

A Conceptual Framework for Change – With Some Gaps

A REVIEW OF *SCHOOLS THAT CHANGE: EVIDENCE-BASED IMPROVEMENT AND EFFECTIVE CHANGE LEADERSHIP* BY LEW SMITH.

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Schools That Change asks us to consider how some schools, that were once disappointments and failures, were able to become exemplary” (p. xiv). It does so by relating the stories of eight winners of the National School Change Award, developed by the author and his students. All had been ranked in the bottom quartile for student achievement, quality of teaching and parental approval.

The research used the portraiture technique advanced by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, which “creates a narrative that is at once complex, provocative, and inviting, that attempts to be holistic, revealing the dynamic interaction of values, personality, structure and history” (p. 49, citing Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis, in *The Art and Science of Portraiture*).

In six sections, the book considers change theory and the methodology for the study; the stories of four elementary schools; the stories of four secondary schools; a conceptual framework consisting of three essential elements for school change; three catalytic forces; and a summary of the lessons to be learned.

In his summary, Smith acknowledges that “each school’s story was idiosyncratic” but also asserts that “certain themes did emerge” (p. 267). These themes include the fact that each story is best understood by considering three essential elements – context, capacity and conversations – and three catalytic variables – internal dissonance, external forces and leadership. Each element and variable has its own internal structure, and all interact with each other in complex ways that compel the author to provide a caution in the form of 10 traps to avoid when applying the theory he presents.

Perhaps these cautions should have been considered earlier rather than presented as an afterthought on the final four pages. This would have been consistent with the portraiture approach and may have avoided the limits caused by the overlay of a tidy conceptual summary on the irreducible complexity of school change. It’s not that the model of change the author presents is wrong, just that it is insufficient to convey the lessons that might be gleaned from the case studies.

There is, for example, virtually no discussion of the transformation that underlies all sustainable change. Molly Maloy, the principal of George Carver Washington School, to whose memory the book is dedicated, is reported to have changed from an authoritarian transactional manager to a facilitative transformational leader due to training she received in the theory and methods of William Glasser, but Smith does not examine the dynamics of this pivotal piece of the story. Thus, perhaps the most important lesson for a principal who aspires to be a change agent is lost. The portraiture in this case would have been richer if its attention to the school organization had been complemented by more careful consideration of the life story of the principal who led it and the school community that populated it.

Similarly, the human drama that must have resulted when Louis W. Fox Academic and Technical School was ‘disestablished’ by firing the entire staff and starting over from scratch is given scant attention. In fact, in all eight cases the portraiture is so strongly focused on the principal that the role and perspective of teachers is largely overlooked. Also largely missing from the case studies is consideration of the role of students and parents in creating, sustaining and changing school culture.

Smith makes the principal the ‘fulcrum’ of his conceptual framework because “whatever else is disputed about this complex area of activity, the centrality of leadership in the achievement of school effectiveness and school improvement remains unequivocal” (p. 241, citing Day et al in *Leading Schools in Times of Change*). It is unfortunate, therefore, that the discussion of leadership in terms of nine characteristics of effective principals is not more extensive and focuses on the principal rather than on leadership per se, particularly distributed leadership. In this, as in other sections of the book, the reader will need to peruse some of the excellent references provided in order to avoid the pitfalls that arise when a conceptual framework for thinking in context is misunderstood as a set of universal levers ready to be employed.

Schools That Change gives rich, engaging and often inspiring glimpses into the stories of eight American schools that went from horrendous to excellent. Although the theoretical conception of change that it draws from these examples does not do full justice to their complexity, it is useful and could provide an effective scaffold for personal reflection or serve as a source book for a Masters program in educational administration. While the stories come from a very different context than is typical in Canada, the lessons are virtually universal. Less clear is how the change model drawn from such rock bottom recovery applies to the vast majority of Canadian schools that function very well, and whose primary challenges are an intense pace that stifles curiosity and a complacency that leads to coasting rather than striving. |

BRUCE BEIRSTO is Superintendent of Schools in Richmond, British Columbia, a member of the editorial board of *Education Canada*, and a regular contributor to the Book Review department.

