Building new bridges
Linking organization theory with other educational literatures

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper provides an example of how organization theory can be linked with other literatures in a complementary and productive manner. Establishing a bridge between the organization theory and learning environment literatures, the authors seek to provide an example of how such literature-bridging can enrich our understanding of the school-classroom relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – After providing a set of working criteria with which to assess the developmental maturity of a field, this paper provides a general review of the learning environments literature. This is followed by an examination of an important yet under-explored relationship in this literature: the school-classroom relationship. Using concepts from organizational theory, the authors seek to establish the utility these concepts have for understanding the relationship that exists between classroom- and school-level learning environments.

Findings – Given the importance of organization theory to our understanding of educational organizations and the increased absence of a substantive organizational perspective from our dialogue, there is a need to build and/or re-establish bridges between organization theory and other lines of inquiry in education. Teaching and learning occur in an organizational context. Thus it is important that this context be considered by educational researchers. The time has also come to aggressively link the study of learning environments with literatures such as organization theory.

Originality/value – This paper provides an example of how literature-bridging can be used to encourage and enrich dialogue between separate yet complementary lines of inquiry. It also sheds light on the relationship shared between the classroom and larger school.

Keywords Organizational theory, Educational institutions, Intergroup relations, Literature

Paper type Literature review

Teaching is a complex and challenging task. To be effective, one must have the ability to recognize and nurture the cognitive and emotional developments that typify the learning process. Although students vary in rates of progression, there are indicators that allow educators to assess this development. Operationalized in terms of behaviors and abilities, these indicators are rooted in common pedagogical experiences (Shulman, 2004; Good and Brophy, 2000; Jackson, 1986; Dewey, 1933). These experiences allow for comparative judgments regarding educational growth and skill development. For example, before students can add and subtract, they typically learn to count. Students who can perform addition and subtraction operations with relative ease are considered more advanced than those who lack the ability to count a simple set of objects. Before students can solve word-problems involving multiple arithmetic functions and variables, they learn to multiply and divide. Students who can consistently derive and solve multivariate equations are considered more advanced than those who can only add and subtract. The existence of these and other criteria, allow educators to assess
the complexity of thinking displayed by students as they progress in math. These criteria, it can be argued, are rooted in common pedagogical experiences.

Building on this logic, the theoretical maturity of a field of study can likewise be gauged using a variety of criteria. We suggest that these criteria allow us to loosely assess the developmental complexity that is present or absent in a given field of study. These criteria include, but are not limited to the following (Johnson, 2003; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Turner, 1989; Dumont and Wilson, 1963): an identifiable and articulated phenomenon of interest; a definition of this phenomenon of interest; the development of grounded concepts related to this phenomenon; the development of relational schemes to connect these grounded concepts; the development of theories which connect these relational schemes to explain this phenomenon; the systematic testing and refining of these theories; and the linking of the literature associated with this phenomenon to other literatures.

While differences exist among researchers regarding the priority to be given them, criteria such as these are rooted in the logic of the research process and provide a reasonable basis for assessing the theoretical maturity of a field of study. To what extent and with what precision have these criteria been met or addressed by scholars working in given line of inquiry? Answers to these questions, it is argued, allow us to gauge the developmental progress and complexity found in a body of research bound by a common focus.

To be sure, these criteria must be elaborated if they are to provide practical utility. One strategy for doing this is to re-state each in the form of question sets. While multiple questions are raised for each criterion, all questions in a given set are valid to that criterion. These are summarized and captured visually as Figure 1 and are as follows:

- Is there an identifiable phenomenon of interest that defines the field? What is it?
- Has this phenomenon – its nature, essence, defining dimensions and variability – been adequately defined?
- Have a defining set of concepts linked to this phenomenon of interest emerged within the field? If so, what is the collective quality of these concepts? Are they empirically grounded and adequately defined? Have these concepts been operationalized? What level of validity exists between concepts and operations?
- To what extent have these concepts been linked to identify and develop key relationships associated with the phenomenon of interest?
- To what extent have these relational schemes been combined to develop explanatory frameworks of the phenomenon of interest? What theories have emerged to describe and predict its antecedents and effects?
- Have these theories been formally articulated and tested in a variety of settings?
- How extensively has the literature associated with this phenomenon been linked with related, yet independent literatures?

