

# CHAPTER

# 1

# Too Much Change, Not Enough Improvement

**T**his book makes a deliberate distinction between leading improvement and leading change because the conflation of these two concepts contributes to why we have too much change and not enough improvement. The assumption that change is good is entrenched in the discourse of educational reform. Schools that have not changed recently are labeled as coasting or stagnant, and school leaders go to courses to learn how to “lead change.” Teachers who do not share their leaders’ enthusiasm for a particular change are labeled as “resistant”—as holding up the march of progress. A similar assumption is made about innovation. Parents choose schools that are innovative in their use of technology, and politicians showcase schools that are early adopters of the latest innovation in school architecture or instructional organization.

Change is too often equated with progress and improvement, despite the fact that they are very different. **To lead change is to exercise influence in ways that move a team, organization, or system from one state to another. The second state could be better, worse, or the same as the first. To lead improvement is to exercise influence in ways that leave the team, organization, or system in a better state than before.**

There are a number of reasons why it is critical to interrupt the assumption that change and innovation are necessarily desirable.

## NOT ALL CHANGE IS DESIRABLE

The history of school reform is replete with accounts of changes that have not turned out to be improvements. In their book *Learning to Improve*, Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, and LeMahieu (2015) outline how large-scale changes in the United States, including the transformation of hundreds of high schools into smaller schools, turned out not to be the panacea that was hoped. The failure of this reform was attributable to the faulty but powerful belief that such structural change would bring the pedagogical and pastoral changes required to improve the well-being and achievement of high school students.

The New Zealand government responded in the 1990s to the poor math results in the third Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) of elementary students with a widely implemented numeracy initiative. Subsequent TIMSS surveys have shown that since its implementation, there has been an increase in students reporting not enjoying math and a further decline in achievement levels (Caygill, 2013; Chamberlain, 2007). Some researchers attribute this to the instructional grouping process that was encouraged by the numeracy initiative. Teachers used the diagnostic tools to group their students on the basis of assessed math ability and then provided the groups with differential opportunities to learn the math curriculum. The unintended consequence was that well-intentioned efforts to “meet student needs”

entrenched initial achievement differences (Hunter, 2010). In this example of failed reform, the problem was not faulty implementation but faulty design and the lack of a rigorous, timely, and independent evaluation.

## DISTINGUISH BETWEEN CHANGE AND IMPROVEMENT

If we insist on the distinction between change and improvement, there is likely to be more critical and more thoughtful debate, before large-scale implementation, about the merits of proposed reforms.

### The Distinction Between Change and Improvement Increases Leaders' Accountability

By making the distinction between change and improvement, we increase leaders' responsibility for developing and communicating the detailed logic of how their proposed change will produce the intended improvement. Too often, leaders ask others to make changes without clearly communicating and debating their arguments for

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doing so. The New Zealand education system is currently going through the biggest change since the introduction of its radical school self-management reform in 1989. New Zealand's highly autonomous schools are now being encouraged to form loose networks of schools bound together by a common achievement challenge. The intent of the policy is to increase the opportunity for schools to work together, learn from and with each other, and share expertise and good practice. This rationale has been communicated to educators, albeit in a somewhat abstract way. What has

not been clearly articulated by policy makers is why they believe that participation in such communities will achieve the overarching educational purpose of the reform, which is to reduce New Zealand's persistent problem of highly inequitable educational outcomes.

The critical question to debate is why, for any given school, participation in a community of schools is more likely to improve the excellence and equity of its students' achievement than the efforts that have been taken to date by the senior leaders of that school. If those senior leaders have been unable to reduce long-standing achievement disparities, despite the initiatives and expertise they have already accessed, then how will their membership in a community make a difference? This question invites a focused debate about the likelihood that the proposed change will be any more successful than the status quo in addressing the central educational problem that the reform is intended to ameliorate. It provides tough tests of the change strategy and helps identify the conditions that are needed if the reform is to deliver the intended improvement.

