

# Strategies for School Improvement: Transferring the Concept of Organizational Learning from an Oil Refinery to a Local Authority Education Department

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## 1. Introduction

In March 2004, Burnham Council, a Local Authority in central Scotland, adopted a new strategy for school improvement which involved transforming the Authority and its 93 schools into a learning organization. Despite the popularity of the concepts of 'learning organization', 'learning community', 'learning school' and the like in the school improvement literature, there are relatively few documented accounts of attempts to create learning organizations in the educational service. The aim of the present paper is to analyze the development and implementation of Burnham's organizational learning strategy, focusing on its impact on professional practice at all levels within the Authority. In so doing, we hope throw light not only on this approach to school improvement, but also to clarify the concept of organizational learning itself, and examine how comfortably it sits with the values of a public service and a caring profession. Given the origins of the organizational learning concept in the for-profit sector, as well as the continuing concern in some educational quarters about the desirability of importing business methods into education, the present paper pays close attention to the transferability of the learning organization concept across the private-public sector divide. It analyzes the process by which the Authority formed its initial concept of organizational learning and drew up its strategy of school improvement through organizational learning, whilst in a second paper (Reeves and Boreham, 2004) we analyze the way in which the Authority's 93 schools, its senior management team, its education officers, its educational psychologists and many others worked together to create a shared vision.

## 2. The concept of the learning organization in the education service

The terms 'learning organization' and 'organizational learning' first appeared in the for-profit management literature (Cyert and March, 1963; Argyris and Schön, 1978, 1996; Senge, 1990). The most widely cited definition of *learning organization* is 'an organization which facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself' (Pedler *et al.*, 1991). Another widely used definition is 'an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights (Garvin, 1993, p. 80). *Organizational learning* is usually defined as the distinctive activity or process in which a learning organization engages, on account of which it can be described as such (Denton, 1998). More specifically, to count as 'organizational', the learning in

which the organization's members are involved must possess four main characteristics. First, the learning must be directed towards a corporate goal – a single common objective, explicitly adopted by the organization and accepted by all the members as its overriding purpose. Second, the learning must take place collectively in the context of 'organizational enquiries' - working parties, teams and other small groups, set up to evaluate current practices and devise better ways of achieving the corporate goal. Third, all levels of employee must participate in these enquiries, not just managers, supervisors, technical experts or consultants, and basic-grade employees must be empowered to question the organisation's existing practices and change them. Finally, the results of these enquiries are shared widely throughout the organisation - they are 'learnt by the organisation' in the sense that they are embedded in its policies, structures, routines, culture and behaviour (Snyder and Cummings, 1992). Viewed in this way, organisational learning is a form of culture-change, and is positioned within socio-cultural theories of learning such as activity theory rather than individually focussed theories of learning such as behaviourism (cf Boreham and Morgan, 2004).

The concept of the learning organisation became popular in the for-profit sector as a kind of recipe for building an innovative, adaptive organisation which could improve its performance against the strong international competition which buffeted the UK and US economies in the 1980s and 90s. However, the idea soon passed into the public sector. Facing strong pressure to improve its public services as well as its industrial competitiveness, the UK government adopted the principle that 'the public service must become a learning organization' (1999, p. 56) and its various attempts to modernize the public services have been influenced to greater or lesser extents by this ideal. In the field of school improvement, many researchers including Fullan (1993), Sammons *et al.* (1996), Hargreaves (1999) and MacBeath and Mortimore (2001) have argued that becoming a learning organization is an essential precondition for continuous school improvement.

It is important to take account of the different ways in which the concept of organizational learning has been interpreted and counter-interpreted in the context of school improvement. Organizational learning was initially advocated as a means of school improvement by the OECD more than 20 years ago (Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1988). This took place against a background of shifting assumptions about the nature of change in education. The traditional (or 'default') change model has always been a hierarchical one in which new educational initiatives are designed by external experts and cascaded down for teachers to implement in their classrooms. However, in the 1980s it was increasingly accepted that schools should take control of their own improvement, and to this end, school development planning was introduced in England along with the local management of schools. In its original form, development planning gave each school the autonomy to identify its goals and objectives and make its own plans to improve the learning of its pupils. Development planning was introduced in Scotland in 1992 by Strathclyde Regional Council and then made obligatory for the rest of the country by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department in 1994. This concept of development planning is linked to the concept of organizational learning by a shared commitment to the decentralization of control. The early advocates of development planning wanted autonomy for schools, and the learning organization theorist Peter Senge wrote:

Learning organizations will, increasingly, be “localized” organizations, extending the maximum degree of authority and power as far from the top or corporate centre as possible. Localness means moving decisions down the organizational hierarchy ... Localness means unleashing people’s commitment by giving them the freedom to act. (Senge, 1990, p. 287)

In a similar vein, Argyris and Schön insisted that ‘organizational learning is carried out by practitioners who are inquirers in their own right’ (1996, p. 43). In this sense, both development planning and organizational learning can be interpreted as attempts to remove the restrictions of bureaucracy and top-down micro-management.

However, the notion of autonomy was rapidly diminished during the 1990s as both north and south of the border there was a rapid increase in the number of school inspections against published performance indicators (the first set of performance indicators appeared in 1992 and the inspectors’ quality assurance manual, *How Good Is Our School* (HGIOS), appeared in 1996). The fact that these inspection reports were made public added considerable pressure to comply with policy priorities which had been imposed from the top. In 1998, target setting became obligatory in Scotland and in 2000 the first Education Act passed by the newly-devolved Scottish Executive introduced the inspection of local authorities and made planning to meet targets a statutory obligation for both Local Authorities and individual schools. In this way, notions of autonomous development planning were increasingly overridden by the imposition of bureaucratic measures of accountability. This brought about a major change in the function of development planning - from being a tool used autonomously by a school to promote its own improvement, it became the instrument by which central and local government controlled (or attempted to control) what took place within the school. Instead of a being a space for self-determination, development planning became a space in which externally mandated teaching strategies were put into place within the school. Over the years, an increasing number of priorities and initiatives have cascaded down to schools from government, often with ring-fenced funding, and these now dictate much of the agenda of school development plans. From this perspective, Burnham’s new school improvement strategy can be regarded as a reaction against this bureaucratic approach and an attempt to return to the more autonomous principles which underpinned the original concept of development planning.

### **3. Burnham Council’s adoption of a learning organization strategy**

The school improvement strategy is known as Succeeding Together. Its aims and objectives are set out in Table 1 in the form in which they approved by the Education Committee and communicated to all 3,500 school employees. It began to be implemented at the school level with an Inset day in May 2004 when every school was asked to identify areas in which they most needed to improve.

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**Table 1**  
**Aims and Objectives of Succeeding Together**

(as stated in the policy document ).

Succeeding together aims to increase individual staff and school capability to significantly raise the levels of pupil achievement in relation to Education’s National priorities ... The following three objectives have been identified:

Success: improving attainment and achievement for every pupil

Learning: engaging everyone in evidence based improvement

Together: sharing and implementing what we learn

The policy document elaborates these objectives as follows:

Society requires individuals, communities and organizations to respond to the ever-increasing pace of change by engaging in continuous development and improvement. In order to respond effectively to this challenging agenda, it is crucial that an organization, whose core business is learning, is itself able to demonstrate the capacity to learn. *Succeeding Together therefore applies the principle of the Learning Organization, a proven business strategy, to our educational context.* More specifically, it focuses on our key purpose of raising attainment and achievement for every pupil (emphasis added).

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All the essential ideas underpinning organizational learning, as these terms were defined earlier in this paper, are contained in these statements, including the frank description of organizational learning as a ‘proven business strategy’ which is being applied in an educational context.

A distinctive feature of learning organizations is that they are not spontaneous developments – most organizations, left alone, remain static – but are planned responses to external challenges or threats. We have already mentioned that in the for-profit sector, the drive to transform bureaucratic companies into learning ones was a response to global competition. Similarly, in Burnham Local Authority, organizational learning was seized as a strategy for responding to external changes imposed by the Scottish Executive. In a letter sent by the Director of Education to all school employees, Succeeding Together is described as the major focus for school improvement over the following three years which will involve every member of staff “in learning how to significantly raise levels of student attainment and achievement against the National Priorities”.

