**What Secondary Schools Can Teach Us About Learning Organisations**

**Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to show that it is possible for UK secondary schools to aspire to aspects of the learning organisation (LO), but not in their current same-age organisational form.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Key features of organisational learning needed for the design of a learning organisation are identified. Two school structures common to the UK and Australia are analysed to see if they share similar organisational characteristics.

**Findings** – Secondary schools adhering to the same-age hypothesis cannot develop the complex organisational learning characteristics needed for the formation of a learning organisation. Schools that redesign their operational methodology based on multi-age tutor groups are reliant on complex organisational learning. This causes them to liberate structure and develop emergent characteristics compatible with a learning organisation.

**Practical implications** – This paper intervenes at a time when interest in the concept of the LO is increasing. The danger of this development for secondary schools is to repeat the reformational mistakes of the past by failing to grasp the nature of systemic change, organisation, and how and why schools maintain sameness over time.

**Originality/value** – This paper offers challenging insights and provocative conclusions regarding school management systems.

**Keywords –** Multi-age systems; organisational learning; learning organisations; vertical tutoring; liberated structures; secondary schools

**Paper type –** part conceptual, part research

**Introduction**

A same-age or grade system describes an operational structure used by most secondary schools, one predicated on the idea that organising students into same-age groups for classes and tutor time is an appropriate means of enabling effective learning and teaching. This dominant model imported from Prussia and 175 years in the making, has changed little in structural form and continues to require high maintenance, constant intervention, and increased costs to make it viable. The same-age hypothesis on which this model depends makes schools highly resistant to change, a factor that indicates difficulties with organisational learning and an ability to respond to environmental shifts.

Despite this, same-age organisation garners little attention and is generally regarded as organisationally benign. This paper suggests that the organisation of children entirely into same-age groups has a profound effect on school behaviour and an unnecessary cause of many of the wellbeing, social and learning issues current in UK secondary schools. If correct, those who believe that operational deficiencies are caused by inadequate resourcing or problems associated with teacher quality and/or school leadership, are looking in the wrong place. Had these problems been true, such *deficiencies* would have been long resolved. It also suggests that those who believe secondary schools can be developed as learning organisations without substantive changes to their organisational structure, may need to completely rethink their strategy.

The multi-age model or vertical tutoring system (VT) describes schools that have abandoned their former same-age iteration choosing to adopt multi-age grouping as their preferred means of organisation. These schools recognised organisational frailties within the same-age system that persist over time and cannot be corrected regardless of the combined effort of school practitioners, students and parents. While many schools adopt VT as a bolt-on change to their pastoral care strategy, mature VT schools have gone much further, adopting a more nuanced system-wide approach to management and leadership.

VT schools begin by adopting a seemingly innocuous organisational change, repopulating tutor time (around twenty minutes each day) with students from all age groups. Classrooms remain largely unaffected although some schools also explore multi-age classes. Mature VT schools redesign their operational structure from the base up: i.e. from the complexity of relationships that arise within multi-age tutor groups. When allowed to run its course, this domino effect builds a complex and sophisticated organisational network of socio/learning relationships which changes the operational form of the school to one able to liberate structure and improve planning processes by harnessing tacit learning. The cumulative effect is to increase the school’s organisational capacity for learning, a precursor towards the notion of a learning organisation.

Set out below is a short review of selected literature referencing the relationship between organisation and learning. This is linked to phronetic organisational research and phronetic social science and the pervasive role of power in management planning and praxis (Flyvbjerg 2001). Five features pertinent to organisational learning are identified to provide a testbed for operational practices used in schools. Using the narrative of schools engaged in transition, the same-age system is then problematized and interpreted to reveal underlying organisational assumptions and practices. The VT system is presented as a design solution formulated by schools to deal with the challenges they encountered in their former same-age iteration. Using the descriptors from the two systems of organisation, these are then tabulated (Table 1) to highlight their capacity for organisational (and individual) learning. The paper concludes with a discussion on the implications for schools and those reformers wishing to develop schools as learning organisations.

