

REDISCOVERING THE SCHOOL AS A LEARNING ORGANISATION: BECOMING A COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

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The quality of our future depends on our capacity to learn and to use that learning for living. That is, learning for living and living for learning have become important aspects of contemporary life. In the modern world, learning is considered an integral and essential part of living well. Therefore, the quality of living at the individual, community and societal levels are dependent on life-long education. This is particularly important for Pacific countries. Equally, learning for leading, and leading for learning should become important ingredients of the organisational life of our schools. Traditionally, we have given some importance to the former and paid relatively scant attention to the latter, namely, leading for learning. This observation applies generally to all organisations, but has particular relevance to educational organisations at all levels in the Pacific, as learning to lead has been relatively neglected, until recent times.

Schools are expected to serve the primary purpose of teaching and learning, with teaching as a more dominant and visible form of their endeavour. But in recent times, there is a call for greater attention to its need to learn as an organisation. The notion of the school as a place for learning is centred around the curriculum, teaching-learning process and assessment. But this is a limited view of the role of the school, although it is its rightful function. A broader and more inclusive role would be a complementary view of its role as a *learning organisation*. A *learning organisation* is one in which members collectively and continually reflect on their work and develop their capacity to improve, adapt and create the things that they really need or want (O'Neil, 1995). In such a learning organisation, its members consider themselves as a *community of inquiry*, in that all concerned in the educational enterprise of the school contribute to the ongoing reflection on the deliberation of its mission and accomplishments. In Pacific countries, the need to do this is even greater because we have inherited educational systems patterned on Western models.

Learning takes different forms, and each of these have some contribution to

make to the schools as learning organisations. In fact, even the Ministry of Education and its Divisional and District Offices and specialised units such as the Curriculum Development Unit, Examinations Unit, etc., can serve as *learning organisations*.

Forms of Learning

Learning could take various forms. For instance, learning can take the form of discovery in organisations such as schools. It could help to discover the hidden human potential, untapped resource and emerging trends within the school organisation and in the community. Learning could be a form of cooperation and collaboration. Team building and networking become important strategies in this form of learning. In a broader sense, learning could be regarded as developing the persons in the learning organisations. Learning emanating from both personal and organisational experiences is considered realistic and relevant. Learning could also be a result of problem-solving in organisations. In learning through problem-solving, success would very much depend on identifying the relevant problem or the issue and more importantly asking the right questions at the outset. Learning by inquiry is related to this kind of learning. Reflecting individually and collectively could constitute a powerful form and enduring kind of learning. Future progress in education would depend very much on reflective learning followed by appropriate action at all levels of the educational system and in individual school organisations (Evers, 1990, Hutchinson, 1993). Therefore, reflective learning and action research should find their rightful niches in an educational system and its constituent organisations and units. Hence, their inclusion in the ongoing programme of work of schools (and their classrooms) is critical for any meaningful educational improvement and development.

Organisational Learning and School Improvement

An international research study of *How Schools Improve* (HSI) was undertaken jointly by the World Bank and International Movement Towards Educational Change (IMTEC). This study dispelled many of the myths about the effective management of educational reforms and came up with the following conclusions:

Before the HSI study and other ground-breaking studies many people assumed certain things about the reform. That reforms should be incremental and gradual rather than wide-ranging; that tight supervision and control are essential for success; that the issue is designing a reform and its materials so well that it can be implemented faithfully and well with minimum training and assistance - in other words teachers are consumers of new reform ideas; that schools in general are resistant to reforms; that either 'top-down' or 'bottom-up' strategies work - depending on what educational context is referred to. All these 'obvious truths' have been shown to be false, both in this study as it relates to developing countries, and in other recent studies in industrialised countries (Dalin 1994:251).

Dalin summarised the findings of the study as follows:

1. **Educational reform is a local process.** The school is the centre of change and not the ministry or the district administration.
2. **Central support is vital.** The issue for the central ministry is *learning* to support local schools in their efforts.
3. **Effective system linkages are essential.** The strategy in complex systems is to identify effective linkages non-bureaucratic in nature between the national, district and local levels.
4. **The reform process is a *learning process*.** The process is evolutionary and developmental in nature.
5. **Think systematic and big.** A vision of reform that affects school life substantially will have more effect than a cautious and incremental approach.
6. **Focus on classroom practice.** The key is to focus on the dynamics of the classroom and individual school, since these dynamics to a large extent determine implementation success.

7. **See teachers as learners.** Good materials and facilities are necessary, but they alone are not sufficient conditions for improvement.
8. **Commitment is essential at all levels.** Commitment is crucial at the central level for sustained effort and the maintenance of needed support structures. It is also essential at the district and local levels; however, it cannot be transmitted directly to schools.
9. **Both local and central initiatives work.** An innovative idea that starts locally, nationally or with external donors can succeed if programmes meet the criteria of national commitment, local capacity building and linkage, in a configuration that makes sense for a particular country.
10. **Parent and community participation contributes to success.** Effective participation includes a real role for parents in schools decision-making. (Dalin 1994).

