A former prime minister of Canada once said ‘living next to the United States is much like sleeping with an elephant . . . if it rolls over we must take notice.’ This statement fits within a 1960–1980’s perception of Canada. In any case to discuss school improvement in Canada will show North American and global influences.

Unlike the United States, Canada has no national representative in the federal government responsible for education, although some areas of education do fall separately into other ministerial portfolios. Having said this the national/federal government does wield considerable influence as the constitutional protector of minority rights and by using its spending power to ‘buy’ its way into areas of provincial jurisdiction like education. Federal-Provincial agreements in education have led to some national and local initiatives. Also the provinces co-ordinate many activities and are working towards a Pan-Canadian view. The Council of Ministers (Provincial) of Education in Canada (CMEC) meet and co-ordinate activities regularly. A national system of performance indicators assists in monitoring provincial performance with national comparisons.

Canada, as is the case in other countries, has seen attempts to improve schools evolve. Most notably have been changes that have occurred in the past 50 years. This process seems to have accelerated in pace and complexity in the last 10 to 15 years with a global reform movement. In this context the profession is struggling to cope as well as improve.

In discussing the Canadian scene there are five elements, which serve this purpose. First are the phases of school improvement (SI), which reflect a particular orientation as to what would best work to improve schools. Second is a more robust and workable definition of school improvement, which reflects this evolution and enables us to capture today’s complexity yet allows for simplicity as well. Third is a discussion as to the effects of school improvement. Fourth is the more recent reform context, which sees a mixture of politically driven reform agendas with mixed motivations and results. Lastly, an outline of how school improvement was introduced to one Canadian province representative of the national thrust called the ‘District Case’.
Fullan (1991) noted that each decade seems to have a new approach or perspective on the way to manage change. Reynolds (1998) identifies four phases, of S1 since the 1960’s. The first phase from the 1960’s to 1970’s is dominated by a concentration on curriculum adoption and dissemination. In the second phase, the early 1980’s, there was a concern with implementation and institutionalization as a result of failures from the first phase. The third phase saw major efforts to understand the process of school improvement, and the fourth phase encompassed an emphasis on the change process and its relation to school improvement processes.

Reynolds (1998) adds another paradigm to the school improvement mix, or a fifth phase to his previously mentioned four phases in the evolution of S1. This phase is reflective of attempts to combine the achievement oriented school effectiveness movement and the process oriented-school improvement movement. Both movements hope to draw on each other’s strengths for a more comprehensive realization of educational improvement. This is producing S1 models considered a merger between the school effectiveness characteristics and S1 process. Such models draw a more direct emphases on student outcomes of which the I.Q.E.A in the United Kingdom and Halton Schools Project in Ontario, Canada are considered as examples.

Calhoun and Joyce (1998) discuss approaches to S1, which reflect a paring down of Reynolds’s (1998) first four phases into 2 perspectives. The first is ‘the classical external R&D (research and development) approach’ and the second is the ‘school-based, faculty centred approach’ (p. 1287). The R&D approach is characterized by the development of innovations outside schools, which are then field tested and then disseminated to schools if deemed to have positive outcomes for students. Concerns arose about this type of approach as ‘with few exceptions, the R&D paradigms implementation efforts however have been as unsuccessful as the development phases were successful’ (Calhoun and Joyce 1998, 1289). The recognition of the development of an implementation gap was the focus of much of the 1980’s literature leading to greater emphasis on teacher participation and school based control of the innovation and S1 processes. The second approach, a school centered approach, results from the recognition of the necessity of involving more stakeholders in change as otherwise many promising programs or innovations are sometimes quickly adopted but rarely institutionalized. Miles (1992) reinforces early teacher involvement in S1, arguing that ‘if people participate early in the process of designing school based changes, they will develop ownership of the project and, at the same time will have
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Elements of a School Improvement Definition | Source
--- | ---
Systematic, sustained effort to improve outcomes. | Van Welzen, 1985
General effort to make schools better. | Hopkins, Ainscow, and West, 1994
Enhanced student outcomes and capacity to manage change. | Hopkins, Ainscow, and West, 1994
On going problem solving and improvement as a process. | Lofton et al., 1998

Table 1: What is school improvement?

