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Managing mandated educational change

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This paper explores teachers' perspectives on the management of mandated educational change in order to understand how it may be managed more effectively. A case study of teachers' responses to the introduction of a quality teaching initiative in two New South Wales schools found that while some teachers described the strong negative impact of this externally initiated approach, others had taken charge of the required change and worked creatively with it. This suggests that it is possible for mandated change to be managed in positive ways, and an alternative approach is explored. Implications for governments, schools and teachers are discussed.

Keywords: leadership; management; mandated educational change; teachers' perspectives; school-oriented approach

Introduction

Research has shown that despite decades of educational reform, the way teachers teach and students learn has changed little (Hargreaves and Goodson 2006; Tyack and Cuban 1995) and that government policy mandates have minimal impact on teaching in classrooms (Albright and Kramer-Dahl 2009; Elmore 2007). One reason for this is the mandatory nature of the changes and the impact they have on teachers. Mandated educational change originates at the government or bureaucratic level, and the problems associated with it have been a concern for researchers and educators for over a decade. In 1994, Fullan observed the ineffectiveness of a top-down model; in 2000, Bailey demonstrated that mandated change leads to the marginalisation of teachers; yet in 2004, Hargreaves noted that most educational change is still externally initiated. Mandated change is currently presenting concerns for researchers and educators in contexts as diverse as Canada (Hargreaves 2004; Leithwood, Steinbach, and Jantzi 2002), the Netherlands (van Veen, Slegers, and Van de Ven 2005), England (Goodson 2001; Harris 2009), the USA (Zembylas and Barker 2007), Australia (Dinham 2000) and China (Lee and Yin 2011). There is no suggestion that mandated reform should be abolished or ignored. Aristotle argued that education of the young should be the first priority of the legislator (Curren 2010), and, in the current global context of standardisation, testing and accountability, a retreat from mandatory educational reform is unlikely (Hargreaves 2004; Harris 2009). Indeed, in recent years, in Australia, the pace of mandated reform has increased, rather than decreased. Clearly, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the impact of mandated change on teachers and the development of improved processes for the implementation of policy mandates.

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This paper explores the effects of mandated change on teachers. The questions being considered are the following: How does the way change is introduced to schools affect teachers' responses to it? And, are there better ways to work with mandated change? The paper begins with a review of the literature on mandated educational change and different approaches to its management. It reports on an Australian study of teachers' responses to the introduction of an externally initiated change in two schools. Suggestions are made for improved processes for working with mandated change, and implications for governments, schools and teachers are discussed.

Background

Mandated change (also referred to as an external approach, or top-down change) is change initiated at the government or bureaucratic level and transmitted to schools, where it is adopted by the administration and communicated to teachers, who will probably attempt to implement it with varying degrees of enthusiasm and success. It is important to note that often teachers are not opposed to the change itself, but their response to it is affected by the way the change is implemented. Dinham (2000) explains, 'Often, it is not change *per se* that is the problem for teachers and schools, but the way that change is introduced, with understanding, direction, commitment, time and resources being lacking' (32). Harris (2009) notes that 'implementation is rushed, under-resourced or simply not thought through' (63). Mandated changes are usually introduced to schools at a rapid pace and teachers are left to cope with the consequences. This phenomenon has been described as 'innovation overload' (Fullan 2001, 21) and 'repetitive-change syndrome' (Abrahamson 2004, 2; Hargreaves 2004, 288). Teachers are confronted by a multiplicity of unrelated and sometimes contradictory reforms with no opportunity to make sense of the changes for themselves. This often leaves them feeling confused, anxious, frustrated and cynical, and likely to respond by resisting and disengaging from the change (Hargreaves 2004; Schmidt and Datnow 2005). When teachers do not understand the change, or are emotionally distressed because of the way it is being implemented, they are likely to resist implementing the change, or implement it in a different form from that intended by the initiators of the change (Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002). Sometimes teachers' practices are governed by previous policy mandates, rather than the latest innovation (Albright and Kramer-Dahl 2009).

