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Theory of Sustainable Change in Education: Leadership Perspectives

A variety of change models are used in business and education, yet there seems to be a gap in models constructed specifically to attend to the nuances of educational change. This study investigated change in the K-12 education system. Data were collected from 12 participants who were in leadership positions for at least 5 years. Three themes (and 10 subthemes) emerged: fostering a culture of trusting relationships, barriers to educational change, and common ground for sustainable change. The data led to the development of the theory of sustainable change in education: leadership perspectives. This article aims to provide an overview of the theory.

Keywords: *educational change, leadership, leadership theory, resistance to change*

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Introduction

A variety of sources have noted the resistance to change in schools; yet those sources also indicate a need for change in a system that notoriously rejects it [1–5]. While there are many models available relating to change, they do not attend to the specificities involved in educational change. This study sought to develop an understanding of sustainable change focused solely on education, as “No model yet exists that is scalable and replicable” [6, p. 46]. The research question for this constructivist grounded theory [7] study is; How can K-12 schools engage in sustainable change?

Resistance to Educational Change

K-12 education's reluctance to change has been an ongoing problem in the United States [1]. For over one hundred years, the American educational system has relied on traditional practices, born of a generation where students were prepared for working in a factory [4]. Although the needs of the workforce have changed, educational practices have remained quite stagnant, with many stakeholders portraying an aversion to change and seemingly content with past practices. It is not for lack of trying to make modifications to the system; education has certainly seen its share of change initiatives. Unfortunately,

it seems many of the attempts for educational change have often been met with great resistance, ultimately causing them to fail [2; 4; 5; 8; 9].

According to Meyer-Looze et al., vast research posits “school communities must change their structures and their policies and practices to adequately prepare all students to succeed in postsecondary education and careers” [3, p. 180]. Dolph [8] suggests there is a current heightened concern and desire for educational reform in the United States that has never been so intense. This identified need increases the urgency of understanding how to implement transformational, sustainable change. and one that needs to be solved to meet the needs of the evolving system.

Herein lies the problem; finding a way to implement change in a system that is resistant to it. Reinventing schools “requires reform to be implemented over time and managed strategically to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a given comprehensive school improvement plan” [10, p. 41]. Principals, the direct leaders of schools, have a responsibility to discover how to navigate the resistance and successfully implement sustainable change [8]. Unfortunately, “System reforms pose particular challenges because of their complexity, the complexity of existing systems that they are integrated into, and the dynamics with the local policy context” [11, p. 19]. As a possible solution to the problem, Meyer-Looze et al. [3] posits that schools should rely on a change model to improve practices and outcomes.

The Need for Change in Education

21st Century Learning

When looking at the history of education in the U.S., there is much contention [2], and for good reason. Teachers and students alike, are bored and unsatisfied with the current system of education [2]. The current “dominant form of education today is ‘one size fits all’” [12, p.1189], and students are underprepared for the workforce they are going into [8]. Instead, the workforce is calling for education to develop skills that prepare students for a variety of 21st Century career opportunities.

Robles identified ten skills business executives recognize as needed in today’s workforce: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibili-

ty, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic [13]. Sarlin et al. notes critical thinking, communication, creativity, and collaborative problem solving as necessary workforce skills [14]. While some of these skills are evident in a traditional classroom, not all of them are a priority. The system is in need of change in order to focus on the skills students should be learning to become productive members of society. While this expectation might be daunting, a learning organization has to learn how to become great at what it does [4]. In order to be great, transformational changes are likely needed.

Failing Schools

Kutash et al. states, “The severe impact of school failure on students and on the nation is well documented” [6, p. 10]. The United States has attempted to implement multiple reform efforts in the hopes of improving schools, including the No Child Left Behind Act in 2011. “Since 2009, an estimated \$8.5 billion dollars in federal funds have been allotted for initiatives to address school improvement” [15, p. 42]. More recently, the School Improvement Grants was an effort to attend to the Obama administration’s plan to turn over 5,000 of the poorest performing schools.

The School Turnaround Field Guide [6] produced one example of failed change efforts. In the guide, turnaround was defined as a “dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that: a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years; and b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performance organization” [6, p. 4]. The turnaround process was described as, “Replace the principal, take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness, institute comprehensive instructional reforms, increase learning time, create community-oriented schools, and provide operational flexibility and sustained support” [6, p. 5]. Unfortunately, the concept of “turnaround” did not produce the anticipated success for the deficits in education [15]. While this is just one example of failed change efforts, there are many more; therefore, the U.S. continues to seek ways in which schools might sustainably transform.

COVID

The year 2020 challenged schools’ abilities to rapidly implement change. With the world unexpectedly closing down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools needed to make immediate adjustments to continue providing students’ support. In an educational culture with a general aversion to change, this was perhaps the ultimate challenge. Some schools met the obstacle by allowing students to take home computers or packets of worksheets, and others just shut down unclear of what direction to go. The larger the district, the more difficult the task seemed.

Adding to the numerous difficulties facing education, Kuhfeld et al. warns the time lost due to the pandemic “will almost certainly affect student achievement, and that impact is hard to estimate given all the unique aspects of COVID-19 on schooling and society” [16, p. 549]. While we might not adequately predict the long-term effects the pandemic had on student learning, we can make the assumption that students suffered at least a year of significant learning barriers.

Administrators and Change

The need for change in education is evident; the task at hand is moving organizations that are averse to change. According to Kotter [17], when an organization is resistant to change, and leaders are not aware of how to implement change, the results are detrimental to the organization. This calls for a careful approach to change. Wong [11] notes, principals play an integral part in the change process and are responsible for making changes to their own practices when planning change. Additionally, superintendents, teacher leaders, and other educational leaders, with or without titles, carry the same responsibility.

