The most striking thing about change is that it almost always fails.
(Christopher Grey, 2005, p. 97)

Introduction
My keynote address at the Australian Summer School for Teachers of English occurred on the final day of two intensive weeks of scheduling, which proved to be very beneficial for my topic on leading, managing and supporting change. By the end of proceedings, I'd been able to listen to commentary from English teachers from around Australia – from all schooling sectors and levels of schooling – and was able to pitch my address to their (surprisingly common) dilemmas concerning change in schools.¹ I'll commence this chapter with comments I heard from teachers. Their remarks are very revealing and sum up the change process precisely, hence I quote extensively. Teachers said:

• When it comes to change the leader [principal] is elemental – I can rely on her support and encouragement, but I’m less confident about my colleagues;
• I’ve got in-principle support from my principal but I’m not sure of support from teachers;
• Teachers are very territorial and ‘I do what I do’;
• Resistance is the biggest thing – and lack of time is another;
• The institution itself can be resistant to change – especially those long standing teachers and long standing traditions;
• Change means ruffling feathers;
• Change means confronting the way we think about things;
• There's never enough money for change;
• If people get excited they want to do better;
• Change happens if people are for it;
• We create our work cultures, we're not victims, no-one's telling us what to do, we're powerful;
• I had a great idea but the sell was difficult, there was huge resistance, people were very vocal. The reaction was that there was too much going on already, or they say they're happy to do it but then don't;
• Resistance is an age group thing – the most resistant teachers are those who have been there, seen it, done it;
• If you take a whole school approach, eventually the dissenters become a very small voice;
• We need to hear the responses about change before we change, collect feedback and criticisms – there's a pre-change stage of discussion, analysis and trialling;
• It was so frustrating. I saw some of the worst behaviour from adults I have ever seen, the anger and antagonism was overwhelming;
• The cost to people's personal health and well-being was incredible. Many resigned, it was a knee-jerk reaction but a lot left;
• Teaching is getting too hard;
• Change is dumped on us;
• We've managed and survived an incredible amount of change in a very short time;
• Teachers are caught in the middle ... We've had huge changes and huge staff turnover;
• There's a lot of teacher dissatisfaction;
• Politicians are making us accountable but they're mucking things up;
• People get involved in our 'deal' when they think we're not handling it properly;
• The message [from politicians] is 'what you're doing is crap';
• We're so busy now with the change that the PR about lazy teachers has gone – people say 'Damn, you guys work hard!';
• Teachers are subject to criticism and attack;
• We need to get to the stage of having a unified message;
• It feels to me now (and I’m a teacher of 17 years) like we just have to follow orders;
• It’s a totalitarian thing – I just have to jump through the hoops, but so do principals and deputy principals;
• It all depends on leadership;
• If your principal isn’t interested, it won’t happen;
• I’ve had a very supportive leader, and one who wasn’t. If you have support, you can make changes more easily at the classroom level;
• Our deputy principal ... uses the budget to give us time together;
• It comes down to the principal and colleagues working together;
• We have huge resistance and protest amongst teachers. They just want to get away early and pick up their kids at three o’clock and so new initiatives fall on me and the new teachers. The others run a mile – it boils down to contributing your fair share to the team;
• The poorest results came from the teacher with the most experience and most years in the school but to her it isn’t her problem. Until people admit that they can do better, they won’t. They have to admit it to themselves;
• We’re like Year 9 & 10 students – tell us what to do and we’ll tell you to “stick it”;
• We expect new teachers to fly ... and land the plane on their first day without any help;
• We had a principal arrive 15 years ago with a blitzkrieg approach. For the last 7 or 8 years there have been no knockers. Everyone wants the best for kids. There’s [been] a lot of changes and they didn’t all work, but at least we know the principal is going to wear the consequences with us... We know he won’t leave, so there’s a spirit of openness;
• After a conference like this there’s a temptation to go too quickly. We have to pull ourselves back a bit and take it more slowly;
• Teachers are scared of being smacked around the ears because things can go wrong when you make changes;
• Change is best when it’s from the inside, not from outside; and
• Teachers need skills and support to make change happen.

From these comments it’s quite clear that teachers know a lot about change. The teachers’ observations capture what is documented in the research literature
which suggests that, fundamentally, change is never easy. However, if teachers can’t initiate positive change, then what good would an expensive national Summer School be, or anything else aiming for educational improvement and renewal for that matter?

