

## *Recension / Book Review*

Blane Després. (Ed). (2008). *Systems Thinkers in Action: A Field Guide for Effective Change Leadership in Education*. Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield Education. 276 pages. ISBN: 978-1-57886-659-5 (hardback); 978-1-57886-660-1 (paperback)

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*Systems Thinkers in Action* is the tenth book in a series that focuses on leadership and systemic school improvement. Editor of this volume, Blane Després, is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education, Trades Technology of the University of British Columbia at Kelowna. The series editor, Francis Duffy, is also a contributor to this volume. Author of *Leadership and Sustainability: Systems Thinkers in Action*, Michael Fullan (2005) has written a brief introduction to this book which suggests that the volume “will provide immediate payoff for those looking for something more powerful to inform approaches to school and system improvement” (p. viii). No doubt, the intent of *Systems Thinkers in Action*, Després’s field book, is to extend the field of thought on the concepts of systemic thinking and leadership.

Després frames a series of scholarly articles around the belief that the organization of schools and schooling is complex, thus requiring leaders within these organizations to be capable systems thinkers. Rationalizing the need for this text, Després suggests two reasons. First, scholarly attention to exploring the links between systems thinking, complexity, or chaos theories and education has been scant. This volume addresses this point through its eighteen contributors’ abbreviated versions of the elements of complexity sciences and systems thinking, or through their interpretations of school phenomenon using a complexity theory metaphor.



The second stated reason for the volume is to provide the “neophyte” or “practiced critical systems thinker” (p. x) with a field guide. Després argues that educators, and here I assume he means teachers, principals, and district administrators, caught in the pressure for school improvement, need to understand and appreciate the topic. It is interesting that the editor chose to use the term “field guide,” not unlike Senge (1994) and colleagues’ fieldbook edition, to describe the volume, implying its use as a tool by educators in the field to help recognize and correctly identify naturally occurring phenomena. As such, one might assume the work organized in a manner that draws a reader’s attention to clear and deliberate instances of systems thinking. Field practitioners, then, could use these examples to guide and evaluate their own experiences. Alternatively, the guide could systematically reveal to the reader a catalogued set of seminal ideas that develop understanding. However, this volume tends toward being a loosely coupled collection of fine scholarly writing that addresses both, without much depth. There is little evidence of cohesion created by the editor, aside from the fact that the articles generally pertain to systematically thinking about organizations’ complex systems in the context of a changing world. That said, a number of chapters stand out as noteworthy.

Ideally situated as a second chapter, Reigeluth’s chapter regarding chaos theory and complexity succinctly identifies some of the interwoven concepts associated with these topics. He then relates these ideas to challenges school leaders accept in transforming schooling. He articulates the concept of “coevolution” (p. 25) in such a compellingly simple manner that it helps to frame his later discussion about systemic readiness. Readers familiar with other organizational change or school culture literature will identify the familiar themes of organizational paradoxes, leverage issues, and urgency-based motivations. For newcomers to the subject, this chapter is a must-read because it provides important background for many of the other articles.

Albury’s “The Crucible of Reform: The Search for Systemic Leadership” is a fine example of analysis of leadership actions achieved through a systems perspective. After making a convincing argument for the need for active leadership that is system-wide and systems-savvy, he concludes by recognizing that effective systems leaders know when to be

directive and when to nurture and respect the distributed leadership found in others. Stating, “there are a variety of contextual variables that need to be considered when developing a system for effective change” (p. 99), Albury illuminates the necessary capacity for leaders to think systemically and to facilitate organizational learning.

I found Davis’s contribution regarding “nested and recursively elaborate processes” most enlightening, truly stretching this volume into new territory. He begins by reviewing and challenging linear models of thinking and knowledge development, arguing for a “complexivist image” (p. 233) to move knowledge building into the dimension time. This dynamic dimension affords both individuals and societies not to simply accumulate knowledge, but to redefine it through “recursive elaboration” (p. 237). Davis artfully illustrates this chapter’s subject matter with examples from mathematics curricula. His use of the “hairball” metaphor to describe complex systems is memorable. It makes it clear why the linear and loop diagrams that are often used in systems thinking writing to approximate organizational phenomenon are so self-blinding to the very complexity they purport to reveal. I would like to have seen this chapter placed earlier in the volume because it helped to open my thinking about many of the topics and ideas presented in the other scholarly contributions.

In contrast, Smitherman, Pratt, and Stringer suggest that the “small change” (p. 139) in a teacher’s sense of reality is comparable to the butterfly effect associated with chaos theory. Providing a rather linear explanation for a clearly complex outcome, they state, “[t]his one small event shifted the community of parents toward becoming their own leaders” (p. 139). Likewise, in the first chapter, Duffy describes three examples of causal loops, which he borrowed from another scholar, and proceeds to give tedious tracings of fictitious school events through the diagrams. He made his confusing narratives more cumbersome when he used excruciatingly long, convoluted sentences.

Finally and most disconcerting for me as a reader were the number of print errors found in the volume. Words were missing or mistyped too often. Després’s concluding chapter included two charts that became bewildering because of what appears to be an omission of one table and a duplication of another. In all, these oversights, either by editor or pub-

lisher, diminished the volume's readability, and thus credibility as a resource for academic study. Although this book will have a place on my shelf for some of the stellar individual contributions, I would not recommend it to the field-practising neophyte and offer it cautiously to the experienced systems thinker.

#### REFERENCES

- Fullan, M. (2005). *Leadership and sustainability: System thinkers in actions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Senge, P. M., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Ross, R., & Smith, B. J. (1994). *Fifth discipline fieldbook: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.