Kotter states, “Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that

vision, and inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles” [17, p. 25]. With this responsibility, educational leaders should be cognizant of how they can affect change through their strategies and methods of implementation [9; 18]. “The call to improve education requires educational leaders to transform schools into learning organizations that produce high-level results for all children” [1, p. 33]. Burke [19] notes that it only takes a few individuals to spread change; in schools, the principal will most likely be one of them. This study, therefore, focused on the perspectives of school leaders in order to better understand change in education.

Theoretical Framework

Burke-Litwin Causal Model of Organizational Performance and Change

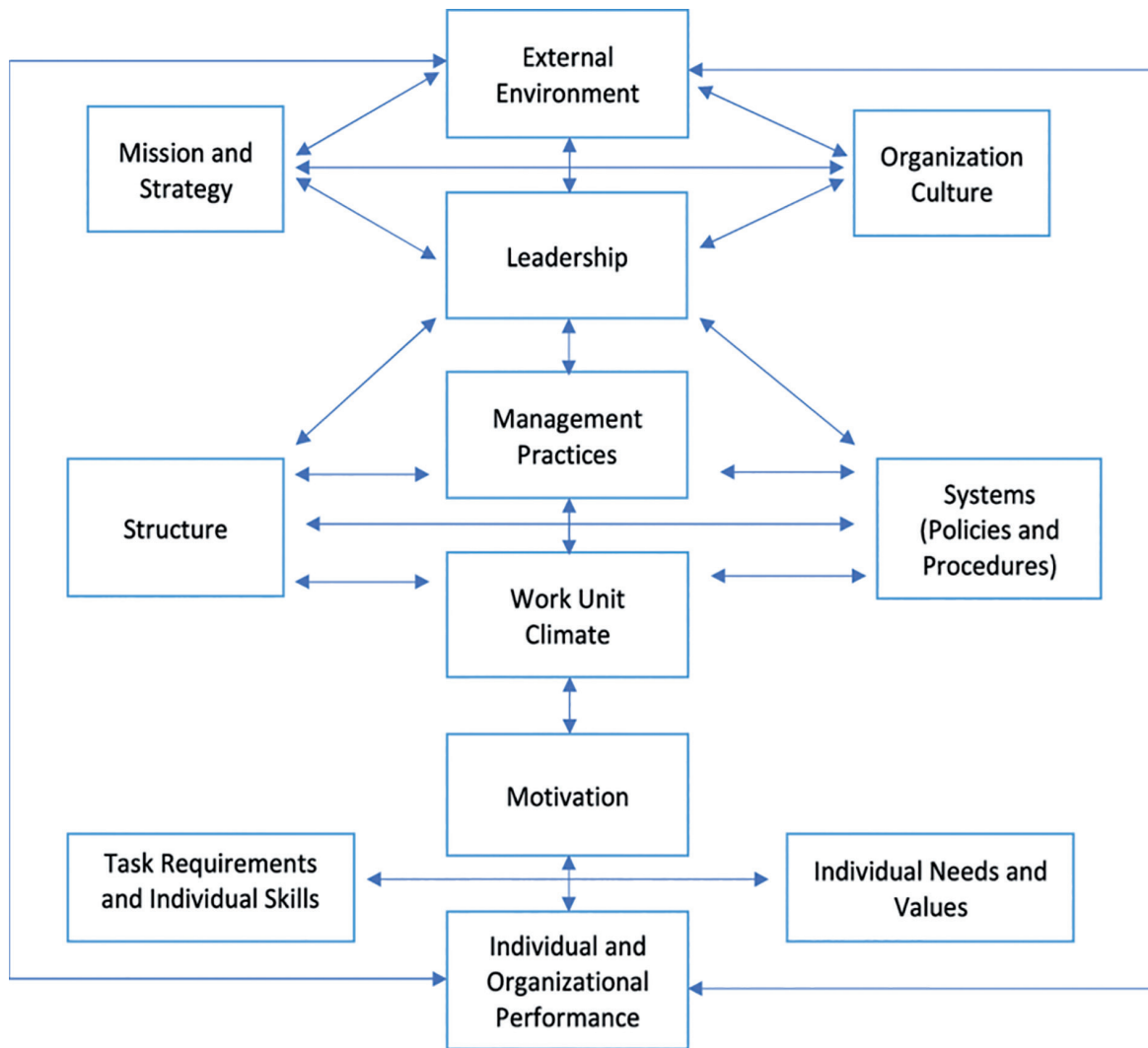
The Burke-Litwin model [19] is considered a “complex” depiction of organizational change [20, p. 324]. The complexities are understandable given the multifaceted nature of organizational change. The model (Figure 1) identifies both transactional and transformational components of change, recognizing transactional change is closely related to management; whereas, transformational change aligns with leadership. The relationships between both transactional and transformational factors are shown as they interact to evoke change. “Furthermore, the model portrays the primary variables or subsystems which predict and explain performance in an organization, and how those subsystems affect change” [20, p. 324].

While Figure 1 depicts the model as a whole, Table 1 outlines the components that Burke [19] identifies as transactional and transformational factors.

The Burke-Litwin model [19] is appropriate for many organizations and serves as a strong foundation for organizational performance and change. While the Burke-Litwin model identifies

Table 1. Burke-Litwin Model Transactional & Transformational Components

Transactional	Transformational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure • Work Unit Climate • Systems (Policies and Procedures) • Task Requirements & Individual Skills/Abilities • Individual Needs & Values • Individual & Organizational Performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External Environment • Mission and Strategy • Organization Culture • Individual & Organizational Performance



■ Fig. 1. Burke-Litwin Causal Model of Organizational Performance and Change

Note. From [21]. CC BY-NC-ND.

factors that are evident in education, this study seeks to identify the innately unique factors, and relationships between factors, that should be considered for sustainable change to occur in educational settings.

Methodology

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Charmaz's [7] constructivist grounded theory provided the structure to further investigate the concept of change in education. The methodology is representative of a qualitative research design where the researcher uses participant data to create a theory of a concept [22]. In this case, the researcher relied on educational leaders' experiences to generate a theory to explain

the process of change in education. Charmaz presents grounded theory from a constructivist point of view. "We *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices" [7, p. 17].

