

Clarifying the Role of Reflection in the Leadership of Educational Change

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ABSTRACT:

While the academic literature regularly highlights the important role played by reflection or self-inquiry in guiding a leader towards achieving sustainable educational change, little is provided in the way of description as to what this might entail. This paper seeks to rectify this oversight. By first reviewing and collating many of the proposed perspectives on what is required of a leader in being able to implement sustainable educational change, this paper is then able to provide a framework to be used to guide such reflection and inquiry. Data from this guided reflection process then provides invaluable insight into not only the relative progress and immediate needs of the change process but also about the leader, themselves, and the authenticity and suitability of their performance within the process.

INTRODUCTION

If deliberately focussed organisational change has been endemic within our schools for over 50 years, then why have we not perfected it? Why do so many authors in the field of educational change continue to claim that our educational leaders still need to learn how to lead change more effectively? Both Fullan (1998) and Miles (1998) position the commencement of deliberately focussed and organised educational change in the late 1950s and go on to acknowledge the lingering lack of clarity and certainty in just how it should be implemented. In 2005, Fullan declared that while some progress has been made in knowing how to better implement educational reform processes, invariably they remain “neither deep nor sustainable”. (p.1) Similarly, Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) lament that “producing deep improvement that lasts and spreads remains an elusive goal of most educational change efforts.” (p.5) Moreover, Hargreaves, himself, argues that even with all the knowledge we have gained over the past 40 years about how to effectively lead change, “too many change efforts remain disappointing and ineffective [and] successful school change on a widespread basis continues to be infuriatingly elusive.” (2005, p.282) Despite all our theories and all our efforts, deeply effective and sustainable educational change remains indefinable. Something, some key integral feature, must be missing from how we conceptualise and, thus, implement change.

Here lies the conundrum. As educational change theorists, we cannot continue to largely promote the same form of change processes and expect different results. Nor can we ignore the burgeoning demands being made upon our schools and educational systems throughout the world to implement change. Educational change is endemic and we must continue to strive to find a key to achieving it successfully.

Being caught between having to lead change and not having access to a credible change process must be incredibly stressful for our school leaders. Thus, it is not surprising to note the widespread acknowledgement of serious problems associated with unacceptable levels of

stress in leadership, untenable levels of disinterest in leadership positions amongst suitably qualified middle managers, and some unsustainable administrative practices within organisations (Allison, 1997; Bergin and Solman, 1988; Carr, 1994; Rees, 1997; Robertson and Matthews, 1988; Smith and Cooper, 1994). More specifically, Allison (1997, p.39) highlights that Canadian research supports the perception that “a substantial number of school administrators have had to take medical leave due to stress-related illnesses”. There is indisputable worldwide evidence showing that school leaders, today, are more prone to serious, even life threatening, levels of stress than ever before and an inadequate or deficient change theory must be acknowledged as a contributing factor.

This paper describes one approach that aims at trying to redress this indefensible situation. It recognises the substantial amount of existing literature that can comprehensively describe the essential practical, strategic dimension of change implementation but highlights the largely forgotten area of change, which Fullan (1982) describes as the “phenomenology” of change. Here he claims that, “Neglect of the phenomenology of change – that is, how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended – is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most educational reforms.” (p.4) This paper will explore this issue of the phenomenology of change and highlight the essential role of reflection in coming to fully understand its nature, significance, and critical role in the achievement of deep and sustainable educational change.

EDUCATIONAL CHANGE FROM A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

It must be acknowledged that Fullan’s concern about the lack of appreciation of the phenomenological influence on the success of educational change was raised over 25 years ago. Did we heed his warning? Can we claim that our current theory associated with being able to lead deep and sustainable educational change incorporates proper attention to the phenomenological aspect?

