies. A third role is to conduct investigations of efforts to scale up the implementation of innovations identified as promising practices in order to help discover what local conditions and interventions hinder and facilitate replication and the accomplishment of the kinds of positive results associated with them.

This brings us to another focus and category of “powerful innovations” that require serious
attention by policy makers, practitioners and researchers alike, namely the support systems for implementation of innovations in curriculum, teaching and learning. Without effective support system policies, structures and practices in place the prospects for successful implementation and continuation of pedagogical innovations is essentially nil, regardless of scale (individual classroom, school, school district, system).

We have educational research to thank for the well-established knowledge about the characteristics of effective in-service training design; the importance and characteristics of professional collaboration amongst teachers in schools for teacher learning and student results; and the kinds of school leadership practices associated with successful implementation of productive changes in classroom practice and student learning.

After about 35 years of studying, consulting and teaching about educational change, I have come to a frustrating but pragmatic conclusion that the knowledge base on educational change, particularly on effective support for educational change, is not inherently cumulative, at least in the arena of policy and practice. With every major shift in policy and practice we seem to rediscover and reconfirm much of what past research has already revealed about implementing and supporting innovations in curriculum, teaching and learning albeit within the changing organizational, policy and technology contexts of education practice in schools. I would argue that another role of research is to sustain an empirically-grounded discourse on the educational change process for new generations of policy makers and practitioners who may be prone to ignore the lessons from the past amidst their optimism and enthusiasm for the innovations of the present.

When I think about my years observing and talking with teachers implementing new programs and practices in the classroom, one recurrent finding that stands out is that even when teachers succeed in adopting and implementing new programs and practices into their instructional routines, they often do so at what I call sub-optimal levels of implementation. That is, they incorporate these innovations into their ongoing practice but often at superficial levels of understanding and skill. As a result, the potential learning benefits for students are diminished.

Routinization can be accompanied by a personal sense of mastery regardless of the level of expertise. As a golfer I am happy if I break a score of 100 and I do not really aspire to be more effective! The pressure on teachers to deepen their expertise, whether externally or self-imposed, often subsides when teachers can at least show that they are implementing new programs and practices. I do not mean this as a criticism, more as an observation of what I have witnessed over the years in the classroom, including the integration of new teaching methods into my own teaching at the university. I am not convinced that improvement in the education system requires radical new methods of teaching and learning so much as devoting more support to strengthening teachers’ expertise in what they are already doing, but maybe not doing so well.

Long-time observers and scholars of educational change, such as Richard Elmore and Michael Fullan, argue that high quality in teaching and learning depends in large measure on creating the conditions under which...
teachers become progressively better at teaching all the students in their school. This is most likely to occur when teachers collaboratively study the results of what they do and support one another in refining current practices, creating new ones or adopting promising practices from elsewhere based on their investigations in their school of what is working well for whom and what is not for specific learning objectives.

Perhaps the most significant role that research can play in supporting powerful innovation and improvement in teaching and learning rests less on research conducted by external researchers like myself, than on strengthening the motivation, capacity and working conditions for practicing teachers to conduct their own investigations of learning in their schools. However, the challenges of institutionalizing professional norms, capacity and organizational conditions for this kind of activity into teachers’ professional work in schools are not simple.

I admit that I have only read about Japanese lesson study and about system-wide norms and practices of school-based action research by teachers in Singapore. From what I have read these seem to be examples of how the professional work of teachers in schools can be organized and supported to achieve this kind of in situ development of greater pedagogical expertise on a system basis.

The prospects for school-wide improvement in teaching and learning are also strongly dependent on teacher consensus on priorities for student learning and on coherence in practice within and across grade levels in different subject areas. In my view the most powerful educational change innovations are ones which classroom teachers and supportive school leaders are working on implementing together in their schools. One implication and eventual result of collaboration on goals and practice at the school and at system levels is greater coherence but also homogenization of practice within and across schools. I do not have a problem with that if the result is that teachers are more likely to follow through with the implementation of innovations directed towards specific gaps in student learning and to deepen their expertise in the use of those innovations if justified by outcomes. In my life as an education change researcher I have never encountered teachers in schools who complained that their professionalism was stifled by implementation of common programs and teaching practices that produce good results for students. Teachers’ sense of efficacy is clearly linked to positive results.

Another pervasive challenge to education reform and improvement in my view is the problem of how to effectively manage the rate and consequences of teacher and principal turnover in schools. High rates of turnover, particularly in schools serving the most challenging student populations in socio-economically disadvantaged communities, present a serious obstacle to the implementation and sustainability of school improvement efforts. Teachers and principals new to the school will not necessarily share the same commitment to existing directions and plans for school improvement, and the teachers are unlikely to benefit from the same intensity and quality of in-service training in the implementation of prior common expectations for instructional practice across the school as their predecessors.