It is important to consider teachers' perspectives on educational change for several reasons. First, teachers work closely with students and are ultimately responsible for implementing any change in the classroom. Second, teachers have common sense understandings of the problems they face, as well as insights and concerns that other stakeholders do not have. Third, teachers often have good reasons for resisting change, and an understanding of these reasons may facilitate the change process (Fullan 2001; Gitlin and Margonis 1995; Goodson 2001; Hargreaves 1996). Andy Hargreaves (1996) has argued that teachers' voices should be understood in their particular contexts, and that a sufficient variety of different voices should be presented so that contrasting views can be explored. This paper endeavours to present teachers' perspectives in such a way.

Teachers' responses to mandated change

Several themes emerged from a review of the literature providing teachers' views about educational change. Teachers are concerned about the sense of compulsion they feel, the lack of opportunity to make meaning of the changes before having to implement them, and the transitory nature of the reforms. Each of these concerns will be considered in turn.

A sense of compulsion

A sense of compulsion and distress about implementation strategies was expressed by teachers in several studies. Researchers in Ontario, Canada, observed that teachers responded to mandated change with negative emotions, including frustration, anger, annoyance, anxiety and an erosion of teachers' sense of self-efficacy. Reasons for teachers' negative responses were a perception that the changes were vague or ill-conceived; the fact that changes were forced upon teachers; poor implementation of strategies; a context of frequent and repetitive change; and a perception that the initiatives were unrelated to improving teaching and learning (Hargreaves 2004; Leithwood, Steinbach, and Jantzi 2002). Hargreaves reports, in teachers' own words, the sense of compulsion they felt: one teacher spoke of a literacy programme he was 'required to do'; another, referring to a change in reporting, said, 'we've forced it on them and now there could be something totally different. It's not good [and] it's kind of, like, I knew it' (297). There was also a concern about the way the change was implemented: 'something else piled on that you had to learn about and you had to fit in somewhere in a day plan that already has so many different constraints' (297). This same concern also emerges in a case study by Van Veen, Slegers, and Van de Ven (2005). David, a secondary teacher in the Netherlands, was initially enthusiastic about the education reforms being introduced by his government because they were consistent with his constructivist view of teaching. However, he became concerned about the lack of support to implement them: 'Given the size of the changes, I don't believe that you can implement them without extra money. That's simply not possible. [. . .]. There are moments I feel deeply unhappy because of this, really' (929).

Lack of opportunity for meaning-making

The complexity of the cognitive and emotional meaning-making process in which teachers engage when confronted with educational change has been examined extensively by Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002). Teachers make sense of new information based on their knowledge, beliefs, values, emotions and experiences, and it is important that they have opportunity to explore new ideas in relation to their own ideology (see also Borko et al. 1997; Timperley, Annan, and Robinson 2009). When this opportunity is lacking, teachers have difficulty understanding mandated changes before having to implement them. This was the concern of a teacher in a study by Leithwood, Steinbach, and Jantzi (2002):

It seems like everybody's relying on the teacher to do all of this . . . that's great, as an individual I can accept that as something you want to do, but you must give me the time to develop, you must give me the time to implement, and you must give me the time to receive professional development. (108)

Zembylas and Barker (2007), in a study of elementary teachers in Illinois (USA), observed that teachers adapted reforms related to a new science curriculum to fit their own values and concerns and to limit negative emotional impact. A teacher in the study explained how she used her time for coping:

I appreciate having the time to get together and talk and share ideas and how we felt about those... Even if I don't particularly like these reforms, I can always use some support to cope with change. (245)

Transitory nature of changes

Teachers, often because of past experience, tend to view mandated changes as transitory, and expect them to be replaced by other initiatives in the near future. For this reason many teachers, especially those in the later stages of their careers, respond to reform by ignoring it. One teacher in Andy Hargreaves' (2004) study expressed this view:

I think that the concept of educational change has worn teachers down to expect something that is going to be very temporary and that something else is going to be coming down the road, so we shouldn't get too enthused about it: we should continue to do what we really do and we will just sort of outlast this change. (T4 – 292)

This last comment implies that the teacher sees the reforms as irrelevant to the real task of teaching. Another teacher was distressed because work done in the recent past had been made obsolete by the latest reform:

