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# 10 Implementing Educational Reform

## *Some Reality Checkpoints*

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### 10.1 INTRODUCTION

These case studies have been prepared by people who have been around and close to the action. In some cases, they were designers, in others, evaluators or action researchers and sometimes they acted as advisers. In all cases the authors sustained an enduring engagement with one or more aspects of the reform in question. They are not innocent bystanders, nor are they unquestioning champions of the programmes. They do offer rich accounts; situating policies and actions in national and historical contexts and identifying choices and constraints faced by policymakers and practitioners. Our overarching instruction to the authors was to illuminate a much under-researched and underdeveloped area, the implementation of educational reform.

In selecting the cases we opted for a mix of nationally and locally mandated reforms with five examples from nations where the state initiated and guided reforms, which is the norm for most countries. But because of the impact United States and United Kingdom examples have had on the field of education reform in the last fifty years we offer two cases where the choice and pursuit of better learning strategies has been the decision of a school or a school district. We did not emphasise or suggest that authors look closely at student outcome data or graduate destinations or international benchmarking exercises, rather our interest is in implementation, on how ideas were

This is written on a lamp post in the middle of Parker's piece in Cambridge, see <http://cambridgehistorian.blogspot.com/2013/06/reality-checkpoint.html>, last accessed March 2021.

enacted. This has also meant that we have relatively short time horizons which, as Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) point out, is a shortcoming in much of the educational change literature. But in some instances the reforms we examine here stretch over many years so we can see changes in emphasis, shifts in direction and in some cases reversion to the norm as implementation unfolds and we find that time is an important factor in execution.

Our task in this concluding chapter is to look back across the cases for patterns, the commonalities and differences, for disparate responses to shared concerns and for similar policies with distinct motivations. In one sense we are picking up a suggestion of forty years ago and doing some 'backward mapping' by looking for the intersection of administrative action and individuals' choices (Elmore 1979–80: 604), where the individuals can be parents, teachers and students, as well as government officials, policy advisers and politicians. Perhaps this is why our first set of observations about the cases are primarily about context.

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## 10.2 CONTEXT COUNTS

Context can refer to a nation's history, or more expansively to the enabling environment;

the whole panoply of national and international policies, measures and institutions in the economic, social, legal and political domains that influence or affect the growth and development prospects of a country. (UN 1997: 2)

Context can also focus more specifically on issues of risks and resources or be shaped by the political and economic aspirations of a community. All these different formulations of 'context' are displayed in the cases. For example, 'history' can be as straightforward as the legacy of former rulers or colonisers, as we see in the cases of Kazakhstan and Hong Kong. The Soviet legacy of a strong focus on mastering physics and mathematics came coupled with a lot of memorisation and rote learning. It also left a strong tradition of compliance and conformity that constrained professional autonomy. Indeed, in all cases we see different levels of professional autonomy. While the Vietnam and the UK Challenge cases refer to instances where school level actors provided critical feedback about policies and priorities, overall there are few references to teachers' voices, to professional associations like a national mathematics teachers' forum or to teacher unions and the role they can play in facilitating and constraining educational reform. This is not a product of

deliberate omission by the authors but reflects the limited roles afforded to classroom-level practitioners.

The leadership continuity that we see in Singapore, Kazakhstan and Vietnam provided a certainty of direction and made the pursuit of particular reforms a constant in the professional life of teachers and school leaders. Yet in other instances, like the case in Qatar, the legal framework that governs the daily life of citizens and institutions was not attuned to or able to accommodate a concept like charter schools that emerge from a completely different legal tradition. In the cases that we present here resources were not a constraining factor: able to draw on revenues from oil and gas, Qatar and Kazakhstan underwrote the costs of quite substantial reforms. The notable exception among the cases is that described by Rowan, in Chapter 6, where lack of resources led schools and school districts to limit the purchase of support services that, coupled with materials and new technology, might have had greater effect at the classroom level and on student performance.

