BOOK REVIEW

Title: Sustainable Improvement: Building Learning Communities that Endure

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“It is time for education to move into the 21st century, to adopt the principles of deep ecology, to embrace the practices of living systems, and to yield schools that can sustain deep, authentic human learning for the long term” (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009, p.197).

Coral Mitchell and Larry Sackney’s (2009) second book on learning communities is a call to wholeness in school improvement. Consistent with the need for sustainability in all areas of our society, the authors present a new model based on an ecological metaphor. Their framework uses Fritjof Capra’s (2002) notion of deep ecology and living systems, a model infused with concepts of reciprocity, mutuality, interconnectivity, and relationships. Extending current mental models in the natural sciences to the social world, the authors conceive of schools as living systems rather than with the mechanistic worldview of past centuries. From this perspective, community members create their experiences out of a collective desire for deep, meaningful, and authentic learning to meet the challenges of the 21st Century.

Sustainable improvement is an important book at an important crossroads: the promise of learning communities has become tarnished with conventional implementation in a “managed system” but shines anew where learning communities have evolved from authentic caring relationships within communities characterized by curiosity. The authors suggest that educators need to do more than “tinker around the edges of the system” (p.197) and engage more deeply in changing the way we teach and learn in schools. They offer the principles of deep ecology as pathways to deeper learning and more meaningful connections, underscored by the importance of collective responsibility and the need for thinking about the health of the larger system.

Mitchell and Sackney’s (2009) living system concept extends from their original framework focused on building personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacity for profound improvement in schools. Sustainable improvement is the culmination of years of research into understanding how high-capacity, living system schools are able alter...
teaching practice in desirable and sustainable ways. The book is rich in theory and research and provides a broad review of literature. The ecological framework is clearly mapped out throughout the book and re-emphasized in the final chapters.

Stories of teachers’ experiences are woven throughout the chapters and provide specific examples of the joy that permeates schools engaged in the deep learning of an authentic, sustainable learning community. The high-capacity schools described are evidenced by energy and enthusiasm across the school. They exhibit collaborative staff cultures of innovation, experimentation, and reflective practice; authentic community involvement; and a record of improved student learning.

The authors begin with a concise review of the learning community tradition that combines the notion of an organization that can learn with the proven relevance of professional communities for student learning. Based on their research and using the ecological metaphor, five new principles are outlined: deep respect, collective responsibility, experimental orientation, appreciation of diversity, and positive role modeling. These new principles support a school vision that “puts people-building at the centre of educational activity, and in learning communities, this means building up both children and adults” (p.34). At the core of the framework, the notion of building people extends to building commitments and building schools. Collegiality, collaboration, networks, knowledge systems, leadership, are discussed throughout the chapters as the authors paint a picture of how educators can aspire to shape the kind of “we culture” (p.85) that has the potential to support ongoing improvement in teaching and learning.

In the chapter on classrooms as learning communities, the authors provide compelling reasons for a focus on teachers’ learning capacity. They describe some innovative ways teachers in high capacity schools create conditions for creativity and excitement in student learning. The authors acknowledge their personal stake in trying to shift the paradigm to create sustainable learning communities---they wish for their grandchildren, and for all children, the learning experiences they witnessed in their research. They advocate for developing classrooms that support and attend to the whole child and that incorporate the four elements of social, emotional, cognitive, and physical learning. They note that children in these classrooms report higher senses of engagement and demonstrate greater motivation to learn (p.168).

The authors emphasize a key idea throughout the book: Teachers must be given the freedom to make meaningful connections to their professional responsibilities, express their autonomy creatively, and take their work in a meaningful direction. Building learning communities from an ecological perspective goes beyond sending teachers to weekend workshops and buying new teacher guides. However, with this new understanding of teachers’ personal power for school improvement comes the slightly daunting reality of personal responsibility for change. Although the authors do provide stories of the experiences of high capacity schools, readers may want to know more about how these schools arrived at their level of capacity and what growing pains they experienced. Educators in low-capacity schools may need more of a bridge to help them move to the high-capacity side of the river.
The authors consistently explain that sustainable learning communities do not follow a recipe approach. We appreciate and recognize the wisdom in their position. The authors assert that shifting to an ecological perspective will not be easy and that teachers will need time and support to adapt to the new paradigm. However, this book seems to require a leap of faith into a new belief system and we suggest that teachers will need more direct signposts to guide them towards sustainable improvement.

This book’s most important contribution may be that it repositions learning communities as a “way of life” (p.103) in schools rather than a regimen of weekly or monthly meetings focused on district agendas. As teacher educators, we are excited about sharing the renewed promise of learning communities described in this book in our classes. As leadership researchers, we are eager to document the learning journeys of schools and help build bridges toward this well-articulated and achievable vision. However, our strongest endorsement for Mitchell and Sackney’s (2009) work may come as parents: for our own children and others, we aspire to embrace the vision and enact the practice of sustainable communities in which all learners flourish.

References
