

The Self-Transforming School – Brian J. Caldwell and Jim M. Spinks, Routledge, 2013 ISBN: 978-0-66059-4

Book Review

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What is a successful school? What factors influence school success? And what do school and school system leaders need to bear in mind in working to ensure such success? The new book by Brian Caldwell and Jim Spinks entitled *The Self-Transforming School* tackles these questions. The authors have made an enduring and unique contribution to theory and research in school policy and management in Australian and internationally over more than 25 years.

This latest contribution provides an authoritative and comprehensive overview of the contemporary issues, dilemmas and paradoxes confronting those with responsibility for improving the performance of schools and school systems. It is, in a profound way, both a culmination of the authors' professional experience, scholarship and vision on the challenge of school improvement, as well as a significant resource for those engaged education policymaking and practice at school, system and government level.

The central argument of the book is that 'significant, systematic and sustained changes in schooling are required to secure success for all students in all settings' (p. ix). The authors describe a self-transforming school as a school that has the capacity to make decisions that lead to such an outcome. In essence, the book is both a call and a guide for higher levels of professionalism among teachers and school executive; greater trust from system bureaucrats and ministerial staffers, and better strategic alignment in education governance and funding arrangements from governments and education authorities. This is a book with a comprehensive brief and scope, and for these reasons should be especially studied by those engaged in policy making aimed at improving the performance of school systems.

The authors make a strong case regarding the pitfalls of what they regard as the 'command-and-control' approach to systemic improvement, arguing that in too many cases (Australia included) international research highlights that prolonged and inappropriate emphasis on standardization, accountability compliance in the areas of curriculum, assessment, achievement measures and teacher performance stifles systemic improvement efforts. Rather they propose a conceptualisation (see Chapter 3) where schools can be progressively 'unchained' from system control and allowed greater autonomy. Interestingly, while their logic in describing the shift of a school from *command-and-control systemic arrangements* to becoming *self-managing*, and then to being *self-transforming* is sound, their vision could be considered profoundly counter-cultural to the contemporary practice and mindsets of Australian Ministers of Education (at Commonwealth, State/Territory levels) and

their senior advisors and department executives. Short election cycles at multiple levels of government, international league tables of school performance, lessening willingness and capacity of government to fund education in light of increasing costs in other areas of social policy (e.g. health and ageing), all point to the continuing orthodoxy of using command-and-control tactics 'to get the schools to change!' Hence, a point to ponder throughout the book is exactly how one might encourage 'transformation' in those with the political power to disrupt that orthodoxy.

In making the case for school transformation, the authors draw on large body of international research and practice on systemic improvement. Their coverage of school education policy, programs and performance in Australia, Brazil, Canada, England, Finland, Hong Kong, India, New Zealand, Shanghai, Singapore, South Africa, and the United States is informative, concise and includes an insightful critique highlighting the complexity of comparing different contexts. This complexity is centred upon questions about how to maintain an appropriate balance between control and autonomy as schools and school systems work to improve performance. Put another way, the authors recognise (in a similar way to Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber (2010) in their report on *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*) that different combinations of both characterise schools as they move through the stages of improvement. One question about this connection though is 'what causes what?' or 'what comes first?' For example, do schools moving from *poor to fair* performance or from *good to great* performance have their systemic controls lifted before, during or after improvement is demonstrated? In this respect, the book does not take a definitive position but instead offers informed advice to policymakers and education system leaders are being aware of the importance of monitoring performance and policy alignment.

Caldwell and Spinks move beyond this synthesis of international trends and developments to consider the processes of educational change itself. They provide a series of case analyses to illustrate the issues that confront schools on their journey to becoming self-transforming. Assumptions about change and innovation, and the criteria and timeline for measuring effects are clearly explained as school-based and systemic phenomena. The authors provide a useful overview of questions that need to be addressed in relation to the nature of the innovation and the capacity of educators at school and system level to work with and lead the implementation of such innovation. As well as revisiting some classic theories (Chin and Benne, 1969), they also describe more recent research by Miles and his colleagues (2002) on change in public sector organisations in Canada and China. Their research emphasises the need to build trusting relationships – or as the authors put it (from the Chinese translation), to 'banquet frequently'!

A further dimension of the nature of school transformation is treated in Chapter 9. It deals with the changes to teaching and learning that are accompanying the development and more widespread use and integration of digital technologies. As with other themes covered through out the book, the authors have done their homework in searching and synthesising the research and leading edge thinking and practice. In discussing the disruptive changes already taking place in the design and delivery of learning opportunities for young people, Caldwell and Spinks provide an informed and hopeful overview of the potential of emerging technologies (including in direct instruction) to powerfully support the transformation of schools and schooling. In light of the earlier discussions about the nature and consequences of command and control approaches in narrowing curriculum and restricted forms of assessment, this chapter opens the door to broader, more comprehensive and engaging forms of educational provision – including global curricula, re-invigoration of the Arts,

and increasing diversity in the way schools are organised. All these point to the need for schools to be freed from the industrial age, bureaucratic compliances of traditional command-and-control education authorities. To survive and prosper in these circumstances, schools need to be able to make their own decisions about how to position themselves and anticipate and respond to changes in the educational landscape. In short they need to become self-transforming.

The latter parts of the book are focussed around the range of resources, referred to by the authors as different forms of 'capital' that self managing schools can use to become self-transforming. Four forms of capital are described: *financial*, dealing with the types, levels and allocation of funding to support student learning; *social*, referring the strength of formal and informal partnerships and networks that a school has to support learning; *spiritual*, relating to the strength of moral purpose and the coherence and alignment of values held by members of the school community; and *intellectual*, referring to the level of knowledge and skill possessed by those working in or for the school.

Together, these forms of capital provide the means for a school to create its future. At least three issues however need to be considered in working with these forms of support. First, the financial, social, spiritual and intellectual forms of capital need to be aligned. The role of school leaders is to work to ensure such alignment. For example what is funded and how it is funded, what teachers do with those funds, how the social fabric of the school supports and is supported by such funding, and the ways in which the funding is allocated cohere with the moral purpose and values shared by members of the school community need to be integrated. The authors consistently remind the reader about this issue throughout Chapters 10-12. Second, the forms of capital are significantly influenced by what happens outside the school – for example in the ways governments choose to develop and implement policy (including funding policy). This means that school leaders need to be consistently aware of the broader educational and political environment. To this end the authors provide useful insights about the need for school leaders to continue to develop their knowledge base through networking. Third, Caldwell and Spinks recognise that trends and influences on schooling are difficult to forecast. Hence building and aligning capital for transformation always has an element of unpredictability. In a somewhat novel but engaging way, the authors choose to quote former United States Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld's description of 'unknown unknowns' i.e. things that we don't know we don't know, to illustrate their point. And so in hindsight, they remind us of the need for some caution as we project, predict or conjecture about the future.

In this, their latest book, Brian Caldwell and Jim Spinks have provided us with a synthesis of international contemporary factors and issues surrounding school transformation. They have revisited their previous work and tabled their ideas for the future shape of schooling. This book is a comprehensive compilation of insights, reflections and opinion based on authoritative research and experience. Caldwell and Spinks deliberately address the critiques and controversies arising from their earlier publications relating to school based management, especially issues around the future of public education. In *The Self-Transforming School*, they centre their arguments on the urgency of changing schooling to ensure all students succeed regardless of what school they attend. They take aim at the prevailing orthodoxy of the multi-government, multi-levelled political and bureaucratic machinery designed to ensure command and control. In its place they argue for schools to have the authority and control to customise their offerings to reach every student and the trust to build their forms of supporting capital. Their argument is well put.

References

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