Historical contexts and traditions are important in their intersection with a reform, for beliefs and values shape and are embedded in practices. There are other aspects to context: there are the political, social and educational contexts and they too intersect with the values and understandings of a proposed change. These values and beliefs are interpreted and celebrated and hence have different meanings for the various groups or constituencies involved in or impacted by a change in policy and practice. Consequently, there will be tensions between competing interests as change is proposed, enacted and resisted. There are lessons to be drawn from the instances of context interacting with possible reforms described in these cases. We are trying to draw attention to the importance of knowing and understanding the context and using that knowledge to shape the design and implementation of reforms, as well as to how and when those reforms are evaluated and assessed.

In the five postcolonial nations we examine here, Hong Kong, Singapore, Kazakhstan, Qatar and Vietnam, the state has been, and continues to be, a clear and present actor in educational policy and practice. It is engaged in setting directions, marshalling and delivering resources, communicating priorities and preferences and judging success. The state's role can be enabling or constraining, regulations can be empowering or confining, and both types of regulations can be enacted simultaneously in one state. Too often the state's role is conceived and analysed in linear terms, which overlooks the higher interactive nature of public policy and the communal nature of social institutions like schools and universities. The power to act

in a particular way is diffused throughout institutions which makes changing how individuals act difficult. But the fact that power is diffuse does not negate the importance of the state's role, nor lessen the need to study and understand the extent and nature of the state's authority in designing and implementing education reforms.

Developing, codifying and applying that understanding takes time and histories of school reform written in the last fifty years have all pointed to the relatively short time spans that political leaders and educational practitioners have, or are willing to invest, in particular strategies or programmes before looking for results or observable differences. It is noticeable that five of the cases that we present here have benefited from the gift of time. We are presenting instances where reform programmes have run largely in the same direction for ten to twenty years. In contrast the UK and US cases have been more constrained for time, particularly in the examples of new technologies described by Rowan, in Chapter 6, where the time from adoption to abandonment is relatively short. The United Kingdom case also shows the disadvantages of political shifts in priority. Sarason (1990) argued for the urgency of those involved in change and reform to become more politically critical and historically aware. Among researchers, change needs to be viewed in the mirror of reflection and not just placed in the service of policymakers' driving ambition for political success.

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### 10.3 TIMESCALES TAKEN

The most striking examples of sustained commitment to a policy direction are Singapore and Hong Kong, where the reforms played out over an extended period which was as planned. The policies evolved, adapted and were adjusted but overall there was a sense of movement in one direction. There was notable political continuity, not just in terms of the same majority party ruling for the whole period, but also a continuity of 'personality', with national leadership being held by the same people for long periods and key individuals leading the reform activity, in both elected and appointed office.

At the agency level in Singapore there seems to have been a continuity of purpose – captured in part by five-year plans and the persistence of key policy documents which were public and shared widely. As Gopinathan and Lim point out in Chapter 8, the implementation of these reforms took years. In Hong Kong the framework that guided policy development and

implementation provided stability and continuity by keeping a focus on four key areas: people and development; planning and support; coherence and structure; and learning and teaching (Chen, 2019). Similarly, the Vietnam case documents a long standing policy framework – the idea of ‘socialisation’, moving part of the cost of services to the local community, has been operating for over twenty years, as has the push to include more active pedagogy in the repertoire of teaching.

It is hard to generalise about the ‘life’ of the US cases. One of the programmes, *Success for All* (SFA), is still operating after more than thirty years and was active in over 1,000 schools in the United States in 2018 and had a presence in schools in Canada, China and the United Kingdom. Schools have joined and left the programme at different times. *America’s Choice* operated for about twenty years but never reached as many schools as SFA. It was acquired in 2010 by Pearson’s, the educational materials and services conglomerate, which eventually took it off the market. The commercial nature of these products and services makes them vulnerable to market forces while many of the other cases are shaped principally by government policy and funding decisions and by changes in political leadership. We see the importance of political leadership clearly in the Hong Kong and the UK Challenge cases where changes in leadership disrupted and impeded implementation. Conversely the Singapore and Vietnam cases show the benefits of political continuity.