**Navigating the literature**

Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (1989: 2) define the learning organization as one that “facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself and its context.” According to Weick and Westley (1996: p. 192) this means “getting the organisation right”; i.e. finding a balance between control and the kind of organisation that enables actors (school staff, students, and parents) to collaborate in supporting and promoting learning and influence planning. To develop such contextual reciprocity hints at the kind of liberated structures described in complex adaptive theory (Nason 2017; Weick 2002). “Getting the organisation right” requires a balance between the opposing tensions of organizing and learning (Weick and Westley p. 190): “To learn is to disorganize and increase variety. To organise is to forget and reduce variety.” This suggests that to understand a system’s capacity for organisational learning it is necessary to inquire into the nature of an organisation’s connectivity, the organisational arrangements that either enable or disable learning. At the extreme, both too much control and too little “results in a paralyzed organization” (p. 195)

The defining characteristics of a learning organisation are relational, and this poses complex challenges about organisational strategies and management praxis. Senge (2006: 3) describes learning organizations as “organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together.” This ontological and almost spiritual perspective resonates throughout much of the learning organization literature creating considerable interest, confusion, and debate while trying to highlight the importance of the human condition in organisational theory and practice (Porth and Bausch, 1999; Howard, 2002: p. 230-242; Sorakraikitikul and Siengthai, 2014: 175-192, Flood and Romm, 2018: p. 267). Like Moses, Senge stands accused of delivering five of the necessary commandments needed to form a learning organization but failing to lead the Systems Thinking Tribe into any Promised Land.

Edmondsen and Noingeon (1998) describe organisational learning as “a process in which an organization’s members actively use data to guide behaviour in such a way as to promote the ongoing adaptation of the organization.” Data refers to “task-relevant information” (p. 22) needed to support and improve performance. How schools identify data and view the process of collection is critical to organisational learning; data can be narrowly defined as standardised performance grades but can also refer to the tacit knowledge harvested from loose and tight networks of staff, students and parents acting agentially (see Granovetter 1977). The former leans toward a narrowly focused and controlled form of organisation while the latter requires a redistribution of power and a willingness to embrace unpredictability. How these are balanced impacts on any organisational capacity for learning. Effectively, organisational learning literature concerns the way people learn in organisations while the learning organisation seeks to describe the (ideal) form needed for such learning to occur (see Easterby-Smith and Araujo 1999).

For Field (2019: p. 1108) this has created a “smorgasbord of terms and concepts from which different investigators can take their pick while asserting that their choice represents the essence of the learning organisation”. In such a landscape of competing hypotheses where every interpretation appears credible, it is possible to “get away with almost anything” (Örtenblad 2007: p. 108; quoted in Field, p. 1108). In his indictment of the state of play, Field goes further, identifying three important challenges; “First, there is no agreement about what the phrase ‘school as a learning organisation’ means; second, most accounts of schools as learning organisations 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” (p. 1108). Paradoxically, in his second criticism, Field offers a clue that might provide a way of resolving such messiness.

Meanwhile, the difficulty of conceptualising and interpreting both the idea and form of the learning organization as a viable operational structure is rife in the literature (Örtenblad, 2002 and 2015; Seddon and O’Donovan, 2010; Morrison, 2010). Further criticism comes from Caldwell, (2012: p. 17) arguing that Senge’s idea of a learning organization should be ‘abandoned as a vision of organizational change and human agency’ while Örtenblad (2007) refers quizzically to ‘Senge’s many faces’ and their interpretation. Seddon and O’Donovan (2010) ask why learning organisations have yet to materialise and why so few, if any, envisage themselves working in such organisations.

