

[Education Policy Studies Series]

**Lee Hysan Lecture Series in Education
Faculty of Education
The Chinese University of Hong Kong**

**Fusion: How to Unleash
Irreversible Change**

**Lessons for the Future of System-
Wide School Reform**

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Acknowledgment

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Education Policy Studies Series

Education embraces aspirations of the individual and society. It is a means to strengthen human resources, sustain competitiveness of societies, enhance mobility of the underprivileged, and assimilate newcomers to the mainstream of the society. It is also a means to create for the populace an environment that is free, prosperous, and harmonious.

Education is an endeavor that has far-reaching influence, for it embodies development and justness. Its development needs enormous support from society as well as the guidance of policies that serve the imperatives of economic development and social justice. Policy-makers in education, as those in other public sectors, can neither rely on their own visions nor depend on the simple tabulation of financial cost and benefit to arrive at decisions that will affect the pursuit of the common good. Democratization warrants the emergence of a public discourse on vital matters that affect all of us. Democratization also dictates transparency in the policy-making process. Administrative orders disguised as policies have a very small audience indeed. The public expects well-informed policy decisions – those that are based on in-depth analyses and careful deliberation. Like the policy-makers, the public and professionals in education require a wealth of easily accessible facts and views so that they can contribute constructively to the public discourse.

The Hong Kong Institute of Educational Research of The Chinese University of Hong Kong provides the space for rational discourse on important educational matters. From time to time, the Institute organizes “Education Policy Seminars” to address critical issues in educational development of Hong Kong and other Chinese societies. These academic gatherings have been attended by stake-holders, practitioners, researchers and parents. The bulk of this series of occasional papers are the fruit of labor of some of the speakers at the seminars. Others are written specifically as contributions to the series.

The aim of this Education Policy Studies Series is to present the views of selected persons who have new ideas to share and to engage all stake-holders in education in an on-going discussion on educational matter that will shape the future of our society.

FUSION: HOW TO UNLEASH IRREVERSIBLE CHANGE

Lessons for the Future of System-Wide School Reform

1

*“The beauty in the tension of opposites I saw
everywhere – the pull of gravity actually
strengthened the bridge’s steel arches”*

*Arthur Miller describing Brooklyn
Bridge in Timebends (1987)*

Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of “fusion,” a way of thinking about school reform which the authors believe can lead to major advance. Starting from the premises that all children can achieve high standards and that rapid progress is possible, five “fusions” are examined. Each is an example of the way of thinking the authors advocate which involves combining apparent opposites. The first fusion described combines equity with diversity, the second pressure with support, the third innovation with sustained implementation, the fourth changing behaviours with changing beliefs and the fifth central direction with empowering the frontline. In describing each of these fusions the authors illustrate them with examples from British and American reforms.



Introduction

This paper brings a variety of perspectives to the most urgent challenge facing modern societies: ensuring successful education reform.

We have not yet seen an education system in which every student succeeds. However, in spite of the disappointments that we have all witnessed, there has been genuine progress. All our knowledge and experience suggest that there are now some universally applicable lessons which can be learnt from those years of reform which, if applied systematically, could bring unprecedented success in the future.

Above all, we believe that two fundamental premises have been firmly established: every student **can** achieve high standards; and radical improvement **can** be rapidly accomplished. The key to both is an unrelenting focus on classrooms, teaching, learning, and students' performance. These are our starting points.

It is our conviction that the conflicts, the setbacks, and the disappointments arise from a single, constantly repeated error. Over and over again important, potentially transformative ideas – equity and diversity, pressure and support, innovation and stability, actions and beliefs – have been placed in opposition to each other by ill-formed, bitter and heated controversy. As a result the potential for transformation is lost. The more effective course of action, which is supported both by the evidence and our own

experience, is to allow these apparent opposites to work in concert to create radical change. Bringing together ideas that are often considered to be opposites – what we are calling “fusion” in this paper – can unleash irreversible change for the better. It is that simple – and that difficult!

As our metaphor suggests, fusion can have dramatic consequences. The outcomes of fusion are not necessarily stable, but if the force which is unleashed is harnessed well and used to good purpose, it will ensure irreversible change. This means that successful education reform is neither a one-off event, nor a mere incremental process. It is an ongoing journey in which the chief task of leadership is to hold these apparent opposites in productive tension.

