Redefining Learning Organisations for Effective School Leadership and Management

Dr. Mabihi Shuping

Abstract:- This paper seeks to first delve deeper into the meaning of a learning organizations. I select some meanings from literature by dedicated scholars, but focus more on Peter Senge's five disciplines which gained popularity in terms of his viewpoint that although there is no consensus on the meaning of learning organizations, there is a converging view that continuous learning and active involvement of all stakeholders play a pivotal role in learning organization. From the outset, I acknowledge that there are many meanings that are contributed by dedicated scholars on the subject but choose meanings that I consider to provide a clearer meaning based on the context. Then I offer an analysis of the school (henceforth referred to *apropos*: school X throughout the discussion in this paper) as a learning organizational context by identifying language barrier as a gap that hinders the dissemination of information in that school. I label this as a gap cautiously because the issues relating to language barrier and dissemination of information in school X are not problems as in the sense of them being wrong and needing to be fixed, but I consider them to be gaps that require enterprising and innovative ideas by everyone in school X to close down, hence the expediency of a redefinition.

Keywords:- Learning, Organizations, Language barrier, Dissemination, Information.

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper makes an observation about the language barrier gap that tends to stifle communication at school X and advances a contention that if the changes are not made as a matter of exigence, school X could turn it into an inefficient and ineffective organisation. Vavrek (2018), provides a simplified description of inefficient organisations as the ones that use their rare resources ineffectively. I determine to what extent that gap would hinder efforts to achieve learning and teaching objectives as espoused in the values as well as mission and vision statement of the school. I argue that in school X's endeavour to become a learning organization, it tends to be bogged down into addressing only a handful and superficial aspects of learning and teaching and seems to ignore other significant underlying factors that have the potential to turn school X into a much sought-after learning organization.

The argument I advance in the fore-going statement is in resonance with Chris Argyris' action theory. This theory comprises of *espoused theory, theory in use, single-loop learning, double-loop learning and triple-loop learning.* Theory in use involves superficial, minor and symbolic change whereas theory in use gives the true picture of what actually transpires in the organisation. I support theory in use and will expound in finer details in the last section of this paper where I conclude with an action plan linked with the proposed Organisational Development (OD) process.

The language barrier gap and the underlying inability to disseminate information smoothly is an identified error that requires in-depth rectification if school X is to become a learning organisation. Whenever a mistake is found and rectified without one getting to the bottom of or changing the underlying values within the system, this is referred to as the single-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978:8). Conversely, double-loop learning takes place when the governing values and actions are changed after those mistakes have been committed. With regards to triple-loop, learning correcting the mistakes tends to be about longer timeframes as it considers organizational values, mission and vision (Argyris,2002:206). I affirm both the double and triple-loop theories as appropriate to improve communication and decision-making processes in school X. I conclude by highlighting the expediency of redefining a school as a learning organization in terms of an organizational development process model. An action plan comprising of ten points objectives that include learning conditions, processes and support are recommended to other schools like school X to become fully-fledged learning organizations. The proffered action plan is then linked to the following adopted definition of a learning organisation: Organizations where stakeholders who lead and manage such schools are collaborative, forward-thinking, enterprising, innovative and regularly share knowledge and ideas.

A. Contextual Analysis of School X as a Learning Organization

School X is the first and the only International Baccalaureate (IB) school in Ningbo City in the Yinzhou district of the Zhejiang province South Eastern coastline of China. The school started in 2006 as a Foreign Language School. The majority of students in school X are mainly Chinese and the teaching staff are recruited from many countries globally. The school is governed as a joint venture by an Educational Group and Yinzhou district department of Education which mainly plays an oversight role in the day-to-day management of the school. The principal acts as a chief executive officer (CEO) and reports to the chairman of the board of directors. English is the predominant language of instruction and Chinese language and culture are well preserved in some of the bilingual lessons at school X. The school offers three IB programmes namely Primary Years Programme (PYP), Middle Years Programme (MYP) and Diploma Programme (DP) (NBHIS WASC, 2021) as well as

the International Arts Academy (IAA) and the Sino-Canadian program. The school is also a member of the World Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and Round Square.

Because of the dominance of the Chinese culture and Mandarin as a common language of communication at school X, the management of the school often hides behind the guise of a language barrier when there is actually a gaping chasm in how they disseminate information to staff members and other stakeholders.

