**Secondary schools and parental partnership: A tale of two systems**

**Abstract**

**Purpose –** The purpose of this paper is to establish a substantive link between the form of organisation used in secondary schools and their capacity to build collaborative home-school partnerships.

**Design/method –**This paper reports on reflexive narrative inquiry from school leadership teams as they explore the transition from a traditional same-age organisational structure to a multi-age alternative organisation known as vertical tutoring (VT). The paper applies complexity theory to show how the form of organisation used by schools determines their capacity to build effective home-school partnerships.

**Findings -** Same-age organizational structures have a reduced capacity for building the effective home-school partnership needed to engage parents in their child’s learning process. Multi-age organization matches capacity with demand by enabling agency and liberating management by designing partnership into its organization.

**Practical Implications –** The arrival of a viable organisational alternative system (VT) intervenes in traditional modes of school inquiry, reformational processes, and building learning partnerships. It suggests that the form of organisation used by schools is institutionally problematic and that the training offered to school leaders re-evaluated.

**Originality –** This paper shows how the form of organisation used by schools either restricts or facilitates home-school collaboration witin the learning process. As such, it offers school leaders an opportunity to reflect on the obstacles to home-school partnership and consider radical organisational remedies.

**Keywords**

Secondary schools; capacity; complexity theory; parent partnership; vertical tutoring

Breslin’s book, “Lessons from Lockdown” (Breslin, 2021), highlights the importance of home-school partnership and what happens when a catastrophe like COVID-19 leads to systemic failure. Weick (1991) noted that “Our ability to deal with chaos depends on structures developed before the chaos arrives”, while Pat Lagadec (1993; 54, cited by Weick, 1991) describes system failure as “ an abrupt and brutal audit: at a moment's notice, everything that was left unprepared becomes a complex problem and every weakness comes rushing to the forefront.” Such lessons provide an opportune time to reflect on the importance of home-school partnerships and how a stronger and more resilient collaboration between school and home might be built.

This paper draws attention to two school models and how their organisational architecture impacts differentially on their capacity to build a viable home-school partnership. “A Tale of Two Cities” concerns the traditional same-age or grade system and the recent arrival of a viable multi-age alternative that schools call a vertical tutoring system (VT). At a deeper level, this paper concerns schools searching for authenticity, lost values, and community attachment. In the words of Wilber (2013: xviii), it speaks to those who "yearn to bring more consciousness to the way we run organisations but wonder if it is possible and how to do it". It also concerns school reform.

Within the same-age structure are certain obstacles to collaboration that are difficult to circumvent. These comprise what Tyack and Tobin (1994), Tyack and Cuban (1995), and Cuban (2019) call “the grammar of schooling", and according to Fullan (2020: 3), this comprises eight "inhibiting factors", including (a) batching children by age, (b) ignoring or miscasting the equity problem, and (c) the separation of parents and communities from schools. While such “grammar” hints loudly at an organisational issue, a viable alternative to the dominant same-age structure is absent, leaving reformers with little room for manoeuvre. As Lumby (2017: 14) says, "The interaction between human behaviour and organisational forms creates an imperative to seek those forms that are most likely to result in behaviour with positive outcomes for learners". This paper is a contribution to such a search.

**Introduction**

Over the last two decades or so, the author has worked intensively with a variety of secondary schools, from the UK but also worldwide, facilitating the transition from their existing same-age organisational structure to a vertical tutoring system (VT). Such schools invariably express a need to re-establish the learning relationships with students and parents they feel have been lost.

The andragogical mechanism employed to guide schools toward the relational changes they seek is transformative learning (TL). Such a programme encourages practitioners (1) to describe how their school functions (the *espoused* system or rationalised view of their school), (2) to critically reflect on the organisational assumptions underpinning their same-age structure (a process of deconstruction or unfreezing), and (3) redesign their school around the centrality of home-school collaboration (co-construction). The narrative stories, descriptions, and metaphors emanating from TL programmes form the research base of an otherwise conceptual paper.

