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Schools as learning organizations: hollow rhetoric or attainable reality?

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Purpose – To assess the desirability and attainability of schools becoming learning organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – Critical analysis based on a wide-ranging review of the “schools as learning organizations” literature.

Findings – The notion of learning organization applied to schools is fundamentally flawed. Most notably, schools as learning organizations are conceptualized in so many different ways that it is possible to claim almost anything; the political aspects of shared learning are inadequately handled; and poor quality scholarship is commonplace.

Practical implications – There are repeated claims in the educational improvement literature that there are significant benefits for schools that become learning organizations and, as a result, school leaders should steer schools in this direction. However, this paper critically challenges these claims, concluding instead that schools and their leaders should ignore calls to become learning organizations.

Originality/value – Many scholars, together with agencies such as the OECD, have suggested that, for schools, the learning organization is both a desirable goal and an achievable endpoint. The value of this paper is that, for the first time, these claims are subjected to a comprehensive critical review, revealing them to be hollow rhetoric rather than attainable reality.

Keywords

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Introduction

The educational literature contains many accounts of efforts to build school cultures that encourage staff learning and development in a climate of reflection, collaboration and collegiality (e.g., Voulalas and Sharpe, 2005; Sackney and Walker, 2006; Schlechty, 2009; Lovett and Cameron, 2011; Scanlan et al., 2016), and the term “the learning organization” has often been used to describe the hoped for endpoint of these and other efforts to improve schools. According to Bowen et al. (2007), “many voices in the school reform movement have discussed the need for schools to operate as ‘learning organizations’, which addresses [*sic*] the importance of faculty and staff working together to solve problems through networking and team learning” (p. 199). The authors point to a “burgeoning number of empirical investigations [that] offers support for positive effects from schools functioning as learning organizations” (p. 200).

Whether the term “burgeoning” is justified is an issue taken up later in this paper, but it is certainly true is that a number of investigators have endorsed the idea that schools should become learning organizations, and pointed to the benefits of doing so. For example, according to Wohlstetter et al. (1997), based on a study of schools in Canada, North America and Australia involved in curriculum reform, actively restructuring schools have more of the conditions in place that support organizational learning than other schools and this, in turn, means they are better able to adopt innovative teaching practices. In another study, based on a large scale investigation of Australian schools, Silins et al. (2002) claim there is accumulating evidence that “higher performing schools are functioning as learning organizations” and that “schools that engage in organizational learning enable staff at all levels to learn collaboratively and continuously and put this learning to use in response to

social needs and the demands of their environment” (both p. 639). Millward and Timperley (2010) draw on a case study of a New Zealand school in a low socio-economic district to identify three “organizational learning mediation processes” that create the kinds of organizational changes needed to improve student achievement. Berkowitz et al. (2013) claim that “schools functioning as learning organizations have the capacity to use knowledge to successfully plan, implement, and evaluate strategies to achieve performance goals for individual students and the school as a whole” (p. 138).

Claims about schools becoming learning organizations identify benefits not only for management and students, but for staff. For example, Bowen et al. (2007) discuss the positive impact of schools functioning as learning organizations on employees’ “personal well-being, their sense of efficacy in working with students, their work satisfaction, and their evaluation of the school as a high-performing organization” (p. 200). Orthner et al. (2006) report that coaching after-school program staff in the principles of organizational learning resulted in increased job satisfaction. According to Schechter and Feldman (2010), in schools that have become learning organizations, “teachers continuously deliberate with one another on how to solve problems that relate to teaching and learning” (p. 490). With benefits like these, it is hardly surprising that, as these last authors claim, “organizational learning has reached the forefront of both school change discourse and academic inquiry” (p. 490).

Endorsement of the learning organization as a worthwhile goal for schools also features regularly in calls for school improvement by policy makers and educational reformers. For example, the OECD guide, *What Makes a School a Learning Organization?* (2016) aims “to support the transformation of a select number of schools into learning organizations”, and implies that there are schools around the world that could and should function as learning organizations (see, e.g., OECD’s (2018) subsequent report on Welsh schools as learning organizations).

Two decades before the OECD guide, a report by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF), *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future* (1996), put forward the core recommendation that "schools be restructured to become genuine learning organizations for both students and teachers". In the 20 years between these two documents, there have been many endorsements of schools as learning organizations in the school improvement literature.

