Chapter 1

The Problem and the Potential of Educational Change

*The faithful witness . . . is at his[her] best when he[she] concentrates
on questioning and avoids the specialist's obsession with solutions.*
                                        Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards* 1992

We have been fighting an uphill battle. For the past thirty years we have been trying to up the ante in getting the latest innovations and policies into place. We started naively in the 1960s pouring scads of money into large-scale national curriculum efforts, open plan schools, individualized instruction; and the like. It was assumed, but not planned for, that something was bound to come of it. We have never really recovered from the profound disappointment experienced when our expectations turned out to be so far removed from the realities of implementation. Indeed, the term implementation was not even used in the 1960s, not even contemplated as a problem.

That world of innocent expectations came crashing down around 1970 when the first implementation studies surfaced. People, especially those in the trenches, no doubt already knew something was terribly wrong, but the problem crystallized almost overnight in Goodlad *et al's* (1970), Gross *et al's* (1971) and Sarason's (1971) major studies of failed implementation.

There followed a period of stagnation, recovery and regrouping during most of the 1970s. Educators, especially in the first part of the decade, had a crisis of confidence. Perhaps the educational system and its inhabitants are not open to or capable of change? Perhaps, worse still, education, even if it improved, could not make a difference given social class, family and other societal conditions outside the purview of the educational sector?

As people plugged away, a few glimmers of hope came through. By the end of the 1970s the effective schools movement had accumulated

some evidence, and a growing ideology that schools can make a difference even under trying conditions. The studies of implementation success and school improvement corroborated the spirit if not all the details of these findings. On another front, intensive work on in-service and staff development by Bruce Joyce and others demonstrated that ongoing competence-building strategies can work. By 1980 we could say that we knew a fair amount about the major factors associated with introducing single innovations.

From a societal point of view this was too little, too late. As problems in society worsened, the educational system was tinkering. Even its so-called successes were isolated — the exception rather than the rule. And they were not convincingly related to greater student learning. There was no confidence that we should, let alone could, reproduce these minor successes on a wider scale.

By the early 1980s, society had had enough. By about 1983 — in fact, the date is precise in the United States with the release of *A Nation at Risk* — the solution was seen as requiring large-scale governmental action. Structural solutions through top-down regulations were introduced in many of the Western countries. In many of the states in the US — intensively so in some states — curricula were specified and mandated, competencies for students and teachers were detailed and tested, salaries of teachers (woefully low at the time) were raised, leadership competencies were listed and trained. Other countries (although Canada is much more uneven given provincial autonomy) paralleled these developments. In Great Britain for example, the Education Reform Act of 1988, heretically for that country, introduced a National Curriculum. Now we were engaged in large-scale tinkering.

Overlapping these top-down regulatory efforts was another movement which began after 1985. In the US it goes under the name of restructuring (Elmore, 1990; Murphy, 1991). Here the emphasis is on school-based management, enhanced roles for principals and teachers, and other decentralized components.

The present is a combination of bifurcation and confusion. The former is represented on the one hand, by centralists who see greater top-down regulation, accountability and control of the educational establishment as the answer. This includes, by the way, strategies such as local management of schools which attempt to place more power in the hands of local interests outside the school. The other hand of bifurcation is represented by the restructionists who see greater control by school-based teachers and other educators as the basic solution.

Many of the bifurcators are deeply convinced that they are right. Unfortunately they offer opposite solutions. For most of us, confusion

seems to be the most warranted state of mind in the early 1990s. The ante has been upped in that we are no longer considering particular innovations one at a time, but rather more comprehensive reforms. It has also been upped in that the solution is seen as too important to leave to educators. Governments (not just Ministries of Education) and business interests are now major players.

We are, in other words, engaged in higher stakes solutions with more to win, but also more to lose. It does not seem to be a good time to wallow in confusion. Tinkering after all can be on a small or large scale, its main characteristic being 'a clumsy attempt to mend something' (*Webster's New World Dictionary*).

I maintain that we have been fighting an ultimately fruitless uphill battle. The solution is not how to climb the hill of getting more innovations or reforms into the educational system. We need a different formulation to get at the heart of the problem, a different hill, so to speak. We need, in short, a new mindset about educational change.

