

Other Approaches to Schools as Organizations

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Abstract *The aim of this paper is to explore the role that the analysis of the school as organization can play in discussions on other education, including the contribution to this discussion of organizational theory, organization research and development in schools, and voices from the field. The question is whether other education implies other organization of learning and working in schools, including other perspectives on the school as an organization. As a first step, a narrow and a broad perspective on schools as organizations are distinguished. Next, the broad perspective is further elaborated, leading to the conclusion that an intrinsic relationship exists between pedagogical and didactical aspects of teaching and learning, the social and power relationships, and the material and immaterial conditions for teaching and learning in schools. This discussion leads to the search for alternatives to the traditional organization of teaching and learning. This search is illustrated by an example from the Netherlands.*

Keywords organizational theory, deep and sustained change, teacher learning, school development

Introduction

For the study and discussion of education, several perspectives can be distinguished: educational, pedagogical, philosophical, and many others. One of the other perspectives on education is organizational. The school is the institutionalized context in which teaching and learning takes shape. When the school is the focus of analysis the organizational perspective can add meaning to the understanding of education.

The discussion on how education can or should be organized and the role of the school in education is maybe as old as education itself. In ancient Greece and Rome the school curriculum, the teaching of teachers, and the learning of students were

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recurring items in discussions on the functioning of the cities and the empire. The 4th century description by Augustinus of his relationship with teacher and school is still very much alive in many respects (Boyd, 1973). Through the ages famous painters made images of schools, in which traditional and alternative approaches of education are expressed. A 14th century scene of the tradition of pupils at desks in a small city school in Lorenzetti's *Allegory of good government* in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, can be compared with the 16th century scene of the circle of students and a teacher in Raphael's *School of Athens* in the Stanze rooms in the Vatican¹.

In my professional work I have been inspired by the search for concrete alternatives for existing educational and organizational arrangements in schools. The driving force is the idea that pedagogical and organizational alternatives for students should go along with alternatives in the content and organization of work for teachers and school leaders. In this paper my aim is to explore the role that the analysis of the school as organization can play in discussions on other education, including the contribution to this discussion of organizational theory, organization research and development in schools, and voices from the field. The question in this paper is whether other education implies other organization of learning and working in schools, including other perspectives on the school as an organization.

Two Perspectives on Schools as Organizations

A Restricted Perspective

The organizational perspective on education can be defined in a narrow way or in a broader sense. In a restricted meaning the organizational perspective on education is defined in terms of a distinguished disciplinary approach of organizational and leadership issues in and around schools. The disciplinary bound study of the organization of schools, teaching, and learning started only recently in the 20th century (for a critical discussion of the origins of the field of educational administration in the United States, see: Hoy & Miskel, 2008). Initially, insights from organizational theory and management studies were applied to schools, without a critical look from voices in the field or results of empirical research in schools.

Until the 1980s, hardly any empirical research on the organizational aspects of schools was executed. For example, two critical essays on educational administration in the U.S. that were published in this period derive their critics only

¹ These pictures can be found via google images. For the traditional image mentioned look for "lorenzetti good government" (and look in the picture, bottom right, for the man with the donkey and the dancing ladies). The school is above the man with the donkey and at the right from the ladies. For the alternative educational image mentioned, look for "school athens euclides."

from general theoretical topics in the field of organizational theory. In one article the violation of human nature in attempts to control behaviour via organizational theory is discussed, and in the other article the role of positivist research in administrative science is criticized (Clark & Astuto, 1988; Greenfield, 1988). No results of empirical research on organizational issues in schools were used in the arguments in these articles, and no reference was made to critical positions of practicing teachers and school leaders. In the same period, early empirical research in the field started up. The main focus of this research was rationalization of teacher work and management, planned educational change, and effectiveness of schools.

Internationally, in the last decades a considerable empirically grounded body of knowledge on organizational aspects of schools and teacher work has been developed. Sometimes this research is related to general insights in organizational theory; other research is completely standing on its own. Often, the aim of this empirical research is to support and to evaluate projects and policies aimed at enhancing efficiency or effectiveness in education. This research is often instrumental or mechanical in character. Nevertheless, the results of this research can be used as input for critical discussions on the organization of schools.

