

Book Review

A review of *School Leadership and Complexity Theory*, by Keith Morrison, 2002. London: RoutledgeFalmer, 215 pp. ISBN 0415277841. \$54.95 USD.

Reviewed by:

BRIAN R. BEABOUT

University of New Orleans (USA)

It is a somewhat unique task to review a book that has been in circulation for several years as one has the benefit of more recent scholarship and pre-existing critiques on which to scaffold a review (see Clarke, 2003; Stanley, 2005). While these sources have been useful in crafting my comments, my work as a qualitative researcher employing complexity theory in the study of school change has provided me with a number of living, breathing examples of complex change. These experiences serve as a constant pointer to the messiness of applying complexity theory to educational practice in modern schools. I discovered Morrison's book while engaged in an inquiry of school leaders' experiences with change. My words here are guided by that experience of serendipitously discovering Morrison's ideas at a time when I was deeply immersed in the study of school change.

One of the strengths of Morrison's book is the clarity with which he writes about the theoretical bases of complexity theory. His first chapter, which outlines the central tenets of complexity theory, would make an excellent introduction for students interested in the application of complexity theory to organizations in general and schools in particular. His treatment of the conceptual turn from the Newtonian view of organizations to the complexity-influenced views is well written, broad in scope, and accomplishes in one chapter what books like that of Wheatley (1999) achieve in an entire book.

The clarity of his writing should not be taken to represent universally agreed-upon ideas. In distinguishing complexity theory, open systems theory, and chaos theory, Morrison (2002) defines complexity theory as “an attempt to explain how open systems operate through holistic spectacles” (p. 7). While complexity theory certainly deals with open systems, the differentiation from open systems theory is muddled here. The only unique attribute Morrison gives to open systems is that they are “teleologically deterministic,” and neglectful of nonlinearity. But others insist that open systems theory does deal with systems that can learn and change, and that open systems are certainly amenable to nonlinear functioning (Miller 1978). Similarly, Ni and Branch (2007) include independence, interconnectedness, and a shared purpose in their definition of complexity theory, while Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr, and Nelson (1998) use much the same language in explicating their systems theoretical approach to educational change. In the end, novices (and experts alike!) should be reminded of the unsettled nature of complexity theory in the social sciences and should not be led to rely too heavily on a single source.

As Morrison moves away from introducing the reader to the concepts surrounding complexity theory and begins developing connections to school leadership and school change, he provides ample connections between complexity theory and other more established areas of research in educational leadership: organizational dynamics (Chapter 2), leadership theories (Chapter 3), organizational learning (Chapter 4), school and community relations (Chapter 5), and communication theories (Chapter 6). While his heavy use of citations and careful treatment of many concepts across these established areas of research in educational leadership makes for slow reading, it provides a vital connection for those readers who will feel a sort of kinship or instinctive agreement with complexity theory but are looking for more traditional scholarly ground on which to stand. If the influence of complexity theory on the study of education is to mature effectively, it is scholarship like Morrison’s work here that will pave the way.

Given the broad swath of educational research Morrison covers in this book, there are bound to be some contradictions and inconsistencies that emerge. While one could explain these as problems with the text, they can be as easily described as areas that require further exploration for the application of complexity theory to education. My work with educators and the change process (Beabout, 2008; Beabout, Carr-Chellman, Alkandari, Almeida, Gursoy, Ma, & Pastore, in press) tells me that the contradictions between the theoretical and practical constructions of complexity theory in education are fruitful areas for the refinement of our theory and the alteration of our practice.

One key area of contradiction regards the role of planning for school change. While Morrison dismisses mission and vision statements as “mind control and thought police” (p. 58) and argues against “Grand Designs” for change, he encourages schools to stick to their “primary purposes and core activities” (p. 63). At issue here is the role of planning in complex organizations. While much has been made of loose coupling in educational institutions (Fusarelli, 2002; Weick, 1976), even the loosest coupling in an organization, especially one supported with public funds, depends on some set of common goals. How are we to distinguish between common goals and Grand Designs? Is it the amount

of stakeholder participation that goes into the vision? Is it the frequency with which the vision is revised based on changing environmental conditions? Does not the collaborative vision of senior members become the pre-existing Grand Design for new members of an organization? I have trouble envisioning a school that constantly revisits all of its purposes and goals without driving away staff members. I find the idea of constantly evolving goals enticing, but the thought of working in such a place nauseating. More empirical work must be done to close this gap.

Another area of contradiction is the central paradox of leadership in complexity theory: How does a leader lead when the goals are self-organization, decentralized authority, and flexibility? Morrison responds to this directly, though incompletely, with the idea that “there are *several* leaders in a complex school. Leadership does not evaporate in complexity theory; rather it is everywhere in the organization” (p. 73, emphasis original). While similar notions of distributed and servant leadership appear often throughout the text, how are principals to authentically use these concepts in practice? At public schools in most industrialized nations, concerns for standardized test scores have applied pressure towards centralized leadership and state-directed goals. Leadership may be everywhere, but accountability rests at the top. And while complexity theory argues directly against this type of policy environment, it is precisely where school leaders find themselves, and complexity theory, including Morrison’s Disney-like vignettes of school turnarounds, does not seem to provide much practical support at this stage.

Perhaps the primary avenue for practical application of complexity theory to educational change is at the policy level where it can be used in the war to bring down the standardization and testing machine that has been constructed over the past 25 years. Arguments about the moral problems associated with standardized schooling in an unequal society can be persuasive, but this is not currently the work of most principals. The ideas of “system leadership” (Hopkins, 2007), in which school leaders take responsibility not just for single schools, but for the health of the entire educational system, might find a useful partnership with Morrison’s ideas in the near future.

In conclusion, this effort by Morrison does an excellent job of introducing the concepts of complexity theory as applied to education, as well as weaving intricate connections between this area of inquiry and other more firmly established areas of research in educational leadership. Not unexpectedly, the book leaves many practical questions unanswered and does not address the political, moral, and phenomenological issues involved in an approach to leadership that challenges the status quo in such a radical way. This work is left to others, and indeed such theory development has blossomed since Morrison’s volume was published (Beabout 2008; Doll 2008; McQuillan, in press; Reigeluth, 2004).

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