Organizational Theory:  
Around the Block Again?  Moving Forward?  Or Both?  

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Abstract:  Tracing organizational theory (OT) early framings (Perrow, 1970) to more recent applications in schools, this essay suggests organizational change may be a productive central focus for future OT thinking.  Positing that organizations exist so that mutually agreed upon outcomes may be generated; it is argued that discovering how learning occurs within school organizations has the potential to increase understanding concerning the outcomes of work in school organizations.  The work concludes with a call for the field to move beyond the development of a theory of school organization to a focus on theorizing around the core issues that school leaders face in order to provide direction toward achieving valued outcomes.

In the Beginning...

Most sociologists point to Max Weber’s description of the basic functions and structures of a bureaucracy as the invention of organizational theory (Weber, 1968).  Others credit the Functions of the Executive, which laid out a social psychological theory of the structures and behaviors that would induce people to cooperate to achieve a goal set by formal supervisors (Barnard, 1968).  Political scientists and economists entered the organizational theory scene as they began to value studies of public administration as well as electoral bodies (Boulding, 1952; Smithburg, 1951), while ethnographers jumped on the new bandwagon with descriptive studies such as Dynamics of Bureaucracy and Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy (Blau, 1955; Gouldner, 1954).  The Administrative Science Quarterly (arguably the premier journal publishing empirical organizational theory research) was launched in 1956, which suggests that the middle of the last century was a turning point for the development of a “field” of organizational theory that was distinguished from a slightly longer tradition of research around administrative and employee behavior and sociological studies of bureaucracy.

During these early years, however, the study of schools as organizations was quite limited.  Education as a research field was dominated by psychologists and a focus on child development well beyond the nascence of OT.  Although a few articles that reflected the increasing interest in organizational structures appeared in major educational journals starting in the mid-1950s, much of the focus was on the increasing reorganization of school districts rather than theorizing schools (or school districts) as organizations.  The Educational Administration Quarterly, founded in 1961, was created to provide a better niche for investigations of school organization, but like all new journals took some time to become established.  During the time when I was in graduate school (late 1960s and early 1970s), organizational theory was a core feature of the sociology curriculum, but its application to schools and educational organizations was still limited.
Fragmentation in Organizational Theory

Although OT’s history is relatively brief, it has been theoretically fragmented from its earliest days, as alternatives to Weber’s focus on bureaucracy and structure emerged. Some saw changes in OT as evolutionary. Perrow (1970), for example, identified four development strands (classical management theory, human relations, neo-Weberian, institutional theory), a view that privileged a particular structural perspective. Another sociologist, Richard Scott, adopted a compatible framework in 1981, but labeled the different phases “rational” “natural” and “open systems” theories (Scott, 1968).

Other disciplines contributed divergent perspectives that didn’t fit neatly into an evolutionary framework. Smircich (1983) proposed a cultural perspective on organizations, while Pfeffer (1981) argued equally strongly for a perspective that focused on power. Paradigm diversity rather than easy consensus became the norm. By the 1990s, Morgan’s popular Images of Organization (1991), shaped the teaching of organizational theory along with Bolman and Deal’s (2003) “frame analysis,” which identified four dominant paradigms in OT: human relations, structural, political, and symbolic.

Perhaps because Bolman and Deal’s text was so accessible (and was initially developed while teaching a class at the Harvard Graduate School of Education), the “let a thousand flowers bloom” perspective quickly dominated introductory courses to OT in many departments of educational leadership and administration. It would be difficult not to agree with Pfeffer’s (1993) observation that “In general, the field of organizational studies is characterized by a fairly low level of paradigm development, particularly as compared to some adjacent social sciences such as psychology, economics, and even political science” (p. 607).

