An Overview of Implementation Literacy

by Hannah Gbenro

"Hmm. I don't see how this approach is any different from what we did last year."

"All we do is sit in meetings and talk about getting things done – we don't actually make decisions and get things done!"

"We just need to go to one-to-one technology then all of our students would be better equipped to be college and career ready."

If I had a dollar for every time I heard someone say something like this, I'd be rich! In reality, the reason these statements sound so familiar is they summarize feelings and perceptions that are a natural part of every single change. Terms like "innovation" are common in today's learning landscape. Although the innovation itself might look different over time, the idea of implementing change within Pk-12 settings is not new.

Every innovation involves implementing something to create change in hopes of creating, at the end of the day, more high school graduates who are college, career, and community ready. In education, we try to implement innovations that are evidence-based practices and interventions because we want to create change and see the difference in our classrooms, schools, and districts. Too often, though, we move forward with an innovation, while overlooking the science behind the implementation of that evidence-based innovation (Gbenro, 2013; Fixsen et al, 2005). This oversight, or lack of implementation literacy, causes misconceptions, miscommunications, and ultimately failure that leads to either (a) the introduction of a different innovation to solve the original problem or (b) new problems.

Examples of innovations

1. an updated curriculum
2. different technology
3. a 7 period schedule
4. a new student information system
5. shifting the role of your Teacher Librarians
6. a new program to support English Language Learners
7. an updated district assessment system
8. a new instructional framework
9. updated approaches to grading
10. new policies for student behavior

An innovation doesn't have to be new to the field of education, it just needs to be new for you and your school/district.

Implementation literacy reduces the likelihood of failure for new innovations. In order to be literate in implementing innovations, educators leading the way need to:

- Gain proficiency with implementation frameworks and evaluation strategies
- Develop cross-functional relationships to support collaborative approaches
- Understand how to shift a culture within simple and complex educational systems
- Understand the implementation cycle

Let's go deeper with each of these concepts and make meaning of their application within our districts and schools

Implementation Frameworks and Evaluation Strategies

If you're not sure where to start when thinking about a framework for implementing and monitoring the implementation of your innovation – that's okay, I'll let you in on a secret: implementation frameworks already exist! This is fantastic because you don't have to start from scratch! Below are frameworks I've found helpful. These frameworks can be applied to many different innovations. Educational leaders who are implementation literate are knowledgeable about different innovation frameworks and use the best framework to ensure a successful implementation.

- Concerns-Based Adoption Model (Hall & Hord, 2011): CBAM is based on over 30 years of research in PK-College settings. The focus of this research, and CBAM, is providing tools and techniques that equip leaders to gauge staff concerns and program use in order to give each teacher the necessary support to ensure the successful implementation of innovations. Innovation Configuration Maps, Stages of Concern, and Levels of Use are core to the foundation of CBAM. More: www.sedl.org/cbam
- Implementation Science (National Implementation Research Network, 2015):

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Hear Dr. Gbenro in person at *ASCD Empower 17* (Annual Conference) in Anaheim this March, 2017. Dr. Gbenro is presenting on "Innovative Change: Ensuring it's Effective and Making it Manageable".

IS involves the study of different elements and factors influencing the full and effective use of innovations within a classroom, school, or district. Implementation Science is designed to identify what is needed to support a successful implementation, and examine the extent to which innovations are being used. Fixsens Stages of Implementation are a fundamental component of IS. More: nirn.fpg.unc.edu

- Developmental Evaluation (Patton, 2010): DA was designed to support the implementation of innovations in education, with a focus on providing educational leaders with a framework to adapt implementations to real-time emerging and dynamic realities within our complex educational systems. DA provides a foundation for using evaluative questioning, thinking, and data to support implementation literate leaders in facilitating systemic, data-based reflection and decision-making.

Cross-Functional Teaming

A cross-functional team involves leaders who specialize in different functions within the school or district (Anderson, 2012). A successful cross-functional team can make a huge difference when implementing an innovation. On the other hand, a cross-functional team can easily go awry without a strong foundation – it might feel like everyone is "speaking a different language" and this quickly becomes a barrier to growing innovation. Educational leaders who are implementation literate often employ the following strategies to support success with cross-functional teams:

- Identify a facilitator who can keep the group focused on the common goal through cooperative grouping strategies and intentional use of data.
- Develop common agreements (or norms) to support the meeting time and ongoing communication amongst team members.
- Leverage the strengths of team members – this engages each individual. Provide opportunities for team members to equip and teach each other about their expertise within the context of working toward the common goal (Bellman & Ryan, 2009).

Shifting a Culture

When a new product is introduced to the market in the business world, a company strategically designs marketing approaches to address consumer concerns and tell the "why" behind the product's design (Kotler, 2011). Implementation literate educational leaders apply best practices from the world of Consumer Psychology and Organizational Development to engage stakeholders and target communications to address the unique needs of teachers, administrators, students, and parents as an innovation is implemented. In order to shift a culture, implementation literate leaders acknowledge *What is* and define *What if?* at three levels: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 2010).

Implementation Cycle

Finally, as educators progress through the stages of implementation within an identified framework such as CBAM or Implementation Science, implementation literate leaders understand how to engage educators to continuously work through the Implementation Cycle: Plan > Do > Learn > Act. Here are some guiding questions that implementation literate educational leaders often consider at each phase of the implementation cycle.

- **Plan:** What is the desired state of implementation? How will we know we've reached this desired state? What practices and processes can we systematize? How does implementing this innovation further the mission of our district? What is the evidence this innovation can be effective elsewhere? What evidence-based implementation framework are we using to ensure the innovation is effective? How are we laying the foundation to ensure this innovation is effective within our schools and district? What are the potential benefits and risks of implementing this innovation? How will we mitigate risks? How are we

Examples of Cross-Functional Teams

- School Example: A task force designing, implementing, & monitoring the impact of innovative spaces. Team members: building administrator, classroom teacher, teacher librarian, student, parent.
- District Example: A team responsible for the rollout, implementation, and monitoring the impact of one-to-one technology to support blended learning. Team members: District leaders from technology, teaching and learning, communications, and human resources. School leaders representing building administration, classroom teachers, teacher librarians, and instructional coaches.

Ideas for telling the story and shifting the culture

- Videos and photos that archive the transition
- Newsletter articles
- Public or internal website housing transition documents and providing transparency
- Written and visual updates targeted for specific sets of stakeholders

Implementation Cycle

assessing, and communicating, the need for the innovation? How will we communicate progress about this project with others? How are we ensuring valid and reliable processes are used throughout the implementation?

- **Do:** How will we communicate as a team? How are we leveraging the strengths of a cross-functional team? How are we valuing functional diversity and promoting effective communication practices? How are we laying the foundation for this change to be adopted and truly shift practice? How are we engaging, equipping, and empowering team members? How are we tapping into the knowledge, talents, and diverse perspectives of team members? How are we intentionally creating, and supporting, second-order change? How are we framing the message for different sets of stakeholders? How are we laying the foundation for the cultural shift at each level (artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, basic underlying assumptions)?
- **Learn:** To what extent is this innovation being implemented? What implementation data supports our understanding of the extent to which the innovation is implemented? What results data do we have so far? How can we use our implementation data as a lens through which to review our results data?
- **Act:** Based on what we know about the extent to which the innovation is currently being implemented, what do we need to adjust moving forward? How will we document that we made these adjustments? What additional supports and/or resources are needed to make this a successful implementation? What policies, practices, and systems need to be adjusted moving forward? (Additional Guiding Questions from the "Do" implementation stage are applicable here.)

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