A clearer sense of what components the project actually entail’ (p. 9). In discussing this second approach, Calhoun and Joyce (1998) argue that ‘they are really different: for the school based approach depends on developing local faculty energy to generate s1, on the premise that faculties can develop the knowledge necessary to build innovation that conforms to the needs of the local community’ (p. 1294). There is strength in a school focused s1 strategy coupled with school-initiated use of R&D approaches. Together they can provide a powerful mix as ‘student benefits are more likely to occur school wide if we combine aspects from both foci’ (Calhoun and Joyce 1998, 1295).

With each phase of s1, or focus, there are various approaches and models. Anderson (1997) points to a ‘tendency with the educational research community to invent new models of educational change for different policy thrusts’ (p. 363). This is reflected in the many school improvement approaches and models such as; Accelerated Schools Models, Cambridge Site Based Planning Model, Coalition of Essential Schools, Comer School Development Program, League of Professional Schools, Manitoba School Improvement Program, Paideia School Based Change Model, (Kilchner 1996), Improving Quality Education for All (IQEA), (Hopkins, Ainscow, and West 1994; 1997; West 1998), Innovator Profiles, Consensus Based Adoption Model, (Anderson 1991) Total Quality Schools School Improvement in Scarborough Secondary Schools, (Earl 1994), The Halton Schools Project, (Stoll and Fink 1996), just to name a few. We have gone through many school improvement models and approaches, which reflect the various phases, but what do we mean when we say school improvement?

What is School Improvement?

School improvement can be an overall approach or the result of a specific application of an innovation. It is aimed at changing in order to achieve educational goals more effectively. Hopkins, Ainscow and West (1994) discuss
two meanings, or senses, of school improvement. The first is ‘common sense which relates to general efforts to make schools better places’ (p. 3). The second is ‘a more technical or specific phrase . . . s1 as a distinct approach to educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthening the school’s capacity for managing change’ (p. 3). The process orientation to school improvement is important as Lofton, et al. (1998) point out claiming that ‘successful school improvement projects were not projects at all but part of an ongoing problem solving and improvement process’ (p. 59). Similar to Fullan (1985), Stoll and Fink (1996) link outcome characteristics of effectiveness to school improvement saying ‘School improvement’s ultimate aim, however, is to enhance pupil progress, achievement and development. This is the bottom line.’ (p. 43).

Having said this, I point to my orientation with regard to s1; a process of sustained activity that looks to improve benefits for students, which can involve innovation, change, and the development of in-house responses or the use of external ideas as well. Process and capacity building are important but a product orientation will inevitably become the focus of any worthwhile s1 process. Evans (1996) argues, ‘The goal is a healthy school improvement outcome, not a picture-perfect process. A good process usually produces a good outcome, and ignoring process can surely damage outcome – but so, too, does getting lost in the process’ (p. 252).

s1 is not a project or quick fix, but part of an ongoing process that requires the participation of teachers in decision making (Stoll 1998). School improvement strategies range from an extreme of ‘top down’ to ‘bottom up’ and somewhere in-between. Given the sometimes-negative impacts of restructuring and reform we need to ask: what are the effects of school improvement initiatives? Do they work?

THE EFFECT OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Reynolds at al. (1996) argue that in school improvement research ‘we have far too long been content with anecdotal evidence and perceptual data collected unsystematically. If the field is to be true to its rhetoric, then serious questions must be asked about theory and strategy, which also must be tested empirically’ (p. 88). Gray et al. (1994) in discussing ‘minimal requirements for studies of school improvement’ (p. 99) list four factors; ‘measures of student outcomes and prior attainment on individual pupils; data on a measure of at least three cohorts; a multi-level statistical analysis; and an orientation towards examining the data for systematic changes in school’s
performance over time’ (p. 100). Gray et al. (1994) report, unfortunately, that ‘none of the studies to date have combined all four of these requirements’ (p. 100).