A New Mindset for Change

Senge (1990) reminds us that the Greek word *metanoia* means 'a fundamental shift of mind'. This is what we need about the concept of educational change itself. Without such a shift of mind the insurmountable basic problem is the juxtaposition of a continuous *change theme* with a continuous *conservative system*. On the one hand, we have the constant and ever expanding presence of educational innovation and reform. It is no exaggeration to say that dealing with change is endemic to post-modern society. On the other hand, however, we have an educational system which is fundamentally conservative. The way that teachers are trained, the way that schools are organized, the way that the educational hierarchy operates, and the way that education is treated by political decision-makers results in a system that is more likely to retain the *status quo* than to change. When change is attempted under such circumstances it results in defensiveness, superficiality or at best short-lived pockets of success.

To put it differently, the answer does not lie in designing better reform strategies. No amount of sophistication in strategizing for particular innovations or policies will ever work. It is simply unrealistic to expect that introducing reforms one by one, even major ones, in a situation which is basically not organized to engage in change will do anything but give reform a bad name. You cannot have an educational environment in which change is continuously expected, alongside a conservative system and expect anything but constant aggravation.

The new problem of change, then, pursued in this book is what would it take to make the educational system a learning organization — expert at dealing with change as a normal part of its work, not just in relation to the latest policy, but as a way of life. In subsequent chapters we will examine the constituent components necessary for this change. The reason that we need learning organizations is related to the discovery that change in complex systems is nonlinear — full of surprises. Yet new mindsets can help us 'manage the unknowable' (Stacey, 1992).

We must also ask at the outset why is it important that education develop such a change capacity, or if you like, what is the promise of educational change if it were to get that good. One could respond at the abstract level that change is all around us, the self-renewing society is essential, education must produce critical thinkers and problem solvers etc. but these have become cliches. A deeper reason, which is the subject of chapter 2, is that education has a moral purpose. The moral purpose is to make a difference in the lives of students regardless of background, and to help produce citizens who can live and work productively in increasingly dynamically complex societies. This is not new either, but what is new, I think, is the realization that to do this puts teachers precisely in the business of continuous innovation and change. They are, in other words, in the business of *making improvements*, and to make improvements in an ever changing world is to contend with and manage the forces of change on an ongoing basis.

Productive educational change is full of paradoxes, and components that are often not seen as going together. Caring and competence, equity and excellence, social and economic development are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, these tensions must be reconciled into powerful new forces for growth and development.

The full outline of the argument goes something like this. Society — for some time now, but increasingly moreso as we head to the twenty-first century — expects its citizens to be capable of proactively dealing with change throughout life both individually as well as collaboratively in a context of dynamic, multicultural global transformation. Of all the institutions in society, education is the only one that *potentially* has the promise of fundamentally contributing to this goal. Yet, education far from being a hotbed of teaching people to deal with change in basic ways is just the opposite. To break through this impasse, educators must see themselves and be seen as experts in the dynamics of change. To become expert in the dynamics of change, educators — administrators and teachers alike — must become skilled change agents. If they do become skilled change agents with moral

purpose, educators will make a difference in the lives of students from all backgrounds, and by so doing help produce greater capacity in society to cope with change.

This is not one of these goals that you can tinker with, that you can vaguely or obliquely expect to happen or that you can accomplish by playing it safe. The goal of greater change capacity must become explicit and its pursuit must become all out and sustained.

One could argue that we don't have much choice. At one level this is true. Few would deny that the ability to deal with change is one of the premier requisites of the present and future. But neither individuals nor groups are known for doing what is best for them, especially when the stakes are high. The historian Barbara Tuchman (1984) exposes this tendency in a grand historical sweep in the *The March of Folly*. Taking as cases in point, the Trojans, the Renaissance Popes, the British loss of America, and the American loss in Vietnam, Tuchman examines her basic thesis 'The Pursuit of Policy Contrary to Self-Interest'. For Tuchman a policy to qualify as folly had to meet three criteria: 'it must have been perceived (by some) as counter-productive in its own time . . . a feasible alternative course of action must have been available . . . the policy in question should be that of a group, not an individual ruler' (p. 5). Among other factors Tuchman cites 'Obliviousness to the growing disaffection of constituents, primacy of self-aggrandizement, illusion of invulnerable status' as persistent aspects of folly (p. 126) (see also CRM Films, *Groupthink*, 1992). Thus, those in authority are unlikely by themselves to conceive of alternative courses of action, even (perhaps especially) when faced with overwhelming problems.

