

# THE DIFFICULTIES OF BUILDING UP A NEW PARADIGM OF WORKING ORGANIZATION IN SCHOOLS

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## Abstract

*With the stated aim of reducing inequities in the access to knowledge, most school systems have been reviewing and standardizing their curricula, emphasizing inclusion, strengthening school autonomy and parental involvement, introducing tertiary training of teachers and principals, and increasing institutional initiatives aiming to enhance teaching effectiveness. This contribution argues on behalf of empirical evidence, obtained by the observation of teachers' and school practices which has been conducted during by the Geneva Research Laboratory, that these sorts of change strategies will not produce the desired impact unless they are combined with specific innovative actions aiming at a) thorough reorganization of work in schools, and (b) making actors and citizens change their attitudes concerning the possible ways of encouraging pupils to learn. The conclusion insists on the need to give professionals the opportunity to thoroughly reconsider the means by which they will be able to move on from bureaucratically founded, rigid and locked in towards a flexible working organization. This change strategy includes reflection on the principles of organization that guide teaching activities and/or on the new learning settings, which make possible new ways of learning.*

**Key words:** change strategies, conditions for learning, imagination, implementation, innovation, knowledge development, learning issues, limited rationality, work organization.

## Introduction

School reforms rarely claim that they maintain or increase inequality. It is more politically correct to declare that the aim is “excellence for all,” the reduction of differences and a general increase in the level of education. Research in education and, more recently, international surveys have to a large extent shown that few countries have succeeded in ensuring that almost all their youth attain the knowledge and skills needed to deal with the realities of today’s world.

For the last decade, and on the basis of this assessment, most states and government bodies have instituted numerous more or less coordinated measures to fight school failure and to monitor the effectiveness and fairness of their teaching systems, in particular at the first level of basic instruction: revision and standardization of curricula, emphasizing inclusion, reinforcement of school autonomy and the participation of parents, professionalization and tertiary education of teachers and staff, multiplication of institutional evaluations, etc.

There is considerable research evidence (amongst which: Coburn, 2006; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Maroy, 2007; Weick, 1976, a.s.o.) attesting that these initiatives are largely influenced by variables situated *outside* the local school: national and local traditions, geographical and economic constraints, organization and power relationships with politics, the diploma and labour markets, and collective attitudes toward knowledge, social and cultural hierarchies. Complementary research (amongst which Draelants & Dumay, 2005; Dumay, 2009; Gather Thurler, 2000; Maulini & Perrenoud, 2005; Maulini & Wandfluh, 2007, a.s.o.) also

attests to the fact that the interior organization of each educational system, if it is responsible to something outside of itself, has also a) a more or less significant portion of autonomy, a pledge to renew and not just reproduce the existing social organization, and b) an impact on this environment that is in the end more or less significant—and more or less valued.

In the loop connecting social and mental structures (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Bernstein, 1971), the school is thus neither a neutral element in a closed system, nor an all-powerful lever of social regeneration by the triumph of reason. On the contrary, it seems all the more justified in innovating in order to try to improve because it is *already* providing satisfaction, and therefore creates confidence, which leads to support, which fosters innovation, and so forth (Bronckart & Gather Thurler, 2003; Chapelle & Meuret, 2006; Ravitch, 2010).

The Geneva *LIFE* (Innovation-Formation-Education) research laboratory has conducted during the years 2001-2006 several series of intensive observations and analyses of teachers' work in schools (Gather & Maulini, 2007). The obtained research evidence seems to indicate that school innovation policies cannot produce the hoped-for effects unless they are accompanied by a double action that is pedagogically determined and politically supported in order to assure the sustainability of on-going practice change: 1) innovative action dealing with the objectively improved organization of school work (and with the work producing this organization), generally an hidden issue of educational reforms; and 2) action to implement change that takes into account the expectations and subjective representations of ordinary actors about the fundamental objectives of teaching and the best and fairest ways to get all students to learn.

