

Learning culture or learning organization – approaches to implement changes at schools

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Abstract: Currently, in Latvia, the improvement of the education process at the political and practical levels is based on the approach of the school as a learning organization, without critically analysing the advantages and disadvantages of the approach. Therefore, the aim of this theoretical study is to evaluate a different theoretical approach - the school as a learning organization and a learning culture to explore the practices taking place at school and to influence them by implementing changes in education. The analysis of the theoretical sources, documents and studies carried out in the research allows to conclude that the approach of the school as a learning organization, although it is widely used, does not sufficiently explain the processes taking place at school, ignoring the interaction of various structures and agents and the power given to them. Educational research is increasingly recognizing the pervasive influence of culture on teaching and learning. From a cultural perspective, changes in education and practices at schools is a complex and not always feasible process, as it is associated with tensions and conflicts. Using the theory of learning culture, it is possible to understand why students learn or do not engage in the learning process, why teachers change or do not change their practices, and how management can influence developments at a particular school. The study demonstrates the possibilities of the theoretical approaches of both sides to find out and improve the teaching and learning implemented at schools on the way to the knowledge society.

Keywords: school as learning organization, learning culture, changes.

Introduction

The processes taking place at school and their improvement can be looked at from different theoretical perspectives. The approach of the school as a learning organization assumes that management methods and techniques can be used to create an ideal organization that will allow different children to achieve higher academic results (Kools et al., 2020, Kaulens & Upenieks, 2021; OECD, 2016). On the other hand, in the cultural approach, learning and teaching are considered as a complex interaction of processes, which is influenced by various structures, agencies and power, and the implementation of changes in such a setting is complicated, well-intended actions do not always achieve the expected results (Biesta et al., 2015, James & Biesta, 2007; Wallace & Hoyle, 2005; Hursh, 2005).

Education policy documents are saturated with the concept of school as a learning organization (Regulation of the Cabinet ..., 2021; School 2030, 2019) It is considered an "ideal type of organization" (Kools et al., 2020, 2.) for mitigating all challenges related to the improvement of the learning process, achieving the set goals, ensuring change (ibid.). However, what to do if the school as an organization does not learn, if the teachers do not want to change, despite the efforts made by the management, and if part of the students are still not active participants in the learning process? Furthermore, schools or individual teachers resist change. In other words, the ideal image of the organization for what schools should become, seems unattainable in practice.

The described contradictions are also recognized by other authors, indicating that the approach of the school as a (learning) organization limits the possibilities of understanding and explaining the processes taking place at school (Rinehart, 2016; Kamens, 2013; Thrupp & Willmont, 2003). One of the possible solutions is to look at teaching and learning at school as a process influenced by culture (Lonka, 2018; Gil et al, 2018; Hodkinson et al., 2008; James & Biesta, 2007).

Culture has a significant influence on the practical work carried out at school - it starts with a widespread notion in the culture of what it means to teach and to learn, which further influences political decisions, and when coming to school, it can be seen in the actions implemented by the teacher, the participation of the student and the material resources available (National Academies of Sciences..., 2018). A broader view of learning allows us to realize the complex nature of this process, which is influenced by various structures and power relations (Kamens, 2013; Biesta et al., 2015).

Culture allows us to see and realize the interaction of different agencies and structures. For example, parents from different cultures may convey to their children's different understandings of what is expected of them at school, which in turn further affects children's participation by maintaining their usual routines (Tomasello, 2016). In Finland, the development of students' social-emotional skills is considered an essential prerequisite for academic achievement, without these skills, education is not equally accessible to everybody, at the same time, researchers have found that not all children acquire these skills due to the influence of culture (Lonka, 2018).

Any individual goal is also influenced by culture. Looking from the perspective of the individual - the goals and motivation to participate in an activity are related to the personal and social dimensions of identity, which are formed in the cultural context (National Academies of Sciences..., 2018).

The described examples demonstrate the significant influence of culture on learning at school, so the aim of this study is to evaluate theoretical approaches of schools as learning organizations and learning culture, choosing the most suitable one which would allow studying the teaching and learning implemented at schools, looking for opportunities to improve it.

Methodology

The tasks of this theoretical study are:

- to describe and evaluate the theoretical framework of the school as a learning organization and learning culture;
- to analyse the importance of both approaches, theoretical limitations and possibilities which would allow a better understanding of the processes taking place at schools and the possibilities of implementing changes.

