Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action

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and

The Moral Imperative of School Leadership

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This book review examines two of Michael Fullan’s recent works on leadership. Fullan contends that the educational system has gone through a number of wrenching changes in recent years and that, as a consequence, leadership roles in schools have been altered. Many principals are now leaving leadership positions, and the educational environment discourages others from moving into these roles. As such, a redefinition of leader is important in order to redeem the school system. While Fullan is recognized as an expert on leadership in the academic world, these books are nevertheless user-friendly handbooks for educators and administrators, offering insight to the crucial role that leaders play in today’s educational climate and encouraging educators to examine their own leadership practices. Parents and policy makers can benefit as well, since it would improve their understanding of leadership in schools. In these works, which highlight the findings of academic research in Canada, England and the United States, the author proposes ideas for school leaders and provides examples of these ideas in practice.

Educational reform in Ontario has gone through the school system like a hurricane. Educators have had a hard time adjusting to this rapid change. Fullan believes the “system is in deep trouble” (2003, p. 24) and offers ideas for transforming leadership in schools. His views are similar to other writers in the educational leadership field such as Daniel Goleman, Steven Covey, Andy Hargreaves, and Roland Barth. Having seen and studied successful leadership in practice, Fullan remains optimistic but fails to provide the practical step-by-step procedures utilized by different groups in order to achieve positive results; nor does he identify the key goals of the systems under study and how those goals were achieved.

Chapter One of The Moral Imperative of School Leadership examines the context of the school climate and inquires, “Where is the source of authority to change the context (culture) of the school?” Fullan speaks about changing the context for the better as a way of defining reform. The leader’s job is to “help change the environment - to introduce new elements into the situation that are bound to influence behaviour for the better” (Fullan, 2003, p.1). Fullan states that to change what the school does, the culture of the school needs to be changed. The culture of a school is made up of the beliefs, behaviours, morals, values, and
attitudes that characterize a school. In that sense, the school culture to which he refers is not primarily about religion, race, or socioeconomic status.

Fullan discusses what schools need in today’s educational system. In support of Collins’s five-level leadership model, Fullan concurs that the executive principal (Level 5) is the standard toward which all should strive. He contends that this fifth level of performance can only be achieved through relationships, and cannot be done alone. Such a leader determines “First who...Then what” (Fullan, 2003, p.9). The Level 5 leaders credit the staff for the school’s successes and blame themselves when school performance suffers. Finally, Level 5 leaders carefully select individuals to be their successors, and set them up for even greater success.

Chapter Two, which addresses barriers to leadership in the school system, provides a list of leaders’ self-imposed barriers such as inability to take charge of one’s own learning, low moral support, neglect of leadership succession, role overload, and role ambiguity. To make key changes, says Fullan, one must go to the grassroots, to the teachers in the classrooms. Disappointingly, Fullan does not directly address the classroom or what is going on there. He suggests supporting leadership opportunities for teachers celebrating their successes since teachers need to be fed emotionally and professionally. True leaders make other people great. This is very important, he maintains; otherwise all initiatives will fail.

Chapter Three looks at the main concept of the book. Fullan’s moral imperative is based on three assumptions: all students can learn; the gap between high and low performance can be greatly reduced; and learning enables successful futures “in a morally based knowledge society.” The moral imperative of an educator is to have a purpose which guides and drives his/her efforts and which goes beyond “individual heroism to the level of a system quality” (Fullan, 2005, p.xiii). This chapter recaps Fullan’s emerging image of the moral imperative of principalship.

Chapter Four looks at how individuals, schools, regions, and society as a whole can make a difference in students’ lives. Fullan provides a number of examples, many from England, to substantiate these ideas. Some readers will wish that he had gone beyond the statistics, to provide key details as to how these successful schools obtained their favourable results. Chapter Five discusses ways for school leaders to transform their school systems. Fullan outlines six strategies for transforming leadership in schools, namely: (1) reconceptualize the role of school leadership; (2) recognize and work with the continuum of development; (3) get school size right; (4) invest in leaders developing leaders; (5) improve the teaching profession; and (6) improve the capacity of the infrastructure (2003, p.73).

Leadership and Sustainability is recommended reading to anyone currently in a leadership position, while Fullan’s more recent book The Moral Imperative of School Leadership, is dedicated to the “new theoreticians” who are the “doers with big minds” (Fullan, 2005, xiii). Too often, Fullan notes, school improvement is temporary. Sustainability in the educational system refers to large-scale reform which lasts for a long time. Seven chapters examine elements of sustainability, the new work of leaders, and leadership at three distinct levels - school, district, and system.
Chapter One of *Leadership and Sustainability* focuses on case studies and statistics of school success in recent research projects. He provides general improvement strategies, but it would be beneficial if he would share details on how to accomplish those strategies. One such strategy is to reinforce classroom learning at home. What exactly does that look like in practice? Fullan cites a study from England for those interested in the specific implementation strategies that resulted in student success in literacy and numeracy.

Chapter Two examines the sustainability of educational reform. Fullan outlines eight elements of sustainability, which include: (1) public service with a moral purpose; (2) commitment to changing context at all levels; (3) lateral capacity building through networks; (4) intelligent accountability and vertical relationship; (5) deep learning; (6) dual commitment to short-term and long-term results; (7) cyclical energizing; and (8) the long lever of leadership (Fullan, 2005, p. 14).

In Chapter Three, Fullan comments on the current systems in Canada, the United States, and England, and shares ideas on how individuals and systems can improve education. Chapter Four looks at some of the new academic work on leadership, while Chapter Five analyzes leadership at the school level. In addition, Fullan comments on the changing school culture, and how educators need to cope with change.

Chapter Six addresses typical problems that districts have with leadership. Over the past few decades, the pendulum has swung several times, from centralization to decentralization, and back again. Finally, Chapter Seven points out the fact that systems cannot move forward with change until there is a partnership in “fostering the sustainability agenda” (Fullan, 2005, p. 80). This chapter mentions the dual role that leaders must perform. Fullan also lists and describes ten guidelines for leaders who want to reach sustainability.

These two works are written in language that school leaders can understand. The books can be utilized in a variety of settings because they are a good source of information about educational improvement. Each book has an extensive list of primary and secondary references at the back, though there is an understandable overlap of sources between the two. Readers should be aware that Fullan often summarizes other people’s research, and is not discussing his own investigations. Nonetheless, administrators could make good use of Fullan’s collected ideas in an attempt to transform their schools into better places of learning for teachers and students. The two books present many positive examples of schools and school systems that have remarkable improvement. There is cause for hope.

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