B. Learning Organisations Defined

Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (1989) define learning organisations as organisations which facilitates the learning of all stakeholders and transforms itself and its context continuously. This definition resonates with Mintzberg's (1979) popular view that organisations that are likely to succeed and adapt easily to circumstances in which they operate, for example clients (i.e. in the case of school X, teachers, parents and learners) as well as government policies. It is therefore apparent from the fore-going definition (Pedler, Burgoyne & Boydell, 1989) as well as Mintzberg (1979), view that organisations need to be able to impact upon their environment as well as adapt to the changes taking place in order to be defined as learning organisations.

C. Reflecting on the Meaning of a Learning Organisation

Evidence-based literature offers a plethora of meanings on of a learning organisation. Argyris and Schön (1999:19) opine that organizations learn by acquiring understanding, knowledge and skills in order to elevate its information base. I found that meaning clear, enthralling and fitting for the context under which school X operates. I also consider the definition by Unger (2002:19) appropriate for school X's context as it puts emphasis on organisations engaging in continuous self-change. I concur with Unger (2002) views on this meaning because he disproves the role of external consultants as change agents and approves people within organisations themselves to be better placed to facilitate processes that could bring about organisational change. In his summarized offering of what a learning organisation mean, Unger (2002) asserts that the ability of an organization to learn is found in the potential of that organization to self-correct. The large part of this paper's engagements; however, tilts more towards another simplistic meaning offered by Senge (2011:13) where he avers that learning organisations are places where people continuously deploy their capabilities and lives up to their authentic targets. These are organisations in which new ideas are invoked and supported and subsequently common hopes are delivered. Senge's (2011:17-22) five disciplines namely; personal mastery, mental models, team learning, common vision and systems thinking support the notion of the continuous learning and development process of a learning organization. According to Karanikola, Zogopoulos and Panagiotopolos (2018:2), the principles surrounding those disciplines are not new to researchers, Senge (2011) just systematised them by creating a theoretical model so that all the five disciplines can collectively be implemented to contribute towards turning organisations into learning organisations. Karanikola et al. (2018) elucidate each of Senge's disciplines as follows:

- *Personal Mastery*: People are acutely aware of the gap between their current situation and where they want to be.
- *Mental Models:* People have different perceptions, thoughts, assumptions and mentalities. Those divergences in mental modes often yield disagreements. It is through this awareness of diversity that respect and mutual understanding for common purpose are harnessed.
- *Team Learning*: Through dialogue, people exchange views and knowledge whilst also forging forward to build new knowledge. They gather better understanding of others' mental models, learn through mistakes and failures and build collective intelligence.
- *Common Vision*: This involves personal and collective visions of the members of the organisation, their dreams and ambitions are interlocked to form a shared vision. The progress and achievement of those visions are collectively expressed and people are supported to create the future they desire.
- *System Thinking*：This is considered to be a cornerstone of all disciplines. It intertwines all the other disciplines as it requires the fields of personal competence, collective learning, mental models and shared vision. Senge (2011:16-17) opines that a focus on system thinking prevents other disciplines from being isolated, running the risk of losing out on having a holistic consideration. Wahren (1996:72) also affirms this viewpoint by asserting that in managing the complexities that exist in organisations, systems have to be focused in relation to the theories and practices of a learning organisation. Senge (2011:102) also points to the self-reinforcement of feedback as the main cause of growth within organisations. The importance of feedback is unravelled more in the OD cycle.

Heftberger and Stary (2004:32) point out that Senge's five disciplines serve to elevate the knowledge base and values of an organization, strengthen the relationships between the members of an organization and ameliorate the problem-solving skills of those involved in such organizations. However, Knipp (2014:54）cautions that Senge's approach should not be misconstrued to mean that organisations learn by themselves, but it should be regarded as an impulse to review the organisations' culture, structure and processes. I am in concurrence with this view and argue that school X needs to have a trained organisational development (OD) practitioner amongst our staff members to facilitate the development processes.

In a nutshell and based on the reflection on the meaning of a learning organisation as discussed above, one can surmise that organization that learns is a learning organization and organizational development provides the methodology through which that process unfolds as it illustrated in the next section below.

II. ACTION PLAN FOR A MOVE TOWARDS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

This action plan includes the learning conditions about issues relating to language barrier and the dissemination of information as a gap I have identified at school X. I surmise that my scheme of purpose would mainly feature a self-reflection on the part of the managers and leaders that the conditions of misinformation do exist. The argument I raise about the existence of those conditions at school X is also supported by Berrell and Wrathal (2001:32) who argue that there is a strong predisposition among Chinese managers to safeguard the *status quo* and implicitly stop any critical reflection about management and leadership in general within many organizations.

