

Westward Expansion as a Metaphor for Educational Change

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**Abstract:** “Westward Expansion As a Metaphor for Educational Change” reviews current leadership research under the guise of an exploration of the American west from 200 years ago. This paper describes the events of a wagon train’s trip west and the problems that occur during the trip and exploration into an unknown land. It uses the events from this trip as a metaphor to explain issues related to education reform. It uses change theory and current research on leadership to explain the events happening on the wagon train’s trip, including why educational change is slow, the role of leadership to support change, and suggestions for supporting an educational change process.

**Annotation:** “Westward Expansion As a Metaphor for Educational Change” is a concept piece presenting a wagon train trip through the old American west as a metaphor for educational change. It uses change theory and research on leadership to analyze educational change.

## WESTWARD EXPANSION AS A METAPHOR FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

An educational change process is a journey that might have some similar traits to an exploration of the American west occurring 200 years ago. The educational expedition is a trip into a world unknown to what educators currently experience or can anticipate in their existing world.

### The Trip

The trip begins with a group of people who are ready to explore a new land of educational reform. The new land is thought to possess great opportunity. The goal of the expedition is for the explorers to discover practical routes across the land of reform in order to help all explorers reach the great treasures of the new land. As the people explore the new land, they must work to establish peaceful relations with all the people they encounter and learn from their experiences so that the trip increases their knowledge and expertise. The expedition should create a path for other explorers to travel in similar journeys.

The trip starts near the shore of a great river, a stalwart for traditions. To the west is a new land. Many people prepare for this journey. Indeed, government officials have pressed the travelers to explore uncharted lands, learn new ideas, and share the ideas with others. The trip is to be duly mapped so that expedition members can be accountable to the funding given to them by the President, Congress, and other government officials.

As the people prepare for their journey, some of the explorers share their worries and concerns from past trips into the new land to the west. They tell of difficult terrain, challenging to all those who cross it. They warn that the time on the trail will be long and arduous. "Some of us," they claim, "will not survive the trip." These keepers-of-the-nightmares (Deal & Peterson, 1999) build resistance to the start of the journey and fear of the entire process.

Another group of explorers also worry, except their focus is on what supplies they should bring on the trip. They hope to maintain their lifestyle across the new world, much as it has been in the old world. They want their supplies and they want their lives to stay the same, essentially "transporting" their trusted homes to new lands. Other adventurers argue, "You cannot take all of your supplies with you! The trip will be too arduous if you take everything you own with you. When you explore new territories, you need to travel light so that you are not weighed down by the heavy load of all of your past possessions and experiences." These stay-at-homes (Schlechty, 1997, p.211) resist this suggestion of change. They hope the status quo can be preserved even during their trip.

Finally, some of the pessimistic storytellers (Deal & Peterson) decide not to travel on to the new world. They continue in their routines, defensive of any change. The rest of the explorers need to go on without them or simply stay at home and continue on as has been done in the past. Traditions and practices would not then change. New territories would not be explored. The pessimistic storytellers who do make the trip vow to keep the status quo as much the same as possible.

As the trip begins, the pioneers venture into the new world. With the constant worrying of those who are filled with fear, the leaders of the trip must provide constant assurances that the trip will be successful. Progress comes slowly. Much of the terrain at first is very similar to what the travelers have experienced in the old world. The pioneers start to feel more secure in the slow, steady pace of the travel west. Though the leaders cannot provide an exact blueprint for the journey, the pioneers constantly see the leaders' strategic planning as the group members progress through all major landmarks of their new world (Fullan, 1993). The plan is in constant revision; however, by maintaining a focus on the vision of the future and creating a culture of trust and

respect, the members of the expedition march forward with more openness for change (Hoy & Miskel, 2000).

As the weeks pass, some trailblazers start to express frustrations at what they see as a lack of quick progress in their journey. They complain about the slow pace of the pioneers. They lament their leadership not being willing to charge more quickly through new terrain. They want to reach and explore new destinations without waiting for the slow progress of the "wagon train." They see mountains ahead, dream of possibilities for a new lifestyle, and want to reach their promised land quickly.

As more and more new landscape is visible in the distance, some of these trailblazers become renegades who go off on their own. The members of the wagon train watch these renegades disappear into the distance of the unknown world of reform. They wonder if they will ever know what lands the renegades have crossed or what their eventual destination is. The renegade members' experiences may be lost to the other members of the wagon train because their discoveries and progress may never be known and experienced. Some of the excitement and vitality of the wagon train culture is lost when these trailblazers leave.

The pioneers who are fearful of the new land and experiences see their group size dwindling. The gossips and new keepers-of-the-nightmares among the group continue to build fear in the small group of pioneers. Finally, as the fear builds and as the pioneers see their lives changing a bit too quickly for them in the now changing terrain of the new world, some of the pioneers become saboteurs (Schlechty) who actively commit to stopping forward progress in favor of staying where they are or returning home. Their fear makes each new step more difficult to take. They fear change and actively resist the forward progress of the wagon train.

The role of the leaders becomes more important now. The leaders must empower the pioneers and help them to see that problems can be their friends and that collectively the group

members have power (Fullan). The leaders try to support all pioneers to view themselves as active, valued members of the wagon train. The leaders help the pioneers to view the trip as an experience that they can survive and from which they can prosper and grow. The leaders ask the storytellers of the group to keep journals of the trip, potentially valuable data for similar travelers who may follow in the group's path at some later date.

