INSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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“A man may well bring a horse to the water, But he cannot make him drinke without he will.”

When John Heywood wrote his proverb in the 1500s, he may well have been thinking of the transition from development to implementation in curriculum change. Developers invent, policymakers dispose, but school people — teachers, students, and principals — energize and transform. Unless they drinke of the waters, the desired transformations from what is to what might be will never occur.

This article addresses several aspects of Hawaii’s experience with this most critical phase of the entire curriculum development chain — getting school people to use the new ideas and products. What can be presented here is only a distillation of many complex events covering a decade’s span and, like all distillations, may have lost some precious essences in evaporation. But each drop adds to our combined pool of knowledge of this crucial stage. And the object of that knowledge, I think, is to make the waters so palatable that all brought to them will happily drinke!

By any standards, Hawaii’s achievement in implementing major curricula in elementary English, Japanese, and the arts; in intermediate science; and in music K-12 is an impressive success story. But it has not been an easy achievement. Every one of our projects in different degree has had its share of the standard fare for all reforms: conflict and struggle, failure and disappointment, and for some, even the threat of extinction. Although support from many quarters has been unflagging, we have had to maintain our own continuity — or swing helplessly betweentimes in a succession of six superintendents and three acting superintendents in ten years; we have been mired in bureaucratic inertia and resistance at critical points; we have been polite combatants in family feuds in our own college; we have faced distrustful administrators, indifferent or hostile teachers, and even more hostile parents; and in working with the bureaucracy and at the same time exerting pressure on it for change, we have been in the difficult position of holding with the hare and running with the hound (borrowing more four-footed creatures from John Heywood).

Yet, for all the difficulties, the programs we have developed are making a difference for many children in what they learn and how they learn, and for teachers, too, in what they teach and how they teach. Hopefully, also, the new programs are making a difference for children in the pleasure they take in learning, and for teachers in the satisfactions they derive from a renewal of their teaching.

The implementation stage covers a number of major operations: formal approval or adoption by the decisionmakers; information dissemination, installation planning and budgeting; procurement and publication; teacher training and continuing support; program monitoring, maintenance, and renewal. Summative evaluation is also part of implementation, but this subject and that of procurement will not be dealt with here.

Our several projects went about these operations in different ways, and each fared differently. Artists in the Schools, the first of our programs, moved smoothly through the approval mechanism and was well received. Not only did it bring dancers, actors, poets, and painters into the schools to weave their magic and relieve teachers for a period; it challenged no vested interest, threatened no teacher, required no training, involved no new materials. Today, eight years later, it is still giving delight and, by all indications, will continue to do so indefinitely.

The science project FAST went the grassroots way. It obtained Board of Education approval as an alternate program but sought no formal
adoption by that body. Starting on a modest scale, the developers kept control of implementation and supervision, placing the program only with schools and teachers wanting it. They presented no outsized budget, kept costs within the schools' normal budget; they printed their own materials, trained the teachers, drew in key College of Education science staff; they established a close support and communication network through newsletters, field visitations, and careful followup, and carried out self-supporting summer science courses to build interest in the program. They wisely let the program and its adopters do the selling, with the result that in less than five years, without fuss and fanfare, FAST is now the major science program in the state's junior high schools.

The largest project of them all, the Hawaii English Program (HEP), fared very differently. Here was a new program calling for radical changes in teacher and pupil behaviors; in language arts content; in instructional technologies; in classroom organization and pupil grouping; in training requirements. It asked teachers to give up the familiar phonics, the comfortable textbook and workbook; instead to trust to controversial linguistic approaches, non-text modes, and single copies of trade books; and above all to trust the child's ability to make educational decisions of his own. In short, the program's very nature made its acceptance by teachers and college trainers an uncertain one.