To the extent that criteria such as these have been addressed, we suggest that the theoretical maturity of a given field of study can be assessed. Have such issues been addressed? If so, to what extent? Does the literature associated with this phenomenon reflect requisite levels of complexity and progress in addressing these indicators/issues?
Focus and purpose
Using these criteria, judgments can be made about the maturity and development of that body of research known as the study of learning environments. As a line of inquiry, the study of learning environments (SOLE) has an impressive history. Its
theoretical and conceptual roots can be traced to the work of Lewin (1935, 1936); Murray (1938); Moos (1979); Trickett and Moos (1973); Walberg (1979); and Ellett and Walberg (1979); Fraser et al. (1982); and Fraser (1994 1986). The last three decades have witnessed a growth of research in this area. Considerable progress has been made in the conceptualization, investigation, and measurement of psycho-social dimensions of learning environments in various settings. One indicator of this progress is the creation and rapid growth of the SOLE special interest group within the American Educational Research Association (AERA).

Yet in spite of this impressive growth, it appears that momentum in the study of learning environments has diminished in recent years. There is a sense that the field is need of an infusion of new ideas and direction. A mild groupthink has emerged. This is not to suggest that the field has reached an impasse. Rather, it is as if the research veins being mined are near depletion and that newer veins are needed. This situation presents a collective puzzle to those working the field. What directions might the field take? What conceptual and methodological tools might be used to provoke further creativity?

Within the context of these issues and consistent with the larger theme of this volume, the purpose of this endeavor is two-fold. First, this paper seeks to provide an example of how organization theory can be linked with other lines of inquiry in productive ways. Given the importance of organization theory to our understanding of educational organizations and the increased absence of a substantive organizational perspective from our dialogue, there is a need to build and/or re-establish such bridges in educational research (Johnson, 2004). This paper provides an example of how this might be done.

Second, by bridging the organization theory and study of learning environment literatures, the authors seek to provide one possible strategy for expanding and enriching research in the SOLE field. We argue that the time has come to aggressively link or bridge SOLE with organization theory. Organization theory offers the study of learning environments an enriched language and logic for contextualizing its rich contributions. Conversely, the insights provided by the SOLE community have much to contribute to organization theorists’ understanding of the core task of educational organization, namely teaching-learning. Just as a bridge facilitates social interaction between disparate entities, developing linkages between related yet separate lines of inquiry can promote conceptual and theoretical growth on multiple fronts, thus generating fresh insights.

The specific focus of this literature-bridging exercise centers on an important yet under-explored relationship in the SOLE literature: the relationship between the learning environment found in individual classrooms and that found in the larger school organization. This relationship has yet to be adequately explained in the SOLE community. Our intent is to explicate this relationship (Johnson, 2003; Turner, 1989; Reynolds, 1971; Dumont and Wilson, 1963) using concepts derived from the organization theory literature. Before examining this important relationship, however, an assessment of the theoretical development of SOLE is in order. This will be done using the criteria outlined above and captured in Figure 1. The intent is to provide a “fresh-eyes” assessment of the field’s theoretical and conceptual maturity and a context for the ideas that follow.
Assessing the theoretical maturity of the research on learning environments

Two principles provide a framework from which the maturity of the SOLE field can be judged. Both are rooted in the logic of social science research and provide the context for the evaluative criteria found in Figure 1. The first rests on the need to move from incipient, implicit descriptions of phenomena to more explicit, systematic, formalized descriptions. This means explicating the implicit (Johnson, 2003; Reynolds, 1971; Dumont and Wilson, 1963). We can conceptualize the implicit-explicit relation as a continuum. Fields of study mature as researchers explicate and formally articulate the field along dimensions such as those depicted in Figure 1.

The second principle focuses on the specific logic and procedures used in this explication process, that is, the need to:

- identify with clarity the focus of study;
- develop valid descriptions of the phenomenon of interest using empirically grounded concepts;
- operationalize these concepts with reasonable levels of validity;
- test the validity of these explanatory schemes through the careful operationalization of concepts; and

Against this backdrop, several observations regarding the maturity of the SOLE field can be made. First, the SOLE literature appears to focus on an identifiable and relevant phenomenon of study. Although SOLE researchers vary in specific interests, there is an implicit consensus as to the integrating focus of the field (Taylor et al., 1997; Walberg, 1979). Whether examined as a dependent or independent variable, learning environments are that defining focus. Learning environments are places, such as schools and classrooms, where learning takes place. Classroom learning environments differ from school learning environments in size (classrooms are smaller than schools) and scope (the learning that takes place in schools is typically broader than the learning that takes place in individual classrooms).