Watkins and Marsick (1993: 193), see the LO as a place where learning is facilitated by a participatory democratic culture, arguably, a far cry from the static hierarchical command structures that schools so often feel obliged to operate. And this is a problem! School leadership teams are masters of rationalising their organisational behaviour and laying claim to whatever description is vogue. This suggests that “metanoia” (the Greek word for “change of mind” used by Senge) has yet to occur and that any dream of post bureaucratic organisations remains largely aspirational. Lumby (2019: 5) posits distributed leadership as an example of how “the latest idea to improve schools appears and is hawked out for a period of ascendency,” arguing for a balance between bureaucracy and any proposed redistribution of power. In her study of Maltese schools, Mifsud (2017: p. 996) also questioned the reality of a claimed distribution off power, suggesting it “serves as ‘a smokescreen for the more authoritarian practices’ of the leaders” (Crawford 2012). Ironically, distributed leadership is an integral feature of organisational learning and the formation of a learning organization! Schools are adept at reinterpreting definitions to describe their management practices and may already feel that the defining characteristics of organisational learning (above) describe precisely what they already do and so pre-qualify them as learning organisations.

**Phronesis**

Flyvbjerg (2007) uses phronetic organisational research to draw attention to structures of power in organisations and the need to discover “who wins and who loses” in any new bid to redefine praxis and “what needs to be done”. Implicit to the idea of the learning organization is an encapsulating philosophy of how learning is enabled in the workplace to improve planning, one that raises questions about the nature of organisation needed. Similarly, Flood and Romm (2018) examine processes of power in learning organizations through organisational analysis. They propose “triple loop learning,” a combination of single and double loop learning needed to solve problems and enable an organisation “to achieve a new reflexive consciousness,” (see Laloux 2014). For Flood and Romm, implications for development as learning organisations are far-reaching and based on three imperatives:

* + - * the power to design becomes (ideally) used in the service of quality of life;
      * the power to make these decisions likewise (ideally) enhances this quality;
      * the power to transform our relations with each other and the planet further enhances this quality. (Flood and Romm, 2018: 267)

These attributes accord with Flyvbjerg’s application of phronetic social science (Flyvbjerg 2001) and the connection drawn between power, values, and the identification of ethical practice (Flyvbjerg, 2007: p. 34). This suggests that the concept of a learning organisation is ultimately connected with values that relate to the quality of life “what is good or bad for people” (p. 7) and rests on the enablement of learning. Any move in the direction of a learning organisation necessarily involves a significant shift in a school’s operational and organisational practices for any reappropriation of values purposes to occur. Such organisational change is a complex matter, one that involves critical reflexivity to guide the co-construction needed to reappraise values, purposes, and what it is to care. The rewards are the “quality of life” benefits that arise from the meaningful relationships that an enabling organisation builds. It is this reward (what W. Edwards Deming called ‘joy of learning’) that makes the learning organisation worthy of pursuit.

**Abstracting the key features of the learning organisation**

As Field says, “it is not possible to distinguish between claimed attributes of the learning organization and other general improvement goals” (p. 1108) so it is important to look at experiential process rather than tick-lists of desirable attributes to which schools can easily lay claim. Argyris and Schön (1974) describe learning organizations as having specific characteristics; they can adapt to change, correct errors, and continually improve. Given that these characteristics are often cited as problematic in schools, it seems reasonable to explore their substance. If these organisational learning characteristics are accepted (there are others), the task is to identify the degree to which these characteristics are present in the two school models under scrutiny.

This section proposes five learning activities (bulleted below) inherent to organisational learning and needed for any development of schools into learning organisations. Having identified these processes, the two systems under scrutiny can be assessed to see if these learning activities are current in their means of organisation. To do this, the same-age organisation used by secondary schools is problematized and interpreted to make its underpinning organisational assumptions visible. Multi-age organisation is then assessed to establish whether the design changes incorporated into VT schools resolve the learning issues problematized in multi-age organisation. To illustrate positionality in terms of the learning organisation ideal, the results are tabulated (table 1).