Two dimensions of these changes were significant in shaping Burnham’s policy: the restructuring of the Scottish teaching profession following the acceptance of the McCrone Report (2000), and an increase in Local Authority and school accountability for meeting pupil attainment targets. The agreement which followed acceptance of the McCrone report *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century* limited working hours, increased pay and transferred non-teaching duties to classroom assistants. The

agreement also changed teachers' conditions of service by emphasizing their accountabilities and responsibilities beyond the classroom, especially for the school curriculum and school development planning, and emphasizing that teacher professionalism is corporate and collegial. Instead of the only form of career progression being promotion out of the classroom into management, the status of Chartered Teacher has been introduced based on occupational standards which emphasize pupil-centred education, commitment to improving professional practice through collaborative action and commitment to evidence based self-evaluation. Thus when the McCrone Report recommended that 'the duties of *all* teachers should include ... participating with colleagues in school self-improvement' (section 6.12, emphasis added), it in effect legislated for a more autonomous approach to school improvement in line with the original spirit of development planning and the principle of decentralization stressed in the for-profit sector organizational learning literature. The other significant externally imposed change was an increase in accountability. Whilst targets had been in place since 1998, the Scottish Executive now moved swiftly to set National Priorities for education, make the production of annual improvement plans by all Local Authorities and schools a statutory obligation and introduce the annual inspection of Authorities together with the publication of the inspection reports. In comparison with the national averages, Burnham was conspicuously behind on many measures of pupil attainment, and when the project began the Director of Education was under pressure from the Chief Executive to bring about a measurable improvement. The link between the restructuring of the Scottish teaching profession and increased accountability for pupil attainment is that the restructuring was intended to strengthen teacher professionalism and bring about a more adaptive, pupil-focused service.

The University of Stirling Institute of Education was already closely involved in developing courses for Chartered Teachers in Burnham, and in discussions with the Authority, the present writers drew attention to the need for the formal restructuring required by the post McCrone agreement to be accompanied by culture change if it was to be effective in terms of the improvement of pupil learning. During these discussions, reference was made to a study of organizational restructuring and culture change in the industrial setting of an oil refinery which one of the present writers had carried out (Boreham and Morgan, 2002; 2004). Given the UK government's predilection for introducing business management into the public service, it was hardly surprising that parallels were noted between the industrial and educational change agendas, especially in the secondary sector (Table 2).

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**Table 2**  
**Parallels between Restructuring in an Oil Refinery and a Local Authority Education Department**

MultiNational Oil Refinery	Burnham Council Education Services
Increased pressure by the international Board of Directors to meet performance targets prompted a strategy of continuous improvement using performance indicators based on oil industry benchmarking	Increased pressure by Scottish Executive and Burnham Council to meet performance targets prompted a strategy of continuous improvement using performance indicators based on benchmarking using national testing and

	exam results
The workforce in a typical plant was delayed by removing the grades of supervisor and charge hand and introducing generic plant managers (responsible for overseeing several plants) in place of dedicated plant managers	The workforce in secondary schools was delayed by abolishing the posts of Assistant Head Teacher, Principal Teacher (Subject specialist) and Assistant Principal Teacher and introducing generic Faculty Heads (called Principal Teachers(Curriculum) responsible for overseeing several subjects)
A drive to develop employees' skills based on a customer-centred model of the business process	A drive to develop teachers' professionalism based on occupational standards reflecting a pupil-centred model of the educational process
More power was delegated to self-managing teams, and all employees were encouraged to improve working practices by organizational enquiries	More authority was delegated to schools and within schools, to Faculty teams, and the (very small number of) teachers accepted for Chartered Teacher courses were encouraged to improve professional practice through action enquiries
There was a significant increase in work-based training (to 8 days per employee per year) to underpin continuous improvement	There was a significant increase in CPD (to 35 days per employee per year) to underpin increased professionalism

In response to the Director of Education's request, we provided a seminar to the senior management team on how a hierarchical, bureaucratic refinery, with strong vertical and horizontal demarcations and a production process which had hardly changed in decades, had been restructured into a flexible organization with a strong customer focus and a commitment to continuous improvement. The principle underlying the change was the adoption of the learning organization model as a way of adapting to the many challenges they faced. Eventually, after considerable negotiation and re-negotiation of the university team's role as consultants and researchers, the Burnham senior management team accepted the need for a positive reculturation policy to underpin their implementation of the post-McCrone restructuring. The availability of a closely researched example of an organization which had successfully managed change along similar lines, notwithstanding the fact that it was operating in a different sector, was seen as a resource worth exploring and the team responded positively to the suggestion that they visit the oil refinery for a more direct exploration of organizational learning in operation.

