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Caldwell and Spinks’ latest book, *The Self-Transforming School*, illuminates for readers the impact of global change and innovation on education, focusing on education policy and practice. Their comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the policy and schooling reforms that have happened over the last 50 years is the backdrop for a look into the future and what will be required for all schools in all settings to provide success for all students. Their work is an important contribution for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners concerned with equity issues in schools.

*The Self-Transforming School* is the fifth publication of Caldwell and Spinks’ collaborative research that has

contributed to educational reform scholarship. Their first book, *The Self-Managing School*, published in 1988, identified characteristics of schools that built capacities to positively impact student achievement. Self-managing schools are focused on processes of “goal setting, policymaking, planning, budgeting, implementing, and evaluating applied to decisions about curriculum, learning, teaching, services, and infrastructure focused on school improvement” (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013, p. 19) These self-managing schools have a high level of autonomy balanced with a high level of accountability for students’ success.

Caldwell’s interest in the foundations of *The Self-Managing School* was evident in his dissertation published in 1977 investigating decentralized school budgeting in seven school systems in Alberta, Canada which was subsequently piloted in the Edmonton School District. This project became a “landmark reform” (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013, p. 6) and has been institutionalized throughout the Edmonton district in their budgeting process. His research was warmly received and he accepted a position at the University of Alberta, Canada. This was the beginning of a 13-year career in higher education, holding positions in Melbourne, Tasmania, and Alberta.

Caldwell and Spinks’ collaborative work began when Caldwell served as Chief Investigator of the Effective Resource Allocation in Schools Project conducted in South Australia and Tasmania with a focus on resource allocation at the school level. A model was developed from practice at Rosebery District High School in Tasmania, where Spinks served as principal. Professionals involved in the Effective Resource Allocation in Schools Project from Victoria, Australia identified this model for implementation in their district. A professional development program was designed by both researchers and presented to 5,000 professionals in 1,200 schools between 1984-1986 that ultimately became *The Self-Managing School*. Subsequently, they both presented professional development programs in New Zealand, Hong Kong, and England culminating in the publication of *Leading the Self-Managing School* in 1992. Continuing their work together, they were involved in collaboration with a research team from the University of Melbourne in
a longitudinal study of Victoria’s self-managing schools investigating the links between self-management and learning which resulted in the publication of *Beyond the Self-Managing School* in 1998. Throughout the next decade, they continued their research in Victoria focusing on needs-based funding at the system and school levels. This research resulted in the publication of *Raising the Stakes: From Improvement to Transformation in the Reform of Schools* in 2008.

*The Self-Transforming School* is divided into three sections. The first section, chapters one through three, provides an overview of the discourse related to global contemporary schooling and the reform efforts enacted in various regions of the world. Also included is a background of self-managing schools’ research and implementation and ways successful schools have navigated the terrain of school reform. The second section, chapters four through six, provide case studies of three countries (i.e. Finland, Canada, and Singapore) and two cities (i.e. Shanghai and Hong Kong) that have embraced school improvement efforts and are leading the way toward system-wide self-transforming schools. Case studies of four other countries (i.e. Australia, England, New Zealand and the U.S.) describe reform efforts that have placed them coming from behind in moving toward system-wide self-transforming schools. The third section, chapters seven through fifteen, describes the contours of change and the impact of innovation, various capitals (i.e. financial, intellectual, social, and spiritual), funding models, and governance policies that must be embraced to achieve moving toward self-transforming schools.

Making a strong case for why schools must make changes required in the 21st century, the authors include international comparisons of students’ performance on PISA (Program of International Student Assessment). Finland tops the list and has maintained the number one ranking for more than a decade. Of particular interest is the relatively narrow gap between high and low performing students, the very demanding requirements for admission to initial teacher education, and the assignment of a cadre of teachers to assist low-performing students (over the course of schooling, about one-third of students require some kind of special support). Additionally, there is no system of national testing. Schools have access to a
wide variety of assessments approved by the Ministry but it is their discretion when to administer them. Finland’s Ministry of Education contributes their success to “equitable provision across all age groups, highly competent teachers, and the autonomy given to schools” (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013, p. 55). The country is committed to equity and a high level of taxation which results in a large expenditure of funds on education. Schools have the autonomy to make decisions within the national framework for site-based curriculum planning and goal setting to achieve national education goals.