To change the metaphor, successful education reform is a drama with an unknown number of acts, often full of sound and fury but, if fusion is present, signifying everything. In this paper we provide illustrations of what we mean by “fusion.” In each case we describe and analyse the ideas and provide examples from our own and others’ experience of education reform in the 1990s. But what we want to do above all is to illustrate a way of thinking.

Fusion 1: Equity With Diversity

Most people over thirty in Great Britain have read the Sellars and Yeatman classic (1998), *1066 and All That*. For those from other countries, or with short memories, or who are under thirty (or all three), it was a light-hearted

romp through a thousand years of British history. Among the many pearls of wisdom in their book, Sellars and Yeatman invented an important classification. They defined the Cavaliers in the English Civil War in the 17th century as “wrong but romantic” and the Roundheads as “right but repulsive.” The more one thinks about this classification, the more one can identify aspects of life to which it seems to apply! In any case, this paradigm provides a key to understanding the political conflict over education in the post-war era.

If we generalise ruthlessly, we could argue that the last fifty years of education debate in Britain and elsewhere have been dominated by an argument between the proponents of two conflicting ideas. On the political right were those who believed that the goal of education should be diversity: diverse provision to meet diverse needs or demands. The political left, by contrast, held that the overarching goal of education should be equity. If the pursuit of equity required the imposition of uniformity, then so be it.

	INEQUITY	EQUITY
DIVERSITY	Wrong but Romantic	Right and Romantic
UNIFORMITY	Wrong and Repulsive	Right but Repulsive

Figure 1

Figure 1 illustrates our point. The position of the political right is found in the top left-hand corner of the diagram, favouring a combination of inequity with diversity. As Sellars and Yeatman would say they are “wrong” about equity, but “romantic” about diversity. The position of the political left is reflected in the bottom right-hand corner. In the same language, they are “right” in that they favour equity, but “repulsive” in their support for uniformity.

The diagram has two remaining corners. In the bottom left-hand corner we find the objectionable combination of “inequity and uniformity.” Surely, no one would design a political programme which was both “wrong” *and* “repulsive,” at least not on purpose! The top right-hand corner of the diagram brings together, or fuses, equity with diversity. Rather than treat the two issues, equity and diversity, as separate and incompatible aims, our goal in this new century should be to combine them – to harness the good in each and to create for the first time in history an education service which is both right and romantic.

This aspiration has an obvious appeal. But more than this, the combination of equity and diversity would recognise two increasingly important social priorities which have made the opposing positions in the stale conflicts of the post-war era simply inadequate. The first is the development of an education system which provides every young person with the opportunity to achieve high standards. In other words, we need a system that provides

equity of opportunity so that everyone reaches a much higher standard in the essential core of learning than, until recently, was believed to be possible.

The second is the recognition of the extent to which society has become more diverse over the last thirty years, and we know that society in future will become even more diverse. Social homogeneity is breaking down as each society is forced to come to terms with multi-racial, multi-cultural, and multi-faith communities. Just as our education systems must strive to provide achievement for all, so too must they be able to respond imaginatively to increasing diversity. Any attempt by education systems, or indeed any public service, to impose uniformity on an increasingly diverse society would result in their demise.

We could give many examples of how this fusion works in practice. The British Government's strategy for secondary education in large conurbations – *Excellence in Cities* – combines an emphasis on high standards for all and a core approach to school improvement with other strategies designed to remove the barriers outside school that prevent some students from making progress. Simultaneously it encourages some schools to take on specialist or magnet functions, but approval for a specialist school requires the school to show how its extra resources will benefit students not just in that school, but in others too. The policy goal is that every student should be a member both of the school community which they attend and of a wider learning community including other schools in the locality, all of whose expertise and resources are

available to them.