Research methods – theoretical analysis of literature, documents and studies, their mutual comparison.

Results and discussion

Currently, the concept of school as a learning organization has entered educational policy and practice, which is interpreted as "the ideal type of organization for dealing with the changing external environment, facilitating and sustaining organizational change and innovation and even improving student and HR outcome" (Kools et al, 2020, 2). A school as a learning organization is characterized by a clear mission, vision, messages, cooperation and learning of all parties, including the systems that are outside the school, modeling and improving leadership (OECD, 2016; Kools et al., 2020).

The concept revives the approach created in the 80s of the last century, supplementing it with new discoveries, dialogues between various involved parties, as a result offering practical guidelines how to transform schools into learning organizations (OECD, 2016).

In Latvia, the approach was used in the education content and reform project to implement a competency-based approach (School 2030, 2019), and there is an opinion that reform is possible with continuous professional development of teachers, continuous learning, which further transforms schools into learning organizations (Kaulens, 2022; Kaulens & Upenieks, 2021).

Schools as a learning organization are widely described in the educational development guidelines, indicating its importance for achieving nationally important goals, for example, effective management of educational institutions, joint learning of teachers, the student achieving the new set goals and results (Regulations of the Cabinet ..., 2021). The state has commissioned a study that would evaluate the approach of the school as a learning organization, developing a model and tools for self-evaluation of educational institutions and evaluation of growth (Ministry of Education, 2022), pointing out that this model will provide the Education quality public service functions to control the educational process and provide recommendations for the elimination of identified shortcomings (Regulations of the Cabinet ..., 2013).

A similar theoretical approach to the school as a learning organization is also described by Leithwood and colleagues (Leithwood et al., 2017), emphasizing the essential role of leadership in the transformation of school practices, improving student learning. According to the authors' offer, it takes place on four distinct paths: rational (knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning), emotional

(individual and collective dispositions and feelings), organizational (relationships, instructions, structures, learning communities) and family (expectations and support). The authors believe that the failing school lacks talented leadership.

The limitations of the school as a learning organization approach can be seen from the theoretical perspectives of other authors who critically evaluate it, pointing to a series of shortcomings that are not sufficiently recognized and the consequences of the approach.

The culture approach of organizations in the promotion of school growth is neoliberal, an interpretation of the situation imposed by policies related to the market economy (Biesta, 2015; Wallace & Hoyle, 2005; Hursh, 2005). Authors who promote such an approach are connected to politics and ask researchers to study how to make school work more efficient, making it more productive (Biesta et al, 2015; Kamens, 2013), thereby contributing to the ever-widening spread of leadership, affecting the perception of the school as an organization that obeys the principles of business management (Thrupp & Willmott, 2003), ignoring the social importance of the school in society (Biesta, 2007; Elliott & Doherty, 2001). The massive decentralization of neoliberalism undermines professional freedom and democracy by changing the understanding of what teaching is, forcing teachers to serve the system rather than students (Rinehart, 2016).

The current focus of education on the achievement of certain standards does not allow to focus on truly important issues - on what students learn, why they learn, from what they learn (Biesta, 2015), and it is assumed that education is valuable in any case (Biesta, 2015), although for some students early school years become a harsh test (Erikson, 1998). Theories that point the way to excellence by defining what each of us should be, ignoring our different starting points, practice labelling (Lave, 1996). And it can be applied to both individuals and schools.

Schools are currently under heavy pressure dictated by national development plans, requiring schools to become open systems while innovation and accountability become the mantras of organizations (Kamens, 2013) and social fictions emerge. Under the influence of educational reforms, teachers have learned to use the new concepts, ensuring the use of language in accordance with the policy, but their understanding of them is superficial - the modern educational discourse is a mixture of competing and unclear ideas, which leave the teachers confused about their role (Biesta et al., 2015).

The approach that ascribes learning to the school as an organization does not allow to understand the essence of leadership, because it does not study the wider sociological and philosophical context, the role of structures and agents, which in interaction create the possibility to understand the existing strategies (Woods, 2007). For example, Kovačević and colleagues (Kovačević et al., 2023), studying school leadership in the former Yugoslavia found that older teachers are still influenced by the socialist education system, fear change and do not see themselves as agents of change, instead trying to maintain the status quo. Also, the group of authors expressed the assumption that school leaders and organizational culture can have limited influence in an environment where resource availability has to be fought for and reward systems exist.