A Broader Perspective

In a broader sense the discussion on organizational aspects of education is focused on how the societal, pedagogical, didactical, and social aspects of learning and teaching relate and come together in the school as an organisation, and how the institutionalized organizational aspects of the school regulate this ongoing discussion. In 1932 Waller wrote:

The school is a unity of interacting personalities. The personalities of all who meet in the school are bound together in an organic relation. The life of the whole is in all its parts, yet the whole could not exist without any of its parts. [...] As a social organism the school shows an organismic interdependence of its parts; it is not possible to affect a part of it without affecting the whole. As a social organism the school displays a differentiation of parts and a specialization of function. The organism as an entity is nourished by the community [...]. A school exists wherever and whenever teachers and students meet for the purpose of giving and receiving instruction. The instruction which is given is usually formal classroom instruction, but this need not be true. The giving and receiving of instruction constitutes the nucleus of the school as we now think of it. About this nucleus are clustered a great many less relevant activities. (Waller, 1932/1961, p.6)

As the work of Waller and more recent studies of teaching and schools show, the school in its present form is not only the result of this broader discussion on the organizational aspects of schools. The institutionalized form of the school also sets limits and directions in this discussion on education in schools (Fend, 1981; Lortie, 1975; Tyack & Tobin, 1994). These broader discussions often are more organic and systemic in character, and often the research they are based on gives voices to the agents in the field (see for example: Van Veen & Slegers, 2006).

A Broad Perspective on the Organizational Context of Teaching and Learning in Schools

Teaching and learning in the school context can be regarded as interrelated social and goal-directed activities. Depending on the pedagogical and didactical assumptions and goals, learning and teaching will vary considerably in pedagogical and didactical practices in classrooms and schools. Goals and practices can vary on dimensions like “teacher- or learner-centred,” “uniform or individualized education,” and “traditional or alternative learning goals, contents and contexts.” Depending on the positions of teaching and learning in these dimensions, the organization of these pedagogical and didactical practices will also vary. More individualized didactical goals and practices need more differentiated work environments for teachers, and mutual adjustment among teachers. For learner centred learning environments to be effective, shifts in authority relationships and new patterns of interaction are needed, as well as interdependent collaborative relationships between teachers and others. Alternative learning goals, contents and contexts often go together with more open relationships with the school environment and open communication with parents and other partners in the school environment. Development of interdependent collaborative relationships in working and learning, and the shift in authority relationships and interaction patterns, not only are means to reach alternative didactical ends. Moreover, these central aspects of other education also embody pedagogical learning goals that contribute to participative and democratic communities, etc.

When brought into practice in “normal” schools, these alternative patterns of teaching and learning, and of working and organizing, are vulnerable to disruptions and evaporation. Their often non-institutionalized character, and the dominance of the institutionalized “grammar of schooling” and image of “the real school” (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) may hinder deep, sustained, and effective performance of these alternative practices. For example, the case of the inclusion reform in Dutch primary education in the 1990s shows that the reinterpretation and reinvention by the participants of the innovations constituting the inclusion reform have resulted in rather traditional methods in schools for addressing the enhanced differences between students. The specialists in the schools, which may include special service coordinators and remedial teachers, diagnose and try to help students having

learning delays and/or behavioural difficulties in addition to the classroom teacher. The classroom teachers attend to the needs of those students within specific limits, limits that permit them not to change their instructional methods and classroom organization in the direction of adaptive practices.

The counterproductive effect of this situation in the 1990s has been to replace separate special schools for students by implicit but nevertheless strongly separated tracks within regular schools for students who need some kind of special education. Thereby the tendency of regular schools is reproduced to create seemingly homogeneous groups of students and only differentiate within the narrow boundaries of these homogeneous groups. Organizational factors of the schools contribute to the counterproductive effect of the inclusion reform notwithstanding the fact that these same factors, alternatively interpreted, were assumed to contribute to the success of the reform (Imants, 2002a). According to Skrtic:

In organizational terms, student disability is neither a human pathology nor an objective distinction: it is an organizational pathology, a matter of not fitting the standard programs of the prevailing paradigm of professional culture, the legitimacy of which is artificially reaffirmed by the objectification of school failure as a human pathology through the institutional practice of special education. (Skrtic, 1991, p.169)

Dealing with diversity and inclusion in schools requires dealing with standardization and flexibility in a balanced way. Reaching this balance is a complex job. Standardization and flexibility are core characteristics of competing pedagogical and organizational paradigms, respectively the psycho-medical and the interactive paradigms, and the professional/machine bureaucracy and adhocracy images (Dyson & Milleward, 1997; McKinnon & Brown, 1994; Mintzberg, 1979). Inclusion is about a paradigm shift with implications for the way schools are organized, the way teachers teach and develop professionally, and for the values which underpin the whole education system; it underlines the importance of multidisciplinary project teams in which team members work collaboratively on the project of inclusion of diverse students and assume joint responsibility for its completion (Skrtic, 1991).

The Dutch inclusion reform in the 1990s offered several opportunities for critical teacher learning from alternative practices, and as such for sustained forms of other education. Notwithstanding these opportunities, the critical reinterpretation and reinvention of the inclusion reform has been largely constrained by the characteristics of the prevailing school structure and school culture and the uniform and traditional interpretations of specific innovations in the inclusion reform which

coincide with the existing structural and cultural characteristics of the schools (Imants, 2002b).

The conclusion of this example is that in and around schools an intrinsic relationship exists between pedagogical and didactical aspects of teaching and learning, the social and power relationships, and the material and immaterial conditions for teaching and learning. For this reason learning, teaching and organizing in classrooms and schools can and should be studied and discussed from the point of view of organizational theories. Looking through the lenses of these theories can bring findings and peculiarities to light that would have gone undiscovered had organizational theories and perspectives been neglected.

As compared to the analysis of the inclusion reform in primary education, the same conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the introduction in Dutch secondary education of the reform of student self-directed learning in the last 15 years (Hoekstra et al., 2009; Imants & Oolbekkink, 2009; Imants & Van de Ven, 2011; Meirink et al., 2010). The interest of this conclusion is not only theoretical. Practically, there is a need for effective and realistic strategies for deep and sustained reinvention and reinterpretation of pedagogical, didactical, and organizational practices in classrooms and schools.

The Need for Alternatives to the Traditional Organization of Teaching and Learning

A well-known and ever recurring problem in the search for other education is the absence of deep and sustained change in classroom and school practices. This problem is the starting point for the argument in this article in favour of alternatives from the traditional organization of teaching and learning, and for the analysis by means of organizational theory of these practices. Often heard explanations for the disruption and evaporation of desired or required changes in “ordinary” schools are: the innovation itself is unsound, the innovation is misunderstood, the innovation is applied into practice in a restricted mode, resistance to change among teachers, inappropriate conditions in schools, shortage of money and other resources, etc. Mostly, these explanations remain at the technical, fragmented, and instrumental side of aspired changes in classroom and school.

Some broader and more systemic explanations might shed better light on the why and how of developments towards other education in schools. This is not to say that the research on which instrumental explanations are based is always unsound. But to get the complete picture, a broader approach is needed. To elaborate the argument, firstly some attention will be spent on the meaning of the concept “ordinary” school in a discussion on the development of other education in schools. Next, some alternative explanations will be put forward regarding the absence of deep and sustained change in teaching and learning in the mainstream of schools. In

these alternative explanations arguments are found for the search for other organizational arrangements in and between schools.

The “Ordinary” School

Maguire, Perryman, Ball, and Braun (2011) recently published an article with the intriguing title “The ordinary school – what is it?” The article describes some of the complexities researchers encountered when they try to construct a sample of “ordinary” schools in the UK, based on Ofsted information. It turns out that schools that are moderately successful, and thus can be characterized as “ordinary,” use promotional and representative devices to escape or avoid being “just ordinary.” These schools do so by constructing themselves in their artefacts of promotion and marketing (mostly brochures and websites). As a result, “the pressure to succeed and ‘look better’ than any other local competitors means that schools are inevitably caught up in a process of attempting to mark themselves out as distinctive and as ‘less ordinary’ than others” (Maguire, et al., 2011, p.4). As the authors conclude: “In this fabricated world, perhaps there are no ‘ordinary’ schools, for how could these possibly exist?” (Maguire, et al., 2011, p.14). In other words, to become real other schools, instead of fabricated not-ordinary schools, means a shift in daily school practice from focussing on rhetoric images of “otherness” to practice of deep and sustained change of teaching and learning.