However, in any attempt to steer in the "learning organization" direction, those in leadership and management roles in schools face three serious challenges, and these are considered in the remainder of this paper. First, there is no agreement about what the phrase "school as learning organization" means; second, most accounts of schools as learning organizations adopt an unrealistic, apolitical perspective on school improvement that ignores the impact of interest differences on willingness to share learning; and third, much of the scholarship advocating that schools operate as learning organizations is of poor quality. Taken together, it will be argued that these weaknesses suggest that schools should treat calls to become learning organizations as hollow rhetoric rather than attainable reality and ignore them.

Challenges of making schools into learning organizations

Lack of agreement about what it means to claim that a school is a learning organization

The first challenge for anyone trying to assess the merits of schools reconstituting themselves as learning organizations is that the literature contains a bewildering array of definitions and concepts that immediately call into question what it means to claim that a school is a learning organization. At worst, the term "learning organization" functions like a Rorschach inkblot (Yeung et al., 1999), carrying the projections, wishes, fantasies and cultural beliefs of commentators and investigators. This tendency is very evident in Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), a book that many view as the starting point of popular writing about learning organizations. As Örtenblad (2007) commented after reviewing this book, Senge's writing is so vague, and the accounts spawned by it so varied, that it is possible for

anyone using Senge’s ideas to write about learning organizations to “get away with almost anything” (p 108), resulting in a smorgasbord of terms and concepts from which different investigators can take their pick and assert that their choice represents the essence of the learning organization.

In many cases, it is not possible to distinguish between claimed attributes of the learning organization and other general school improvement goals. This is very evident from Santa's (2015) analysis of 29 definitions of “the learning organization”, showing the frequency of each term used. These not only include obvious ones like “learning” and “organization”, but many broader terms as well, including “change” (referred to ten times in the definitions Santa considers), “processes” and “systems” (each used nine times) and “create”, “behaviour”, “improve” and “new” (each used seven times). Santa also considers cultural characteristics claimed to be associated with learning organizations, and finds them equally varied, ranging over such things as “trust”, “risk-taking”, “dialogue”, “openness” and “reflection”.

Before school leaders embark on a quest for their school to become a learning organization, it would be reasonable to ask about the extent to which schools are already functioning as learning organizations. This is where definitional issues are particularly problematic, because they give rise to a range of very different “school as learning organization” questionnaires, each with a different conceptual basis. Table 1 provides examples.

Table 1: Conceptual bases for “school as learning organization” questionnaires

<i>Source</i>	<i>Claimed “school as learning organization” components</i>
Gil, Carrillo, and Fonseca-Pedrero (2019)	Learning Leadership; Learning Structure; Learning Opportunities; Learning Culture.
Higgins, Ishimaru, Holcombe, and Fowler (2012)	Psychological Safety; Experimentation; Leadership that Reinforces Learning.
Schechter (2008)	Analyzing Information; Storing, Retrieving and Putting Information to Use; Receiving and Disseminating Information; Seeking Information, all with strong emphasis on curriculum, instruction and student achievement.

Park, J. (2008)	Senge's (1990) five disciplines, all with strong emphasis on teacher compliance with the needs of schools and their students.
Bowen, Ware, Rose, and Powers (2007)	Actions (e.g., Team Orientation; Innovation; Involvement) and sentiments (e.g., Common Purpose; Respect; Optimism) associated with learning organizations.
Silins, Mulford and Zarins (2002)	Trusting and Collaborative Climate; Taking Initiatives and Risks; Shared and Monitored Mission; Professional Development.

Reflecting the variety of conceptual bases shown in Table 1, the items in each questionnaire vary greatly, again reminiscent of Örtenblad's (2007) term "smorgasbord". Indeed, in these questionnaires, one can find items that encompass most positive aspects of school functioning (Table 2).