Canada is also a top performer on PISA with a much larger and diverse population than Finland. Large cities such as Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver are predominately multi-cultural and the populations of the suburbs often deal with socio-economic issues. Of particular interest in Canada is the federal government’s limited role in education except for First Nation indigenous children, children whose parents serve in the military, and children of incarcerated parents. Public funding is provided to public and separate schools but not from the federal government. The authors highlight the provinces of Alberta and Ontario because of the close proximity of students’ performance to Finland. Alberta’s school districts have a relatively high level of autonomy and have implemented innovative grants to school districts that support collaborative projects developed by teachers, parents, and the community focused on improvement of student learning. Ontario school districts have focused on increasing high school graduation rates and have been successful in raising them from 68 per cent in 2004 to 82 per cent in 2011. System-wide strategies have been embraced to support success for students focused in the following areas: school improvement, small number of achievable goals, leadership, effective use of resources, innovation, effective use of data, results, capacity building, and strong implementation effort. Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves have written extensively of the reform initiatives that have been implemented in Canada with impressive results.

Innovation is the cornerstone of education for students in Singapore who have scored consistently at the top of international rankings. Leadership from the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the national government,
particularly after the Asian financial crisis in 1997, recognizes the importance of a strong economy build on an educated population. Technology has been embraced and changes have been made in teacher education and curriculum with assessments focused on creative thinking and project-based learning. Shifts have been made to provide more autonomy for schools. Networks to share action research and school-based curriculum development focused on deep learning are supported by the MOE. Caldwell and Spinks (2013) reference Knight (2011) identifying Singapore as “one of six countries in the world that are committed to positioning themselves as an International Education Hub” (p. 222). These innovative projects, initiated within the system, and supported by leadership are focused on responsiveness to change and sustainability of excellence in educational opportunities for students.

China’s value of educational excellence is demonstrated by students who attend school in Hong Kong and Shanghai. They have scored consistently at the top of international rankings and there is strong support from the population at large and the government for schooling to be one of the country’s top priorities. Innovation has been embraced in both systems and the government has increased requirements to become a teacher as well as the amount of continuous professional development for teachers. Jensen, Hunter, Sonnemann and Burns (2012) are referenced by Caldwell and Spinks (2013) noting that schools in Hong Kong are focused on curriculum changes that provide “learning experiences for students rather than simply transmitting knowledge” (p. 18). This has also required changes in pedagogical approaches. Grants are funded through the Quality Education Fund (QEF) providing financial resources for innovative projects supporting student achievement. Curriculum reform has also been a significant part of Shanghai’s innovations as well as removing examinations from entry into primary and junior secondary schools. Responsibility for students’ achievement is shared across school boundaries with partnerships being forged to support sharing knowledge and best practice to further ensure students’ success. The Shanghai Education Commission supports a web-based platform for teachers to share curriculum, pedagogy, and best practices.
Systems leading the way in students’ performance on international assessments have embraced innovation, school autonomy, and funding models that provide strong financial support for schools. Reform initiatives include changes in teacher education and curriculum as well as building capacity at the school and district levels. All reform efforts have been focused on improvement of achievement for all students.

In contrast to countries that are leading the way in responding to providing excellence in educating students in the 21st century, four countries that have traditionally been considered strong educational systems find themselves coming from behind when compared to the international community: Australia, England, New Zealand, and the U.S.. All of these countries are below performance levels of the countries described above and have implemented very different reform initiatives to address declining performance and negative perceptions related to quality of schooling.

Caldwell and Spinks (2013) posit “a capacity for self-management, or a relatively high level of autonomy, is associated with higher levels of student achievement, provided it is accompanied by accountability, and that self-managing schools use their capacities to transform learning” (p. 3). The above four countries have embraced more centralized reform efforts which are characterized by “a powerful and excessive command-and-control approach” (p. 3). The authors identify command-and-control approaches as “extensive, top-down systems of monitoring to check on school quality, the imposition of improvement strategies that are relatively insensitive to local context” (p. 5). Command-and-control approaches are often accompanied by carrot-and-stick strategies with “higher levels of government . . .providing funds to lower levels of government requiring acceptance . . .of strict terms and conditions that are not necessarily those that would have been accepted if there was no such dependence” (p. 5).