In sum, within 40 years the new-ish field of OT had splintered, and the application of this theory to education became equally fraught. Any hopes that a unifying theory of how schools could be better organized collapsed: Even a cursory examination of publications from the 1980s and early 1990s in highly regarded education journals or books that purported to deal with the intersection of OT and schooling reveals that some focused on politics (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Sharon, 1990; Barnett, 1984), others on structure (Rowan, Raudenbush, & Kang, 1991; Tyler, 1985). Some emphasized the importance of culture and/or norms (Cheng, 1993), while others, like Hoy & Woolfolk (1993) adopted a human relations/social psychological perspective. Still others used an institutional framework that looked at commonalities in “real school” (Rowan & Miskel, 1999) or the common “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). At the same time, additional theoretical perspectives on school organization began to emerge that would gain increasing traction in educational OT, although having less impact in the OT field more broadly: (1) school effectiveness research (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000), and (2) critical theory, including post-modernism (Maxey, 1995) and critical race theory, which examines the organizational residues of past injustice (Tate, 1997).

Simplicity amid Complexity

The proliferation of different organizational theory paradigms in educational research has had less impact on published research, where limited sets of frameworks are apparent. First, sociological perspectives, both quantitative and qualitative, continue to dominate over those contributed by other disciplines (law, anthropology, social psychology). This is not surprising, because it reflects the general state of organization theory as reflected in journals such as Organization Science, Administrative Science Quarterly, or the Academy of Management journals. Within this general framework, priority is given to:

- School or department as the unit of analysis;
- Questions such as "Why is the school organized the way it is?" and "What are the effects of school organization on [student performance, change, etc.]?"
- Structure and/or climate/culture as the focus of study

These priorities are apparent not only in research that is implicitly or explicitly functionalist in perspective, but also in investigations that adopt a critical perspective. For example, even challenges to an old-school rational model of school behavior, such as Weick’s (1976) classic article on loose coupling, were predominantly functionalist in their assumption that organizational goals are best met by structures that do not look like a "classical Weberian bureaucracy" but are modified webs or networks. The notion that hierarchy is being replaced by networked organizations persists as a theme in studies of both schools and other kinds of organizations, but the questions associated with networked analyses typically focus on questions that are related to the functionalist assumptions indicated
above. To give just one example, the accumulating work on networked schools and districts has focused on the relationship between network structures inside organizational units and information use/change (Daly & Finnigan, 2011; Finnigan & Daly, 2012). While the assumptions about structure are different, the underlying question (relationship between structure and outcome) are classic, and have been incorporated into critical organizational perspectives on race and class in U.S. schools (Diamond, 2006; Oakes, 1985).

The dominant models in educational have been serviceable, adaptable and have produced a lot of good research, as well as quite a few "useful" findings. For example, the extensive implementation research studies conducted in the 70s and early 80s have deeply affected the structures and programs that educators attend to when they design and put innovations into place. Today, investigations of professional community and communities of practice (along with other work on adult cultures within schools) have shifted the attention of administrators away from the "hygiene" conditions of teachers' work to considerations about how structures foster social and professional support, while research on school cultures has resulted in extensive professional development programs that are designed to sensitize educators to institutional racism.

Organizational Theory: So, If It Ain’t Broke, Why Fix It?

Even though the structural-functional perspective dominates, its limitations are also apparent in the empirical research that has emerged over the last several decades—much of which has made use of the multiplicity of paradigms in ways that do not pose an overt challenge as much as a nagging sense of inconsistency.

Critical theory, although often conducted within a structural functional framework, provides an explicit challenge to the assumptions that (1) we can find good models to explain the sources of "the Gap" (or other indicators in inequality), which means that (2) we can find the mechanisms (structures and programs) to redress them. Instead, it is argued that racism (or other assumptions about class or gender) is so deeply embedded in our institutions that they require more than tweaking structural and cultural components that can be easily identified. A critical theory perspective may require looking at the socio-political context differently, concentrating (for example) on ideology, technology, and praxis in new ways (Steffy & Grimes, 1986).

However, this is still largely an empty cell in OT: a JSTOR search for the intersection between “organizational theory” and “critical theory” found fewer than 100 published articles.