Orsae-Larbi and Asumeng (2015:29) posit that the main purpose of the field of organizational development (OD) is to provide methods on how to implement change in order to build learning organizations. Orsae-Larbi and Asumeng (2015) further underscore that although the models of OD may not be able to elucidate every scenario in the real world, OD models create a leeway on which change agent might use to design, plan and implement change. The action I would adopt for the learning organization (i.e. school X) has all the hallmarks of a general organizational development model as opposed to a change management model. I plan to find out what issues require problem solving in that organization, what knowledge do colleagues at school X have amongst themselves about such problem and then chart a plan to bring about change in a facilitative, distributive and shared approach typical of a learning organisation.

The action plan I propose is embedded within the general model of OD. According to Cummings & Worley (2006) outline the following attributes: Strengthens best working relationships between the OD practitioner and members of the organization, put zest on both identifying gaps as well as developing new and positive ideas and best practices to close that gap, targets change at all levels of the organization (i.e. strategic and structural , groups and individual levels) comprises of the following steps, stresses cycles of research as opposed to linear research until the organization attains the change it desires, encourages research to promote ability to identify and define problems. Lastly, the general model OD does not only provide the necessary information about the stages of change, but it also provides clear guidance about which sets of activities are necessary at each stage to direct the organization towards the state it desires to be in (Cummings & Worley, 2006; Lacey, (1995). In **figure 1** below, I present the cyclical OD process with action planning highlighted as the most important stage in the process:
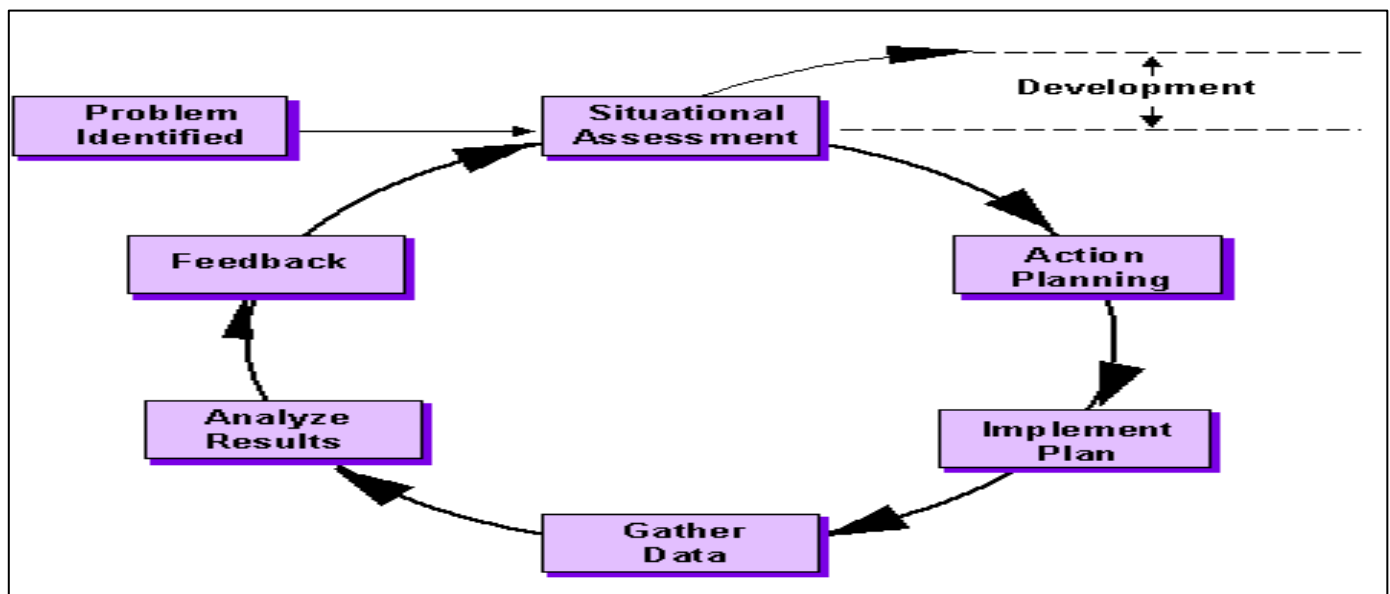

Fig 1: Organisational Development (OD) Cyclical Process
Source: https://schoolworkhelper.net/the-organisation-development-od-cycle/

III. LINK BETWEEN THE ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (OD) PROCESS AND THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

Organizational Development (OD) process and the problem statement regarding the language barrier gap in the dissemination of information in school X as a learning organization and the associated action plan can be attained by following the five (5) steps below *(supra:6).*

A. *Step 1: Diagnosis of a Problem*

- **Identify the Issue:** Management should recognize that there is a significant language barrier affecting the dissemination of information within school X. This impacts negatively on communication among staff, students, and parents and hinders the school's effectiveness as a learning organization.