Given that, in the ensuing years, some authors have only endeavoured to add definition to Fullan’s initial claim rather than to actually address his concern, suggests that this concern remains relevant today. For instance, Hargreaves (2004, p.287) asserts that “Change and emotion are inseparable” and adds, “There is no human change without emotion and there is no emotion that does not embody a momentary or momentous process of change.” Often people feel overwhelmed and vulnerable as a result of the speed, diversity, and regularity of change (Dawson, 2003). More specifically, Heifetz and Linsky (2002) draw our attention to the fact that “change involves loss, and people can sustain only so much loss at any one time.” (p.119) Such a sense of loss raises fear and anxiety in people and that manifests in feeling “angry and alienated” (Kouzes & Posner, 2000, p.78). These feelings of anger and alienation are not just because the thought of having to implement the change presents the people with something new, uncertain or unclear but because they feel disconnected from its apparent meaning and significance (Hargreaves, 2005). People resist applying themselves to work which seems to have a trivial or personally irrelevant purpose. Most people desire to do something meaningful, to contribute and serve, such that any process that aims to bring about

a change must ensure that it has meaning for all involved. As argued so powerfully by Wheatley (2006, p.133),

If we want to influence any change, we need to work with this powerful process rather than deny its existence. We need to understand that all change results from a change in meaning. Meaning is created by the process of self reference. We change only if we decide that the change is meaningful to who we are.

Moreover, enabling a person to find meaning is about helping him or her to find alignment between their own life and their work (de Quincey, 2002). While meaning-making involves experiences of purpose and values, it also refers to what is beyond the person. While we might think that having a meaningful life is something solely intrinsic within ourselves, de Quincey reminds us that such meaningfulness “gets its richness from its interconnectedness and interdependence with the whole” (p.78). We find meaning and purpose through how we understand ourselves and how we understand others and our reality. “The more we feel connected with the whole, the more we experience life to be rich with meaning and possibilities. Meaning involves intentionality in the sense of directed awareness. It is awareness that refers to something beyond itself with which it participates in some way.” (p.79)

Within the limitations of this paper then, it can be seen that coming to appreciate the integral phenomenological aspect of change is at least in part about understanding the complexity of human emotions and meaning-making processes, which essentially involves personal feelings, subjectivity, beliefs, intentionality, choice, self-agency, purpose, worth and value. Hence, the aptness of William Bridge’s powerful assertion, “It isn’t the changes that do you in, it’s the transitions.” (2002, p.3) Here, the transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. “Change is external”, claims Bridges, while “transition is internal”.

In other words, any theory that professes to be able to successfully guide the leadership of educational change must inculcate processes that attend to both its external and internal aspects. Change is a duality; it possesses two distinctive but inter-related features. Any credible change theory must attend to the complexity and intricacy of this duality.

However, it must be realized that this phenomenological or psychological response to change not only occurs in those assigned with the task of implementing the change but it also occurs in the leader of the change. “To lead is to live dangerously because leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear”. (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p.2) People tend to resist change and distrust the person leading it (Blenkin, Edwards, & Kelly, 1997; Dawson, 2003; House & McQuillan, 1998; Schein, 2004; Snowdon & Gorton, 1998). Moreover, this resistance regularly manifests itself explicitly as open criticism, conflict and defiance or implicitly as apathy, disinterest and non-compliance.

Thus, every leader of educational change is charged with the unenviable task of implementing something that history shows is unlikely to succeed with people who do not want to be involved and who will most likely challenge their position either openly or

surreptitiously. Such an expectation is a sure source of an emotional response within a leader placed in such an undesirable position.

RESPONDING TO THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF CHANGE

In such an emotionally laden environment, it is no wonder that there is now considerable support for the inclusion of emotional intelligence as an essential dimension of contemporary leadership (Fullan, 2006; Goleman, 1999; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Schein, 2004). The leader must have the emotional or psychological strength to remain sufficiently resilient, confident and purposeful despite any explicit or implicit resistance. At the same time, the leader must have the emotional or psychological capacity to reach out to those they are leading, regardless of their degree of cooperation, and help them to deal better with those adverse emotions aroused by the proposed change. As Goleman (1999, p.3) so fittingly suggests, “The rules of work are changing. Leaders are being judged by a new yardstick: not just by how smart they are, or by their training or expertise, but also by how well they handle their self and others. This new measure takes for granted that the leader will have personal qualities such as initiative and empathy, adaptability and persuasiveness.”