In education, a “humanistic” argument that focuses on human and community needs has been a part of conversations for some time (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 1992; Passow, 1954), but has not had a deep impact on organization theory. Murphy and Torre (2014) bring the issue back into the conversation but are focused more on praxis than on organization theory. Organization theory has, in general, failed to include a community needs or communitarian perspective, although it points to a needed value dimension to the study of organizations that are inherently value-laden and cultural artifacts (Morrill, 2008). However, neither community nor culture has provided a basis for building a radically new organizational theory—community and culture address some of the value goals of education, but not all. A value-based organizational theory needs to incorporate some attention to competing demands for different kinds of goal attainment (a public values approach) that so vividly differentiate the educational sector from many others. Community and culture as metaphors for a theory do not facilitate action to address these demands.

Finally, a significant challenge, perhaps best exemplified by the work of Margaret Wheatley (1992, 1996), suggests that OT should be recast around a basis of chaos theory. The core paradigm for organizational research that has dominated education "works" in settings where rates of expected change are moderate. However, it does not necessarily apply in situations where the demands for change are unrelenting and demanding of "third order change." Drawing attention to uncertainty builds on micro-political and “garbage can" theories that argue that schools work/don't work because of their non-rational character and the competing demands and interests mentioned above. While I enjoy reading this work, it has had very limited impact on OT. Most micro-political work ignores large-scale uncertainty (preferring a focus on power regimes rather than chaos and power vacuums), and the applications of the "garbage can" to OT have been relatively minimal, except in the analysis of internal organizational dynamics. Thus, in spite of their popularity, we have limited empirical evidence of their utility in an increasingly uncertain world. In addition, they ignore values for the most part (and thus do not address the above challenge); and they provide a limited basis for quasi-rational action, except the mild assertions that the accumulation of a-
rational, self-interested behaviors will be positive (or at least non-detrimental) in the long run.

A Central Problem and Question for OT

Although these challenges are real, I suggest that their primary importance is because they draw our attention to the matter of organizational purpose or outcomes. As organizational theorists, we may or may not be comfortable with the current focus on measureable student achievement as the determinant of organizational value. However, we generally accept that OT exists because organizations are expected to DO something (typically something that produces social value for some group, whether legitimate or not) and that what they do will generate some CONSEQUENCES. In addition, because we work in an applied field, we hope that what we know about organizational doing (and its consequences) have some practical usefulness. In that sense, there is very little traction for a truly post-positivist OT theory either in the existing literature or on the horizon, although a focus on organization action can promote a renewed concern with the humanistic and moral side of group work (Harmon & White, 1989).

The central organizational problem for schools is that no matter how educators try to change (only occasionally based on good research), the global outcomes don’t appear to improve very much. Schools, more than perhaps any other social institution, are a living example of “the more things change, the more they stay the same.”

Thus, I argue that the central organizational problem of education today is change, and that any emergent OT in education must take this as its central focus. This is obviously no simple task, and it must respond to the (now) classic observation that changing schools is not as easy as contrasting top-down versus bottom up, nor is it sufficient to increase the complexity and uncertainty of roles and structures, which disrupt traditional cultures (distributed leadership, etc.). Railing against neo-liberal policies is popular, but doesn’t actually increase our capacity to understand why systems respond in different ways to the same stimulus (Louis & van Velzen, 2012).

Slouching Toward a New Path: Can OT Be Energized Through a Learning Perspective? 3

The organizational learning frameworks that are popular in both education and business do not provide a solution, but suggest some new directions that respond to these challenges. Further, focusing on learning and change can easily incorporate the value and non-rationality challenges discussed above. Because organizational learning maintains some features of the "old paradigm" (a sociological underpinning and emphasis on school structure and culture) it is likely to be an acceptable alternative that generates both theorizing and research-to-practice work.

