Developing schools as learning organisations—"Why" and "how"?

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1 | INTRODUCTION

> *Today's schools must equip students with the knowledge and skills they'll need to succeed in an uncertain, constantly changing tomorrow. That means preparation for constant learning and growing. We used to learn to do the work, now learning is the work. Students are unlikely to become lifelong learners unless they don't see their teachers as active lifelong learning. That means schools today have to be effective learning organisations'.*
>
> (Schleicher, 2018a)

A generation ago, schools would have been expected to equip students with the skills needed for the rest of their lives. In today's world, they need to prepare students for life and work in a rapidly changing environment, for jobs and for using technologies, some of which have not yet been created (Benevot, 2017; Schleicher, 2018b). Cognitive abilities such as literacy and problem-solving are still crucial, but teachers must also support students in developing the strong social and emotional foundation skills needed to thrive in a highly-dynamic labour market and rapidly changing world. Education today is much more about ways of thinking that involve creative and critical approaches to problem-solving and decision-making where students influence what they learn. Their interests, motivation and overall well-being are taken in consideration for shaping their learning (Dumont, Istance, & Benavides, 2010; Trilling & Fadal, 2009). Traditional models of schooling whose organisational patterns deeply structure schools—the single teacher, the classrooms each with their own teacher and traditional approaches to teaching and classroom organisation, etc.— are therefore inadequate for delivering these 21st century learning agendas, especially for the most disadvantaged students (Schleicher, 2012).

Countries have been trying to accommodate their increasingly complex education systems to the changing times, but this is not limited to the education sector. In many countries, the changing environment has called for public sectors to innovative their services (Agostino, Arena, & Arnaboldi, 2013; Albury, 2005). Research evidence shows us how innovation can contribute to improving the quality of public services and enhancing the problem-solving capacity of governmental organisations in dealing with societal challenges (Damanpour & Schneider, 2009). Hence, innovation is not an optional luxury for public services and the public sector: it is core and needs to be institutionalised as a deep value (Albury, 2005; Bekkers, Edelenbos, & Steijn, 2014; De Vries, Bekkers, & Tummers, 2014). Few would therefore dispute that the primary task for management today, whether in public or private organisations, is the leadership of organisational change (Agostino et al., 2013; Damanpour & Schneider, 2009; Fernandez & Rainey, 2006; Plowman et al., 2007; Schleicher, 2018b). However, organisational change is a complex, multifaceted process and creating sustainable change is difficult (Kuipers et al., 2014; Walker, 2006). Whilst many public sector organisations have embarked on the path of change and innovation, many do not achieve the intended outcomes (De Vries et al., 2014; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011; Potts, 2009).

Unfortunately, the education sector is no exception. In many cases, reforms have failed to take hold in the classrooms or at best get 'adopted on the surface without altering behaviours and beliefs. Many reform efforts

and policies have also failed to adequately prepare schools for the changing environment (Fullan, 2011; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Viennet & Pont, 2017). This, whilst schools are now urged to learn faster than ever before in order to deal effectively with the seeming growing pressures of a rapidly changing environment (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

As a response to the often-disappointing results of reform initiatives and a seeming lack in ability of many contemporary schools, policy makers, educators and scholars have looked for alternative strategies that could foster school-wide change and affect all aspects of the school culture. In this context, a growing body of scholars, educators and policy makers has argued for reconceptualising schools as "learning organisations" (Bowen, Rose, & Ware, 2006; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Schlechty, 2009; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, & Dutton, 2012; Silins, Zarins, & Mulford, 2002; Stoll & Fink, 1996). The argument is that a school that is a learning organisation deals better with the changing external environment, facilitates change and innovation, induces improvements in the human resource outcomes of school staff, such as job satisfaction and self-efficacy, and ultimately enhances student learning. However, although the concept of the learning organisation has inspired the hearts and minds of a steadily growing body of scholars, educators and policy makers worldwide for some 25 years, relatively little progress has been made in advancing the concept—either in research or in practice. There are still significant shortfalls in the literature (Kools & Stoll, 2016). A challenge is the lack of clarity around the concept. Part of the problem lies in the shortage of systematic empirical investigations (Schleicher, 2012; Zederayko, 2000). Despite some advances by different scholars (Bowen et al., 2006; Silins, Mulford, & Zarins, 2002), the evidence on the construct or key characteristics that make an education institution a learning organisation is still thin.