The role of the federal government in schooling in Australia increased dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s. Recommendations from a committee created by the Australian Schools Commission identified a need for an expanded role for the federal government in terms of
funding and programs’ support. National partnership agreements are available to districts and schools but require extensive paperwork and specific accountability requirements. There is also “an army of bureaucrats at every level of government involved in the administration of grants” (Caldwell and Spinks, 2013, p. 44). National curriculum reforms have been enacted as well as professional standards for teachers and principals. Despite the reform efforts that have been implemented over the last four decades, there has been no overall improvement in outcomes for students.

England became an early adopter of self-managing schools with the passage of the Education Reform Act (ERA) in 1988. Since that time, there have been significant changes in the governance and funding of schools focused on setting standards and building accountability frameworks. Specialist secondary schools were established in 1997 to support students in disadvantaged communities with a heavy infusion of private funds to support technology integration, hiring staff, and selecting its support services. The number of specialist schools grew rapidly until they were abandoned with the election of David Cameron in 2010. Cameron’s election introduced academies to replace low-performing secondary schools and have been steadily increasing in number and now includes primary schools which are located throughout the country. The lack of sustainability in the reform efforts adopted in addition to the changes enacted through several elected officials have not created a system that is responsive to 21st century schooling demands.

New Zealand, also an early adopter of self-managing schools, has a publically funded system that supports all schools including Catholic and independent private schools. School boards oversee hiring of principals, finances, and human resources. The Education Review Office (ERO) employs approximately 150 people who evaluate and review schools and education services and prepares reports for policymakers and The Ministry. In 2012, the ERO prepared a report based on 15 national evaluations and reports of good practice identifying three key issues facing the system: “shift the focus to student-centered learning . . . implementing a responsive and rich curriculum. . . [and] using assessment information to know about and plan for students’ learning” (Caldwell & Spinks,
2013, p. 49). Data suggests that the needs of students in schools in New Zealand have been identified. The future will determine how and to what degree these needs are being addressed.

The U.S. has a federal Department of Education that works with state departments of education overseeing enactment of policies and procedures through local school districts. The role of the federal government has increased dramatically in all aspects of school governance and policy environment, particularly with the passage of NCLB in 2001. Accountability frameworks and distribution of Race to the Top funds to states are characteristic of command-and-control and carrot-and-stick reform approaches. Caldwell and Spinks (2013) reference Zhao (2009) by indicating that “while the United States is moving toward more standardization and centralization, Asian countries are working hard to allow more flexibility and autonomy at the local level” (p. 63).

The countries coming from behind have adopted more centralized and expanded federal involvement in schooling to deal with disparities in student achievement. Reforms have been enacted but in a much less systematic manner with frequent changes in focus. Many reforms involve tightened oversight and control, rewards, and sanctions. Caldwell and Spinks (2013) suggest “a command-and-control or carrot-and-stick approach that tells [educators] what to do, how to do it and with what resources, and who should be rewarded and in what fashion, has a dismal record of success” (p. 101).

Caldwell and Spinks (2013) define a self-transforming school as one that “achieves, or is well on its way to achieving, significant, systematic and sustained change that secures success for all of its students regardless of the setting” (p. 4). The authors make a strong case for what will be required for this type of change to occur. “Innovation in policy and practice that reaches the student, whose needs, interests, aptitudes, ambitions and passions are satisfied; improvement is sustained; and there is a contribution to social and economic well-being” (p. 102). Embracing innovation, maintaining a futures perspective, integration of technology in all aspects of schooling, and enacting collaborative processes with students and adults are critical elements of moving toward self-transformation.
Additionally, building capitals (financial, intellectual, social, and spiritual) creates capacities that can be synergistically enacted to achieve excellence and equity for all students.

The authors have clearly articulated the elements that will be required for schools to become self-transforming. The central question that remains to be answered after reading the book: Do school leaders and school communities have the capacity, or can that capacity be developed over time, to create self-transforming schools?

References


About the Reviewer

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