#### *Problem of Research and Research Focus*

*LIFE*'s research is founded on the thesis that school innovation policies cannot produce the hoped-for effects unless they are accompanied by a double action that is pedagogically determined and politically supported for its duration: 1) innovative action dealing with the objective organization of school work (and on the work producing this organization), generally an hidden issue of educational reforms; and 2) action to implement change that takes into account the expectations and subjective representations of ordinary actors about the fundamental objectives of teaching and the best and fairest ways to get all students to learn. Let us approach each issue in turn before we conclude by combining all of them.

School work has been and still is subject to many rules. The school institution is a paradoxical one, semi-bureaucratic and semi-anarchic, which divides and regulates the work in a fairly rigid manner, but at the same time allows the classroom teacher a great deal of freedom. All over the world with more or less effect and for a varying length of time, this "bureau-anarchic" logic has raised scientific and/or ideological criticisms. This problem is omnipresent in contemporary debates on educational governance. It has been one of the main reasons for the restructuring of curriculums and the introduction of teaching cycles, the validation of new procedures of regulation and selection as well as the thriving for alternative differentiation practices inside and outside each class, and last but not least the revision of the traditional curriculum planning, which has been strongly rooted in the Taylorist vision of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and can be considered as being largely obsolete nowadays.

The research results we mentioned above seem to argue in favour of an organization that is neither too rigid nor too lax, setting deadlines to mark progress for students who in fact have the greatest need to be supported and stimulated. But these studies have not proved to be the determining factor change of practices in schools: when they are brought up, which is not the rule everywhere (Darling-Hammond, 2010), they are instead raised in a distorted or opportunistic way, to act as the instrument rather than the driving force of a policy. This may disappoint both the progressives and the scientific rationalists, but also lead them to question

themselves: it may be easier to denounce the limits of the existing organization than to clarify or go beyond them. If they only act as the basis for a militant discourse, focused on conceiving and establishing new organizational forms, they can give rise—this time more or less negatively for teachers – to an increase in uncertainty and/or obligation in which the practitioners struggle to see both meaning and feasibility.

Cellular structuring in classes, tracks and grades; annual programs and more or less strict conditions for promotion between levels; division of space and time into schedules, lessons, homework, teaching blocks, textbook chapters, lesson plans, exam sessions: everything is potentially transformable, making people cry out for (or fear) a systemic change breaking with traditions. The most optimistic innovators dream of a custom-made school (Claparède, 1920), inventing continuous mechanisms adapted to the needs of each pupil. They emphasize the importance of taking advantage of flexible groupings to take care of the known problems of permanent (re) composition of levels and students' needs, time on task, the poor use and excessive fragmentation of human and material resources, etc., in order to replace it with a new conception that is more adaptable and differentiated from teaching times and spaces (Perrenoud, 2002; Maulini & Perrenoud, 2005).

Can the school organization modify the social organization or is it rather its reflection, and therefore much more difficult to change than technocratic reasoning would lead one to believe (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Dubet, Duru-Bellat & Véréout, 2010)? In the context of consistent and historically persistent school failure, organizing school work differently is certainly necessary.

## **Methodology of Research**

### *General Background of Research*

To understand this complex subject, LIFE has undertaken numerous research and action-research projects in collaboration with individual teachers, headteachers, schoolteams and teacher trainers. These projects were conducted in order to support the establishment of multi-year learning cycles (Perrenoud, 2002), hierarchical programs oriented towards concepts and key competences (Muller, 2006; Maulini & Wandfluh, 2007), modular systems for structuring curricula (Wandfluh & Perrenoud, 1999; Progin & De Rham, 2009), combinations between integrated support and a differentiated undertaking of targeted needs, interactively planned strategic teaching practices, boards, school principals and decentralized instruments of management and evaluation (Périsset Bagnoud, Gather Thurler & Barthassat, 2006; Capitanescu, 2010).

The tight cooperation which has been built up between researchers and practitioners offered the possibility to obtain systematic observation of significant effects produced by these changes on school learning, in particular that of students from disadvantaged environments, in places where innovation was at the same time politically validated, wished for by the teachers and accepted, even supported, by their environment (Wandfluh & Maulini, 2011). At the same time, the obtained data permitted to build up a better understanding of the existing reality (Hutmacher, 1993) that made it so difficult to transform the work organization in certain schools. Not only because the actions undertaken were opposed, but also and sometimes especially because those involved could not imagine that they were coming up against a paradigm that they had taken for granted, a kind of matrix buried in the depths of the institution.

