

**Hans Siggaard Jensen**

*Professor*

*Learning Lab Denmark*

*School of Education – University of Aarhus, Denmark*

*E-mail: hsj@dpu.dk*

**Abstract**

An analysis is given of the tension in understanding the school as an organization between a viewpoint focusing on the student-teacher relation and one focusing on the school as an instrument of the State. A third position seeing the school as a knowledge organization is presented and some points are made about the implications for the cognitive virtues this implies and the type of organization the school could be if organizational learning is to be possible.

## **THE SCHOOL AS A LOCUS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING**

Two different conceptions about the school as an organization seems to be at work when we discuss quality of education. One is the idea of the school as centered upon and built around the dyadic relation between student and teacher. The other is the idea of the school as an institutional instrument of control used by the State in parallel with others such instruments. These two ideas and our use of them in specifying the school as an organization have great importance for how one thinks about the development of the school system and what should be done to take in a desired direction.

The first idea stems from the conception of the school as a locus of teaching and that teaching is essentially a relation centered on student and teacher. The good school is first and foremost the good teacher. From the point of view of the teacher the optimal school is one that permits this focus, and where all other parts of the organization goes in that direction. The individual teacher should have optimal freedom and should have available through own education and the educational system and the school in which the teachers teaches adequate resources. These resources are then used through the qualified and prudent decisions of the good teacher to the best advantage of the student. The development of the school as an organization is thus on this conception first and foremost the introduction of new disciplinary and didactic knowledge that can be available to the teacher and thus improve decisions. Reforms or others forms of change, are filtered through this idea and only passes if they can actually improve on existing practices focused on the student-teacher relation. Management is seen primarily as a sort of protection against undue interference from external influences such as political decisions. The teacher has as the main task the teaching.

The other idea is base don the assumption that the school basically is just one of several instruments that the State has available for shaping society through political decisions. Thus the school is a professional bureaucracy that works through rules and regulations. The school is a hierarchy and the headmaster is only a servant of the State. Management has the task of making sure that the school works in accordance with decided policies and towards the goals set. If this is not the case management must have more power and authority and teachers a higher degree of loyalty. Plans, goals and contracts become instruments and standardization, evaluation and more management are introduced all in accordance with the principles and practices of New Public Management. A certain degree of freedom is left, as long as this is seen as helping towards realizing goals and policies. The teacher should be a responsible employee not somebody with a vocation, but rather a profession.

But are these two conceptions of the school really what we have to choose between or is there a third conception? A school is more than the sum of the relations between students and teachers. A good school – recent studies have shown – involves also a high degree of organizational learning capacity, knowledge sharing and communality in planning and evaluation. Furthermore if the school becomes even a very qualified professional bureaucracy the fact that it becomes more of a bureaucracy hinders the flexible realization of routines, and even their development. Focusing on the good and competent teacher is thus too individualistic a perspective. It is like judging the quality of a sports team through an addition of the qualities of the individual players. But we all know that this is inadequate. A team is also in need of the ability to follow common strategies and create common tactics together with a good - and even better an optimal - division of labour based on both individual competencies and situated practices and decisions.

To conceive of the school as one among several public institutions and treat them alike underscores that fact that the school has a long and special history and a special status as an institution. There are no specific rules to follow, that describes what to do in the sense of routines and procedures. There are general prescriptions about what to teach and how to assess, evaluate and document the results. The schools give grades and administer exams, and can give degrees. The student is not a customer and the system of governance is complicated and based on a large degree of freedom for the teacher. The teacher has to be able to be self-managed, because the work consists in a series of decisions that have to be made in concrete situations. This demands a professional training and attitude and the ability to do situated reflection and make decisions that influence the further development of the teaching activities and the learning of the students. The professional understanding and self-understanding is thus both based on knowledge and on explicit values and an understanding of the tradition and functions of education. In a society where education to and for democracy is an essential part of the school, the ability of reason in an independent and critical fashion is central. This is only something that can be achieved if the school is not seen as just a part of the instruments of the State. The school has to have a special status as a locus for independent thinking and reflection. Otherwise the school becomes just an instrument of disciplining and then can only fit as a part of a totalitarian state. This makes the whole idea of managing and controlling the school through the techniques of New Public Management spurious and problematical.

