

CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

This review – authored by Naomi Hersom - of the essay *Review of Research on Curriculum Implementation* – authored by Michael Fullan and Alan Pomfret – has two parts, the first being written by Fullan and Pomfret, the second written by Hersom herself. It appeared in the inaugural issue of the *Canadian Journal of Education*.

“Only recently,” Fullan and Pomfret begin, “have curriculum researchers identified problems associated with implementation as the major underdeveloped area in the field.”¹ That judgement derives not from any intellectual history of the field but from their observation that “even a soundly developed and carefully evaluated curriculum often flounders in the everyday world of the classroom,” that (in other words) a “decision to use a curriculum does not guarantee that actual classroom use will correspond to the planned use.”² Worse, “attempts at implementation in schools and classrooms frequently “exacerbate the very social conditions the curriculum was designed to alleviate.”³ They conclude: “It is now clear that the process of introducing and implementing curricula are far more critical and complex than previously acknowledged.”⁴

Fullan and Pomfret provide “two main reasons why it is useful to focus on implementation,” the first relating to the “notion of the innovation as a dependent variable.”⁵ Apparently, “innovation” implies not necessarily improvement but any “change,” as Fullan and Pomfret assert that: “We need to examine strategies and other determinants of change as they affect degrees of implementation in various settings in order to engage fruitfully in planned change efforts of any kind.”⁶ The second reason “derives from the need to assess the impact of the innovation as an independent variable or treatment in an experimental design,” e.g. “exactly what it involves in practice in order to assess its effects.”⁷ Neither a dependent or independent variable, innovation appears to be a given in this description of the “main purpose of our review,” which “is to identify and critically assess the process of implementing the social or role-relationship components of innovative curricula in schools.”⁸ Excluding “radical alternatives to the current school system,” Fullan and Pomfret do “cover a wide range of curriculum-related innovations involving single-subject organizational changes (e.g. differentiated staffing) as well as small-single school change and large-scale national programs.”⁹ They identify “fourteen factors that influence implementation ... grouped into four categories:

explicitness and complexity (characteristics of the innovation); in-service training, resource support, feedback mechanisms, and participation (strategies); adoption processes, organizational processes, environmental support, and demographic factors (characteristics of the adopting unit); and design questions, incentive system, evaluation, and political complexity (characteristics of macro-socio-political units).¹⁰

Fullan and Pomfret's recommendations confirm their conversion of "innovation" from variable to assumption as they "argue for the usefulness of conceptualizing implementation as a problematic negotiation process involving users, developers, and adopters and characterized by conflicts over goals, means, and resources."¹¹ So far, their findings seem obvious, but that may well be because they are now integrated into our understanding of curriculum implementation.

Fullan and Pomfret recommend that "central agencies ... alter their incentive structures to encourage greater emphasis on user participation, planning for implementation, and the provision of implementation resources."¹² They ask "researchers and evaluators ... to concentrate more on facilitating implementation than on measuring outcomes, especially in a program's early stages," as they believe that the "implementation process is ... a more appropriate research focus than degree of implementation."¹³ Regarding that "process," Fullan and Pomfret acknowledge that the studies they reviewed did not "confront the question of the extent to which the problems and barriers to implementation ... result from poor planning and inadequate conceptualization or to what extent they are, for political reasons, an inherent part of the planned change process in school systems."¹⁴

In fact, Fullan and Pomfret wonder about "the wisdom of selecting degree of implementation as the key problem area," as "this approach takes a developed innovation as the starting point and concentrates on finding ways of transmitting the pre-specified package intact to the various user groups."¹⁵ Defining innovation as the "means to achieve certain objectives," they worry that "by concentrating too hard on achieving means the goals may be forgotten and displacement of goals by means may occur."¹⁶ "An alternative approach," they continue, "would be to provide the structure and support for users to define their own needs and develop and/or choose their own solutions," what they term a "user approach."¹⁷ It almost appears Fullan and Pomfret conclude: never mind implementing the Ministry's curriculum "innovation," teach what you deem appropriate.

As if anticipating Miriam Ben-Peretz,¹⁸ Fullan and Pomfret recommend that research on curriculum innovation "start with the teacher instead of the innovation," learning "teachers' views [of] their problems, needs, and interests in relation to their role in curriculum planning and implementation."¹⁹ Teachers were not the only ones treated as consumers or clients in the research they reviewed: students and parents too. Fullan and Pomfret recommend the inclusion of both.²⁰ Their final and "basic point" is "not so much whether one can measure and assess degree of implementation, but whether the implementation process itself is conceptualized as a problem to be addressed."²¹ No wonder curriculum implementation could be the most "underdeveloped" area in the field, as they observe at the outset.