Yet we are led to the conclusion that time spent in understanding the context and shaping initiatives and testing ideas and practices from other realms and environments is time well spent and more likely to lead to more effective and more sustained implementation. Time also allows for the flow of ideas and information throughout the community or the system; it is companion to good communication.

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## 10.4 COMMUNICATION

Communication is one of the linchpins in effective implementation. It is not just the matter of how the policy intent is communicated throughout the system of schooling or within a school site or across the profession. Nor is it simply a matter of telling students, parents and teachers that this is what needs to be done or how something must be done. In several cases here there is an underlying message about the power and persuasiveness of expressing the essential purpose of a reform initiative in terms that are connected to key

values like national identity, economic survival or individual opportunity. This is striking in the case of Singapore, where survival of the nation and the quality of life for its citizens is a pervasive and recurring theme shaping the messages about the nature and purpose of schools and education. Both the Hong Kong and Singapore cases also highlight how important communication is to effective implementation. In Singapore it was the emphasis on communicating about the nature and direction of reforms that built a remarkable degree of consensus or support for the various waves of reform. Apart from some initial opposition on the question of the language of instruction, the Singapore reform seemed to gain and keep a lot of support from stakeholders, from parents, from employers and from practitioners. It is not just that the communication was persistent and pervasive, it also permeated the different parts of the education system. The messages were also accessible and appealed to the economic and personal interests of the actors.

In contrast, the cases dealing with Kazakhstan's educational reforms suggests that there was some under-communication and that, while the overall imperative for the reforms echoed the economic and cultural identity issues expressed in the Singapore example, the messages were not as effectively crafted and did not immediately appeal to or evoke an interest in the nation's future and in the formation of a national identity. The messages needed to get to the stakeholders, such as parents, and they needed to be in a form that was accessible or mis-interpretation could occur. For example, it is difficult to explain the benefits of formative assessment to parents and grandparents who are used to the Soviet model of daily summative scores on a five-point scale if there is not some immediate connection to them and to a wider powerful goal. The policy implementers soon realised the need to increase communication by undertaking a national communication exercise addressing town hall meetings in regions.

The commercially-based programmes discussed by Rowan, in Chapter 6, relied on communication about the effectiveness of the service to recruit schools and drive sales. *Success for All* (SFA) was successful in its communication efforts, as evidenced by its growth. But, overall, its communication strategies did not extend to channelling the voice of practitioners about what works, about what support they needed and how much time they had, back to SFA's designers and advocates. This produced a disjunction between the expressed policy, the intended courses of action and what was implemented, how often and at what intensity. The UK Challenge programme was very practitioner-focused and driven, so communication was less problematic; it was the political continuity that mattered for programme continuity.

In this set of cases we have instances where communication was central to implementation and where we can see the commitment to communication and particularly the mode and intensity of communication, influencing the enabling environment and being shaped by the central values of the environment. In short, context and communication interact and influence implementation in a process Supovitz (2008) calls an 'iterative refraction'; reform ideas adjusting to the environment and being adjusted by practitioners and designers as they are put into use.

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## 10.5 MODELS OF IMPLEMENTATION

There are distinctly different models playing out in the described cases. The United Kingdom and United States examples reflect the decentralised nature of the school systems in those nations. Cohen et al. (2017: 206) note that, while the US public school systems are mature, having developed and operated for over 100 years, 'only a few seem to have developed the infrastructure that would have enabled them to tightly guide instruction'. The United States and United Kingdom reform programmes described are not the expressions of national or central governments as they are in the other cases: the decision to take up one of these reform packages is a matter for individual schools or districts. In addition, the discourses about why improvement is needed varied. In the Asian examples the discourses emphasised economic gains and focused on the need to update the education system in line with other global systems. International comparisons often played a part. The United Kingdom example emphasised equality of outcome to an extent not matched in other cases.

The United States programmes are at heart commercial transactions, with materials and services being bought and sold. In contrast, the Kazakhstan cases are championed by central authorities and use demonstration and diffusion models with a university (NU) and a network of schools (NIS) as experimentation sites to test and adapt practices. They were to serve as a 'demonstration and innovation site, a beacon of change and reform' (Ruby and McLaughlin 2014). This is in the tradition of industrial innovation and trade liberalisation pioneered by free-ports and continued as Special Economic Zones and Education cities, places free from regulatory constraints and the strictures and socialising norms of an existing organisational culture.