If a person is a really gung ho person, if they really try and go out of their way to find resources for their classroom, to develop really neat experiences for the kids to the best of their ability... then the next year they are told one way or another that everything that they've developed is now obsolete. It's hard to build new units with those experiences. There comes a point... you are starting to feel kind of cynical. (Focus group – 292)

Summary

An examination of teachers' perceptions of current methods of managing mandated change reveals a largely negative effect on teachers and lack of substantial change in classrooms. Teachers' concerns include a sense of compulsion that sparks negative emotions, such as frustration, fear, anger and cynicism; lack of time and opportunity to understand a change before having to implement it; a corresponding lack of support during the implementation phase; and the sense that changes are transitory and that work done to implement them is soon made obsolete. Given these concerns, mandated change is unlikely to facilitate the enhancement of teaching and learning and bring lasting change unless it is managed differently.

A school-oriented approach to mandated change

Some researchers have examined an alternative approach to management of mandated change. Fullan (2000) recommends that teachers and schools define their own reform goals in relation to government policies in such a way that they maintain ownership. Goodson (2001) has argued that the personal aspect of educational

change, that is, the beliefs and missions of individual teachers, needs to be integrated with system (external) and school (internal) demands if change is to be effective. Andy Hargreaves (2004) supports this view when he says, 'External change can lead to positive and productive teacher emotions if it is inclusive of teachers' purposes, respectful of their priorities and sensitive to their working and implementation conditions' (301). When teachers have some control of the change process, their emotional responses are usually more positive (Elmore 2007; Fullan 1994; Hargreaves 2004). For example, when Hargreaves (2004) asked teachers about changes they themselves had initiated they were 'overwhelmingly enthusiastic and animated' (299), in marked contrast to their responses when asked about mandated change. They reported feelings of success, satisfaction and triumph. These feelings seemed to be related to a sense that the changes had benefited students.

A school-oriented approach to educational change sees teachers and schools driving the agenda for change by interpreting mandated changes in terms of school goals and teacher purposes. Such a model allows teachers the time and space to understand and cope with the change. In his study of mandated and teacher-initiated change, Hargreaves (2004) reports 'a curious finding' (301) that when asked to speak of self-initiated changes, 39% of the teachers he interviewed actually spoke of changes that had been externally initiated. He provides two examples of teachers who were able to take charge of a mandated change. One was an elementary teacher who had created a reading centre in her classroom and, 'felt proud that I understood and appreciated the individual needs of the children in the classroom, that their needs were more important than any needs as a teacher'. Another was a secondary English teacher who developed standards for reading and writing with the district and, 'liked it very much because it was a far superior standard from the provincial one. I am quite glad to see it . . . working in the school' (302).

This review of the literature on teachers' responses to educational change indicates that mandated change is problematic for teachers and unlikely to engage them sufficiently to implement reforms in a satisfactory manner. A better option would appear to be an approach that enables teachers to take some initiative and interpret mandated changes in terms of the school's goals and their own priorities.

Case studies in two schools

This paper draws on data collected by the author for a study that examined teachers' responses to the introduction of the quality teaching (QT) model in two New South Wales (NSW) schools (Clement 2007). The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) introduced the QT model (Ladwig and King 2003; NSW DET 2003a, 2003b) to all schools in the state in 2003. The model was designed to improve pedagogy and student learning (for more information on the QT model, see Ladwig and Gore 2005; Ladwig and King 2003; NSW DET 2003a, 2003b). A more recent approach to implementing the QT model is outlined in Bowe and Gore (2012).

Case studies were conducted in two secondary schools in order to answer the question: How do different amounts and types of professional learning influence the way teachers respond to the QT model? Both schools were co-educational suburban high schools and were selected because they had different professional development programmes. Although both school principals reported that teachers had a similar amount (four to five hours) of professional development for QT per month and used

the booklets provided by the NSW DET, there were differences in the way learning was organised. At the first school, professional learning took place in regular meeting times, such as whole school staff meetings, team meetings and on school development days (i.e. days determined by the DET when teachers attend school and students do not). Because the second school was in an area designated as lower socio-economic status, based on questionnaires completed by parents, it received additional government funding for the purpose of improving literacy, numeracy and the participation of students. This funding was used to provide all teachers in the school with a teacher development period once a week, and for three terms during 2004, these periods were spent in professional learning related to the NSW QT model. In addition to the kinds of activities listed for the first school, teachers at the second school also reported watching the video of sample lessons provided by the DET and, in discussions with other teachers, used the QT documents to code these lessons. Some learning time was used for faculty programming with QT, and some for developing cross-faculty programmes.

