

**Book Review**

# So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools

Charles Payne

Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2008

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As Charles Payne states in his introduction, this book is about failure, frustration, and struggle: After nearly half a century of educational reforms any promised change has not come through. What happened? Was it lack of implementation? Weak policies? Inadequate leadership? Is anyone to be blamed? Lots of questions could be posed in order to understand the breakdown of the latest reforms in education.

First it is necessary to be aware of the difference between *reform* and *change*. Not all change in education is produced by reform and not all reforms bring about change. In other words, reform as a deliberated intervention in education through policy may or may not generate change. The occurrence of educational change could be driven by different factors that are not necessarily related to policy.

Payne aims to explore factors involved in what he calls the *sociology of failure*, focusing mainly on the phenomenon of demoralization, which in his view, is the most common symptom of dysfunctionality in schools. Examples include (a) the lack of trust, (b) the lack of collegiality, (c) the disenchantment, and (d) the disillusion that dwell in the most troubled schools where no reform attempt has succeeded in years. Although parts of the study use the city of Chicago as background, the stories and experiences can be easily extrapolated to other contexts. Certainly, this is not a locally focused book: The challenges of reform, implementation, and change that Chicago schools face, are faced by school districts throughout Canada as they become more diverse and multicultural.

Payne states two methodological points at the beginning:

1. Although he shares concerns regarding an overreliance on test scores, he acknowledges that there are few options out there if we want to identify levels of achievement on a large scale within the school system. He calls for caution in test score interpretation saying that such interpretations should be tied to additional qualitative data.
2. He bases his study on the assumption that the more troubled schools are examples of the structural problems associated with unattained change. If we are to understand a reform's failure, troubled schools are the best place to start, and from there, we can extrapolate the experience to the rest of the system.

According to Payne, one of the worst sins of policy-makers is to mistakenly assume that all schools are rational organizations. In his view, schools that exhibit the poorest results in

standardized tests also display a lack of curricular coherence, as well as communication difficulties between stakeholders. According to the author, reformers usually make the mistake of initiating interventions without taking into account the presence or absence of organizational rationality in their schools. The attribution of rationality to a very dysfunctional organization creates a vicious circle: As more reforms are introduced, dysfunctionality gets more accentuated. This situation leads to a state of organizational irrationality, meaning an inability to match the proposed ends with the appropriate means. However, it is remarkable to notice that although bottom-tier schools may appear to be irrational organizations, the people in such organizations act like fully rational agents who move towards their own goals. The problem is that they do not find ways to interact with each other in order to attain the organization's goals. In Payne's words, this makes "the whole less than the sum of the parts" (p. 61).

Another threat for successful change rests in the "What works?" question. According to Payne, the tendency to look for general solutions instead of acknowledging the particular contexts in which school problems arise leads to incoherent implementation attempts. In other words, social, political, curricular, and organizational issues are so unique to certain schools that one model that is successfully implemented in one school may not work in the school across the street. Payne's call is for policy-makers to take into account diversity in the contexts in which policies are enacted; intervention regardless of the context is an instance of irrational behaviour in policy implementation. In this sense, the "Let's implement what works!" attitude towards school reform is symptomatic of a dysfunctional policy development process, especially when innovations and reforms are implemented disregarding schools' particularities.

The disconnection between policy and practice is also evident in the most troubled schools. Probably the most striking issue is how both policy and practice are detached from daily life. In his study, Payne finds out that there is no bridge to fill the gap between policy and practice, and the introduction of the latest *snake oil solution* just worsens the problem. Therefore, it could be said that irrational organizations that display high levels of disconnection between their parts make it worse when new variables are introduced into such highly unarticulated systems. This means no hope for any successful implementation.

Regarding implementation, Payne's preference is to start from the bottom, meaning from the schools and classrooms instead of higher-level interventions such as the school district or even nation-wide. The broader the reform, as difficult as it is to work out, the less likely the change will flourish.

Payne's book is organized in a very systematic way so the main argument is not difficult to follow: Chapter 1 is centred on the issue of demoralization. According to Payne, generalized demoralization has the power to affect any change attempt. It is present in dysfunctional schools and comes along with (a) colleague distrust, (b) low mutual expectations, (c) social tensions, (d) predispositions, and (e) weak communication channels. Such schools do not display instances of "relational trust [which in Payne's words] is a multidimensional concept, involving issues of respect, integrity, personal regard and confidence" (p. 36); a concept that involves values and the quality of social relationships.