*Organized Work, Organizing Work*

These experiences have forced us to conceptualize the problem to identify the variables at work. From the practitioners' point of view, we can sum up the tension between the work organization that exists and the one that is possible by consequently distinguishing between three levels: 1) *real* work (that of the workers), 2) *desired* work (by the workers), and 3) *imposed* work (on the workers). We presume that organization of work is not a new problem adding to the others. It is the key variable that quite rightly *organizes* the others, that predetermines them all the more permanently since it most often eludes our awareness. Scientifically it is a heuristic way of representing the dual nature, both static and dynamic, of the "school machine" and its evolution (Meirieu & Le Bars, 2001).

Let us see what this concept of work organization will allow us to reformulate:

1. *School work is organized.* Well organized, badly organized, disorganized—work is always at the junction of order and disorder. How is it organized? How is it structured, divided, planned, monitored, regulated? This kind of product/process research informs us about the effect of the teacher in a closed context, but does not tell us whether a quantity of good teachers in isolation makes a good school, or whether we must rather collectivize the work, its evaluation and its regulation via reflexive dialogue to move to a higher level of professionalization. (Perrenoud, 2001)
2. *Organized work is the product of an organizing work.* The actors who work do so in conditions that are the result of organization, but this organization itself is the result of the work. If observers want to take a look at school work in its entirety, they have to observe not only the work done (organized) but also the work determining (organizing) this work. Depending on where the educational transfer is studied, the same people may organize their activity (as in the case of teachers who plan their courses). But the two phases may also separate, the organizer becoming the one giving the order (and/or the room to maneuver) to the one designated to carry it out (for example, when the principal orders teachers don't make a decision on whether a student should repeat a year without talking to the parents). *Who is organizing whom* is the question par excellence of power, autonomy and professional responsibility. It is also, we will see, the unstable locus of all ambivalences.
3. *The organization of work (1) and the work of organization (2) relates back to practices, but also to ideas.* Organizations and workers do not just work and become organized. They embody, they claim responsibility for, they justify and they disseminate *ideas* about work and its organization. From Taylorism to *New Public Management*, peer teaching to cooperative learning, models emerge, spread, are transformed, become distorted, and implemented. They are transferred, translated, and integrated into new contexts that are at the heart or on the margins of actual practices.
4. *Work as conceived and work as practiced have effects, if not issues, that are at least objectifiable.* All work has an output in the broad sense of the term. At school, work produces not only learning, but it also produces, possibly, *meaning* (or non-meaning), self-esteem (or a feeling of worthlessness), suffering (or pleasure), resignation (or passion), experience of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2011), etc.

Studying these four dimensions and their connections is a theoretical work that has hardly begun. We think that researchers and practitioners are entitled to do this work together, where their different concerns intersect. If it is to be productive—if it is to yield returns—this conceptualisation requires patience. Because it is not entirely disinterested, because it is tied to collectively shared concerns about education, innovation, professionalization and the democratization of access to knowledge, this work is important. And because it is important, it must be done methodically and patiently.

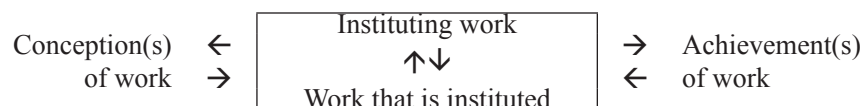
## Results of Research

On behalf of the obtained research evidence, it can be argued that school work is not the starting point for learning; to be accomplished, it must itself be *organized*, by itself or in some other way. It is organized because the teacher organizes the students' work (like the foreman in a workshop), and because the school system organizes the work of the teachers (like management or the planning department in a company). This induces conceptual framework that does not set *a priori* criteria for good or bad school management, but one that allows to ask a question creating an obstacle that must be addressed and could open onto other sub-questions: what is produced by different forms, different logics, or different cultures of school work organization, and what prevents them from producing something else?

