



Chapattis and the challenges of educational change

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There are three critical overarching aspects to consider when we look at educational change: 'what', 'how' and 'who'. We need to be clear about what is worth changing. For instance, we must ensure that all teachers are in class and teaching. Obviously we need to do a lot more than that! The 'what' involves changing the practices of individuals, institutions, and the system, because as long as they continue to do what they currently do, nothing will change for the better.

But the 'what' is a lot easier to talk about than to actually execute. How do we, for instance, ensure that all teachers are in class and teaching? How do we bring about this change in practice?

We could send out a government order, but experience tells us that it does not work. We could police the teachers, but we do not have enough people to do this. Even if we did, we can never be sure that they are going about their teaching with commitment and motivation. In fact, research from around the world shows that most attempts to enforce external accountability have failed! To address this problem, as well as the many other changes in practice that need to be brought about, we need three sets of abilities:

1. We need the diagnostic abilities to understand what the real underlying problems are, and we may be surprised to find that they may not be what we think they are!
2. We need the abilities to synthesise the appropriate solutions, and here it is useful to

understand the enormous body of knowledge about educational change, which tells us what really works and what does not.

3. We need the change facilitation abilities to make these solutions happen, abilities that are complex and require a great deal of expertise.

So we can see that the 'how' question is much more difficult to answer than the what.

Looking at the 'how', leads us to the third critical overarching aspect: 'who', i.e., who will need the expertise to become effective change facilitators. Is it adequate if this expertise resides in a few people in each state education department? Will a few people be able to diagnose the numerous problems and change the practices of a large numbers of individuals, institutions and the system? It is obvious, given the scale of what is involved, that we will need a critical mass of expert change facilitators.

It should be obvious by now that: very little of what we currently do to bring change focuses on effectively changing the practices of individuals, institutions and the system; we are doing little to leverage the enormous body of knowledge about educational change; and that we are doing very little to develop a critical mass of change facilitators with the deep expertise required of them.

Having looked briefly at the 'what', 'how' and 'who', let us turn our attention to a fourth aspect: "How do we develop expert change facilitators?"

It is highly unlikely that such expertise can be developed through conventional means used today – classroom training. To understand why let us turn to the science of making perfectly soft, fluffy chapattis. We all know the science: First, mix the dough, and set it aside so that it has the right level of moisture and elasticity. This allows us to roll the dough out so that it is thin enough for the later stages to work well. We then put it on the flame, and adjust the flame so that it is just right. We cook both sides just enough to form a thin layer that is impervious to steam. We continue cooking it just enough so that the steam that is formed inside pushes out the thin layers without puncturing it, while at the same time filling the entire cavity – and we have perfect, fluffy, soft, hot chapattis that are ready to eat. Some would say it is an art. Others would say that science well understood and applied is always an art.

Everything that I have discussed about making chapattis can be shared in conventional classroom training. However, it is extremely unlikely that a person by merely knowing the science will make perfect chapattis the first time. Why is this so? Because there are many unknowns in the science described above: what is the right level of moisture? What is the right level of elasticity? What is the right level of flame? When will I know that the layer that is impervious to steam is thin enough to resist breaking, but no thicker? The answers to these unknowns are tacit knowledge. They lie in the tactile knowledge of the fingertips of the person kneading the dough. They lie in the brain that knows, how much heat is right, and is a knowledge that cannot be effectively communicated in words. They have to be personally experienced to be known – and that is a key to the development of expertise.

Let us use this example to understand how expertise gets developed. This expertise can get developed through trial and error by anyone who understands the science. But let us explore how it can get developed formally in the novice, with the support of experts. One obvious part, knowledge, has to do with understanding the science – that is a given. The second is creating

opportunities for the novice to try and make their own chapattis - application. The third, coaching, is for the expert to help the novice reflect on their experiences – both successes and failures – so that they can connect their practice to the science, in a way that the science comes alive and becomes almost magical. With adequate application and reflection, the novice will become an expert. There are millions of people who have developed this expertise of making melt-in-your-mouth chapattis.

Needless to say, facilitating educational change is infinitely more complex than making chapattis, but the principles of developing expert change facilitators are not very different.

There are other fields that take the idea of expertise development seriously. Take for instance the field of medicine. While there is an enormous amount of knowledge that needs to be acquired, it does not stop at that. There is an enormous amount of opportunity to practice and apply (at least in the places where this is done professionally around the world); and as interns, aspiring medical practitioners work under the guidance of expert attending doctors, who guide their exposure to practice when the interns reach a stage of readiness.

Closer home to our domain, to qualify as primary school teachers in Finland, they need to acquire a research based Masters degree.

It is time we realised that educational change is serious business and can only happen if we do things differently:

1. Understand the science
2. Put in the efforts to develop change facilitators as experts, and
3. Create a critical mass of them

Can we expect change to take place if we do not do this?

There is a common notion in our country that we have good education policies, and that our problem is with implementation. I would like to argue that this is not the case. Policies that cannot be implemented cannot be 'good' policies, they

become mere wish lists. For a policy to be implemented, it needs to be accompanied by decisions (i.e. other supportive policies) that create enabling conditions for its implementation. Currently the 'what' to change is left to policy makers, while the 'how' to make the change happen is left to practitioners on the ground. Practitioners struggle to implement policies without the enabling conditions, and stand accused of 'implementation failure'. Yet decades of research on educational change tell us that the 'what' is significantly easier than the 'how'. Interestingly, when we understand the 'how', the 'what' itself changes (but that is another story). Policies made in the absence of understanding such educational change research may appear to be good policies, but research from around the world tells us that they are unimplementable. Even

well-intentioned policies made in the absence of understanding educational change make it very easy to shift the burden from policy makers to practitioners and result in 'implementation failures'.

It is time we shifted the 'burden' back to policy makers. What is this 'burden' that we are talking about? It is making policies that are implementable, policies that create enabling conditions, policies based on what is known to work and how. It is time, policy makers understand the research on educational change, and set about answering the 'what', 'how', and 'who' of educational change. Create a cadre of change facilitators capable of bringing about educational change.

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He worked in the IT training and education field for 17 years, 14 of which were as a CEO. He has been with the Azim Premji Foundation since 2006. He has worked closely with the public school education system, observing and identifying solutions to the systemic constraints that make it difficult for people at various levels from IAS officers to teachers to improve the system. He has worked on large scale programmes that facilitated change from within the department. Currently, he is a Professor in Azim Premji University, where his areas of interest are educational change; the diagnosis, design and strengthening of school education systems; and education leadership and management..

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