Our leaders need emotional intelligence so as to be able to “act inconsistently when uniformity fails, diplomatically when emotions are raw, non-rationally when reason flags, politically in the face of vocal parochial self-interest, and playfully when fixating on task and purpose backfires.” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p.435) Such an understanding of leadership calls upon the leader to “create underlying senses of basic personal safety and emotional security, in which risk and creativity can flourish.” (Hargreaves, 2005, p.285) Hence, effective leaders of educational change “are not those with the highest IQs but those who combine mental intelligence with emotional intelligence.” (Fullan, 2004, p.93)

In brief, Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) describe the four fundamental characteristics of emotional intelligence as those of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Within each of these characteristics there are additional fundamental skills and understandings to be grasped. Self-awareness requires the development of emotional self-awareness, accurate self-assessment, and self-confidence. The attainment of self-management is said to be dependent on having the personal qualities of self-control, transparency, adaptability, achievement, initiative, and optimism. Social awareness emanates from empathy, organisational awareness, and service. Finally, the growth of relational management is built upon the capacity to inspire, influence, develop others, catalyse change, manage conflict, and to develop teamwork and collaboration. In keeping with Fullan’s (1998) firm conviction that building teacher capacity is at the heart of deep and sustainable educational change, he describes (2004) the achievement of self-awareness and self-control as the building of personal capacity while the development of social awareness and relational management is described as the building of social capacity.

Despite the logical simplicity and appeal of the work of Goleman and his colleagues in the area of emotional intelligence, it is now the subject of criticism (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Not from its theoretical perspective but from its practical standpoint. Nowhere is it explained by

Goleman, or his colleagues, as to how one can specifically develop these essential emotional intelligence characteristics. If we are going to redress the critical omission of an attention to the phenomenological aspect of educational change then it behoves us to posit some practical means of nurturing emotional intelligence.

To this end, Wheatley’s warning that, “We cannot move past analysis by being analytical” (2006, p.139), is timely. Emotional intelligence is in the subjective and psyche realm and not the objective and material realm. Its essence is consciousness and not analysis for, as de Quincey informs us, “the characteristics of consciousness include feelings, subjectivity, beliefs, intentionality, choice, self-agency, purpose, meaning, and value” (2002, p.66). Moreover, such personal phenomena cannot be determined by an external agent, they can only be discerned by the person, themselves (Branson, 2009). No one can tell you what your feelings, beliefs or values are or should be, you have to learn this for yourself. This form of learning is gained from continual inner reflection rather than the implementation of a preconceived objective plan (Branson, 2005). Thus, inner reflection is the best course of action for nurturing emotional intelligence and, thereby, being more confident and capable of achieving deep and sustainable educational change.

A MODEL OF REFLECTION FOR SUSTAINABLE EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

From the previous discussion, a suitable model of reflection that can uniquely contribute towards the achievement of deep and sustainable educational change would need to acknowledge the indisputable need to include:

1. a practical plan or strategy to guide the change;
2. the integral role of increasing consciousness through reflection;
3. the need to develop personal capacity through self-awareness and self-control; and
4. a way to develop social capacity through social awareness and relational management.

To these I would add the need to be aware of the contextual forces for change. It is essential for the leader of educational change to be aware of the diversity of actual and expected changes being imposed on his/her school so that mandatory changes are attended to, beneficial changes are considered, and unnecessary changes are avoided.

With these parameters in mind, figure 1 illustrates the proposed model for guiding reflection for the leading of deep and sustainable educational change.

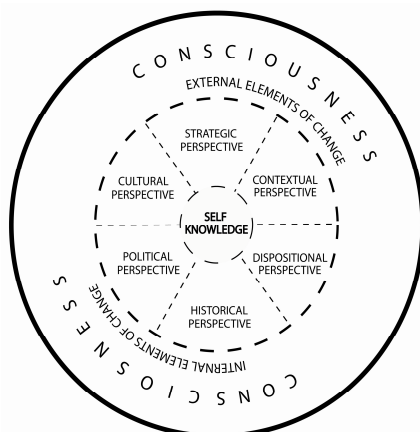


Figure 1. A model for guiding reflection for the leading of deep and sustainable educational change.