Having said this, some studies point out that it does work and those that fail suffer from a familiar problem as Evan (1996) points out ‘we – everyone involved in school improvement – still face a major implementation gap, for now we are attempting reforms that are far more extensive and complex than ever before’ (p. 5).

Springfield et al. (1998) studied ten promising programs finding that the Comer SDP and The Success for All (SFA) program showed significant gains in student achievements. Concern about failures were related to a mixture of external and school based approaches, and the lack of commitment, which impacted on success at either level of adoption, implementation or institutionalization. Stringfield et al. (1998) found that,

schools obtaining the greatest academic achievement gains for their at risk students paid a great deal of attention to the issues of initial and long term implementation, and to institutionalizing the reforms. Several general and a great many program specific implementation issues, if not successfully addressed, permanently crippled otherwise promising programs (p. 1327).

Miles (1992) also argues that programs or innovations are sometimes quickly adopted but rarely institutionalized. Innovations are important as they seek to improve schools. Miles (1992) confirms positive effects for students saying that ‘studies can actually demonstrate the causal relationships between adoption (to) implementation (to) enhanced technical capacity (to) revised institutionalization alignment (to) measurable impact on pupils within the ‘thrust’ of the innovation’ (p. 11).

The message is consistently argued, that if it is well planned, well supported, embraces teachers’ input, is supported by leaders, and is part of an ongoing process orientation, it does work. (Reynolds 1998; Miles 1992; Lofton et al. 1998). This argument is very similar to the kinds of mixed support for SDM/SBM, as SDM can be seen as a form of it. The net effect of all this discussion points to a continuing problem with adoption to implementation and institutionalization as well as the transferability of successful innovations from one site to another. If the results of any initiative do not impact change at the teacher level, and thereby the school culture, real change will not occur. Indeed this is the heart of the thrust. Unfortunately, however, looking back at the restructuring and reform context
‘improvement’ may have meant a better deal for taxpayers but not necessarily better outcomes for students!

The topsy-turvy fluctuations of mandated change from above versus resistance from below, school based change initiatives against upper level resistance and inflexibility have caused considerable turmoil in the last 15 years. These counter-balancing forces are reflected in the reform agenda as, regardless of the source, action is met with reaction.

**THE REFORM AGENDA**

Reform in Canada reflects many aspects of the reform process globally, particularly in English speaking countries. The impetus for reform comes as a result of a political outcry followed by a royal commission or task force. Reform is then guided by the implementation of many of these recommendations (Pal 1997). Also reflected in this process are attempts to address fiscal realities as successive provincial governments attempt to reduce costs.

School restructuring is resulting in fewer and larger school districts, greater resource sharing efficiencies, and more forms of site-based decision making. These changes are taking place in the context of decreased funding. (Leithwood and Menzies 1998). Defining st as improved student outcomes whether using process or product orientation, over the short or long term, overlooks this not so hidden st/Reform agenda item. Federal and Provincial Governments in Canada are reducing costs. Paradoxically attempting to eliminate resources and add capacity. Thus in many instances the st initiative occurred in the context of a reform/restructuring aimed at assuring quality while reducing cost or as Leithwood and Menzies, (1998) point out ‘holding the quality of education constant while decreasing its costs is a school improvement goal that needs to be let out of the bag’ (p. 344).

Governments arguing global competition and high taxes with heavy debts were very successful in convincing the public, if not the profession, that more money was not the issue. The issue is to improve schools, restructure, remove waste and apply scarce funds more strategically. Restructuring school systems has had a lot to do with redistributing funds but the basket used to pass the funds is porous, as much of the money has gone elsewhere. One key feature in this was to remove the middle level of administration. Governments consolidated school districts while redistributing the powers.