#### **4. The visit to MultiNational Oil's refinery**

Early in 2003, a group of about 12 staff from Burnham Council visited the MultiNational Oil Company's refinery to study how the latter had managed the change process. Analysis of this crucial visit provides direct insight into how the concept of organizational learning can bridge the public-private sector divide, and moreover how concepts from one domain can change meaning when they are used in another. The party included the Director of Education, sundry other officers, representatives of teachers' unions, a councillor and the university team. The invitation was extended by the manager at the refinery who had led the

implementation of the culture change strategy and who was responsible more than anyone else for implementing the concept of organizational learning in the refinery. In the hotel the night before the meeting, staff congregated to discuss what questions ought to be raised, and this reveals their perception of the extent to which the meaning of institutional change spans different sectors. The questions fell into four main categories: how to manage the change process; how to cope with the loss of specialists arising from the introduction of more flexible roles; how indicators can be used positively under the conditions of external accountability; and the changed role of management in a learning organization:

- the major issue in most peoples' minds was how the refinery had accomplished the change management process. Senior staff at Burnham were responsible for implementing the new structure and were keen to hear how the successful restructuring had taken place at MultiNational Oil. Questions here focused on how to mobilize the workforce to accept the changes and clarification of problems to do with the challenge to traditional professionalism which results from adopting a corporate improvement strategy.

- in both the refinery and the council, one direction of restructuring was the move from specialist departments led by specialists in the discipline to a more flexible structure of multi-functional departments with leaders who were not necessarily specialists in the whole of the field they were managing. The questions raised by the Burnham visitors included whether such leaders could maintain credibility, how the company coped with the loss of specialist expertise, and how to replace working under the direction of a specialist supervisor by self-directed working.

- both MultiNational Oil and Burnham Council were subject to external monitoring and benchmarking using numerical indicators of performance. In both cases, external bodies (the international Board and the Scottish Executive respectively) were prepared to name and shame underperformance in ways unknown in both sectors ten years earlier. The main questions the visitors raised here was what performativity measures were used at MultiNational Oil, and how could they be deployed positively.

- in both organizations, delegation of authority down the hierarchy, delayering and the emphasis on more participatory decision-making had significant implications for the role of management. Concerns focused on what the managers of a learning organization actually do, how to get the right balance between operational control and facilitation, and what kinds of management development had been provided.

The day of the visit began with a short journey by minibus to the refinery, where we entered a large classroom in the Training Centre and were met by the Manager of Training and Development (who had led the change process), Wayne Burge (a pseudonym) and a member of his staff. On the screen was a large slide saying cheerfully "Welcome to our Burnham Visitors". The meeting began with a presentation by the Director of Education for Burnham and one of her Deputies, who described their task as implementing the two recent political directives in Scotland - the decisions following the McCrone report *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century* and the Education Act (Scotland) 2000. Between them these required the Authority (1) to improve pupil attainment across the board, (2) change the orientation of teaching from delivering a set curriculum to more responsive, child-centered

approaches guided by formal quality assurance procedures, and (3) restructure the teaching profession by removing management hierarchies, transferring non-teaching duties from teachers to non-teaching staff, transfer the administrative duties of heads, deputies and principal teachers to business support managers and concentrate more of the formers' time on facilitating pupil learning across the school.

The hosts then screened a short film giving the history of the MultiNational Oil Company and an account of its recent international restructuring. Following this, the manager outlined the restructuring which had enabled the refinery to move from a position in 1992 when they were losing £5M per annum to a position today when they are leading on a range of performance indicators, including profitability, reduction in the number of accidents and protection of the environment from pollution. An explanation was offered of the means by which they made the transformation. Formerly a monolithic, hierarchical organization, in which a demarcated workforce followed fixed procedures laid down by management, the restructuring transformed this rigid and immutable body into a flexible organisation explicitly committed to continuous improvement through organisational learning. Thus the company's mission statement declares that *learning as an organisation* will help it meet the challenge of global competition, and stresses the need to *learn as a company from past mistakes and successes*, and the need to *openly share knowledge and learning within the company*. Wayne stressed the following aspects of the restructuring as vital to success.