Such a debate is quite different from a vaguely specified process of "consultation" with relevant stakeholders. The purpose of consultation should be to gain a greater understanding of the conditions required if the change is to produce the intended improvement; the extent to which those conditions are already in place; and, if they are not, how they can be created. The initial consultation will not provide definitive answers, as **collective inquiry is needed throughout the change process in order to learn** what the required conditions might be in different contexts and at different points in time. However, if educators experience their leaders as listening and as responding to feedback in ways that build a more compelling theory of improvement, trust will grow, and they will become more internally and less externally committed to the change. As I write, many New Zealand school leaders are agreeing to form communities of schools because they want access to the professional development money that will be made available to those schools

that sign up. How much better it would be if they were signing up because they understood and were fully committed to the educational arguments about why this particular change might bring the desired improvement in student outcomes.

## The Distinction Fosters Vigilance About Whether Change Is Working

Once a change is initiated, the distinction between change and improvement encourages more vigilance about how to make the change deliver the intended improvement. No matter how thorough and thoughtful the initial debates about change, there is always considerable uncertainty about what conditions are required to turn change into improvement and about how to create those conditions in different contexts. Good ideas sometimes fail to generate reliable improvement because neither the advocates nor the implementing agents know how to execute them in ways that deliver the intended improvement. As Bryk et al. (2015) write, “We consistently fail to appreciate what it actually takes to make some promising idea work reliably in practice” (p. 6). Instead of taking for granted that change will lead to improvement, we should do the opposite—that is, believe that change will not deliver our intended improvement unless there are structures and processes in place for ensuring that all involved can learn how to turn change into the intended improvement.

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## Is the Change Worth It?

Change is an extremely disruptive and costly process, in both a material and psychological sense. Of course, people resist rather than embrace change, for change takes time, money, and effort. If the implementing agents are teachers, they not only have to learn,

for example, how to teach, assess, or relate to students differently, but also how to adjust all of the other practices with which the new ones must articulate. The cognitive and practical effort required to make these adjustments is usually greater than learning the new practices in the first place.

My intention in stressing the distinction between change and improvement is not to somehow defend the status quo or diminish the importance of making large-scale and difficult changes. If we are to make the difference we seek, however, we do need to reduce the number of failed change efforts by being more thoughtful, before changes are adopted, about their likelihood of success and about the conditions required to ensure improvement. Once change is initiated, we need to be humbler about the challenge of implementation and about how much all of those involved have to learn about how to turn the change into the intended improvement. My goal is to help leaders reduce change in order to increase improvement.

## **IMPROVEMENT MEANS POSITIVE IMPACT ON LEARNERS**

Talk of improvement immediately invites difficult questions about what counts as improvement. In this section, I argue that the best indicator of whether or not the changes that leaders make constitute improvement is their impact on learners. This test is consistent with the widely shared moral purpose of education, which, broadly speaking, is to enable all children and young people to succeed at intellectually engaging and enriching tasks and, in so doing, to become confident and connected lifelong learners.

It is one thing for leaders to articulate this moral purpose in policy pronouncements, strategic plans, school assemblies, and team meetings and quite another to use it as a moral compass in day-to-day leadership decisions. Part of the difficulty in using this indicator of improvement is that it is often extremely difficult to tell what

course of action is likely to have the greatest positive impact on students. Even if there is relevant research evidence available, that evidence may be conflicting, not accessible to the leader, or not applicable to his or her particular context.

In the absence of widely shared and reliable knowledge about how to make a positive impact on particular social or academic outcomes of learners, other indicators of “what works” have taken the place of evidence about impact on learners. After a recent presentation I gave to Danish school leaders, the director of the local authority (commune) governing the region’s schools confessed that he and his staff had assumed that timely completion of project milestones would inevitably be associated with positive impact on students. Timely completion had become the indicator of improvement because it was assumed that correct implementation of the reform guaranteed better student outcomes. Rather than testing the relationship between timely completion and student outcomes, commune leaders had assumed it would be positive.

