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Coral Campbell

Improving Schools

Productive Tensions Between the Local,
the Systemic and the Global

 Springer

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We would like to thank the regional staff, teachers, students and leadership staff in our case study schools for their honest and open sharing of their experiences about this short cycle of school improvement in their network of schools.

Foreword

When the chapters that make up this book were sent to me for perusal and consideration, I was heading to the beach at Kirra, for the annual family holiday. I have read the book and revisited the research with great interest, already knowing something about the inquiry that has informed it. Unlike most readers I have been privileged to have ‘watched’ the work of this project over its duration, as the research team presented and reflected on, first, the methodology, and then their early findings from the study, to the annual conference of Australian Educational Research Association (AARE). Over this time their work has reminded me about the central importance of school-based attention to curriculum and pedagogy, if there is to be high-quality educational provision in the struggle for equity. Now, in its final form, this work has re-educated me about school improvement, and allowed me to examine several of my own interim hypotheses about the nature and nurture of school improvement programmes and processes in the present time, as represented in this study and beyond. This work brings me to understand the school improvement policy mandate, in the Victorian context at least, as still a good idea and one that travels well enough to remain important at local levels for promoting real and productive school and educational reform. And it leaves me to wonder why it does not consistently, rather intermittently, reach its real potential.

It is the current specificity of the global educational context that shapes this book. School improvement policies taken up by government systems within a globalised education economy, rather than by communities, need schools to improve in particular ways, and want them to be able to produce effects in terms of student learning that can be made to measure (inter)national rather than local priorities. This is at the heart of the issue that makes school improvement so often confused with effectiveness, and which drive what this research team has found to be often productive tensions between these differently focused (and differentially engaging) aims for schools and their constituencies. For readers, the invitation to connect, make sense and review one’s own understanding, theoretical position and action is compelling.

There's a lovely little place at the very southern end of the Gold Coast called Rainbow Bay. It sits between Snapper Rocks and Greenmount, often overshadowed in the tourist imagination by the vast expanse of Coolangatta Beach around the corner. It seems to quietly offer its sun and sand and sea to visitors, and just gets on with its work as a holiday destination. For me, the lack of Gold Coast glitz at Rainbow Bay has always been its attraction, although I had often thought it seemed a sad, old-fashioned little place apart from the splendour of the beach and sparkling water. I remember the ragged yellow fish and chip shop on the corner, and the locked toilets behind the surf club. But this year, reading the chapters in this book, I am suddenly struck by the changes I have seen around me over the years: attending to the signs that show how the residents and "Friends of Rainbow Bay" have been committed to a programme of 'Improvement' in this small, community, intricately connected to larger policy networks of tourism and local government. I noticed how they have dealt with the changes wrought by globalisation and systemic council reform over the years, and how Rainbow Bay, though small, has shown the signs of maintenance and continuous improvement of its public facilities. As a summer visitor, the walk around Greenmount to Rainbow Bay and Snapper Rocks has always been a regular treat for me, and as the marvelous painted pathway 'rainbow' of my childhood gradually faded away over the years, my delight in it gave way, in my increasingly globalised estimation of quality community amenities, to appreciation of the boardwalk and the fine hardwood steps that made for easier access to and from the beach. Rainbow Bay, like other places, introduced amusing surfboard-shaped wooden benches along the walkway some years ago, too, for people to sit to watch the surf and the surfers.

This year I attend to the fact that the naïve rainbow path has fully disappeared, that it has been resurfaced, its warm worn concrete covered with the ubiquitous pebble path that connects it seamlessly with the rest of 'the coast'. This year I am thinking about 'School Improvement' and noticing that over time it has been a lot like the 'Rainbow Bay Improvement' I have observed as a regular annual visitor... a community proud of its amenity, taking the trouble to add value to the asset that is itself. I see that this is far more than just 'facility maintenance': this Improvement looks outward to the rest of the world to see and understand both what tourists want and need to make their visits to the place a pleasure, and how to work in and with the environment to conserve and enrich the materiality of the place itself. This year I notice too that the 'Friends of Rainbow Bay' have tried to improve the holiday experience their community offers: attending to the curriculum of the place by working around a council decision to introduce short-term paid parking (a well-travelled, internationally successful policy for revenue creation), and preparing temporary signs to subvert a policy that does not fit this local community—advising visitors who come by car that parking regulations now allow only two hours without the risk of fines. This year I notice that the tensions I find described in these pages between local and global, community and systemic interests are materially apparent right here in Rainbow Bay, in a situation quite different from the educational context described and analysed by the authors of this book. The clear explanations and illustrations they have provided, of the

discourses, practices, representations and networks in operation in the ‘Billabong’ school cluster, have allowed its application to settings far beyond the initial research setting.

