

Organizational Learning and Educational Change

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The avant-garde of educational change theory is the idea that schools be treated and developed as learning organizations which do not pursue fixed plans in pursuit of set goals, but structure and develop themselves so that they and their members can continually learn from experience, from each other and from the world around them, so that they can solve problems and improve on a continuous basis.

In this chapter, Mulford takes this field of organizational learning, describes its key principles, discusses some of the research evidence that is beginning to emerge in relation to it; and engages critically with some of the field's claims and their limitations. Mulford's chapter is neither blindly euphoric nor sweepingly dismissive of organizational learning theory. Instead of uncritically applying the general theory to education as many other writers and advocates of educational change have done, he presents one of the few critical appraisals of the field and its relevance that have yet been written.

INTRODUCTION

In a time of massive change countries worry about themselves. This concern inevitably results in special attention being given to public institutions, including schools. We certainly seem fascinated, if not entranced, by the change that surrounds us in education (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Hargreaves, 1995; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Whether those in schools are thriving on the change is another matter. Some argue that “the decades of change, improvement and reform have left many educators – consciously or otherwise – confused, exhausted and disillusioned” (Deal, 1990, p. 131). Such a situation should be of concern not only for schools but also for the society they serve.

Peters is right when he says that the core paradox in a world of massive change “is fostering (creating) internal stability in order to encourage the pursuit of constant change” (1987, p. 395). Stability for change, moving ahead without losing our roots, becomes the challenge. This challenge may be able to be met in education and elsewhere by focussing on a change strategy where learning comes to be seen as “the single most import resource for organizational renewal in the post-modern age” (Hargreaves, 1995, p. 11). In this strategy the school is viewed and treated as a learning organisation.

In contrast to business where there has been a veritable explosion of books and journal articles on organisational learning (DiBella, 1994), a small but increasing number of educational writers have taken up the organisational learning ‘baton’

(Argyris, 1993; Argyris & Schön, 1978; Cousins, 1994; Fullan, 1993, 1994; Keating, 1995; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1995; Louis, 1994; Miles, 1993; Mitchell, 1995; Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993) and an even smaller number of educational researchers have studied the area (Leithwood et al., 1995; Louis, Kruse, & associates, 1995; Mitchell, 1995; Russ, 1995; Sackney, Walker, & Hajnal, 1995). This literature and research, although small in quantity, raises a number of important issues that need to be taken into consideration if we are to see organisational learning as a change strategy likely to fulfil its early promise. But before turning to these issues which group around the two areas of developmental pathways and limitations of the current literature, we first need to examine the concept of organisational learning itself.

DEFINITION

Almost 20 years ago Argyris and Schön (1978) argued that those intervening in organisations “have had to recognize that their main challenge is not to help an organization become more effective at the performance of a stable task in the light of stable purposes, but rather to help an organization restructure its purposes and redefine its task in the face of a changing environment” (p. 320). Similarly, Peter Senge (1990) believes that the basic meaning of a learning organisation is one that is “continually expanding its capacity to create its future” (p. 14).

Argyris and Schon (1978) go on to say that we should give primary importance to organisational inquiry (or learning), that is, “an organization’s capacity for conscious transformation of its own theory of action, and to individuals’ ability to appreciate and transform the learning systems in which they live.” (p. 331) The better organisations are at learning, the more likely it is they “will be able to detect and correct errors, and to see when they are unable to detect and correct errors” and the more likely they “will be at being innovative or knowing the limits of their innovation” (Argyris, 1993, p. 1).

Louis (1994) argues that existing models of change management in education are now inadequate but that the organisational learning model may be more promising because the “image of change that emerges in the organizational learning paradigm has elements of both managed change (organizational learning is affected by structure and leadership) and anarchy (the emergence of alternative paradigms and the selection of a new paradigm is a chaotic, largely unpredictable process)” (p. 20). Although, as she notes, “the frame is poorly developed in educational studies (see Dalin & Rust, 1983 for an exception), it has potential for helping to think about the problem of how schools change basic assumptions about ‘what it is we do here’ when demands for significant reforms are made” (p. 9).

Results of previous phases of a five year longitudinal study of policy implementation in the Canadian province of British Columbia (Leithwood et al., 1995) “increasingly have directed attention towards individual and collective learning processes [organisational learning] as explanations for variation in the productivity of school responses” (pp. 3–4). The authors (Leithwood & Aitken, in