A Concerns-Based Approach to Curriculum Change

Susan Loucks and Harold Pratt

Paying attention to teachers' concerns as they begin using a new curriculum helps assure that they will use it successfully.

Curriculum change isn't easy. Almost any educator can provide a list of reasons why it won't happen: "The teachers won't support it"; "The principal won't support it"; "The central office won't support it"; "The teachers have been around too long"; "The teachers haven't been around long enough"; "The school's too big"; "The school's too small." Human nature is such that changing anything is usually more difficult than maintaining the status quo.

Change is a complicated process, which until recently had not been observed carefully enough to attend to all of its complexities and therefore to ensure meaningful and long-lasting effects. We've delivered curriculum to teachers in bright, shiny new boxes and expected students to have made achievement gains by the end of the year. We've torn down classroom walls in July and expected to see proficient team teaching and individualizing in September. Frequently, we have different expectations from one year to the next. We rarely attend to the individual teacher in the process, and often do not involve the teacher at all until the new program is delivered. In too many cases, the results of our ignorance have been unfulfilled expectations and increased frustration.

One reason for this situation is that until recently a clear, logical, and practical approach to the conceptualization and implementation of change did not exist. Such a model is currently being tested in a collaborative effort between a national research center and a large school district: the Research and Development Center for Teacher Education at the University of Texas at Austin (UTR&D) and the Jefferson County, Colorado, Public School District (Jeffco).

Researchers at UTR&D have developed a model for change called the Concerns-Based Adoption Model, and have spent six years defining and initially

---

verifying its important dimensions by in-depth study in both school and university settings. Jeffco, a large school district west of Denver, Colorado, serving 81,000 students in 108 schools, has a long-standing commitment to districtwide curriculum planning. It has evolved a systematic curriculum development process that involves teachers in all phases and in all decision making.

In early 1976, the Jeffco science department completed a two-year pilot study and field test of a revised elementary science program (grades three-six). Along with district staff developers, the science staff was beginning to grapple with problems of implementing the program districtwide. A systematic curriculum implementation process was needed to parallel and complement the development process. An introduction of the UTR&D staff and the concerns-based approach to Jeffco educators brought two worlds together; researchers and their model suggesting more effective ways to implement change, and practitioners in search of those better ways. A collaborative effort was soon underway.

Even before collaboration began, it was clear that both groups shared similar assumptions about change. These assumptions provided the framework for designing specific aspects of the implementation effort for the science program. They are:

1. Change is a process, not an event.
2. Change is accomplished by individuals, not institutions.
3. Change is a highly personal experience.
4. Change entails developmental growth in both feelings about and skills in using new programs.

Change is a Process

The first assumption of the model is that change is not an event but a process that takes time. Too often policy-makers, administrators, and even teachers assume that change is simply the result of an administrative decision, legislative requirement, new curriculum acquisition, or procedural revision. The conviction lingers that somehow, with the opening of school, the change will have been made. However, R&D Center research indicates that three to five years are necessary to implement an innovation that is significantly different from current practice.

Initially, the Jeffco science department considered a fairly typical "hit and run" inservice effort—three inservice days for teachers, two weeks apart, at the beginning of the school year. Knowing that change takes more time than that, they reconsidered and planned a full year of inservice activities beginning with an orientation for administrators.

Teacher exposure to the program started with a brief "pre-inservice" session aimed at creating awareness of the new science program. Two months later the inservice began: three full-day released-time sessions, paced to correspond with changes in the classroom—each component scheduled as close as possible to the time of actual teacher use.

Change is Accomplished by Individuals

The second assumption of the model is that the change process is experienced by individuals, not by institutions. For institutions to change, the people within them must change. Other approaches to change (organizational development, for example) view the institution as the primary unit of intervention, and focus on topics such as "communication" and "organizational norms." The concerns-based approach emphasizes the roles of individuals in the implementation process.

In accordance with the concerns-based philo-
the Jeffco project paid close attention to the individual teachers who were implementing the science program. Between inservice workshops, two members of the science staff engaged in a variety of "comfort and caring" activities: talking with teachers in the teachers' lounge during the day, lunching with an individual teacher to discuss issues, observing science classes to help teachers deal with problems. In addition, inservice sessions offered choices of content and complexity for teachers with varying amounts of science teaching experience and confidence with the current curriculum.

The philosophy that individuals must be the major focus of interventions does not suggest ignoring the institution or its representatives. Support for teachers at the building level is vital to successful change, and Jeffco staff developers made every effort to ensure that teachers would have logistical as well as moral support at the school level. Before teachers became involved in the science program, school principals learned about the equipment and supplies needed, ordering and scheduling procedures, and other details. They also heard suggestions for how to be supportive of teachers in the change effort. In addition, the science department staff was available to principals and was called upon for various kinds of assistance, from cleaning and rearranging school science storage areas to rearranging teaching schedules and unit plans so teaching could go smoothly.