Moral purpose is one antidote to the march of folly, but it is martyrdom without the inbuilt capacity — the habits and skills required — to engage in continuous corrective analysis and action. Productive educational change at its core, is not the capacity to implement the latest policy, but rather the ability to survive the vicissitudes of planned and unplanned change while growing and developing.

Educators cannot do the task alone. Already too much is expected of them. Teachers' jobs are more complex than ever before. They must respond to the needs of a diverse and changing student population, a rapidly changing technology in the workplace, and demands for excellence from all segments of society. The global marketplace raises the stakes ever higher in its performance demands of schools. Deteriorating social conditions continue to widen the awful gap between the haves and have nots. As Goodlad (1992a) says, 'healthy nations have healthy schools' not the other way around. Many things are required for a nation to be healthy, observes Goodlad:

Education in parenting, an array of agencies and institutions including schools joined in an educative ecology, a business/corporate ethos of making the highest quality goods available at the lowest possible cost, a substantial investment in research and development, leaders and executive officers who rise to the top through first-rate performance in all aspects of the enterprise, and more. (pp. 7–8; see also, Goodlad, 1992b)

We are talking about the larger social agenda of creating learning societies. The focus of change must be on all agencies and their inter-relationships, but education has a special obligation to help lead the way in partnership with others.

Overview of the Book

In chapter 2 I take up the rather strange partnership of moral purpose and change agentry. On closer inspection they are natural companions in the post-modern age. Moral purpose without change agentry is so much wishful valuing; change agentry without moral purpose is change for the sake of change. It is not farfetched to conceive of teachers as change agents. They are already part way there. Teachers as change agents is the *sine qua non* of getting anywhere.

Chapter 3 delves into the complexity of the change process, identifying insights not previously possible with the old mindset of policy and program implementation. Lessons for understanding change in new ways will be identified in order to provide more generative concepts for contending with the forces of change. We will see how seemingly incompatible pairs like continuity and change, personal mastery and collective action, vision and openness, failure and success, and pressure and support, not only can but also must go together in successful change processes.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus respectively on the school as a learning organization, and on the two-way relationship between a learning organization and its environment. I do not assume that the school of the future will look like the school of today (or even be called a school). But using recent research and the generative concept of the learning organization, we can begin to see how the education organization of the future would function. How individualism and collaboration must co-exist. How vision and strategic planning have serious blind spots. How educators must work in new ways. In chapter 5 the relationship to the environment is explored again with new and I think fruitful

results. Why neither centralization nor decentralization works. Why the best collaborative organizations are (and must be to survive) more open to and proactive with their environments. What external agencies must do to help produce and sustain learning organizations.

Teacher education defined as the entire continuum — the subject of chapter 6 — has the honour of being the best solution and the worst problem in education today. Despite the rhetoric, society has not yet seriously tried to use teacher education as a tool for improvement. Underneath the rhetoric there does not seem to be a real belief or confidence that investing in teacher education will yield results. Building on the analysis of previous chapters, I will argue that the problem of productive change simply cannot be addressed unless we treat continuous teacher education — pre-service and in-service — as the major vehicle for producing teachers as moral change agents.

In the final chapter, I return to the individual and change in societal context. Especially in times of paradigm or mindset shifts we cannot expect existing institutions to lead the way. More fundamentally, in any society of the future, productive educational change will mean productive individuals who do not fully trust the institutions that surround them. Systems do not change themselves, people change them. The role of the individual, the kind of institutions he or she should be helping to shape and check, and strategies for taking action along these lines will form the content of chapter 7.

To return to Tuchman, there are feasible alternative courses of action available. But we can't start from scratch each time there is a serious problem. We must ingrain in society the kind of capacity for educational change that inevitably generates its own checks and balances and lines of solution in situations that will always be somewhat out of control, even if we do everything right.