To ask this question is to suggest some hypotheses that are not new and that were in fact raised earlier in this paper: school work is organized, this organization is the product of work, it is related to ideas about work and it has effects and results, in short, an impact on all kinds of variables, beginning with knowledge and skills up to and including the students' relationship with the world. Teaching is indeed a human profession. The existing work intelligence is not produced the way tomatoes or trucks are. In fact, teachers don't produce much by teaching, at least not directly: at the very most, the *conditions* for learning will only occur if the students agree to it (Meirieu, 1996; Blais, Gauchet & Ottavi, 2008), and have the feeling that it makes sense. But nothing about all that forces to consider teaching and learning settings as being without effect, ineffective, and fruitless, assigning the so delicate education of human beings to the vagaries of luck and the principle of every man for himself.

It is thus possible to make a provisional sketch of this framework and this question by designing a basic loop linking *work that is instituted* (the organization of work) and *instituting work* (the work of organization), and suggest that the different strata of the institution (with its main actors: principal, inspectors, teachers, students) are at the same time organizing and organized by the other strata. This loop can be considered as the system that supports the various occupations and helps them evolve: the teacher, the student, the inspector, and the principal. (Tardif & Levasseur, 2010). It is determined from the top down, more or less consciously, explicitly and coherently by more or less consensual *conceptions* of what school work and the organization of schoolwork are and should be. And lower down, it results in more or less measurable effects (learning, meaning, identity, etc.) that can be called *achievements*.

This suggests the design of a second loop that goes from achievements to conceptions. This makes the occupational system more complex by introducing the logic of *professionalization*, a logic that can be summarized schematically as follows: the more workers control their work, i.e., the more they check the work achieved, the more they become professional. Thus we obtain two loops: the occupation loop (work that is instituted/ instituting work) and the professionalization loop (work conceived / work achieved) that can of course interact.



**Figure 1: The double loop of schoolwork organization.**

For a school system to become more effective, it is not enough to have action from a few militant teachers, or one or two avant-garde schools, even a task group specifically designed by the whole system. Nor is it enough that those at the top conceive of the change, develop strategies to ensure the quality or institute sophisticated control and evaluation systems.

Suppose it is necessary for all actors concerned to be motivated and interested in committing to the process of change, to have the will to make it succeed, and to get involved in order to “make a difference.” This willingness will only come into existence provided that they feel their power is increased and they want to exercise it. According to Rosenholtz (1989), teacher optimism, hope, and commitment are associated with workplace characteristics that make them feel like they are “professionally invested with power,” meaning that their ability to make decisions is socially recognized. At the same time, many studies (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Hodkinson, 2009; Huberman, 1988) have warned against using *empowerment* as an independent variable. Along with other variables (collective responsibility and systematic cooperation in the management of teaching arrangements; consistency and authenticity between structures, regulations and teaching practices; the opportunity to cooperate within the networks of practitioners), it will be the basis of a collective, systematic and concerted effort to make the conception of school work evolve with the aim of improving the management of student progress.

## Discussion

### *From Invention to Implementation: New Attitudes about Learning Issues*

Schools that are involved in the fight against school failure invent new ways of working, and pose at least two kinds of questions: how do they go about it? And, following this lead, is it possible to disseminate this kind of innovation, and under what circumstances?

Many research studies demonstrate that the work of ordinary teachers is more and more difficult to carry out, and perhaps more and more distressing to experience (Osborn, McNess & Broadfoot, 2000; Ball, 2006). These studies make us aware of an essential dimension of educative work, indeed of *all* work: the relationship of workers to their own work, between actual work and stipulated work, but also between work that is hoped for and work that is ultimately prevented. They remind us how ambivalent teachers are about collective action, and they document the following paradox: a cooperative school organization is often experienced as constraining, even confining, but it is also claimed by the most committed professionals to be a way of resisting the injunctions of the authorities and/or experts.

