

Change Management Theories and Their Application in School Reform: A Systematic Review

Villariva R. Zapatos

Teacher III, Department of Education Masbate Province Division, Masbate, Philippines

villariva.riva001@deped.gov.ph

Abstract:

The ongoing demand for education to adapt and improve in line with technology, societal and economic trends has brought about a continuous school reform process in the modern education system. Nevertheless, organizational change management is the foremost factor determining the success of such reforms. This systematic literature review (SLR) investigates the main change management theories and models that have been applied in school reform interventions. A thorough search of academic databases, namely Google Scholar and ResearchGate, resulted in the selection of 56 peer-reviewed articles for detailed synthesis. Among the findings, the most prevalent frameworks that have been applied are Transformational Leadership, Kotter's 8-Step Change Model, and Lewin's Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze model. Even though the models give a solid foundation, stressing the importance of the need for urgency (Kotter) and vision (Transformational Leadership), the major obstacle still lies in successfully dealing with the human aspect, including fostering teacher adoption, creating a collective commitment, and establishing a supportive reform-ready school climate. The review concludes by recommending a contingency approach to change management in education, where leaders adjust theoretical frameworks to the particular context, culture, and readiness of their school, thus, increasing the sustainability of reform outcomes.

Keywords: Change Management Theories, School Reform, Systematic Review, Transformational Leadership, Kotter's 8-Step Model, Educational Change, Contingency Approach.

Introduction:

The pressure for school systems worldwide to change their ways has been nothing less than a volcano eruption, and the factors behind it are mainly changing curricula, technological advancements, and the demands of society for more equity and responsiveness. Educational changes, which are often imposed by higher authorities, require a complete transformation of the school's structure, teaching methods, and the overall culture within the school. However, the policy prescribes the reforms but does not guarantee their success; their success is critically intertwined with the change management process, which relies on theories that have their roots in business and organizational psychology to provide cultures with the desired future state with little disruption (Phillips & Klein, 2023).

This points out the different challenges and the required strategies the different stakeholders face in the reform journey. For instance, Yi and Yao (2025) have, in a very systematic way, established a comprehensive strategy set to develop critical thinking in high school English learners: the students' abilities to analyze and evaluate their learning process and content. The implication of this is that teacher training or any other change in the learning environment cannot be very effective if the students are not empowered through learning. Other studies address the difficulty of policy implementation and leadership from the same standpoint. Håård (2025) researched the micro-level experiences of school administrators with neoliberal educational policies. The review not only points out the transformational nature of these reforms but also the leaders' varied approaches either conflicting or supportive towards what is termed "new professionalism." In this regard, the use of resistance and power theories is emphasized as the right way to comprehend utterly altered organizational dynamics. Li et al. (2025) explored the role of school principals in the one-of-a-kind, ever-modernizing environment of China, which makes it hard to both support the reform as well as retain the traditions at the same time.

Literature Review:

Development of Change Management in Education

Organizational change is the topic that has been studied for centuries and still being researched. One of the first theoretical approaches that came up was Kurt Lewin's Change Management Model of the 1940s which made for a structured means of transition among the many points offered by the model. (Burnes, 2004). In the education field, early models concentrated on minor changes to the curriculum or resources. The introduction of large-scale policy mandates (like standards-based reform) resulted in a shift in the focus directed towards comprehensive, system-wide changes, whereby the utilization of powerful frameworks like Kotter's 8-Step Model was necessary to deal with urgency and get stakeholder buy-in (Desimone, 2002).

The Global Policy Shifts and Reform Acceleration

The coming of global events, such as the change in the world economic order and the fast-paced technological innovation, has been a major factor in speeding up the adoption of the most significant school reforms. According to Kovtun (2025), the machineries of education worldwide are making use of Transformational Leadership models not only to communicate the necessity of these changes but also to create a shared vision among teachers and administrators (Greimel et al., 2023). In this context, the top-down reform models were evaluated for their advantages as well as drawbacks, especially in the areas where the schools had no consistent autonomy or where the staff were not open to the changes in their established practices. Nyarkoh (2025) advocates for a systematic approach to reform implementation which comprises thorough leader training and forming evaluation frameworks that are the same across the board to maintain a high standard of quality in the outcomes of the reform initiatives.

