

# A Small Sip from the Pierian Spring

## A REVIEW OF LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY: SYSTEM THINKERS IN ACTION BY MICHAEL FULLAN

(Corwin Press, 2005)

Michael Fullan's *Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action* is an intellectual dance of the seven veils. That is not to say that the book is without merit – far from it – but only that it suggests more than it delivers. Is that accidental? Is it a problem?

The focus of the book is on the importance of sustainability in educational reform and how leadership can promote it. Fullan defines sustainability as “the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose” (p. ix) and contends that this requires ‘system thinkers in action’ “who act locally and beyond, all the while producing such leadership in others” (p. 51). He suggests eight elements of sustainability that these ‘new theoreticians’ should nurture: Public Service with a Moral Purpose, Commitment to Changing the Context, Lateral Capacity Building, Intelligent Accountability, Deep Learning, Dual Commitment to Short- and Long-Term, Cyclical Energizing, and The Long Lever of Leadership.

In Fullan's view, large scale reform has generally been neither deep nor sustainable because it has been too narrow, intensive and centralized. Unfortunately, despite contending that “every abstract concept must be accompanied by a practical strategy” (p. 13), the book provides more familiar exhortations to “moral purpose,” “reculturing” and “capacity building” than practical advice on how to correct this fault. There are tantalizing flirtations with “deep learning” and “cyclical energizing” that introduce relatively novel themes in the popular educational literature, but they are treated so briefly that I wonder if Pope's caution that “A little Learning is a dang'rous Thing” might not apply.

The great merit of this book, like other titles in Fullan's recent flurry of publications, is that it popularizes and, to a degree, integrates, significant themes in educational thought and research. Its actual impact on individuals, and on the collective enterprise of public education, however, will depend on how it is used. If by introducing readers to critical themes and sensibilities this book stimulates curiosity, discussion and collective professional learning through further study, application and praxis, then it could be very constructive. If not, it will yield quickly to the next book *du jour* without having any real effect.

I suspect that Fullan is well aware of this. It seems to me that he may have considered his purposes and concluded that the greatest positive impact was to be had by providing research light in an epigrammatic form that will appeal to a large audience of practitioners rather than a thicker scholarly treatment for a smaller audience of academics and Masters students. In what is perhaps a self-revealing reference he speaks admiringly (twice) of Perkins' call for “not just explanation theories, or even action theories, but good action poetry ... simple, memorable and evocative”

A little Learning is a dang'rous Thing;  
 Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring:  
 There shallow Draughts intoxicate the Brain,  
 And drinking largely sobers us again.

An Essay on Criticism – Alexander Pope

(pp. 50 & 102). Certainly his own aptitude for tidy summaries and catchy phrasing is potentially well suited. The danger is that the result may be simple, but neither memorable nor evocative.

In his conclusion, Fullan calls for leaders “who don't thrive in armchairs or in the trenches but who are at their best when they are on the dance floor and the balcony on the same day” (p. 104). He then wonders rhetorically if this might be mission impossible, but advises his reader to not “give it another armchair thought. To the new theoretician, mission impossible is just another hypothesis to be tested. Go for it” (p. 104). Thoughtfully enacted, this bias for action may be precisely what is needed to overcome the frequently frustrating self-satisfied inertia of public schools, but urgency can easily create the proverbial haste that begets waste unless it is supported by the deep roots that can only be developed through the difficult, and necessarily slow, ‘inner work’ of personal transformation.

There is nothing in this book to argue with. It is relevant, constructive, insightful in places, inspirational in others and accessible throughout – but it provides only a small sip from the Pierian spring. One way or another a deeper drink will be required.

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