To make its way harder, management decisions for implementation were ill-advised. The developers' plans for a slower-paced, tighter, voluntary installation were ignored. Instead, the program was broadcast statewide into every one of 136 elementary schools. This set the pattern for a highly visible budget request for every legislative session, adding to the hazards the program faced. The installation was mandated by the Board without a parallel requirement for teacher training. No lead time was allowed for procurement of materials, or for streamlining and debugging the finished program. After one summer of extensive
teacher training, further training activities were
suspended for two summers while the state
passed through a fiscal crisis and its first
collective bargaining contract with teachers.

HEP is a study in bigness, of too much too
soon. By every principle laid out for planned
change, it should be defunct by now. Yet it is very
much alive, a decade after its initial conception,
five years and ten million dollars into
implementation, and, for all the problems that
have plagued it, indubitably here to stay.

What of value have we learned from these varied
experiences about the dynamics of getting new
curricula to children, of getting them used
effectively by teachers?

First of all, we are positive that systematic
large-scale development and installation hold the
best promise for change over all other models of
curriculum change. The more radical the change,
the more organized and longer should be the
change effort. This is true of the local scene as
well as the national. Innovations by individual
teachers, teacher committees, or schools rarely
reach exportable stage. Even those supported over
several years by that best subsidized of federal
programs, Title I, rarely extend beyond the single
classroom. Our experience is clear that even with
the problems of bigness, the potential for taking
education in desired policy directions is greatest
when talents, energies, and money are centralized
in fewer but larger efforts covering a longer period
of time.

On the other hand, there is a problem of scale
that cannot be ignored. To be effective, the project
cannot be too small, but neither can it be too big.
There are natural geographic/social/political limits
beyond which the communication of intent and
fidelity of ideas begin to bog down, and
implementation efforts do not pay off. A point of
diminishing returns is reached. This was
demonstrated not only in the local installation of
HEP, but also in its attempts to implant authentic
models in California and the South Pacific. The
cost in staff energies has had the net effect of
robbing the Hawaii installation.

Time is also critical: time for shaking-down,
debugging, getting teachers and parents
comfortable, and separating the effects of the
change from those generated by the friction of
getting it established. In short, time for a fair test,
and perspective to assess long-term benefits and
effects of the change on the various outcomes of
schooling.

Our experience also shows that there is greater
desire and willingness for risk-taking in new
educational ventures within schools than the
literature seems to indicate. I am speaking here of curriculum changes, not of structural or delivery system changes that alter radically the locus of control in the schools. The literature on change tends to overrate the institutional constraints against change. The market analogy is often cited to explain why schools are slow to change, disposed only toward innovations perceived as safe or as prestigious by the elite group. Generally this may be true. Left to their own resources, schools may tend to react in predictable ways to stress-producing changes. However, there are enough counterforces within the system favorably disposed to curriculum change that, once identified and organized, they can motivate the implementation of fairly radical changes.

Put another way, schools are not passive recipients of change. The dynamics of implementation involve a potent mix of factors which makes the school anything but a passive adopter. The nature of the innovation, its importance as perceived by the teacher, the approach to implementation, the organizational climate, the staff's professionalism, the proportion of young teachers to the "old guard," the quality of key leaders, pupils' reception, parent attitudes, the time available for planning, the degree of staff involvement in the development stage — these factors and many others form a mix which determines how well the implementation proceeds. The project staff needs to work closely with the schools to determine their makeup.

We have noted that the dynamics of implementation differ from those of approval or adoption at the policy level. In FAST, for example, implementation at the teacher level went smoothly, whereas the approval process at top and middle management and board levels met with obstacles. With HEP, the top policy levels (board and legislature) were supportive throughout, while middle management and school-level management were considerably less supportive. Among teachers, some 89 percent expressed preference for it, but a small and extremely vocal minority continues to raise 99 percent of the opposition. We have had instances of the principal deciding to adopt, while his faculty leaned the other way; and the converse, where the teachers brought a reluctant principal around.