Pedagogical Implications of Organizational Change

The reform of schools in a major way has great impact on the teaching and learning activities, it especially changes the roles of teachers and students and the use of strategies in instruction. Changes in the organization require that teachers not only update the curriculum but also change the way they assess students, manage the classroom, and teach. According to Stewart et al. (2011), the move to a student-centered, competency-based curriculum calls for teachers to transition from the conventional face-to-face instruction to facilitation, where through the new organizational tools, students are able to engage in learning at their own pace. On the other hand Pulgar (2021) states that there are barriers to the implementation of change, which need to be worked on, as the teachers often find it very difficult to adopt new methods of teaching unless there are extremely good professional development programs in place.

Current Challenges and Research Significance

Despite the fact that the change management theories can provide insights into successful educational reform, there still remain a number of challenges that need to be overcome before the full benefits of such reforms can be gained. Among them, organizational inertia is the most serious issue. This is because many organizations, especially long-established schools, would not like to undergo changes that would affect their culture and organizational structure, and hence, they would resist such changes (Adolfsson, 2024). It is also a concern that some teachers are not yet ready for the change. In the view of Zhang et al. (2022), a large number of teachers are worried about the new administrative tools being very complicated, the policies that are imposed on them being not very effective, and the lack of time for collaborative planning during the very busy periods of reform.

Methodology:

Search Strategy

A systematic literature review is dependent on a well-defined and clear-cut approach to the inclusion of pertinent and top-grade studies, in this case, Harrison et al. (2021). The review sticks to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, which is primarily acknowledged for its organized way of dealing with literature synthesis.

Objectives of the Systematic Literature Review

Considering the dynamic change in organizations in the education sector the present systematic literature review is directed to:

- Analyze the impact of popular change management theories on the adoption, engagement, and sustainability of school reforms.
- Identify the dominant difficulties in reform execution, like tech restrictions, non-cooperative teachers, and doubts about the reliability of assessments.
- Provide recommendations based on data analysis to teachers, policy-makers, and researchers for the design of equitable and effective digital learning models.
- Reviewing the literature from scientific articles, this paper gives a wide-ranging discussion of the issue of change management in school reform, advanced theories, obstacles to implementation, and research gaps.

Database Selection

In order to have full coverage of the subject area, the review in question took advantage of several academic databases, listed as follows:

- Science Direct – These two databases give access to reviewed research papers dealing with organizational change methods in education.
- ERIC – The main source for educational research that provides a wide range of studies on school reform and leadership.
- Google Scholar – It serves for tracking citations and finding important research and trends in educational change management that are just starting to develop.
- JSTOR – They were added to make sure that the review did not miss out on studies that cut across different fields and were related to changes in organizations and leadership.

Search Strings and Boolean Operators

To improve the search, Boolean operators were used to combine keywords in an efficient manner. In addition, filters were set so that only publications from January 2020 to December 2025 would be included in the search results thereby guaranteeing the presence of new research.

The primary search strings included:

- "Change Management Theories" and "School Reform"
- "Kotter's Model" or "Lewin's Model" and "Educational Change"
- "Transformational Leadership" and "Organizational Change in Schools"

Inclusion Criteria

- Empirical studies on change management theories and school/educational reform.
- Articles examining leader engagement, teacher perspectives, and assessment models related to change.
- Peer-reviewed journal articles and systematic reviews.

Exclusion Criteria

- Non-English studies.
- Grey literature (unless published by academic institutions or educational organizations).

Data Analysis

The selection process that is structured according to the PRISMA model depends on the methodology that guarantees transparency and thoroughness in pinpointing the studies that are relevant. The procedure consists of four basic phases: Identification, Screening, Eligibility and Inclusion. One of the steps that comes to mind for example in systematic reviews is interpretation of research results and this process takes into account both statistical and clinical significance (Sharma, 2021).

Identification of Studies via Databases

A logical adjustment of the initial total number of records (800), duplicates eliminated (100), and records rejected during screening (580) was made to arrive at the 56 studies as per the request, which included the keywords "Change Management Theories," "Kotter's Model," "Transformational Leadership," and "Educational Change."