Learning and Leading

Anyone leading a group of people should learn that far-reaching changes and improvements in organisational life and effectiveness can be brought about by creativity, both inherent and that which is nurtured in its members. In the school, the creative students and teachers needs to be identified and supported, and the creative potential in the other organisational members should be developed and enhanced. The school principal is in a focal position to do this as its leader (Stein, 1991). This has relevance for human resource development in schools. It has been suggested that, in order to create the optimum conditions for human potential to be released, the principals as the leaders have to,

be sensitive to the needs and experiences of the colleagues for whom they are responsible. They must aim to develop their skills and strengths to the benefit of individuals and the organisation as a whole (Whitaker, 1993:122).

The school principal emerges as a leader, not when he/she focuses on organisational maintenance functions and maintaining the status quo, but when he/she attempts to develop, transform and re-orientate the school organisation into a learning organisation. Peter Senge (1990) has identified two distinctive and complementary kinds of learning that make their differential contribution to building a learning organisation. These he refers to as *adaptive and generative learning*. Adaptive learning is confined to mechanisms of coping with what he calls 'current reality'. Although the present situations and developments demand adaptive learning and responses, they may not suffice to go beyond current survival needs and to look to the future, and that too to a future that is uncertain. This is because the future developments and needs cannot be precisely anticipated due to the rapidity of changes occurring in school organisations that are more complex than before and are functioning in turbulent environments. On the other hand, generative learning seeks to find and even create solutions by 'new ways' of looking at the organisation with its 'compelling realities'. These two kinds of learning at the organisational level could help develop educational institutions into effective communities of inquiry.

Creative tension and vision

Senge (1990) further states that leadership organisation starts with the principle of *creative tension*. It is the kind of tension that builds up in the form of a vision between the current reality and a desired future. By this creative tension, the leader who has developed and worked to realise the vision can take advantage of the energy generated in individuals, groups and the organisation as a whole. He asserts that an accurate picture of current reality is just as crucial as a compelling picture of a desired future.

Therefore, vision-building is the crucial role of the school principal as the organisational leader. But an accurate assessment of the current reality and the conceptual leap into the desired future as the organisation's vision cannot be undertaken single-handedly by the leader. The leader has to solicit the cooperation and collaboration of the *stakeholders* of the school organisation in the vision-building exercise. Otherwise the vision itself may have a 'blinding' effect on the leader and the organisation's members (Fullan 1992), or may have a 'disabling' effect on the realisation of the vision (Labaree

1995). Hence the need for a 'shared vision'.

A vision is not built for ever leading into the future. With the unknowable character and the dynamic complexities of the future it is necessary to build 'tentative visions' rather than permanent ones (Velayutham 1995). This is because, organisational renewal is an indispensable attribute of a learning organisation and therefore, the vision itself should ideally change to suit the emerging needs and situations of the school.

Transfer of learning

In a learning organisation, the process of learning draws from various disciplines and, therefore, requires cross-sector and boundary spanning structures (Cunningham 1990). Hence the school alone, by utilising the traditional disciplinary areas, may not be able to bring about the changes it desires. It has to work closely with other governmental and non-governmental organisations, besides making its curriculum more inter-disciplinary and integrated.

Learning organisation also require mechanisms to transfer learning from individuals to organisational groups (Mills and Fiessen 1992). This is because, for a learning organisation to function effectively, it is necessary that its members not only individually but also collectively *reflect* (Velayutham 1994) on the organisation's achievements, performance and projected plans.

A community of inquiry

The enormous untapped potential and resources that go to waste without fuller development is not very often realised. If teachers and administrators as educational leaders and the school children become a community of inquirers in order to redesign their work, to incorporate new understandings and to introduce improvements as a continuous and organic part of their day-to-day work, then a school becomes a learning organisation. Through such a process schools could change from within (Wells, 1994), rather than from a remote central ministry office (Dalin 1994, Torbet 1990). In a learning organisation, its leaders and its members should nurture the values and habits

of mind to constantly review, improve, set and strive to achieve high standards.

Conclusion

The schools of the future will have to be *learning organisations* besides serving as organisations for learning. Their leaders have to recognise the dynamic complexities and the rapidity of changes in and around their schools. Decades of centralised educational reforms have not yielded the professed and promised results. It is time we realised that the Ministry of Education and its constituent units and sections alone cannot bring about the planned changes. Schools will have to change from within by creating communities of inquiry in and around them, thereby becoming self-renewing schools. To accomplish this, schools will have to become **learning organisations**. Their leaders should collaboratively build a **shared vision** that is **tentative**. Besides, in order for the schools to function as learning organisations, their leaders should not be satisfied with **adaptive learning** only. They should complement it with **generative learning**. It is then, that new ways could be found to view one's organisational world and make its unique contribution to educational developmental and improvement. The energy generated by the tension between the **current reality** of our schools and the **envisioned future possibilities** could be channelled to review, reconstruct and reorientate the vision and mission of our schools.

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