Similarly, the Qatar reforms, influenced by the charter models in the United States, opted to create new schools and to emphasise school

autonomy. The new schools adopted common curriculum standards, used national assessments and, despite training programmes encouraging a shift in pedagogy, the result was ‘autonomy deferred’. Teachers grappled with reporting requirements and school leaders had to navigate a governing environment that had no prior experience with independent entities and had not established an enabling legal framework for the new schools.

It seems as if the Qatar reforms were heavily influenced by recent reform practices elsewhere, by a desire to adopt the ‘right’ reforms and emulate others rather than create reform strategies that were likely to be effective in the local environment and build on existing successful or culturally mandated practices. This echoes the findings of Harris and Jones (2018), in a cross-national study of education reforms in seven nations, that context mattered. This reinforces our observations in Sections 10.2 and 10.4 about the significance of the enabling environment.

The Qatar case contrasts with the two Kazakhstani cases, where there was a degree of customisation and adjustment in the design and implementation of reforms which took time to create and enact. For example, formal and explicit recognition of the largely autonomous nature of NU and NIS was embedded in legislation within five years of the university’s formal opening, while the legal system in Qatar still seems to be underprepared for independent schools.

The pursuit of new practices and behaviours through the creation of new sites, which hopefully would develop new cultures and norms, contrasts with the reforms in Vietnam, Hong Kong and Singapore and with the UK Challenge programmes and all the United States examples, which worked with existing schools which have prevailing institutional cultures. Recognising the power of inertia, of established repertoires of practice, the UK Challenge schools were encouraged to focus on service improvement. The aim was to adopt practitioner-focused, highly collaborative, evidence-based approaches to finding more effective ways of working. In this the Challenge programme is different from the other cases, with an explicit role for classroom practitioners in the crafting of new methods of practice. The other programmes tacitly omit a role for teachers, especially those who will be implementing the initiative, in constructing better approaches to pedagogy and learning. As Ainscow points out, in Chapter 2, this is a different viewpoint on who creates the knowledge around reform. Is the knowledge on how to improve practice and learning outcomes brought in by those who have created it outside or some distance from the school? Or is the knowledge



developed, tried and adjusted by those in the system, and if so at what level and how is it used and shared with other practitioners?

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## 10.6 INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ACTORS

In the US case all programmes and products were designed by actors external to the systems responsible for delivering education opportunities. As a result, adoption and take up begins with a purchasing decision rather than a decision to design a solution or innovation to solve a problem or improve an outcome. It is a little like the difference between buying clothes that are 'ready to wear' and not 'bespoke', discussed beforehand, to establish the preferences and unique features of the client so the garment can be tailored to suit. Rowan refers to this as the 'discretion that schools have to work on instructional improvement' which comes in part from the diffuse and weak governance structure for school education in the United States.

At a more granular level the US cases illustrate different models of implementation, which Rowan discusses in some detail in Chapter 6. For example, two of them sought to standardise instruction by specifying routines for teachers and students. For teachers there are 'scripts' to be used in classes in a pre-determined sequence. For students there are pre-determined reading materials and assessment tools. This is a 'high fidelity' model which can also be characterised as a 'low trust' model, where there is limited room for professional judgement which might see teachers adapting materials or techniques to respond to the needs of individual students. The interest in fidelity has been influenced by the literature on highly reliable organisations that serve significant regulatory functions, especially in the transportation sector. While it is an appealing idea that schools would always operate 'without critically cascading errors' from the first day (Stringfield et al. 2012: 45) our cases show that the image does not really capture behaviours in complex social institutions with multiple missions. The cases show that work practices change as ideas are disseminated, interpreted, applied and adapted. The result is not a waterfall of mistakes but an iterative process of action, reflection and adjustment that forms and validates practice knowledge.

