

1st and 2nd Order Change¹

The driving force of contemporary reform efforts is the need to redefine the **quantity** and quality of student learning. Since reform efforts began, researchers have conducted a number of studies to describe the nature of the changes being made in the schools and to identify the impact of those changes on student learning. Currently, the body of research and consistent findings are enlightening, and show an emerging coherent picture of successful reform. Goodman (1995) wrote about “change without difference,” and identified top-down, technical, ameliorative responses as first order changes. School systems have implemented numerous first order changes. Examples of these include changes in school and administrative structures, **schedules** and class sizes. First order changes have extended to the classroom level as well. Teachers have been trained in an abundance of specific instructional strategies such as writing lesson objectives on the board, managing cooperative learning groups, and asking higher-order thinking questions. These efforts are usually accompanied by teacher skepticism, subversion, and questions such as, “Why are we doing this?” This is a valid question – decades of reform have passed and students are still not meeting achievement goals. In many schools, so much attention is directed to outward changes that the fundamental reasons for change are ignored.

Recalling Michaels (1988) once again, “The clear message of reform is that we need to examine our basic philosophical beliefs about teaching, learning, the nature of human beings, and the kinds of environments that maximize growth for teachers and **students** alike” (p. 3). Changes that bring meaningful and lasting reform to the school and classroom alter the underlying philosophical beliefs driving practice, and are described by Goodman (1995) as second order changes. In their book on school restructuring, Ellis and Fouts (1994) argue that second order changes are required in order for educational reforms to be accomplished and sustained over the long term. According to Fouts (2003):

There is evidence that one of the reasons schools remain unchanged is that the reforms or changes have been superficial in nature and/or arbitrary in their adoption. Teachers and schools often went through the motions of adopting the new practices, but the changes were neither deep nor long-lasting. In other words, the outward manifestations of the changes were present, but the ideas or philosophy behind the changes were either not understood, misunderstood, or rejected. Consequently, any substantive change in the classroom experience or school culture failed to take root. The illusion of change is created through a variety of activities, but the qualitative experience for students in the classroom remains unchanged when the ideas driving daily practice remain unchanged.

¹ From “A decade of reform: A **summary** of research findings on classroom, school, and district effectiveness in Washington State,” by J.T. Fouts, 2003, Seattle Pacific University. Adapted with permission. <http://www.bercgroup.com/1st-and-2nd-order-change.html>

In the educational reform research work of Baker (1998), Fouts, Stuen, Anderson, and Parnell (2000), Mork (1998), and Van Slyke (1998), schools were asked to identify the focus of their improvement efforts. Many schools focused on **cosmetic** first order changes, while others shifted their philosophical understandings about the nature of teaching and learning and experienced second order changes. The research revealed that schools have significantly better chances for achievement gains when, rather than focusing on implementing specific strategies, their improvement efforts addressed basic concepts of how students should be taught and collaborative culture in the school and classroom. Second order changes in successful schools incorporate three factors: (1) a fundamental change in ideas about and actions toward student achievement, (2) instructional enhancement focused on refining pedagogy, and (3) collaborative support that replaces a culture of isolation with one of extensive partnership (Baker, 1998).

When strategies are outward manifestations of underlying philosophies, deep change in school culture and in classroom teaching and learning can occur. The examples shown in Figure 1 are changes that appear frequently in research around school reform. When educators adopt new ideas about instruction (second order changes), they might select strategies (first order changes) to put those ideas into practice. Together, first and second order changes help provide a qualitatively different experience for students and raise achievement.

Figure 1. First Order Changes and Corresponding Second Order Changes

<u>First Order Change(strategies)</u>		<u>Second Order Change (philosophies)</u>
Smaller class		
Site-based councils	⇒	Changing relationships and teaching philosophies
Ninety-minute teaching blocks	⇒	Collaborative ownership
Small Learning Communities	⇒	Extended teaching and learning opportunities
Teaching teams with common planning	⇒	New interactions/relationships Coordinated focused curriculum & instruction

To illustrate the difference between first and second order changes, consider the specific strategy of reducing class size. Research shows that students benefit from an educational environment in which they receive personal attention from the teacher and individualized instruction that meets their needs. Students are able to develop closer relationships with an adult and with their peers when class size is small. However, as desirable as reducing class size may be, the strategy does not ensure that the relationship between the teacher and students in the classroom will change, nor does it ensure that diverse or more appropriate teaching methods will be used. A teacher can be just as impersonal and uncaring toward 15 students as toward 30 students; simply reducing class size will not change that teacher’s behavior. The philosophy and ideas driving teacher actions in the classroom must be replaced.