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# COPING WITH SCHOOL-BASED CURRICULUM CHANGE

Review by Anthony Seow

## INTRODUCTION

In a recent questionnaire given out in the Diploma in Departmental Management Course in NIE/NTU, I asked my course participants – some 10 English Heads of Department (Secondary Schools) – to list the three most difficult aspects of managing the English Department in their school. Although their responses were somewhat varied, a good number of the respondents indicated that, in their role as change agents, having teachers to respond **positively** to change was one of the most difficult things to do. To understand why curriculum change is such a sore point, this article proposes to ask two pertinent questions.

- (1) What are the consequences of a curriculum change?
- (2) What needs to be done to help teachers accept the change?

## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

There is a substantial amount of literature and research studies focusing on curriculum development and curriculum change (see e.g. Bradley, 1985; White, 1988; Brindley & Hood, 1990; Marsh & Morris, 1991; de Lano, Riley and Cookes, 1994; Brady, 1995). One research paper that specifically addresses the issue of curriculum change in Singapore is that by Breen (1994). In it, Breen identifies five ‘inevitable consequences’ of curriculum change, viz. **resistance, assimilation, interactivity,**

**multiple effect and mediation.**

**Resistance**, he believes, is “*a natural reaction to anything outside us that seems to demand significant adaptation*” (Breen, 1994 p. 103). It is, therefore, not unusual for us to expect teachers in our schools, given an impending curriculum change, to manifest resistance to the innovation by being sometimes unreasonably difficult, negative towards the change or simply indifferent. Such forms of overt behaviour may exemplify a more complex underlying difficulty. It is possible that teachers may feel insecure in trying to come to terms with change, especially when they perceive themselves being transformed from experts in what they knew and did so well, to novices where they lack practical experience or have only limited knowledge. To put it differently, teachers may be “*asked to give up an environment in which they would have previously felt comfortable and in command, for one in which there are as many possibilities of threat as there are changes*” (Luxon, 1994 p. 6). When a curriculum changes, teachers need to gradually adapt and adjust to the change, even if they do not entirely resist the change. It would certainly help to make the change easier for teachers if the change agent appreciates the transitional difficulties that teachers may experience in regard to the change.

Another natural consequence of curriculum change is **assimilation**. It is “*the process where an introduced change is, at best,*

*eroded until it is made to fit into established patterns of being and doing or, at worst, where the change is simply not recognized for what it is and assumed to be no different from what prevailed beforehand*” (Breen, 1994 p. 104). This being so, we can expect our teachers in the schools to either genuinely accommodate the change into their teaching process after some initial period of adjustment or see the change as not requiring them to teach substantially differently from what they have always been doing. As any curriculum change affects teachers emotionally, intellectually and pedagogically, it will normally take some time for teachers to realign themselves to the change.

**Interactivity**, another inevitable consequence of change, is seen as *“a joint endeavour between the initiators of change, its mediators who have to turn it into practice, and its recipients – the students in the schools”* (Breen, 1994 p.104). Accordingly, there is a need for harmony to exist among the participants involved in the change such that the change is perceived as beneficial to all the parties concerned. Once this equilibrium is achieved, the change initiator sees the change as moving in the right direction; the teachers feel that the change is consonant with their beliefs about how the subject matter could be taught, and the students realize that their learning needs are being satisfied.

The fourth consequence of change is what Breen calls **multiple effect**. It implies that *“one innovation will reverberate through other aspects of pedagogic practice and will touch upon the wider realm of a teacher’s daily work so that it too will be changed”* (Breen, 1994 p. 104). This simply means that implementing an

innovation affects the teachers in the way they think, teach, and relate to their students.

Finally, **mediation**. It suggests that *“any proposed educational change is always interpreted through the frames of reference and experiences of those whom it is likely to affect”* (Breen, 1994 p. 105). In other words, the change agent’s original document specifying the curriculum change in its idealised form is likely to be diversely re-interpreted by the teachers who carry out the change in the classroom.

## HELPING TEACHERS TO ACCEPT CHANGES

The next question we need to address is how best we can help teachers accept a curriculum change. According to Rogers & Shoemaker (1971) - cited in Marsh & Morris (1991) - teachers are more likely to accept a curriculum innovation if:

- (1) it has a distinct advantage over an existing practice;
- (2) it is compatible with existing values, experiences and needs;
- (3) it is easier to understand and use;
- (4) it has potential for limited experimentation;
- (5) it allows for observable results.