In Lancaster, Pennsylvania, this fusion of equity with diversity is illustrated by a school system that is organised by levels of schooling rather than traditional grades: primary (formerly grades K-3), intermediate (formerly grades 4-5), middle level (formerly grades 6-8), high school level I (formerly 9-10), and high school level II (formerly grades 11-12). In order to move from one level to another, or to graduate from high school, students must meet a set of clear academic standards and benchmarks. Students may take more time or less time to complete a level of schooling. For example, some students might complete the requirements of middle level in 2 years, some in 2.5, some in 3, and some could take up to 3.5 or 4 years. In addition, students who are experiencing difficulty in meeting standards have access to extended learning opportunities after traditional school hours and during the summer vacation. Moreover, a series of learning choices within and outside the traditional school milieu is available as students approach their middle and secondary years. These learning choices further fuse equity (the need of every student to acquire a level of fundamental learning as they move from level to level) with diversity (the power of personal endeavour when directly aligned with students' individual hopes and aspirations).

These are examples of attempts to build systems which provide both high levels of fundamental learning *and* provision for personal endeavour. These are not

alternatives. We must do both. We must ensure a level of knowledge, skill, and understanding that leads *all* students to productive life-choice options (i.e., high academic standards for everyone). We must also personally engage students in opportunities that respect their hopes and aspirations so that those who choose to do so may seize them and pursue them to the highest levels of which they are capable. That is why we always talk not simply about students' **needs** but about their **needs and aspirations**.

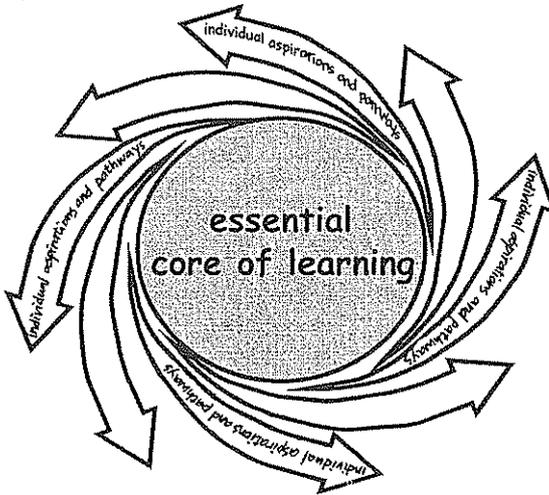


Figure 2

In essence, as shown in Figure 2, these two elements should become a virtuous circle:

- success in the core of the curriculum opens up opportunities across many disciplines and activities;
- success in individually chosen areas – a particular

sport, language, art, or a particular skill or quality like leadership – builds the confidence and self-esteem to enable further success in the core.

Fusion 2: Pressure and Support

Among the many useless and polarising arguments in education during the last twenty years has been whether emphasis should be placed on improving schools by **pressure** or by **support**. On the one hand, there are those who strongly favour high-stakes accountability (a system of rewards, assistance, and consequences that is based on explicit performance targets for schools). On the other there are those who believe that high-stakes accountability reflects a “carrot-and-stick” mentality that does little to build the capacity of schools to improve. Neither position is sufficient on its own. High expectations call for high supports. Both are essential. Schools, school districts, or, in Britain, local authorities, need a clear set of expectations or “conditions” to guide their work *and* a set of tools or “supports” to ensure that they have the best possible chance of getting the job done. Figure 3 illustrates the relationships between pressure and support.

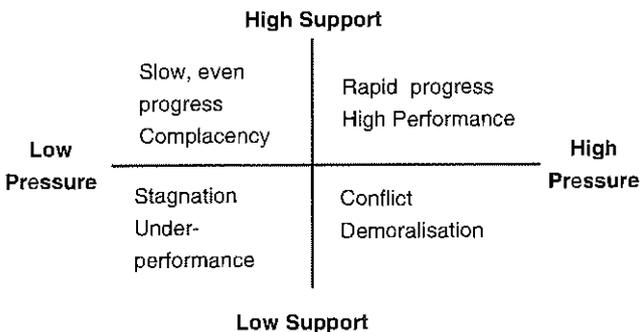


Figure 3

From our perspective at least four conditions are important to the “pressure” side of the equation:

- **Rigorous academic standards:** clear statements of what students should know and be able to do, and how well they should know and do them.
- **Robust assessment systems:** multifaceted assessment systems that are sophisticated enough to tell us whether students are achieving the rigorous academic standards that have been set for them; that provide a far broader view of student abilities than standardised testing alone; and that serve multiple purposes such as informing instruction, holding schools accountable for results, and reporting to the public.
- **Accountability:** systems of accountability that do more than track how the money is spent; rather, systems of accountability that tell us whether the education that was funded with those pounds/dollars has had any real effect on student achievement. In other words, a willingness to stand up for the results we produce.
- **Equity of opportunity for all:** the fusion of equity and diversity; ensuring that all children have access to a good education which meets their needs and aspirations regardless of where they live in the community, or in what community they live.