This paper has four sections. The first draws on the discourse of practitioners as they engage with transformative learning (TL). The intention behind a TL programme is to inspire reflexivity by exposing participants to previously overlooked organisational assumptions, increasing organisational awareness. Cranton (2006: 8) calls this “making meaning out of experiences and questioning assumptions based on prior experience”. Such a process reveals the different characteristics of same-age and multi-age organisations.

Having established systemic organisational differences, section 2 can take a more nuanced view of the home-school partnership literature. The emphasis is not so much on the accepted benefits of home-school partnership, but the challenges posed by implementation. The absence of a viable alternative form of organisation (such as VT) locks the building of such a partnership in a reductionist cycle that ultimately repeats like a Mobius Loop, constantly producing the same partnership problem. Notably absent from the traditional secondary school literature is any substantive systemic link between organisation, collaboration, capacity, and complexity.

A third section explores the challenge of implementation by framing such a problematic within complexity theory. It argues that same-age structures are *complicated* while multi-age organisation is *complex*, characteristics linked directly to the release of participant agency (staff, students, and parents). This section references the analyses of complex systems provided by Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002), Boisot and McKelvey (2008), and Ashby (1956) and how they relate to school organisation and home-school collaboration.

Finally, the summary discusses how organisation, collaboration, complexity, and capacity combine as a virtuous and hermeneutic circle centred on home-school partnership.

**Transformative learning and the realisation of collaborations**

Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) famously wrote:

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that's all.”

So it with phrases like *home-school partnership* and words like *care,* *collaboration, and communication*. Meanings and linguistics are easily adapted and assumed to suit the rationalised description of the school and how it operates.

Transformative learning (TL) is a discursive process designed to provoke and guide the reflexivity needed for organisational change, which is to be master. Mezirow (2003: 58) describes TL as:

‘…learning that transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change.’

During such a programme, participants engage in a reflexive discourse (narrative reciprocity in part) designed to provoke practitioners with disorientating dilemmas, self-examination, and critical reassessment (see Mezirow, 2003; Cranton, 2006). In essence, a TL programme for schools is designed to raise organisational consciousness by differentiating between what Argyris and Schön (1974) describe as the “espoused system” (what is claimed by schools) and “the system in use” (what is practised by schools).

The TL programme for secondary schools takes practitioners on a reflexive journey that enables participants to deconstruct their same-age iteration and co-construct a multi-age alternative (a VT system). Three short and intentionally provocative questions concerning organisation (complete with trigger warnings) drive the various stages (described below) by problematising areas often assumed.

The questions are:

1. Does the school care about students?
2. Does the school believe in the value of parent partnership?
3. Does the school believe in the value of communication?

**Stage 1**. The first stage employs the above questions as a framework for illuminating the school’s published policies, practices, principles, procedures, and protocols. Practitioners describe how the school goes about its business, how their school operates as a teaching and learning system. The consultant researcher prompts and records discourse until participants agree on how the school’s policies guide processes and values. The questions provoke an emotional response that leads participants to justify their decision-making and management roles.

*Of course, we believe in parent partnership. Our staff are really caring and work hard. How could you even question this? Our pastoral policies cover all eventualities, and parents can contact the school whenever they wish. We are in regular contact with the home. Datasheets measuring progress are sent home regularly, and we have a dedicated learning support team. The school is consistently oversubscribed, and of course, parents are encouraged to be involved with their child’s learning.*

Such a response is rightly passionate. This kind of narrative is the leadership team’s espoused view and public persona, the way it handles implied criticism and fends off perturbation. Schools have no difficulty providing examples of good and outstanding practice, invariably claiming to be *good* or *very good* when it comes to parent partnership. Participants refer to certification, Ofsted reports, letters sent home, the school website, subject meetings, datasheet information, home-school agreements, open evenings, events, the PTA, parent governors, and the failsafe opportunity for parents *to discuss their concerns with the school at any time*. Schools invariably express a high degree of satisfaction with such a collaboration. Everyone is working hard and doing their professional best in a fast-changing environment.