- **Collection of Data:** Gather data through surveys, interviews, and feedback from stakeholders (i.e. teachers, students, parents) to understand the extent of the language barrier problem within the school.

B. Step 2: Planning and Designing Intervention Strategies:

- **Set realistic Objectives:** School management team (SMT) should establish clear objectives to bridge the language gap. These could include enhancing bilingual communication, providing translation services, and promoting language learning programs.
- **Develop Strategies:** Create strategies that focus on improving communication. This may involve hiring additional bilingual staff, using technology and/or volunteers for translation, and offering professional development (PD) for teachers to support bilingualism.

C. Step 3: Implementation of the Action Plan

- **Resource Allocation:** School managers should ensure the necessary resources (e.g., funding for translation tools, training programs) are allocated to support the interventions.
- **Training Programs:** Conduct training sessions for teachers and staff to enhance their language skills and cultural competence.

D. Step 4: Monitoring and Evaluation

- **Tracking of Progress:** School managers should regularly monitor the progress of the implemented strategies provide feedback and stick to the performance indicators.
- **Adjustment of interventions:** Make necessary adjustments based on feedback and evaluation results to ensure the interventions are effective in minimising the effects of the language barrier.
- **Technology Integration:** Use technology like translation apps, bilingual communication platforms, and online resources to facilitate better communication among stakeholders within the school.

E. Step 5: Institutionalizing The Changes:

- **Policy Development:** School managers in conjunction with relevant stakeholders should develop policies that support bilingual communication and cultural inclusivity within the school.
- **Sustainability:** Ensure that the changes are sustainable by embedding them into the school's culture and practices, and by providing ongoing support and resources to various stakeholders.

➤ *Action Plan*

Redefining a learning organization involves creating an environment that fosters continuous improvement, open communication, and effective management practices. **Figure 2** below illustrates is the proposed 10 points action plan followed by discussion on how each of the points in the plan can be accomplished:
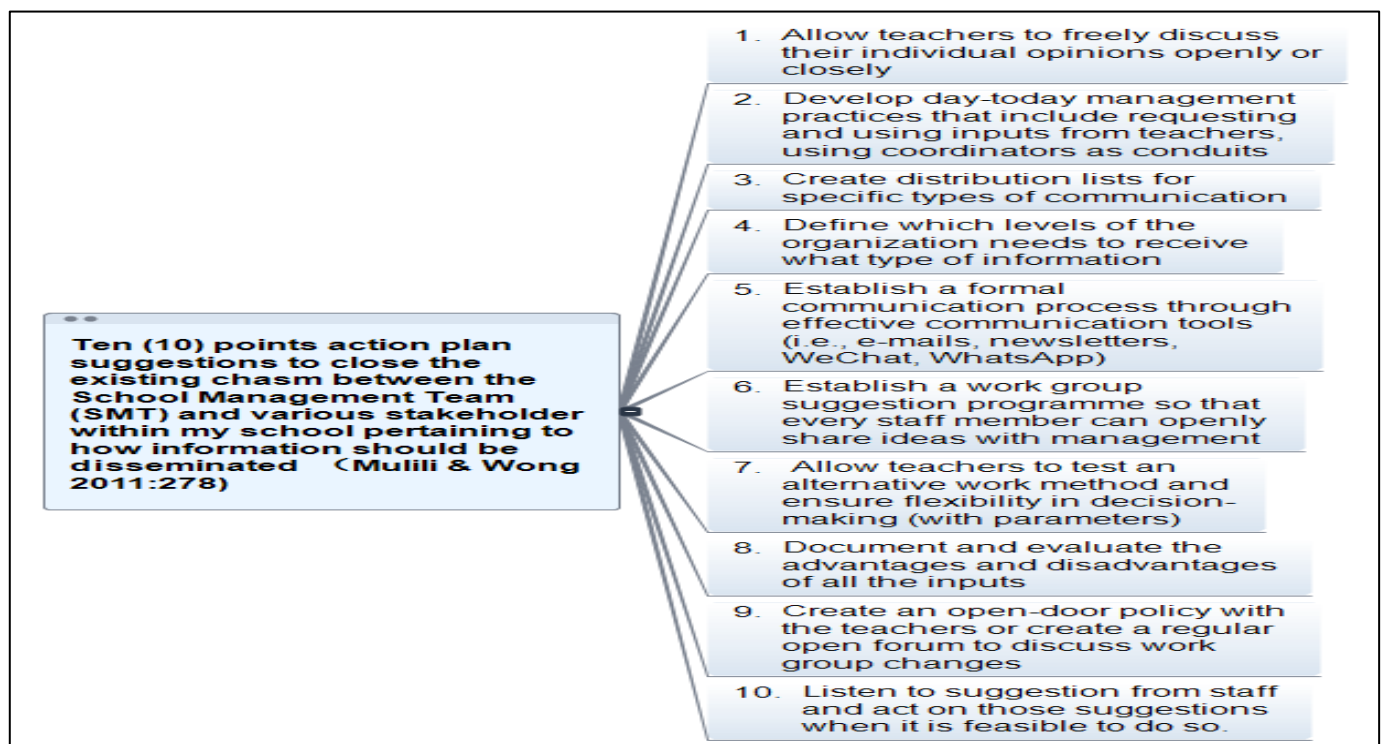