The primary researcher in this study has twenty-three years of experience in a variety of educational roles, including K-8 public, private, and Christian. The secondary researcher has served on K-12 school boards for Christian and public institutions. The researcher has experienced and played an integral role in several change initiatives in schools, some that were sustainable and others that did not last. The data, coupled with this perspective, assisted with the construction of an understanding of the change process in K-12 schools. Charmaz's belief indicates that if "we start with the assumption

that social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed, then we must take the researcher’s position, privileges, perspective, and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality. It, too, is a construction” [7, p. 13]. Therefore, the participants’ voices provided data to inform theory development, while the researcher used her previous experiences to make sense of the data.

Participants

Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling and were required to have at least five years in K-12 school leadership. The pool of participants included principals, superintendents, and consultants who served in a number of different grade bands, including elementary, middle, and high school. Participants also emerged from a number of different educational environments, including public, private, charter, and international schools. Participants expressed the need for change in education and

were willing leaders of educational change. Although saturation [22] was reached with nine participants, a total of 12 school leaders were interviewed. Table 2 provides an overview of the participants.

Data Collection

Charmaz recommends the use of intensive interviews in grounded theory, because both are “open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted” [7, p. 85]. Semi-structured interviews, of approximately one hour in length, allowed the researcher to ask open-ended questions and collect in-depth data [7]. With this in mind, the researcher identified the primary interview questions as:

1. Could you describe your experiences with change in education?
2. How is change in education unique?
3. What are your experiences with change initiatives that lasted?

Table 2. Study Participants

Participant Number	Professional Experiences	Location(s)	Gender
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 Years Classroom • 17 Years Administration 	USA — Midwest	Male
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 Years Classroom • 8 Years Administration 	USA — Midwest	Female
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 Years Classroom • 13 Years Administration 	USA — South West	Male
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 Years Classroom • 15 Years Administration 	USA — West Coast Overseas — Asia	Male
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 Years Classroom • 9 Years Administration 	USA — West Coast	Male
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 Years Classroom • 10 Years Administration 	USA — West Coast, South West Overseas — Asia	Male
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 Years Classroom • 10 Years Administration 	USA — South West, East Coast Overseas — Sweden, Finland	Female
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 Years Classroom • 7 Years Administration 	USA — West Coast Overseas — Asia	Female
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 Years Classroom • 12 Years Administration 	USA — South	Female
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 Years Classroom • 14 Years Administration 	USA — West Coast	Male
11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 Years Classroom • 16 Years Administration 	USA — South	Male
12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 Years Classroom • 8 Years Administration 	USA — Midwest	Male

4. What are your experiences with change initiatives that failed to last?

To construct theory, Charmaz [7] identifies 4 concepts that shape data collection: 1) theoretical plausibility, which occurs as themes begin to emerge, 2) theoretical direction, as patterns occur and provide insight as to whether some questions are irrelevant or new questions need to be asked, 3) theoretical centrality, where categories emerge, and 4) theoretical adequacy, where interview questions help to assess the categories for accuracy. Each of these “concerns” [7, p. 87] can identify areas that need more information, and areas that are irrelevant to the theory development. In other words, in constructivist grounded theory, the interview questions start out broad and become more focused as the theory develops. The researcher used open-ended questions as a basis for initial interviews and continued to develop more concentrated questions to fill in theoretical gaps throughout the research.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, interviews were transcribed using Zoom and reviewed for accuracy prior to analyzing the data. After each transcription review, the researcher coded the data. Researchers use coding to “define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means” [7, p. 113]. In this study, coding started with the first interview. The process began with initial coding, where each line was coded, followed by focused coding, then identifying themes [7; 22; 23]. The constant-comparative method of data analysis was used, so that as the researcher collected interview data, analysis also took place [22] allowing the researcher to determine if there were gaps in understanding that needed further investigation [7].

Throughout data collection and analysis, the researcher used memoing to note the researcher’s thoughts in relation to the data [7; 24; 25]. The researcher continued to develop the theory via theoretical sampling to pursue additional data to fill in any gaps in the theory [7; 22]. As new categories were identified, the researcher continued to move forward with analyzing until each category was theoretically saturated [25].

Reliability

Throughout the data analysis, verification was used to “process with continual checks on the credibility, plausibility, and trustworthiness of the findings” [24, p. 285]. A focus group session (external audit), peer debriefing, and member checking provided validity for the study [22; 26; 27].

Limitations

Participants spoke of their experiences from their perspectives. The researcher relied on participants’ honesty and memories for accurate data. Additionally, the theory was developed from the leadership perspectives, which negated other stakeholder perspectives.

Results

Data analysis elicited three main themes that emerged from the data, as well as a total of 10 subthemes, as shown in Table 3.

Theory

While the discovery of themes and subthemes is one component to a grounded theory study, the additional goal is to consider possible theories that might be developed. In analyzing the data in this study, a theory was developed to synthesize the research findings. The Theory of Sustainable Change in Education: Leadership Perspectives, states, fostering a culture of engagement and trusting relationships is the foundation for examining the barriers to educational change and cultivating common ground in preparation for sustainable change in education. Figure 2 presents a model of the theory to depict the interaction of the theory’s themes and subthemes.

Theme 1: Fostering a culture of engagement and trusting relationships. Participants identified fostering a culture of engagement and trusting relationships as the foundation for change in education. This theme radiates through everything the organization does, and should be continually cultivated. Participant 12 stated, “it has to start with a culture of trust and the ability for people to truly be willing to take risks and have that support if they don’t have immediate success.”

