



Book Review: Systems Thinking for School Leaders: Holistic Leadership for Excellence in Education

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A Book Review on Systems Thinking for School Leaders: Holistic Leadership for Excellence in Education

Haim Shaked and Chen Schechter, (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG), 2017, 140 pages, ISBN: 978-3-319-53571-5.

The authors of *Systems Thinking for School Leaders: Holistic Leadership for Excellence in Education*, Drs. Haim Shaked and Chen Schechter are distinguished scholars and prolific authors in the fields of systems thinking and leadership development. Dr. Shaked, a former elementary and high school principal, is currently the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Head of the Department of Education at Hemdat Hadarom College of Education. Dr. Schechter is a Professor of Leadership, Organizational Development, and Policy in the School of Education at Bar-Ilan University and also serves as the Editor-in-Chief (co) of the *Journal of Educational Administration* (JEA). Both Drs. Shaked and Schechter bring practical knowledge of and expertise in leadership preparation to the discussion of the acquisition and application of a systems thinking, or holistic, mindset in educational leadership.

The book is divided into two parts that follow what Shaked and Schechter (2017) refer to as a “funnel-shaped” (p. ix) structure moving from general information about systems thinking to the more specific and practical approach of implementation. Part I, *The Environmental and Empirical Backdrop to Developing an Enhanced Systemic Leadership Approach*, devotes four chapters to a summative review providing definitions and developments regarding systems thinking. After a brief introduction on the need for holistic school leadership, the authors review the evolution of systems thinking, the varied incarnations of systems methodologies, and the existing manifestations of systems thinking as it has been applied to school leadership. It is in Part I that the authors also wade through the multitude of systems thinking definitions from various disciplines to identify two major characteristics of systems-thinking, and the foundation for the approach of the book: (1) systems thinking is “seeing the whole beyond the parts” and (2) systems thinking is “seeing the parts in the context of the whole” (p. 11).

Part II is titled *The Holistic School Leadership Approach and Guidelines for Its Implementation*, and it dedicates six chapters to conceptual framework of holistic school leadership and application of systems thinking in educational contexts. As the title implies, in Part II, the authors define holistic school leadership, explain its importance as a framework for educational leaders, and provide guidance on putting the theory to action. Additionally, the authors identify four core characteristics of holistic school leadership: (1) leading wholes, (2) adopting a multidimensional view, (3) influencing indirectly, and (4) evaluating significance (p. 56) and explain not only the

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major sources for acquiring the knowledge and skills to employ the characteristics, but also a five-stage process through which development of holistic school leadership occurs. The authors acknowledge the complexity of systems-thinking, recognizing that building the capacity for holistic school leadership is accomplished through years of cultivation in a leader's career and also highlight the lack of literature in any discipline on the process(es) used by professionals to adopt a systems-thinking perspective, calling for increased empirical research to address this gap.

The authors are forthright about the purpose of this book—to argue that systems thinking may be beneficial for school leaders who face complex educational problems and to provide practical ways for school leaders as well as policy makers and leadership preparation programs to implement systems thinking through the holistic leadership framework. To achieve this purpose, the authors present their conceptual framework in an accessible format, intertwining relevant, real-life examples, and anecdotes from their own research of Israeli principals who demonstrate systems thinking with short, bulleted summaries of major concepts and themes. The authors also include as the final chapter a series of action principles related to the four characteristics and major sources of holistic school leadership. These action principles provide leaders with actionable steps they may think about or act upon in order to enhance or develop their own systems thinking perspective.

In both the preface and the conclusion to the book, Shaked and Schechter (2017) stress the importance of context in both developing and implementing a systems thinking perspective through the holistic leadership framework. For this reason, the authors present their framework not as a structured tool or program, but as pliable allowing policy makers, leadership preparation programs, and school leaders to adjust the characteristics based on identified needs and the local environment. Though they present the idea of holistic school leadership as “global” (p. x), the authors acknowledge the importance of attending to various situational contexts—of understanding the larger system in which the framework

is operating—for successful implementation. This approach is exceptionally pertinent for current leaders in public education under increased regulatory pressure that cannot afford to ascribe to a rigid or narrow framework in attempts to achieve improved outcomes.

An important distinction between the holistic school leadership framework presented in this book and existing literature on systems thinking and school leadership is that this book does not present systems thinking solely as a means to address a specific problem or as an isolated strategy for school improvement reform. Drawing on previous research by Fullan (2004, 2005), who also happens to have written the forward to this book, the authors argue that while the current body of literature has established the importance of systems thinking in education, it falls short of identifying the characteristics of using systems thinking comprehensively in the regular operations of a school. In *Systems Thinking for School Leaders*, however, Shaked and Schechter build on the systems work by Fullan and other researchers in the field to present the holistic school leadership framework as not only an approach to problem solving, but as a paradigm shift, one in which the school leader and ultimately the school staff think through their daily work with a systems mindset.

The authors are explicit about the audience for this book: “principal educators, policy makers, and especially school leaders” (p. x). Indeed, this book is a substantial choice for systems thinking exploration by each of the aforementioned audiences as well as any educational leader who is seeking sustainable transformation of not only an educational organization, but also a transformation of self.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CE is a graduate student. JM-S is CE's graduate advisor and also the instructor for CE's directed reading in which the book in the review was the main text. CE wrote the first draft of the book review, and JM-S revised, edited, and restructured for publication.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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