Table 2: Examples of questionnaire items intended to gauge how closely a school resembles a learning organization

<i>Source</i>	<i>Sample scale items</i>
Gil, Carrillo, and Fonseca-Pedrero (2019)	<i>"In your school, you feel comfortable talking about your professional problems and disagreements."</i> <i>"In your school, the principal carries out a constructive critique of the problems that arise."</i>
Higgins, Ishimaru, Holcombe, and Fowler (2012)	<i>"People in this school are usually comfortable talking about problems and disagreements."</i> <i>"My principal listens attentively."</i>
Schechter (2008)	<i>"Staff meetings make reference to decisions taken in previous meetings."</i> <i>"Reports about professional changes and innovations are circulated."</i>
Park, J. (2008)	<i>"Teachers often use the significant events of the school or classroom to think about their own beliefs about education."</i> <i>"Teachers feel free to ask questions of other teachers or staff regardless of gender, age, and professional status at the school."</i>
Bowen, Ware, Rose, and Powers (2007)	<i>"At my school, we treat one another as both colleagues and friends."</i> <i>"At my school, we focus our efforts on achieving measurable results."</i>
Silins, Mulford, and Zarins (2002)	<i>"Discussions among colleagues are honest and candid."</i> <i>"Good use is made of membership of teacher professional associations."</i>

The problem with items like these is not only the breadth of school improvement efforts they range over, but also that one can easily visualise scenarios where items like these apply even if a school is a long way from the learning organization ideal. For example, in a school where there is widespread hostility towards a newly introduced performance management system, staff might agree with most of the items shown in Table 2. They might respond that their school department does indeed measure performance gaps, and attest to being

comfortable with honest, candid dialogue with colleagues (perhaps candid dialogue denouncing the new scheme), with thinking (perhaps very critically) “about their own beliefs about education” and about how to make “good use of membership of [their] teacher professional associations” to take up their grievances.

Tendency to ignore the political dimensions of sharing learning organizationally

The second challenge for anyone trying to assess the merits of schools as learning organizations is that most accounts gloss over the political dimensions of shared learning, just as the mainstream organizational learning literature tends to do (Field, 2011). In the schools as learning organizations literature, the underlying assumption often seems to be that in a properly managed school, teachers and other staff should be prepared to share their learning in the service of the school’s interests. As a result, learning-related behaviour that serves personal rather than organizational interests—for example, a teacher who keeps quiet about what she has learnt because she fears criticism or exposing colleagues—tends to be viewed very negatively.

This tendency can be traced back to the earliest significant writing about organizational learning. Argyris (1994) depicts defensive routines associated with protecting against feelings of vulnerability and embarrassment as “anti-learning” (p. 79), and Senge (1990) refers to the kind of dynamics that might underpin reluctance to share knowledge as a “reeking odor” and a “perversion of truth and honesty” (both p. 273). Similar thinking is found throughout the organizational learning literature. Thus, Godkin and Allcorn (2009) offer a diagnosis of behavioural barriers to organizational learning, with “narcissism” and what they term “arrogant organization disorder” considered particularly problematic; Smith (2011) describes the “catastrophic” (p. 6) impact of being governed by “self-interest”; and Rupčić (2017) links learning organizations (“a Holy Grail we have been seeking all along”) with giving up “behavior based on self-interests” (both p. 421).

Most of the material just referred to was produced in North America, where there is a tendency to assume that human resource management strategies can reconcile the different interests of management and employees (Newman and Newman, 2015). Assumptions of alignment and common interests dominate the schools as learning organizations literature. There are repeated references to “all staff”, “everyone working as a team”, “sharing a common belief”, “identify with the school”, “shared sense of direction”, “all members of the school community with a shared purpose” and other phrases suggesting that alignment around school mission, vision, goals and values is both desirable and achievable.

Senge’s influential book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990, pp. 234-235) uses a neat graphic to underscore the importance of aligned interests in learning organizations. Organizational members are represented by small arrows, all embedded within a giant arrow representing the organization and the vision its members share. Senge’s point is that learning organizations require the smaller “individual” arrows to align with the giant “organizational” arrow. When this happens, he claims, learning becomes more like “the coherent light of the laser rather than the incoherent and scattered light of the light bulb” (p. 234).

Following Senge’s lead, many accounts of schools as learning organizations (e.g., Hallinger, 1998; Silins et al., 2002; Schechter, 2008; Kurland et al., 2010) assume alignment of the interests of school leadership and staff, in what Fielding (2006) disparagingly refers to as “collective unity” (p. 357). The OECD and NCTAF publications mentioned to at the beginning of this paper exemplify this emphasis. The OECD guide talks at length about the need for each school to develop a *common* vision, to establish a *school-wide* culture, to create *continuous* learning opportunities for *all* staff and to have leadership that “binds *all* of the separate parts of the learning organization together” (p. 10, italics added). The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future report also puts great emphasis on alignment, underlining the importance of developing *shared* goals and talents, *shared* standards for student learning, *shared* responsibility for groups of students and *shared* planning time.

