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Integrating Innovations

Proponents of new ideas promote their favorites without seeing connections to other strategies—it's up to school leaders to discover how to integrate a collection of models within their improvement programs.

At no other time in the history of education have there been more new ideas and innovations available to educators, administrators, and teachers who are planning school improvement programs. Each of these options promises to improve student learning and enhance the quality of education, but each represents a somewhat different vehicle to use on the road to educational excellence.

The following innovations, for example, have attracted the attention of large numbers of educators:

- Cooperative learning (Johnson and Johnson 1987, Slavin 1983)
- The effective schools model (Brookover et al. 1987)
- Critical thinking (Costa 1985, Marzano 1986)
- Mastery teaching, various forms of which are also known as instructional theory into practice (ITIP), elements of effective instruction, and the Hunter model (Hunter 1979, 1982)
- Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA) (Kerman 1979)
- Learning styles, including programs on learning modalities and brain hemisphere differences (de Bono 1983, Carbo et al. 1986, McCarthy 1987)

All these strategies seek to provide better learning opportunities so that students can be more successful. All can also be adapted for use at any grade level and in almost any subject area. What's more, all have numerous advocates eager to testify that their particular strategy does indeed improve educational outcomes, although the theoretical and research foundations of each differ greatly in strength.

Selecting Innovations

The number and kinds of innovations that school district leaders choose to include in improvement programs vary from one district to another. Some districts center their plans on the comprehensive implementation of a single innovative strategy so that their efforts can be well focused and clearly articulated. The vast majority of districts, however, include a combination of strategies in their improvement programs. Although educational leaders in these districts may be aware of the need for coherence among their improvement initiatives, they are sen-
Practitioners often need more than one year to grow comfortable with any change.
with school districts on program implementation; some participate in research studies to determine how effective their strategy is under various conditions. As a result, few have time to develop the deep understanding of other innovations necessary for suggesting how to synthesize them for use in classrooms.

Further, an underlying sense of competition among the proponents of different strategies often hinders efforts to integrate. With limited funds and time for staff development, school leaders may have to choose among innovations. Consequently, some presenters emphasize the strong points of their strategies and what they regard as weaknesses in the others. They are not inclined to concentrate on how different strategies can be combined. Unfortunately, this rivalry promotes a separatist view of the innovations and increases the frustration and cynicism of practitioners.

If the integration of innovations does not come from the advocates of innovative practices, from whom will it come? At present, I contend it will have to come from the same team of administrators and teachers who develop the district or building improvement program and who choose the set of innovations to be included in that program.

Creating a Framework

Five guidelines can aid school leaders in their efforts to synthesize the different innovative strategies that constitute their improvement programs. These guidelines should be taken as a frame of reference for addressing issues crucial to the success of integrating any combination of innovations.

1. All innovative strategies in the improvement program should share common goals and premises. Every innovative strategy I listed earlier is specifically designed to increase learning and enhance the well-being of students. Although each focuses on different aspects of the teaching-learning process, all presume that learning can be improved and that educators can strongly influence learning. Furthermore, all emphasize that when students experience greater success in learning, they feel better about learning, better about themselves as learners, and are more highly motivated to continue learning in the future. Explicit acknowledgment of these common goals and shared premises is a necessary first step in bringing about their systematic integration.

2. No single innovative strategy can do everything. Despite the claims of some advocates, no innovation will solve all the complex problems facing educators today. Therefore, a highly effective improvement program must note different strengths and employ a combination of strategies that will positively influence different aspects of teaching and learning.

Figure 1 illustrates how this might be accomplished. In the blocks across the center of the figure are five major components of the teaching-learning process: (1) specification of clear learning objectives, (2) initial teaching or instruction, (3) a check on initial learning through some type of formative assessment, (4) the provision of feedback and corrective instruction for students who have not learned well through the initial teaching or enrichment activities for those students who have, and (5) summative evaluation of student learning.

The figure also includes my interpretation of the major strengths of the innovative strategies mentioned earlier. Arrows extend from each strategy to the component/components that is/are a principal focus—and thus seemingly a major strength—of that strategy. This does not necessarily mean that an innovation is weak with regard to the other components but simply that less attention is devoted to that particular component in the major references describing it.

