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# SCHOOL SYSTEM

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# Anything Changed Around Here Lately? The Change Process in Public Education

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Change within the American educational system is an ongoing process characterized by competing and often conflicting theoretical perspectives and models. To work effectively within the education system requires an understanding of these change processes and the rationale behind them. Public education is viewed as a complex open system. Change within this system involves multiple levels of communication with information and directives flowing in different ways depending on the theory of change employed. Three theories of change (empirical-rational, normative/re-education, and power-coercive) are discussed. Two models of change, comprehensive school reform and concerns based adoption model, illustrate change processes. The change process is part of the environmental press of school-based practice. Occupational therapists working in the schools must consider these change processes as they develop and implement effective occupational therapy services in support of education.

Twenty-eight years ago when I started work as an occupational therapist, I thought of myself as practicing the art of therapy. As I practiced more client-centered care, I came to think of myself as an agent of change. I still do, although now I change students into therapists. What is therapy about if it is not about change? The therapeutic process involves identifying and moving toward a goal. It involves strategies, activities, and efforts to move toward that goal. It implies the belief in the ability to change. And, it is a message of hope. The therapeutic and the educational processes have many similarities.

Fullan (1993) argued that the moral purpose of education—to make a difference—is concerned with bringing about improvements, which, of course, is change. Education, thus, is a change process. Public education is known for embracing models of change, constantly seeking better, quicker, more accountable ways to teach greater and greater numbers of diverse students with diverse needs under increasing fiscal challenges. Despite the adoption of multiple fads or changes that the educational experience for many students is incredibly similar to that which their parents and grandparents experienced. Certainly, the buildings may be designed differently, the texts updated, the cafeteria menu less appealing, and the disciplinary code less flexible, but the actual instructional process is remarkably unchanged. Why? Because “the way teachers are trained, the way schools are organized, the way the educational hierarchy operates, and the way political decision makers treat educators results in a system that is more likely to retain status quo” (Fullan, 1993, p. 13). Yet, the public and agencies with oversight, particularly the federal government, are urging the schools to do “better” and to do the educational process differently. To say the least, it is time for a change. How, though, does effective change come about? How is it nurtured and sustained? How does a process of change—education—change

itself? As occupational therapists working in educational environments, how do we participate in the change process at the classroom and institutional levels?

Change within an educational environment, such as that occupational therapists find themselves working in school-based practice, is a multifaceted process. Occupational therapists are more familiar and comfortable with individual change at the student level than with institutional change. Yet, models of educational change are almost always directed at the institutional level with the hope and expectations that they will foster change at the instructional level and thus, eventually, at the individual level. To participate actively in school change (or, perhaps, not be knocked over by it!), occupational therapists must understand the most recent ways change has been initiated or directed in the public schools.

Several aspects of this process illustrate both the challenges and the opportunities of participating in a change process in an educational environment. Schools are systems, and applying systems analysis to the process is necessary. Understanding the importance and parts of a communication model to effect change is essential. Finally, change is situated in theoretical perspectives.

### Systemic Change

Systemic change is predicated on seeing an entity, such as a public school district, as an interactive, dynamic system with multiple parts that interact in many and changing ways. Facilitating change in such a system requires understanding the parts of the system and how they interact. Understanding that change in one area may resonate in another and cause either an anticipated or an unanticipated change is crucial to applying a systems theory perspective to school district change. It requires viewing the system—the whole—as more than the sum of its parts. The four defining characteristics of open systems are: goal orientation, input from the environment, output to the environment, and feedback from the environment about the outputs that initiate the input process again (AECT Council on Systemic Change, 1999b). School districts are seen as open rather than as closed systems.

Systemic change, as applied to a school district, entails realizing and acting on the fact that change must reflect the “interrelationships among education’s stakeholders and subsystems” (AECT Council on Systemic Change, 1999a). Change from a systems perspective does not mean changing everything at once, which is neither practical nor realistic. It does mean, however, that whatever change is actually implemented is congruent in some manner with that which has not yet been changed. Compatibility rather than conflict is sought. The realization also exists that systemic change takes time and that a constant reflection on what has occurred, its impact or effectiveness, and what still needs to be done must be part of the process. An action research perspective is essential. This perspective is

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not unlike the reflective practitioner who constantly evaluates the effect of intervention to guide decision making.