Another substitute indicator of improvement is change in teachers’ practice or attitudes. While teachers’ reactions to change are important, the moral purpose of education requires leaders to avoid the assumption that such reactions are reliable correlates of positive impact on students. In a comprehensive systematic review of research on teacher professional learning, Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung (2007) used impact on the students of the participating teachers as their indicator of improvement. One big finding was how few studies had measured such impact. Measures of teacher satisfaction and of implementation of the professional learning were far more common. A second big message was that correct implementation of the new practices does not guarantee improvement in student outcomes. In a few of the studies included in the systematic review, student outcomes declined when teachers implemented the new practices. This happens when teachers conscientiously implement a change that has not been proven to make the difference that is claimed. This is probably what happened in the New Zealand numeracy project—it was scaled up without sufficiently rigorous

and independent evaluations. There was a problem to be solved (disappointing math results) and passionate and articulate advocates of a solution (the numeracy project). What was missing was leadership at the national level that insisted on early engagement with its critics and rigorous independent evaluation of the project's impact on the attitudes and achievement of students.

It is considerably easier now for educational leaders to access the accumulated evidence about the likely impact of any particular change effort on student outcomes than it was twenty or even ten years ago. Rather than rely on a few frequently contradictory studies, leaders can now access systematic reviews (see [evidenceforessa.org](http://evidenceforessa.org) and [ies.ed.gov/ncee/WWC](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/WWC)) of the accumulated empirical literature on the likely impact of a proposed reform process on student outcomes. It is important to remember, however, that research findings provide generalizations rather than certainties about the likely impact on students of introducing any particular change. They may help us to select interventions that increase the chances of gaining improvement, but those involved in the change need, in addition, to conduct ongoing inquiries into the impact of the change so everyone can learn how to make it work for students in their own context. Leaders must be willing, at key stages of the change process, to ask, "Is the change likely to or actually delivering improvement?"

## THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

The pressure has never been greater on school leaders at all levels to improve outcomes for students. The public availability of international comparisons of student achievement across multiple country and state education systems has made policy makers very aware of the consequences of their current policy settings for student outcomes. Overall, underperformance of systems—or of particular social groups within those systems—is receiving unprecedented levels of attention. System-level efforts to improve student outcomes nearly always include assessing and building the

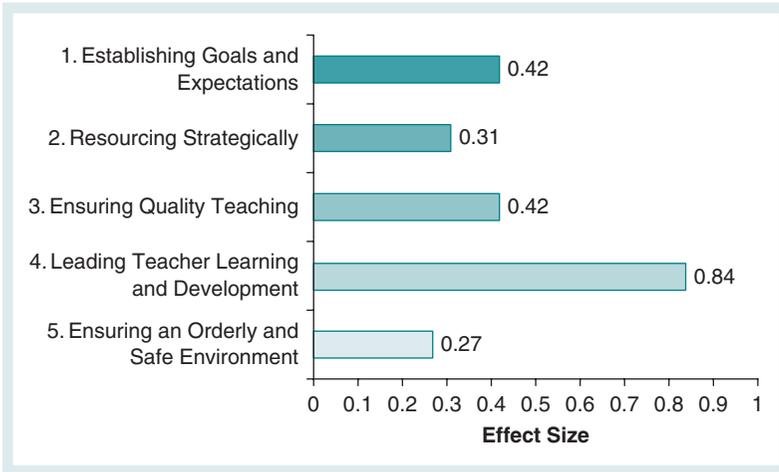
capability of school leaders to lead improvement in their own contexts (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010).

Politicians, policy makers, and the public at large are right to focus on the quality of leadership. While such quality is, of course, only one of multiple in-school and out-of-school influences on student achievement, it is the second most important, after teaching quality, in-school influence on student outcomes (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Nearly every evaluation of school improvement will partially attribute its degree of success to the quality of leadership (Robinson & Timperley, 2007). Leadership is the enabler of improvement, orchestrating the various conditions, such as professional capability, community engagement, and quality instruction, that need to be working together if improvement in student outcomes is to be achieved and sustained (Bryk et al., 2015).