Effective redistribution of powers entails a number of measures. A key factor is the redistribution of powers between central governments and site based authorities. This also fills a gap left by the erosion of the regional school district presence. Some have called this greater say by those closer
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to the scene with more interest in ensuring the success of students, others have called it a power grab by central government/departments. Both are right. School restructuring has resulted in fewer and larger school districts and a search for greater efficiencies. This has been implemented using a dual thrust of decentralization of authority to schools and school councils while concentrating key curriculum and outcome roles to the central government. Some specific analysis of the Canadian scene is outlined and discussed below.

In paring down to a truly Canadian situation I refer to items listed, as a national perspective, for the Council of Ministries of Education for Canada conference in January 2000. Information reflected below has been gathered from all provinces and specific information is drawn from Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, Newfoundland, British Columbia, and Manitoba. An outline for this will follow political actions, accountability, finance, and curriculum as key factors of the reform driven agenda.

THE CANADIAN NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Political Actions:
- Issues of education standards and cost raised as election issues
- Concerns of deficit and competition for scarce dollars
- Reform of education becomes election issue . . . future
- Royal Commission of inquiry into education . . . recommendations
- Governments actioning recommendations
- Shift to linguistic system from denominational (Nfld and Que)
- More choice in schools, i.e. private, charter, etc.
- Shift in funding to provincial treasury, less from regional or local sources
- School councils mandated
- Decision making moved to local or provincial level
- Reduction in number of school districts
  - Alberta 200 to 62
  - Nfld 35 to 11
  - NB one provincial district

Accountability:
- All schools must have school improvement plans
- School councils responsible to approve school growth plan

75
Standardized testing, outcomes approach to measuring school success
Reports must be shared with school council
Annual reports to parents and community using indicators as to schools performance
Adoption of ‘essential learning outcomes’ as guide for program, course approval and graduation requirements
School council have approval of fundraising

Finance:
- Loss of resources . . . money, fewer teachers
- Treasury board having greater role in education issues (cost)
- Schools seeking alternate sources of funding
- Partnerships
- Federal funding programs
- Public fees
- Public frustration over cuts and reductions in service
- Greater reliance on provincial sources of fundraising

Employer Relations:
- Government driven reforms using legislation
- Opposition by Teacher Association/Unions
- Active campaign by teacher organization against government during election . . . unsuccessful
- Restriction, reduction, and freezing of salaries and benefits
- Bitterness over increased workloads and loss of benefits
- Removal of Administrators form teacher collective bargaining (Ontario and British Columbia)
- Large numbers of senior teachers retiring
- Expected teacher shortage . . . about 20,000
- Perception of government attacking the credibility of teachers
  - Poor results
  - Over paid
  - Not working
Curriculum:
- Extensive changes in curriculum using essential outcomes as guide
- Testing to measure success in meeting curriculum objectives
- Increased expectation but not with adequate supports
- Changes often budget sensitive
- Trend toward a Pan Canadian curriculum
- New national testing

There are themes that drive the 1990's reform/school improvement in Canada:
- Concern about sagging economies and global competition
- Governments determined to reduce deficits and cut costs
- Competition for scarce dollars from other sectors like health care
- Public lack of confidence in the status quo
- School and research based initiatives to cope with change

What we see in the Canadian scene is a reform movement that is driven by the fear that global competition means our education must change to meet the changing demands. Also by a need of governments to trim costs while reassuring the public quality could be maintained, if not improved.

This resulted in a two-fold thrust toward reform. On the one hand, restructuring to change the delivery and organization of services. This was achieved largely by, reducing the district level influence, consolidating quality aspects of curriculum, and setting new standards by central governments. On the other hand, greater decision-making was moved to local sites, such as school councils and schools based personnel. Also there was a more genuine attempt at a process of school improvement using a school centred approach to change and decision making typical of the latter phases to school improvement. We have discussed the reform movement and school improvement, sometimes as mixed entities and sometimes separately. This mixture reflects the reality in Canada as waves of reform and various school improvement initiatives have not been linear, nor have they spread in any traditional geographic sense, but they are occurring. The changes range from fairly mild reforms, mostly recommended as in Manitoba, to extreme cases of legislated change in provinces such as Ontario, which now publicly ranks schools in local newspapers based on their performance on standardized testing. In another recent action Ontario’s ‘Educational Quality
Commission’ instituted an external literacy testing program, which grade 10 students must pass to meet graduation requirements.

