
Guest editorial: Organizing schools for the future: innovative conceptualizations of schools as organizations

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School leaders face considerable challenge. In addition to multiple and frequent short-term crises, the endemic nature of Covid-19, the presence of global on-going racial, political and economic unrest, continuing gun violence and the marginalization of non-cis-gendered individuals has shown us that leading during crisis is likely to become increasingly routine for school leaders.

Certainly, and in relation to Covid-19 in particular, short-term district and school leadership responses, the world over, were focused, swift and responsive to student and family needs. School closures were credited with slowing the spread of the virus. The deployment of laptops, hotspots and other technologies to support remote learning increased school attendance and academic focus for millions of students across the globe. Globally, UNICEF scaled up support in 145 countries to ensure the continuity of learning and mitigate learning loss (Barron Rodriguez *et al.*, 2020). Throughout the pandemic, at least 60 million educators engaged in online distance learning to sustain some semblance of schooling, leading to the claim that the pandemic has created the most unparalleled educational disruption in history (UNESCO, 2020). As a result of these incomparable challenges, schools were contending with profound changes in their day-to-day practices, including suspension of classroom teaching, transformation in learning and teaching modalities and the provision of health and social services to students and their families (Huang *et al.*, 2020; Reimers and Schleicher, 2020).

Moreover, this global crisis has led to students' higher dropout rates, parents' increased responsibilities in the education process (Azorin, 2020; Striepe and Cunningham, 2022) and school principals' enhanced concentration on strengthening the school's community and its individual members (Schechter *et al.*, 2022; Thornton, 2021). These impacts have not waned. As Krffenberg (2021) and Spiteri *et al.* (2023) have suggested, Covid-19 will have a long tail. Findings from early research suggest that, on average, students lost several months' worth of learning in reading and math, mental health professionals reported increased rates of anxiety and depression among school-aged students and students with disabilities were cut off from vital services (Almeida *et al.*, 2022). Soberingly, education's most vulnerable children were impacted far more greatly than those with greater economic, social and medical supports (Wilke *et al.*, 2020).

Even as school organizations struggle to address these shifts, changes and concerns, our perception of the school as an organization has remained underappreciated and, we contend, underexamined. However, it is important to note that organizational models dictate our thinking, and our thinking dictates how we see and create organizations. Fundamental shifts in our understanding of the nature of organizations have emerged. We have gone from viewing the organization as a mechanical system to seeing it as a purposeful socio-cultural system. This shift is important to recognize because a school is an inherently complex organization, involving a vast number of interacting functions, people and purposes, and as Covid-19 demonstrated, challenging times call for creative solutions and reimagining including innovative conceptualizations for schools as organizations.



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This special issue was designed to highlight the need to conceptualize innovative frameworks for school organization with the intent of developing an understanding about how educators might better recognize and address the complexities of our times. Emerging from lessons concerning how school leaders respond to uncertainties and emergencies, this special issue explores alternative and innovative trajectories of schools as organizations within their local and regional systems. Central to this endeavor was an intent to explore questions such as

- (1) What are school characteristics and structures to guide schools in future challenges?
- (2) What are alternative/innovative/creative/imaginative conceptualizations for school organization?
- (3) What are the necessary leadership practices required to initiate and support these new organizational perspectives?
- (4) How do these innovative school organizations emerge within the local, regional, and systemic levels?

As ambitious as those questions were, we contend that the articles included here articulate ideas that explain, illuminate and challenge our current conceptions of school organization. Additionally, we submit that, if taken seriously, these ideas have the potential to improve leadership practice. It is obvious from the articles included that this special issue encompasses a range of different and contrasting perspectives concerning how school organization might evolve and what the outcomes of such an evolution might be.

Yet, we suggest the articles converge on three central themes including the nature of leadership response to organizational change and crisis, organizational interdependency and boundary spanning and relationality matters to inform leaders' weathering of crisis and challenge. We recognize that these broad themes are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, each justifiably engages topics from the others. However, and in the spirit of our wish to conceptualize innovative frameworks for school organization, we submit that each offers a window into how educators might even better recognize and address the complexities of our times. We consider each in turn.

Leadership response to organizational change and crisis

As *Maxwell Yurkofsky* and *Donald Peurach* suggest during times of crisis and change, a school leader's ability to build learning systems amidst uncertainty is less of rational act and more one of balance. Noting that prior thinking suggests that uncertainty is either mitigatable or not, Yurkofsky and Peurach offer a new conception of uncertainty as only sometimes mitigatable, cautioning that within dynamic environments, such as those school leaders currently face, leadership requires that the cultivation and reduction of uncertainty must be actively balanced.