In chapter 2, the problem of demoralization is taken one step further moving the focus to the issue of organizational irrationality. While this review has already addressed this issue, it is important to highlight the noticeable link Payne makes between the failure of the *Best Practices* discourse and organizational irrationality. According to him, this breakdown is due to a lack of consideration of the particular context in which the school is embedded. What is called *best practice* in certain contexts could be *harmful practice* in others. In other words, schools with no

clear goals or organizational structure display a tendency to introduce external models to their own environment. The problem is that these external models respond to specific contexts, and whenever the organization has no coherent functioning it is less likely that any external model will work out. Even worse, they could create more confusion and disorganization.

In chapter 3, Payne explores the impediments for high-level teaching in troubled schools. Among the most salient factors he highlights are (a) organizational fragmentation, (b) teacher isolation, and (c) lack of curricular coherence, as well as (d) the absence of leaders, and (e) leadership opportunities.

Chapter 4 focuses on the characteristics of high-impact instructional programs in urban schools. Payne emphasizes the importance of leadership practices that are sensitive to class and racial inequalities. He references a number of successful initiatives in which the construction of the students' identity was influenced by the social support they received both in school and at home. It is not just a matter of providing a demanding environment focused on the academics; it is also a matter of having fostering and caring schools that take into account kids' realities, needs, and expectations.

In chapter 5, Payne analyses the impact of bureaucracy on the institutional environment. In his view, an authoritarian bureaucratic model hinders school development and simply acts as a roadblock for successful reform. The reasons are multiple, among them being the hierarchical relationships shaped by hierarchical structures, and a lack of reliance on the classroom-level initiatives. According to Payne, administrators tend to give more credibility to proposals originating from policy-makers and other administrators, instead of giving credibility to the initiatives originating at the classroom level. This situation prevents information flowing smoothly within the system, so implementation takes more time to get through given the lack of autonomy at the classroom level. Payne illustrates this situation with salient examples taken from Chicago and other cities.

Chapter 6 is devoted to analyzing the failures of implementation. According to Payne, the problems urban schools deal with are multi-dimensional, intertwined, irrational, and over-determined, so any attempt to implement reform must have in mind these factors prior to beginning reform. Different models of intervention have been employed over the last couple of decades. Payne focuses on two of them: (a) the *whole school reform*, and (b) the *standards-based reform*. According to Payne, both attempts have fallen into the problem of presupposing levels of organization that some schools simply do not have, and that is why implementation did not eventuate. Successful implementations have been evidenced in schools where there is (a) coherence, (b) stability, (c) peer support, (d) training, and (e) engagement; that is, in environments where the focus is on aptitudes rather than the lack of them.

In chapter 7, Payne looks at two political perspectives on school reform. He identifies the central postulates in these discourses and provides some critical insights. On the one hand, there is the *conservative-oriented reform* that has been centred on accountability, structural change, and managerialism. On the other hand, the *liberal-rooted reform* has been pushing for reform endorsing the *voluntary involvement model* which relies on people's engagement in implementation once they realize the changes the reform brings about. According to Payne, both perspectives, liberal and conservative, have historically assumed that teachers and reformers work within the same epistemologies, but this is an unproven assumption that could create more confusion to the already troubled environment. For example, a concept like *success* can result in differing perspectives. Some reform discourses associate success with test scores, while others may have a more holistic view of it.

At the end of the book there is a handy glossary where the reviewed models are explained. This is very helpful for those not familiar with the different initiatives Payne refers to throughout his study.

My main disagreement with Payne's argument is the ad hoc distinction between *rational reform* and *irrational organizations*. It is not clear how and where to delineate the boundaries of rationality in education reform. Payne's insistence on rationality seems to commit him to find some kind of *optimal state* for the implementation of reform. This point is explored by Feuer (2006) who concludes that reformers should desist seeking *optimal* solutions and should acknowledge the *ambiguity* and *complexity* of schools. Feuer proposes looking for *reasonable* reform policies instead of *rational* reform policies. The former are bounded by contextual factors whereas the latter assume an *optimal* but unrealistic solution for any policy problem.

Payne places great importance on the role of the teacher, and it seems that, in his view, teachers bear the responsibility for successful reform. At first glance, it could seem that Payne is charging teachers and unions with a great deal of responsibility in reforms' implementations. This point should be considered carefully; although teachers play a fundamental role within the educational system, they are not the only players in it. There are other stakeholders who play crucial roles related to reform initiatives. Moreover, the problem is not about resistance or the ways to reduce or eliminate conflict, the problem is how we understand conflict and the value that reformers assign to it.

Payne's book makes a valuable contribution to the literature on school reform and educational change. It aims to stimulate the ongoing conversation between teachers, administrators, and policy-makers interested in the transformation of urban schools. In my opinion, Payne's study offers valuable insights into the dynamics of school reform. His approach aims to reconcile the complex realities of schools with the demands of educational policy-making.

## References

- Feuer, M. J. (2006). *Moderating the debate: Rationality and the promise of American education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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