The consultant researcher’s role is to understand the picture that practitioners describe, the espoused unexpurgated version. The way the leadership teams sees it.

Session 1 ends (an hour later) with a fourth and telling question regarding care, communication, and partnership, to prepare for session 2.

*Q. Given what you describe, is it possible for a child to go right through their career in this school without ever discussing their social and cognitive learning at critical times with someone in the school who knows them well, someone who sees them every day, and with their parents present and all information available for as long as it takes to agree on strategies for support and improvement?*

Despite asking this question to many secondary school leadership teams, none could answer affirmatively and convincingly!

Having established the espoused system, the next stage is to stress-test what is claimed.

**Stage 2.** This stage involves organisational deconstruction and unlearning or unfreezing (Schein 1996; Cummings *et al.* 2016). School policies and practices previously accepted as watertight are interrogated in more detail using role-play, whereby the researcher-consultant takes on the role (in this case) of the parent. Such realism enables participants to experience what Gowlett et al. (2015:149) call *policy reception*, effectively how policy and practice work to develop or hinder home-school collaboration.

*My child is starting Yr. 7 this September. Can you tell me more about the datasheets the school sends home and how I can use these to support my child’s learning? When do I meet my child’s teachers? For how long? What happens on the first day of school? What happens if my child is bullied? How will my child’s reading difficulties be addressed? What happens if my child’s tutor leaves or changes? To whom do I turn?*

As the questions persist and deepen, they reveal policy reception (the system in actual use), exposing the rationalised (espoused) assumptions inherent in the same-age model. Participant practitioners realise that communication is not the two-way process claimed, that access to the school is not easily facilitated, and datasheets do not support parental and student involvement in learning as suggested. Instead, the rhetoric of the school relies on a form of linguistics so generalised that in the *Humpty Dumpty School of Management*, words can mean whatever is intended.

In this way, TL enables school leadership teams to critically reflect, confront the reality of policy reception, re-evaluate the effectiveness of same-age organisational processes, and start to realise the many assumptions inherent to the same-age system. The *system in use* reveals itself to be far from the *system espoused*. From a parental perspective, the desire to be involved in their child’s learning is restricted by the very policies and communication systems claimed to promote home-school collaboration. Such a situation, unless addressed, invariably creates processes that differentially favour some groups over others, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) describe.

**Stage 3:** The final stage of TL is co-construction which involves redesigning the system’s relational support and learning architecture around the trinity of the parent, the student, and form tutor. (An in-depth description of the VT system is available at Barnard, 2015 and 2018). Lesson time is unaffected, but for 20 minutes a day, all staff and tutees meet in carefully formulated mixed-age groups. Effectively, the aim is to ensure an answer to question 4, above. The following practices and principles apply:

* Every adult employed by the school returns to front-line tutoring (two tutors per group). This includes managers, leaders, and non-teaching staff.
* Tutor groups are repopulated and rebalanced with children from all age groups.
* There is no taught programme as such in the 20 /25 minutes of tutor time.
* All assessment and reporting information is rerouted through tutors and shared with students and parents to produce *strategies for improvement* (not targets).
* Assessment information and reports are redesigned to ensure participant usability, not simply data.
* Tutors, students, and parents discuss progress at deep learning conversations held at critical learning times in the year and decide changes needed. These are not time-limited.
* The tutor-child-parent trinity maintains contact and shares information throughout the child's school career.
* A bio-ecological support system is constructed around each child congruent with child social psychology (a nested system).

The aim is to ensure an ongoing partnership and conversation about learning that unites participant actors (staff, students, and parents) in a way that ensures every child is known and supported as needed. The form tutors become synaptic conduits of information, creating an open system that enables sense-making, quick judgment decisions, and intervention by tutors. The effect is to distribute leadership beyond the otherwise formal controls of the school (the so-called *edge of order* described by Prigogine and Stengers, 1997), releasing agency, liberating management, and promoting individual and organisational learning, effectively the self-managing system advised by Laloux (2014: 93).

