BOOK REVIEW


The first time I recall ever really wishing I had done something before somebody else was when I was in a rock band at school and I had heard the introductory chord to a Hard Day’s Night by Lennon and McCartney. That sound grabbed me so strongly I knew I had to get more but I sorely wished I’d done it first! It is with similar feelings that I reflect on my reading of *Profound Improvement* by Coral Mitchell and Larry Sackney. I read it and thought to myself, “I wish I’d said that, in that way, structuring the text to so clearly attend to such a complex issue.” I kept going back for more, re-reading, thinking, attending to the many and varied details and nuggets which this work provides. It is therefore a pleasure to have the chance to report a few words on the book to a wider community as a recommendation of what is a compelling and challenging read, and in concluding to have the chance to ask one simple question of the school improvement genre as a whole. The authors take the matter of reflection on the ideas of profound improvement presented in the book very seriously. They suggest that as ideas are presented in fragments, the reader should step back and consider how the various fragments connect and inform to generate a greater meaning. This advice should not to be overlooked, the book demands some time to be read because it is so carefully constructed and often when revisiting a section one finds new insights, new connections with later sections.

At the core of the text lies the argument that schools need to be reconceptualized to enhance rather than inhibit learning. This, I accept, has been stated before in many places, yet this does not diminish the profound importance of the claim. To substantiate their view, the authors suggest that there needs to be a realignment of power within the education system where teachers become professional creators of a learning culture, rather than have that culture defined for them by external agencies such as government or state. This assertion is not left as a statement of hope. It is very closely linked with a broader discussion which is developed in the

early section of the book that places educational change within a broader worldview which they suggest is in transition from an inherited rational-analytic view of how the world functions to an emerging ecological model. Where we are as a human race in this transition depends partly on personal ideological interpretation. If you accept the assertion, then you are led to seek alternatives. If you do not, then what the authors are raising is not going to be on your agenda for reform in any case. The authors suggest that in general terms we are mid-way, and as a result we have the tension of both models operating within and between schools as a result of their resonance at the societal level.

The problem, then, is one of power. The dominant world view which is subsequently a dominant school view is one that trivializes learning and has separated school activities from the life worlds of students. Rather than learning in school being a natural outgrowth of students’ confrontation with the perplexities of their own lives (as suggested through the ecological and sustainable perspective) it is managed, manipulated, controlled, organized and constrained by adults who are out of touch with the realities with which students live. Mitchell and Sackney’s argument is compelling and unsettling. It leads one to conclude that the present arrangements are unsustainable and as the authors guide the argument from the theoretical to the practical they then begin to introduce some conditions and considerations for an alternative. Their response is to create schools as learning communities, and this demands what Starratt (1996) called the principle of subsidiarity; that is, “the authority to make decisions concerning the work is placed as close to the work as possible” (p. 121). The principle rests on four conditions: (1) trust, (2) knowledge of the task, (3) the capacity to carry out the task and (4) a sense of the whole. In the book, the problem of creating such capacity and of assuming subsidiarity of the problem as a whole is modelled through three capacities – personal, interpersonal and organizational. In dealing with each of them, the authors draw heavily from existing literature, and importantly, from their substantial experience from the field, providing insights and illuminating what can otherwise be complex theoretical issues. Thus, we move from a stimulating, challenging and articulate consideration of the contextual elements which underpin the necessity for profound improvement to the practical capacity-building features of a learning community.

What I particularly enjoyed about this book was the fact that it does not avoid the difficulty of creating an argument for reform which is in itself sometimes fuzzy at the edges. The absolutes and certainties of the old approach are replaced in this book by approaches which flow, one leading into and supported by another, or as the authors put it, turning