Second, while numerous operational definitions can be found (Freiberg, 1999; Moos and Trickett, 1987; Fisher and Fraser, 1983; Fraser et al., 1982; Rentoul and Fraser, 1979) there are few, if any, explicit conceptual definitions of school or classroom learning environment. This is puzzling, particularly in light of the quality of work in the field. To be sure, the conceptual influences of theorists such as Moos (1979, 1974: human environments) and Murray (1938 – needs-press theory) exist. Yet the SOLE literature assumes an implicit rather than an explicit working definition of learning environments. To get at a conceptual definition of learning environments, one must reconstruct definitions from existing operational measures. Examining these, we see that terms such as “ecology”, “milieu”, “affect”, “perceptions”, “structure”, and “the culture which defines a classroom or school” conceptually describe learning environments.
The absence of an explicit conceptual definition of learning environments leads to a third developmental issue: assessing the validity between the conceptual and operational definitions of learning environments. The absence of an explicit conceptual definition makes attempts to assess the critical validity-link between concept and operation problematic. Given the operational richness found in the field, this absence is cause for concern. It highlights the need for SOLE researchers:

- to move toward the articulation of a refined conceptual definition of school and classroom learning environments; and
- to seek tighter links between conceptual and operational definitions.

The field’s ability to address the latter issue rests on its effectiveness in addressing the former.

A fourth indicator of maturity is found in the extent to which defining concepts in the SOLE field have been systematically related to other concepts. Identifying and exploring these relationships is critical to research progress. Our collective understanding of learning environments expands as these relationships are established. SOLE researchers have related learning environments to a variety of school-, classroom-, and personal-level variables (Fraser and Walberg, 1991). Using learning environment dimensions as dependent variables, predictor variables such as the following have been examined: specific curriculum types, (e.g. Harvard Project Physics, a Fijian social science curriculum); specific instructional interventions (e.g. stress-reduction program for students), school-level variables (e.g. type of school, school size), classroom-level variables (e.g. class size) and teacher-related variables (e.g. gender), instructional techniques, and student variables (Fraser, 1986).

The predictive effects of learning environments have likewise been explored with classroom robustness and student-related variables (e.g. achievement, learning skills, attitudes, dispositions, popularity). Creating a visual model of the relationships shared between the learning environment of the classroom and these variables (i.e. creating what amounts to an analytical as opposed to a statistical meta-analysis) reveals once again the richness of the field. The explication of these relationships represents an ongoing need.

The extent to which a given line of inquiry has been linked to related yet independent literatures represents a fifth indicator of maturity. Is the field a conceptual island or has it been juxtaposed and contextualized within other literatures? A stifling inward-focus appears to have emerged within the learning environments community, prompting a call for greater linkages to other lines of inquiry. The introduction of constructivist frameworks to the study of learning environments (Lambert, 1995; Fraser and Tobin, 1989; Taylor et al., 1997; von Glasersfeld, 1988, 1981) provides a useful example of how other literatures can reinvigorate the field. While many researchers question the validity of conceptualizing learning environments as pure idiosyncratic constructions, the recent use of constructivist frameworks has provoked healthy debates within the field.

Returning to the field after an extended hiatus, we are surprised that stronger connections have not been made between SOLE and literatures such as school leadership, school improvement, and organizational theory. If educational organizations are about teaching and learning, and if classroom and school learning environments provide the context for these core organizational tasks, then why are the
bridges between these literatures weak or non-existent? Importing frameworks and concepts from other avenues of inquiry represents an effective strategy for reanimating and expanding the horizons of a field. More of this literature bridging is needed.

Building bridges between learning environments and organizational theory

A useful example of how related yet independent fields of inquiry can inform the study of learning environments is found in the organizational literature on schools. As a sub-field of sociology, organizational theory focuses on the systematic study of formal organizations (Scott, 2003; Hall, 2002; Mintzberg, 1979; Morgan, 1986; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Perusal of this literature reveals that all organizations share common features: a defining core task, structure, culture, and a sense of purpose (however vague). Likewise, all organizations exhibit conflict, wrestle with change, interact with the environment, and struggle with attempts to maximize effectiveness and efficiency. These and other features define the essence of formal organizations.

Although far from exhaustive, the literature on educational organizations is substantial (Cusick, 1992; Willower, 1982, 1986; Weick, 1976; Lortie, 1975; Bidwell, 1965). Its more notable contributions include concepts such as loose coupling (Weick, 1976), de-coupling (Meyer and Rowan, 1978), the cellular structure of schools (Bidwell, 1965), teacher autonomy (Lortie, 1975), teaching as an ill-defined task (Cohen et al., 1972; Johnson, 1997; Rowan, 1990) and public vulnerability (Johnson and Fauske, 2000; Willower, 1985).