For example, as part of an excellent
guide for developing a school climate conducive to learning, the effective
schools model emphasizes the impor-
tance of clearly recognized and ac-
cepted learning objectives common
for all students. Outcome-based edu-
cation also stresses the need to state
clearly what students are expected to
learn but does not relate objectives
specifically to school climate. Instead,
outcome-based education emphasizes
the importance of summative evalua-
tions of performance strictly according
to stated objectives.

Neither the effective schools model
nor outcome-based education, how-
ever, offers much specific guidance on
instructional quality. Mastery teaching,
on the other hand, helps to clarify the
important decisions teachers must make
in planning and conducting classroom
instructional activities. TESA, too, con-
centrates chiefly on instruction, since
it helps teachers become more aware
of the expectations they communicate
to their students. But mastery teaching
and TESA say little about assessment
or evaluation.

Mastery learning does address (1)
formative assessment to give students
regular feedback on their learning
progress and (2) pairing that feedback
with high-quality corrective activities
for students who need additional as-
sistance or enrichment activities for
students who have learned very well.
But mastery learning is basically neu-
tral with regard to curriculum objec-
tives or instructional format.

Concepts from cooperative learning
and learning styles are especially valu-
able when teachers are planning alter-
native instructional approaches, espe-
cially for corrective or enrichment
activities. Though neither the coopera-
tive learning nor the learning styles
literature offers detailed prescriptions
for evaluation, the data on critical
thinking provide several methods for
assessing higher-level cognitive skills.

The complementary nature of the
models must be emphasized if
practitioners are to understand how
to integrate them and how to translate
that synthesis into classroom practice.

Whenever presenters introduce a
strategy, they should illustrate how
that strategy ties in with the ones in-
troduced earlier.

Of course, differences between
strategies should be pointed out, par-
ticularly points of disagreement, but
attention needs to move beyond sim-
ple comparative analyses and toward
practical synthesis. The compromises
necessary to attain such a synthesis are
far more likely to enhance the effec-
tiveness of each strategy than to det-
tract from any one.

4 All innovative strategies need to
be adapted to individual classroom
and building conditions. Few prac-
titioners can take what they have
learned from staff development, move
directly into the classroom, and begin
employing the new strategy with suc-
cess (Crandall 1983). Educators need
time to experiment and work through
the process of mutual adaptation.

Support during this period of adjust-
ment is crucially important, and that
support must be extended beyond the
first year of implementation (Guskey
Teachers and administrators alike need ongo-
ing guidance and direction to adapt the
strategy to their needs while still main-
taining its fidelity. Without the necessary
guidance and support, the innovation is
apt to be implemented poorly or incom-
pletely, and improvements will then be
minimal.

5 When a well-conceived combina-
tion of innovative strategies is used,
the results are likely to be greater than
those attained using any single stra-
tegy. The various innovations shown in
Figure 1 are complementary in nature.
Using a combination of them, there-
fore, is likely to prove very powerful.
In fact, research evidence suggests that
when a combination of strategies is
employed, each addressing a different
aspect of the teaching-learning pro-
cess, the results can be additive. That
is, if one innovative strategy is in place
and another is added, the benefits of
the new strategy do not duplicate
those of the established one but rather
add to them (Bloom 1984, Walberg
1984). For example, when mastery
learning and cooperative learning are
used together, the results can be im-
pressive (Mevarech 1985b, 1989). Of
the five guidelines offered, this is
probably the most crucial—and the
most neglected. If the effects brought
about by different strategies were not
additive, the incentive to use them in
combination would be far less com-
pelling. It remains our challenge to
determine the optimal combinations
for particular settings and to imple-
ment them in ways that give them their
greatest chance to produce their best
results.

Broadening Our Scope

If school improvement efforts are ever
to attain their full potential, educators
must broaden their thinking about the
way improvement efforts are planned
and implemented. To do so, we must
first drop the practice of introducing
each innovation as an isolated "new
idea" without relationship to or regard
for other ideas. Throughout all stages
of improvement initiatives, we must
clearly describe the relationships be-
tween existing and new strategies in
practical terms.

Second, we must expect the advo-
cates of a particular strategy to argue
persuasively for the advantages of
their approach, but we should press
them to be explicit about the limita-
tions of that approach. Only then can
one strategy's strength compensate for
another strategy's weakness.

Third, when new strategies are in-
If the effects brought about by different strategies were not additive, the incentive to use them in combination would be far less compelling.

The primary task that lies ahead, therefore, is not so much the generation of ideas as their integration, not so much finding individual ideas that work as making a collection of ideas work together.

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