Individually and together, the chapters in this book provide both a practically useful and theoretically strong account of school improvement over time, at the micro- and more macro-levels. Reading about this research at this point in time, when all the work has been done, and the research team has both a story to tell and has developed a set of important theoretical insights about the nature and process of school improvement policy and practice, has both substantive and methodological value for readers in a range of educational practice settings. This is an unusual achievement, and is the strength of the study for the reader. In terms of structure—from the larger historical context to the particular network model of school improvement and its connection to global and local policy agendas, to case accounts from the cluster of schools that informed the study—there is a strong foundation for the examination of the challenges and changes that arose in the setting. Not surprisingly for the research team and for the reader, these focused on the important role of leadership in managing change; and have driven the reflective framework that has been developed as a model for understanding and dealing with the tensions arising in the practice of school improvement within the competing investments and relationships in local, systemic and global agendas.

It is at the local, detailed level of everyday practice in schools involved in the project, positioned by policy both as needing to improve and capable of improving, that this book teaches me most. Productive tensions around such things as the time-frame for short-term improvement cycles that were used within this particular school cluster, for instance, are explored. Initial thinking by some teachers that the ‘new’ short time-frame for improvement activity introduced in the project was ‘valuable because it was short’ changed over time, due to the experience that it was too short to really see evidence of changes in student learning outcomes. This tension saw most schools change their time-frame from the recommended 6-week-cycle borrowed from elsewhere, to almost double this time, in a term-long framework. Six weeks may have remained the actual implementation time for the teacher’s action plans, but the longer time-frame allowed time for planning and reflection. Rather than what could have turned into a continual cycle of ‘busy work’ without discussion and review, teachers worked with, and *around*, the policy plan to make things work for them. This also meant that another school decided to look more deeply into existing issues that were already on the way to desired improvement rather than turning to new issues just because a new cycle was beginning on the plan. These sorts of ‘work arounds’, changes to the universal or generic model that had been transported in to this community, led to “great[er] support for changes to the model to fit within the context of each school,” and “an increase in enthusiasm once the practices of change were demonstrated through student learning” (Chap. 4). It seems that desired and worthwhile changes were achieved when teachers were fully supported by leadership and expertise, though it is important to remember that these are not necessarily synonymous.

In summary, the team found that each of the five forms of educational practice described by Kemmis et al. (2014) was achieved in most of the cases studied, so that the school improvement plan, here, can be seen to have resulted in clear documented evidence of student learning, introductory and continuing professional learning on the part of their teachers focused towards improving student learning, and the sharing and taking of responsibility for continuing to lead change in their schools related to the systematic trialling and evaluation of new pedagogical practices. As with other recent studies of school improvement, collaborative improvement practices appeared to have worked more successfully in primary schools, and best of all in the smaller primaries, where the sense of community can be more easily fostered. The strength of the book lies in its clear demonstration of the complex ways that practices, discourses, networks and representations of school Improvement interact in the achievement of school/system goals.

Importantly, too, I have been reminded about the difficulties that systems' agendas present for academic research and researchers. These issues have not been glossed over in this report of the study, and this is one of the reasons why I find this volume so practically useful for others (teachers, principals, research students and academics) who are interested in school reform, school improvement and teacher learning in general. The fact that no students were interviewed at the secondary school within the cluster because "students failed to return the permission forms" is the sort of information that is far more helpful to others than silence or defensiveness about research practice in school settings. This is real—it is what it is like for everyone, and it is therefore most helpful to be able to read about it as we prepare our next research endeavour, for the text allows us to decide ourselves whether perseverance in the light of tardy return is a desirable or not.

Like the researchers who have co-authored this book, I work in a university setting. In the academy, the idea of 'improvement' remains a vexed and problematic issue, although in different ways. In the university setting, many individual academics work hard to continually improve their teaching practice, alone or in course teams, driven by measures of student satisfaction rather than student achievement. It is this that must be measured for government here, and that drives the need of staff to innovate, to keep up to date with students and respond to advances in technology and knowledge that make for pedagogical and curriculum change and renewal. University management explicitly aims to make teaching and research more effective, and university governance tries to ensure that what is on offer to students and staff is of good quality. In university settings, the tensions between the 'improvement' and 'effectiveness' of teaching seem far less productive than in the school sector described in this book, which seems anomalous in the light of discourses of academic freedom and autonomy.

Towards the end of the book, the authors return to their claim for the importance of understanding the history of school improvement, introduced in the opening chapter. They note that school improvement practices and discourses are founded in the ways in which local government, citizens and parents attempted the betterment of their own schools as part of their community obligation and

investment in the assets of their community and its sustainability into the future. They place this concept as central to their work and argument. School improvement is about looking to the future, and dealing with change. And it's about people in particular situations working with what they have, to ensure it is protected, nourished and preserved, as well as being made better in the eyes of the world and themselves. This book makes a clear case for the importance of community and relationships in understanding what works in assisting schools to change, grow and 'improve' in respect to the material and cultural differences that situate it over time.

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Jo-Anne Reid

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