At the core of this model is *self-knowledge*. It is through the gaining of self-knowledge that the leader becomes more self-aware and thus able to enhance their self-control. Increased self-knowledge increases the leader's personal capacity to lead deep and sustainable educational change. But what specific self-knowledge would achieve this outcome? Here, a more recent version of Branson's (2005) diagrammatical representation of the various components of the self answers this question.

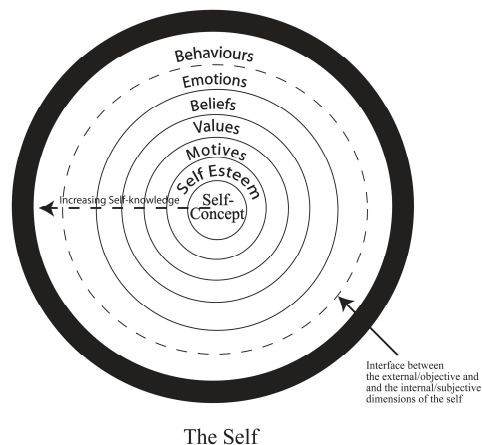


Figure 2. A diagrammatical representation of the various components of the self.

Unlike previous representations, this particular diagram of the self includes the component of “emotion”. Its inclusion is influenced by the view of de Bono (2009) who posits that, “It is beliefs that control emotions and emotions control behaviour. Changes in beliefs will change emotions and therefore behaviours. If your beliefs change, you have no choice: your emotions and behaviour change too.” (p.4) Such an understanding is not only directly consistent with Branson's understanding of the role and function of each stated component of the self but also it clearly established the rightful place of emotion between beliefs and behaviours within this representation of the self.

In his initial research into the credibility of this representation of the self, Branson (2005) used trigger moments, or past self defining moments, in the participant's life on which to focus the reflection process. However, in preparing for, and guiding during, the implementation of educational, this paper argues that this reflection process can be turned from looking into the past to looking into the here-and-now and the future. In this way, it becomes a self-guided mental preparation process much like that used by professional sports persons. Here, each component of the self is used to focus and frame a series of questions to ensure that the leader gives full and accurate consideration to their immediate and future responsibilities. Such a structure for guiding self-reflection ensures that essential data is not ignored or misinterpreted, that unimportant data is not given too much emphasis, that personal biases are acknowledged, and that the views of others are heard and taken into account. To commence the process, the leader creates as vivid and realistic a picture of themselves in their mind of the situation they are about to confront (ie about to introduce the first step towards implementing a desired change or about to meet with a group of teachers

who have openly resisted the proposed change) and then honestly and courageously answers questions about how their self is reacting to this task and their feelings about their own capacity to complete this task.

To begin with, such a structured form of reflection would look like:

COMPONENT OF SELF	QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION
Self-concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will I be affected by the likely outcome generated by all of the other ethical perspectives? • What are my true feelings about this outcome? • What is the source of these feelings? • Are these feelings based on the immediate issue or from past experiences?
Self-esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strengths or previous knowledge do I bring to this issue? Will this influence my thinking appropriately? Is this strength or knowledge truly relevant? • What weaknesses or lack of knowledge do I bring to this issue? Will this influence my thinking appropriately? Is this perceived weakness or lack of knowledge truly relevant?
Motives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is my primary motive in resolving this issue? • Is my thinking unquestionably aligned with this motive? • What outcome do I personally prefer? Why? • What outcome do I personally dislike? Why? • Are my actions reflecting a commitment to self-control?
Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I personally benefit in any way from a particular outcome? • Which values or principles do I want guiding my decision? • Is my thinking free from self-interest, self-deception and impulsiveness?
Beliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What personal biases do I bring to this issue? • What is my regular outlook towards those who will benefit most from each possible outcome? Has this influenced my thinking? • What is my regular outlook towards those who will be adversely affected by each possible outcome? Has this influenced my thinking? How could these adverse effects be minimized or negated? • Is my thinking more influenced by personal beliefs rather than an unbiased assessment of the knowledge gained from each of the other ethical perspectives?
Emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are my desires, hopes, or dreams about this issue? Are these realistic or idealistic? Why? • What are my fears about this issue? Are these realistic or idealistic? Why? • Am I aware of my emotions in relation to this issue? What does this say about my involvement in this issue?
Behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has my analysis of each ethical perspective been influenced by my own views? • How can the outcome be implemented in the most ethical, respectful and empathic way? • Will the implementation of the intended outcome reflect all of the values and principles that I wanted guiding my decision process?