Systemic change needs a coordinated approach to this daunting task. Systemic change is actually a transformation. Who will lead such an effort? How will all these parts come together for the good of the whole? The transformation style of leadership is compatible with a systems change perspective. Transformational leadership is predicated on the belief that it is more effective to pull people along on the road to improvement than to push them into change.

At some point in the pulling, the individual “buys into” the changes and becomes an active part of the change process. How does this pulling occur? A well-articulated vision or goal is the first step. This vision must be believable and related to the mission of the school district. All who are concerned with a school district or a school must come together and articulate a goal or vision of what a transformed school or district will look like. This step should include the occupational therapist working in that school or district. What is your vision for your school and school district? This step might be completed through multiple venues, such as Parent Teacher Association meetings, roundtables at schools or within grade levels from multiple schools, open forums at school board meetings, or a suggestion box(es). Analysis of this input would reveal a leading vision. For example, a focus on student learning might be articulated.

Once a goal is agreed on, the current state of the district or school is examined. What aspects of the district or school support the articulated goal or vision? What aspects hinder its attainment? This approach is not a top-down one (in the sense of any one individual or entity directing the change) but involves everyone in the district or school, from students, to parents, to teachers, to other citizens and entities in the community. Input from all levels of the system focused on those aspects about which those individuals are most knowledgeable is essential. They are the experts in their area. Input from all individuals knowledgeable about the various levels of the system is essential, as these persons are experts in their areas. People become empowered when their voices are heard, and their efforts often are beyond what would have been expected based on past performance. Transformational leaders act on empowerment and, often, more of the leader’s effort is focused on this aspect of human resource development. This valuing of the human resources involves listening as well as communicating. It is part of the feedback mechanism in an open system.

Transformational leadership involves a degree of risk taking. If the status quo worked, there would not be a need for systemic change. The vision of the system as meeting students’ educational needs requires that many things be done differently. A certain amount of risk is inherent in change. If the vision of student learning truly reflects the values of the stakeholders, then a proactive stance on the part of the leader will help to facilitate a proactive perspective by those at all levels and in all parts of this interactive system (Méndez-Morse, 1992).

## Change Communication Model

In any successful transformation, communication is essential. The

Change Communication Model (CCM), articulated by Ellsworth (as cited in AECT Council of Systemic Change, 2000), as adapted from the general communication model, has corresponding parts. These are the change agents (sender) of the innovation (message). The intended adopter of the change is the receiver of the innovation or message. The change process in the CCM is named the “medium of change” or “means of channeling the message.” The environment of change is consistent in the general communication and the CCM. Interference or resistance to change is the final component of these communication models.

## Theories of Educational Change

Several approaches to change in education have been identified by different theorists. Three models articulated by Chin and Benne in 1969 (as cited in Hord, 1992) will be discussed in relation to the components of the CCM. Chin and Benne identified the empirical-rational model, the normative/re-education model, and the power-coercive model as three ways that change is implemented or attempted to be implemented in education. Applying the CCM to three approaches to educational change will help to illustrate the commonalities, differences, and omissions of these three approaches.

The empirical-rational model postulates that people will make the logical and right decision if they are presented with accurate information (Hord, 1992). In the case of education, this would be information gained from empirical research and disseminated to the educators by universities, state departments of education, technical resource centers, and the like. In the empirical-rational model, the change agent is the sender of the information, such as one of the agencies noted or a similar agency or entity. The innovation is the knowledge itself or what will be developed by using this knowledge to design curriculum, courses, learning activities, the building, organization of the staff, or myriad other supportive activities that relate to the specific knowledge. The intended adopter relates to the type of knowledge that is disseminated. It could be the county curriculum leaders, the superintendent, the budget officer of the school board, or the maintenance staff. The change process is dissemination of the information, with supportive products or activities to assist in the implementation of acts based on the knowledge. The environment is the school and the larger political and cultural setting in which it is located. This larger climate or setting may be the source of interference to the changes that have been encouraged by further knowledge.