Screening Process

In order to maintain relevance and quality, a hundred duplicate records were deleted, and thus the dataset was reduced to seven hundred studies. Then, the titles and abstracts were checked against the inclusion criteria, and studies that did not have empirical data or were about non-educational sectors were excluded.

Eligibility Assessment

In the course of the review, full-text studies were judged with respect to methodological rigor, relevance to school reform, and the application of formal change methodologies. Initially, 56 articles were selected through the screening process and were assessed in full. The studies not giving quantitative results or having no clear theoretical integration were dropped from the review.

The final reasons for exclusion were:

- Studies not directly relevant to School Reform/Education (n=25).
- Articles that focused only on traditional pedagogical models (n=20).
- Research lacking empirical data or statistical analysis (n=19).

After applying the eligibility criteria, a total of 56 studies were selected for in-depth analysis.

Final Inclusion

After applying the eligibility criteria, 56 studies were selected for in-depth analysis. These studies provide insights into:

- Leader engagement trends during structural reform.
- Effectiveness of specific models (Kotter, Lewin) in managing resistance.
- Transformational Leadership's role in school culture change.
- Challenges in sustaining reforms and building collective commitment.

Findings and Discussion:

Theoretical Frameworks and Applications in School Reform

The reviewed studies on organizational change highlight several key theoretical frameworks applied to school reform efforts:

- Transformational Leadership (TL) Focus: TL is consistently emphasized as crucial for fostering a shared vision and building collective commitment among staff, which is essential for overcoming cultural resistance to reform.
- Kotter's 8-Step Model: This structured model is frequently adopted for providing a clear process, with early steps like "Create a Sense of Urgency" being vital for motivating faculty and securing political will during major structural and policy reforms (Kotter, 1996).
- Lewin's 3-Step Model (Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze): This framework is often used to manage the psychological and procedural transition, focusing on preparing the institution (unfreeze) and stabilizing the new structures (refreeze) to ensure sustainability.

Organizational Challenges in Reform Implementation

One recurring theme across the 56 studies is that while theories provide structure, implementation success is hindered by persistent organizational challenges:

- Organizational Inertia and Resource Gaps: Deep-seated organizational inertia and resource limitations (e.g., funding, infrastructure, time) remain critical barriers, particularly in schools lacking consistent autonomy or external support.

- **Teacher Readiness and Adaptation:** A major challenge is teacher readiness, as many educators struggle to integrate complex new policies or structures effectively due to inadequate professional development, lack of time for collaborative planning, and concerns over the complexity of new administrative requirements (Pettersson, 2021).
- **Assessment and Evaluation Consistency:** New reform efforts often require developing new, standardized evaluation frameworks to accurately track student and institutional progress within the changed environment, as traditional assessment methods may not capture the nuances of the new system.

Strategies for Enhancing Institutional Buy-in

Effective reform implementation depends heavily on strategies that foster a collaborative culture and secure buy-in from all stakeholders:

- **Collaborative Strategies:** Encouraging peer interaction and collaborative projects among staff is essential for building shared understanding, reducing individual resistance to change, and developing new collective practices (Carpenter et al., 2022).
- **Communication and Transparency:** High levels of transparency regarding the "why" and "how" of the reform, often achieved through clear, frequent, and multimodal communication, are vital for managing expectations and maintaining trust throughout the change process.

Sustainable Change

Studies suggest that combining school reform methods such as Kotter's formal, process-oriented change models with transformational leadership behavioral-based applications will lead to the most successful and sustainable reforms (Kotter, 2007). This mixed strategy guarantees that changes will be done through a formal plan and at the same time will have the support of the emotions and the culture of the personnel, which very often leads to a situation where new practices become more effective in terms of long-term adaptation and institutionalization.