High expectations (i.e., pressure) alone can lead to conflict and demoralisation across the board. In particular, teachers are understandably reluctant to embrace standards, assessment, and accountability if they do not believe they will be given the support to do what is being asked of them and of their students. One might think of these supports as the “toolkit” that schools will need to be successful (e.g., continuing professional development for teachers; early and extended learning opportunities for students; strategic partnerships with parents and the community; and effective use of time, resources, and technology). The exact contents of this “toolkit” may vary from place to place. But when we combine pressure and support, what might have been demoralising on its own becomes a recipe for high performance and rapid progress.

The British Government’s National Literacy Strategy, which requires that schools set demanding targets and publish their results, also provides consistent, high-quality professional development opportunities. It has resulted in substantial gains in students’ performance within two years.

We would characterise this work – the fusion of pressure and support – as *gentle pressure relentlessly applied* and *serious support intentionally delivered*.

The approach of the Lancaster School District to improving public education (Figure 4) illustrates this perfectly.

Improving Public Education

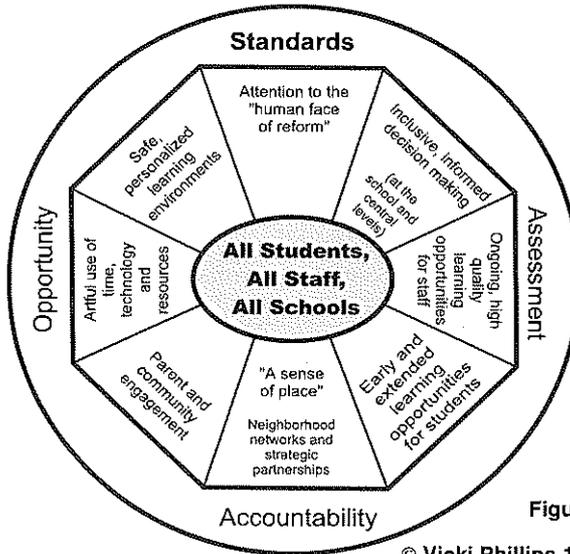


Figure 4

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What do we mean by *serious* professional development? Central to the concept of high pressure/high support is investing in the knowledge, understanding and skill of teachers. For the most part, previous reforms never reached as deep as we must now reach to bring about lasting change for the better in public education. Changes in the beliefs of teachers and improved classroom practice are at the very core of the work we are undertaking. The name of the game is "capacity-building" and we must discover what this entails, or we shall find that our current attempts to improve education will fail as so many others have done in the past.

We expect that the deepest learning for leaders of education reform in the next few years will take place as we grapple with the challenges of building that teacher

and school capacity. Continuous personal and professional growth are essential if teachers, administrators, and support staff are to stay current in their field, meet the ever-changing needs of students, and remain motivated and full of energy. This will not happen by chance or by putting the responsibility totally on teachers and administrators. The system must invest in ongoing opportunities through which staff can retain their professional edge and be personally renewed.

As important as other parties are to student learning, the role of the teacher is paramount. It seems odd to have to emphasise this, but this basic truth is often overlooked. In the final analysis, it is the quality of the interaction between teacher and learner that determines when, how, and how well learning occurs. Teachers must have access to ongoing, high-quality professional development to ensure that they are:

- *intimately familiar with the subject area* (e.g., mathematics, science) that they are to teach and are up-to-date with changes and growth in the body of knowledge;
- *adept at using differentiated instructional strategies* that reflect their students' learning styles and historical/cultural orientations and draw on internationally proven best practice;
- *assessment literate* (i.e., adept at assessing students' learning in relation to national and international

standards), so that they gauge accurately how well students have learnt and use that knowledge to adjust instructional practice;

- *able regularly to share proven approaches with their colleagues and receive advice and coaching* on how to enhance their effectiveness;
- *capable of motivating or engaging students from a range of different backgrounds.*

While we do not have all the answers, we believe that a major part of the solution lies in:

- Providing professional development that is teacher-centred, classroom-focused, and school-based.
- Designing content institutes so that teachers maintain a thorough understanding of the subject areas they teach.
- Helping schools to use standards as the basis for selecting curriculum materials and instructional strategies.
- Creating teacher-led networks or professional learning teams both within and between schools, in which participants can continuously enhance their knowledge base, share standards-based instructional practices, and raise and resolve common problems.