A collective organization is not necessarily efficient, but an efficient organization is always more so if it is collective. It can provide solidarity, courage, freedom and responsibility for teachers, who suffer from a cruel lack of recognition. Teachers, and more and more often principals as well, are increasingly sceptical when faced with “whole system” innovations that downgrade workers by doing the thinking for them, and always “for their own good” (Gather Thurler, 2000; Progin & Gather Thurler, 2011; Rayou & VanZanten, 2004). We cannot, therefore, skip over their ideas about work well done, or work to be done, or work that is possible or impossible to do in their situation. We cannot ignore their expectations, the needs they talk about, but also those that they don’t, or even the ones they don’t even realize they have. Selfish (or at least personal) interest is admittedly an essential influence from the sociological point of view, but it gets bad press in teaching. So we should think about the relationship between the work organization as it is, and the reasons that the school and the teachers will have to change it, not just on the margins of the system, but from an “inside-out perspective.”

### *Interest in Being Alienated?*

The problem as outlined refers back to several levels of discussion, including at least two that we must differentiate if we want to articulate them. On the one hand, we have the organization of work “as it is.” In nineteenth-century state primary schools, in Célestin Freinet’s

classroom, in charter schools or experimental secondary schools, teachers and students work; their work is organized, and this organization functions. It functions more or less well, more or less easily, to the more or less obvious satisfaction of its workers and users, but it functions. So one interesting question would be: *how does it function, how does it endure, to what end and at what cost?* That is the first level.

We could also wonder why a school does not function in a different way, or why it *would* not function differently. But that would move us to another level, a level that rejects the observable functioning as “a different question.” The teacher’s freedom and interest give us an interesting example in that regard. If an organization less cell-like, more coordinated and modular is debatable, it is perhaps because it restricts the teacher’s freedom and spontaneity. Cooperative work may restrict the teacher’s autonomy, but it may also extend it. We can be alone in our classroom and jealously preserve this area of freedom, but we can also become organized with several others and give up some of our “personal distance” in order to obtain new rights and new room to maneuver.

In reality, we know that teachers do not greatly care to be boxed in with procedures, which are often experienced as threatening, constraining, and inhibiting. They prefer to fiddle endlessly with temporary arrangements that they control (Lortie, 1975). But we also know that they are not without ambivalence towards “state anarchism,” which they both condemn and proclaim in turn: to be free in one’s classrooms and school, of course, but not to the point of relinquishing the hierarchical shield when parents or students contest our educational choices. What differentiates different modes of organization, political or educational, is perhaps less the proportion of freedom and constraint than the *forms* of distribution. What do we know about this distribution in the various schools? Where are the freedoms and the constraints in each? Policy calculations show that cooperative organization has a cost for those who are part of it but also for those who are not. The question is less one of knowing what is being lost by collectively organizing than one of comparing the outcomes of two different policies: the policy of withdrawal and that of coordination.

#### *Limited Rationality and the Need for Dignity*

To this strictly economic argument we can add two other mediating influences: psychology and ethics. We cannot reduce human beings to the sum of their interests, because we are not transparent to ourselves, our calculations are not always correct and our rationality is incomplete and biased, determined, limited (the psychological argument). And we also cannot be that reductive because solidarity is required of us above and beyond our own interest, as is the case with selflessness or sacrifice (the second, ethical argument).

These two intermediary variables take us away from school work in the narrowest sense, but they move us closer to a basic question: what are the motivations for our action (Giddens, 1984; Rorty, 2000)? What makes workers work, become involved in their work and the transformation of their work? The reference to personal interest can lead us to several interpretations. Either the actors are completely independent individuals, totally lucid and selfish, and will organize their conduct on the basis of a “calculation of interests” that will justify various decisions. Or they are related to other human beings who offer “recognition” that they need to live and exist, and they will make commitments from altruism, compassion or solidarity (Honneth, 1996).

What we are missing is perhaps a theory of risk taking and categories of interests. In (ultra) liberal philosophies, the *homo economicus* acts strategically according to his self-interest. In other philosophies, he fits into an interpersonal space that determines not only his choices but also his horizon of possible choices. For a work organization to continue, workers must have the feeling that they are making progress, developing, working better—in short, see themselves

as *growing*. And since we never grow except in the eyes of others, we must in our own self-interest sometimes lose in comfort and tranquillity what we gain in dignity. In this regard, the motivations of the organization are those of legitimate action.