Table 1 Questions to guide self-reflection as an integral part of leading deep and sustainable educational change.

As the implementation of the desired educational change progresses, the questions the leader poses to their self within each component may well become more specific.

In conjunction with reflection on the self is reflection on the external and internal elements of change as shown above in figure 1. The external elements deal with the essential objective realities, which the leader needs to address. These are listed as the Strategic Perspective and the Contextual Perspective.

The **Strategic Perspective** is the systematic, instrumental, logical, and sequential action plan that is specifically designed so as to bring about the most effective and efficient means of achieving a pre-defined outcome or intention. Some required considerations would include:

- An appropriate Plan or Strategy
- Maintaining Resources
 - Ensure sufficient resources are available for successful start
 - Ensure supply always meets demands
- Time Allocation
 - Additional time is given to those involved
 - Time does not control the pace of the implementation of the strategy.

On the other hand, the **Contextual Perspective** acknowledges that, while the moral purpose for the staff in every school is to ensure the best learning environment for its students, this endeavour is continually under the strong influence of many different sources all striving to force schools to adopt particular but divergent educational changes. Hence, the onus is upon the leader to be the gatekeeper, to be aware of all of the potential forces for change and to ensure that mandatory changes are attended to, beneficial changes are considered, and unnecessary changes are avoided. Being ever mindful of the potential sources for change forces can greatly help with this gatekeeper responsibility. Such sources would include:

- School specific student needs
- Society's changing norms (Globalisation, Digital Communications, etc.)
- Government initiatives (Nationalised testing, curriculum, funding)
- Systemic requirements
- Governing body expectations
- Local community expectations
- Nature of the school (Rural, Multicultural, Co-educational, Primary)

The internal elements of change deal with Fullan's emphasis on the importance of the social capacity of the leader. The ability of the leader to nurture an authentically open, collegial, productive, and meaningful working environment that is fundamentally relational. Today, every employee wants their leader to be flexible, understanding, encouraging, friendly, inclusive, and open, to model appropriate values and moral behaviour, and to take all the right steps to ensure that they are able to successfully do meaningful and purposeful work

(Branson, 2009). First and foremost, they want their leader's attention to be on them and the development of a productive organisational culture rather than being on ensuring the group or organisation achieves any externally mandated outcomes.

Moreover, during times of overtly challenging periods of change, employees want to be heard and understood (Dawson, 2003; Eccles, 1996; Hargreaves, 2005; Snowdon & Gordon, 1998). Indeed, Heifetz and Linsky (2002) would advise the leader of educational change to always listen to those you would normally wish to silence. Similarly, Fullan (2001) urges leaders of change to appreciate, if not welcome, resistance rather than striving to suppress it. He adds that dissent should be seen as a source of new ideas and breakthroughs and the absence of conflict as a sign of decay. Rather than avoiding or suppressing criticisms, conflicting opinions, or antagonistic behaviour from those who appear partially or totally resistant to the change, the advice is to create an appropriate forum where the perspectives of both protagonists and antagonists are given equal and respectful consideration. All views, regardless of their level of support, may be a source of essential wisdom. This is about ensuring that everyone is heard and their contribution is treated with integrity.

At the same time, every person, not just their opinions, needs to be understood. According to Wheatley (2006, p.152),

We were taught that change occurs in increments, one person at a time. We not only had to design the steps; we also had to take into account the size of the change object. But now we know something different. We are working with networks, not billiard balls. We do not have to push and pull the people, or bully them to change; we have to participate with them in discovering what's important to each of us.

