The fluent leader: functional fluency and effective leadership inspired by transactional analysis

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BOOK REVIEW

The fluent leader: functional fluency and effective leadership inspired by transactional analysis, edited by Valerie Fawcett, London, Routledge, 2023, pp., 173, £29:99 ISBN 978-1-032-38540-2

I will begin with a hearty endorsement of this title; I think the book provides a comprehensive account of a powerful model of reflective practice for school leaders and classroom practitioners. I will also declare an interest from the outset; I am a longstanding advocate of functional fluency, having been associated with its theoretical development and supported colleagues sharing the model over several years.

For readers unfamiliar with functional fluency, the book provides an excellent introduction to the model, originally developed through research by Susannah Temple, subsequently incorporated into the Temple Index of Functional Fluency (TIFF) and featured in numerous professional development programmes within and beyond the educational arena. Whilst the focus of the book is leadership, given the relative lack of mainstream publications on functional fluency, I would suggest that a wider range of readers than those in leadership will find this a worthwhile read.

The book comprises eight chapters with the first four being orientated toward those who are new to the model and providing a thorough introduction to core components and general application. The remaining chapters provide more specific consideration of how the model can be used in relation to group dynamics and organisational change. The contributors come from the world of organisational consultancy, training and coaching with plenty of experience to share and integrating additional models alongside the central model of functional fluency.

At risk of over-explanation, functional fluency provides a way of understanding relational effectiveness, which is an aspect of leadership that, as several contributors observe, can be especially problematic for those in leadership positions. Certainly, in my experience working with head teachers, the interpersonal domain remains the most troubling part of the job, giving rise to self-doubt, recrimination of others and a general source of anxiety. Functional fluency is arguably one of the most straightforward routes into the complexity of human relationships and yet is not especially well known, which is a pity given that its roots are in classroom practice. Temple's original research was very much based on figuring out what exactly teachers do when they are at their most effective – in other words, when they are 'functioning fluently'. The resulting model has been remarkably portable, having been applied across a wide range of contexts including parenting, teaching, developing personal effectiveness and, obviously, leadership.

Each chapter of The Fluent Leader includes a specific aspect of application of the model, case study material and useful questions to help readers reflect on their own context. The writing is consistently engaging and well edited throughout – an impressive achievement given the range of contributors and varied perspectives. This is an easy book to pick up and get into with plenty of ideas to take away and try out. On first glance it might appear that the onus is on the corporate sector, however the nature of functional fluency combined with the accessible style of the book means that the material travels very easily into the

field of education. Whilst there are connections with other related theoretical approaches and ideas, for example, transactional analysis, group development, role theory and systems management, no prior knowledge is required by the reader.

Some senior staff might be put off by the lack of educational context; I counted just one school based scenario in the case study material. I can appreciate that this is a persistent complaint of school leaders, that educational leadership development tends to over-rely on translating corporate sector concepts into the world of schools and colleges. However, the quality of writing and insights offset this reservation. Another consideration I had, whilst reading with an international readership in mind, was that a sense that the book feels rooted in a Western frame of reference, in contrast with a cross-cultural perspective. In other words, cultural diversity and localised implications of functional fluency is not something accounted for by the contributors, even though some are writing from beyond the Anglo-European region. A third comment is that leaders already familiar with functional fluency might be irritated by the repetition of explanatory passages in different chapters.

Nevertheless, despite these few critical comments, the book offers a welcome and fresh insight into what it means to be personally effective. Those in pastoral care roles will find not just a resource to support personal reflection and impact, but also an approach for sharing directly with older students. Most importantly, though, the value of the title is that it really is the 'go to' source for anyone interested in discovering the power of functional fluency.

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