Finally, the school as a learning organization approach demonstrates the view that management today provides a solution to all complications, thus reducing school learning to a technical process where social aspects can be ignored (Thrupp & Willmott, 2003). However, schools are institutionally, socially, and politically complex structures that act as mediators to mitigate external influences, and they can develop systems that resist change, rather than yield to (Brown, 2004). The learning organization does not allow such a vision.

Believing in leadership as the solution to all the problems existing in the school, it is impossible to understand the complex nature of learning, as well as the changes that take place without the active participation of the leader within the institution, therefore, to learn about the processes taking place in the school, a social theory is needed, which helps to understand and characterize what is happening, thus reducing the risk that conducted research resembles management consulting (Fitz, 1999). Changes in education research have been brought about by the merging of social and cultural theories, interpreting learning as a social process that is formed, supported, and maintained by cultural systems (Tomasello, 2016). Such a theoretical point of view would allow overcoming the listed shortcomings of the learning organization approach.

Currently, new ideas about what it means to teach and learn are changing in the world - replacing the pedagogy of the industrial society (transfer of facts from the teacher to the student) with a knowledge society, which requires active participation of students, motivation ensuring deep learning (Lonka, 2018). When facing the new, the learning culture can be full of contradictions, creating tension and conflicts that prevent the implementation of the intended changes (James & Biesta, 2007). Therefore, it can be said that the changes in education, the transition to the competence approach, creating a knowledge society, can create disagreements, and not knowing the processes of how these contradictions arise and are maintained or reduced, will prevent the implementation of the intended.

Knowing the culture that affects teaching and learning can solve several challenges that schools and systems face, described by different authors, for example: how to promote the transformation of social practices from the dominant transfer of knowledge to work with knowledge (Hakkarainen, 2009); how to reduce power relations at school (in the field) by promoting teacher agency (Aoyoma, 2021); how teachers learn every day, situated because the existing knowledge acquisition process does not change practices in the classroom (Tarnanen et al., 2021); whether and how to change the student's identity in conditions where cultural expectations prevent the implementation of appropriate pedagogical approaches (James, Davies & Biesta, 2007).

The concept of learning culture can be interpreted narrowly, for example, Gil and colleagues (2021) describe it as the process between the teacher learning and the delivery of knowledge to the classroom, with the teacher taking/not taking responsibility for it.

This work will use a broader theoretical perspective of learning culture, where the authors James and colleagues (James & Biesta, 2007; Hodkinson et al., 2007b) propose to recognize learning by connecting people's individual growth process with the context and setting in which it occurs, thereby explaining in the interaction of what factors students' opportunities to learn are formed (Hodkinson, 2008). The authors use the anthropological definition of culture, meaning a way of life that is expressed through actions and the process of communication (Hodkinson et al., 2007a).

The theory of learning culture, as opposed to the school as a learning organization, emphasizes that the improvement of learning is related to the transformation of culture, which is easy to express in verbal form, but relatively difficult to realize in life, because culture is the result of the interaction of very different influences (Biesta et al., 2007). Different schools have different beliefs about how things are done, how things should be done, and opportunities to influence and change culture will also vary from place to place (James & Biesta, 2007).

The authors of the theory to cognize learning emphasize a set of four important concepts that help to understand the complex nature of learning (Hodkinson et al., 2008, James & Biesta, 2007).

The inseparability of individual involvement and social interaction in the learning process. The experienced situations and emotions influence how an individual feels and acts, how much they participate in learning or avoid it. This point confirms the recent findings that in the learning process the content, interrelationships and cognitive engagement are subjective, accompanied by emotional reactions that can support or undermine the individual's participation and achievement (National Academies of Sciences..., 2018). The importance of social situations in content learning. Learning content cannot be separated from the social situations in which it is learned. The importance of social situations is related to the situated learning theory, which explains learning as participation in everyday socially organized activities, learning norms and rules to become a competent group member (Lave, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The essential role of this influence was found by Nasir (2002) describes teenagers who, while playing basketball, were able to apply complex mathematical operations - calculate average values and percentages, while they could not perform the same mathematical operations in the classroom.

The impact of institutional, social structures and agency. Learning cannot be separated from the social and economic pressures, the influence of the media, which are felt at schools, affecting their performance. In the field of education, there is a tension between teacher's beliefs, values and wider institutional discourse and education policy (Biesta et al., 2015). Biesta and colleagues believe that there are countries where teacher agency is currently trying to be replaced by a data-driven approach, although teacher agency is an integral part of good, meaningful education.