Relatively little is also known about whether learning organisations lead to better outcomes for students or for the people working in these schools. Although some evidence confirms these positive relationships (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006; Erdem, İlğan, & Uçar, 2014; Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Razali, Amira, & Shobri, 2013; Silins & Mulford, 2004), systematic research—both theoretical and empirical—on this important research/policy question has been limited to date. In addition, how to create schools as learning organisations has remained an elusive phenomenon (Gandolfi, 2006; Harris & Jones, 2018; Kools & Stoll, 2016). This, in turn, has hindered the advance of the SLO in both research and practice.

In keeping with these considerations, we invited theoretical and empirical contributions for this issue of the Journal to join us in our efforts to responding to these gaps in research knowledge. We invited contributions that expand the literature on the potential of schools as learning organisations for promoting teaching and learning of 21st century curricula. Admittedly, the final selection of contributions has a strong focus on examining the school as a learning organisation concept and its measurement in different country contexts and on the capacity of school districts to develop as learning organisations. We believe that developing other parts of the system to become learning organisations is essential to support schools to develop as learning organisations. Without government/policy support for collaboration and collective learning and system leaders modelling and distributing leadership, schools as learning organisations will continue to operate in isolation (if at all), especially in an age of accountability.

2 | IN THIS ISSUE

This issue of the Journal can be considered as part of our ongoing efforts to gather evidence from a wide range of countries on the 'why' and 'how' one should develop schools into learning organisations. Through our research, we aim to expand the literature on these important questions and provide practical guidance to schools and local and system-level stakeholders for catalysing the desired change and innovation and developing professional learning cultures across school systems.

In the first article, Claire Sinnema and Louise Stoll reflect on the appeal and promise of the school as a learning organisation by examining the question of how schools as learning organisations can support the realisation of 21st century curriculum aspirations. They describe four common and interrelated challenges—depth, spread,

reach, and pace—that are associated with enacting a new curriculum. They argue that "curriculum capital" represented by schools and practitioners that address these challenges and meet associated learning demands —commitment, knowledge, understanding and capability—is essential to ensure that curriculum aspirations are realised. They go on to propose that schools as learning organisations create the conditions that are necessary for responding to these challenges and learning demands.

The second and third articles are empirical in nature and respond to the "scholarly chaos" that has surrounded the school as a learning organisation concept and hampered its advance in both theory and practice. Marco Kools, Louise Stoll, Bert George, Bram Steijn, Victor Bekkers and Pierre Gouëdard explore the construct validity of the school as a learning organisation through a purposefully designed survey. Drawing on survey data from a large-scale OECD study in Wales, UK (OECD, 2018), this article examines the key characteristics of a school as a learning organisation through a principal component analysis and a reliability analysis. The results show that such a school is associated with eight dimensions. The article argues that a reliable and valid schools as learning organisations scale can help to enhance our understanding of the concept and can be used by school leaders, teachers and all others wanting to develop a thriving learning culture in their schools.

In the third article, Asimina Papazoglou and Manolis Koutouzis examine the school as a learning organisation in Greece, a country characterised by a centralised and highly-bureaucratised educational system—and, as such, quite different from the Welsh content presented in the previous article. After tailoring the survey in the OECD study in Wales to the national context, they examine the construct validity of the school as a learning organisation as part of a large-scale, nationwide study. In addition, they analyse the relation between two key antecedents, school size and school geographical location, and schools operating as learning organisations, thereby expanding the research evidence on the conditions that enable or hinder schools in developing as learning organisations.