Table 3. Theory of Sustainable Change in Education: Leadership Perspectives, Themes & Subthemes

Theory of Sustainable Change in Education: Leadership Perspectives, Themes & Subthemes	
Themes	Subthemes
Fostering a Culture of Engagement & Trusting Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous Conversations • Developing Trust • Building & Nurturing Relationships • All Around Support
Barriers to Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholders • Time • Metrics, Funding, Policy
Common Ground for Sustainable Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust • Why • How

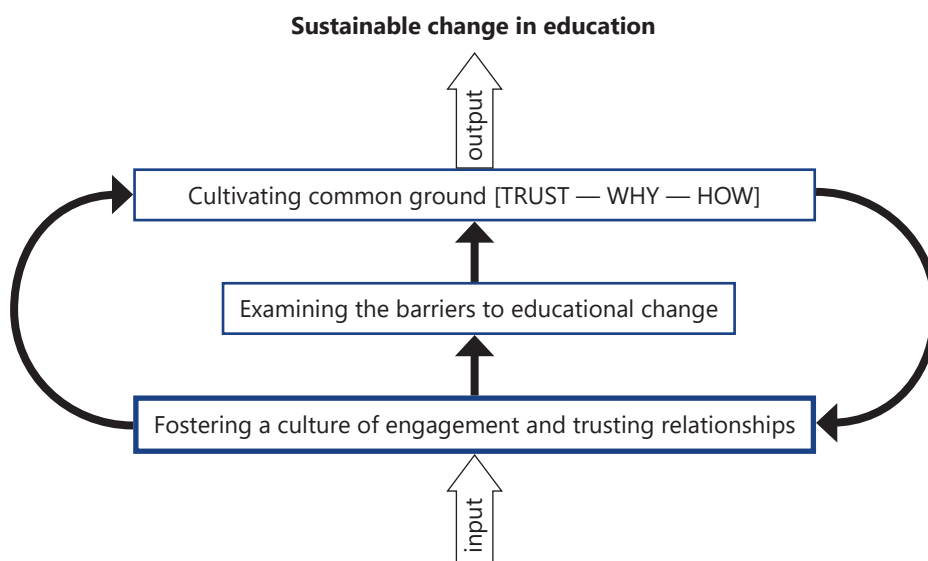


Fig. 2. Theory of Sustainable Change in Education: Leadership Perspectives Model

Participants acknowledged that in order for change to occur, all educational stakeholders should build and nurture relationships through continuous conversations. Participant 6 stated, “you start with the teachers and you build their trust and their knowledge, and then you have to make them the change agents; you can’t necessarily just force it on them.” Through continuous conversations, leaders should develop trust with stakeholders, so individuals can feel confident their best interests are taken into consideration. Participant 12 recognized,

the culture of trust extends beyond just the actual school people; it goes to the stakeholders. We have to have a community, leaders who are willing to stand up to the naysayers and say, no, this is what we’re doing, this

is why we’re doing it, and you need to come with us...to me, that’s where it would really start is having people willing to make those changes in a safe environment.

This trusting relationship should be nurtured and supported from peers, parents, leaders, and community members. Participant 2 stated, because once you have those relationships, now that you know me, as a person, and I know you, as a person, you don’t get offend...we can truly have a conversation based off of what we see, because you trust that I’m coming to you in a way that’s really let’s figure this out.

Although this is the foundation for change, the expectation is that relationships are perpetually attended to in order to build a culture that

is ready for change to occur. Participants 8 and 1 noted the importance of valuing the team you expect to engage in change.

Participant 2 mentioned the concept of “hero chats,” a tactic the participant used in communicating with faculty and staff. Time was set aside for each employee to speak with Participant 2, as their leader, and provided times for employees to discuss successes, concerns, and anything else that was on their minds. Likewise, Participants 4 and 10 discussed meetings that allowed for continuous conversations providing support from above and below. Participant 8 mentioned the importance of asking questions and learning more about what was happening in classrooms.

Even in times of conflict and disagreement, communication is paramount. According to Participant 11, “there is an element of being comfortable with leaving a room when not everybody always agrees on everything” and “finding ways to understand the disagreement and move forward.” Through this process, Participant 3 mentioned, “they learn to trust and understand the way I work.” While speaking can be a valuable piece of communication, listening was recognized as an imperative component of communication. Leaders recognized listening as something that can help leaders learn how to support those who engage in change. Participant 8 discussed the importance of listening to parents, while Participant 2 recognized the value in letting teachers’ voices be heard through restorative circles in weekly staff meetings.

Sometimes communication leads to employees recognizing they are no longer a good fit. Several participants (2, 3, 6, 10) noted that in building relationships they found there were employees who needed to be let go. The participants noted their efforts, as leaders, to support, encourage, teach, and provide professional development to struggling employees, only to find that there was little to no growth. The leaders continued to have open, honest communication with the employees and eventually felt it was evident those teachers needed to move on to different employment. Participant 2 stated, “there were people that I did everything I could do to support them, some people are just not meant to do that [teach]... I had to do what I needed to do to help those people to find a profession that was better for them”.

Theme 2: Examining the barriers to educational change. As relationships are built and continuously nurtured, the educational community should note and attend to the barriers to educational change. Participants identified three main barriers: (1) stakeholders, (2) time, and (3) metrics, funding, and policy. While participants took note of these barriers, they recognized that being aware of these barriers can help to inform how to work through them to engage in the change process.

Stakeholders. Perhaps the largest, most significantly discussed barrier participants identified were the stakeholders, from educators to parents and students, to the larger community and politicians, and even textbook companies. Participant 5, 6, 8, and 12 noted how individual’s personal experiences with school tend to shape their opinions of current education topics, which can cause problems. Participant 7 stated, “unless we educate the parents, we’re putting ourselves in a spot where we’re educating kids and they’re going home and teaching their parents, but we still have this gap.”

