

“Promising practices”:



by Nancy Watson

This issue of *Education Canada* portrays an amazing variety of good ideas in education. When I was first approached to write this article, I expected that the issue would be a collection of innovative practices in elementary and secondary schools across the country. What we have, however, is much richer. The articles outline an impressive range of “best practice” in Canadian schools, school districts, colleges and universities. But beyond these glimpses into various educational organizations, we have a chance to hear about partnerships and outreach activities, some of which extend our thinking about what education is and could be. Although I focus on schools, it is important to remember that education extends well beyond these conventional settings.

What does it really take to make a difference?

The articles in this issue give us close-up views of many different initiatives, each generating enthusiasm and commitment, many making an impact. My perspective is somewhat different in that I am trying to stand back - to look at the broader landscape of school improvement and to add a cautionary note.

In recent years, schools have been saturated with changes. Many of these are a result of external forces such as district directives, provincial policy shifts, and funding cuts. Other changes come about because teachers and principals identify needs and then develop programs and initiatives to address such needs. Regardless of how change has come about, schools have not been standing still.

For many years, attempts to introduce innovations into classrooms and schools tended to emphasize the product or practice that was being advocated (e.g. new approaches to math or open classrooms). The assumption was that everyone should adopt this great new approach. Disappointment has inevitably followed. In some cases, the innovation was poorly understood and never really implemented. In other cases, the innovation created problems because it fit poorly with the way most schools operated. Open classrooms, for instance, were not popular with teachers accustomed to organizing their classrooms with little interference or distraction from others. In still other cases, innovations were adopted, but did not last. Perhaps the novelty wore off or an innovation was supplemented by yet another new idea. Some innovations continued to be seen as interesting but isolated projects (peer coaching, team teaching), rarely becoming part of the organizational fabric of schools.

Fortunately, much has been learned over the last two decades about educa-

tion reform and the management of change. Much has also been learned about which educational practices have the best chance of significantly improving student outcomes. In this brief article, I will look at two distinct but complementary approaches to improving the likelihood that new ideas will make a sustained difference in schools. First, I will summarize some conclusions about which practices are worth adopting, drawing mainly from the research on effective schools. Second, I will look more broadly at schools as organizations - beyond choosing and implementing "good ideas," what is required for schools to sustain the improvements they work so hard to put in place?

Choosing the "right innovations"

As part of ongoing efforts to improve student learning and to help schools provide supportive environments for students and staff, researchers have tried to identify practices that work well. The "effective schools" research, for instance, has led to hundreds of such practices - far more than any school or school district could keep track of, let

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alone implement.¹ One list of the effective schooling attributes that are seen as most crucial focuses on *instruction* and *context*.² Instructional attributes include focused instruction, effective questioning, and feedback and reinforcement. Contextual attributes refer to such factors as strong administrative leadership, safe and orderly schools, monitoring of student progress and parent/community involvement. None of these sound new or surprising to educators or to the public, although it is not always clear how schools might actually move from "less effective" to "more effective." Practices identified through the effective schools research may sound unexciting to educators, partly because they rein-



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Les éducatrices et les éducateurs mettent souvent beaucoup de dévouement et d'énergie pour élaborer des programmes qui répondent aux besoins des élèves. Mais pour que les pratiques les plus prometteuses puissent avoir un impact sur l'apprentissage des élèves, il faut faire plus que cela. Le présent article, un survol des pratiques qui méritent qu'on les adopte, examine les résultats d'études sur les écoles efficaces et la recherche sur l'école en tant qu'organisme. En plus d'offrir des conseils sur la sélection et la mise en pratique de bonnes idées, il parle de ce que les écoles doivent faire pour que puissent se préserver les améliorations qu'elles ont mis en place avec tant de peine.