In the final article, Angela King Smith, Karen E. Watkins and Seung Hyun Han report on an action research study that examines how central office leaders and school principals break down organisational silos to build a culture of learning using learning organisation principles. Using the short form of the Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (Watkins & Marsick, 1997), they investigated a school district's staff capacity for learning. Data from the survey and interviews illustrate how the learning organisation served as a model to create the organisational conditions and culture to enable support and cooperation for learning, capacity, change and improvement to occur. They extended the literature on schools as learning organisations with an example of data-informed change in one large school district in the Southern United States.

Together, these articles provide important findings about the why and how schools can develop as learning organisations. As noted by Marco Kools, Louise Stoll, Bert George, Bram Steijn, Victor Bekkers and Pierre Gouëdard, further research, both theoretical and applied, is needed, however, to explore what makes a school a learning organisation, how the concept can be further developed and the associated value to student learning and staff outcomes.

3 | PART II

Part II opens with an article by Hugo Garcia-Andreu, Alejandro Acebal Fernandez and Antonio Aledo on *Higher education segregation in Spain: gender constructs and social background.* The theory of Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI) observes that the horizontal stratification of university degrees is a strategy of social differentiation used mainly by the most advantaged social class to access the occupations that are better valued in the labour market. This article verifies the EMI theory by means of a statistical analysis of the chosen degrees differentiated by sex and social class carried out in a Spanish university during the period of expansion and consolidation of the higher education system. The results confirm the theory, but they are partially conditioned by the vertical stratification that alters the composition by sex of the contingent of students of less advantaged social class in which women present a greater tendency to choose degrees that are less valued by the market.

The second article by Kjetil Egelandsdal and Hanne Riese, *Never mind the gap: Formative assessment confronted with Dewey's and Gadamer's concept of experience* discusses the notion of "closing the learning gap" in the light of the concept of the American philosopher John Dewey and the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. Their conceptualisation challenges the idea of learning as a linear and controllable process that results in stable and predictable outcomes. Using the concept of experience, the article argues that learning follows a continuous circular movement where previous experiences condition future interpretations and that every experience changes the subject. This process of change is both unpredictable and diverse and requires that attention is paid to the uniqueness of each situation and to students as subjects. Following the discussion, they propose a model for considering the extensiveness and rigidity of formative assessment practices.

The third article by Kristijan Breznik and Vesna Skrbinjek, *ERASMUS student mobility flows* uses the official ERASMUS data from 2007/2008 to 2013/2014. It used program R for statistical analysis and the Pajek programme for the analysis of networks. Findings provide an overview of the student mobility from three perspectives. The most balanced relative outbound and inbound mobility are found in Spain, Switzerland, Austria and Poland. Moreover, Spain and Italy exchange the most students between each other. The core centres for student mobility are Spain, France, Germany and Italy. Smaller countries, such as Luxemburg, Malta, Liechtenstein have large numbers of mobile students considering the size of the country's student population. The network analysis revealed 3 groups of countries: good receivers and senders (Spain, Italy, and Germany), good receivers only (Finland, Sweden, the UK and Portugal) and good senders only (Belgium and the Czech Republic).

The last article by Maja Šerić, *The influence of technology-mediated and in-person communication on student satisfaction: The moderating role of national culture* analyses the effects of technology-mediated (i.e., social media) and in-person communication (i.e., non-verbal cues) on student satisfaction in a higher education context. Data were collected among students from the University of Valencia (UVEG) in Spain and analysed from the perspective of the respondents' national culture. Contrary to expectations, the results show that neither one of the social media aspects drives student satisfaction, thus providing support for the technology paradox literature. Instead, three non-verbal communication cues influence student satisfaction, i.e., paralanguage, kinesics, and chronemics. The moderating role of national culture on the examined relationships is also considered. The results reveal that national culture seems to only affect the relationship between chronemics and satisfaction.

DISCLAIMER

Marco Kools is an OECD analyst. However, the analysis and views presented in this article do not necessarily reflect the official views of the OECD or its members. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein are those of the author.

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