While there are many definitions of organizational learning, I like a simple focus on the creation of socially constructed interpretations of facts and ideas that enter the organization from both the external environment or are generated within. This definition includes several assumptions:

- Adults learn most deeply in their organizational-practice and not in classes or by reading;
- Learning is a process of forging individual identity within an organization/community;
- Information gains meaning only within a socially constructed setting; and
- Learning and changing are in a dynamic causal relationship. (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Schön, 1983)

In order to become a serious contributor to OT, an organizational learning perspective must contribute to addressing what I have identified as the central problem of identifying DOING and CONSEQUENCES, as well as the application of that knowledge in practice (Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron, 2001).

Accumulating research evidence suggests that focusing on how information is turned into commonly held knowledge that is actionable means thinking about how people work with each other to change. First, in order to create any basis for collective action (whether determined by individual choice or by a plan), there needs to be shared knowledge that contributes to the reshaping and transformation of schooling (Hage, 1999; Simsek & Louis, 1994). Second, whether formally identified or explicit, members of the school community
must recognize the cognitive understanding and skills that they can access (which is often referred to as absorptive capacity) (Lewin, Massini, & Peeters, 2011; Zahra & George, 2002). Third, the implicit idea of learning presumes an evolving knowledge base -- acquired through random, incremental and more intellectual action. Finally, knowledge acquisition behavior will differentiate more effective from less effective teams in schools and other organizations [using broad and multiple measures of effectiveness] (Higgins, Weiner, & Young, 2012; Yli-Renko, Autio, & Sapienza, 2001).

But creating patterns of doing that change organizational consequences is not an easy task, even in cutting edge, high tech firms. In schools, which are not organized to be nimble, the challenges are greater. Most schools lack an informal inventory of knowledge and skills, which limits a school's ability to use new ideas intelligently. Schools invest little in research and development (typically hoping to find magic bullets in purchased solutions) and staff development is generally weak. These characteristics limit the absorptive capacity of school to take in and use new ideas. Even with the recent emphasis on professional learning communities, the experience of members in building shared understandings and a subsequent shared knowledge base is limited and infrequent. Thus, schools change all the time and most teachers are highly adaptive in their classrooms, but the changes don’t add up to collective learning and improvement.

The available empirically based theory to support the development of a focus on learning and change as a place where fragmented elements of OT could find common ground is in the earliest stages. Sharon Kruse and I have laid out a simple framework for beginning to think about organizational learning in schools that points to features of both culture and structure that are important, thus providing links between a new focus of OT on change and improvement and the dominant models (S.D. Kruse & Louis, 2009).

Memory

Memory acts as an essential feature of school culture. Positive memories from previous learning situations are attached to current situations. The memories enhance change efforts while negative memories, when jointly held by many members of the school organization, act as barriers to new learning efforts (Huber, 1991). The absence of memory can inhibit change (for example, in schools with very high turnover of teachers, administrators and/or students) (Higgins et al., 2012). Without an adequate base of experience from which to draw, teachers can be reticent to begin new learning activities. Developing memory is a cultural endeavor, typically linked with story-telling, consultation, and informal exchanges, particularly with members who have access to the organizational history (Rusaw, 2004).

Knowledge Base

A knowledge base includes individually held knowledge. Teachers, through both pre-service and in-service experiences, enter schools equipped with disparate foundations of information related to content and pedagogy. Such individually held knowledge is often difficult for colleagues to access and utilize. It also includes knowledge and vocabulary generated by school-based analysis. The results of self-study efforts can generate commonly-held knowledge about the purposes and goals of schooling that, in turn, can provide a common vocabulary that fosters continued organizational learning process. Schools also search for knowledge, and react to information that is gained by organized search efforts. When school personnel collectively engage in systematic searches for new information to improve perfor-
mance, knowledge is generated that both further defines the problem and suggests alternative actions. Schools may also be provided with information (data) that becomes grist for interpreting what is known. Although a great deal of emphasis has been placed on formal data-driven decision making in schools in recent years, attention to all four kinds of knowledge development is important in considering how schools (and districts or systems) determine what they do (Nonaka & Georg von, 2009).