- Developing and providing access to reliable ways to measure and track student progress and assisting teachers to enhance their knowledge and use of those tools.

For individual teachers access to high quality learning opportunities should be an entitlement. Ensuring that they improve their subject knowledge and professional skills should be a duty. For school systems the challenge is to create the conditions which make this possible.

Fusion 3: Constant Innovation and Sustained Implementation

Stagnation and indifference are fundamental enemies of change. These tensions can be managed by the right balance of pressure and support. But there is another enemy of change which is found not among those who resist progress, but among those who are its most enthusiastic advocates – haphazard and unsustained implementation. The failure to guarantee time, tolerance, perseverance, and sustained support imperils any reform which is designed to be a comprehensive and integrated effort, rather than a narrow, pick-and-choose menu of “boutique” projects.

There have been countless promising reforms in the last few decades. We would guess that the vast majority of these failed either because they were not aligned with a range of other contemporary initiatives or, more likely, because the change effort was never sustained. Like

viruses, we simply expected those initiatives to catch hold and spread. Or we might say we applied the “trickle down theory” of education reform, and, like “trickle down” economics, it was ineffective. Time and again we were disappointed that such initiatives had little or no impact on student achievement. Leaders lost interest (an ever present risk with elected politicians, maverick administrators, and educational theorists), barriers were not overcome, and excessive dilution was allowed. The result, therefore, was not change in classroom practice but dissipation – this truly is sound and fury signifying nothing.

The keys to successful implementation are:

- alignment;
- leadership;
- sustained follow-through;
- effective communication;
- constant feedback and refinement;
- capacity building.

The Kentucky and Philadelphia reforms, like those in El Paso, Texas, are American reforms which have been sustained over several years. The National Education Goals Panel Report on Texas and North Carolina draws out some of the keys to successful, sustained reform. Three overarching reasons for success were:

- leadership from the business community;
- political leadership;

- continuity and stability of reform policies over time.

The key reform policies were:

- state-wide academic standards by grade for clear teaching objectives;
- the same standards for all students;
- state-wide assessments closely linked to academic standards;
- accountability systems with consequences for results;
- increasing local flexibility for administrators and teachers;
- computerised feedback systems, providing data for continuous improvement;
- shifting resources to schools with more disadvantaged students;
- infrastructure to sustain reform.

In the UK, the present government's continuation and refinement of the previous government's approach to school inspection and school failure have also enabled the policy to reap the rewards of six years of sustained commitment. As a result the number of failing schools has dropped steadily in the last twelve months. Its national literacy and numeracy strategies have been mapped out for at least five years.

In these cases, local, state, and national governments have been able to continue to adapt and, indeed, to advance further innovation without being distracted. What makes reform complicated in this era of rapid change is that, at

any given moment, there will be a range of policy developments working their way through, each at a different stage of development. Those responsible for the overall strategy need to ensure both that each one is embedded and that they are all aligned. This, by the way, is why a shared vision is so important. It is possible to view the process as a time sequence or a series of waves and to ensure the system is always focused on the achievement of clear goals in the future, as in the diagram below (Figure 5).

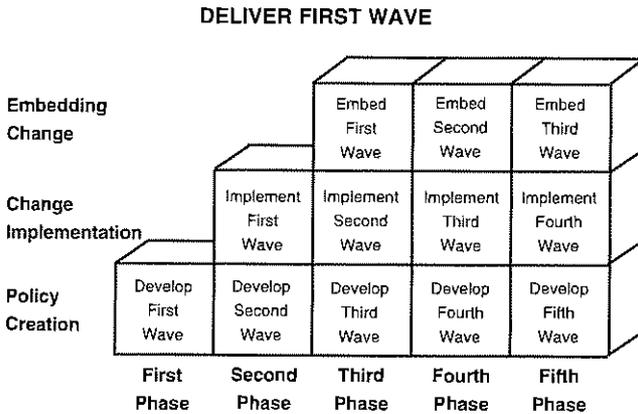


Figure 5

Fusion 4: Behaviours and Beliefs

There is a popular misconception about the process of change. It is often assumed that the key to successful change is to “win hearts and minds.” If this is the starting point then the first steps in the process of change are likely to be consultation and public relations campaigns. These may have some beneficial impact in creating conditions

