Dealing with Curriculum Change

How teachers perceive recent curriculum changes and the strategies they employ to cope with such change

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any other tertiary education institution.

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PREFACE

My interest in this topic grew from what I had experienced working in a very ‘traditional’ country school which chose to ignore the implementation of the Curriculum Framework, assuming the changes would ‘go away’. As a new teacher, ready for a challenge, I found this attitude extremely frustrating. This experience was juxtaposed with a move to a new and ‘innovative’ school where change was a normal part of teaching, where teachers were encouraged and supported in taking on change with the aim of improving the quality of education for students. This process of talking to teachers of different backgrounds and experiences has widened my perspective as to the motives and viewpoint of those less enthusiastic about change.
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ABSTRACT

The current study attempted to identify conditions that affect the manner in which Western Australian primary school teachers perceive recent curriculum changes; the types of support they access; and the relative usefulness of this support. Based on preliminary findings in the first phase of this study and the research literature it was expected that teacher self-efficacy, teacher characteristics such as age and years of teaching, and school context such as the level of 'innovativeness' would prove to be influential in the process of implementing new initiatives. A model expressing the relationships between these concepts was developed and evaluated in the second phase of this study. This study is important for two reasons. It focused on Western Australian primary school teachers, whereas most previous research focused on high school teachers, and it explored ways to help teachers deal with future changes instead of simply identifying their responses to changes. It is therefore hoped that the education system will be more informed and better able to provide appropriate support for teachers when faced with future reforms.

The study was conducted in two parts. The purpose of phase one was to become familiar with the current circumstances of teachers in relation to curriculum change. By focusing on the attitudes and behaviours of teachers from 'innovative' schools it was thought more could be learned than in schools that maintain the status quo. Qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews, informal observations and the analysis of websites and school documents were utilised throughout this phase. The second phase of the study employed a quantitative approach, based on the findings of the first phase, specifically a process of questionnaire construction and distribution throughout the defined population.
A number of cautious conclusions have been made within the limits of this study. Firstly, the most useful type of professional development for teachers involves teachers interacting with each other. Teachers need time to discuss issues and share their successes. However, Action Research as a means of professional development is currently under utilised. It was discovered that most teachers were positive towards curriculum change, yet an overwhelming workload has proved a formidable barrier to new initiatives. In addition, most teachers will modify initiatives to meet the needs of their students and to fit in with their existing orientations. Consequently, school structures need to become more flexible to encourage teachers to engage in innovative practices. Interestingly, the self-efficacy of a teacher influences the way they perceive and cope with curriculum change, however teacher characteristics, such as age and the number of years teaching, did not yield substantially different results when teachers were categorised along these dimensions. School context, as defined by the level of ‘innovativeness’, did produce differential results in terms of teacher attitudes and responses to curriculum change, and the type of professional development accessed. Finally, schools may need to involve parents and the wider school community in the school level decision-making processes if they truly are to become ‘learning communities’.