By assuming collective unity, calls for schools to become learning organizations avoid engaging with situations where school improvement efforts result in conflict of interest. As the author has discussed at length elsewhere (see, e.g., Field 2018 & 2019a), interest differences have received little attention in the organizational learning literature, despite their importance in accounting for the likelihood that learning will be shared. When change involves conflict of interest (e.g., new arrangements for managing teacher performance, compliance, remuneration and career progression, or that reduce the power, professional status, learning and development opportunities and/or resources of individuals or groups), it is unlikely that managers and staff will openly share what they have learnt with each other.

The attitude of management and staff to sharing what they have learnt in such situations may be somewhat different, and it is useful to consider each separately. With regard to management, a framework proposed by Lukes (2005, 2006) for thinking about power in organizations helps to account for why managers may be very reluctant to share their learning when there is conflict of interest. According to Lukes, managers can exercise power in three different ways. The first is to prevail over others in what he terms the “first face of power”. For example, senior school management might use their power to represent a change and to structure consultation in ways that result in their achieving the outcomes they want.

However, close analysis might also reveal less visible, parallel processes occurring. Perhaps, as well as openly stating and justifying their position, school management might attempt to control the problem-resolution agenda while ignoring, misrepresenting or deflecting the grievances of those whose interests are negatively impacted. Lukes calls the power to exclude unwanted issues from debate and to shore up existing power arrangements the “second face of power”.

Looking deeper still, managers driving school improvement might exercise power in order to influence teachers’ perceptions of options and of what is acceptable. For example, they might try to induce staff to endorse arrangements despite the likelihood (for the teachers

involved) of negative consequences; or they might try to steer away from solutions that, if it were not for management preference-shaping, staff would recognize as aligning with their real interests. Lukes terms the power to do so the “third face of power”.

When it comes to management learning in situations where there are conflicts of interest, Lukes’ analysis suggests that managers are very unlikely to share with non-managerial staff what they have learnt about such things as how to exclude threatening issues from debate, how to shore up existing power arrangements, and how to induce staff to endorse arrangements that disadvantage them.

Teachers and other non-managerial school staff may also be reluctant to share what they have learnt with anyone other than colleagues whose interests coincide. Their reluctance may be associated with a range of considerations, including their roles, power, status, span of control, access to budget and resources (Bunderson and Reagans, 2011). School staff with less status and power have less freedom to act, and are therefore less able to focus attention on sharing learning that might have the potential to improve school operations.

School employees with less power and status also have less control over resources like funds and information, and are less able to influence their personal reputation, so they stand to lose more if they criticize proposals and get senior management offside. Moreover, by keeping quiet about what they have learnt rather than (as the “schools as learning organizations” literature advocates) sharing it openly, staff may feel more indispensable and therefore safer. As Bunderson and Reagans (2011) point out, even if low status staff do speak up and share what they have learnt, their contributions are unlikely to be given as much weight as those of management.

To summarize, in contrast with the assumption that often underpins accounts of schools as learning organizations—namely that, if properly managed, management and staff should willingly share what they have learnt in service of their school—the analysis presented here suggests that, when there is conflict of interest (as often happens during school improvement

efforts), it is unlikely that what is learnt will be shared with anyone other than colleagues with common interests. The implication is that widely shared learning is only ever likely to be a small subset of what managers and staff have actually learnt from school improvement efforts.

Poor quality of much of the scholarship surrounding organizational learning in schools

A third challenge for anyone trying to assess the merits of “schools as learning organizations” is that much of the scholarship surrounding learning organizations is of poor quality. For example, consider the statement by Klein and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2016, p. 134) that “the principles of organisational learning have been implemented in many schools (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995; Silins et al., 2002)”. In fact, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin do not mention organizational learning at all, and their only reference to “principles” relates to designing professional development. The other source referred to, Silins et al. (2002), does not provide any evidence about how widely implemented organisational learning principles are in schools.

Or consider two claims made in one of the papers cited earlier (Bowen et al., 2007)—first, that there are a “burgeoning number of empirical investigations that offer support for positive effects from schools functioning as learning organizations (see, for example, Lick, 2006; Orthner et al., 2006” (p. 200) and second, that the extent to which schools function as learning organizations may influence school employees’ “personal well-being, their sense of efficacy in working with students, their work satisfaction, and their evaluation of the school as a high-performing organization” (p. 200).