Framing learning environments as an organizational phenomenon

Given that classrooms are sub-units within the larger school, discussions of the individual classroom should logically be framed within an organizational context. Though the amount of SOLE research in this area is growing, only a small number of studies have investigated the link between school- and classroom-level learning environments (Creemers and Reezigt, 1999; Dorman et al., 1997; Fisher et al., 1993; Fisher et al., 1995; Fraser and Rentoul, 1982). This is due in part to the tendency within the SOLE community to define these environments as distinct constructs (Fraser, 1994), a distinction supported by SOLE research. Statistical evidence suggests that the relationship between school and classroom learning environments is at best weak and indirect, if not insignificant (Dorman et al., 1997).

The cumulative effect of this evidence has been to redirect research in the field. Rather than explicating the school-classroom relationship further, SOLE researchers have been content with mining what would appear to be other, more promising research veins. This response is both reactive and premature. A review of research focusing on the school-classroom relationship reveals that SOLE scholars have provided little clarity on this important relationship. This situation is perhaps indicative of the propensity within the research community to pursue statistically significant as opposed to non- or less significant relationships.

Three additional reasons may explain this state of affairs. First, the SOLE community has attempted to make sense of this relationship using concepts and frameworks indigenous to the learning environments literature. It may be that the analytic and operational tools that have come to define the field lack the requisite complexity needed to accurately gauge and explain this relationship (Johnson, 2003; Weick, 1978). These tools may in fact be inadequate for understanding the
school-classroom relationship. How can we measure something for which no or inadequate measures exist? How can one measure something that is not recognized as a variable?

Second, as if to excuse further exploration of this relationship, some have established artificial boundaries between lines of inquiry by noting that larger school concerns fall outside of the learning environments domain. School-level environments fall within the purview of the school leadership literature, it is argued, a distinct and independent literature. As such, it is of secondary concern to the SOLE community. Given that the organization provides the context for the individual classroom, this response is both narrow and counter-productive.

Third, for those handful of SOLE researchers who make use of organizational theory to explore the school-classroom, this literature and the concepts associated with it have not been fully explored. For example, concepts such as teacher autonomy (Fisher et al., 1995) and schools as loosely-coupled systems (Dorman et al., 1997; Weick, 1976), when found in the SOLE literature, are used in a cut-flower fashion, divorced from the conceptual soil from which they emerged. As a result, the richness and explanatory power that comes with this soil is lost.

Organizational theory and school-classroom relationship
These arguments beg the larger issue of how to squarely address the relationship between school and classroom learning environments. As noted above, one possible strategy is to make greater use of the literature on educational organizations. The analysis which follows seeks to bridge SLE with this school organization literature. While several concepts/ideas from this literature are useful in explicating the school-classroom relationship, only five will be examined here:

1. educational organizations as human service organizations;
2. the core task and technology of educational organizations;
3. the core task-organizational structure relationship;
4. the defining challenges of teaching; and
5. teacher autonomy and its effects.

These concepts provide the basis for functionally integrating these two literatures.

Schools as human service organizations
Theorists have long sought to identify the common and distinctive features of organizations. While concepts such as structure, culture, and core technology represent common organizational features (Hall, 2002), numerous typologies have been offered as a means for highlighting distinctions along key variables/dimensions (Scott, 2003; Etzioni, 1975; Parsons, 1967; Carlson, 1964; Blau and Scott, 1962). One concept that has received less attention in the literature but which highlights the distinctiveness of educational organizations is the descriptor human service organization. Human service organizations are those organizations whose primary function is to protect, maintain or enhance the well-being of individuals (Hasenfeld, 1983). Whether through the definition, shaping or altering of personal attributes, the core task of these organizations is transforming humans. Organizations such as schools, universities,
counseling agencies, churches, rehabilitation clinics, hospitals and prisons share this defining feature.

With the goal of changing people, human service organizations operate in a value-laden, morally-charged milieu (Scott, 1995; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The moral character of this endeavor is reflected in several ongoing challenges. First, because clients are self-activating and can resist, the organization must develop acceptable mechanisms for compliance. The core activities in human-service organizations consist of relations between staff and clients. These relations serve as the vehicle through which the organization assumes jurisdiction over clients and accomplishes desired results through client transformation.