In Newfoundland and Quebec there was considerable turmoil as these governments restructured from a denominational system of education to a linguistically based public system. This removed constitutional guarantees of church run schools financed by these provinces. In Newfoundland’s case it came only after two hard fought referendums asking voters to choose this change in the face of stiff opposition from the Pentecostal and Roman Catholic churches and their supporters.

The denominational debate, as other debates in other provinces, have obscured a more genuine attempt by provincial departments of education, with help from federal authorities, to initiate changes in how Canadian schools operate. In this regard Newfoundland was fairly typical and showed considerable success in moving from a phase one and two mode of to a phase four and five style of school improvement.

THE DISTRICT CASE

The provincial Government of Newfoundland and Labrador initiated two major reform initiatives which reflect the dynamic of the reform agenda. The first was the Challenge For Excellence (1990) document. This proposed change in the education system relied heavily on the effectiveness literature and school based change processes. The second thrust came from the report of a Royal Commission of Inquiry into Education with over 600 recommendations. Thus the stage for change was set.

In conjunction with federal resources allocated under a ‘Human Resource Development’ agreement provinces were able to access additional funds to initiate a province wide thrust to stimulate school improvement. It was process orientated aimed at having schools develop the skills to tackle the task of developing school improvement plans and making local decisions. As well it aimed at assisting teachers cope with change.

Districts from across the province sent teachers to be trained as facilitators. These teachers then served as resource persons and external facilitators in their home district as each school was encouraged to adopt, or at least look into, the school improvement process. Eventually teams of teachers in each school in the district were brought into the school improvement process as a result of a similar district initiative.

The first leadership in this regard came from the district superintendent who embraced the concept and then encouraged school administrators to
adopt the process, although stressing the voluntary nature of any schools involvement, i.e.: teacher must participate in making the decision as well.

The district through the district leadership supported teachers in this transformational process toward school improvement. This district can be influential, when it chooses, especially in motivating principals to act on a particular initiative. (Griffin and Chance 1994; Elmore 1993; Miller 1988). The transformational leader is needed as traditional rigid approaches are limited in their application, are not flexible and do not easily anticipate change. In addressing or dealing with the unpredictability of change and determining the future Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1998) say

One problem is the risky business of predicting the future social and economic consequences of present trends; the other is the improbability of accurately and precisely specifying the characteristics of schools adapting to such consequences. . . . That schools will continue to face a steady stream of novel problems and ambitious demands is the only predication required. (p. 2)

In May 1995 teachers were inserviced at a three-day retreat on school improvement. School based school improvement facilitation teams were established. Each team then organized inservices in their schools and subsequently schools adopted the school improvement process.

For schools this changed the leadership style, from the traditional Principal centred leadership, to a more inclusive teacher leadership concept. It initiated many changes in how these schools now operate. Indeed to rephrase MacLuhan’s ‘the medium is the message’ this change to a more distributed leadership, having greater teacher involvement in decision-making is the medium, and teacher leadership is the message.

While the decision to participate was voluntary the process followed Fullan’s ‘Eight Basic Lessons of the New Paradigm of Change’. Facilitators often referred to these ‘Eight Paradigms of Change’ as part of their presentation to teachers. The district leadership expected the schools to participate but ‘ownership’ of the process was site based. Teachers were now, formally and informally, being widely involved in the decision making process about conditions in their workplace. The more active role of teachers as leaders was part of this school improvement process.

