

BOOK REVIEW

An Excursion into the Labyrinth of School Change: Lessons Learned

Riva Bartell and Marv Bartell

Smith, L. (2008). *Schools That Change. Evidence-Based Improvement and Effective Change Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, a Sage Company.

In this book, Lew Smith selected from four hundred and eighty nationally nominated, for National School Change Awards, schools for detailed portrait-narratives eight underperforming schools that transformed themselves into thriving schools. The process of change occurred during the period 2000-2007.

The portraits were composed utilizing descriptive, qualitative methodology and employing portraiture techniques. No two schools were and are alike and their paths to effective functioning are varied as well. No one approach to success that fits all is neither offered nor attempted. What then, the apt reader may ask, is unique about this book? Let us count the ways:

- Each of the eight schools started the process of change from *within*, rather than having been imposed upon from outside or above.
- The change was substantial and systemic, focused on teaching and learning outcomes and actively involving all stakeholders.
- The portrait methodology aimed to combine systematic, detailed observational data with interpretive and nuanced layers of the dynamic interaction of the human experience. Thus, the reader is likely to experience each of the individual school portraits as live and present.
- The theoretical model consisting of 3 essential elements and 3 catalytic variables was essentially inductively developed “bottom up” from the analysis of the empirical data, using a wide range of eclectic sources and supports.
- School, generically, is viewed by Lew Smith as an organization and as such, he broadens the scope of his discussion of organizations, and leadership of organizations, to include examples and references from across and far afield – such as business, history, physics, spirituality, and geographical realms.
- The author views schools in the broader, rapidly-changing societal context as having to catch up with the changing times and uncertain destinations.
- Eight of the eighteen chapters in the book are dedicated to a lively, firsthand description of an insightful and sensitive active-participant observer, that is, the author himself and his team of researchers, who repeatedly visited all the school sites, built trust and had extensive conversations with the lengthy, arduous, challenging and exhilarating processes that their “subjects” were experiencing and undergoing. No

wonder that his and his research team's contacts with members of the school communities were likely "infected" favorably by the author's observant eye and wisdom. How much influence? We could only imagine.

- The selection process of the finalist eight schools for the award resulted from a step-wise process from the pool of four hundred and eighty that were initially identified and nominated. Each school, with its own idiosyncratic context and characteristics, centered its change process in the person of the principal who also served as a hub for the many and varied activities and actions.

In one elementary school, for example, the vision of the principal for his school was inspired powerfully by a feature-length film called *Miracle* that described a sport team in his state that was transformed from losing to winning over the Soviet Union team. This was his starting point in leading the change. Another elementary school principal, in another context, chose to upgrade the physical environment of the school – recruiting her own family, friends and community volunteers, to fresh-paint the common areas of the school during her summer break, as a "Message, Milestone and Metaphor" (Smith, 2008, p. 68), to kick start her change agenda.

A strong-willed and determined high school principal challenged the staff that she expected them to like kids and not to be clock-watchers. Many teachers resigned and she newly hired two-thirds of the teachers willing to accept and practice her challenge. In another high school, in a different state, the principal revitalized a school leadership team and thus created a climate for change with the message that succinctly asked the message: "Why are we here?"

Other chapters in the book discussed the nature of change, generally and school change, specifically, and measurement of change. Four criteria, or dimensions, for assessing school change were:

- (i) Is the change substantial or superficial?
- (ii) Is the change systemic or isolated?
- (iii) What is the focus of the change?
- (iv) Is the change outcome-oriented? (Smith, 2008, p. 44).

The author, wisely, in our view, avoided any attractive, broad formulaic solutions, and instead, identified two sets of a 3x3 model of six interacting components as a lens through which the common variables - which undergird the richness and the diversity of the change process of the eight schools - are revealed and account for their significant change, in (a) the three essential elements and (b) the three catalytic variables:.

(a) The essential elements are: *school context*, including culture, climate, messages and physical environment; *school capacity* which comprises what individuals and organizations are capable of doing, specifically, to teach, assess and plan coupled with the capacity to work and learn in teams; *conversations* about and with the students about teaching and learning, about vision and about progress. These three elements are interrelated and all three are essential elements, according to Smith, if there is to be substantive change in any failing school.

(b) The *catalytic variables* are: *internal dissonance* referring to concerns within the school about professionalism, support for moving forward, pride, order and security; *external forces* which include governmental authorities and the community-at-large, the

push-in forces, and reach-out forces, such as, grants, awards, partners and charter schools; *leadership*, in particular, change agent leadership that enables the school to move from failure to success.

Not to be missed are the whimsical and wise TEN TRAPS TO AVOID (Smith, 2008, pp. 273-276). The book ends with a note of caution: “If you’ve plugged a breach in the levee, get ready for the flood” (p. 275). The author points out that “we may require a complete structural overhaul of what now exists”. “It may be necessary to dramatically change how we view levees (and schools). What purpose do they have? How well do they function? “Are there better structures and systems?” “What do we do when they break and do not do the job they are expected to do?” “We must see the larger picture.”

In conclusion, this book is a refreshing read for anyone interested in schools and the process and prospect of change. It provides a refreshing perspective on school change, using holistic observational-interpretive methodology and a useful conceptual model for accounting for the successful change of these schools. It provides a fascinating reminiscence of the vivid depiction of the social realities of the school in Phil W. Jackson’s 1968 *Life in Classrooms*, and as such it is very delightful and instructive reading. The additional bonus is the author’s thoughtful conceptual formulation that could serve as an empirically-based guide, a checklist for considering, or planning school change, or as an audit, following a change process. About six years have passed since the conclusion of this massive study. A follow-up would be interesting and instructive in terms of the sustainability of the change over the passage of time. The author invites the reader to contemplate and consider the foregoing questions in terms of substantial change of schools and schooling in a dynamically changing society that is highly impacted by rapid technological change.