for change, but often the outcome will be inconclusive for the simple reason that, for most people, most of the time, the status quo will have greater appeal than an uncertain alternative. Many people implicitly agree with Lord Salisbury, the British Prime Minister at the end of the 19th century, who said, "Whatever happens will be for the worse and therefore it is in our interests that as little should happen as possible." There are many reasons for this: a universal fear of the unknown; the hard work of making change happen and sustaining it into the future; the reluctance to admit the inadequacy of the present; and the fact that many individuals and organisations have a vested interest in the existing state of affairs.

Even when they have the evidence on their side, those who advocate change encounter a litany of excuses that is depressingly familiar:

- It's impossible.
- We are already doing it.
- We need more time.
- We did that before and it failed.
- It is too much, too fast.
- The old system works fine.
- If it isn't broken, why fix it?

And we have not even mentioned the power of inertia and apathy! So, amid a cacophony of excuses, efforts to change are often overwhelmed by all the *noise*.

The explanation for this is simple. The popular

conception is wrong. Winning hearts and minds is not the best first step in any process of urgent change. Beliefs do not necessarily drive behaviour. More usually, it is the other way round – behaviours shape beliefs.

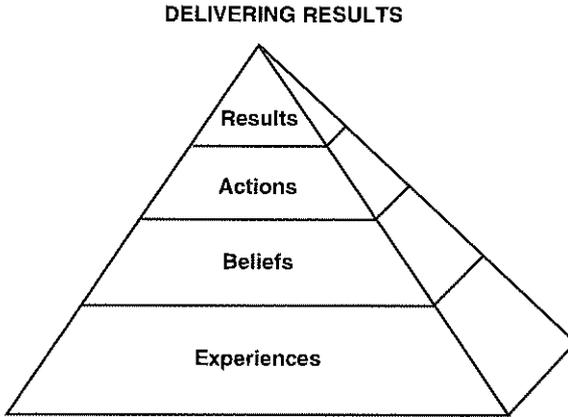


Figure 6

Only when people have experienced a change do they revise their beliefs accordingly. And often they must experience change over a period of time for such beliefs to change permanently. Denial is a powerful force and it is not always possible to overcome resistance simply by attempting to win hearts and minds. Sometimes it is necessary to mandate the change, implement it well, consciously challenge the prevailing culture, and have the courage to sustain it until beliefs shift. In other words, sometimes it is more effective to show people something or let them experience it than to tell them about it. The driving force at this critical juncture is leadership. Successful strategies for change require the leadership to

establish and maintain an emotional and professional environment in which others can explore new experiences with a sense of purpose and a feeling of some security. Of course, there is one necessary precondition for this to work – the mandated change needs to be a good idea!

The Smith and Connors pyramid in Figure 6 illustrates the argument perfectly. It can also be seen as a cycle (Figure 7), which starts at the top:

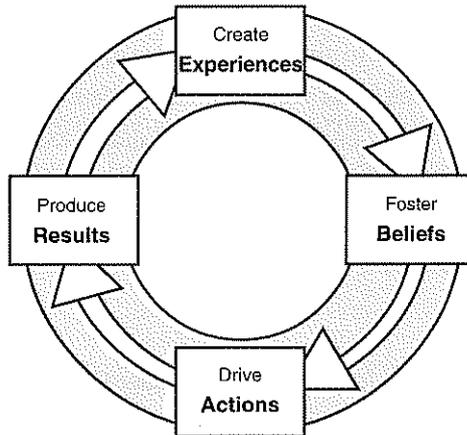


Figure 7

All this may be a long-winded way of saying something very simple: leadership makes all the difference. Are the people leading the change capable of articulating the case, maintaining the momentum, facing down criticism, and ultimately, if not immediately, winning the trust of those who are expected to change? Can they develop a critique of the present which does not undermine the confidence and self-image of those who are responsible for it? Can they engender the hope of a

better future even as change goes through what Michael Fullan (1991) calls the “implementation dip”? Can they remain optimistic about the future when the present reality is a storm? Can they manage anxiety – their own and that of others? Can they ensure a “praise to blame” ratio of 4 to 1 even as they demonstrate that the status quo is unacceptable? Can they, over time, build an alliance so overwhelming that, even if they leave, the change will have become unstoppable and irreversible?