Complimenting this thinking is the *David Brazer*, *Scott Bauer* and *Alyson L. Lavigne* article that asserts that even amidst challenge, district and school leaders can quickly adapt and act in response to threat. The authors argue that school leaders, in real time, can simultaneously employ school and district structures and supports for crisis leadership, resulting in increased individual and collective sensemaking and the provision of needed resources, in turn, buffering school organization members from threats. Moreover, they conclude that adapting, rather acting in rational, but outdated ways, increases the potential for leaders to better respond to persistent uncertainty and singular crises like Covid-19. Read together, these articles underscore the value of mid-course intellectual and functional corrections as the narrative of crisis and challenge unfolds. Similarly, both surface the importance of ongoing dialogue and inquiry to organizational success.

Organizational interdependency and boundary spanning

Drawing on the work of Mary Parker Follett, *David Eddy-Spicer* explores how school interdependency and boundary spanning offer important avenues for cultivating relationships with the potential to foster organizational change. Stressing that interorganizational connections between schools and universities have the power to support sustainable improvement, Eddy-Spicer's examples of research–practice partnerships and leadership preparation partnership remind us of the utility of foundational organizational theorizing in the context of current school organization.

Introducing the concept of smart eco-school systems as a conceptual framework for leading complex educational systems, *Pascale Benoiel* and *Chen Schechter* suggest that the digitalization of learning networks, connections and collaborations holds strong promise for responsive and instinctive knowledge creation. The authors promote a lens that encourages shifting away from hierarchical school models and embracing dynamic systems of assembly and disassembly of organizational understandings and meaning making. Central to their synchronized framework is the importance of permeable organizational boundaries that create and sustain organizational interdependency and boundary spanning.

Showcasing innovative models that stretch the school day and school year, *Sarah Woulfin* and *Natalie Spitzer* challenge our traditional conceptions of time within educational organizations and barriers those conceptions impose on educational organizations. Informed by concepts of philosophy and physics, Woulfin and Spitzer investigate the importance of the role of time as a factor in responsive, equity-centered, academic and social emotional learning opportunities and its influence on organizational stability and change. The authors demonstrate how teacher/leader collaboration can be encouraged when time is viewed less rigidly and how accelerated learning and tutoring opportunities can be enhanced by reconceptualizing educators' thinking about the use of time. Taken together, these articles stress the ever-evolving nature of school organization and the importance of appropriate resources and conceived affiliations and connections.

Relationality and leadership foci

Rooted in the idea that humane workplaces are healthier for school leaders and teachers, *Sharon D. Kruse* and *Karen Edge* explore how individual and collective burnout has affected educators in a post-Covid 19 world. Employing research from a broad range of professions, Kruse and Edge argue that burnout is organizational concern and for burnout to be successfully abated, strategic and focused organizational responses are essential to identify, track and counter individual and collective burnout. The authors suggest that in challenging contexts and circumstances, school leaders must understand that broad system change is required and that system change be focused on supporting, rather than depleting, educators at all levels of the system.

Similarly, *Jennifer Karnopp* and *Jeff Walls* assert that the role of relationships in organizational learning is undertheorized. Their work focuses on understanding how key constructs of building strong school cultures including trust, belonging, care and shared values interact and create conditions that foster system-wide organizational learning and change. Arguing that relationality is central to leadership and organizational effort, the authors propose a holistic and dynamic sense of community framework with the potential to offer insight into the conditions and actions that facilitate or hinder the organizational learning process.

Finally, *Scott Eacott* proffers that relational, rather than transactional, approaches are necessary for schools to address challenge. By contesting the prevalent dualisms that permeate the framing of school organization (i.e. structure/agency, universal/particular and individual/collective), Eacott suggests a framework that lays the foundation for a generative conceptualization of school organization that blends the explanatory with the empirical and description with explanation.

Conclusion

That Covid-19 changed schools and schooling is an uncontested truth. Offered here are eight distinctive approaches for thinking about how we all, as theorists and practitioners of organizational theory, make sense of and intellectually grapple with the challenges of Covid-19 and more broadly organizational change. Together these articles offer hope that the strains and stresses Covid-19 imposed created the conditions that allow for new insights, knowledge and understandings with positive and lasting impact.

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