These changes interfere with traditional school structuration. Instead of being tightly coupled, structure and agency can decouple as needed, a system described by Wilber (2014: xvii) as a shift from a single “dominator hierarchy” to multiple “actualisation hierarchies”. The purpose of system deconstruction (unlearning or unfreezing) is to create space for co-construction (the *metanoia* or shift of mind described by Senge, 2006: 13), a strategy that prevents self-referential ideas projecting into any new reality (revised system).

With these two models in mind, it is possible to detect adverse undercurrents within the research literature concerning the implementation of home-school partnership.

**Literature review**

In their paper on home-school collaboration, Cowan *et al*. (2004: 201) define *collaboration* as “working together toward a common goal”, one that “recognises that parents are invaluable members of the educational team”. They describe *partnership* as a relationship “based on the premise that coequal power and coequal participation are prerequisite conditions for meaningful collaborative endeavours” (Cowan *et al*., 2004: 208). This definition hints at a non-linear system based on complexity (described in the following section). Similarly, Johnston and Clarke (2001: 68) note four partnership requisites based in part from research with schools, including one where Clark was a community governor, and the author was the school principal. These are:

* **Two-way communication**: including the ability to listen carefully to the other
* **Trust**: the degree to which one partner depends on the work or recommendations of the other
* **Intimacy**: the extent to which each partner shares their plans and strategies
* **Rules:** a mutual acceptance of how this relationship operates.

This conceptual paper accords with the idea that effective home-school collaboration is not only desirable but essential for individual and organisational learning (Christenson and Sheridan 2001: Fan and Chen 2001; Seginer 2006; Hill and Tyson 2009; Hill and Chao 2009). It accepts that the research literature has a full grasp of the benefits of home-school partnership, "the evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing" (Henderson and Mapp 2002). Similarly, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) find that effective partnerships increase attainment, build self-esteem, and raise aspirations. It further accepts that when home and school combine their agentic roles, learning dispositions improve, including increased self-regulation, positive school attitudes, and better study habits (Fan & Chen 2001; Harris and Chrispeels, 2006; Henderson *et al*., 2007). It also accepts that meaningful home-school partnership supports academic, social, and behavioural adjustment (Izzo *et al.* 1999; Christenson & Sheridan 2001). The case for effective home-school collaboration in learning is unequivocal.

***Implementation***

However, difficulties emerge in the literature regarding implementation, i.e., how such a partnership is realised, operationally actioned, and defined. The challenge facing schools is to release and develop agentic reciprocity among staff, students, and parents in ways that support learning, improve outcomes, and reduce inequity (Boutte and Johnson 2014; Connors and Epstein, 1994). This suggests that a more extensive understanding of organisation is a prerequisite of school leadership.

While there is a laudable focus in the literature on how home-school collaboration might be improved (Souto-Manning and Swick 2006; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014) and no shortage of recommendations and strategies, researchers face a system unresponsive to external reform and one that maintains stasis over time. Hence, Epstein (1991) suggests that parents should involve themselves through parenting, communicating, volunteering, home-learning, decision-making, and community collaboration, entering the school by the back door, perhaps. Little advice is offered by way of implementation of such ideas or what they mean. Similarly, Hornby (2000) offers eight strategies, including communication, liaison, education, support, information, collaboration, resourcing, and policy-making. Again, how these turn into collaborative practices is uncertain when faced with the same-age model.

Helpfully, Sauto-Manning and Swick (2006) describe a client-based perspective suggesting a six-point strategy based on "an appreciation of families". Although welcome from a policy reception perspective, implementation in a large secondary school where information resides at different access layers, remains problematic. The Connecticut School-Parent Compact provides a not untypical example of standard home-school agreements, promoting a ten-step guide. However, these reductionist approaches make no mention of the capacity needed to meet such an exacting list of client demands, just that they should.