The principal of each school completed a brief questionnaire about the amount and type of professional learning and was asked to select three teachers who had been at the school since May 2003 (when the QT model had been introduced), were preferably from a range of subject areas, with a variety of levels of involvement with QT and a mix of genders. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with three teachers at each school. Teachers were asked about their opinions of the QT model; its impact on their teaching practice; the mode, source, quantity and effectiveness of the professional development they undertook in relation to the model; the way the QT model was supported in the school; and whether they experienced compulsion to engage with the model. Each interview took about 45 minutes.

Interview transcripts were coded using *QSR NVivo 7* (QSR 1999–2006), and teachers were given pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality. A picture of professional learning for QT in each school was developed and the two schools were compared and contrasted in a cross-case analysis. Conclusions were drawn about the relation between the professional learning and teachers' responses to the QT model, but a key finding was that some teachers resisted engaging with the model because they perceived it as a mandated change (Clement 2007). It is this latter finding that provoked this paper.

Findings

Teachers in this study had concerns about the compulsory nature of the reform and their lack of time to understand the QT model before implementing it. They also feared that the model would be just another transitory reform, soon to be replaced by another.

Sense of compulsion

Teachers in both schools in the study viewed the introduction of the QT model as an external change, something that had been imposed on them from outside the school and which they felt coerced to implement. Alan and Sue both said, 'It was thrown at us' (Clement 2007, 44, 47); Steve commented, 'People have foisted it upon us' (44); and Sue said, 'It gets pushed from the top all the way down' (47). The sense of compulsion was expressed by Anne, quoting other teachers who said, 'We're only

doing it because they said we had to' (56), and by Kate: 'I suppose it's like anything, it's a professional . . . workplace so . . . you're expected to do it' (56). These teachers saw the QT model as an externally initiated change that they were obligated to implement in order to accomplish the agendas of others.

Lack of time for meaning-making

Although there were differences in the professional development experienced by teachers in the two case study schools, teachers at both schools thought they needed more time to make their own meaning of the QT model. At the first school, one teacher was concerned that other teachers were afraid that their lack of understanding of the QT model would be exposed:

But a lot of other people I hear speak about it in really derogatory terms, like it's the enemy, and it's because of fear. People are frightened that they're going to get found out because they don't understand this stuff. And they don't understand it because they haven't had a chance to. (Steve, Clement 2007, 42)

He was also concerned about the lack of time and opportunity for teachers to integrate the QT model into their practice and saw this as a reason for their teaching practices remaining unchanged:

We haven't had time to absorb any of it and, unless you actually do some creative work on your own, unless you go out and do some research yourself, there's precious little time being dedicated to it from the higher authority. And I mean it's all well and good to say, 'Let's adopt all of these things', but if there's no transition or there's no implementation of the program or there's no way that the teachers can take it on board before they're expected to deliver it, then they'll go with what they trust and what they know will work. (Steve, Clement 2007, 44–45)

Another teacher at the same school was concerned about the need for more guidance and follow-up. He said, 'We developed tasks that we used and probably weren't given enough lead-in guidance, and then probably didn't get to follow it up as well as we could have' (Alan, Clement 2007, 45).