The nature of the staff-client relationship is a critical determinant of organizational success. For example, when in educational organizations students dislike a teacher, the motivation to learn suffers. Maintaining cooperation with clients who resist is an ongoing challenge for human service organizations, particularly in organizations where client participation is mandatory, e.g. public education, prisons, etc. The essential tasks of such organizations consist of a series of transactions between clients and staff in which compliance is negotiated. This negotiation is a moral process.

Given the centrality of staff-client relations, the tasks performed by human service organizations require considerable levels of autonomy. Lipsky’s (1978) frequently referenced street-level bureaucrat provides a description of the discretion experienced by line-staff while performing their duties. This autonomy creates coordination challenges for human service organizations. Because the quality of staff-client relations is a function of the personal attributes of staff and clients, the capacity of human service organization to coordinate the work of sub-units is limited. The ability to efficiently coordinate these sub-units is defining challenge for human service organizations.

The goals of human service organizations are likewise ambiguous and problematic. Toward what end should the organization seek to change the individual? What attitudinal or dispositional outcomes should be sought? These are perennial questions. Many of the attributes human service organizations are asked to change cannot be readily observed. Because disagreement exists over outcomes and end-states, the goals of human service organizations are typically multiple and vague. The moral ambiguity surrounding debates over goals underscores the turbulent environment in which human service organizations operate. This environment consists of multiple interests. While consensus among environmental interests may exist at an abstract level, implementation necessitates that human service organizations make normative choices in a society of multiple interests and competing values. Operating in a highly institutional environment (Scott, 1995; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977), an important challenge facing leaders in human service organizations is managing this environment.

Given that the activities with clients are laden with significant moral consequences (i.e. the means used to foster dispositional change), the technologies used by human service organizations must be morally justified. Such organizations are limited in what they can do with clients; the technologies they employ are morally constrained and indeterminate. This ambiguity is rooted in multiple sources. Humans represent complex yet variable entities. As raw material, they are variable and unstable. Knowledge of how to effectively foster change is incomplete.
Conceptualizing schools as human service organizations emphasizes the role that both teachers and schools play in enhancing the well-being of students. Not only are goals for school organizations multiple and contested, teachers make use of technologies that are ambiguous and at times unpredictable. These technologies fail to fully diagnose and solve learning challenges for students. As a result, a measure of ambiguity defines both school and classroom learning environments.

Defining core task, task clarity, and organizational structure

Another way to examine the school-classroom relationship is by conceptually describing the defining task of the school organization and the requisite organizational structure associated with it. Organizations may be distinguished by the core tasks, which define them. For example, the defining task for General Motors is automobile production. The defining task for McDonald’s is fast-food preparation. The defining task of school organizations is teaching-learning. In describing the defining core task in schools as teaching-learning, the authors are aware of the debates and issues this designation evokes. While many tasks can be found in these organizations (e.g. managing, counseling, coaching, selling), it is the core task that defines each organization. Schools are defined by the teaching and learning that occur in them. While schools do perform other important tasks, the essential tasks of teaching and learning define the school as an organization.

Organizations vary in the level of clarity surrounding their defining task. The level of task clarity surrounding the preparation of fast food at McDonald’s – the degree to which inputs are certain and the extent to which the means of transforming these inputs into outputs are known and predictable – is much higher than the task clarity which surrounds teaching-learning (Perrow, 1967; Rowan, 1990). At McDonald’s there is (more or less) one best method for making hamburgers. This method has been standardized across franchises. By contrast, there is no one best method of teaching. An instructional approach that works with one student may not work with another. What worked with last year’s class of Algebra I students may not work with this year’s class. The task clarity of teaching-learning is much lower than that associated with fast-food preparation.

The importance of the task-clarity variable is found in the relationship it shares with organizational structure. If structure is defined in terms of the centralization, coordination and control mechanisms found in organizations (Scott, 2003; Hall, 2002; Mintzberg, 1979), then task clarity and structure share a positive relationship. Tasks that are lower in clarity lend themselves to looser, more organic (Burns and Stalker, 1961) and decentralized organizational structures. Tasks that exhibit higher levels of clarity lend themselves to tighter, mechanistic, more centralized structures.

Returning to the example above, the task clarity associated with fast-food preparation is high. There are few, if any unknowns. By contrast, the task clarity associated with teaching-learning is lower because more uncertainties are present (e.g. varying abilities of students and teachers, varying attitudinal, emotional, and dispositional states across students, prior student experiences). As a result, one would expect to find contrasting structural configurations in these organizations. Whereas a more centralized, bureaucratic structure is found at McDonald’s, a more decentralized organizational structure is typically found in schools. The decentralized structure that typifies school organizations provides teachers with the autonomy and flexibility
needed to adapt and adjust to the uncertainties of teaching. The structural relationship between classrooms and the larger school has been described as loosely-coupled (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, 1978; Weick, 1976; Bidwell, 1965). This looseness represents a structural response to the ambiguities of the teaching-learning task.