Change as teachers see it
Although all schools are different, they exhibit some remarkable similarities, as the teachers’ observations suggest. Many externally mandated change initiatives occur without extra resources and with very short time lines – in fact, there is never enough time to plan and implement change thoroughly. As a result, most change efforts fail, or ‘succeed’ in word (mostly written) but not deed (see Starr, 2007). Teachers’ work has intensified – everybody is busy all the time, which is a large part of the problem. Paradoxically, mandated accountability, compliance and regulatory requirements that are supposed to improve schools have interfered with the ‘core’ business of teaching and learning, making change efforts even more compromised (Gronn, 2003).

Teachers argue there is not enough time or opportunity to work with colleagues in teams to develop curriculum and discuss pedagogy. Teachers appreciate talking, planning and sharing ideas, engaging with peers in teaching and learning processes – such as at the Summer School – which doesn’t occur regularly enough in schools. In the same vein, teachers would like opportunities for mentoring and coaching to grow professionally and solve problems with support and encouragement. Teachers learn best from each other (Fiszer, 2003). Successful change requires long timelines and money, with the money often being needed to buy time for teachers to plan and collaborate within school hours.

Cal Durrant and I commented in the first chapter that English teachers have been under critical media scrutiny for some time – not that any teachers have escaped criticism of some sort. One would assume from public commentators and politicians that Australia’s teachers are sub-standard, their teaching methods highly suspect, their students ill-prepared, with English teachers being especially singled out because it’s assumed they are primarily responsible for literacy and holding up cultural standards of what counts as literature. Systemic change is increasingly politically motivated and subject to public scrutiny and is foisted upon professionals as urgent reforms, remediation or rectification for a plethora of education ‘crises’. Hence the teachers’ comments listed above indicate that
they feel controlled, 'put upon', unacknowledged and un-thanked for their efforts. They feel that they have lost professional autonomy and their voice in public educational debates and decision making. What these sentiments reveal is that change is diminished when its implementers feel unappreciated and unsupported.

Change is assisted by continuity, but can also be hampered by it. Teachers who have worked with long-standing school leaders spoke about the sense of trust and certainty that develops when a group has been together for some time, especially with the same respected leader and in a school culture that embraces ideas for improvement. Change becomes easier and risk taking is permitted because colleagues are trusted to do their best to achieve better outcomes. There are benefits of having support from principals and deputy/assistant principals, but some teachers found school leaders to be too consumed and distracted with their own work demands to be concerned about the English curriculum or pedagogical issues. There is also acknowledgement that long-standing, very experienced teachers can be the ones most resistant to change. Change is hampered by cynics who see education fads coming and going, claiming that nothing's new – they've seen it all before (Evans, 1996). Cynical peers discourage those who are keen to see change occur and many Summer School participants felt compromised by resistant teacher peers.

This and other issues are taken up below, where I embellish teacher wisdom by discussing why most educational change efforts fail.

**Why schools are resistant to change**

*Reforms for schools, no matter how well conceptualised, powerfully sponsored, brilliantly structured, or closely audited are likely to fail in the face of cultural resistance from those in schools.* (Mulford & Silins, 2003, p. 175)

Change is difficult to lead and manage in any organisation, but is especially difficult in schools (Evans, 1996; Mulford & Silins, 2003). Unless individuals have been involved in its creation, it is human nature to resist change. People are comfortable with familiar and established routines, and organisational cultures operate to maintain the status quo. Change disrupts feelings of comfort, long-held values or beliefs, or ways of working. Whatever it is, there will be some break from the past, new effort and thinking required and extra time needed to
implement the new pursuit. It’s easier to remain the same. Sarason (1990, p. 35) argues:

*Like most other complex traditional social organisations, the schools will accommodate in ways that require little or no change ... The strength of the status quo – its underlying axioms, its patterns of power relationships, its sense of tradition and therefore what seems right, natural and proper – almost automatically rules out options for change.*

Many barriers to change relate to the nature of teachers’ work. Teachers’ work is complex, demanding, requiring untold interactions each day and attention to the diverse needs of large numbers of students, many of whom have learning or social difficulties. Students are becoming more demanding and harder to motivate (Evans, 1996), and teachers have to perform well in order to grasp and retain students’ attention and cooperation. Parents have increasing expectations of schools and teachers (Evans, 1996). Curriculum expectations are constantly changing and expanding. Teachers deal with daily unexpected requests, complaints, demands and queries. Hence, the quotidian of schools is messy, busy, exhausting and stakeholders are many. Time for prolonged planning, reflection or problem-solving is always lacking.