Change Is Personal

The third assumption of the concerns-based approach is that change is a highly personal experience. Staff developers, administrators, and other change facilitators often attend closely to the trappings and technology of the innovation but ignore the perceptions and feelings of people. The personal dimension is often more critical to the success of the change effort than are the technological dimensions. Change is brought about by individuals, so their personal satisfactions, frustrations, concerns, motivations, and perceptions all play a part in determining the success or failure of a change initiative.

In line with this philosophy, the inservice training offered to Jeffco teachers was not the same for everyone. Participants included both professionals and beginners, so training was geared to varying levels of teacher expertise. To attend to the diversity of interests and needs, choices of content and learning format were available at various times during inservice sessions. The leader-to-teacher ratio was kept small by using trained, enthusiastic classroom teachers, who had already taught the curriculum, as leaders.

Change Entails Growth in Feelings and Skills

The fourth assumption is that change is a developmental process involving both the feelings and skills of individuals. Individuals go through stages in their affective orientation to the innovation, and in their skill and sophistication in using it. Research at UTR&D has identified seven "stages of concern" that individuals experience as they implement change. (See Figure 1.)

Six years of research indicate that as an innovation is adopted, concerns develop through these seven stages. Initially, individuals have primarily self-oriented concerns; those of an informational and personal nature. ("What is it?" "How will it affect me?"") As use of the innovation begins, concerns become management-focused; concerns about materials, scheduling, and time requirements are uppermost. When management problems become resolved, concerns can become focused on the impact of the innovation upon learners; concerns about consequences, collaboration, and refocusing become dominant. To be relevant to teachers who are implementing new programs, inservice activities should be addressed to resolving the different concerns as they emerge.

The Jeffco science implementation effort was designed with the Stages of Concern model in mind. The "pre-inservice" sessions were designed to address informational and personal concerns (stages 1 and 2). They were held for small numbers (teachers from two schools) in a familiar setting (one of their schools). The content was informational: a science department member described the program with an entertaining slide presentation, noted what changes had been made,

described plans for inservice, suggested schedules for teaching, and distributed the new teacher's guide. The atmosphere was intimate and informal, with a question and answer session so individuals could ask whatever they wished.

The three full-day inservice sessions held later focused on management concerns (stage 3). Teachers worked with the materials, experiencing the learning process their students would use. Classroom management techniques were demonstrated and discussed.

It was anticipated that some teachers at the inservice sessions, particularly those who were experienced in science teaching, would have more "consequence" (stage 4) than "management" concerns. To address these teachers' concerns, self-paced instructional modules were made available. Modules were developed around student-focused topics such as the implications of Piaget's work for teaching science, techniques for stimulating student talk in discussions (such as using "wait time"), and using the outdoors for teaching science concepts. Time periods were allotted during the inservice days for teachers to choose either group work, in which they could get more detailed assistance in use of materials, or work with the modules.

Outcomes and Future Directions

Three years have passed since the Jeffco implementation effort was designed, and the new curriculum was first introduced into the schools. Although collaboration with district staff developers is ongoing, the study in schools has been completed. What have we found out? Preliminary data analysis indicates first, and perhaps most important to any implementation effort, that science teaching is occurring across the district. In many cases, teachers who had neither the time nor interest to teach science before are now doing so. Workshop questionnaires indicate a high level of satisfaction with inservice content and format. Science department staff, who continue having personal contact with teachers, say teacher commitment to and enthusiasm for science teaching is greater than ever.

These outcomes are highly satisfying, but there are also many questions that remain unanswered. Informational and personal concerns are lower, and concerns about management and consequence have increased. We believe that many of these concerns will be resolved with experience.

Some teachers are beginning to have consequence concerns; most do not. Should they? If so, how can consequence concerns be brought about? If initial inservice training was focused mainly on management concerns, should later inservice efforts attend to consequence concerns? What should be the workshops' content and format?

Another interesting outcome is that different schools appear to have different profiles of concern. There is more and more indication that principals in these schools have had a great deal of influence on whether teachers remain with management concerns, or whether these are resolved and consequence concerns emerge. Our research indicates that what the principal does is critical to the success of an implementation effort. Does the principal make sure equipment and time are available for the new program, indicate that use is indeed a priority, provide moral support when needed, and legitimize early failures when they occur? Where this is true, teachers have resolved management concerns; where this kind of support does not come from the principal, management concerns often remain high. What is the principal's role in change? How can he or she be prepared to play that obviously vital role?

Although many questions are as yet unanswered, the continuing collaboration between UTR&D and Jeffco has added to knowledge about the process of curriculum implementation. We are beginning to shed some light on the complex nature of change in education, but the illumination reveals a whole roster of new questions to pursue. The continuing effort promises benefits not only for the two institutions, but also for others interested in school improvement.


Susan Loucks (left) is Assistant Program Director, Program for Adopting Educational Innovations, Research and Development Center for Teacher Education, The University of Texas, Austin; Harold Pratt is Science Coordinator, Jefferson County Public Schools, Lakewood, Colorado.
Copyright © 1979 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.