force conventional wisdom (e.g. safe and orderly schools) and partly because they are presented so generally as to be of limited value to teachers (e.g. effective questioning). It is unlikely that any educators would advocate for unsafe and disorderly schools or for ineffective questioning. Kathleen Cotton provides an excellent summary and unpacking of "schooling practices that matter most," in which she explains in more depth and detail what is meant by terms such as "clear and focused instruction" and "feedback and reinforcement."³

"Restructuring" provides a somewhat different approach to improving schools. Rather than specific practices, the emphasis here is on structural shifts such as decentralization, shared decision-making, new forms of assessment (such as portfolios) and increased accountability (often with external standards).⁴ All of these have been put forward as at least partial remedies for educational problems, but again, researchers such as Anthony Bryk and his colleagues show that there are no magic solutions.⁵

Schools and school districts have developed a range of other practices and innovations which can have a positive impact on students, including dropout prevention programs, links between school and child health agencies, and efforts to increase equity and to appropriately address student diversity.

Although these may not be directly linked to student learning, they address the wider context to provide better opportunities for all children.

It is clear from this brief summary that there is no shortage of good ideas and excellent programs. At the same time, however, research on outcomes has been somewhat disappointing; there seem to be few innovations that can be relied upon to consistently improve student learning in all situations.⁶ Educators often show great commitment in developing programs and investing energy to ensure that student needs are met. But, if "promising practices" are to make a difference in student learning, more is required.


What else has to happen?

Increasingly, educators and researchers are coming to a consensus: improvement in student learning is fostered and sustained by a confluence of favourable conditions in the school. In addition to individual teacher skill and knowledge, successful schools are characterized by *professional community* and *program coherence*.⁷ Professional community should not be confused with high morale or collegiality, desirable as those are. A school with strong professional community focuses on student learning with clear shared goals, collective responsibility, ongoing problem-solving, and opportunities for staff to influence school policies and activities. Program coherence means that school programs and activities fit together, are sustained over time, and are perceived by staff to support agreed-upon school priorities.

According to Michael Fullan, the main enemies of successful reform are "overload and extreme fragmentation."⁸ The phrase "Christmas tree schools" refers to schools that showcase a multitude of programs and initiatives, some of which may be operating at cross-purposes.⁹ Given the "sea of excessive, inconsistent, relentless demands"¹⁰ surrounding schools, it is not difficult to understand how they become overloaded with well-intended but unconnected activities.

While remaining alert to worthwhile new initiatives, schools must be selective; there is no prize for taking on the greatest number of innovations. Schools do better to focus on a few key priorities, sustained over a number of years. Such key priorities can guide choices about new initiatives and can help overcome fragmentation by connecting activities across the school. Again, the touchstone for all innovations would be the expected link to improved student learning.

Conclusion

Education seems to be in a constant state of flux, motivated both by external pressures and by internal changes. Educators do well to be proactive in the face of such pressures, that is, to take the initiative in selecting and developing solutions to the problems they see in their schools. However, it is important to remember that, *in and of themselves*, promising practices are unlikely to make much sustained impact. Good practice must be integrated in a whole school effort to build coherence and overcome fragmentation. In schools with the capacity to do this, and with a constant focus on student learning, promising practices can lead to sustained success. 

1 R.R. Edmonds, "Effective Schools for the Urban Poor," *Educational Leadership*, 37 (1), 1979: 15-18, 20-24.

2 K. Cotton, *Research You Can Use to Improve Results* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999).

3 K. Cotton, *The Schooling Practices That Matter Most* (Portland, Oregon: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2000).

4 F.M. Newmann and G.G. Wehlage, *Successful School Restructuring* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995).

5 A. Bryk, et al., *Charting Chicago School Reform*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998).

6 Newmann and Wehlage.

7 M.B. King and F.M. Newmann, "Will Teacher Learning Advance School Goals?" *Phi Delta Kappan*, 81 (8), 2000: 576 - 580.

8 M. Fullan, "The Three Stories of Educational Reform," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 81 (8): 581-585.

9 Bryk.

10 Fullan.

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