Teachers as a group, we have found, are far more open to change than is commonly believed. Given opportunities for training, particularly if supported by such incentives as free tuition, released time from teaching duties, professional recognition, and participation as partners in the process of change, most teachers will opt for change. After all, what human being does not welcome freshness, new perspectives? If the changes are profound, teachers want assurances of safeguards and greater incentives, but teacher resistance to change is largely a myth.

Out of our experiences in the teacher training arena, we have come to view the general preparation of teachers from the particular perspective of curriculum change. The conventional approach assumes that given principles and a survey of methods, the teacher will be able to handle anything encountered in the field, including the adapting of extant materials and the creation of new.

We find otherwise. The teacher trained thoroughly in a well-designed, specific program developed from theory is more likely to use that as a springboard for change and growth than the teacher given an exposure to many different curricula. We find also that teachers trained well in a new curriculum make the best trainers of other teachers. Some of them develop design competencies and are picked up by the projects. Others move up the ladder. In the schools they often form pockets of ferment around which improvement activities revolve. On advisory councils they make excellent spokesmen for the research and development movement. If we could call the shots, we would organize the major part of all current preservice programs around significant change efforts going on or projected for the public schools.

A central element of the dynamics of implementation is the close collaboration, from start to finish, of every group involved in the change process. Perhaps collaboration is the key element in Hawaii's success. It obtains in the formal institutional agreement which brings the school system and the University together into a cooperative working arrangement; it obtains in the
way we work closely with content scholars, with the professional subject organizations, with the teacher union, with curriculum people from state and district levels, and with teachers. In working with such groups, it is not always easy to keep innovation from being reduced to the least common denominator, but the dialogue is healthy and absolutely necessary.

Throughout every stage of implementation, in dealing with individuals and groups, we have engaged in politics as an ever-present fact of life. Whether and how to urge a place on the next board agenda; how to reconcile professional differences; how to get money to keep afloat; how to conciliate a group of loudly unhappy parents; how to "educate" legislators to your view without offending the bureaucracy — these only suggest the kinds of instances in which politics must come into play.

A House majority leader long ago gave me this definition of politics which is as good as any: "Whenever you have a human organization with a job to do, you have to organize power to get the job done. And when you organize power, you have to have politics." Value conflicts are inevitable in effecting change, and power is what resolves them if professional discussion does not. School people don't like to admit to politics, but to avoid it is an impossibility. The pity is that we don't examine the process openly so that we can understand and use it better.

The influence networks which obtain in Hawaii's educational system form a fascinating arena for study. Basically, the networks probably do not differ significantly from others, but it seems that the insularity and ethnic makeup of the Islands and the close familial and friendship ties that prevail impart a marked quality of pervasiveness which is unique. Just about everybody knows or is related to somebody who knows or is related to somebody who occupies a position of influence. We know a little about how this influence network operates, but not enough. We know, for example, that a relatively few legislators hold the key to educational decisions in our state legislature but that their support depends on a number of shifting factors in which personality plays a large part. We know that the board is often frustrated on policy issues about which they differ strongly with the legislature and/or the Governor's office and that the pressure points to apply on those issues lie outside the school body. We know that the decisive power is exercised by a relatively small number of people in an informal power structure outside of the formal decision structure, but that this power varies according to the nature of the decision. We know that the members within this group vary greatly in the degree of influence they wield, and that their influence is not necessarily associated with social or economic status. There is a great deal more to be learned about these centers of influence and how they operate if they are to be harnessed to the service of educational change.

We have taken the position that educational business without politics is impossible, in fact irresponsible. To be political in effecting school improvement is not manipulation but strategy, not opportunism but adroitness at seizing the moment, not self-interest but single-mindedness about getting an important job done. The fundamental platform for political position has paid off.

It has not been my intention to leave the impression that Hawaii has solved all the difficult problems of implementing change on a large scale. Far from it. We have only begun to understand a little the many processes and the intricate networks of relationships that operate in working with the several levels in the system. There remain many problems of implementation — social, political, fiscal, and technical — worthy of study and research.

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