Teachers were the stakeholders recognized as presenting a substantial barrier for a variety of reasons. Participants 2 and 10 noted the fear behind change, which can lead to resistance. Participant 5 recognized, “if we look at the role of the teacher 25 years ago versus now, I think one of the biggest distinctives you’ll see is that we bolted on a thousand new responsibilities while we’ve tried to hold on to what this old role is supposed to be.” Participant 4 stated,

people have assembled themselves around their tribe, and if you’re in my tribe, you’re in my tribe, and if you’re not, you’re not. So we’ve politicized things so anytime any topic comes up, the first thing that has to pass is okay, whose agenda is this? Whose political thing is this? Do I agree or disagree?

Participant 6 noted that teachers are averse to change, yet Participant 8 noted teachers having change fatigue.

Participant 10 noted the times in which it is important to take note of teacher’s resistance; “if a change is coming down and they [teachers] don’t think it’ll be good for students, they’re going to speak up and they’re going to fight it.” On the other hand, Participant 2 recognized individuals whose resistance to change was hindering positive organizational outcomes.

Stakeholders that create barriers to change also included public office and government. Participant 7 warned education, “has become such a huge mass of conglomerates of companies... all the fingers that are working in education right now, and you think, we can’t rock the cart, we can’t make waves here.” Participant 5 stated,

Government has taken on the primary role of educating our people, and so they’ve sort of drawn in the expertise...and slowly over time taken away from parents. So parents, in general, again, speaking in general, don’t have a clear sense of what it takes to educate a child anymore.

Participant 9 agreed, stating, “there’s a lot of people that want their hands in education. It seems like no matter what the office they had, there’s some reason why they need to have their thumb on education.” The overwhelming number of stakeholders were recognized by all participants as creating a great hinderance to educational change efforts; therefore, highlighting the importance of gaining stakeholder support.

Time. Participants 2, 6, and 10 identified time as the biggest barrier to change in education. Some participants indicated how long changes take, while others indicated the slow speed of change in education. Participant 6 described change as “baby steps.” Participant 2 noted it took four years of building relationships, seeing where changes were needed, and implementing change to see sustainable changes. Participants 3 and 5 discussed the challenges of the nine-month school calendar as a challenge, creating an urgency that was often a barrier. Participant 12 noted that the lag time caused people to revert to what has been done in the past because they don’t see the change working quickly enough.

While change was described as slow, it was also discussed as rushing change too quickly. Participants 8 and 9 noted that teachers need time to explore and implement changes to do it right. When change was implemented too quickly, teachers often became angry (P. 3). Participant 9 said, “the pendulum swings so quickly in education, we get somebody new in office and boom, we want it implemented.” Participant 8 stated, “deep change, you know things have to have time to take root. You can’t really rush that process.” Change requires time, yet time is something that is in high demand during the

school year, often causing change to take a back seat to other priorities.

Metrics, Funding, and Policy. Participants found it challenging to obtain clear measuring tools as a means for identifying the need for change in education or the effectiveness of implemented changes. Funding was an additional problem noted by participants, particularly due to being at the mercy of governmental decisions. Also noted were the policies, which were seemingly beyond school leaders’ control.

Multiple Participants explained how difficult it was to obtain clear data that informed what changes might need to take place and described the lag time education is faced with (P. 11). Participants 6 and 9 identified the difficulty in clear, strong metrics in education as compared to what businesses typically use. They described the ease in which business obtain data and react to it, whereas the data collected in schools was not clear enough to make decisions.

Participants also described funding and policy as barriers. Participants described spending billions of dollars on mandates made by people who have not recently been in classrooms. Participant 6 stated,

You’ve got to figure out who holds the purse strings and convince them to spend on something different or to stop spending on something that isn’t working anymore, which is very, very difficult in schools; the finances are closely guarded and rarely change very much.

Participant 7 indicated that education is not valued; therefore, not adequately funded. Also expressed was how government determines funding, which does not promote innovation or improvement (P. 5).

Participants also discussed how policy influenced change, or the lack of change, in education. They described having to quickly implement mandated changes that were out of their control and noted that many leaders don’t have the stamina to argue mandated changes (P. 9, 10, 12). Participant 4 described superintendents as “getting pushed at every level on every topic in every imaginable way, and then some that you couldn’t even imagine.” The barriers were noted by each participant and were factors that all leaders considered when implementing change.

Theme 3: Common ground for sustainable change. The third theme identified in this research study distinguishes what it looks like to

put change into action. Common ground for sustainable change means having the foundation of trust in place, communicating why the change is needed and how the change will be implemented. Participant 8 called change “a we process, not just an I process.” Common ground for sustainable change means taking steps toward change as a collaborative, cohesive organization.

Trust. Trust was identified as the starting point for implementing change. With trust in place, people who are asked to implement change feel confident they are being led in the best interest of the organization. Participant 10 said, “if I want to do something new, there’s already an established trust there that people would go along with it and at least be open to it.” The trusting culture allows for open communication to support change efforts.

Building trust can mean encouraging autonomy and watching people grow through the process (P. 4, P. 8). Trust also provides room for failure and learning to occur in the change process. Participant 3 encouraged teachers to “just try your stuff and fail... you’re not damaging the kids, right, if you try a lesson, and it doesn’t work, that’s okay. Keep trying.” While change might be possible without trust, it is likely that change will be much easier and more sustainable with trust in place.

Why. The subtheme why means communicating the need for change. Participant 4 stated, “you really have to intellectually help people see why this change is needed,” and continued, “But you need to be able to provide those answers to them and not make them feel stupid for having a point of view that may or may not be different than yours.” Participant 8 said,

because education is involving human beings there is never 100% certainty, and so there will always be that voice of, is this the right thing...why do I need to change? So, I think being able to say why...and to be able to show people and not just tell people.

Participant 8 recognized the importance of explaining changes to parents and listening to their feedback to understand different perspectives. Participant 11 recommended sitting down and listening and empathizing with those who the change might affect. Communicating can help those involved to collaborate for a common purpose (P. 2).