(1) The company has introduced a four-year rolling business plan, which is shared with all employees and which specifies annual targets for improving all dimensions of the company's performance (these are finalised through an 'all to the table' decision making process, not by management decree). The plan is based on benchmarking, which identifies specific areas in which the refinery is falling behind its competitors are the target areas for improvement. Wayne stressed that they involved all staff in setting the targets in each year's business plan.

(2) An essential part of the workforce restructuring was to outsource all non-core activity and focus the work of the remaining employees on core business activities – a strategy which corresponds to the McCrone strategy of transferring administrative duties from Head Teachers to Business Support Managers, thus giving the former more space in which to lead their staff in improving pupil learning.

(3) At the refinery, each work unit draws up its own annual plan based on the targets in the company plan. Staff work commitment is based on the work unit plan, entailing that all employees have two kinds of responsibility: (a) their regular tasks (as instrument technician, for example) and (b) special tasks allocated to them to achieve specific targets in the plan. The company has increased its investment in work-based training and the content is closely linked to the improvement targets set in the business plans. The connection is made by Personal Development Plans (PDPs), which identify the learning each individual needs to meet the challenges identified in the work unit's annual plan. Training courses are mounted in response to the PDPs, and are thus closely linked to the learning needs required to achieve the improvement targets.

(4) Worker-led organizational enquiries are used as the prime means of improving working procedures. Several of these are described by Boreham and Morgan (2002; 2004); a typical example is the *Systematic Approach* (SA). This is an initiative whereby employees are encouraged to work independently in teams to solve problems encountered in the workplace. Essentially a form of collaborative action research, it can be initiated by any employee whenever an incident occurs or he/she encounters a difficulty in following an established procedure. When this happens, the employee calls a meeting of all the employees who are involved in some way. In this meeting, the employees identify the source of the problem and agree a new set of procedures. The introduction of SA was intended to replace the following of fixed procedures by a more pro-active and participatory approach, so that if employees felt that there was a problem, they would be empowered to try and solve it. <sup>1</sup>

(5) To develop a culture of organisational enquiry, every employee attended a residential course on solving problems at work by the systematic approach. The course ended with groups of participants each choosing a problem to investigate and hopefully solve when they returned to work. When the results of these projects were reviewed, it was found that while some had been unproductive, many had generated innovative solutions to problems concerning the reliability of the refining process, or safety, or productivity or environment protection. Problem solving by autonomous organisational enquiries is now part of everyday work, usually initiated by members of the workforce without any involvement of management. The role of management is primarily to promote a culture in which groups of employees will engage autonomously in these enquiries. Co-ordination and facilitation of organisational enquiries is through "Focal Points" (ordinary workers doubling as the representatives who deal with issues such as health and safety, training, etc.). These employees support organizational learning, co-ordinate activities and communicate results by electronic communication on the company intranet.

There then followed a question and answer session in which the Burnham employees addressed the special concerns that had been identified the night before. Inevitably, the focus was on how the change process had been managed. Burnham people felt that while a bad HMIE inspection could lead to senior staff being dismissed, there was a culture of protectionism at the school level which resisted the acknowledgment of underperformance and which would prevent significant change from being implemented. Wayne's reply to this was that there was a crucial need to legitimize the changes. He told how in the past, MultiNational Oil employees refused to accept that the refinery was performing badly and alleged that poor performance data had been fabricated. There were four main elements in the change management process. First was a participatory way of taking the details of the change forward. The MultiNational Oil employees contained many cynics but these were recruited to the cause of change by involving them in organizational enquiries, and the delegation of autonomy to work groups proved highly motivating. Second was an improvement of communication – previously, communication was management cascade, and many managers were poor at even this. Cascade was replaced by a high level of transparency and openness about all that was happening – and at this point, the Director of Education seemed to have gained an insight, exclaiming “It's necessary to be open from the start, to share all information with everybody, otherwise they'll be suspicious and resentful when they find out”. Third was to work closely with the

unions throughout. Finally, Wayne stressed that the only way to sustain the change process was by continually striving for improvement with renewed efforts.