Ainscow and Southworth (1998) in a study of The Role of Leaders and External Consultants discuss teacher leadership reporting that teacher leaders assist change in school by:

1. Dealing with people
2. Taking a whole school view
3. Keeping up the momentum
4. Monitoring development and
5. Establishing a climate (p. 233).

Teacher leadership became part of the school improvement process. As Ainscow and Southworth (1998) write, ‘Overall, these processes and all other points we noted about these teacher leaders help establish a climate that is supportive of school development activities. In particular they were seeking to assuage their colleagues’ doubts and concerns about managing change or coping with another development.’ (p. 238.)

In the restructuring and reform environment such capacity building elements are essential, or as Fullan (1997) says ‘teachers and principals must regroup internally and reframe their relationships with their colleagues and others inside and outside the school. They must . . . go both deeper and wider if they are to have any chance of survival.’ (p. 1.)

In this province school improvement is a site based effort where a school’s staff, with the support of the district, collaborates in assessing the strengths and needs of their school for the purpose of creating a more effective educational setting. (Deer Lake School Board 1995). An outline of the School Improvement process is found in the Deer Lake St. Barbe South Integrated School Board school team handbook is listed below:

- Readiness
- Creating Value Statements (Mission, Vision, and Beliefs)
- Developing a School Profile
- Establishing Priorities
- Setting Priorities
- Building The Long Range Plan
- Action Planning (p. 8)

These goals may appear to be at odds with Fullan’s ‘Vision Comes Later’ but the facilitators stress that these are not prescriptive and that each school may take a different approach. McLaughlin (1990) cited in Reynolds (1998) described four characteristics of successful school improvement efforts: policy cannot mandate what matters; implementation dominates outcomes; and local variability is the rule; uniformity is the exception. The uniqueness of schools both in context and approach is widely recognized, albeit with many similarities of purpose and intent as well.
As to the results it is hard to determine. There was no comprehensive attempt to take base line data as reflected in Gray's criticism of research on school improvement. Also the system lost significant amounts of resources through restructuring. Working on a go forward process, there are considerably more standardized measures of student outcomes to measure achievement of students' and schools' performance. This is now used as part of school growth plans and reports to the public.

The process is more open, schools are more accountable, and must react to results of student performance.

CONCLUSION

Pressured by global competition, sagging student results, and a crushing provincial debt provinces set out to redefine how education was to be delivered in light of shrinking funds and changing expectations. This was the restructuring side of the reform movement. After failed attempts to regulate sagging student performance to better results a new more professional approach is being adopted sometimes by design, sometimes by necessity. Governments have taken the position of setting goals, targets, and developing new curriculum and monitoring systems in the name of quality. Schools being the centre of improvement have more decision-making ability and accountability. They are expected to improve, although the resources are not always provided, making this transition problematic.

Regardless of these obstacles however, many schools are finding a greater quality emphasis, more emphasis is placed on the school as a learning organization, more on the process side, and the more genuine school improvement side. Fullan’s 8 paradigms of change are often used, as teachers are encouraged to rethink and reframe their approach and view of school. Teachers are becoming better able to think in terms of school based improvement initiatives and ‘action plans’. In this regard they quite naturally are coming to want mechanisms to monitor their performance, which were at first resisted. In this regard there is a better acceptance of fairly extensive quality indicators as teachers see these as a means to adjust and adapt their school improvement plans.

Perhaps the last word should go to a teacher's view of the process posted on a teacher Internet bulletin board:

The School Improvement Process, as imperfect as it is, seems to be one vehicle likely to help staff adjust and grow and stay with the task of teaching for learning effectively. I heard about
a tee shirt in Winnipeg that read ‘Elvis is Dead. Deal with It.’ Somehow, even the honest attempt to listen to each other more and work together in a more structured manner has helped a number of schools addresses what sometimes seems like a tide of change. Maybe we don’t have to feel good every day, but we should be able to feel better over time. I think we increase our chances of affecting the quality of what happens in our schools, both for our students and for ourselves. What choice have we got but to try? (Pellerin 1995).

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