

THEORETICAL BASIS FOR IMPROVING THE INTEREST OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE PROFESSION

Avliyoqulov Tolib Xolmurodovich

Teacher, Termez State University

Abstract:

This article describes the process of theoretical reflection that preceded the development and empirical verification of a model of “effective school improvement”. The focus is on basic mechanisms that could be seen as underlying “getting things in motion” and change in education systems. Four mechanisms are distinguished: synoptic rational planning, the market mechanism, cybernetics, and autopoiesis. Principles relevant for effective school improvement that are deducted from these basic mechanisms are: goal setting for improvement, pressures to improve, cyclical improvement processes, and autonomy. The article also briefly touches upon the way empirical models of school effectiveness and school improvement can be linked and used in the encompassing model of effective school improvement.

Key words: *process, goal, mechanism, deduction, improvement, model*

Introduction

The empirical work in the Effective School Improvement (ESI) Project was preceded by conceptual analysis. This conceptual analysis considered the relationship between school effectiveness and school improvement and analysed different strands of educational and social scientific theory that might explain core ingredients of an integrative model on effective school improvement. In the course of the process, an integrative model gradually emerged. This contribution refers to both processes of model development and theoretical reflection on initial model specifications, in order to lay bare the theoretical foundations of the ESI model. We shall first describe various strands of theory and then turn back to the integration of perceptions on school effectiveness and knowledge on effective schooling further on. Four strands of theories, which could be seen as representing four basic theory- embedded principles in the social sciences, were considered: The empirical work in the Effective School Improvement (ESI) Project was preceded by conceptual analysis. This conceptual analysis considered the relationship between school effectiveness and school improvement and analysed different strands of educational and social scientific theory that might explain core ingredients of an integrative model on effective school improvement. In the course of the process, an integrative model gradually emerged. This contribution refers to both processes of model development and theoretical reflection on initial model specifications, in order to lay bare the theoretical foundations of the ESI model. We shall first describe various strands of theory and then turn

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Main part

We shall first describe various strands of theory and then turn back to the integration of perceptions on school effectiveness and knowledge on effective schooling further on. Four strands of theories, which could be seen as representing four basic theoryembedded principles in the social sciences, were considered: Curriculum theory, which is seen as an off-spring of the rational planning model. 2. Micro-economic theory and public choice theory; emphasising incentives and consumer-controlled accountability. 3. Cybernetics and theories on “learning organisations”. Cybernetics literature refers to control and communication systems that depend on feedback loops. 4. Theories on self-regulation and self-organisation, which have a place in theorising related to the concept of autopoiesis. Autopoiesis means self-production, and is a term that was employed to refer to circular processes of production in living systems (Maturana, 1980, p. 78) and later on also used in a more metaphorical sense in organisation science (Morgan, 1986). In the subsequent paragraph, these four theoretical principles will be further explained. By way of positioning at least three of them in assumed developmental stages of educational systems, we refer to Carneiro’s (1994, p. 6) synoptic table (Table 1). He

shows how four development stages of educational systems could be characterised regarding the driving forces, the main features, and the dominant actors involved in each of them, as well as their theoretical orientation. Carneiro's behavioural theories are closely linked to our interpretation of the rational planning model. The first stage, labelled "production-oriented" stage, could be well described by what we usually call "behavioural theories" in a classic sense. Characterised by an important economic expansion and dominated by economic factors, it is mainly a period of quantitative expansion of the school institutions. The two following stages ("consumption-oriented" and "client-oriented") are well formalised by the public choice theories. The two different stages could be found more or less at the same time in a system but the second stage usually appears before the third and is characterised by an economic expansion, while the latter is more closely associated with a less positive economic situation and public deficit reductions. These two stages are difficult to distinguish without a very careful analysis, because they could exist in a kind of complex and mixed stage (e.g., public and private schools but equally funded by the state or an experimental voucher system concerning only a part of the public system). The last stage, called "innovation-oriented" stage, is not yet perfectly implemented in our economically developed countries, but we can perceive more and more signs of it: for example, in all attempts to internationalise educational programmes or assessments and insure student mobility with a common system of certification. We shall now proceed by explaining the three basic strands of theory, also distinguished by Carneiro (1994), in more detail. The ideal of "synoptic" planning is to conceptualise a broad spectrum of long-term goals and a possible means to attain them. Scientific knowledge about instrumental relationships is thought to play an important role in the selection of alternatives. As stated before, given the orientation towards the primary process, inherent in economic rationality, the synoptic planning approach in education applies most of all to curriculum planning, design of textbooks, instructional design, and preparation of (series of) lessons. Innovation methods are mainly implemented by central impulses, accompanied in the field by a conformity control (inspection). Improvement is to be understood in terms of introduction of a planned change in the production means. When the ideal of rational planning is extended to organisational structuring, related principles about "controlled arrangements" are applied to the division of work, the formation of units, and the way supervision is given shape. "Mechanistic structure", "scientific management", and "machine bureaucracy" are the organisational-structural pendants of rational planning. The basic ideas go back to Max Weber, who stated the principles of bureaucracy as "a form of organization that emphasises precision, speed, clarity, regularity, reliability, and efficiency achieved through the creation of a fixed division of tasks, hierarchical supervision, and detailed rules and regulation. Although Mintzberg's (1979) conception of the professional bureaucracy, applicable to schools and universities, is often treated as the complete antithesis of classical

bureaucracy, it should be emphasised that the basic notion of standardisation and predictability of work processes, albeit with considerable breadth of individual leeway, is retained.

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