How Inclusive Is Systemic Change in Education?

Spencer Johnson’s *Who Moved My Cheese*, a No. 1 best-seller, was profound and powerful not only because of its overt metaphorical themes, but also due to its clear, simplistic language. This book revolutionized the way organizations view the change process and presented a different methodology for analyzing complex concepts. In the book, Johnson both exalted and validated the phrase “keep it simple” and assigned it a whole new meaning. In keeping with Johnson’s concept of how to effectively present information in comprehensive language, I propose that educators communicate with major stakeholders in school districts in a language they understand.

For example, there is a plethora of literature written for school administrators, teachers, counselors, and social workers addressing myriad educational topics. How about students as major stakeholders? How often do we overlook the nucleus in the world of education? School districts are careful to provide explanations of systemic changes to adult stakeholders, but often neglect to properly prepare students for such changes.

**Students as Major Stakeholders**

I am not advocating that students attend professional development trainings alongside teachers and school administrators, but instead I suggest that information about educational changes be presented in a way that students understand the fundamentals and what role they are expected to play. From personal experience, I believe that many districts are agreeable to the idea of broadening their systemic scope, especially when it concerns school or classroom codes of conduct. This is primarily the time that most districts feel obliged to share new policy and procedural information with students and parents. Why? One reason is clear: districts want code-of-conduct changes to occur swiftly. Districts already understand that shared knowledge leads to cohesive action. When districts share conduct policies and procedures with parents and students, systemic change becomes tangible and apparent. However, often, the same ideology does not apply to changes as it relates to effective teaching and learning strategies.

My observations have been that district faculty typically receive professional development training, but rarely is that knowledge turn-keyed to parents and almost never includes the student directly, and so explanations for changes in teaching and learning methodologies become guarded secrets, locked away from the very audience it seeks to engage. In the fourth edition of *The Meaning of Educational Change*, Michael Fullan reminds us that the race toward full implementation is more easily won when information is shared. “To put it positively, the more factors supporting implementation, the more change in practice will be accomplished,” he writes. How can districts expect efficient systemic change to occur if targeted participants are excluded? If educators aspire to extract active participation from students in a timely manner, then it is imperative that students receive clear direction at the onset of the change process. After all, wasn’t it the student who often prompted the unwilling, technologically challenged teacher to infuse technology into instruction more frequently? Let’s not discount the power of the student to affect change.

One method of presenting progressive teaching and learning strategies to students includes clarification of unfamiliar terms and concepts, and providing explicit examples of students’ anticipated roles. If a district is introducing instructional changes to its faculty, then at the same time students should be offered an explanation of proposed instructional changes, an outline of projected roles, and details of the assumed benefits of a particular change—not simply be expected to participate in the change.

This bridges a real-life connection to change and teaches students what it means to be a change agent and how to engender change in one’s own life. It also constructs teachable moments and a conscious opportunity for students to experience systemic change in real time. Isn’t this the stuff of life-long learning? The fact is that few educators would readily adapt to changes without thorough explanations and concrete examples of expectations, but districts expect that students will readily adapt to changes without explanation or detailed preparation.

In viewing classroom literacy through the eyes of children, we begin to understand how students adapt to change. Here are three simple approaches to creating a student-inclusive model.

**Strategic Inclusion.** Use a portion of common planning time to create grade-level appropriate plans that outline, in comprehensive language, how instructional changes will be turn-keyed to students.

**Student Input.** Provide opportunities for students to give suggestions regarding the implementation of instructional changes. For example, after providing an explanation of the proposed instructional change, ask students: How can you contribute to the success of this change? What are some things you can do to help this change occur quickly? Is there anything about the change that you do not understand? These types of questions engage students early on in the change process, help relieve anxiety for both educators and students, and...
Cohesive Reflection. Students and educators should periodically reflect on instructional changes, with a focus on effective implementation. This can occur for both parties through a brief written questionnaire. Collectively, teachers, reading coaches (if applicable), and school administrators ideally should create the teachers’ questionnaires, which will benchmark the level of implementation. Teachers should create student questionnaires, but only after observing the students’ engagement in the change process. This will allow the questionnaire to target specific issues and be more meaningful. Both teacher and student responses can be shared during common planning time and compared with other classroom responses to establish trends.

Students as Equal Partners
The most important lesson I have learned in the course of facilitating districts is that change is often stifled by failed communication. Consequently, I encourage fellow educators to view students as equal partners in their own learning experiences and share teaching and learning methodologies with students in clear, uninhibited language. This is how authentic, sustainable systemic bridges will be built and maintained. Our charge as educators is to view students as major stakeholders, make them equal partners, and create inclusive environments to that effect.

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