Understanding the task clarity-organizational structure relationship as elaborated in the organizational theory literature is critical to understanding the school-classroom learning environment relationship. The uncertainties of teaching call for a decentralized structure that gives teachers flexibility and autonomy. Yet to what specific end is this autonomy needed? School organization literature identifies two fundamental challenges that the teacher must address.

The dual challenges of the classroom teacher
Waller (1932) was among the first to formally articulate the fundamental challenges of teaching. Others have since elaborated on these ideas (Brophy, 2004; Cusick, 1992; Jackson, 1990, 1986). The first challenge focuses on the creation and maintenance of an orderly learning environment, the second focuses on motivating students to learn. Both challenges are mutually reinforcing. Each contributes to the quality of learning environments found in classrooms. Both also highlight a defining tension in schools.

As with other human service organizations, the relationship between the organization and its clients is of utmost importance in schools (Hasenfeld, 1983). For learning to occur, teachers must create and maintain an orderly classroom environment. The creation of this environment relies heavily on the quality of the student-teacher relationship. This relationship, however, is complicated by two factors:

1. attendance for students at schools is mandatory; and
2. the maturity level of students is such that the educational goals, demands, and values personified in the school’s representatives (i.e. administrators and teachers) are often incongruent with student interests and motivations. Simply stated, students are captive clients with immature tendencies (Muir, 1986; Carlson, 1964).

Many students attend school against their will and as a result resist efforts to solicit cooperation. These factors make the creation of orderly classroom environments problematic for teachers. To counteract them, teachers must coax, negotiate, and occasionally resort to various “strong arm” tactics with students. Whether an appeal to the authority-status of the teaching role or to the bureaucratic rules of the school, these tactics are impersonal and potentially alienating for students. If used in an excessive manner by the teacher, passive student resistance can easily lead to overt rebellion. However, if used with skill, these tactics can create an environment conducive to learning. The need to establish classroom order is a fundamental challenge that all teachers must address.

The second challenge of teaching follows logically from the first. Teachers must also motivate students to learn. The effectiveness and success of human service organizations rest on the cooperative participation of the clients served. In the context of school organizations, effective learning requires the active participation and cooperation of students. This cooperation requires that the teacher energize and establish affective bonds with the class. Given that teaching is an individualized and interactive activity, motivating students to learn is a function of close, warm relations...
between teacher and student. To maximize the learning experience, teachers must connect or bond with students.

The irony of these dual challenges is not found in the mutual relationship they share. Rather it is found in paradoxical and countervailing tensions they create, tensions that must be skillfully balanced. Whereas the need to establish classroom order rests on the use of impersonal bureaucratic tactics with students, the need to motivate students rests on the affective, individualistic and personal appeal of the teacher. Reflected in this tension is the juxtaposition of the personal and impersonal. In dealing with students individually and collectively, the teacher must behave in ways that are simultaneously personal and impersonal. This highlights a basic dilemma in school organizations, particularly at the classroom level: the need to motivate students to learn (i.e. the need to solicit student cooperation) while creating an orderly environment in which this learning can occur (i.e. the need to threaten and force compliance as needed while running the risk of undermining student motivation).

The learning environment that exists in a given classroom would appear to be a function of the teacher’s ability to effectively balance these countervailing tensions. To be sure, teachers vary in their ability to address these challenges and the subtle nuances associated with them. A host of teacher-variables contribute to this variability: the knowledge base a teacher brings to the classroom (both subject-matter and pedagogical knowledge), life experiences, judgment skills and a repertoire of teaching skills. These teaching challenges and the influence they have on classroom-level learning environments have not been explored in the SOLE literature.

School culture, sub-cultures and counter-cultures
Schools are complex organizations. As organizational participants negotiate this complexity, shared meanings and norms of conduct emerge to regulate and define behavior. Schein (1985) defines organizational culture as that set of assumptions and values that develop in an organization over time. This culture develops as the organization seeks to integrate the work of its participants while addressing environmental demands.