There is a constant danger in such approaches that the essence of partnership as home-school learning conversation becomes drowned in a sea of tick-lists and reductionism. While the research literature is precise regarding the benefits of home-school collaboration, the consensus on any affirmative action to build such a partnership is non-specific. Research accurately identifies the straight edges of the partnership jig-saw, but the other connecting pieces are less certain, creating concerns that some approaches to home-school collaboration may be counterproductive (see, for example, Goodall 2019 and 2018; Hornby 2000; Jeynes 2018; Harris and Goodall 2008; Henderson *et al.* 2007; Crozier, G. and Davies, J. 2007).

Two ethnographic studies go to the heart of the problem. A study of four secondary schools (Walker, 1998) describes parents' report evenings as "a unique interactional event which creates a problematic interface between the power bases of home and school, concentrating on the assessment of a (frequently absent) individual." The title of her study, *Meetings without Communication,* references examples of mistrust, anxiety, and confrontational approaches far from any notion of partnership, joint enterprise, and commonality of purpose. A dozen years on, it seems there has been little progress, with the parties of home and school irretrievably locked in boundary maintenance issues. For MaClure & Walker (2010), "The complex negotiations and skirmishes that take place during these encounters testify to their precarious location on the boundary between the two institutions of home and school".

Hornby and Lafaele (2011) note potential barriers, including age, economic issues, behaviour, context, and language. They call for "clarification of the specific factors responsible for the rhetoric-reality gap" a "precursor" for the realisation of effective collaboration. The rhetoric stemming from TL shows that such a reality gap is organisationally driven and exacerbates inequality.

***Partnership, Involvement and Engagement***

Goodall and Vorhaus (2011: 20) affirm the need to rebalance the agentic role of home, school, and child within the learning process, while Torre and Murphy (2016: 205) reject the "categories of parental involvement that have defined school-parent relationships (e.g., Epstein, 1996)". They note, "For the past century, the scaffolding for school-parent connections has been constructed from an ideology based on the principles of hierarchy, bureaucracy, and institutionalism as opposed to strong family and community relationships (Murphy, 2005)". Prior to VT, no viable alternative model has been offered. Similarly, Torre and Murphy (2916: 217) call for "a community of engagement", one with "shared values of trust and respect, authentic membership, collective workload and vision". Palaeilogou and Male (2017) too, suggest an "empowerment paradigm of partnership" one based on ecological principles. Arguably, only VT schools meet such design criteria. Like Torre and Murphy (2016), they analyse the previous models and provide a laudable list of components but, without a working alternative, must sidestep implementation issues.

It seems inevitable that same-age organisation invariably leads to reductionism leaving parent partnership (PP) compartmentalised into parental involvement (PI) and parental engagement (PE). Goodall (2017: 139) describes PE as “engagement with the broad sphere of their children's learning". For PI, "the agency for action remains with the school, rather than with the parents or family" (Goodall and Montgomery 2014, cited by Goodall 2018: 143). Critically, Goodall and Montgomery (2014: 401) promote the need for a change in "relational agency". The aim is to grow the capacity of parents to engage with the learning process while the school's role is to enable such engagement. The advent of the VT system (described above) suggests how this might be achieved.

In her reflective summary, Goodall (2019) argues that progress has stalled around the discourse of change, leaving ever more questions unanswered. For Goodall (2018 and 2019), the challenge to school leaders is to find a means of working with parents and especially those whose children are at risk of underachievement. In her reflective critique, Goodall (2019) poses a provocative and unanswered question, "How can we support parents to engage with learning – and others to engage with parents – in ways that challenge, if not dismantle systemic inequalities?" The VT answer is to build a system based on equality of input involving all participant actors, precisely what such a multi-age system seeks to do.