Information Distribution and Interpretation

Data warehouses may add to the capacity of states and districts to provide knowledge from different sources to schools. However, this knowledge will be useless until it stimulates new understandings. This means that it must be shared and incorporated with other sources of internal and external knowledge. Sharing should not be taken for granted, particularly in an age of information overload. Natural sharing systems in most organizations mean that some people and groups are information rich, while others are out of the loop, and being out of the loop also means weak learning processes (Daly & Finnigan, 2011). Beyond simple sharing, schools need protocols to ensure that information is processed and interpreted. Information is not neutral, but lands in or is generated by a specific context, where it will be processed through individual and collective belief structures, frames of reference and organizationally based social constructions, the cues and feedback related to organizational symbols and shared understandings, or the process of unlearning old, now replaced, practices and beliefs (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). Because knowledge and “data” in education (even student achievement data) are usually ambiguous and contestable, the cultural norms about information processes are particularly critical (Mahler, 1997).

Reflections on Evolutionary Change in Organizational Theory

One reason to support a focus on organizational learning is that it does not require throwing out what we have learned about what makes some schools more adaptive and potentially effective, while others remain “stuck” (Rosenholtz, 1991). For example, we know that decentralization/shared decision-making is associated with both learning and traditional measures of school effectiveness, as are communication structures, supportive leadership, stability, and “information richness.” As an adaptive framework, organizational learning allows us to attend to values and to incorporate critical perspectives, including attention both to iatrogenic features of school cultures, as well as non-rational or a-rational behaviors of schools and school systems. In addition, organizational learning focuses our attention on aspects of OT that make us relevant to practitioners and policy makers: how schools change and improve. No one who is attached to the big sociological categories of structure and culture needs to exit or complain of being left out. Even some of the key questions can be familiar—for example, why are schools organized the way they are, and what is the impact of that organization? Or, how can schools organize to become more responsive to information and more able to act on it? Finally the learning framework points to obvious questions about effects of learning and change on students, teachers, etc. The units of analysis can be flexible: We can theorize about organizational systems (districts), individual schools or school types, or even organizational subunits (departments, grade levels, etc.).

So, what needs to change? First, organization theory must be attentive to knowledge/learning, organizational DOING and the CONSEQUENCES of doing. This is not a new focus, but it draws our attention more clearly to the dynamics of organizational structure and culture, and to a more interpretive perspective. If we focus on doing, we need to understand not only how people behave as they do, but why. We also need to understand how they think about their behavior (as well as the behavior of others). This does not imply a singular methodology, but it does have implications for how we conceptualize the basic units of school organization. In addition, a focus on organizational learning demands more serious attention to consequences. Organizational learning both causes and is a result of behaviors, but also stimulates teachers, administrators, and pupils to adapt. It is an inherently non-mechanistic perspective that privileges local understandings, culture and patterns that are present in so much educational research, but that have been less clearly integrated into OT.

In sum, I propose a modest and temporary middle ground between comprehensive classifications that integrates competing or alternative paradigms and celebrations of the thousand blooming flowers that we see in the field. Rather than A THEORY, we need to work on creating some common assumptions that help us to THEORIZING core issues facing schools as organizations, while helping those who work in and around them to acquire navigational tools to chart a course in
the uncertain seas of changing expectations as they steer toward destinations that are off the map of current “best practice.”

References


1Post-modernism has had very limited traction in general organizational theory. For example, an article on post-modernist theory in one of the most highly ranked journals (Academy of Management Review) by two well-regarded scholars received only one citation since its publication (Calás & Smircich, 1999).

2Note that critical race theory did not enter the educational research field with any force until Tate’s 1997 review.

3This section draws heavily on work that I have done over many years with Sharon D. Kruse. Some of our conversations have turned into publications in which pieces of these ideas appear (S.D. Kruse, 2001; S.D. Kruse & Louis, 1997, 2009); others are influenced by her work, but not co-authored (Louis, 2006, 2010).