The decentralized nature of schools invites the creation of sub-cultures and counter-cultures. Qualitative differences distinguish these sub-cultures. For example, there are those sub-cultures that enhance or compete with the larger school culture and those which exist independently of the school, e.g. professional affiliations, ethnic affiliations, etc. Tensions develop as organizational participants develop affinities with multiple sub-cultures, e.g. ethnic-race affiliations, a classroom, the lunch group, the department or grade level cohorts to which one belongs, etc. Such associations complicate teachers’ perceptions of how to best meet the core tasks of teaching-learning within the classroom. Likewise, these associations frustrate and/or facilitate teachers’ efforts to align themselves and their classroom with the larger culture of the school. School and classroom learning environments bear cultural hallmarks that bespeak the relationship individual classrooms hold with each other and with the school at large.

Teacher autonomy and organizational structure
As noted above, the decentralized nature of the school organization means that teachers enjoy a measure of autonomy in the classroom. Moreover, this autonomy is needed to address the fundamental challenges of teaching. It is a defining norm in the
teaching profession (Jackson, 1990, 1986; Lortie, 1975; Bidwell, 1965). Teachers regard classrooms as territory over which they exercise considerable control. It is a jealously guarded domain. Administrative policies and changes that ignore this norm are destined for resistance.

Yet to say that the structural link between the classroom and school is loosely coupled is not to say that it is decoupled (i.e. that no link or a single structural link connects the classroom to the school). Some learning environment researchers equate the two concepts. Classrooms are not decoupled from the larger school. Not only are there multiple structural links that connect classroom to school, the number and strength of these links vary across and within schools (Gamoran and Dreeben, 1986). Hence, the impact and influence of the larger organizational structure can be found in the classroom. Whether expressed as a prescribed curriculum, a required text, a teacher evaluation system or an end-of-year standardized student-exam, these links place constraints on teacher autonomy. While the uncertainties associated with the teaching-learning task call for a structure that allows for autonomy, teacher autonomy is not without its limits. It is a constrained autonomy (Willower, 1986; Gamoran and Dreeben, 1986; Corwin and Edelfelt, 1977). The influence of the larger school structure in the classroom is always felt. Hence, the question is not: Is there a relationship between school and classroom learning environments? The structure, culture, climate and leadership dynamics of the larger school do influence the classroom. Rather, the question is: To what extent is this influence felt in the classroom?

Once again, the literature on school organizations provides insight into this relationship. As noted above, teacher behavior is defined by attempts to address the fundamental challenges of teaching: maintaining classroom order and motivating students to learn. The learning environment that emerges in the classroom is a function of the teacher’s efforts in addressing these countervailing challenges. Not only do these challenges define the teacher’s approach to students, they define the teacher’s view and interpretation of environmental influences outside the classroom. As such, they function as perceptual filters that assist in identifying and assessing those influences in the school that would facilitate or hinder the ability of teachers to address these challenges in functional ways.

Evidence of this behavior is seen in most attempts at systemic reform. Teachers tend to assess school-level change along two dimensions:

1. How will it affect my ability to maintain order in my class (challenge 1)?
2. What effect will it have on my ability to motivate and teach students (challenge 2)?

School-level changes that undermine teachers’ abilities to address the challenges of teaching are typically resisted. This resistance explains in part the conservatism exhibited by teachers and the teaching profession. However, school-level changes that facilitate teachers’ abilities to address these challenges are often embraced.

This governing logic can also be seen in the way teachers deal with other school-level influences. As threshold guardians of the classroom (Willower, 1986, 1985, 1982), teachers scan the larger school environment for influences that would hinder or facilitate efforts to manage the challenges of teaching. To minimize the effects of hindering influences, teachers employ various buffering strategies. These strategies allow teachers to protect the classroom from influences that threaten autonomy and
success. To capitalize on the energy and momentum of facilitating school-level influences, teachers employ strategies that allow them to bridge the classroom with the larger organization. In doing this, the ability of teachers to manage the challenges of teaching is enhanced.

Conceptualizing the school-classroom relationship

While the concepts described above represent a sampling from the organizational literature, collectively they help illuminate the school-classroom relationship. Their use in this context exemplifies how literature from a related yet independent field can contribute to the conceptual unpacking of this important yet under-examined relationship. With these thoughts in mind, several summary observations are in order.

First, the task clarity of the teaching-learning process is such that a decentralized structure is needed in school organizations. This decentralization is directed downward to classroom units and is expressed as teacher decisional autonomy. Autonomy is needed for teachers to address the fundamental challenges of teaching. Yet to say that teacher autonomy is needed does not mean that it exists in equal measure across schools. Autonomy is variable both within and across schools over time.