Consider then the endless imposed mandatory change agendas that are extrinsic to the school’s priorities, which add to workload and steal time from the school’s internal change initiatives. One-size-fits-all policies and the technical-rational-structural approach often adopted further exacerbate problems in implementation. Change is ongoing, uncertain and time is pressured, but imposed directives regularly ignore this fact. Top-down mandatory change that assumes a straight-forward, logical, predictable implementation with prescriptive timelines and procedures, fails to grapple with the complexity and dynamism of school life.

Teachers’ work can be very individualistic, despite teaching being a very community-spirited and publicly responsible occupation. After years of encountering the demands of students, schools and systems, teachers develop their own ways of operating and coping. Through experience and trial and error, they come to know what works for them. And although their intrinsic knowledge may not be articulated as theory, they know intuitively whether a new proposal is going to be useful or not. It is hardly surprising, then, that having found their
own tried and true methods, teachers may be ambivalent, skeptical or resistant to change.

Another relevant factor is that teachers are rarely involved in policy or change agenda formulation. They are acted upon – they are not co-sponsors of change. In this regard, Australian teachers are dealt with in a particularly shoddy way, often being portrayed as a part of the problem rather than as the solution to educational problems (Starr, 2007).

These conditions are hardly conducive to inspiring change and innovation. Reform requires an atmosphere of trust. It is this history that makes some experienced teachers very cynical and resistant to change (Evans, 1996; Grey, 2005; Duignan, 2006). These longstanding teachers are custodians of stories about the unintended, unanticipated, negative consequences or side-effects of change. Although frustrating for those leading change, it is important to consider that people have other life concerns besides their work. Middle age is the time when people's own children are going through critical times in their education or are leaving home; ageing parents are making extra demands; retirement is looming and plans and adjustments have to be made. Life gets more, not less complex. Some older members of staff won't be the only ones who are less than keen to change, but they can be most confident and vocal in their dissent and have the capacity to take other members of staff with them.

The Summer School participants had numerous ideas for change and wanted to make sure the changes they had planned were not thwarted back in schools. So what can teachers do to give curriculum and pedagogical change the best chance of succeeding?

**Back to the beginning: giving change the best chance**

What can teachers do to make change more likely to happen in schools? The following ideas can be gleaned from the teachers' comments quoted at the start of this chapter. Other suggestions are derived from research into successful school change, especially as it relates to teacher leadership (see for example, Starr & Oakley, 2008). Some things are fundamental to successful change. Many of the ideas below are simple and based on common sense, but research demonstrates that without some seemingly unimportant particulars being considered, change outcomes are radically reduced (e.g. Evans, 1996; Gray, 2005).

Teacher leaders are more successful when they operate in a shared leadership environment, with the tacit support of principals and deputy/assistant principals.
This can be achieved through:

- Having regular meetings with school leaders to garner their interest, to ensure they understand the aims of the change and what it entails, so they can provide resources, encouragement and advice on leading and managing change;
- Ensuring the change initiative is included on the Faculty Strategic Plan or School Development Plan, which provides status, impetus and implicit endorsement while ensuring that the program is aligned with school goals, needs, priorities and budgets;
- Using school-based data to provide evidence of the need for change and information to enhance the development of new programs;
- Assuming ownership and responsibility for the program, its budget and its processes;
- Securing time and money for professional learning, for group reflection and planning;
- Agreeing on accountability processes so that expectations are achievable within realistic timeframes;
- Being relieved of extra administrative or extra curricula tasks;
- Negotiating a time allocation to undertake major change;
- Requesting opportunities for mentors and coaching support sourced from within and outside the school;
- Undertaking interschool visits for fact-finding and ideas sharing; and
- Sharing professional readings or other pertinent information to raise interest and discussion.