At the second school, teachers appeared to have had more time for meaning-making. Anne reported, 'We've all had a terrific opportunity to become comfortable with it [the QT model]' (Clement 2007, 54) and Phil said, 'I think the majority of our staff have applied it quite readily and it's been pretty successful' (54). In spite of this, teachers felt that they still needed more time. Kate summed up their feelings with, 'It's just another thing that's been put in there and not enough time's been allocated to do it well' (54). In addition, teachers noted a lack of support and follow-up for the implementation of QT strategies:

Really . . . you go watch the videos, you have it explained to you, this is what it is, this is what you should be doing, and then, that's it. You're expected to find the time to do it. (Anne, Clement 2007, 54)

I think on reflection they probably didn't spend enough time evaluating what people did do and give people feedback as to where they were going and whether they were on the right track. (Kate, Clement 2007, 54)

It was left to teachers to have their own interpretation of how they saw the model and how they were going to implement it in their own classrooms. (Kate, Clement 2007, 56)

Teachers were unhappy because they had insufficient time and opportunity to understand the QT model and, according to Steve, some teachers were continuing with familiar methods, rather than experimenting with the new pedagogical model. Those who did attempt to implement the model were given little guidance or follow-up.

Transitory nature of the reform

Teachers in the study also expressed the view that the QT model was just another transitory reform in a context of continual change. At the first school, Alan spoke of a “‘here we go again” mentality’ and another at the same school commented, ‘I do think it’s the latest thing and it will pass and something different will come in that could possibly be better or maybe not as good’ (Clement 2007, 47–48). At the second school, Anne spoke of some of her colleagues whose perspective was, ‘The wheel just keeps turning and it’s the same thing over again. It’s nothing new and they just get cynical and . . . it’ll change again next week’ (57). Teachers also indicated that at this school the ‘wheel’ had already turned on the QT model, that the school had ‘done’ QT and had moved on to other things. Anne again explained, ‘But things changed . . . This wouldn’t be a focus now. We’re supposed to have taken it all on board and be operational’ (57). Kate said, ‘When it’s out there people talk about it, but when it’s not it’s a failure, it’s forgotten’ (57).

Sue, a teacher who was in the later stage of her career, expressed the frustration of many later-career teachers with the repetitive nature of externally initiated change and explained their resistance to it:

The [subject] staff are all older than me – oh, not another thing . . . not new work, not another program . . . Getting sick of this.

I’m not really negative. I might be coming up negative and cynical, but I’m not really. I love teaching and I want to do the best for the kids . . . But you get to the age where you just get things thrown at you, the latest thrown at you and then it disappears. You do all this work and it disappears and then you get the next thing. (Clement 2007, 48)

This comment makes it clear that the issue is not lack of interest in teaching or lack of concern for students, but the damaging impact of repetitive reforms over the period of a teacher’s career.

Teachers in these two schools were suffering from ‘innovation overload’ (Fullan 2001) and were unable to judge the QT model on its merits. The hurried way in which the model was introduced to them and their lack of time to understand it gave them the impression that it was just like all the other changes they had experienced previously and would soon pass, or in one school, had already passed, less than three years after its introduction.

Working with mandated change

In spite of their negative responses to the way the QT model had been introduced, four teachers in the study were able to work with the reform that they considered to

be mandated and transform it into something more akin to self-initiated change. They did this by being innovative in their particular faculty area or by taking charge of an aspect of their professional development. Although professional development opportunities at his school were more limited, Alan had developed a rich task that he used with one of his classes, and he was working with his faculty to create an elective in his subject area using new resources and the QT framework. He spoke of teachers in his faculty who had, 'taken a bit of time to delve into how they can really develop the QT in [this subject], looking at specific sorts of lesson plans and specific syllabus points where they can...make a big impact' (Clement 2007, 46). At the second school, teachers had taken initiative and become involved in leadership of their professional learning. Phil and Kate had led cross-faculty action learning groups and had been influential in the choice of the topic studied. Both found the work 'interesting'. Anne had been a team leader for workshops on backward mapping and described them as 'fun' (52). The sense of satisfaction expressed by these teachers is an indication that they had found a way to merge the required change with their own purposes and concerns, as Goodson (2001) suggests.

Like the teachers whose comments are reported in the study by Hargreaves (2004), some of the teachers in this study were able to take charge of a required change and work creatively with it, interpreting mandated reforms in terms of school goals and their own concerns. They made time to understand what was required of them and developed new strategies that could lead to changes in their teaching practice. This suggests that it is possible for teachers to engage with mandated change in creative ways that are likely to lead to more effective implementation. Although the generalisability of the findings of this study is limited by the small sample size (two schools and six teachers), when set alongside other literature that documents teachers' responses to mandated change, the findings suggest the need for further research on the impact of mandated reform and better ways to manage it.

