
Book Review

Thandi Ngcobo

van der Westhuizen, P.C. (Ed.). 2002 (2nd ed.). *Schools as organisations*. Pretoria: van Schaik.

Compared with countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the United States, relatively few books on education management have been produced in South Africa. This volume is therefore of great value for its contextual relevance, particularly for a country trying to establish and manage an education system related to its changing needs.

The book consists of four sections subdivided into eleven chapters contributed by seven authors, in some cases on the basis of co-authorship. Two authors, Steyn and de Bruin, were not in the original team of contributors to the first edition of the book. Mindful of the book's multi-author collaboration, this review accordingly comments on one section and one chapter at a time.

Contributions by the two new authors consist of two new chapters in the book, the first and the last chapters. These two chapters seem to be the main justification for the second edition.

Schools as organisations is targeted mainly at the South African postgraduate student, either at the level of the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) or the BEd (Hons) courses.

Education Management is a fairly new discipline, with most of its concepts borrowed from disciplines in the Humanities and the Social and Management Sciences. As a result, its disciplinary components are not always as consensual as those of other more established disciplines. This dilemma sees some of its scholars focussing extensively on justifying both the discipline's existence and/or its components. The title, *Schools as organisations*, illustrates the former while various sections of the book, as will be illustrated, provide testimony to the latter. Confusion brought about by these disciplinary issues can find the reader wrestling not only over what the actual focus of the book

is, but also over its justifications for some of its contents. The dilemma is particularly apparent in the first two sections of the book.

The first part of the book is titled '*The education system as an organisation*'. It consists of one chapter, 'The education system in relation to its environment'. The chapter provides a useful introduction to education management for the book's main target market. The introduction is informative even though both the section's and the chapter's justification in a book claiming the *school* as its major focus is not made entirely clear. What is also not made very clear is why the only chapter in a section claiming to be dealing with 'the education system as an organisation' chose to focus on 'the education system in relation to its environment'. Discussion on the *school*, rather than the education system, in relation to its environment would have included various sections of the education system discussed in the chapter and would probably have been more apt.

'*Organisational theory of the school*' is the title of the second section of the book. Three chapters make up the section. The first presents a discussion on, and sets out to give 'a qualitative evaluation', on various organisational theories under the title 'Perspectives on the school as an organisation'. Again, the content of the chapter is impressively informative. A disappointing feature of the discussion, however, is the author's decision to commence by naming 'theories' after their pioneers, not on given points of departure or claims made by the theories. This leaves no scope for tracing the theories' developments, if any. This is particularly disappointing taking into account that some of the theories were pioneered as early as early as the 1950s. Griffiths, for example, first put forward his theory in 1959. The author then moves on to a section headed 'The influence of some trends and life views on the development of education management theory'. The heading holds great promise but its contents, namely, 'positivism'; 'post-positivism'; and, 'postmodernism' are puzzling considering that these cannot be said to be organisational theories even though they may frame the study of, and assumptions about, organisations.

'An ontological perspective on the school as an organisation' is the subject of the next chapter which actually deals with the Christian perspective. Whilst Christians will probably not have any qualms with the singling out of this particular ontological perspective as a preferred perspective, the authoritarian prescription may restrict its readership to followers of the religion, and may indeed be offensive to communities subscribing to other religions. A critical

presentation of a range of ontological perspectives may have been more fitting for a society as divergent as South Africa, and also for postgraduate study that the book claims to be aimed for.

Discussion on the next chapter focuses on 'General characteristics of the school as an organisation'. The strength of this chapter also lies in its informative presentation on its stated topic, which makes its deviation from the stated focus of the section justifiable.