The role of power. The learning process is also influenced by power exercised at the institutional or micro-political level. Sometimes it is difficult to separate the effects of structure, agency, and power as separate points. They are related to Bourdieu's theory of practice, using it as a thinking tool (field and habitus, capital, and power, misrecognition), which allows learning to be seen as interactions, also identifying the consequences it creates. Similarly, the interaction of structures, agency and power is included in the concepts of audit culture, audit society - the concept of what can and should be controlled (Apple, 2005; Power, 1994), and because of this influence, some people start believing that the exercise of control is an important part of learning (Hodkinson, 2008).

Considering the preconceptions described by the authors of the theory, the following basic assumptions are put forward, which are applicable to the theoretical understanding and knowledge of learning and learning culture (Hodkinson et al., 2007 a).

First, learning cannot be limited to intellectual activity. Learning is the process by which an individual's system of dispositions is recognized, developed, challenged, or changed. Therefore, the culture of learning is not focused on content, but on the study of the social practices in which people learn by participating.

Second, the interaction between learning culture and individuals is mutual. People influence the formation of learning culture and culture influences the formation of human behaviour. A person's ability to influence a specific culture depends on his/her position in the field, his/her disposition towards the specific culture and the capital (social, cultural, and economic) he/ she has at his/her disposal.

Thirdly, learning culture allows, promotes, hinders, or excludes the emergence and existence of specific social practices. Therefore, one of the functions of a culture theory of learning is to understand how culture facilitates or limits the opportunities for learning among its participants.

The theory of learning culture allows identifying barriers at different levels that limit effective learning, as well as synergies that promote learning; explain the extent to which learning depends on the teamwork of teachers and what lies beyond these boundaries (Hodkinson, Biesta, Postlethwaithe & Maull, 2007). Therefore, it is essential to use it when learning the processes of change at school and the education system.

Cultural approaches to learning are also subject to criticism, for example, they remove the focus from learning as knowledge acquisition (Besar, 2018). Looking more broadly, it can be said that approaches that do not have clear accountability and monitoring implemented in schools can threaten the progress of the education system by introducing harmful practices (UNESCO, 2017).

However, it would be advisable to use the theory of learning culture in the education research Latvia, in order to be aware of existing social practices that promote or limit the learning of students and teachers, including recognizing that the learning process at school can be not only a positive benefit; would understand the reasons for the emergence and maintenance of these practices, which are influenced by the school or other external bodies. Such a theoretical approach would allow us to understand how to help implement changes in the field of education by reducing tension and overcoming conflicts in order to create a knowledge society in Latvia.

Conclusions

- Both described theoretical approaches – the view of the school as a (learning) organization and the theory of learning culture are focused on the improvement of learning, but they interpret the opportunities to implement change differently.
- In the approach of the school as a learning organization it is assumed that the school can become an ideal structure that overcomes existing challenges, introduces changes, influencing the growth of both students and school staff. This approach is widely described in the documents of the education policy of Latvia, it is planned to be used in school quality assessment.
- The organizational approach has significant shortcomings - it does not sufficiently explain the processes taking place at school, their causes, it does not sufficiently recognize the difficulties and obstacles that both institutions and people face when implementing changes. Also, it overestimates the role of the management in making changes, not considering the structures that influence the school's processes, and is outside the school's control circle, thus preventing us

from learning and understanding the essence of leadership, the influence of other agents at a specific place.

- Research in the world, exploring teaching and learning, increasingly describe the influence of culture, which is formed, maintained and changed by structures and agents in mutual interaction, determining the value of education, the practices implemented at schools, including recognizing that culture can not only promote learning, but also reduce participation.
- Viewing teaching and learning as a process influenced by culture, it is recognized that implementing changes in education can be a long, complex process and can be implemented differently at different institutions. Local practices and experiences can significantly influence how changes are perceived and evaluated, their inadequacy.
- The cultural approach is criticized because it removes the focus from learning as the acquisition of knowledge and neglecting the monitoring function, schools can introduce harmful practices.
- However, by expanding the study of learning at schools from the learning organization to the framework of the theory of learning culture, it is possible to learn how the mutual interaction of different parties creates or limits learning opportunities for different students. The theory of learning culture in research can help to find answers to the questions - why students learn or do not learn, why teachers change or do not change the usual practices and how the management is able or unable to influence the course of these processes, so it would be recommended to use this theory in the research of the educational processes, on the way to the knowledge society.

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