Lessons from similar fields like drug use prevention programmes in schools (Dusenbury et al. 2003) suggest that 'highly detailed protocols have low success rates' in institutionalising changes (p. 253) while teachers who were able to modify the 'curriculum were more motivated, and creative in

general and thus better teachers' (p. 252). Carroll et al. (2007) develop these observations into a framework which distinguishes between elements which contribute to 'adherence' to a design and those which moderate fidelity including the complexity of design, how responsive or motivated participants are and the nature and quality of training and other support strategies. This framework underscores the weakness of simple implementation attempts which expect early and complete adoption of new work practices or materials.

Similarly, the externally designed US models were distinguished by the pursuit of structural changes to augment or strengthen pedagogical leadership. For example, *Success for All* expected schools to have a full-time literacy coordinator overseeing the reading programme. These approaches are essentially cautious or incremental, bolting or grafting something onto the existing organisation and hoping that it would not be too disruptive or rejected. The weakness is that it is not an integral part of the school and can be ignored by participants. Anderson (2017) looks closely at the issue of fidelity of implementation of *Success for All* and *America's Choice* and concludes that the conventional view that fidelity is less likely when the proposed reform is larger or more fundamental may not be true. Rather, she suggests that 'the salience of very large changes may actually help teachers shift their thinking in ways that promote high-fidelity' (p. 1309). The importance of a large motivating message seems to be part of the apparent success of the educational reform programmes in Singapore, Hong Kong and Vietnam reported here.

In the cases of Hong Kong, Qatar and Singapore, the reform process tended to be iterative; ideas were tried and tested, evaluated and modified, even if the process was occasionally reactive rather than intentional. This was not necessarily a linear process, nor was it a process that only involved officials and experts. In the Qatar case, parental choice not to send their child to a charter school led to a reappraisal of the change strategy, as did other factors. In Singapore, we see twenty years of implementation, reaction, adjustment, further implementation and evaluation and another adjustment. There is a whole process of policy learning and policy adaptation that is being led by the state, but which involves a range of actors: parents as well as school leaders and employers. One thing to note about the Singapore case is that the process was purposeful. There was a clear assumption that policies would and should change and improve over time.

The recalibrating of reforms is a distinctive element in the Singapore case and to a more limited extent in Hong Kong. We see references to feedback,

iterative loops in design and implementation processes and beta testing in different literatures but the key point is that the design process seldom, if ever, produces something perfect. But it does produce something that can be improved as implementation (trailing, testing, de-bugging) takes place. Elmore (1979–80) calls this ‘fixing’. This can be a structured process with external evaluators or a collegial process where practitioners share experiences and describe adjustments and refinements.

The Vietnam case shows how there is a feedback loop from practitioners to the middle level and from them back to the MOES. The presence of these processes in a small system like Singapore and in a nation twenty-times larger in population and with vastly greater distances between school and central MOES suggest it is not simply scale and dispersion that fosters these formal structures. The ‘effective middle layer’ of actors, often drawn from the profession rather than from a purely political or administrative cadre, makes a difference.

The learning we take from this is that educational policies are not conceived as if they were fully formed ideas or models. They adapt and evolve over time shaped by circumstances and the actors themselves. The importance of adapting a programme or policy to the environment or to maximise the capabilities of current practitioners as implementation proceeds evokes Supovitz’s (2008) iterative refraction notion we referenced in Section 10.4. The practice knowledge and the realities of infrastructure and resource constraints can shape the design and implementation. It is not a simple linear one-directional process of conception, proclamation and execution. Ideas get tried, evaluated, modified and improved and tried again to get a better or more appropriate way of acting. We have described elsewhere (Ruby and McLaughlin 2014) the process of beta testing which characterises the Kazakhstani school reforms. This parallels the views of commentators ranging from scholars (for example, Hargreaves 2012) and development agencies (World Bank 2018) that educational reform or change is more dynamic and multi-pathed because of the presence, participation and impact of different actors which shape educational systems at all levels.