“Lead us to the promised land,” someone once shouted to the great American labour leader Eugene V. Debs. His reply encapsulates the kind of leadership we are talking about. “If I could lead you there,” he answered, “someone else could lead you back.” If a leader is successful and a change is embedded, there is no going back.

Let’s not forget that Christopher Columbus, on the verge of sighting land on his first voyage, faced down a mutiny. Had he lost his nerve in the midst of the anxiety of his crew and turned back to Europe, someone else would have discovered America. It is the vocation of leaders to take people where they have never been before and to show them a new world from which they do not want to return.

Fusion 5: Central Direction and Empowering the Frontline

We can think of no other subject on which more

breath has been wasted than the conflict between “top down” and “bottom up” reform. Both are essential and successful change comes from the fusion of the two.

Each of the other four fusions we have described points clearly in this direction.

- In the unstable combination of equity with diversity, someone has to be the guardian of equity. All the evidence shows a free market, left to its own devices, will not do that.
- To fuse pressure and support successfully demands that someone has a strategic overview. At some point someone has to decide when to make the shift from pressure to patience and when to shift ownership to the frontline.
- Constant innovation and sustained implementation require a sophisticated strategic grasp.
- If behaviours are to change before beliefs, leadership is decisive.

In short, as Charles Handy (1994) puts it, “a strong centre” is a necessary precondition of successful change. This strong centre promotes equity, takes a strategic overview, and provides courageous leadership. The centre also needs the capacity to monitor performance, to tackle failure, to scan the horizon, and to anticipate further change. Someone or some group needs to spell out the

core narrative of the change process: quite literally to tell the story as it happens. An effective centre would heed the words of the American ice hockey player, Wayne Gretsky: “The others skate to where the puck is. I skate to where it will be.”

But none of this implies a domineering, heavy, or bureaucratic centre. On the contrary, success will depend on empowering those at the frontline, devolving responsibility, encouraging initiative, ensuring rapid, accurate feedback, and, as always, excellent communication. We never said this was easy!

Conclusion

We are still developing the idea of “fusion” in education. There may even be a better term to express this way of thinking. We recognize that all changes are complex, and no culture evolves without tension or without the interaction of many factors that, if taken on their own, would produce little or nothing. What we are trying to illustrate through these five examples is the power of combining ideas that are apparent opposites and may sometimes be considered to be in conflict.

Our notion of “fusion” is quite different from “compromise.” We are not seeking the lowest common denominator: far from it. Essentially we believe that fusing potentially transformative ideas – equity and diversity, pressure and support, innovation and stability, actions and beliefs, top down and bottom up – opens up the way

forward for radical and irreversible change in education, change that will enhance student achievement and benefit our communities for generations to come. Indeed, we believe we have the opportunity now to create an unstoppable momentum for progress.

The leaders of education at the dawn of a new millennium need to have the courage, the imagination, and the spirit to fuse our knowledge of the past and our ideas of the present into new possibilities for the future.

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Notes on the Authors

Michael Barber has chaired a LEA Education Committee (the British equivalent of a school board), has worked for a teacher's union, and has led research into educational change. Currently he heads the British government's Standards and Effectiveness Unit, which is responsible for the implementation of the Blair government's school reform programme. He is the author of several books on education reform including *The Learning Game: Arguments for an Education Revolution* (Indigo, 1997).

Vicki Phillips played a leading role in one of America's most influential and widely admired state-wide reforms in Kentucky, where students' performance has risen steadily through the 1990s. She worked for the National Center on Education and the Economy, which led the drive for standards-based reform, and then organised the support of the business community for Philadelphia's controversial, successful, and ongoing reform. Now, as Superintendent of the School District of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, she has taken school reform to the next stage, focussing in particular on innovative and comprehensive approaches to professional development and public engagement.