Fig 2: Ten (10) Point Action Plan (Suggested Model)
Source: own construction, https://www.matchware.com

➢ *Allow Teachers to Discuss Issues Freely:*

- Objective: To foster an open culture where teachers, students and parents feel safe to express concerns and ideas.
- How to Accomplish: By establishing regular formal and informal meetings where stakeholders can voice their opinions. Schools can also use platforms like suggestion boxes to garners complains and/or compliments or even conduct anonymous surveys to gather feedback without fear of repercussion.

➢ *Develop Day-To-Day Management Practices:*

- Objective: To ensure smooth and consistent school operations.
- How to accomplish: By creating a handbook outlining daily procedures for effective teaching and learning practices such as classroom management, administrative tasks, and student interactions. Managers should regularly review and update these practices to adapt to changing needs.

➢ *Create a Distribution List for Communication:*

- Objective: To make information to flow smoothly to relevant stakeholders within the school.
- How to accomplish: By developing emails or messaging groups on platforms like Wechat and Whatsapp and have lists segmented by departments, grade levels, or special committees. This will ensure all staff members receive timely and pertinent updates.

➢ *Decide Which Level of the Organization Needs which Type of Communication:*

- Objective: To tailor communication to be effective and relevant for different groups within the school.
- How to accomplish: By Categorizing information based on its relevance to different stakeholders (teachers, administrators, parents, students). This promotes a tiered communication system where critical information is prioritized.

➢ *Establish Formal Communication Processes:*

- Objective: To standardize how information is shared and ensure consistency.
- How to accomplish: By creating protocols for different types of communication (emergency notifications, routine updates, school/government policy changes). Utilize a combination of meetings, emails, newsletters, and digital platforms to disseminate information to all stakeholders.

➢ *Allow Teachers To Test Alternative Communication Methods:*

- Objective: To encourage innovation and identify the most effective communication strategies.
- How to Accomplish: By Piloting new innovative communication tools and methods such as collaborative apps such as Teams or Skype, social media groups, or innovative meeting formats. Collect feedback and assess their impact on communication efficiency.

➢ *Establish Working Groups:*

- Objective: To promote collaboration and targeted problem-solving by all stakeholders.
- How to accomplish: By forming committees or work groups within the school. Those group should focus on specific areas (curriculum development, student behaviour, technology integration, wellness programs). Managers should clearly define roles and objectives for each group and provide resources to support their work.

➢ *Document And Evaluate Advantages And Disadvantages:*

- Objective: To incessantly ameliorate practices through reflective evaluation.
- How to accomplish: By keeping and maintaining records of all implemented strategies, noting and building on successes and attending to challenges. School mangers should conduct regular reviews of the programs they implement in the school to assess the effectiveness and make necessary adjustments.

➢ *Create an Open-Door Policy:*

- Objective: To enhance accessibility and trust between staff members and management.
- How to Accomplish: By school managers making themselves available for one-on-one meetings with teachers and staff if and when they are required. School managers should clearly communicate the open-door policy and ensure that time is regularly allocated for those interactions.

➢ *Listen to Suggestions:*

- Objective: To value inputs and act on suggestions made by all within the school community.
- How to Accomplish: By establishing formal channels for suggestion submissions (digital forms, suggestion boxes). School managers should frequently review suggestions in staff meetings and provide prompt feedback on which ideas will be implemented or which would be explored further.