Although all parts of the CCM can be identified in the empirical-rational model, they do not appear equally weighted. The change agent may engage in a short-term or even one-time transaction. This is related to the postulate that people will accept rational, fact-based information. The innovation often comes prepackaged with materials, instructions on how to implement, and the blessing of the “higher ups.” The change process is intended to be short and focused. The environment may present interference to the change, depending on who is affected, in what manner, and to what extent. Districts that have a very local control perspective may be less open to changes that are approached from the empirical-rational model (i.e., “that’s not how we do it here”).

The normative/re-education model operates from a perspective of seeing those in receipt of the message of change as active participants who will “rise to the highest potential” (Hord, 1992) to achieve lasting improvements in education. The message is internally given and received. As active rather than passive participants in the change process, these individuals will increase their capacity to problem solve by identifying barriers to progress and using strengths within the system and themselves to overcome barriers (interference) and move forward. In the normative/re-education approach, the individuals’ values and societal norms are the important aspects of the environment that must be considered when changing an organization and the way it operates. This is a familiar and comfortable model to occupational therapists.

In the normative/re-education approach, the change agent, the intended adopter, the innovation, and the change process can be seen as occurring within the individuals who work within the educational environment. Similarly, the environmental press of the school and the community, including possible interference, must be considered as important contextual factors. The idea of finding shared meaning and values that are articulated and acted on is an important

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aspect of the change process in the normative/re-education model of change in education.

The power-coercive model is, perhaps, the one most familiar to people (Hord, 1992). The past 15 years have seen a tremendous increase in the use of this approach to foster and bring about change (most notably increased achievement scores) in education. Within this approach, the change agent is the mandate from an authority with some degree of power over the schools. This authority and the power to issue mandates may be political through the legislative process, judicial, administrative, usually budgetary, or even moral. Inherent in this approach is the ability to impose some kind of sanction (loss of funding, loss of accreditation) if the intended innovation is not adopted or adopted well. The innovation in this approach could be related to curriculum, focus of education, time spent in direct instruction, time spent in core subjects, and an endless list of others. The intended adopter of the innovation, the local education agencies and ultimately the schools and the individual teachers, has little to no say in the change process. The change process is to implement what has been mandated (throw out the old, do the new). As stated, the change process involves sanctions. The environment is a top-down approach with little sense of ownership of the changes by those who must implement them. Interference often is felt because of the nature of how the changes come about and the potential conflict with local values and competing interests. Education is still very much a local responsibility in this country.

These approaches have had limited success, but all offer some aspect of promise. A focus on the role of the change agent has suggested models emphasizing this aspect of the CCM. The idea of public education as an open system has led theorists to propose that only an approach that takes into account all parts of the educational system, its context, and its interactions has the potential to foster fundamental change. The term *reconceptualization* is a better descriptor of what a system of change should be. Visualizing public education as an open system provides the roadmap of how to approach fundamental, systemic change. If we want systemic change, we have to look at the system. Only an approach to educational improvement that considers the resonance of change on another part of the system, which in turn causes a change that resonates to another part of the system, has a chance of succeeding. As occupational therapists, we know and understand the concept of resonance. Human behavior is messy.

## Recent Educational Reform Change

### *Comprehensive School Reform*

Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) formally refers to a legislative initiative that promotes systematic changes in how schools operate. The initial implementation of CSR was directed at schools with a high proportion of low-income students and was focused on improving reading and math achievement. In 1997, the federal government initiated the CSR Demonstration program, which provided funds to local schools through their state local education agencies. These funds were awarded after schools had analyzed, planned, and set evaluation procedures for their reform efforts (Comprehensive School Reform Program, 2005).

The concept of CSR is embedded in No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; Public Law 107-110), the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. As articulated with NCLB, the CSR program is partially regulated by the Fund for the Improvement of Education. This Act aligns CSR implementation with the goals and requirements of NCLB, specifically the requirements that changes in instructional strategies be based on scientifically proven methods and practices. All students, including those with disabilities, are to be included in the efforts toward reform (National Clearinghouse for School Reform, 2001).

