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Merseth, Katherine K., with Cooper, Kristy; Roberts, John; Tieken, Mara Casey; Valant, Jon & Wynne, Chris. (2009). *Inside Urban Charter Schools: Promising Practices and Strategies in Five High-Performing Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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Reviewed by Gary Hartzell
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Inside Urban Charter Schools is an interesting and useful book. Like the institutions it describes and analyzes, it is not without its flaws and weaknesses; but, like them, it too is effective in achieving its goal. The authors' goal was to examine five unique and uniquely successful charter schools in the greater Boston area, define the elements that in combination make each work as well as it does, and, finally determine which, if any, of those elements are universally present. The result is a well organized, well written, readable, and insightful book. Five chapters offer rich ethnographic descriptions of the schools, one chapter delineates a theoretical framework, four chapters examine

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elements shared by the schools, and a concluding chapter draws all the material together, poses questions for reflection, and offers suggestions for current practice and future research.

Based on the evidence presented, the book's overriding argument is clear and simple: "...these five schools operate in a purposeful and deliberate manner—in a coherent manner—where little is uncertain and less is left to chance" (p. 228). Tight coupling (Weick, 1976), then, is the key to school effectiveness. School culture and action, personnel selection and behavior, organizational structure and operating systems, classroom activity and student outcome measurements are all given shape by and closely tied to the school's stated mission. While each school operationalizes each of these elements in its own way, they all pursue a conscious effort to create a school culture that carries mission commitment to every corner of the building and out into the students' homes.

The thought that went into conducting this study and crafting this book is evident throughout. There isn't space here for a detailed examination, but a few examples can offer a glimpse of the book's strengths.

First, the concept of cohesion and each of the success-producing elements found across the five schools are examined in light of educational and organizational research. While schools are unique organizations, both as an organizational type and as individuals within that type, they still are organizations and share a body of characteristics with other kinds of organizations. Bringing the larger literature of organizational research to bear here helps to put much of what the researchers found into a richer context, and the book is better for it.

Not all of the chapters are rooted in research-based analysis to the same degree, however, and, as with any book where multiple authors are involved, writing and analysis quality vary from chapter to chapter—but only minimally.

Second, the authors offer what they call the Charter School Coherence Model. As much as theoretical models appeal to academics and tend to be ignored by field practitioners, the lesson at the heart of this model is vitally important:

...any given element, such as the people in an organization or its structures and systems, relates inextricably to the others. In other words, the functions of these key elements work interactively and synergistically, all playing an essential role in achieving successful student outcomes. (pp. 122-123).

In embracing this notion, the authors avoid the list-making weakness that plagues many other works that try to identify the essential elements of success in a school setting – just think back to the Effective Schools research of the 1980s. As lead author Katherine Merseeth eloquently puts it,

...a list of characteristics frequently fails to acknowledge that there is more to successful school reform for urban youth than a series of one-step efforts individually implemented. Lists have a tendency to obscure the important connective tissue that brings coherence to the overall effort; in other words, lists ignore how the organization operates as a whole. (p. 117)

Third, each of the analysis chapters has a “Lessons for Replication” section at the end. These suggest how some of the concepts and practices identified in the chapter could be used by other charter school and traditional public school educators to improve their programs and raise student achievement levels. These sections might better be titled “Possible Applications,” given the autonomy and operational differences between the schools in the study and regular public schools—something the authors recognize early in the book. Nonetheless, these sections do contain ideas that might be adapted, at least partially, in different environments to good result. Finally, there are some useful appendices, not least of which is a description of the study methodology. While promoting a sense of trustworthiness in the book and its conclusions, this particular appendix also explains one of its clear limitations, which is the absence of student input. The U.S. Department of Education prohibited direct contact with or interviews of students as a condition of the research grant.

There are limitations that come with using qualitative methods without substantial quantitative survey support, as a few counter examples will illustrate. For instance, based on interviews with a minority of teachers and without reference to any comprehensive teacher survey across the five schools, the authors contend that while teachers are everywhere very closely managed, “[T]he coherence between teachers’ values and school goals ...enables teachers to accept this monitoring and feedback without a sense that they are being overly supervised” (p. 186). This seems a questionable assertion, particularly in light of the turnover rates at each of the schools. Granted that other factors surely are present in the mix of things that would cause a teacher to leave, many of which are insightfully discussed in the book, the constraints of a tightly enforced scripted instructional style merit consideration.

Similarly, there is no reference to any systematic broad-based survey of parents. The cited interview quotations are all quite positive, but can only represent the thinking of a small fraction of the parent body. Considering the heavy pressure put on parents in all of the schools, it seems a little presumptuous to assert the presence of consistently high levels of parental satisfaction across the population.

In the book’s totality, however, these are lightweight criticisms. Its strengths overwhelm its flaws, and it is recommended reading for anyone interested in school improvement.

Reference

Weick, K. E. (1976) Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21(1), 1-19.

About the Reviewer

Gary Hartzell is a Professor Emeritus, Department of Educational Administration and Supervision, University of Nebraska at Omaha. His research interests center on schools as work places for adults, with particular attention given to work place relationships. He has focused most of his attention on the assistant principal and school librarian

positions. His interest in these two areas grew out of his own experience and out of materials surfacing in a seminar he taught on power and influence in the work place. He is the author of *Building Influence for the School Librarian* (Linworth, 2004), the lead author of *New Voices in the Field: The Work Lives of First-Year Assistant Principals* (Corwin Press, 1995), and many articles on school administration practices, school librarians, and workplace relationships.

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