Next, the hosts showed a video was shown of the company's use of employee-led organizational enquiries. This showed a conference in which basic grade workers reported their experiences with the systematic approach, which was described above.

## **5. Planning Succeeding Together**

The question now arises whether the learning organization concept makes sense in an educational context. Following the visit, the Authority threw itself into an energetic period of planning the new strategy. Of course, many members of the Authority's staff were already acquainted with the concept of organizational learning through the work of school improvement theorists and the general management literature, with Senge (1990) being especially well-known. One member had even worked at the MultiNational Oil refinery and others knew of similar developments in other oil companies. Many of the essential ideas of organizational learning could also be found in the Scottish Executive's policy documents on developing collegial decision making in schools. We are not making the simplistic suggestion that Burnham acquired their understanding of organizational learning from the visit to MultiNational Oil. On the other hand, as we will show, members of the SMT made use of many ideas they learnt at MultiNational Oil when they were planning Succeeding Together. The issue is really is how far the experience at MultiNational Oil was influential in guiding the planning process. The data for this part of the paper consists of: (1) verbatim notes of meetings compiled during the planning process, (2) a series of in-depth interviews in Spring 2004 in which we asked the senior management team to reflect on the visit and gauge its relevance to their own work, (3) a series of in-depth interviews with a QDO and the staff of one secondary school, and (4) our own experience as consultants to the development of the Succeeding Together strategy.

### *First Planning Meeting*

This meeting was convened to agree the objectives and modus operandi of the new school improvement strategy. In the event, the meeting only managed to complete the definition of the objectives of Succeeding Together. Discussion focused on one particular weakness with the current approach to development planning - its extremely diffuse goals, about which a recent seminar of heads had commented adversely. With HMIE pressing core skills and SEED pressing five National Priorities on the school development planning agenda, and seven areas of HGIOS plus a host of special initiatives to incorporate too, it was felt that there was a need for a clearer focus. The significance of the MultiNational Oil visit was revealed when one member of the planning team said

In the past, we have failed to work together. MultiNational Oil was impressive because they did all focus on one common approach.

A member of the SMT then proposed that the Authority adopt a 'shared vision' which s/he defined as a common view of the needs of their young people; everyone, s/he argued, should consciously work to this common goal. After lengthy discussion, this was defined as a triad of attainment, achievement and inclusion and expressed simply

(see Table 1). It had been noted during the visit to the refinery that the agreed targets were displayed everywhere - on posters in all work spaces, on office stationery, and so on; following this example, the common vision was reproduced on posters and bookmarks supplied to all schools.

### *Second Planning Meeting*

This meeting addressed the Succeeding Together *modus operandi*. The starting point for the discussion was the purpose of the post-McCrone structure to empower class teachers as the prime agency for school improvement. In place of top-down initiatives, the post McCrone agreement envisaged a strengthening of teachers' professionalism. The SMT's attempt to conceptualize what needed was assisted when a member said:

There's a comparison with MultiNational Oil. MultiNational put the workers in charge of improvements by giving them the lead role in fields such as the procedures and competence development methodology [one of the types of organizational enquiry] – the only way to engage with the problems is to build on *their* perceptions of them.

Whilst the idea of action research was of course quite familiar, and a small number of teachers from Burnham were already engaged in action enquiry as part of the Chartered Teachers' course, it appears that watching the film of organizational enquiries in action at MultiNational Oil had crystallized this idea in the SMT members' minds. It was consequently decided that each school would select an aspect of their performance, using available indicators, where there was the biggest need for improvement and to tackle it through teacher-led collaborative action research. It was decided to dedicate some of the newly-expanded CPD programme to the direct support of the organizational enquiries by making some of the 35 hours for CPD available for the schools' action research projects, by offering courses in action research and by using CPD resources to build networks to facilitate cross-school communication. However, whilst an expanded training programme of this kind had underpinned the organizational learning strategy at MultiNational Oil, too much could easily be made of the analogy as the expansion of CPD was ordained by the post-McCrone agreement, and the need for cross-Authority professional networks had already been identified in Burnham.