By systematically addressing each of these points elaborated in the proposed 10-point action plan, school X can evolve into a more dynamic, responsive, efficient and effective learning organization (Poell, 1999).

IV. CONCLUSION

The detailed exploration of learning organization entailed in this paper provided an analysis of the language barrier gap that contributes towards poor dissemination of information to all stakeholders at school X. The paper applied Chris Argyris' action theory to provide a comprehensive way of how school X can develop to become a complete learning organization. The paper identifies communication as a major problem and advocates for a double-loop theory and triple-loop to address the problem effectively (Argyris, 2002).

The proposed action plan which is underpinned in Organizational (OD) principles, stressed the need to implement a cyclical, research-based approach. By fostering a culture of continuous learning and collaborative problem-solving, school X can become a learning organization and attain the goals and objectives espoused in its mission and vision *(Infra:2)*.

To conclude, redefinition of school X as a learning organization involves more than just addressing the pressing issue of language barrier leading to a problem of the dissemination of information, but also deep-rooted systemic changes that need to be put in place. This transformation would require the collective effort of all stakeholders to embrace innovative practices suggested in this paper and an in-depth reflection on the learning processes. The ten-point action plan, objectives and implementation strategies proposed serves as a pragmatic guide for other schools that face the same challenges as school X. This paper has succeeded in illuminating the significance of collaboration, forward-thinking and the sharing of knowledge and ideas as the hallmarks to attain organizational excellence, efficiency and effectiveness. Those hallmarks are crucial in the endeavour to redefine schools as learning organisations for effective school leadership and management.

REFERENCES

[1]. Argyris, C. (2002). Double-loop learning, teaching and research. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*. 1(2):206-218.

[2]. Argyris, C., & Schön, D.A. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.

[3]. Berrell, M., & Wrathall, J. (2001). A model for Chinese management education: Adapting the case study method to transfer management knowledge. *In Cross Cultural Management Journal.* 1(8):28-44.

[4]. Bratianu, C. (2015). Organizational Knowledge Dynamics: Managing knowledge creation, acquisition, sharing and transformation. Hershey. IGI Global. DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8318-1.ch012.

[5]. Cummings, T., Worley, G. (2006): Organization Development & Change.

[6]. Gallos. *Organization Development: A Jossey Bass Reader.* San Fransisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

[7]. Heftberger, S. & Stary, S. (2004). *Partizipatives organisationales Lernen,* Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitatsverlag.

[8]. Karanikola, Z., Zogopoulos,C. & Panagiotopoulos, G. (2018). The learning organisation according to Senge: Recording and valiadation of the park research tool in primary education schools in the prefecture of Ilia. *European Centre of Human Resource Management* 5(6):1-19

[9]. Knipp, A. (2014). Learning by knowing, Hamburg: Diplomica GmbH.

[10]. Senge, P.M. (2011). Die funte Disziplin, 11., vollig uberarbeitete and atualisierte Aufl.,Stuttgart:Schaffer-Poeschel Verlag.

[11]. Lacey, M. Y. (1995). Internal consulting: Perspectives on the process of planned change. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 8(3), 75-84.

[12]. Mulili, B. M., & Wong, P. (2011). Continuous organizational development (COD). *Industrial and Commercial Training*, *43*(6), 377-384.

[13]. Ogbeiwi, O. (2017). Why written objectives need to be really SMART. *British Journal of Healthcare Management.* 23（7）：321-336.

[14]. Orsae-Larbi, J.A., & Asumeng, M.A. (2015). Organization Development models: A critical review and implications for creating learning organizations. *European Journal of Training and Development Studies*. 3(2):29-43.

[15]. Pedler, M., Burgoyne, J., and Boydell, T. (1989). 'Towards the learning company'. Management Education and Development, 20(1), 1-8.

[16]. Poell, R. F. (1999). *The learning organisation: A critical evaluation*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312072289

[17]. Senge, P. (1999). *The fifth discipline. The art & practice of the learning organisation*. London, UK: Random House.

[18]. Unger, H. (2002). *Organisationales Lernen durch Teams,* 2., verbesserte Auflage, Mering: Rainer Hampp Verlag.

[19]. Vavrek, R. (2018). Efficiency and inefficiency of public administration. In *Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People* (Vol. 7, Issue 1).

[20]. Wahren, H. E. (1996). *Das lernende Unternehmen. Theorie und Praxis des organisationalen Lernens*, Berlin: Verlag Walter de Gruyter.