Advantages of the school-oriented approach

This paper has examined two different approaches to the management of educational change: the conventional approach that attempts to implement successive mandates as they are issued and an approach that is oriented towards the needs of the school and the concerns of the teachers. The latter approach overcomes many of the problems of the conventional approach because it is inclusive of teachers and involves them in the change process in positive ways that include designing as well as implementing reforms (Hargreaves 2004; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2011). The sense of compulsion and associated negative impact on teachers is reduced because they have input into, and ownership of, the way the reform is implemented in the school. Teachers have the opportunity to understand the change and think through its implications for their values, beliefs and teaching practice. When the school and the teaching staff have a role in shaping the reform to fit their particular context, it is less likely to be transitory and more likely to be sustained over the long term. Teachers' professionalism is respected as their skills are valued, employed and developed through their involvement in the change process.

More effective management of mandated change

Managing mandated change by integrating it with the priorities of the local context has the potential to enable leaders, teachers and schools to work more creatively with mandated reform. This approach has implications at all three levels of education and for further research. At the external level, policy-makers must understand that government mandates will bring only superficial change, unless they are accompanied by support for schools and teachers to facilitate teacher understanding, shifts in beliefs and values and changes in pedagogy (Darling-Hammond 2005; Goodson 2001; Smith 2008). This will require policy-makers to impose fewer reforms over a longer timeframe (Harris 2009; Leithwood, Steinbach, and Jantzi 2002).

At the internal (school) level, a school-oriented approach to change makes school leaders the mediators and managers of change as they integrate external mandates with internal purposes (Hirsch 1999). School leaders have an important role in framing or interpreting policy for teachers (Coburn 2006) and in demonstrating how policy mandates relate to the school's own reform agenda (Fullan 2000; Leithwood, Steinbach, and Jantzi 2002). Leaders can structure the change implementation so that teachers have opportunities to take initiative (Hargreaves 2004; Smyth 2005) and make meaning of the change (Schmidt and Datnow 2005; Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002), and to also ensure that they themselves have access to learning opportunities and support (Timperley 2005).

At the personal level of change, a school-oriented approach means that teachers also recognise the inevitability of systemic mandated change and that they can, with colleagues, take ownership of the process. Rather than being overwhelmed by the multitude of reforms and the rapidity of change, teachers can be empowered by knowing that their involvement in educational change is crucial to its success and that as they develop their own capacities to learn and to work with others, systems will be transformed (Fullan 2005). Teachers can be part of the process of understanding how policies relate to the school's reform agenda, initiating change at the school level and working with colleagues to integrate their own concerns and purposes into the school's programme of reform.

The findings of this paper also have implications for future research. Further study is needed on the impact and management of mandated reform, and how schools and teachers can take charge of mandated reforms in ways that bring meaningful and substantial change in their own settings. Other issues for consideration are the following: how teachers and school leaders can be supported as they take on the task of managing mandated changes in ways that are appropriate in their school; how teachers make personal meaning of an educational reform and the factors that influence this process; and how these meaning-making processes influence teachers' implementation of change.

Conclusion

This paper has considered teachers' perspectives on educational change in order to understand how mandated change in schools may be managed more effectively. Teachers' views of the conventional approach to managing mandated change indicate that it is damaging to teachers' morale and their sense of professionalism and inadequate for bringing sustainable change in education. A school-oriented approach

to educational change, where school personnel take charge of mandated reforms and interpret them in terms of school goals and their own concerns, is likely to be more acceptable to teachers and more effective in bringing substantial and lasting change.

Notes on contributor

Jennifer Clement completed a Master of Educational Studies degree at the University of Newcastle in 2007, after a long career in secondary teaching. Since then, she has combined work on a variety of educational research projects with doctoral study in the area of teacher change. Her other research interests include leadership and management of educational change, teachers' perspectives, and teacher professional development.

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