CSR efforts hold the promise of systemic change rather than piecemeal changes to an existing structure. Changes of this nature have promoted incremental progress but have been hard to sustain without ongoing funding and support. Viewing the schools as an open system with interrelated parts that influence each other in a continuing process of input, output, and feedback as input allows change efforts to look at the whole and the parts.

Systemic change is a profound challenge, especially for institutions such as public schools that must meet so many needs. McCune (1991) wrote of schools as conserving institutions (conserving and

passing on the past) and anticipatory institutions that try to anticipate what knowledge, skills, and abilities students will need in their future as adults. Paradoxical functions to be accomplished against a backdrop of increasing student needs for socialization and basic services (nutrition, after-school care, etc.) require new ways to operate. The CSR program promises a way to accomplish these paradoxical functions if the individuals involved will identify the changes they want.

In schools that implement CSR programs, the entire school is seen as the change agent. The entire school as a system is transformed. CSR programs require that 11 essential components be included in any program of reform (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). These components, although specific to school reform, are familiar aspects of any systems change. Specific goals, which in many systems is a drive toward homeostasis, can be described in the schools as higher achievement for all students. Input in the schools can be seen as professional development and a comprehensive plan that encompasses all parts of the school in their myriad functions. Support within the school and parental and community involvement also are a type of input to the systemic change. Output can be viewed as the use of scientifically proven instructional strategies and curriculum. Feedback is evident in the use of measurable goals and objectives and the evaluation strategies that address reform implementation and student achievement. Feedback as input reflects the cyclical and interrelated aspects of systemic change. The external technical support and assistance that is required of any CSR program operates as both an initial input mechanism and a feedback mechanism. The CSR program and the various models that have been developed to assist schools in implementing comprehensive change should facilitate change in education.

### Concerns-Based Adoption Model

The Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) grew out of research on curricular reform efforts indicating that successful reforms “recognized the role of individuals in the change process” (Gallagher, 1999, p. 1). This observation is not particularly startling. The point of implementation of any change is the individual. However, the role of the individual had not received particularly deep attention in systemic school reform efforts. The CBAM has provided a systematic way for school officials to carefully consider the role of the individual, primarily the teachers, in school change.

The CBAM contains three diagnostic and evaluative tools to measure three important aspects of an individual’s reactions to change and change efforts. These tools are (a) the innovation configurations, which essentially provide information about the current status of what is being done in the classroom in relation to desired change; (b) the stages of concern, which measure how individuals feel about the change process as they enter into and proceed with it; and (c) the levels of use, which measure how individuals are using the innovations or changes. As one reads about these tools, the similarity with the therapeutic process is striking. The innovation configurations tool is comparable to what is termed the present level of performance, which usually has been altered dramatically by some catastrophic event (stroke, accident).

The levels of use tool is comparable to what often is called patient motivation or acceptance (how invested the individual is in the therapeutic process). The challenge, though, is using this highly individual experience and data and designing educational development experiences for groups of individuals that take this information into account.

CBAM recognizes that change is a process (multifaceted) and not an event. The CBAM involves developmental growth that takes time (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987). Schools must be ready to change. It is essential that all steps of the process be done. Initial systematic data on what the individual schools are actually doing is crucial. Consistent with the “buy-in” of the teachers is the sense that the reform belongs to the school. The school and the individuals in that school must have a sense of ownership of the process and the reform results.

### Conclusion

Educational change is a process, not an event. One can be sure that continuous change will occur in the schools. New models of change will be proposed before the “old” change processes have been completed. One can view this as a continuous forward process or as a

rather illogical way to run education. Readers are left to form their own opinions. Occupational therapists should be aware of change processes occurring in the educational institutions in which they work. If one understands the process, one can anticipate how to participate most effectively for the profession and the students we serve. The role of occupational therapy practitioners in the schools related to educational change processes is one of anticipation and participation. Change is inevitable. Be prepared for it by being knowledgeable about theories and models of educational change. Participate in it by having occupational therapy be an integral part of the educational process. In these ways, occupational therapy practitioners can most effectively serve the individual and collective needs of students. That's what education is all about. ■

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