**Complexity theory and home-school partnership**

The literature review leaves the challenge of implementation unanswered but returns to structuration theory, the link between structure and agency and a central construct of this paper is. The autopoietic nature of schools as closed, self-referencing systems seemingly impervious to external reformational perturbation tie together structure and agency by controlling communication (see, for example, Luhmann’s theory of social systems – Luhmann, 1986). From a systems thinking perspective, schools in their received same-age form have not moved far from their Prussian inheritance. They remain as command-and-control teaching systems, party to a giant specifications industry glued to ideas like deliverology, neoliberalism, and new public management. Seddon (2016: 14) notes how values purposes have been replaced by measures (*de facto* purposes) which impose targets and constrain method (pedagogy). VT is a systems thinking alternative that requires value purposes to be shared with system users; these determine the measures needed to liberate method.

The role of complexity is to provide a framework for understanding how organisation and collaboration combine to create the capacity needed to cope with the learning demand on the school’s system. Consider, for example, the following table (table 1).

**Table 1. Simple, complicated, and complex systems – adapted from Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **The (re)-production of the same-age system** | | **The VT alternative** |
| **Simple**  **(One-size-fit-all-system**  **Non-adaptive)** | **Complicated**  **(Bureaucratic / Technical-rationalist)** | **Complex**  **(Liberated agency / leadership)** |
| **Following a Recipe** | **Sending a Rocket to the Moon** | **Raising a Child** |
| The recipe is essential | Formulae are critical and essential | Formulae have a limited application |
| Recipes are tested to assure easy replication | Sending one rocket increases assurance that the next will be OK | Raising one child provides experience but no assurance of success with the next |
| No expertise is required but cooking expertise increases success | High levels of expertise in a variety of fields are necessary for success | Expertise can contribute but is neither necessary nor sufficient to assure success |
| Recipes produce standardised products | Rockets are similar in critical ways | Every child is unique and must be understood as an individual |
| The best recipes give good results every time | There is a high degree of certainty with outcome | Uncertainty of outcome remains |
| Optimistic approach to problem-solving possible | Optimistic approach to problem-solving possible | Optimistic approach to problem-solving possible |

Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002) use schools as a metaphor to explain issues concerning the application of complex adaptive theory to the health sector (table 1, above).

The question posed by Table 1 is where to situate schools. The *recipe* column describes the search for "what works", i.e., recipes drawn from a menu of research-based "effect lists" and a quest for pedagogical laws yet to be discovered by social science (see, for example, Schram 2006: 23). Column two recognises that column one rarely works well with such a variety of live ingredients and requires an expanding number of specialists and support staff to deal with those who do not fit easily into the cooking time. In such a bureaucratic and technical rationalistic model, costs escalate, and time evaporates. Column three recognises such messiness and adapts the organisation's capacity to meet the child's demand needs and is not reducible to the other two columns. Dougherty (1996: 184) talks of capacity in terms of situated judgement whereby people (like tutors) are enabled to "evaluate complex, fuzzy problems", intervene, and adjust.

Effectively, the child represents a complex demand on the school system. Multiply that by many children, and the complexity of demand increases, and unless met, threatens to overwhelm the supply-side of the school. The organisational responses (table 1) describe the school’s organisational coping strategy, effectively how human resources are deployed. For the same-age school (table 1), the child must adapt to the one-size, same-age school system, a process that puts wellbeing at risk and exacerbates inequalities. For this one-size-fits-all approach, complexity is reduced (smoothed) to cope. Recognising that such a system fails children leads to a technical rationalist solution (column 2) requiring expensive expertise, complicated referral systems, and time to make the school (not the child) operationally effective. Many of the problems that this system “treats” are problems that the system itself is causing!

For column three, the child’s psychological, social, and cognitive needs require a secure feedback and support system supplied by parents and vertical tutors working in tandem with the child (see, for example, Anderson and Pavin (2003); McClellan (1994); Bronfenbrenner (1990); Coleman (1987); Stone and Burriss (2019). In many ways, the tutor acts both as a professional counsellor and the other parent in the room. The VT system (complexity column 3) cannot entirely undo the damage of the other two approaches, but it can return Maslow’s pyramid to its previously inverted form, one that enables self-actuation through a network of support and feedback loops where all agents (staff, students, and parents) work in partnership.