Discussion on the third section falls under the title '*The organisational ecology of the school*'. As pointed out on the back page of the book, the rationale for this section is that "modern organizational theories stress the importance of the ecology of the organization". The importance of ecology for organizational effectiveness cannot be challenged and it has consistently been illustrated by various studies on the subject. A chapter entitled '*The organizational culture of the school*' sets the section off. In this chapter the reader is first introduced to the concept of 'organisational culture' and then presented with the relationship between organisational culture and organisational climate; and guidelines on "the establishment of an organizational culture in a multicultural school" are offered. Although the author makes mention, and gives examples, of policies that organisations sometimes adopt for the handling of diversity, it is a pity that the author makes no effort to describe the policies. Descriptions of policies could have been stimulating and could have provided room for reflection. Reasons for the inclusion of a study on the organisational culture of ten schools in this chapter is not clear given that no description of the schools is provided, except to say that they were Afrikaans speaking at the time of the study. The chapter concludes with useful guidelines on the establishment and maintenance of effective school cultures. Discussion then proceeds in a chapter on 'Organisational climate in schools'. This chapter is not handled very differently from the previous chapter. In conclusion, the section presents a very short chapter on the 'Organisational health of the school', which also has a structure very similar to the previous two chapters and is equally informative.

The last section of the book is devoted to '*Organisational change and development*'. As in the previous section, inclusion of this section in the book is stated as being motivated by literature concession. In this case, the concession is that "the most important aspects of an organisation" are change and renewal (pg. 181). This section comprises four chapters, the first of which

is 'Change in educational organisations'. Most of the chapter lays a foundational conceptual and theoretical framework on educational change. This is done in a very informative manner which leaves one inclined to think that this should have been the only focus of the chapter, and that the last three sections in the chapter should have been accommodated in a subsequent chapter. All of the discussion in the next important chapter, '*Resistance to change in education*', maintains its focal point and cohesion, and should provide a very useful resource not only in preparation for practice in education, but also for current practitioners most of whom are faced not only by an ominous oasis of change but also by an equally overwhelming resistance to change. The third chapter on 'Organisation development and the quality of working life in schools' lays ground for the ensuing chapter in a very detailed and informative manner. The section ends with a chapter on 'Organisational development in schools through quality management'. A reader is initially impressed by the author's attempt to shift certain sections of the country's schooling community from sole reliance on 'scientific management'. Further reading into the chapter, however, reveals a line of thinking that is aligned not merely to qualitative management approaches but specifically to that field of management popularly referred to as 'Total Quality Management' (TQM). In any event, the chapter provides wide information on TQM and suitably applies it to school development.

The content of the book lays a sound foundation for its projected market and does so in a very 'reader friendly' manner. The book's biggest shortcoming is its prescriptive tendencies - which may work with certain communities - but may probably be out of synchrony with the emerging South African post-graduate student who, one would hope, is more inclined to reach decisions in an informed, independent, reflective, critical and analytic manner, particularly in a task as critical as that of education management. The other major shortcoming of the book was the tendency by some of its authors to quote books published more than two decades ago in their attempt to illustrate a point they claim to reflect a present situation. For example, in the second chapter of the book, to illustrate that "only a few studies which focus exclusively on the school as an organization have as yet been conducted", the author lists sources published in the 60s, 70s and early 80s (p. 181). One other example of this practice is gleaned from a statement that starts with: "In recent years ..." and goes on to illustrate the assertion by referring to a source published in 1975 (p. 85). Such references are confusing because one would have thought that one of the reasons for issuing a new edition was to update its content.

Nevertheless, the criticisms raised above do not overshadow the book's strengths, most of which relate to its relevance, as illustrated, for example, in the introductory chapter which not only introduces the reader to education systems in general but also to the South African system in particular. The former provides a good introduction to organisational study while the latter provides appropriate contextual illustrations. Discussions on educational change management provide an additional display of relevance. This is particularly so taking into consideration that South African schools are currently overwhelmed by multiple forms of change. What also makes the book a valuable read is that all its chapters have managed to pack in loads of useful and relevant information.

Thandi Ngcobo
University of Natal
Durban

Email: ngcobot9@nu.ac.za