The concept of school improvement as organizational learning which emerged from the planning meetings can be represented as five co-ordinated activities: (1) a shared vision; (2) the decentralization of control over the school improvement process; (3) organization of the school improvement activity in school-based organizational enquiries, stressing action research and evidence-based decisions; (4) knowledge sharing, horizontally and bottom-up as well as top-down and (5) the use of CPD to develop capacity for organizational learning by directly supporting the organizational enquiries.

(1) *A shared vision* The shared vision was stated by the Director of Education as “to maximize the life chances for every single student in Burnham” in the letter sent to every school employee, which announced that Succeeding Together was intended “to enable all of us to work together towards this goal”. This was backed up by the aims

and objectives (Table 1). We provide a detailed analysis of how this vision was developed by the Authority in another paper (Reeves and Boreham, 2004).

(2) *Decentralization* The importance of decentralization in fostering organizational learning has already been mentioned. In Burnham, the fundamental basis of the strategy is to give each school more autonomy to identify areas for improvement and design new approaches to teaching and learning. Quoting from the letter sent to every school employee:

Each school will be asked to develop ways of further improving the attainment and achievement of its pupils, based on an exploration of the pupils' learning needs in the specific context of the school and the local community.

This articulates the fundamental assumption that a school's improvement activities must be based on the circumstances, challenges and opportunities in that specific school. *Succeeding Together* requires that schools undertake an initial period of exploration to clarify what these are – and evidence them.

Implementing this aspect of the strategy has required extensive restructuring of the process of Development Planning. Previously, Development Planning required schools to set objectives in the seven areas of HGIOS following a bureaucratic process which accorded all of them equal priority, regardless of the circumstances in the school. In seminars with head teachers and education service managers, several factors were agreed to limit the effectiveness of this bureaucratic approach. Covering a wide range of objectives resulted in a debilitating diffusion of energy, and planning became too much of a defensive paper exercise carried out to 'cover backs' in fear of a style of inspection which came looking for omissions in the documentation. Moreover, there were insufficient resources to tackle all the objectives. In the words of one interviewee:

people are responding to what they see as various demands from different directions including inspections ... there's an awful lot of development planning going on in terms of documents [instead of what's really needed, which is] making sure that in practice people are focused on what is really going to make a difference' (interview with officer).

In place of this, a new method of improvement planning was designed by the Stirling University research team in collaboration with school and Authority staff which required each school to identify just one priority area in which the school needed to make improvements. At time of writing, all 93 schools have completed this initial stage and reports from the Quality Development Officers who have been supporting this process are encouraging:

It's interesting how they're all geared towards seeing the same things that's causing a barrier to success in that particular school ... it's amazing how they say they have got a consensus of opinion more readily than they ever thought was possible (interview with QDO).

### *(3) Evidence-based school improvement through action research*

Focusing on the priority area for improvement, each school engages in two or three action research projects to deal with it. In a very real sense, this brings about a major change in the way quality assurance is planned, a shift in emphasis from writing documents to taking action. The planning documents are restricted to three pages whilst the identification of the need for improvement is brought about by evidence-based action research. As the policy document describes it:

Success in terms of improving attainment and achievement for every pupil will be achieved by collaborative learning, and specifically through action inquiry research projects. This means engaging everyone in evidence based improvement. Action inquiry involves all staff working collaboratively to:

- Thoroughly explore where, why and how students are experiencing barriers to learning
- Develop, plan and implement strategies to bring about improvement
- Monitor and evaluate students' responses to the strategies and the effect on learning
- Refine and develop the successful aspects of the intervention, further develop and refine the interventions as required and repeat the cycle of intervention and evaluation

The procedures to be followed are articulated in a Guide to Implementing Succeeding Together which was developed by the Stirling University research team in collaboration with a wide range of schools and other members of the Authority's educational services, drawing on standard approaches to action research, a process which is analyzed in more detail in Reeves and Boreham (2004).

### *(4) Knowledge sharing*

So that the whole organization learns from the action enquiries, the intention is that lessons learned will be shared throughout the school, between schools and information will move up the hierarchy as well as down. As the Director's letter to all school employees stated:

- Lessons learned from these projects will be shared across the Authority
- The educational Services Team at [head office] will support these school-directed projects, and will learn from them how it can improve its own practices and procedures.