Building on the characteristics identified by Argyris and Schön it is possible to set aside the idea of the learning organisation as an ideal form and instead proffer a schema of experiential learning (see Schon 1983; Purser and Passmore 1992: 55, quoted in Weick and Westley 1996 p. 193). This involves creating a template that acts as a staging post on a school’s developmental journey, one focused on the operational capacity of schools for (a) individual and organisational learning, (b) problem identification and resolution, and (c) innovation. This means looking beyond the rationalisation of the espoused system and focussing on the system in use and its capacity for organisational learning; i.e. how the school’s operational culture makes sense of policies and planning, what Gowlett et al. (2015: p.149) calls “policy reception”. Attention focuses on:

* how schools recognise and correct problems (the single or triple learning loop used);
* the organisational methodology and capacity for harvesting tacit knowledge (school communication processes and variety of interdependent feedback loops - staff, students and parents);
* the capacity for managing information (the degree of sophistication of any interdependent and interconnected learning networks, where memory is stored);
* information flows, delays and obstructions (the balance between bureaucracy and actor agency – staff, students, and parents);
* the degree to which power and leadership are distributed to enable staff, parents and students to contribute (the school’s phronetic planning, action, and sense-making capability).

These are not straightforward boxes to be ticked, nor is this information obtainable by questionnaire, guesswork, observation, or conceptualisation, but they nevertheless comprise much of the invisible actualité of organisational learning beyond the curriculum. This information is obtainable by accessing the reality of policy reception, how actors respond to the organisation rather than how it is assumed they respond. They reflect the ability of system users (staff, students and parents) to participate in the organisation, influence planning, and draw down from the system the information, support, and means of intervention they need to make progress. Such characteristics reflect the degree to which the actors that comprise the dynamic of the school’s system are enabled or disabled, connected or disconnected, listened to or disregarded. Whatever the case, the organisational capacity of the school to harness tacit knowledge, share information and listen to a polyphony of voices and groups is made visible. Such an approach is a perturbation and has the benefit of making the system reflexive and self-diagnostic (Schon 1983: 242); i.e. the school starts to learn how to learn (Purser and Passmore 1992: 55). Using the template (Table 1 below) it is possible to see how the two existing candidates, the dominant same-age model and VT system, compare.

**Problematizing same-age organisational characteristics**

The following interpretation derives from the narrative of school leadership teams engaging with critical reflexion and systemic inquiry. Prior to such reflexion, these schools were aligned to the same-age hypothesis and viewed their organisational planning and policies as uncontested strengths. The following overview of commonalities emerges.

