The Human Face Of School Reform

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the change process and understand factors that facilitate school reform. Sashkin and Egermeier (1993) suggested the following for the change process: (a) fix curricula, teaching methods, and materials; (b) fix the school climate and culture; and (c) fix the people through training and staff development. Fullan's model (1982) is similar and discusses instructional strategies, new curriculum, and alteration of mindsets (pedagogical assumptions, values, and beliefs). Fullan's theory supported Shahan (1976) who asserted that the process of change has a "human face." This implies that programs, instructional strategies, or new curricula materials do not provide educational change; it is accomplished by focused and committed people.

School reform represents a deep change in education, not simply alterations in the forms and structures of schooling, but fundamental reconfiguration at every level of the educational enterprise. One important concept of school reform is the human element. Shahan (1976) referred to this phase as "the human face" which embraces the emotion, feelings, needs, and perceptions of teachers and leaders as well as their roles and beliefs and/or pedagogical assumptions. Evans (1993) stated that reform is too often treated as a product and tends to overlook its human face. However, Shahan (1976) contended that the key to reform is to focus on the human face and to see innovation as a generative process originating with the people charged with accomplishing it. Reformers must keep in mind that organizations, materials, curricula, and instructional strategies do not have the capability to plan, initiate, or implement programs, but people do! It is only the people within the reform movement who are able to develop and carry out plans that ultimately lead to a positive change.

The human element of the reform process focuses on the relationships, the interactions, and the dynamics of people. It is only when the people in this process are considered first and their needs and wants met that educational reform has much chance for success. Persons responsible for leading reform efforts must be aware of the stakeholders' feelings and must attend to enhancing their self-esteem (Combs, 1991). Although the reform process involves altering the school's culture, the teaching strategies, the curriculum, and the materials, it must always be done from a human perspective.

The Human Face of School Structure

Even though the school's structure is a major target of change, the people within the structure, according to Hall and Loucks (1978), must have their own self-interests resolved before they can truly show concern for the organization. They further stated that teachers want to know (a) what the change is about, (b) how the change will affect their professional space, and (c) what they have to give up in order to manage the new change. Furthermore, Patterson (1997) contended that people who are the targets of change tend to question the trustworthiness of those proposing the change.

Most change in a school involves the alteration of beliefs and assumptions about education, the implementation of new instructional strategies, and/or the use of a new curriculum (Fullan, 1982; Sashkin & Egermeier, 1993). Patterson (1997) stated that systemic change happens only when the people inside the school critically examine their beliefs and change their instructional practices to fit these revised precepts. Therefore, teachers' perception of the targeted modification and their voluntary participation are essential to a successful change. Educational reform requires that teachers comprehend their roles in the process and that they are also understood and accepted by their peers and supervisors. Since they often feel that their workload is very heavy, they consequently need a compelling reason to change or participate in the change process. Their concerns may be ameliorated through staff development collaboration and study groups where they can (a) learn about new researched-based strategies and ideas, (b) learn from lead teachers and/or colleagues who model and demonstrate lessons until a comfort level has been established, (c) function in a risk free environment to try new instructional strategies, and (d) build their confidence and self-efficacy. Since participants typically are concerned about how change will affect them, it was suggested by Hall (1996) that teachers be afforded the opportunity to work through this experience in a way in which the rewards at least equal the liabilities.

The School Culture

Researchers reveal that significant educational change requires modification in the school's culture, including its pedagogical beliefs, values, and norms (Sashkin & Egermeier, 1993). School culture defines what is of worth for teachers, specifies acceptable limits of behavior and beliefs, and acts as a powerful factor in promoting or resisting school improvement efforts (Hall & Loucks, 1978). Some teachers tend to resist becoming involved in school modification because cultural changes require a reshaping of their attitudes related to educational programs. For some teachers change can be frightening or at least uncomfortable.

Milstein (1993) suggested that change means loss, destabilization, and uncertainty. He also suggested that change requires taking a risk to learn new roles and skills and demands extra confidence for successfully functioning in the unknown. Marshak (1996) also believed that change involves a perceived loss; this creates grief and generates resistance. Loss and uncertainty create an environment of fear, anxiety, and frustration.

In order to change the culture, reshape beliefs, alter mind-sets, or adjust attitudes regarding educational programs or instructional strategies, members of the school should be assisted in exploring their feelings, dealing with their uncertainties, and understanding their

beliefs and attitudes. School leaders must make their case for needed change, create an environment of comfort, and entice their teachers to conclude that there is also a need for change. Marshak (1996) suggested that this might be addressed by communicating openly and safely about the staff's emotional perception of change. Opportunity to communicate openly may be provided through collaborative groups, grade level meetings, and staff meetings. Frequent, continuous, and concrete communication creates collegiality among staff members (Barth, 1990).