**NB**. What makes the VT column (table 1) complex is the addition of parent partnership as an integral part of the learning process. The school effectively distributes power to form tutors at the organisational edge, enabling tutors to harvest and synthesise information from the school, parents, and the child (see Mifsud 2017, on the problem of implementation). The agentic effect of enabling a multiplicity of voices to be heard and a multiplicity of feedback loops to form, most of which are beyond technical-rationalist and bureaucratic control (the edge of chaos), determines structure. The school can now adjust its capacity to absorb complexity, storing information in new learning networks. The agentic effect is to liberate management and formulate a supportive and enabling leadership architecture.

A school becomes complex when it distributes leadership to the organisational edge and builds multiple feedback networks of information and learning reliant on trust and operating far from normalised control. In effect, parent partnership is a reliable measure of a school’s complex adaptivity.

***Complexity as the link between modernism and post-modernism***

The VT school can listen to and value a multiplicity of voices rarely heard, rewire the feedback loops that are otherwise damaged or missing, and exchange information too often ignored, devalued, and assumed. Such a process at the organisational edge provides the lever for systemic change and school reform. First, the school moves from a closed autopoietic entity to one that allows a cross border flow of energy and information (Betts, 1992: Banathy, 1991), reconnecting the school to its community, i.e., towards an ecological model discussed earlier.

It is possible, therefore, to rewrite the grammar of schooling and return overly rationalised (stretched) linguistics to their former meaning. For Boisot and McKelvey (2008), “Complexity science offers an epistemological bridge between the order-seeking regime of the modernists and the richness-seeking regime of the postmodernists”. This paper argues that the VT system provides the complexity bridge connecting such otherwise separated frameworks of meaning by showing how structure and agency can couple and decouple to enable learning. For example, Ashby’s Law of Requisite Variety (Ashby 1956) states that to absorb the complexity on a system, a system must be equally complex (variety destroys variety). Treating children and learning demand as complications (see Pflaeging, 2014: 9) is a simplification that creates further complications and increases costs downstream. Given that students are a massive source of complexity, a school must have the organisational capacity to elicit a complex response. This paper argues that this can only be achieved by changing the organisation to enable the multiplicity of conversational discourses at the edge of the school where sense-making and decision-making can advise structure.

Schools errantly believe their system fails to meet demand when they have insufficient finances to expand their resource capacity. Options open to them include curriculum editing, pedagogical breakthroughs, push management, and intensive staff accountability. Another is to reduce or *smooth* demand, and an easy way of doing that is to pare parent partnership (save resources) and rationalise in the self-deceit that all is well. A better but more challenging option is to grasp the nettle of complexity, grow organisational consciousness, and embrace change.

**Concluding remarks**

VT enables schools to form both a virtuous and hermeneutic circle. The multi-age organisational form allows previously stifled agentic voices and conversations to be heard. Such collaboration enables the school to complexify, massively increasing the stock of information and tacit knowledge. In turn, complexification creates the capacity to absorb individual and organisational learning demand, while the distribution of leadership and trust liberates management. And therein is the challenge to school leaders.

Goodall (2018: 143) notes that that "persistent gaps in educational achievement are based on background rather than ability" (citing Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Rasbash et al. 2010; Andrews et al. 2017; Whitty and Anders 2017). The arrival of an alternative school model two decades ago, one based on multi-age groups, is absent from the research literature, so endemic is the same-age mindset. The concurrent arrival of multi-academy trusts has shifted power to the centre, stifled organisational innovation, increased costs, and promoted wrong-headed management ideas. It is in the nature of a self-referencing autopoietic system like a same-age school to continually (re)-produce itself and maintain stasis through technical rationalisation. VT is a step too far for many school leaders in a system that guards power so jealously. It is a sad state of affairs that when a headteacher writes a letter to parents, the last thing she wants is a reply! It is schools, not parents, that are so often the ones hardest to reach.

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