The school should be understood as a knowledge-based organization which is between the two conceptions thus far described. This is of course accepting that the student-teacher relation – often seen as a I – You relation – is important, and also that the school is part of the public sphere and can be part of the State, but with a certain independent status. Knowledge in its many forms

is an indispensable resource of schools and thus this must be reflected in our understanding of them as organizations. They must be managed accordingly, and thus teachers as other knowledge workers must be given a high degree of independence. It must also be recognized that the work done in schools is such that it is based on the use of reason and values of a professions rather than procedures and a hierarchy of goals given from the outside.

If the school is understood as a knowledge-organization a number of new questions have to be asked. How do we organize learning also between teachers not only between teachers and students and how can we develop forms of organizing such that our daily activities in meetings and encounters not only consists in exchange of information but also becomes arenas for development, learning and collective decision-making? This is like in other knowledge-organizations. How can we use technology so it is supporting such a form of organization and how can we develop new competencies for self-management and a good regulation between the individual and the collective practices in the organization? In general the perspective of a knowledge organization in the field of force between the individualistic and the “totalitarian” sets a new focus on the qualifications and competencies of the teacher. The disciplinary and didactic focus must be supplemented with a focus on the organizational, and thus it is important to be able to transform individual resources to collective ones, and via this also to be better in action and performance.

It has in recent years become important to see the school – even the whole school system – to both individual and organizational learning. It is thus possible to ask under what conditions there is interplay and what form this interplay takes. Above an outline of what characterizes the school as an organization has been given. What aspects of this type of organization are essential to the interplay between individual and organizational learning? There are other perspectives on the school than the one outlined above. And in these we do not see interplay between individual and organizational learning as an important and explicit aspect. The school can for instance be seen as a production organization where the teachers take an input and produce an output – the qualified students – certified through a system of exams and degrees. The typical learning form in such a system is a feed-back loop from the output to the production system, such as is seen in quality management. It can also be seen more as a community with common goals, where the students are in residence for some time, and this has certain effects. The school is thus not a production system but a socialization system. Bordering types of organizations are the sports club, where the output can be fit persons or competition results, or the research team, where the output is the knowledge produced – and an example of a side-effect is the training of doctoral students.

The thesis of the present paper is that only when the school is governed by certain cognitive values and virtues will it be possible to have a learning organization that also furthers and

makes individual learning possible. The additional point is that in actual good schools such cognitive values and virtues have been adhered to. The major conditions for the cognitive values are those that focus on a collective responsibility for discussion and criticism rather than strict adherence to a set of rules. Schools are neither military nor religious organizations.

Organizations can be value based and knowledge based. The school has for a long time been value based, and that aspect is still very important. The school might produce obedient citizens – or rather subjects – or it might produce autonomous, independent and educated persons that can function as citizens in a democratic society. These are different values. It can also be based on revelation, on science, on critical thinking, on discussion and debate. These are examples of knowledge bases. What has been said above is that we should look at the school as being in a field of tension between two conceptions, that are both very value-based and that the third way of looking at the school is as a knowledge-based organization.

Let us just look at the interplay of individual and organizational learning in relation to this field of tension. If the school is an instrument of an authoritarian hierarchy then the learning can in fact be effective in securing the reproduction of that hierarchy. Learning in a sense takes place as the indoctrination of individuals into an organization. But with only reproduction no organizational learning takes place. On the other hand if all learning is ad hoc and located in a specific situation and its locus – if there is no curriculum or no traditions – then there might be individual learning, but no organizational learning.

For both individual and organizational learning to take place in the school it has to be based on certain cognitive values that both make student-teacher relations possible and makes possible free debate and discussion. The authoritarian indoctrination will not do, neither will the totally free discussion. There is a need to have an organization which is independent, but at the same time has a continuous existence. It has to be based on internal freedom of expression and discussion, and have the ability to develop its own curriculum based on experience, development and research.

Thus only if the school is an organization based on cognitive values and virtues such as freedom of inquiry, a critical attitude, the ability and inclination to discuss and question, can the organization develop. Its status has to be like that of an independent corporation. Thus it has to be an organization with explicit structures and norms, and it has to be independent. This is the essence of certain scholastic freedoms connected to the freedom of the teacher to choose his or her own methods of teaching and in the case of the university the old norm of academic freedom. It can be a professional bureaucracy but it can not be totally part of an authoritarian state or other dominant organization. Thus totally state-controlled schools are not organizations where one can

have both organizational and individual learning, nor are corporate in-house teaching or learning departments totally governed by another corporation such places. Learning presupposes the possibility of organizational learning, which is actually a type of freedom.

(This paper is based on joint work with Eirik J. Irgens of the North Trøndelag University College, Norway)