

# **Dealing with Curriculum Change**

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

**Michelle Cresdee**

**Murdoch University, Western Australia**

**December 2002**

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.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michelle Cresdee', written in a cursive style.

Michelle Cresdee

## 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.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost my thanks goes to all those in the ‘Woodlands’ district involved in the study. My deepest gratitude is extended to the teachers and principals who welcomed me into their schools, allowing me to be stimulated by a group of exceptional teachers.

Thanks also to all the wonderful staff at my own school who have supported and encouraged me throughout the course of this research. Your approach to teaching has been an inspiration to me.

To my supervisor, Lucy Jarzabkowski, thank you for always being happy to hear from me, for always having an encouraging word for me, and for recognising that I would put enough pressure on myself to do my very best.

Thanks to my friend, Melanie Arundale, who has provided valuable advice and invaluable periods of relaxation over the course of this study.

Finally, but most importantly, thank you to my husband, Shane, who has shown more patience and support over the past year than I thought possible from one mere mortal. Thank you for helping me to keep everything in perspective.

# CONTENTS

<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>ix</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2 Statement of the Issue</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1.3 The Significance of the Issue</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>1.4 Background to the Study</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1.5 The Research Questions</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>1.6 Limitations and Delimitations of the Study</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>1.7 Organisation of the Thesis</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Review of Literature</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>2.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>2.2 Curriculum Change and Educational Reform</b> .....	<b>8</b>
2.2.1 Nature of Change.....	8
2.2.2 Curriculum Change in Australia.....	9
<b>2.3 Teacher Perceptions and Responses to Change</b> .....	<b>12</b>
2.3.1 Teacher Characteristics.....	12
2.3.2 Teacher Responses to Change.....	13
<b>2.4 Supporting Curriculum Change</b> .....	<b>16</b>
2.4.1 Fostering Curriculum Change.....	16
2.4.2 Professional Development.....	20
<b>2.5 Conceptual Model</b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b>2.6 Conclusion</b> .....	<b>28</b>

<b>Chapter 3: Methodology</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>3.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>3.2 Mixed Mode of Study</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>3.3 Population</b> .....	<b>30</b>
3.3.1 Target Population.....	30
3.3.2 Defined Population.....	31
3.3.3 Sampling Frame.....	32
<b>3.4 Phase One: The Interviews</b> .....	<b>32</b>
3.4.1 Negotiating Access to the District.....	32
3.4.2 Networking: Curriculum Improvement Manager.....	33
3.4.3 Negotiating Access to the Schools.....	35
3.4.4 Interview Schedule.....	38
3.4.5 Interview Process.....	38
<b>3.5 Phase One: Analysis of the Interviews</b> .....	<b>41</b>
3.5.1 Content Analysis of the Interviews.....	41
3.5.2 Document Analysis.....	48
<b>3.6 Phase Two: The Questionnaires</b> .....	<b>49</b>
3.6.1 The Sample.....	49
3.6.2 Questionnaire Development.....	50
3.6.3 Questionnaire Distribution.....	53
<b>3.7 Ethical Considerations</b> .....	<b>54</b>
<b>3.8 Conclusion</b> .....	<b>54</b>
<b>Chapter Four: Results</b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>4.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>4.2 Quality of the Data</b> .....	<b>56</b>
4.2.1 Coding and Data Entry.....	56
4.2.2 Reliability and Validity.....	59
<b>4.3 Questionnaire Results</b> .....	<b>60</b>
4.3.1 Sectors Influencing Major Curriculum Change.....	60

4.3.2 General Feelings Towards Curriculum Change.....	63
4.3.3 Self-Efficacy.....	67
4.3.4 Types of Support Accessed.....	73
4.3.5 Types of Support Considered Most Useful.....	78
4.3.6 Action Research.....	81
4.3.7 Impediments to Change.....	84
<b>4.4 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Chapter Five: Analysis and Discussion.....</b>	<b>87</b>
5.1 Introduction.....	87
5.2 Research Questions.....	87
5.2.1 Research Question One.....	87
5.2.2 Research Question Two.....	89
5.2.3 Research Question Three.....	91
5.3 Revised Conceptual Model.....	91
5.4 Conclusion.....	99
<b>Chapter Six: Implications of the Study.....</b>	<b>100</b>
6.1 Introduction.....	100
6.2 Significant Findings.....	100
6.3 Value of the Research.....	102
6.4 Methodological Reflection.....	103
6.5 Future Research Directions.....	105
6.6 Conclusions.....	106
<b>References.....</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>117</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure 1</b>	<b>Conditions fostering the implementation of large-scale innovation programs .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Figure 2</b>	<b>Model of factors impacting on curriculum change.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Figure 3</b>	<b>Major themes that emerged from the interviews.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Figure 4</b>	<b>Sectors introducing major curriculum change (Combined data).....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Figure 5</b>	<b>Attitude towards curriculum change (Combined data).....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Figure 6</b>	<b>Extent of taking on change (Combined data).....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Figure 7</b>	<b>Confidence in attempting new initiatives (Combined data).....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Figure 8</b>	<b>Success with previous initiatives (Combined data).....</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Figure 9</b>	<b>Level of confidence compared with level of success.....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Figure 10</b>	<b>Attitude towards change compared with extent of change.....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Figure 11</b>	<b>Types of support accessed by teachers (Combined data).....</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Figure 12</b>	<b>Levels of usefulness for different means of support (Combined data).....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Figure 13</b>	<b>Perceptions of action research (Combined Data).....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Figure 14</b>	<b>Factors impeding curriculum change (Combined Data).....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Figure 15</b>	<b>Revised model of factors impacting on curriculum change.....</b>	<b>92</b>



## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table 1</b>	<b>Summary of schools participating in interview phase.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Table 2</b>	<b>Interview participants profile.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Table 3</b>	<b>Summary of schools selected for questionnaire phase.....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Table 4</b>	<b>Current school context- innovative versus non-innovative schools.....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Table 5</b>	<b>Sectors introducing major curriculum change.....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Table 6</b>	<b>Attitudes towards curriculum change.....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Table 7</b>	<b>Extent of taking on curriculum change.....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Table 8</b>	<b>Confidence in attempting new initiatives.....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Table 9</b>	<b>Success with previous initiatives.....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Table 10</b>	<b>Types of support accessed by categories.....</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Table 11</b>	<b>Level of usefulness for different types of support (mean and standard deviation).....</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Table 12</b>	<b>Attitudes towards action research.....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Table 13</b>	<b>Impediments to curriculum change.....</b>	<b>85</b>

## 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'.