1. Same-age structures lean more to ‘teaching organisations’, being heavily reliant on a single formative information feedback loop (teacher/student). These schools have adapted to the environment of performativity, inspectorial demands and the ‘what works’ agenda by standardising internal processes and increasing controls to match external data requirements. They believe that what happens in the classroom between teacher and student is all that really matters. As managers focus energy on improving this area using appraisal, performance management and accountability processes, other feedback loops are sacrificed isolating the classroom and causing practitioner and student workload to increase to near unsustainable levels.
2. Other feedback loops such as those emanating from parent partnership, tutors, tutees, and students mentoring students are absent, downgraded, assumed or only partially working; this inhibits the organisational ability to gather and share tacit knowledge; learning networks beyond classrooms are damaged, missing or partial.
3. The tutor role as a support function is confused and undermined by large tutee numbers and unrealistic demands. This causes a failure in building socio/learning relationships which can transfer negatively into classroom misbehaviour. Student and staff policy reception has significant scope for negativity. Tutor group sizes are based on historical “forms of entry” requirements at least six decades old rather than individual and organisational need. Schools often complain of poor quality and insufficient numbers of tutors.
4. Management structures are hierarchical and bureaucratic static, restricting access, information flow, and delaying interventions. While job titles and descriptions change on a regular basis, processes remain static. These processes become more rigid over time when appraisal and accountability structures are added and need for data collection increases.
5. Students are rarely if ever engaged in feedback on their learning with someone from the school who knows them well, sees them every day, and holds the bigger learning picture. Learning relationships are difficult to develop, a major concern of these schools. Consequently, behaviour becomes a complex issue and more pro-social programmes are added to the curriculum increasing pressures on time.
6. Close examination of policy reception shows that concepts like ‘care’, ‘partnership’, and ‘communications’ are assumed rather practised. This is made obvious from the contrasting narratives of VT schools (below).
7. The organisation is split into two sub-systems, pastoral and academic, splitting resources and shifting problems (single loop) within complicated referral processes that rarely complete. This creates an exponential need for more support staff and resources. The system creates waste and increased costs.
8. Managers are convinced that they should manage people rather than the system. The system itself is overloaded with catch-all principles, practices, protocols, policies and procedures that staff rationalise and work around. Time becomes a critical issue in these schools.
9. Bullying is rarely effectively tackled, in part because it is a by-product of same-age grouping (Salmivalli et al. 1996). Research rarely crosses school borders and when it does it is reinterpreted, assimilated, and shaped to suit the system espoused. Internal structuration persists over time and similar problems reoccur.
10. Posts and job titles tend to reflect whatever school inspectors expect to see rather than a rationale for what learning is needed. Heads of Year are renamed ‘learning managers’ or ‘leaders of learning’ but still (largely) do the job in the same way that they did as Heads of Year! Many schools have recently designated a manager to be i/c teacher learning and support (quality control) rather than teacher training.
11. School reports to students and parents rarely comprise more than scant data sheets devoid of usable information such as agreed strategies for improvement and any substantive behavioural commentary. Rather than an effective communication system (two-way) there is now a one-way out system designed to limit information coming in. Schools believe parent partnership is a strength.
12. Meetings between teachers and parents are often five-minute slots once per year at times convenient to the school. Deep learning conversations are absent. Schools offer parents the ‘opportunity’ to call any time. This facility is rarely used and acts as a catch-all excuse for item 11 (above). There is confusion between parent partnership, involvement, and engagement.
13. Wellbeing is at constant risk and job satisfaction low compared with multi-age organisations. Recruitment, retention and morale can be problematic.

Same-age systems use highly organised, bureaucratic and complicated so restrict organisational learning. However, the difference between the same-age or grade system and the VT system (below) has littele to do with the quality of staff, parents, students or leadership but with the way each system is organised and the effect of organisation on participant behaviour. The difference between the school’s official version and the system in use is wide.

Leadership teams adhering to the same-age hypothesis were asked if they cared. They were adamant that they did, offered answers, and often felt offended to be asked. Later, they were asked if it was possible for a child to go through their school without ever sitting down for (say) 40 minutes at each critical learning time in the school year with someone in the school who knew them almost as well as their parents, to reflect and discuss that student’s learning. Such a *deep learning conversation* requires (a) all parties to be present (tutor, child and parents); (b) open-ended time; (c) written formative and summative reports from the school that include strategies for improvement (not just data sheets); (d) the ability to listen and share information and agree strategies for improvement, and (e) individual and group action. All same-age schools (the author estimates 250+ over two decades) admitted this did not happen in their organisation; but for a school, this surely is part of what it is to show care. A system that cares is preventative by design, not one that provides sticky-back plasters for the inevitability of system damage.

**Multi-age structure: the vertical tutor system**

The design changes set out below stem from the narratives of schools that have abandoned same-age organisation and transitioned to a VT system following guided reflexion (see Xxxxxx 2018: p. 20). These schools recognise the challenges inherent in their previous iteration and seek to remedy them through innovative planning and a design process based on multi-age tutor groups.