We do not have enough research-based evidence on how to effectively manage teacher and principal turnover in ways that acknowledge a certain amount of turnover as normal, but without disrupting positive histories of improvement in school effectiveness where they are happening. My belief is that the solution lies less in principal leadership than in developing norms, teacher capacity and working conditions that support continuous improvement in practice as an
expectation for teacher professionalism that are sustainable regardless of turnover at the principal level and that, at the same time, make schools into professional workplaces where teachers are more likely to remain than to leave. I also think that the challenges of turnover are probably best addressed at the school district level.

Your report Beyond Islands of Excellence examines the role of school districts in school improvement. What can school districts do to improve teaching and learning in every school?

Beyond Islands of Excellence marked a significant evolutionary point in my research on educational change from the individual teacher and classroom, to the whole school, to the school district as the unit of change and factors that facilitate and inhibit change. This was also a significant dimension of the research on leadership and student learning that I conducted with colleagues from OISE and the University of Minnesota for the Wallace Foundation in 43 school districts across nine states.

From my own investigations and from my review of research on the district role in educational change I am convinced that school districts and similar intermediary levels of school system governance, management and support services in education can make a significant difference in improving and sustaining the quality of teaching and learning in multiple schools in ways that are practically beyond the direct capacity of state or national education agencies and beyond the individual capacity of single schools.

School districts where the quality of student learning is positive and/or improving across most schools tend to be characterized by district leaders and staff who believe strongly in the capacity of teachers and principals to deliver quality education and in the district’s capacity to develop the organizational conditions for that to happen. They are able to build consensus around core expectations for professional practice (curriculum, teaching and leadership) and to differentiate support to schools according to their particular characteristics, strengths and challenges. They set clear expectations for school leadership and create leadership development systems to select, train and assist principals and teacher leaders. They maintain a clear focus on the quality of student learning and its improvement, and develop local strategies for ongoing local inquiry into challenges for student learning and program implementation, including organized opportunities for teachers and principals to interact across schools in the common pursuit of excellence and improvement in teaching and learning. These are also districts in which different central office units are working coherently in coordination with one and other and the schools they serve towards common goals.

At the same time, I believe that school districts need to be sufficiently large and sufficiently resourced to have the internal human resource capacity to actually fulfill that kind of role. I do not think this kind of intermediary role can be effectively developed and carried out by thousands of mostly rural school districts that consist of little more than one high school and one to three elementary and middle schools which still exist in many regions of the United States (e.g., Texas has over 1000 school districts; Nebraska has over 500 districts) and that are staffed by little more than a superintendent, one or two curriculum and special education professionals, and a team of principals with additional “system” responsibilities.

I do not believe that large-scale improvement in education is feasible and sustainable in most countries without a well-developed professional intermediary level of school system management and support. I am not keen on organizational models that are
emerging in some jurisdictions in the US and internationally that relegate the role of school districts to contracting professional support services from external agencies. The future of public education in my view requires strengthening commitment to professionalism at all levels of the system.

You have been a strong supporter of public education. Can public education fulfill the promise of quality education for all students? Why and how?

The well-being and survival of public education is a political not a technical problem. I am not an advocate for large scale privatization of education and the diversion of public funds to that end. We do have examples internationally of robust national (e.g., Finland, Singapore) or state/provincial level (e.g., Ontario, Alberta) education systems that, at least according to PISA-type indicators, are succeeding in providing mass public education at the system level without resorting to or succumbing to political interests from some quarters in opening the policy doors and public coffers to greater privatization. In the United States many examples of exemplary and improving school districts can be found that are doing a good job serving all students, though all of them would recognize that there is still work to be done.

What we do not have are examples of large scale privatization initiatives that “fulfill the promise of quality education for all students.” Where privatization policies and the diversion of public funds to private education providers have occurred on a large scale, the end result as reflected in comparative research on those initiatives is an increase in the inequities between the quality of education provision to students from low income and other marginalized families and to those who can afford private provision.

Perhaps I am just a nostalgic hippie from the 1960s but I do not believe that the potential to provide a quality education for all will be well served by supplanting the “common good” with the “profit good”. Failed business abound. Why should we expect private provision of K-12 education to be more effective or efficient than public education providers just because they are private?

At the same time, I recognize that in some contexts, particularly in some developing countries, government funded and managed K-12 public education systems are failing in their mandate to provide a quality basic education to all due to a combination of issues related to funding, infrastructure, human resource development and capacity, corruption, professional support systems, community support, high levels of poverty and other social and economic factors and the list goes on. Privatization is not a solution to these problems, but one can understand its appeal as an alternative to dysfunctional systems. That said, I still believe that the ideal of a well-developed well-resourced universal public education system should be attainable in all contexts where the political will exists to invest in making it work and to engage in processes of continuous inquiry, deliberation and action on directions and plans for improvement.

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