While metrics were seen as a barrier to change, the need to discover clear data points to support

change was evident. Participants recommended using data to show the need for growth, setting goals, and always staying true to the organizational purpose and vision. This allows stakeholders to see there is validity to change. Participant 9 recognized that data is not shared often enough, especially beyond the scope of leadership, and recommended putting the data in the hands of all stakeholders to build trust.

Participant 1 identified multiple qualitative (coaching perspectives) and quantitative (testing) data points that were continuously monitored while engaging in changes to the district’s math program, recognizing how the data points supported the need for change. Participant 2 noted,

I started off with data. I didn’t come in talking about what I think or what I feel, it was truthfully, here’s what our data is showing...it took away my judgment...we’re looking at what it is. We can’t argue with what our academic scores are looking like.

Participant 3 even used external data to identify a need for a pilot program in the high school; “I read this fact that we’re going to be hundreds of thousands of pilots short.” Using data, the school obtained funding to offer a flight program for high school students.

Participants recognized the value in having a clear, unified vision when engaging in change. Participant 3 stated,

You have to have a vision in your brain or you have to have somebody else who has a vision that you subscribe to, and then you need to invite people consistently into that vision...you are led by a vision and that vision is one hundred percent dependent on good people being on board.

Participant 1 recommended talking people through the change indicating the vision and goal. Participant 2 stated, “once all of those pieces started coming together, and we got a school where people, teachers, actually wanted to be there and shared a common vision, then that’s when we started seeing things turn around.”

How. After communicating evidence of the need for change, participants relayed the next steps in implementing change; indicating how it will occur. First, they recognized how systems/structures can help with implementing change by setting clear expectations. Participants 1 and 4 noted that it is necessary to understand in order to achieve the desired outcomes. Participant 12 stated,

start with what is it about your system that says that they're ready for a change or they need to change... why are we making this change? We have to be intentional and have a purpose for this change. What's our intended outcome. And then, we need to backtrack from there and say, okay, if the change is truly needed, what do we have to do to get the system ready for this change?

Participant 8 added the importance of consistently revisiting plans and continuing to progress on plans that have been made. Participant 4 described how reflection supported the change process because it provided the opportunity to look at what was learned and modify plans as needed.

Buy-in was discussed at length, noting that it didn't mean every stakeholder had to agree with the change immediately, but that some needed more time and communication to fully understand the need for change. Change can be challenging because people feel they have lost control, but having a plan to rely on can provide comfort in uncertain circumstances. Participant 11 stated, "sustaining that change is giving voice to those at the center of who we're trying to serve in the first place. And then saying, listen, it hasn't changed who we are." When the barriers became increasingly difficult it was important to encourage perseverance (P. 11). Participant 1 said, "understand there are going to be problems that occur that you couldn't predict... we have to understand how it is we're going to come together to problem solve."

Consistency is another tool that participants identified to try and help change agents know what to expect during the unexpectedness of change. Participants 3 and 4 noted the importance of communicating the vision repeatedly and consistently to all stakeholders. Participant 12 stated, "we have to stick with it. We can't jump to another change. We have to get it firmly embedded and ingrained."

Engaging in change can be intimidating and overwhelming; however, using a structured foundation for change can help ease some of the burdens that emerge in times of change. As education seeks new ways of providing student support and learning, the theory of sustainable change in education can assist educational entities in slowing down to ensure changes are necessary and sustainable.

Discussion

Education is at a dire turning point; yet, navigating changes due to lack of student academic growth and failing schools can be complex. Educational entities should rely on the foundation of a change model to encourage a thriving academic community. The argument might be made that suitable change models already exist; however, the intricacies of education call for a model that is solely focused on educational organizations. The theory of sustainable change in education provides the foundation for lasting educational changes to occur.

Relationship to Previous Theory

While there are factors of the Burke-Litwin model for organizational performance and change evident in this research, the nuances to educational change are accounted for and prevalent in The theory of sustainable change in education (TSCE). Table 4 depicts the alignment of the factors from the TSCE: Leadership Perspectives with the Burke-Litwin (BL) model, noting a considerable gap between the two.

Components of the BL model came up in two of the three categories in TSCE. Culture is present throughout the TSCE model; therefore, cultural components of the BL model aligned with the themes of 1.) Fostering a Culture of Engagement & Trusting Relationships and 3.) Common

Table 4. Alignment of Change Models

TSCE Themes	Burke-Litwin Alignment
Fostering a Culture of Engagement & Trusting Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work Unit Climate • Individual Needs & Values • Organization Culture • Individual & Organizational Performance
Barriers to Educational Change	
Common Ground for Sustainable Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure • Work Unit Climate • Systems (Policies and Procedures) • Task Requirements & Individual Skills/Abilities • Individual & Organizational Performance • External Environment • Mission and Strategy • Individual & Organizational Performance

Ground for Sustainable Change. Culture is a vital component to change. With a strong cultural foundation, organizations can rely on trusting relationships to provide a sense of comfort and confidence for employees when implementing change. Notably missing from the BL model is the communication component found within the TSCE cultural theme. While communication could be assumed within the BL model, participants in this study identified continuous conversations as a theme necessary to support educational change.

The structural elements of change, with attention to organizational missions, are also identified in both models. These elements are vital to identifying why change is necessary and planning for change. TSCE identifies the need for structure in theme 3.) common ground for sustainable change, under the subtheme how.

Barriers to education are, understandably, missing from BL model. This is not to say that there are not barriers considered in the BL model, but that the barriers to education are factors participants relayed as prevalent. In the Burke-Litwin causal model of organizational performance and change [19], the barriers might present themselves in the culture and climate components of the model, such as in the internal and external factors; however, the TSCE accounts for the most prevalent barriers in educational change, making the theme the unique factor in this change model.

While the factors are something to consider when looking at different change models, the arrangement of the factors is yet another topic to consider. Models are built to show relationships between concepts. The BL model shows the relationship between transformational and transactional factors [19]; whereas, the TSCE reflects the need for culture as a constant component of supporting change in education. Additionally, the TSCE depicts working through barriers prior to being able to implement change.