Collegiality

Collegiality is an essential component of school improvement or the change process (Barth, 1990). Warren (1981), as quoted in Barth (1990), defined collegiality as the presence of four specific behaviors: (a) adults in school talk about practice frequently, continuously, concretely, and precisely; (b) adults in school observe each other engage in the practice of teaching and reflect on and talk about their observations; (c) adults engage together and work on curriculum by planning, designing, researching, and evaluating curriculum; and (d) adults in schools teach each other what they know about teaching, learning, and leading.

Collegial activity creates a sense of belonging among staff members. Cohesive relations or bonds are formed where a sense of trust emerges. Barth (1990) asserted that the following outcomes may be associated with collegiality: (a) adult learning is energized and more likely to be sustained; (b) there is a higher level of morale and trust among adults; (c) decisions and accompanying implementations tend to be more effective; (d) student motivation and achievement increase; and (e) as adults share and cooperate, students tend to do the same.

Communication

It is imperative that communication be open and that all stakeholders involved in the change process be able to share information and ideals about education. Information is essential to bring teachers to an understanding and a sense of need or readiness for change. Barth (1990) observed that in faculty meetings, principals talk; however, in parking lots and classrooms, teachers talk. Unfortunately, teachers and principals seldom talk openly together about their important work. Attention to the removal of barriers to communication should begin with the school leadership.

Communicating salient information to the participants about the change process raises awareness levels, keeps participants informed, and assists in reducing the feelings of anxiety, frustration, and concerns. In addition, providing on-going information regarding rules and procedures for the change process and how this change will affect participating members is essential and creates a greater probability for building consensus (Anderson, 1993). Katz and Kahn (1978) stated that communication is the very essence of a dynamic school.

Altering Teacher Behavior

To alter teacher behavior, researchers advocate the introduction of new materials (direct instructional resources), the alteration of the culture (pedagogical assumptions and beliefs), and the application of new teaching approaches (Fullan, 1982). In addition, Fullan (1990) and Joyce and Showers (1980) contended that teacher behavior may be changed through the use of staff development where new strategies and skills are introduced. They further stated that presentations, demonstrations, modeling, and peer coaching may also be employed to change behaviors, or as figuratively suggested by Fullan (1982), "fixing the people." All of these initiatives must be incorporated in a manner which encourages teachers to take risks for pedagogical growth.

"Fixing the people" may be accomplished through programs with which teachers progress and grow by reflecting on and by examining their teaching practices in meeting school goals. Joyce and Showers (1980) asserted that most teachers are capable of applying new teaching approaches reasonably well if they are provided with opportunities for studying the theory behind the strategy and if they receive positive feedback on successful implementation.

Another component of staff development includes peer coaching, where colleagues agree to observe one another, to model or demonstrate a new pedagogical technique, and to provide constructive feedback to their colleagues to improve their instruction (Joyce & Showers, 1980). Coaching is essential for ensuring the acquisition of skills, because teachers may have difficulty transferring new skills or strategies learned in staff development meetings into the classroom. Also, it may be helpful to customize staff development to individual teachers since they grow and learn at different rates and have diverse needs.

Teacher Efficacy

Implementation of a successful program may also depend on how teachers feel or think about their ability and their self-efficacy to deliver instruction to promote student achievement. Teacher efficacy is defined in the confidence of the teacher in his/her own ability to affect student achievement (Ross, 1995; Sparks, 1988). Bandura (1993) stated that the teacher's belief in his/her efficacy to promote learning affects the types of learning environments that are created and the level of academic progress students achieve. Teachers who possess a strong sense of self-efficacy tend to have a high level of commitment and confidence in their teaching ability. They are usually willing to take risks and participate in the change process (Sparks, 1988).

Teachers who possess low self-efficacy usually resist change efforts for fear of disrupting what is already in place. Fullan (1982) stated that if teachers truly resist change, no mandate will deter that resistance. Therefore, teachers must feel comfortable or willing to take a risk to change from the "old" to the "new." It becomes the school's leadership responsibility to foster confidence in teachers, to help them feel free to take risks for change, and to remind them that positive assistance is theirs for the asking.

Summary

In summary, change relies on the human face of its participants. The change process must be approached from the teacher's perspective, because what the teacher does and thinks is essential to the reform initiative (White, 1990). Teachers must be provided answers to: (a) what is the change about: what weaknesses have been identified in the school program; (b) how change will affect their personal space: what changes are teachers expected to make or what is expected from them; and (c) what will they have to give up to manage change: what behaviors need altering.

Time and opportunities for teachers to examine themselves must be made available. An examination of their teaching styles, beliefs, pedagogical assumptions, and understanding themselves may give impetus to a need for change. When teachers are aware or convinced that change is necessary, they are more willing to alter or change their behaviors. Professional development programs provide opportunities to address teachers' needs and/or concerns after important self-reflection is completed. Clearly, the change process focuses on the human face. People bring about changes needed for educational reform or school improvement. Therefore, their emotions, relationships, interactions, needs, and wants must be considered before the process of change will be effective.

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