Teachers will probably be less resistant to change if (1) - (5) above are clearly in place, since such conditions would make the change more manageable for them. However, Marsh & Morris (1991) realize that if indeed the proposed innovation is closely compatible with existing values and experiences, then little real change will ever occur. It is a truism that teachers are usually more amenable to change if they understand the rationale for change. Bradley (1985)

argues that the change should be reasoned with teachers on one of two premises:

- that change is necessary because there is an existing deficiency in the curriculum;
- that with change, there is a reasonable likelihood of **further** improvement to an existing curriculum that may not be regarded as particularly problematic.

If indeed an existing deficiency in the curriculum is verified, then there is a legitimate reason to alter an existing practice and move towards change that is designed to correct that deficiency. Given the assumption of rational human behaviour, teachers are not normally adverse to accepting a curriculum change if it means that the change will redress the deficiency. In this case, there can be a genuine acceptance of the change. On the other hand, if the curriculum as it stands, may not seem to have any apparent problems, the school may still be in a continuous mood of self-improvement. It seems that a healthy state for the school is to be in “*a state of being and becoming*” – in other words, a state where it feels positive about what it is but is trying to be better (Bradley, 1985, p. 115).

A curriculum change may sometimes appear to work against tradition. For any planned curriculum change to be acceptable, “*the change agent must understand that tradition does not need verification, defining, or defending. However, changes will need extensive verification, defining, and defending*” (ibid.). If the planned change cannot be defended or if teachers perceive some weaknesses in the change, whether subjective or not, then they are likely to

return to the familiarity and comfort of tradition and abandon the change altogether. It has been well documented in the field of curriculum innovation and development that for a successful change to occur, the change catalyst should involve all the participants of the innovation in all stages of the change process before they can be convinced to accept the change (see e.g. Brindley & Hood, 1990; de Lano et al., 1994). Needless to say, the change agent must be committed to the change. Coping with the change is made easier through collective responsibility and a sense of ownership.

It may not be immediately apparent, but once an innovation gets underway, what the change agent hopes to see happen in teachers is not so much an immediate improvement in **teaching competence** as a change in **teacher behaviour**. Consider what Hanzelka (1987 p.112) has to proffer: “*For staff development evaluations, I suggest that we begin not with the question of whether or not teachers are ‘better’, but whether or not they are different.*” Towards this end, he contends that the change agent ought to be asking questions such as:

- has the program been effective in changing teachers?
- do they think differently?
- can they do things that they couldn’t do before?
- do they feel differently?
- are different things occurring in teachers, in classrooms?

Once teachers feel that they are being closely evaluated for demonstrating significant improvements in teaching, they will feel threatened especially if they are finding it difficult to cope with a new innovation. However, if the change agent

allows for, what de Lano et al (1994 p. 490) suggest, “*a high tolerance for ambiguity*” and encourages teachers “*to change, to adopt an innovation and use it in an appropriate context*”, then teachers would probably feel less insecure in accepting the change.

## CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, the success of a school-based curriculum change is not so much

what the change agent is prepared to initiate as how much the teachers are willing to go along with her in making the change. There is often “*the perpetual tug of war*” between tradition and change (Bradley, 1985 p.115). For teachers to want to abandon tradition in favour of change, they would, in the first instance, have to see the change as being practicable in the day-to-day work of the classroom.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

A successful curriculum change and implementation could well entail the following procedure:

- ***Orienting:***  
Prepare the teachers psychologically to accept the change by explaining the rationale for the change and getting their commitment for collective implementation of the innovation (See especially Luxon, 1994, p.7);
- ***Training:***  
Familiarize the teachers with the procedure for implementing the innovation so that they know exactly what to do with the innovation (See e.g. Churchward, 1981, in her argument of the need for orienting and training in an innovation);
- ***Monitoring:***  
Keep tabs on the progress of the change from time to time to ensure that the teachers are coping with the change, but allow room for mediation (See Breen’s *Mediation* above);
- ***Evaluating:***  
Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the change with a view to improving the innovation;
- ***Revising:***  
Make any necessary modifications to the innovation by consensus. (See e.g. Bradley, 1985, especially Chapter 2 for curriculum *evaluation* and *revision*).

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