

# Strategies for Education Reform: Chinese Connections

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I have been very encouraged by the strong interest in China in the ideas on educational reform that we have been working on over the past 25 years. I visited Beijing in 2000 and again in 2004 and met with hundreds of principals, and educational leaders at the local, regional and government levels. The interest has been so strong that it has led to the translation into Chinese of four of my books. The first three concerned the *Change Forces* trilogy, and more recently a book called *Breakthrough* that I wrote with colleagues Peter Hill and Carmel Crévola. All of these books have been published by Education and Science Publishing House, Beijing.

In this short note I will identify the key ideas in these books and indicate their application to Chinese education reform. The basic idea in *Change Forces* (1993) was twofold. First, to establish 'the moral purpose' of education reform which is for leaders to commit to and focus on providing a strong basic education for all students regardless of background — raise the bar and close the gap, especially in literacy and numeracy. The second change force focused on understanding the complexities of the change process in order to develop schools and school systems as learning organizations.

In *Change Forces: The Sequel* (1999), I probed more deeply into the moral purpose of education and began to consider the deeper meaning of internal to the school collaboration, and external collaboration.

In *Change Forces with a Vengeance* (2003), for the first time I made explicit the idea of 'tri-level reform' which involves developing policies and strategies that address and connect each of the three levels of (1) local schools and communities, (2) regional infrastructures, and (3) government. We have had considerable success in Ontario, Canada, for example in implementing a tri-level reform strategy since 2003. In this period we have substantially improved literacy and numeracy in the 4,000 elementary schools, and increased significantly high school graduation rates in the 900 secondary schools — as well as improved morale of teachers, school principals and district leaders (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008; and Fullan, 2008a).

In *Breakthrough* (2006), I teamed up with Peter Hill (recently retired head of the Hong Kong Examinations Authority) and Carmel Crévola (international literacy consultant) to produce a book that asks and answers the question of what it would take to get full success in literacy and numeracy in all schools. We offered an instructionally focused model developed and tested by Hill and Crévola called CLIP (Critical Learning Instructional Pathways). But the big question as always is *implementation*. For the latter we drew on our wider change strategies and recommended that moral purpose be at the core driven by what we called the Triple P model — *personalization* (focusing on the individual needs of each and every learner), *precision* (doing so in a way that connects the precise instructional practice to the student's need, and *professional learning* of teachers and principals (learning that is build into the day-to-day culture of the school).

Attempts to improve learning in some of the best planned and funded school reform initiatives in the western world have resulted in very small gains. The principal reason, in our findings, is that there has been a failure to address the quality of instruction. *Breakthrough* focused on this issue offering ideas for achieving major gains directly working on improving instruction.

With well over 300,000 elementary schools in China embarking on reform it is obvious why there is strong interest in our work on large-scale reform. Here I identify eight key components to our strategy that should be of strong interest for those implementing education reform in China:

1. A shift in the role of the *school principal*
2. The need to focus on *instruction*
3. *Capacity building* at the core of the strategy
4. The developing of *professional learning communities*
5. Designing strategies for schools to learn from each other — what we call *lateral capacity building*
6. The use of *student achievement data* both as a strategy for improvement and to serve accountability
7. New roles of *government and ministries of education*
8. Two-way *communication* about the strategy

In our work there is a shift in *role of the principal* from "administrative management" of the school toward developing a "learning culture" that leads teachers to focus on continuous instructional improvement linked to student achievement. There is considerable

research that shows that the principal can be a key factor (second only to the importance of the teacher) in leading successful change. In my *What's Worth Fighting For in the Principalship* (2008b), I identified several action guidelines for principals. Essentially this involves stimulating and helping teachers to work individually and collaboratively to make continuous instructional improvements. One way of stating the new priority for principals is that they must work on items two through six in the following principals. It is likely that this will involve a major change in the role of the principal in China.

Second, and related, teachers and schools must begin to focus on a small number of ambitious *instructional goals*. Again, in China it would seem that literacy in Chinese, mathematics and perhaps English as a second language would be the high priorities. This is a matter of identifying and spreading the *most effective* pedagogical practices that produce results in student learning and achievement. The recent McKinsey report that examined the 'top performing education systems in the world' identified two crucial factors: (1) attracting the best people to become teachers, and (2) helping them focus and develop instructionally on the job (Barber, and Mourshed, 2007). The implications for China are evident: major reforms in initial teacher education, criterion of selection, salaries, and continuous development on the job.

Third, we express the core of our strategy as *capacity building*. The latter has two components. One involves strategies for increasing the competencies, knowledge and skills of teachers to become instructionally effective (basically it involves implementing the focus of item 2). The second dimension involves knowledge of the 'management of change', especially for schools and other leaders — knowledge about developing collaborative cultures within the school, and about relating to other schools, and to government policy.

Fourth, and again related, consists of fostering *professional learning communities* or PLCs as they are called in the literature. PLCs have at least three characteristics:

1. They prioritize *learning* as the core purpose and are willing to examine their teaching practices in this regard;
2. They cultivate *collaborative cultures* through developing high performing teams, and
3. They focus on and assess their effectiveness based on the *results* they are getting.

Thus, developing PLCs must become a priority for Chinese schools which has major implications for the role of school leaders as I have already said, and for government leaders at the regional and national levels who must make PLCs a priority through policy and the allocation of resources for capacity building.

Fifth, we have found that isolated schools are no more effective than isolated teachers. Collaboration then, does not mean school autonomy where just internal-to-the-school collaboration is expected. For large scale reform to occur schools must learn from each other. Strategies are needed that cluster or network schools to learn together in relation to the core instructional priorities. We call this lateral capacity building.

The sixth element concerns the role of student data. Data on student achievement is crucial for day-to-day or within-school improvement. The 'assessment for learning' information is essential for knowing what and when to alter instruction. In addition, data on how well schools are doing is another important element of our system-wide strategy. In Ontario, for example, the Province's assessment agency collects student achievement data on reading, writing and math for grade 3 (8-year old) students and grade 6 (11-12 year old) students. Schools themselves (led by the principal) use the data to compare 'themselves with themselves'. That is, how well did we do last year? Where are we this year? And what can we do to improve next year? The Ministry of Education uses the data to identify schools not doing so well (compared to their peers facing similar circumstances), and then to establish a 'turnaround schools' strategy to help schools improve on the previous five elements — the role of the principal, instructional focus, capacity building, professional learning communities, and later capacity building — are integrated with the use of data.

The seventh element concerns new roles for government. Essentially they must identify a small number of core priorities, stick with them, invest in capacity building strategies and integrate accountability. It is critical that governments not make the mistake of putting accountability as the main strategy. The other elements are more important with accountability flowing out of the capacity building work.

Finally, the eighth key factor concerns communication. Because new priorities require constant attention, because strategies must be clearly understood, and because the entire change process involving system-wide reform is highly complex, governments must constantly engage in two-way communication. The first part is to be as clear as possible about the strategy at the beginning and as it unfolds. The second involves gathering information from the field about how implementation is unfolding in order to use this information to identify and solve problems along the way.

China faces an enormous challenge because of the sheer size of the system, and the deeply ambitious reform goals being addressed. There will certainly be policies and strategies linked to Chinese culture and traditions.

What I have tried to do in this short paper is to identify eight key factors associated with large-scale success in our work in Ontario and around the world. I very much appreciate the interest of Chinese educators in our work, and am very pleased to see this work increasingly available in the Chinese language. Best wishes for success to my colleagues in China as they pursue their reform agenda in the immediate future.

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