Fullan and Pomfret's "basic point" does not seem to resonate with the reviewer. Naomi Hersom emphasizes instead what she thinks we've learned from their review of "twenty-seven carefully selected studies from Canadian, British, and American

sources,” specifically the “factors significant to the process of curriculum implementation.”²² Hersom credits Fullan and Pomfret not with questioning the very concept of implementation, but for providing “a rich resource suitable for identifying criteria for implementation practices and variables for further research.”²³

Hersom focuses first on “the set of problems related to variations in the effects of implementing new curricula,” an example of which is: “where there are gains in achievement scores, the question remains whether greater gains would have resulted if the implementation process had been different.”²⁴ The implication of cause and effect here seems questionable, as the complexity of both variables would be difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. Again, attending to achievement scores, Hersom wonders “why can greater gains be associated with some teachers and lesser gains with others?”²⁵ Implied in that question is that teachers are responsible for student test scores, an implication that ignores students’ responsibility, their efforts and talents, as well as parents’ economic and psychological support and circumstances. Then Hersom turns to “discrepancies between the scores attained in content areas and those attained in the acquisition of learning skills,” an issue the significance of which I confess not to grasp. So-called “learning skills” can be extracted from “content” but lose their contextualization, their embeddedness in specific content. And this is only the first set of problems Hersom identifies.

The second set “revolves around the permitted degrees of freedom to vary an innovation during the process of implementation.”²⁶ Hersom affirms the “need for explicitness and specification to make clear the intents of the originators,” but asks: “what are the boundaries within which the users must stay in order to preserve the integrity of the innovation? And what are these areas in which adaptation is not only acceptable but also desirable?”²⁷ The first question becomes an issue only in top-down curriculum reforms, a pattern of power Fullan and Pomfret have questioned but Hersom seems to ignore. I use the phrase “curriculum reform” rather than “innovation” as the latter term – despite the Fullan-Pomfret definition of it as simply any “change” – seems to me more honorific than descriptive.

The third set of problems Hersom identifies concerns “difficulties in identifying characteristics common to the adopting units which have effectively implemented a new curriculum,” problems that “arise when it is difficult to be sure of the meanings attached to certain terms in various contexts,” including terms like “voluntary participation.”²⁸ Other problems arise in “studies that do not differentiate between the effects of implementation processes in elementary and in secondary schools, or among teacher capacities to use an innovation.”²⁹ That word “effects” is ambiguous: is Hersom interested in test score gains or in the meanings students derived from their study? Does her distinction between elementary and secondary schools imply irrevocably different institutional cultures of implementation?

Hersom criticizes Fullan and Pomfret for failing to raise at the outset the issue of teachers’ centrality in curriculum implementation. Had they focused on this issue in

the beginning of their review rather than at the end, she suggests we would have learned more about the “kind of knowledge essential for practitioners who confront the task of deciding on the *scale* of implementation appropriation to a particular kind of innovation, under particular conditions, and with particular people.”³⁰ Ignored too, she concludes, is the “validity of the innovation,”³¹ surely a restatement of the canonical curriculum question: what knowledge is of most worth?

COMMENTARY

I found the format of this review noteworthy, allowing the authors of the book reviewed to summarize their study before the reviewer renders her judgment. A rejoinder – even an extended dialogue – might have been interesting too. I am reminded of Madeleine Grumet’s title for the book review section of JCT³² when she took on the editorship of it, namely “Pretexts,” making explicit the reader-response³³ idea that a text starts not ends a conversation. I am reminded too of Terry Carson’s hermeneutical study of implementation,³⁴ research that helped shift the field’s focus from “effects” (especially as test scores) to “effects” as lived experience and meaning.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In Hersom 1976, 73.

² In Hersom 1976, 73.

³ In Hersom 1976, 73. This sweeping statement is made without evidence, argument or reference.

⁴ In Hersom 1976, 73.

⁵ In Hersom 1976, 73.

⁶ In Hersom 1976, 73. Does “fruitfully” reference fidelity between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived?

⁷ In Hersom 1976, 73.

⁸ In Hersom 1976, 73.

⁹ In Hersom 1976, 73-74.

¹⁰ In Hersom 1976, 74.

¹¹ In Hersom 1976, 74.

¹² In Hersom 1976, 74.

¹³ In Hersom 1976, 74.

¹⁴ In Hersom 1976, 75.

¹⁵ In Hersom 1976, 75.

¹⁶ In Hersom 1976, 75.

¹⁷ In Hersom 1976, 75.

¹⁸ See research brief #55.

¹⁹ In Hersom 1976, 75.

²⁰ In Hersom 1976, 75.

²¹ In Hersom 1976, 75.

²² Hersom 1976, 76.

²³ Hersom 1976, 76.

²⁴ Hersom 1976, 76.

²⁵ Hersom 1976, 76.

²⁶ Hersom 1976, 76.

²⁷ Hersom 1976, 76.

²⁸ Hersom 1976, 76-77.

²⁹ Hersom 1976, 77.

³⁰ Hersom 1976, 77.

³¹ Hersom 1976, 77.

³² <http://www.jctonline.org/about/>

³³ A canonical statement of which is Bleich 1978. The idea seems quite accepted today; see the format of Wearing et al. 2020.

³⁴ Carson 1984, 1992.