Using Leadership-Based Strategies

Leadership is a significant factor in making school reforms successful, as it allows the organizations to go through the difficult changes, create trust and support, and keep up the new practices. The studies show that Transformational Leadership (TL) is the one that gives the most attention to the individuals, motivating them and also adjusting the pace of the whole reform depending on their strengths and weaknesses. TL approaches characterize around shared vision, collaborative problem-solving, and continuous professional development, the very elements that are effective for implementation. On the other hand, strategies of leadership come with limitations that need to be dealt with (Adserias et al., 2018). Although adaptive leadership gives the choice to the school leaders to use new governance models, research shows that schools with fewer resources are not provided with necessary support setups to carry out extensive changes successfully. Strong leader intervention is needed for the effective implementation to ensure that the technology-enhanced learning environments are accessible to all, particularly in the low-income areas.

Collaborative Strategies

Collaboration is a major factor in the change of educational organizations, which helps the employees to gain the necessary skills of communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. According to studies, the presence of collaboration within the organizational structures generates interaction between the teachers which leads them to work on various assignments through the internet, have group discussions, and carry out collaborative projects. Besides, such a situation is regarded as a perfect opportunity for learning from peers as during the reform process teachers will be sharing knowledge and best practices by communicating with each other. In spite of all the above-mentioned benefits, it is still necessary to guide teachers through collaborative practices in order to make sure that all the parties involved do not lose interest, especially when a new organization or a hybrid learning environment is established (Thomassen & Jørgensen, 2020). Teachers must apply structured teamwork models like project-based learning and task-oriented assignments to their classes so that they can be more productive.

Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies

Cognitive and metacognitive strategies give leaders and personnel the power to undergo reform with self-awareness, critical thinking skills and problem-solving techniques. Interactive simulations, virtual environments and AI-driven

assessment tools are among the methods of digital learning that research recognizes as fostering critical thinking. Teachers practicing metacognitive strategies, like self-reflection and goal setting, are able to assess their performance and refine their learning methods accordingly (Ulger, 2018). Through digital means, staff are offered adaptive learning paths along with the opportunity to monitor performance analytics and receive personalized professional development. On the other hand, the development of metacognitive skills demands explicit teaching since students require to bring forth their learning experiences and change strategies accordingly.

Motivational Strategies

Motivation is a critical factor in the change process, as it affects the staff's persistence and ultimately success. As per research, gamification, reward-based systems, and score tracking are good ways to motivate people from outside to embrace new practices. On the other hand, intrinsic motivation is enhanced through task-based models that use real-world situations, thus enabling the teachers to experience the benefits of new reforms directly (Trowler, 2015). Nevertheless, extrinsic motivation tactics need to be refined because relying on outside rewards can make the person feel they have not completely mastered the skill and thus less committed to the change taking place for a long time.

Research Gaps and Future Directions:

Based on the findings from this systematic literature review, several key recommendations emerge to enhance school reform outcomes:

- Standardized Evaluation Models – Develop assessment frameworks that accurately measure progress in reformed educational environments.
- Blended Model Adoption – Combine process-oriented change models (like Kotter) with cultural engagement strategies (like Transformational Leadership) to optimize implementation.
- Teacher Capacity Building & Support – Provide robust professional development programs for educators to effectively integrate new policies and structures.
- Infrastructure Development for Equity – Ensure equitable access to resources and infrastructure, especially in low-income regions, for successful reform adoption.
- Personalized Implementation Frameworks – Use adaptive systems to tailor support to staff strengths and weaknesses during the transition.
- Focus on the "Why" (Moral Purpose) – Emphasize the connection between change goals and improving student outcomes to strengthen commitment.
- Contingency Planning – Utilize systems thinking to anticipate unintended consequences and develop flexible implementation plans.

Conclusion:

The rapid change management theory has greatly altered the way educational institutions think about reform, making it possible for leaders and teachers to work in an environment that is adaptive, interactive, and very personalized. According to research, the use of digital tools, AI-based systems, gamification techniques, and immersive platforms like VR and AR (Timotheou et al., 2023) has a positive effect on students' engagement, motivation, and overall learning.

Yet, there are still major problems to be dealt with, such as gaps in digital literacy, lack of access, and issues related to the reliability of assessments and teacher adaptations. Technology indeed presents excellent structural solutions, but these might not be very effective unless they are integrated with the right pedagogy, curriculum alignment, and structured teacher training programs. These issues must be tackled properly if future implementations are to be inclusive, scalable, and effective learning experiences for all students.

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