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## 10.7 STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR ROLES

Once we acknowledge the presence and legitimacy of multiple actors in educational change processes we need to pay more attention to their

interests, concerns and responsibilities. One avenue for deepening our understanding of stakeholders and their roles is to pursue what Elmore (1979–80) described as the importance of ‘backward’ and ‘forward mapping’ distinct ways of analysing implementation approaches and policies, identifying who is involved in doing what and the power and knowledge they have. He calls the process forward, mapping the ‘noble lie’ of policy analysis for it is built on ‘the notion that policymakers exercise – or ought to exercise – some kind of direct and determinant control over policy implementation’ (p. 603). Forward mapping relies on logical, linear, objective-driven policy formation, is driven from the top and usually outside of schools. Backward mapping takes the policymaker’s perspective on the implementation process, it does not assume that policy is the only – or even the major – influence on the behaviour of people engaged in the process. It takes more account of reciprocity in relationships between authority hierarchies and looks closely at the role of key behaviours and points in the process close to the goal of the change.

These differences have concomitant implications for the roles adopted by and power given to various stakeholders. As Ainscow said in Chapter 2, within different models are views of who creates and holds the knowledge and where power, authority, control and responsibility for problem-solving lie. We have already discussed the position of teachers in the reform process and the importance of context, here we are pointing to the need for real and legitimate engagement of practitioners in design, execution, evaluation and adaptation. This is what Datnow et al. (2002, 2006) and Datnow (2020) argue is an understanding of educational reform implementation as a co-constructed process; where the relationship between structure, culture and agency is dynamic. The causal arrow of change can move in more than one direction. It can move in an upward direction as well as a downward one, not just ‘from the statehouse to the schoolhouse, so to speak’ (Datnow 2020: 435). However, the role of teachers and their actions at the site level are central and we see different levels and forms of stakeholder engagement in our cases.

A common view of Singapore’s reform culture is that it is centrally driven and ‘top down’. While wider national priorities shaped and drove reform priorities, as captured in centrally planned and promulgated documents and five-year plans, there is evidence that stakeholders were involved at different points of implementation and in re-calibrating reforms. See this from the Chapter 8:

The implementation of this reform took years and involved the support from the ministry headquarters, school leaders, teachers and the education fraternity. The combined effort and teamwork yielded positive results as students improved in their learning, thinking and performance. Reforms which aim to change deeply embedded pedagogical practices like 'teaching to the text' require close collaboration and ongoing two-way support from the top and ground.

Similarly, authorities in Hong Kong viewed engagement with stakeholders as central to real change. The process began with a vision established by the most important stakeholders represented on the Education Commission. There was a map of the key stakeholders and real attempts to engage with them systematically.

The Vietnam case study illustrates the way formal structures of school boards and committees offered channels for the involvement of parents and local community members in school governance, including exercising some decision-making power over how local financial contributions are applied.

Kazakhstan is a good example of forward mapping in two senses. First, it was the decision of parents to opt out of national schooling due to unhappiness with the quality of education that prompted the change in the first place and then, the realisation that there was under-communication with parents led to much more engagement with parents. When there was unrest about the use of formative assessment and other aspects of the new curriculum, a communication exercise was undertaken and it involved going to local areas and engaging with parents and community members. This was an example of listening to the local actors and responding. In the Qatar case there appeared to be a lack of real stakeholder involvement exacerbated by attempts to fit borrowed strategies and approaches to the local environment and a lack of local knowledge.

The UK Challenge approach placed stakeholders in schools centre stage. Networks of schools were established. The engagement and leadership from teachers, headteachers and advisers drove the approach. Teacher voices were largely absent from most of the other cases.

Elmore's words are an appropriate summary, 'the implementation literature provides strong support for an analytic framework that takes account of reciprocity in the relationship between superiors and subordinates in organizations; the connection between hierarchical control and increased complexity; discretion as an adaptive device; and bargaining as a precondition for local effects' (Elmore 1979–80: 612). Or more simply, things work better when people talk and listen to each other.