1. Instead of tutor groups with large numbers of students and a single tutor, mature VT schools opt for tutor group sizes of between 18-20 students to maximise learning and support relationships (using all spaces and all staff). They regard this strategy as essential for tutors to be front-line effective, every child to be known, positive relationships to form, and any barriers to learning identified and removed.
2. These groups are populated with students from across the school’s age-range using gender, personality, and ability to balance the groups (not friendship). How the tutors first meet the students (in small groups) is important to ensure relationships of care form immediately.
3. Schools build a nested system (Bronfenbrenner 1977) on the basis that familial tutor groups are the lynchpin to learning, social development, resilience, wellness, and the building of an interconnected learning and support network (see Granovetter 1977).
4. All staff including the leadership team, all teachers and support/office/clerical staff are tutors for 20/25 minutes each day (before morning break). Each group has two tutors, a lead tutor and co-tutor. This ensures that every child is individually known throughout their school career. By being part of the VT system, the head and leadership team realise policy reception first-hand, attend to any systemic needs, and understand how to organisationally enable staff, students, and parents. Parent partnership is re-established as an integral part of learning and teaching.
5. Tutor time is not a taught or programmed session but an opportunity to communicate, network, and support, guided by the tutors and the demands of students identified in the school’s calendar. Teachers teach subjects because this is what they love; nothing detracts from that. The connectivity of the organisation enables students to (a) learn social and empathetic behaviour; (b) grow resilience, and (c) build sustaining relationships. Empathy is designed in.
6. All communications are rerouted through the tutors (effectively to every member of staff) who become access points and learning hubs; these are the communication centres (synapses) around which sophisticated learning and support networks build. Tutors connect the school to students and parents ensuring a free flow of communications able to harness tacit knowledge, a process of complexification. The school connects to more of itself.
7. To support staff, student and parent agency, assessment reports are more detailed, containing written strategies for improvement, not data sheets alone. This improves the quality of information available, opening a richer discourse between tutors, students and parents who comprise an interdependent network of agents (team child) engaged in a collaborative learning partnership.
8. Tutors meet parents and students at an identified critical learning time in the school year. These ‘deep learning conversations’ last around forty minutes and comprise learning reviews, summative assessment, reflection, and agreed action. These are rarely time restricted. Individual appointments are spread across a week to enable attendance.
9. All students take on mentoring and leadership responsibilities. By helping others, they not only grow themselves but grow citizenry and the goal of goodness. Values are practised not preached. Care is redefined. Every child is a leader.
10. Younger students benefit from role models (leadership on tap), a safer environment, and access to the range of mentoring, socio/psychological support, and friendships they need; the networking that will be so important to them after school is learned in tutor time, not taught.
11. Bullying, a constant feature of same-age groups, (Salmivalli, 1997: 305) declines markedly in these schools. Anti-bullying behaviour is designed in not taught as bolt-on subjects. Everyone is an anti-bullying ambassador.

Woods and Roberts (2019: 665) propose two competing philosophies of leadership practice; one of “dependence” and the other “co-development”. The same-age system descriptors tend towards “dependence”, where actors are “conceived as agents who serve values, aims, and priorities determined by those who hold formal authority” (p. 666). “Co-development” sees “leadership as the outcome both of people’s intentions (intentionality) and the complex flow of interactions in the daily life of schools (emergence), and aptly describes the organisational descriptors of a mature VT system. The transition by schools from a same-age to a multi-age structure is, in many respects, a journey of transformational leadership and organisational learning, one that involves critical reflexivity and the development of pro-active agency “free of – or at least more distanced from – a restricting philosophy of dependence” (Woods and Roberts, 2019: 666).

The narrative from VT schools, often expressed online, suggests they are happier places, experience less bullying and enjoy improved interpersonal relationships. From an organisational perspective VT schools are complexity dependent, heavily reliant on multiple feedback loops to operate which makes them better able to absorb the variety of student (system) demand. Such schools might be described as a community of learning agents; less predictable but safer; able to balance the enabling disorganisation that allows them to learn within an organisational structure that ensures agential collaboration and the enablement of greater actor autonomy and self-determination. Ironically, the complexity of co-development produces behavioural patterns that makes organisation simpler over time; it also takes them closer to the characteristics used to describe learning organisations and complex adaptive systems.

**Systemic capacity and capability for learning**

Table 1 (below) sets out how each system compares with the organisational learning pre-requisites set out above.