Although there are a variety of available change models that contain similar factors necessary for change implementation, the TSCE has identified those factors which attend to education's unique qualities of change. Additionally, the model highlights how the factors work together to support sustainable change in education, something that has been difficult to obtain in years past. The TSCE can be a foundation for

easing the stress and difficulties associated with change in education and provide support for sustainable change.

Relationship to Practice

The world is ever evolving; yet, for over one hundred years, education has relied on the many of the same, traditional practices. As needs, opportunities, and expectations of businesses and organizations change, education has to adapt as well. Meyer-Looze et al. notes, "Successful schools are able to describe a theory of change, or change model, which drives their school improvement process to close the gaps between their current reality and their desired future state or vision" [3, p. 170]. Holmes & Maiers note,

Schools showing early signs of success from the first year of implementation of a comprehensive school reform plan share several factors in common: collaboration, data, increased skills, increased expectations, changes in beliefs and dispositions, development of meaningful partnership and wraparound services, and increased parent engagement [10, p. 43].

Many of the factors identified by Holmes and Maiers are embedded in the TSCE, which provides foundational support for the educational community to embrace sustainable change.

When utilizing the TSCE model, schools can begin building a cultural foundation where relationships, engagement, and trust are fostered through continuous conversations and support. Meyer-Looze et al. acknowledge "developing a positive culture is an important factor to the success of any initiative" [3, p. 184]. Additionally, Fullan [28] recommends, "if you want to challenge people to change, develop a relationship with them first" [28, p. 64]. Identifying a culture of engagement and trust as the foundation for sustainable change is not profound or new; however, the idea permeates as the heart of educational change.

Hurtienne et al. [29] found that the leader who works most closely with an employee has the most influence on the employee's engagement in the organization; therefore, it is vital for those in leadership positions to support individuals who directly report to them. May and Sanders [15] note that transformational leaders, in particular, promote cultures where staff feel recognized and valued for their contributions.

This supportive culture, grounded in open, honest communication, can foster a sense of camaraderie, resulting in trust and engagement.

The most notable nuance to the TSCE, when compared with other change models, is the identification of barriers to change in education. While barriers cannot be eliminated, they can be considered in preparing for change in an effort to overcome the challenges. Every participant identified stakeholders as a key barrier. The list of stakeholders alone appears to be overwhelming — parents, students, educators, administrators, community members, policy makers, politicians, textbook publishers, etc. When coupled with the vast array of educational experiences stakeholders bring, this barrier can appear incredibly daunting; however, the cultural aspect of the model should permeate through the barriers to overcome the challenges. In other words, when schools create a culture of trust with all stakeholders, even individuals with the most adverse educational experiences should be willing to explore something new.

Starr [5] identified resistance to change as expected and looked at negatively. Changing the narrative could move resistance from something negative to an opportunity for conversations to strengthen change efforts. Additionally, stakeholders should know the why when change is introduced [3]. Continuing to communicate with honesty nurtures those relationships and bolsters a community of support throughout an educational system.

Time is a barrier that can diminish the momentum of educational change; either in going too fast or too slow. Participants indicated the typical 9-month school year also to be accounted for. Is an initiative going to span over multiple years? If so, how will the gap in time affect the change efforts? Will the change occur within the 9 months? If so, does that time-frame appear too short? Will the change be able to resume in the next school year and be sustainable? While time can be a barrier to educational change, recognizing the potential hurdles and planning for them can ease the looming burdens.

Metrics, funding, and policies also play a role in creating barriers to educational change. Metrics don't necessarily provide the best, most accurate data. Measuring student learning is often difficult to rely on for providing substantial data; instead, it is often a snapshot in time. The data

are often lacking, not taking into consideration students not sleeping well, lack of food, and the endless student variables that can happen when testing.

Participants recognized using a variety of qualitative and quantitative data can help ease the difficulties in utilizing metrics. Meyer-Looze et al. identifies additional data points as, "attendance rates, enrollment trends, behavioral data; achievement or outcome data, which should include both standardized as well as classroom assessment data, and perception data" [3, p. 172]. Schools should seek opportunities for collecting a variety of data to accurately monitor progress when change is implemented.

Money can be a barrier in many organizations, so it is not surprising that education experiences roadblocks with funding, as well. Rather than solely relying on tax dollars or tuition money, schools can find unique ways to gain financial support. While schools often indicate they are underfunded, they also can muster community and even business support to supplement funds. This barrier can be easier to navigate if done thoughtfully and creatively. Participants noted the connections they made with other businesses and organizations, along with fundraising and grants, often provided additional financial support for their schools.

Almost every participant noted the barrier of policies, which participants indicated are generally created by individuals who were not well-versed in educational practices. Too often leaders felt they had to implement changes just to adhere to a policy pushed down to them without explanation, research, data, or a reasonable consideration for how it might affect schools. This is perhaps the most challenging barrier to navigate, as it is so deeply imbedded in governmental red-tape. Policy is widely seen as a significant cause of resistance in educational change due to the high-stakes and fast-moving expectations that accompany policy [5]. While participants did not have a strong means of solutions for this barrier, they did note the importance of having open, honest conversations with stakeholders to communicate where changes were coming from. Identifying the reasons for change were helpful in continuing to foster relationships and trust.

The final component of the change model is common ground for sustainable change, which identifies the steps for implementing

change. Holmes & Maiers note, “The implementation stage is the most difficult of all, and it is the stage where a majority of serious improvement efforts fail” [10, p. 41]; therefore, it is vital to develop trust and explain the why and how change will be implemented. Using the trust that has been developed and continuous conversations, schools can work on getting individuals and groups to buy-in to the idea that change is necessary. “Emotions and ideas are contagious” [28, p. 89], for better or for worse. When buy-in is present, the change can be smoother, but where there is strong resistance, it often comes as a group mentality.