Shared leadership is actually shared learning. It is impossible for change to occur in schools without it. School leaders can't initiate change all by themselves. Supporting others to lead change builds capacity, enhances the potential of change and nurtures leadership succession. While school leaders may be too busy to be closely involved in a change program, their support can be invaluable to teacher leaders.

The most successful change results from the deliberations of those who will be affected by it and those who are involved in its implementation. A clear rationale must be developed, providing the reasons why it is better to change than to retain the status quo. Emphasise where current practice is out of step with
current research and thinking in English. The intrinsic benefits of change need to be amplified — for students, teachers, parents, and the school. The reform needs to be 'sold' well — to gain commitment and, ideally, consensus. As one teacher suggested at the beginning, if people aren't for change, it won't happen.

Key people are critical for the success of major change. Even when agreement about reform and the process for achieving it is struck, there will be key personnel who are indispensable in terms of impetus, motivating others and taking responsibility for certain tasks. Ask for volunteers or tap recruits on the shoulder. In nearly all cases, colleagues play their part when they know it's a team effort.

People need to be reassured with explicit steps about what is going to happen, when these things are going to happen and what the expected outcomes will be. These points should be negotiated. Timelines are critical. Provide adequate time and try to create extra time. Most importantly, publish and distribute these steps simply and succinctly. Repeat them often and revise them if necessary. Simply mentioning these details at a meeting won't be enough.

Change gains momentum when it is announced in every possible forum and to all stakeholders. Once a change is announced publicly, there is a commitment to see it through. People will understand that there is no chance of this initiative being sidelined or abandoned. Present progress reports at staff meetings, assemblies, in newsletters, at council meetings, parent gatherings — whenever and where ever you can. Let everyone know what is happening and why. Most importantly, publicise the benefits for students who are at the heart of major decisions.

When asked to perform in new ways, teachers should be supported by appropriate and tailored professional learning. Professional development must be timely, intensive, sustained, theoretically based, practically situated, responsive to the expressed needs of the teachers involved, and is best if school-based evidence is at its foundation. Professional learning should be both reflective and future-oriented. It should receive a time priority as part of the change process and will involve a budget for staff release and other resources. Ensure that newcomers are inducted into the change process, and are clear about expectations of them — get them enthused about the vision for improvement and the benefits it will bring.

Never underestimate how difficult it is to manage change, or how oppositional some people will be. Expect resistance and emotionality to override rationality at times. Discussion about difficulties and resolutions should be
open and encouraged. Plans will invariably be compromised and adapted as time goes on. And expect change to have unforeseen repercussions. It can have both positive and negative consequences – even if it is highly successful overall.

Consideration must be given to the cultural and behavioural changes that will be necessary to ensure that change is enduring. Distrust must be addressed or major change will be sabotaged. To achieve the trust required, teacher leaders must be optimistic, confident and endorse supportive, convivial relationships. It is imperative that teacher leaders exhibit dedication, involvement and passion. The leader has to lead, encourage, support and be personally available and involved. This means maintaining steadfast faith in the change program whilst addressing contextual problems and supporting others. It means rolling up one’s sleeves and working with others to engage the change, to see and hear about problems first hand. Compromise and revision may be necessary and often improves original intentions. Maintain a sense of humour!

Keep records about the change process – what has been done and what has changed. Collect data that indicates improvement e.g. improved academic performance; increased staff capacity through sustained professional learning; positive comments from students or parents, etc. These will provide others with a broader appreciation of what has been achieved collectively. Celebrate successes and milestones along the way.

**Conclusion**

Change is demanding, stressful and difficult and can’t occur without teacher leaders. Whatever its catalyst, knowing how to lead and manage change effectively is an essential attribute for teacher leadership, and is a constant expectation. Sharing leadership and power throughout the change process will be enabling for everyone in the school. Despite its extra demands, there are rewards for teacher leaders who oversee second order change. The more difficult the challenge, the greater the professional rewards and satisfaction when improvements are made. And everyone benefits – most importantly, our students. It is everyone’s great hope that the plans made by teachers at the Summer School succeed in school settings across Australia.
Note

1 Here I am talking about major or second order change processes. First order change concerns ongoing minor modifications or adjustments to existing practices to improve effectiveness that don't involve consequential alterations. Second order change is more complex – it involves systematic renewal and incurs fundamental or radical departures from usual practice.

References