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## 10.8 REALITY CHECKS

Looking across the cases there are some observations or lessons for designers, advocates and deliverers of educational changes and reforms. There are practicalities and truisms that are often overlooked in the rush to govern or manage a system to respond to a political imperative. We like to think of them as reality checks, reminders that educational changes involve real people with direct and indirect interests in what they do in their working and learning lives, people with a deep understanding of their environment and thousands of hours engaged in learning, years of professional experience and stores of practice knowledge. Yet these obvious and readily observable lessons are often overlooked.

For example, it is obvious that the first attempt at reform is not always successful. The three model universities that preceded the establishment of Nazarbayev University are a ready illustration. It was not that these three institutions did not work, and indeed all three still operate, it was that they did not fully respond to the central concern of government. The challenges and constraints each faced shaped their successors and deepened understanding of the legal and legislative changes that were necessary for greater impact. The design and implementation of reform is a learning process where ideas are tried, tested and adapted.

The second truism is that ideas change as they are implemented. This can be as simple as something that children learn from party games like ‘pass the message’, and ‘rumours’ – a game that has many names in different cultures. But it is more than understanding that long chains of communication can distort messages. Ideas change as they transfer across national and cultural borders and as they move from ‘centre to periphery’ or become ‘official gossip’ where the meaning of the policy statement, while changed, is still legitimate (Lima de Sousa 2014: 197). One of the reasons that message varies and adapts is that the scale of the process varies and the composition of those participating differs. Anderson (1972), writing about theoretical physics, observed that as scale increases things become more complex: ‘more is different’ (p. 393). This reminds us that as the number of sites increases – be it individual learners, numerous groups of learners or aggregations of those groups – new constraints and opportunities emerge. Or we can look at this in terms of ‘de-coupling’, the term that Meyer and Rowan (1977) use to refer to instances where what policymakers intend or promote is not what happens in practice. Decoupling is more likely to occur when the intended

outcome is perceived to be largely symbolic or when there is little capacity or motivation to adopt the new practices. It is tempting to see our Qatar and Vietnam cases as instances of de-coupling, but we suspect that they are more accurately described in terms of adaptation, acculturation or vernacularisation; a policy is adjusted by practitioners to meet local needs and constraints and to build on existing successful methods of work. This is consistent with Coburn's (2004) proposition that reform proposals or mandates are (most effectively) enacted through a process where teachers' beliefs, experiences and existing modes of work shape what is implemented. Teachers' knowledge and values also shape their responses to intended reforms. Choi (2017) argues that as teachers become 'comfortable' (p. 597) in searching for and applying new solutions and materials they adjust their practice. Training, repetition and support can provide 'scaffolding' to help teachers adopt reforms. Opportunities for teacher training and the design and delivery of materials to argument new practices increase when there is more time set aside for implementation. More time for design, delivery, use, testing and adaptation and more time before evaluation are recurring themes in these cases.

The third piece of common wisdom is that change requires a detailed analysis of the context into which the practice is being implemented, this includes examining the potential barriers and supports, as Lewin's (1943) forcefield analysis taught us. He also talked of balance and dissonance. 'To bring about any change, the balance between the forces which maintain the social self-regulation at a given level has to be upset' (Lewin 1943: 558) and then a new balance established with the competing cultures weakened. If the analysis is undertaken then there can be clarity about what is required – what needs lessening, removing and strengthening. It is grounded in the opportunity to learn, like Carroll's (1963) theory of learning, and time on task models of schooling: What needs to happen and how much time needs to be invested in a particular behaviour or practice to realise an effect? Sometimes this is discussed in terms of frequency, be it an additional class a week devoted to our topic or a theme or the opportunities for training and scaffolding available and accessed to support an initiative. Or it can be intensity, duration and length of implementation. And, as we have seen from Rowan's observations, in Chapter 6, recommended time allocations are not always followed because there were competing priorities or established routines which left little place for 'new' practices. In other cases, the frequency fades because of teacher turnover and reassignment, as in the Qatar case, where all the trained teachers had left the school site after a few years. Yet teacher attrition is a well-known feature of US public schools (Boruch et al.

2016) and can be factored into the design and implementation strategies of a reform programme.