Given the overall impact of leadership on student outcomes, it is important to ask, “What do leaders need to do to improve outcomes?” and “How do they do it?” Recent research has provided considerable insights into the first question. In the remainder of this section, I briefly review the evidence about *what* leaders of high-performing or improving schools do, so it can serve as a background to the second question about *how* they lead improvement. It is this second question that is the central focus of this book.

In the last fifteen years, new empirically grounded theories of educational leadership have emerged that are based on the educational work of school leaders rather than borrowed from business leadership. Variouslly called instructional, pedagogical, or educational leadership, these theories are increasingly based on empirical studies of the relationship between particular types of leadership and student outcomes. In my 2011 book *Student-Centered Leadership*, I presented a systematic quantitative review of such studies, called a meta-analysis, and reported the average effects of five dimensions of educational leadership on student outcomes (Robinson, 2011; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). The dimensions and their average effects on student outcomes are shown in Figure 1.1. The order of the five dimensions is determined not by the size of their effects but by the story they tell of how leaders make a difference to student outcomes.

**Figure 1.1** Average Effects of Five Dimensions of Educational Leadership on Student Outcomes



*Source:* Robinson, V. M. J. (2011). *Student-Centered Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, page 9.

In brief, leaders make an impact by setting goals on the basis of the curriculum, community priorities, and evidence about student learning needs (Dimension 1). They then allocate materials, money, and staffing to the pursuit of those goals (Dimension 2). As leaders ensure quality teaching by supporting and evaluating the quality of the curriculum and teaching (Dimension 3), they learn more about what they and their staff need to learn in order to achieve their priority goals. Leaders can then make a considerable impact by leading the teacher learning and development required for goal achievement (Dimension 4). The effects of Dimensions 1 through 4, however, are unlikely to occur without sufficient attention to Dimension 5—creating an orderly and safe environment. As I say to newly appointed principals, if you discover, on taking up your new appointment, that getting teachers and students to class on time is one of your biggest challenges, then start with the practices involved in Dimension 5.

In summary, perhaps the biggest message to come out of this research is that “the more leaders focus their relationships, their work, and their learning on the core business of teaching and

learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes” (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 636). So we now have considerable research evidence confirming what the public and the profession knew all along: that leadership matters. But more than the confirmation of common sense, this research has also shown that some types of leadership are much more likely to make a positive difference to students than others.

Since the publication of this work, I have discussed its implications with hundreds of school leaders in many different countries. While the great majority espouses developing stronger student-centered leadership in their school, they struggle with the fact that by becoming “closer to the classroom,” they may need to challenge and change long-standing norms and traditions about how leaders interact with their staff. Some leaders talk to me about how strong norms of professional autonomy preclude challenging teaching practice; some high school leaders say they are not confident about their theory of teaching effectiveness and so are reluctant to provide feedback about another’s teaching. Team leaders sometimes tell me that they do not feel any responsibility for their colleagues’ teaching practice because they have no positional authority over their team members.

There are many reasons why leaders’ change efforts do not lead to improvement, but the reasons I am interested in are those that lie within the control of leaders themselves.

But just as often, leaders recount examples where they have taken responsibility for leading improvement but been unsuccessful in their efforts because teachers have not changed their practice in the intended ways. There are many reasons why leaders’ change efforts do not lead to improvement, but the reasons I am interested in are those that lie within the control of leaders themselves. This means focusing on the reasoning and action they bring to the change process. It is there that the keys lie to increasing the chance of making changes that result in improvement. That is why in the rest of the book, I focus on *how* to lead educational improvement.

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● ● ● ● REFLECTION AND ACTION

1. In your organization, is a careful distinction made between change and improvement, or is it assumed that changing is equivalent to improving?
  2. Discuss how you could interrupt the assumption that changing your system, organization, or team is the same as improving it.
  3. How much change is taking place in your context? What do you know about whether it is leading to improved outcomes for learners?
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