### *Transfer or Problematization?*

Our research shows that awareness that *the organization matters and that it must be accountable* varies among teachers. Which raises the two-fold question of their relationship to knowledge (“what the researchers say”) and their relationship to power (“what the regulations dictate”). Their vision, their conception, in short the way they see their profession, is a combination of two dimensions—objective (what is) and prescriptive (what should be).

Since a collective enterprise does not operate by decree, we are sometimes tempted by a slightly simple alternative: either to convince or to compel the sceptics. But the conviction is based on works that teachers rarely read, and that they buy into with difficulty; and the obligation is seen as a failure by the institution, which prefers reason to force in establishing the truth. So we must invent other more complex and more interactive ways of implementation. How do we know whether a new teaching practice is of interest when it has not been tested? And how can we try it if no one will take a chance on it because interest has not been demonstrated? Of course we could ask for volunteers, pilot schools, or pathfinders, and establish quantifiable comparisons. Let us suppose these demonstrations were even possible: we will always be able to say that the pathfinders certainly have merit, but that they are not representative of the rest of their colleagues. To transfer the invention mechanically from one school or training service to other schools with the expectation that it will really be installed is logically impossible. What innovators invent, they alone are committed and organized enough to keep going. You don't buy a whole new work organization as you would a new lighter.

If teachers have a romantic and rather exclusive relationship with their work, this is not necessarily irrational or irresponsible. So we must allow that some resistance on the part of teachers is reasonable, which does not mean it cannot be debated. Since convictions (not to say beliefs) are strongly entrenched and since in the end there are all kinds of good reasons not to change *the state of the art* to which we are attached, it is as well as to appear pragmatic and use every available means: carry out experiments, study their effects, produce knowledge and new skills, establish standards, promote existing practices, say goodbye to others, negotiate arrangements, give guarantees, etc.

There is an immense gap between the logic of prescription and that of permissiveness. The responsibility of the institution is precisely to create this space, by negotiating a framework that can both support and limit creativity. One school will begin to rethink its work because it has become aware of a problem (the inefficiency of repeating a year), another because it has discovered a new tool (the school council or the portfolio), a third because it has to respond to a request from an authority (evaluating without grades or changing a history textbook). The best way to encourage and support these initiatives is not to construct *in vitro* or *in vivo* an immediately transferable model for the organization. It is this detour by way of problematization and analysis that justifies research and conceptualization, from the point of view of professionalization.

## **Conclusions**

The preceding analyses suggest the importance of breaking down two doors that are less open than they appear to be.

The first one is the *relationship* between workers and their work. What are the styles, modes and forms of subjective relationship that teachers maintain with their work and its organization? What are the elements of rationality, feeling, attachment and detachment,



conservation and creativity, submission and dissent? Attitudes can vary from one teacher to another, and they can evolve over time and under the influence of new ideas and practices. Interests can be conscious or unconscious, explicit or implicit, proclaimed or secret. To think of the work organization - the observable organization and the desirable organization - is to think also of the teachers' relationship to a particular organization, and their relationship to organized work itself.

The second door is the sum of the *transactions* between workers and/or work partners. Representations, standards, judgements, values, visions of the world: all the dimensions of work and the organization of work are subject to negotiation, discussion, even conflict. External as well as internal suggestions for change will constrain schools to take a collective position, make the implicit explicit, shake up the current *modus vivendi* and get the work organization out of the obvious and the impenetrable. It is because these transactions are inevitable and necessary that it is worth observing how they operate and in what way they end up in various socio-historical contexts.

The interest of a team of researchers and practitioners is that it can connect two stances and two logics: transforming the work organization and reflecting on its transformations, understanding the work in order to transform it and transforming it in order to understand it. The issue for basic research is not to change work but to understand it. Even if - as a secondary benefit - it means we also change it. Actors or researchers, we all gain from creating a clearer idea of more or less desirable forms of work organization. At times we produce requirements, incentives or at least suggestions, and we might better propose good ones than bad. But that is exactly the function of the research pathway: to analyse our forms of organization to better understand them, and to understand them in order to make them evolve.

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*Advised by Michael Schratz, University of Innsbruck, Austria*

Received: September 07, 2012

Accepted: November 24, 2012

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