Leaders have to recognize not everyone will be ready at the same time, and there should be continuous attempts to gain support from stakeholders. Starr [5] recognizes that those expected to engage in change efforts are more resistant to change if they are not involved in planning for change; therefore, stakeholders should be encouraged to collaborate to evoke change [3]. Stakeholders should have the opportunity and access to research as change is planned [3], which will allow them to discover best practices and contribute to the change efforts. Working as a team across many disciplines encourages looking at change from a variety of perspectives and continues efforts to foster relationships. With the trusting culture in place and careful attention to barriers, the common ground for sustainable change can be laid.

From trust, organizations move to defining why change is necessary; a step identified as necessary for sustainable change [3]. Schools can explain why using quantitative and qualitative data to identify areas for growth that align with organizational goals, purposes, and visions. Earlier, the metrics of data were acknowledged as a barrier to change; yet, here, it is necessary for identifying the need for change. This is why it is vital to recognize the barrier metrics can present, and work through how to break down the barrier. The why should also connect to the mission and vision of the organization, so the purpose supports who the organization is, being that “Shared vision fosters risk taking and experimentation” [30, p. 195].

Organizations can then move into how change is implemented. Schools can rely upon organizational systems and structures so those who engage in change have some guidelines. Participant

4 also recognized the importance of “really stopping and looking and saying, does your system allow for this level of change to happen?” When systems seem out of sync with the intended change, they may have to be modified or even eliminated to pave a clearer path for change.

Change often constitutes new learning, which requires time to consider what worked and what didn’t. With a plan in place, training is vital for employees to fully understand what is expected in the change. Too often, organizations fail to implement training that supports the learning needed for change to occur, or trainings are only provided for a limited time that doesn’t thoroughly develop employee’s understanding. “Training is, indeed, capable of helping organizational members learn and develop, but training targeted at supporting and enhancing organization change can have considerable payoff” [31, p. 374]. Leaders need to ensure training is done intentionally and regularly to reach the goal of sustainable change.

Along with training comes reflecting, which also requires time. Employees need time to process what they are learning and the changes that are happening so adjustments to change efforts can be made. Participants recognized the value that came in collaboratively considering the road to change and modifying the plans or celebrating the successes. Reflecting on change efforts is vital for learning from the past and moving forward with change implementation. As change is implemented, it should continue with consistency, where people are aware of what to expect. Leaders also need to communicate any detours and why they are necessary.

Throughout change, leaders can encourage perseverance. As Fullan states, “when you are on a crucial mission, stay the course against all odds” [28, p. 30]. There will inevitably be challenges and barriers throughout the change process, but if the change is truly needed, the organization has to come together to work through the difficulties to reach sustainable change.

Conclusion

Change in education can be complicated, time consuming, and overwhelming. According to Participant 1, “change is a term that can frighten people. And sometimes, if not frighten, put people off in a way that it’s difficult to capture their

hearts.” The complexities of the TSCE depict how challenging sustainable change can be. When schools recognize the commitment required for change to occur, conceivably, there will be greater consideration for whether a change is warranted. If a change is not worth the commitment needed to engage in the theory of sustainable change in education, then perhaps the change is not necessary for reaching organizational goals.

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Теорія сталих змін в освіті: Перспектива лідерства

У бізнесі та освіті використовуються різноманітні моделі змін, однак, очевидно, в існуючих моделях існує прогалина, призначена саме для нюансів освітніх змін. Автори досліджують причини, з яких більшість змін у шкільній освіті США (K-12) не призводять до бажаних результатів, і акцентують на необхідності трансформаційного лідерства для впровадження довготривалих змін у сфері освіти. Спираючись на конструктивістську обґрунтовану теорію та модель Берка-Літвіна, яка дозволяє окреслити взаємодію між управлінськими та лідерськими факторами змін в унікальному контексті шкільної освіти, автори приділяють основну увагу ролі керівників шкіл як ключових агентів змін у подоланні опору та побудові системи, здатної до навчання й адаптації.

Методика дослідження передбачала вивчення процесів змін в освіті через призму досвіду шкільного керівництва. Дані були отримані від 12 учасників, які обіймали керівні посади у школах різних типів впродовж щонайменше 5 років. Було виділено три ключові теми та десять підтем, які лягли в основу запропонованої авторами теоретичної моделі сталих змін. Перша тема — формування культури довірливих стосунків. Учасники наголосили, що довірливе середовище та підтримка є передумовою для будь-яких трансформацій, а це вимагає постійного діалогу й побудови взаємин. Друга тема — аналіз бар'єрів на шляху освітніх змін, як-от: опір з боку стейкхолдерів, часові обмеження, неефективні або неузгоджені метрики, недостатнє фінансування та надмірне регулювання. Третя тема — досягнення спільного бачення, або спільне підґрунтя для сталих змін, — передбачає формування довіри, розуміння причин змін і наявність чіткої мотивації ("чому"), а також створення зрозумілої структури їх впровадження ("як"). Результатом стала концептуалізація теорії, яка описує динамічну взаємодію цих компонентів у процесі освітніх трансформацій з позицій шкільного керівництва — теорії сталих змін в освіті (*Theory of Sustainable Change in Education*, або TSCE).

У висновках наголошено, що впровадження змін в освіті потребує унікального підходу і створення окремої моделі для освітнього середовища, в основі якої лежать побудова довіри, системна комунікація, врахування бар'єрів і залучення всіх учасників освітнього процесу. Модель TSCE пропонує послідовні кроки до сталих змін, інтегруючи дані, спільне бачення та культурні чинники. Вона не лише розширює наявні моделі змін, а й пристосовує їх до реалій освітньої практики, зокрема роль міжособистісних стосунків, часового ресурсу та політичного тиску. Лідери освітніх організацій можуть використовувати TSCE для планування, реалізації та підтримки ефективних і довготривалих змін.

Ключові слова: освітні зміни, лідерство, теорія лідерства, опір змінам