Table 1. System comparisons

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| *Organisational features for learning* | *Same-age system* | *VT system* |
| Identification/correction of Problems | Single loop learning/static | Triple loop learning/dynamic |
| Harvesting tacit Knowledge | Highly restricted and disconnected | Unrestricted and secure sources |
| Operational feedback loops | One effective and operational feedback loop (teacher/pupil) | Multiple agential feedback loops throughout |
| Information storage / retrieval | Limited and separated networks | Unrestricted, sophisticated interdependent networks |
| Information Flow | One-way outward | Two-way dependent |
| Distribution of leadership/agency | Disabled by hierarchy & dependence | Enabled and supported through co-development |

Table 1 indicates that same-age structure is overly dependent on a single teacher/student feedback loop around which an organisational bureaucracy is built. Such a system is highly organised and rule-bound, and learning is concerned with improving teacher capability rather than any organisational learning capacity. This negates innovation and emergence. From inside the same-age structure, all appears to be plausible with everything working as it should; edicts are delivered to staff, checks for compliance are made, and data gathered; there appears to be little need for change. While the leadership team clings to the official version of how things work (the espoused system), the staff culture builds unofficial ways of getting the work done: i.e. the system in use.

For VT schools that have abandoned the same-age structure, the pressure and waste that result from operating with the duality of an espoused system and a system in use are thrown into stark reality. Their move from a system naively concerned with control and a belief in the vagaries of a “what works” agenda, to one that is self-designing, enabling and exploratory, creates a more balanced organisation to which all actors contribute. In a VT system, the system espoused is the same as the system in use. For schools seduced by the siren call of the same-age hypothesis, any aspiration towards a learning organisation is far from the direction of travel, and those wishing to develop them as learning organisations should rethink their strategy.

**Implications for developing schools as Learning organisations**

Returning to Laurie Field’s damning indictment of current approaches, his argument is not only against the ambiguity and messiness of a poorly defined concept, but with reform strategies that promise the world only to recreate the existing system and embed it deeper. Field is right to caution schools to steer clear of such “hollow rhetoric” (p. 1106) but his concerns run deeper. In an email on the subject, Field said, “anything you can do to challenge the idea that educational institutions are homogeneous, unitary entities is very worthwhile. Your points about 'the role of parents and students as key contributors' and 'same-age structural form' seem to do just that.” Hopefully, this paper helps.

The fact is, all schools learn continuously; they learn how to be themselves, survive, and protect their identity over time. Schools using a multi-age system have learned to learn, an emergent quality; they learn to how to innovate, adapt, and absorb demand by complexifying; connecting to far more of themselves. The organisational psychologist, Kurt Lewin, said that any organisational change involves “unfreezing, cognitive restructuring, and refreezing.” The process always begins with perturbation, an interruption needed to disturb the school as a living system. What follows is a process of reflection, openness to learning, cognitive restructuring, unlearning, co-construction and re-freezing. Schein (1995) describes Lewin’s strategy as one that involves a number of complex psychological processes: (a) disconfirmation; (b) induction of guilt or survival anxiety; (c) creation of psychological safety or overcoming learning anxiety; (d) cognitive redefinition; (e) imitation and positive or defensive identification with a role model; (f) scanning, insight or trial and error learning, and (g) personal and relational unfreezing. Transition from one way of working to another can be painful and threatening to school leaders (not staff), which is why so many schools shy away. For those seeking to transition schools towards a model of the learning organisation, these difficult processes are necessary if school leaders are to overcome any deeply ingrained self-deception. For the rest of the school staff the process is relatively painless and often welcome. Simply attaching labels to same-age structures based on previous analyses of school effectiveness changes nothing, yet this is what appears to be happening. As Lewin famously said, you cannot understand an organisation unless you try and change it. Nevis et al. (1996) put it this way:

To transform something is to change its fundamental external form or inner nature. . . In the world of nature, a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly; its DNA remains unchanged, but its form and properties are fundamentally different. A butterfly is not a caterpillar with wings strapped on its back. - Nevis, Lancourt, & Vassallo (1996, pp. 11-12)

Schools should consider change if, indeed, they are still allowed.

19/08/19

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