With regard to the first claim about burgeoning support for the benefits of schools functioning as learning organizations, Bowen et al. only cite two studies, and neither contains any evidence to support their claim. Lick (2006) is about professional learning communities, and only mentions the term “learning organization” once, in a passing reference to Peter Senge’s work, and Orthner et al. (2006) is about after-school programs

rather than schools. With regard to Bowen et al.'s second claim—that schools that function as learning organizations benefit staff—no evidence is provided.

Finally, consider the following passage from a paper that aims to “suggest an alternative framework for developing and analyzing schools as learning organizations” (Schechter and Mowafaq, 2013, p. 505):

According to Barnes (2000), a focus on the gathering and processing of information requires schools to establish opportunities for teachers to collectively think and share information on a sustained basis. Therefore, as learning organizations, schools should develop processes, strategies, and structures that would enable them to learn and react effectively in uncertain and dynamic environments (Giles and Hargreaves, 2006; Kruse, 2003; Louis, 2007; Silins et al., 2002; Strain, 2000).

In this passage, as with many references to schools as learning organizations, it is difficult to follow the logic and determine the credibility of the material cited. The paragraph begins by mentioning Barnes, a cultural anthropologist writing in a popular weekly magazine who does not mention learning organizations. The statement that follows (*viz.*, “therefore, as learning organizations, schools should ...”) then implies that the category “schools as learning organizations” is a tangible reality, but the basis for this claim is not revealed in the material that follows.

In focussing on these passages, there is no suggestion that they are unusual, and they are not the result of cherry-picking the kind of weaknesses that one can find in any body of scholarship. Instead, weaknesses like these are widespread in the schools as learning organizations literature. They include citing material that does not actually support points made; a variety of learning-related terms used interchangeably with “learning organization”, including “organizational learning” (which, as Örtenblad (2001) shows, is conceptually very different), “collective learning”, “collegial learning”, “professional learning”, “learning community”, “school as learning system”, and “learning team”; repeated use of conjunctive

adverbs like “thus” and “therefore” to imply a logical connection where none exists; an implicit assumption that “learning organization” is a meaningful concept; and under-acknowledgement of critical views.

Quality problems associated with endorsements of schools as learning organizations only mirror those found in the general learning organization literature. Recurring weaknesses identified in an extensive review of learning organization scholarship between 2008 and 2018 (Field, 2019b) match many of the weaknesses pointed out in this paper, and include conceptual misunderstandings about what the term “learning organization” means; absence of adequate differentiating criteria and standards that allow distinctions to be made between “learning” organizations and “non-learning” organizations; and repeated failure to meet even the most basic social science requirements for trustworthy data.

Discussion

Despite learning organizations regularly being championed in the school improvement literature, the material presented here suggests that schools should avoid using the term “learning organization” to describe the hoped-for endpoint of efforts to build a culture that encourages such things as learning and development, reflection and collaboration. This conclusion is based primarily on three considerations.

First, there is no agreement about what the term “learning organization” means. This is very evident when one looks at questionnaires claimed to measure how closely a school resembles a learning organization. Not only is there little common ground between the various conceptualizations of “learning organization” but, within each questionnaire, scale items range over most aspects of school change, making it possible to claim almost any desirable school characteristic is associated with becoming a learning organization, and impossible to distinguish clearly between “learning” and “non-learning” organizations. Second, most accounts of schools as learning organizations ignore political aspects of learning and, instead, make the unrealistic assumption that the interests of all school staff are, or should be,

aligned. By doing so, conflicts of interest that often accompany school improvement efforts, and the learning associated with them, tend to be downplayed or ignored altogether. Third, much of the scholarship in this field is of poor quality, making it impossible to thoroughly evaluate claims made about the merits of schools operating as learning organizations.

The implication of these findings is that schools and their leaders should ignore calls to become learning organizations. The concept of “school as learning organization” is so poorly defined, so politically naive and so inadequately supported by trustworthy data that it would be much more accurate to describe it as “hollow rhetoric” than “attainable reality”. There is no justification at all for referring to a school as a learning organization, and doing so does not clarify anything about the role of shared learning in school improvement efforts.

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