As the weeks of the journey progress, the cold winds of approaching winter start to blow. The members of the expedition need to spend more and more of their time on daily survival issues. Surviving the winter makes the path through the wilderness increasingly difficult. Some members of the expedition lose focus on the end goal of a new land in the daily struggle to get by and the busy workload and labor intensification of the harsh winter. As winter progresses, the leaders of the expedition realize that perhaps some outside experts may be needed to help enliven the group and increase the pace westward toward the new frontier. The leaders elicit the help of Sacageweas and Charbonneaus who can be both guides and interpreters for the new people and issues continually being addressed in the movement west.

The guides help to refocus the vision and strategic plan for the trip; they work to invigorate the trailblazers, yet they make the pessimistic storytellers and keepers-of-the-nightmares even more worried and concerned. The guides also bring knowledge of the new terrain. This knowledge helps the pioneers move more easily through the rough terrain and avoid some 'pitfalls' along the trail. The pace continues, sometimes unbelievably slowly through the rough terrain of the mountains facing the expedition, and sometimes a little faster, depending on the immediate obstacles of each day.

After long months on the wintry road, with slow but steady progress, the terrain has changed. The members of the expedition realize that their trip has been completed. The new land is found but needs much work to be settled. It has many similarities to what the pioneers

abandoned, but also many unknowns yet to be explored and discovered. The new land is not a panacea or solution to all past problems. The new land is an opportunity for a new life.

### The Metaphor

This educational journey can be a metaphor for educational change. It leaves us with some interesting questions and the opportunity to look back on educational reform and the role of educational leaders during this recent period of educational accountability.

A comparison can be made with the exploration of the American west and the Lewis and Clark expedition of 200 years ago. For example, thanks to Thomas Jefferson's liberal interpretation of his presidential power, he arranged for the Louisiana Purchase and the opportunity for westward expansion. Who is to assume the responsibility for current educational reform? Should educators assume leadership for the directions for change or rely on others to determine the path and agendas for reform? What should be the role of leaders at this time? To what degree should they be historians, anthropologists, visionaries, poets, actors, or healers (Deal and Peterson)?

A second issue to consider is what can be learned from educational reform. Lewis and Clark provided information on the new frontier including the geography, animals, plants, and people encountered. The members of the expedition carefully recorded the data that provided future explorers with valuable information on the new frontier. To what degree are educational leaders able to provide valuable information on educational reform agendas? Fullan tells us that educational reform is a journey but not a blueprint to follow. Yet how much can change agents map out possible reform agendas to help more schools, educators, and students? What data is important to collect? How is that data used in the decision-making process?

Another issue to consider is to whom educators should turn for help. Without Sacagawea and Toussaint Charbonneau, who acted as both guides and interpreters, the original members of

Lewis and Clark's expedition would have had more trouble finding the route west and being able to interact peacefully with the native peoples. On whom should current educational explorers/leaders depend? Who should be the support people to act as guides and interpreters? When should leaders bring in outside experts to help explore the frontier of educational reform, and when should educators take the lead and responsibility for themselves?

The speed of an educational reform process must be carefully considered. If it moves too quickly, the stay-at-homes and pessimistic storytellers may have trouble accepting the reform. If it moves too slowly, the trailblazers' energy and vitality may dissipate. The role of leaders is important here, too. Leaders must provide guidance for the journey while facilitating the vision and strategic plan developing along the way. They must support group learning to build acceptance of the journey and to build openness for the possibility of change (Fullan).

This discussion opens the door for a unique role for leadership. According to Senge (1990), change must begin with individuals transforming their personal beliefs and leaders enabling followers to build the capacity for change and improvement. Educators commit to change when they can envision and imagine a future which holds more promise than their current practice (Yukl, 1998; Bennis and Nanus, 1985). Leaders must project this vision and bring it to life. The result of this is transformational leadership when leaders and followers engage with one another and raise each other to higher levels of morality (Burns, 1978). This process should help to reduce the number of stay-at-homes, pessimistic storytellers, and saboteurs because all members of the organization should participate in the creation of the vision and goals along with the implementation of the change process.

Therefore, periods of educational change need leaders such as described by Sergiovanni (1999). The transformative leader must recognize schools as loosely structured organizations. The leader must practice leadership by purpose, so all educators involved in the process develop a



common sense of value and vision. The transformative leader must “practice the principle of power investment” (p.86), meaning to distribute power to other workers, so as to get more power in return in terms of accomplishments and achievements. A transformative leader understands the difference between having power over others and empowering others to make changes based on the values and vision of the organization. The transformative leader should help all educators reach beyond their expectations for their own performance through authentic participation in order to be more productive members of the organization. The result is transformational leadership as “moral agency” (Green, 1987, p. 108 as cited in Sergiovanni, p.92).

A final consideration is to question who will profit from the educational journey. Indeed, citizens of the United State learned a lot from Lewis and Clark’s trip, and the amount of land acquired provided opportunities for many new settlers. Yet the expedition was not profitable for the Native Americans pushed out of their homes and eventually losing much of their cultures. With people supporting educational reform pushing accountability, often through the use of standardized testing, for whom will current educational reform prove to be of value? Will all students see improved schooling opportunities or will minority and low income students see their schools being labeled as not making 'Adequate Yearly Progress'? Will these schools close and some of the school culture be forfeited? Who and what will ultimately define the success of educational change and reform?

Schwahn and Spady (1998) describe the "changing views of change" as a journey instead of a destination. Exploration and change is a part of American history and life whether it be westward expansion or current educational reform. As educational leaders continue with educational exploration and reform, they need to remember that it is a process rather than an event, continuous rather than episodic, near chaotic rather than predictable, and required to

survive rather than dangerous to risk (p.2). Educators must question what is learned from the adventure and what historians will record about the value and ethics of the quest.

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