Second, the learning environments that emerge in classrooms are a function of the effectiveness with which teachers manage the countervailing challenges of teaching. While teachers vary in their ability to do this, this autonomy is facilitated or constrained by the level of structural centralization/decentralization that defines the school. Teachers in one school may have more autonomy to address the fundamental challenges of teaching than teachers in another school.

Third, the school-classroom relationship tends to become more of an issue for teachers under negative rather than positive conditions. Teachers’ awareness of this relationship is heightened when they sense that school-level structures and dynamics are hindering, restraining, or conflicting with their work in the classroom. To be sure, effective teachers are adept at taking bridging with the facilitating aspects of the larger school environment (i.e. school influences that support teachers’ abilities to manage classrooms effectively). Yet teachers are more sensitive to those school-level dynamics that hinder work in the classroom. Stated somewhat differently, individuals tend to become conscious of the air-conditioner when it fails to cool (negative), rather than when it is cooling properly (positive).

The natural response of teachers to this failure is to buffer the classroom from such influences. The cellular structure of schools and the physical isolation of classrooms allow this to occur. Yet buffering has its limits. Classrooms are not decoupled from the larger school organization. Though physically dispersed, they are not islands within the school. Structural and administrative mechanisms that allow school leaders to control, constrain, coordinate and facilitate teacher work do exist (Logan, 1990; Gamoran and Dreeben, 1986). The number and strength of these mechanisms are important variables across schools. For a given school, this constellation of variables plays an important role in the strength and direction of the school-classroom relationship.

Fourth, teachers vary in their ability to identify and assess school-level structures and dynamics that would hinder or facilitate work in the classroom. This ability has consequences for the specific buffering or bridging strategies a teacher employs (or
fails to employ). Teachers also vary in their ability to effectively buffer and bridge school-level influences. For the teacher who is ineffective or unsuccessful at buffering, the school-classroom relationship is perhaps more pronounced in a negative direction. For the teacher who is effective in bridging, the school-classroom relationship is more pronounced in a positive direction. This would suggest that the strength of the school-classroom relationship becomes more pronounced as conditions move toward extreme ends of the continuum (i.e. as school and classroom interests become highly incongruent or as school and classroom interests become highly congruent). An extremely incongruent state suggests a negative school-classroom relationship; a congruent state suggests a positive relationship.

The nature of these and other variables suggests that the school-classroom relationship may in fact be facilitated or suppressed by several factors. Many have been described above. Other organizational variables could shed light on this relationship. For example, one might consider the role that organizational culture and socialization play as internal guides to teacher behavior. To what extent does school culture function to direct, constrain, and define teaching behavior and the learning environment that emerges in a classroom? Again, these and other organizational concepts provide insight into the school-classroom relationship. Most have yet to be fully explored and utilized by the SOLE or organization theory communities.

Conclusion
In spite of the ebb and flow of developmental momentum, the SOLE field remains a rich and promising line of inquiry. Schools are about teaching and learning. The SOLE literature has allowed us to systematically examine these defining organizational tasks in novel ways and in a time when productivity and accountability demands are on the rise. One of SOLE’s greatest strengths lies in its international flavor. In contrast to other culture-specific lines of inquiry, SOLE research has attracted an international group of scholars. Many of its concepts, operations, and theories have been examined in multiple countries and cultures. This international flavor attests to the field’s richness and relevance.

At the same time, the field is need of an infusion of ideas and strategies that will further invigorate the field and provoke fresh insights. These can only assist the field as it moves toward theoretical maturity. Literature-bridging is one such strategy. The concepts and analytic tools from the literature on school organizations provide an example of how other literatures can be used to conceptually unpack the school-classroom learning environment relationship.

Using the SOLE literature as a point of departure, we have also sought to provide an example of how organization theory can be linked with other literatures in a complementary and productive ways. Given the importance of organization theory to our understanding of educational organizations and the increased absence of a substantive organizational perspective from our dialogue, there is a need to build and/or re-establish bridges between organization theory and other lines of inquiry in education. As noted above, teaching and learning occur in an organizational context. It is important that this context be considered by educational researchers. The norms, pressures and incentives that have come to define the research enterprise encourage an excessively narrow and myopic focus. As a result, scholars working in related yet separate lines of inquiry are often unaware of how complementary other fields can be.
The left hand often does not know what the right hand is doing. The links have yet to be made. The bridges have yet to be built. Organization theory has much to offer the educational research community. Likewise, the research community has much to offer organization theory. The time has come to revisit and systematically examine literature-bridging as a viable research strategy.

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Further reading


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