Four Alternative Explanations

As compared to the instrumental explanations of the vulnerability and evaporation of desired change in classrooms and schools, the following two interrelated, alternative explanations are put forward:

- 1) It is not uncommon, that social and organizational aspects of desired change are neglected, and a one sided focus on pedagogical and technical aspects of innovation dominates. Or the other way around, that innovation is narrowed to structural adjustments in the organization of teaching and learning in schools, without giving the attention they need to the culture in the school and the meanings teachers give to teaching and learning for successful change to occur (Fullan, 2007). According to the broader approach of the organizational aspect of schools, social relationships and structure, power and culture, resources and capacity of teachers should move along with the changes in the field of pedagogics and didactics.
- 2) Strong ideologies regarding teaching and learning in schools keep schools away from moving in the direction of other education on a sustained basis. Ideological positions, expressed in the grammar of

schooling and the image of the real school (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) encompass significant organizational and managerial points of view that make change processes vulnerable for evaporation. These ideologies serve as powerful contexts in which pedagogical and didactical alternatives are developed and brought into practice (in which education is reinvented and reinterpreted). These contexts generate a constant pressure to restore the daily school practice, the educational as well as the social and organizational practices, back to “normal.”

An example is the often-practiced method for social or cooperative learning. For cooperative learning to be effective, learning tasks should be developed for students in which the students are stimulated to develop interdependent patterns of collaboration while executing the task. This interdependency should be inherently built into the tasks for the students. When no interdependency is inherently part of the tasks students can take the opportunity to divide subtasks, instead of to collaborate. Superficially, these students cooperate when they execute subtasks. But when looking more deeply into the task performance it turns out that students only fulfil their specific part of the task individually. In such a case it can be expected that most of the students learn less about the subject that was central in the complete task, as compared to students who receive traditional direct instruction. In the latter case all the students are expected to study the complete task.

This example of “superficial implementation” (Spillane, et al., 2002) illustrates how seemingly close are the deep and superficial applications in classrooms of innovative educational practices. For teachers this can be an argument to talk about the innovative practice in terms of “old wine in new bottles.” Why hold onto the new practice while the old, routine practice seems to be at least as effective? In that case superficial innovative practice and evaporation of the innovative practice go hand in hand.

An interesting result of research on teacher collaboration in teams is that teachers can show the same pattern of collaboration as their students, a tendency towards division of subtasks instead of interdependent performance of the complete task as a team (Meirink, et al., 2010). And this, of course, is in line with the image of division of labour that dominates the field of education, as well as the field of industry and business.

Besides the two arguments just mentioned for a broad organizational approach to schools in contexts of school development in the direction of other education, a third argument is focused on the role of teacher learning in school development.

- 3) It is important that teachers themselves get familiar with the practice of learning tasks that they teach to their students in order to

realize deep and sustained change. Two reasons to strive for this analogy in learning of teachers and learning of students are:

- Complex pedagogics and didactics need high quality teaching by teachers, which asks for teachers who learn how to reinterpret and reinvent the complex learning task for their own students in the context of their own classroom; learning by teachers how to teach to students the successful completion of the complex learning task is done by going through the learning task themselves (Imants & Oolbekkink, 2009). This observation is in line with the emphasis on room for experimentation in organizational learning literature.
- Students need teachers and school leaders as convincing models, not only at the individual level, but also at the cultural level. These models demonstrate to students how the school can function as a democratic, innovative or alternative community.

A fourth argument for a broad organizational approach of schools which develops in the direction of other education is related to the availability and the spending of scarce resources.

4) Restricted resources in and around schools should be directed towards the development of educational and organizational alternatives to make innovative practices happen in a deep and sustained way in and around the school. It takes a clear vision on the development of the school, and widely distributed and wise leadership to get these scarce resources to those places in the school where they will optimally contribute to the development of the school in the aspired direction.