This is about refraining from labelling resisters and antagonists and, rather, seeking to understand the possible causes of their resistance. Most often people resist for self interested reasons and not because of the perceived worth of the proposed change (Hargreaves, 2002; Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1997; Sachs, 2003). Once the leader can see the potential myriad of reasons why a person may be a resistor it then becomes much easier to remain resilient and confident during times of criticism and to continually seek ways to relate to the resistor with sincerity, authenticity, and optimism in order to ultimately enable them to willingly engage in the change. In other words, the leader of educational change must reflect upon what might possibly be the idiosyncratic cause of the person's resistance and to seek ways of helping them to overcome it.

To assist the leader in this essential endeavour, this internal dimension is divided into four subcategories: the Cultural Perspective, the Political Perspective, the Dispositional Perspective, and the Historical Perspective.

The *Cultural Perspective* acknowledges that each person within a school participates in a unique cultural web because they are influenced more by the school's distinctive socially symbolic relationships and structures than its formal system of defined values, mission, goals, roles, policies, and procedures. Whilst structural limitations on the length of this paper prevent elaboration, reflection of the cultural perspective associated with implementing educational change would include consideration of the following:

- Social geographies (Informal respect for objects, spaces, time)
- Formal/informal roles and responsibilities
- Demographics (Gender, age, locality)
- Formal/informal symbols and icons
- Relationships
- Formal/informal channels of communication

The ***Political Perspective*** highlights that each school is a heterogeneous entity as it is formed from a collection of many uniquely different individuals and groups each applying various sources of power, authority and influence through ongoing political struggles in order to further their own interests. The introduction of any form of change is likely to impact in some way on the existing patterns of power, authority and influence and any negative impact will be resisted.

- Formal and informal power and authority
- Forms of resistances
- Sharing of leadership
- Distribution of Resources
- Cliques, groups and relationships
- Conflict resolution
- Communication flow

The ***Dispositional Perspective*** recognizes that the lives and careers of all employed in each school are strongly aligned with the school such that any change in the school is invariably viewed in terms of personal and professional hopes, dreams, aspirations, fears, commitments, beliefs, and values rather than what is in the best interests of the school. Hence, in reflecting on why a particular individual might be presenting as a resistor, the leader should consider how some parts of the change could be interpreted as negatively impact on that person's personal disposition. Such reflection would include consideration of the following with respect to the resistor:

- Professional identity (collaborative v individualistic)
- Personal identity (hopes, aspirations, fears)
- Respect for length of professional experience
- Recognition of existing knowledge and skills
- Meaningfulness of professional development

Finally, the ***Historical Perspective*** stresses the need to accept that both the teacher and the curriculum have an existing history such that the relative acceptance of any proposed change will be assessed against the experience gained from past proposed changes and the perceived impact of the proposed change on accepted traditional curriculum priorities. Thus, the leader of educational change must discover and reflect deeply upon the implications of such things as:

- Memories teachers have of previous educational changes
- Memories teachers have of past ineffective change leadership
- Existing curriculum priorities

- School traditions
- School reputation

CONCLUSION

Effective leadership of educational change is an “improvisational art” because although you need to have an overarching strategic plan “what you actually do from moment to moment cannot be scripted” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p.73). You have to move back and forth from your plan to the reality so that the plan is being achieved but any adverse effects on those involved are being empathically attended to as well. Every approach to change must be able to cope with the unforeseen, the unexpected, and the idiosyncratic (Dawson, 2003). Keeping abreast of this reality and achieving essential flexibility and creativity is initiated through reflection. While it is absolutely essential for the leader to attend to this individually, it can also be enriched through a similarly structured process for group and team reflection.

This paper has taken up Hargreaves’ (2005) strong stance that educational change is not just a strategic puzzle; it is a moral, political and relational struggle. Hence, the myriad of emotional responses to this struggle must not be seen as a frill but as an integral component of a successful and sustainable school improvement process. Reflection is the only way that the leader of educational change can both prepare themselves to cope best in an emotionally charged environment as well as having the social capacity to suitably attend to the unhelpful emotional response of those they are leading. Without some understanding of what such a process of reflection might be, it has the potential to be superficial, misguided, or self-centred. Ultimately, this would prove unhelpful to the leader and the importance of reflection would be lost. By providing a clear outline of the constituent elements of a comprehensive process of reflection for guiding the leadership of educational change, this paper fills the unacceptable void that currently exists in our educational change theory.

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