Top-down and Bottom-up Educational Change


We are living in a time of rapid technological change. However, change is a relative thing. Our parents and their parents also lived in times of rapid technological change. Changes such as the telephone, automobile, airplane, and television seem mind-boggling to me. In any case, it is the adults who are stressed by the change—not the children.

Over the centuries, our educational system has had to deal with considerable change. Perhaps the mechanisms that have been developed can cope with the current pace of technological change.

**Top-down Decision Making**

In the past, educational change was dealt with in a top-down manner. There are many reasons for this. Among them are that there were relatively few well-educated people, access to information was limited, and transportation and communication systems were relatively slow. The top-down approach is still being used in much of the world today. The people in power—definitely not the children being educated—decide on the solutions to be applied to the current educational problems.

A top-down approach to dealing with educational problems has many strengths. Some of these strengths are illustrated in the following simple-minded example. Suppose that every first-grade student in the country used the same reading books and was taught using the same theory of how to teach reading. Suppose that this approach continued for many years, with no changes in the books or methodologies. Eventually all new teachers and all parents of first graders would have received the same initial reading instruction. As they became teachers—informally at home, or formally at school—they would teach the way they were taught, using the materials that they had used as children. This would seem to be both efficient and egalitarian.

In such a system, a change in either content or teaching methodology needs to be given very careful thought. A large change drastically affects both the parents as teachers of their children, and people who are preparing to become teachers. There are other major considerations, such as the cost of preparing new materials and articulation with other grade levels. A change in first grade content or methodology might necessitate changes at every grade level.

**Weaknesses of a Top-down Approach**

There are many potential weaknesses in having a uniform educational system with changes occurring through a top-down approach. These weaknesses are exacerbated by the basic changes in our world that are summarized by the words "Information Age." In the Information Age, many people are well educated. Information flows freely throughout much of the world. Transportation and communication are much improved. Computer technology is contributing to very rapid change in all areas of technology.

The technology and the research into teaching and learning are combining to contribute to potential change in education. For a really current example, suppose that hypermedia and voice
input to computers prove to be superior aids to first-grade students learning to read. Suppose that first graders who learn to read in such an environment prove to have received a far superior education as compared with similar students in other educational environments.

In a bottom-up educational decision making system, many schools might adopt such changes in just a few years. Parents and teachers would be aware of the effectiveness of the new approach, and they would want the best for their children/students. In a top-down approach to educational decision-making, such a radical change might take many decades.

**Current Times**

Governments, businesses, and education systems through the world are struggling with the top-down versus bottom-up approach to change. Each institution is faced by the changes that the Information Age is bringing to our world and its societies.

Clearly, the greatest changes have occurred in the business world. However, we have also seen immense change in political structures, such as in the Soviet Union. Interestingly, we have seen relatively little change in education. While there have been experiments with school site-based management, for the most part these have been on a modest scale. Most countries are clinging to the educational system design and change process mechanisms that they have employed for many decades.

This is surprising, because it seems so obvious that these mechanisms are no longer viable. Seymour Sarason has spent his professional lifetime analyzing some of the problems of education. His conclusion is that the essence of the problem is who has power. Throughout the world, educational decision-making power is held by groups of people who wield their power in a top-down manner. Thus, the only types of solutions that they can conceptualize and consider implementing are those that are consistent with a top-down approach.

Sarason argues that the only solution to the problems that education faces is to empower the students, parents, and teachers. However, it is not enough just to turn over the power to these groups. They need the education and the support to be able to make good decisions that can be successfully implemented. The analogy of bringing capitalism to people who have spent their entire lives in a controlled economy is relevant. It takes a lot of learning and support for a person to learn to deal with such change.

**Closing Questions**

Many teachers welcome the idea of empowering teachers. But, are they willing to empower their students and the students' parents? When was the last time that you began a class by asking your students what they wanted to learn, and by facilitating them in developing answers that were meaningful to them and their parents? Are your students learning to be independent, self-sufficient learners who can decide what they want to learn, and then learn it?

**Reference**