Finding and allocating the time and resources and ensuring that they are well used is one of the fundamentals of planning for change that gets overlooked or dismissed, with a blithe aside, that it can and will take care of itself. It does not. To accommodate a new or different practice, something has to be displaced, slimmed down or the learning day extended. If instead the change demands additional effort or more intense effort by teachers and learners the consequences are likely to be teacher burnout, overloaded academic calendars and learner fatigue. And soon the impetus for improvement is dissipated and lost.

A highly related point is that supporting change in learning practices often requires a bundle of changes; more time, more teacher professional development, more materials or resources, a change in legislation or reallocation of time and resources. What is highly counterproductive is to imagine that these elements can be unbundled and stripped away without consequence. Unbundling often happens when there is not enough money to initiate and support a change or there are too many priorities or there is a need to seek a quick win. Our case studies show the consequence of altering the bundle as the reform progresses so that it is set up to fail.

Our final reality check is to make sure the objectives of the change are well articulated and aligned with enabling environment. Rowan's survey of various US initiatives reminded us of Lawrence Stenhouse's essay on the limitations of specifying objectives when designing curriculum reforms. While they can be helpful and appeal to a desire for logic and rationality, behavioural objectives tend to encourage over-simplification and to undervalue or to even ignore the 'complexity of schools and classrooms'. In many of the cases here implementation was impeded by a lack of understanding of 'the presence of many variables and uncertainties' (Stenhouse 1970–71).

Objective setting is always challenging when there are multiple stakeholders and priorities. Sometimes objectives are underspecified and ambiguous, fostering uncertainty and a search for clearer direction, or it can encourage inaction and 'non-compliance'. Poorly-specified objectives lead to poor communication, which limits support for change. Objectives can also be overspecified, ignoring professional judgement which is often a criticism of behaviourist approaches to learning. This problem of specification is sometimes embedded in notions of how much the teachers and school leaders can be 'trusted' to implement appropriately or with fidelity. It also ignores the well-established value and importance of 'involving individuals in



the design of their own jobs'. Engaging practitioners in the task of finding better ways to do something, like new structures and patterns of work 'creates stronger skill matches and smoother transitions' (Hancock et al. 2020: 68). It is also more likely to be effective.

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## 10.9 FINAL WORDS

We have borrowed from a Cambridge lamp-post the idea of 'reality checkpoint' – the words which are carved into a lamp post in the middle of a green near to the city centre. The Cambridge historian<sup>1</sup> puts forward three common stories to explain this. One was that when lost and you cannot see where you are due to fog or stormy weather, the lamp-post was a marker as to where you were. Two was that the lamp-post is found in the middle of two paths that intersect, so anyone who is in a daydream could walk into the lamp-post, hence 'reality checkpoint'. The third is that the lamp-post marks the end of the University and the beginning of the town, so you were either entering or leaving reality, and possibly gives you an opportunity to change direction.

We see strong analogies with the work herein. First is that we need to have a simple accessible way or means to find out, or know, where we are in implementing something as the process occurs. Not to wait to find out at the end when it is too late. We need markers in the fog. This connects to the second fact; we often stray onto another path and walk inadvertently into an abyss or a wall – usually a painful experience. We need forward and backward mapping. Finally, the implementation of change in practice through a change in 'policy' involves actors from very different worlds, each with their own perceptions and realities and each with a distinct set of expectations and understandings. None of the constellation of actors, teachers, learners, parents, policymakers and community members knows which is the prevailing reality and so there is a need for all to engage with and understand the lived realities and their impact on others in the world of education. There is a need to check, understand and respect the realities of others and to have markers, milestones and lodestars, so we know where we are in the journey and where we want to go, for all our paths intersect.

<sup>1</sup> <http://cambridgehistorian.blogspot.com/2013/06/reality-checkpoint.html>, last accessed March 2021.

The cases here are rich and varied, testimony to hard work and authentic efforts to improve education for young people. There are of course other motivations too – building a country, building an identity or strengthening an economy. There are many lessons we have learned from these stories and from the messages on the Cambridge lamp-post.

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