Other Schools in the Netherlands

“Traditional Reform Schools”

The Netherlands have a long tradition of schools that are funded on principles of specific pedagogies: among others Montessori schools, Jenaplan schools (based on ideas of Peter Petersen), Dalton and Freinet schools, and “Free” schools (based on ideas of Steiner). The umbrella term for these schools is “traditional reform schools.” In this section the focus is not on these schools. The focus in this section is on schools whose aim is to develop from a position of ordinary school towards a school with innovative and integrated pedagogical and organizational practices.

Growing Attention for Organizational and Managerial Aspects of Schools

In the Netherlands, attention for organizational and leadership issues in education started in the late 1970s and 1980s. In these years the first government funded research projects on managerial issues in schools were executed. Some professional journals for practicing school leaders in primary and secondary education were started. The first edition of the Handbook for School Organization and Educational Management was published in 1983. The first training programs for school leaders in secondary education started in the end of the 1970s, and comprehensive programs for school leaders in primary education followed ten years later. In the same period anti-management feelings dominated discussions in the Netherlands in and around schools: “schools are not factories,” and “students are not garden peas to be canned”; just the word “management” provoked fire alarm style reactions among teachers.

Recently, attention for organization and management is quite normal, although the worlds of many teachers and school leaders in many respects still are separated (“living-apart-together”).

The National School Network TOM

The national school network TOM is about education in primary school teams that fit the specific alternative educational goals and practices of the school. The project started 10 years ago, with the device *Onderwijs Anders* (= Other Education). The project was based on a grant by the national government, and supported by a national educational consultant company. In this period dozens of schools have participated in trajectories of several years, in which they worked to realize two interrelated aims: (1) improvements in learning content and radical changes in learning context for students, and (2) strengthening capacity among teachers and creating conditions in the organization of the school by the creative and effective development of resources, culture, and structures.

Some of the options for improving the learning context for students are: from the computer as a tool for practicing, towards the computer as a learning source and communication instrument; from passive listening to the teacher, towards learning by using own learning styles and intelligence; from uniform didactics, towards explorative and collaborative learning; from learning by the method, towards meaningful learning; from isolated classrooms, towards learning and working sites; and from a static building, towards a flexible school building.

The learning content concerns the knowledge and skills for the teachers and other professionals in the school to deliver the best education to the students. Examples are: knowledge of the curriculum goals and structure to gain mastery over the method (instead of the method being the master of the teacher), translating general learning goals in specific and meaningful learning activities, adapting methods for teaching to diverse sources of knowledge (facts, understanding, skills),

the proactive monitoring of the progress of students by using observations, test results, a student portfolio, and reflective interactions with students.

Teachers develop capacities in the direction of coach and mentor, rich tasks and varied functions to be performed, teamwork, shared responsibility for all the students in the school, team teaching, workplace learning, and a professional career.

Structure, culture, and resources in the school develop in the direction of flexible classroom structure, pedagogical team of teachers, mixed steering by teachers and students to promote meaningful and self-directed learning, and flexible learning groups.

These four pillars (learning context, learning content, development of teacher capacities, and development of culture, structure, and resources) develop within the context of a continuing change process. Constituent elements in this process of change are an open culture, school leaders as coaches, open communication, and creative and goal-oriented use of resources.

Several instruments have been developed during the ten years of practice that can be used in new schools, and reused and developed further in experienced schools. Most of the participating schools recently organized into an association VTG (United TOM schools Group). Schools are members of the association on a voluntary basis; the only expectation is that member schools carry high ambitions for the learning of their students and the development of teachers, the organization, and the relationships with the local and national environment. The aim of this association is to continue, enrich, and extend the network, now the project as such has ended. Exchange of information, mutual support around development of education and organization, and professional development are key activities.

Conclusion

In this article, the assumption that sustainable alternative schools and other education require solid and fitting alternative – other – organizational foundations is elaborated. Other education and other organization are regarded as two sides of the same coin. Organizational theory might be helpful in critically analysing existing modes for organizing education, and identifying and developing promising other modes for organizing education.

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