And as the policy booklet states:

Learning from action research will impact on support for schools from central services which will be reviewed as required

### *(5) Developing capacity for organizational learning by CPD*

The post-McCrone agreement provides a massive increase in CPD entitlement (some would say the imposition of an obligation to undertake CPD) up to 35 hours per annum, and part of this extra resource will be devoted to Succeeding Together. While the traditional course provision will continue, participation in action enquiry projects ‘will form a significant part of the CPD commitment of individuals’ (the Succeeding Together policy document). A major contribution is being made by the University of Stirling MEd course in professional enquiry, which develops the capacity of aspiring Chartered Teachers to engage in evidence informed practice, and whose course members are providing internal consultancy for schools in Succeeding Together.

## **6. Reflections by the Senior Management Team on the significance of the visit to MultiNational Oil**

After a few months, we carried out a series of interviews with the SMT to explore their perceptions of how the Succeeding Together strategy had been influenced by the example of MultiNational Oil. The SMT included the Director of Education, two deputies, the officer responsible for implementing the post McCrone agreement, the head of quality assurance and others. At this stage, the Director of Education and the officer responsible for the restructuring acknowledged a significant influence on their thinking, while the others acknowledged only a limited influence.

Perhaps the most useful part of the visit for the Director of Education related to the foremost item in the minds of the visitors to MultiNational Oil, how the change process had been managed. For the Director of Education, the person responsible for managing the change initiative at MultiNational Oil, Wayne Burge, was remembered as a charismatic character who had been particularly inspiring. As stated above, his response to the Burnham visitors' key question had been the importance of legitimizing the changes. The Director of Education recalled:

I think Wayne Burge and his requirement that you’re changing a culture and legitimizing the reasons for that and evidencing it, was crucial to me. I’ve kept that in forefront of my mind, you know.

The onus is on us to legitimize any change .. when I came back [from the visit to MultiNational Oil] I said to the two Heads of Service “You haven’t done the job properly, you need to go back and do it again ... [because]... it’s not coming from them, they’ve not taken ownership, they feel it’s imposed ... they understand it all, but they just don’t want to do it ...” It was from your Wayne Burge approach, that reading those minutes [of a negotiating committee in which there was opposition to the new structure] I realized we haven’t legitimized it ... the onus is on us for any change, to ensure that we explain it and justify it, really justify it.

Two other aspects of the visit to MultiNational Oil had impressed the Director. One was the way the company had decentralized the improvement process by empowering every member of the workforce as an agent of change, thus encouraging the growth of a learning community and facilitating lateral communication.

I think it was every time [Wayne] was talking I was thinking of McCrone, freeing up the individual who is the expert at the operation, at the point of delivery. We need to hear them, and we need to hear what they're saying, and therefore I think that's been a crucial message ... Going round all the schools, we met the classroom support assistants and I said "You must see an awful lot going on in classrooms. Do you share it?" - "Mmm". Now that was Wayne Burge, you know - if you see it you share it. [Suppose] there's one teacher struggling with an aspect that somebody else has cracked, I said. "Wouldn't you suggest getting them together to talk?" - "Who - me?" So I said "What would make you say that?" - "Oh, if the teachers asked us." So I met the teachers and said "Did you ever ask?" "No, we talk about professional development, and we talk about, you know, enquiry, and nose into how others are doing". "Would you not ask [the classroom teaching assistants]?" "We've never thought of that!" ... That was from Wayne Burge, ... the idea they can solve each other's problems ... That came from Wayne Burge, and that's the message we're putting in. We've *all* got superior information, and [we must] share it and learn from it.

The other thing which had impressed the Burnham Director was the way MultiNational Oil's continuous improvement was targeted on performance deficits, which they identified by benchmarking with other refineries. Focusing on these deficits, they carried out organizational enquiries to ascertain what was going wrong in the specific areas where they were weak. Burnham possessed a Performance Unit which calculated a range of performance indicators for each school, compared them with national benchmarks and discussed the results with head teachers. However, this was where it ended, and many Heads found the burden of reviewing performance indicators wearisome. What apparently impressed the Director of Education was that at MultiNational Oil performance indicators were not ends in themselves, but indicators of where improvement was necessary and led directly to organizational enquiries:

The problems - you need to establish the problems, so therefore if things are up, saying it, acknowledging it and wanting to change it - that's the professional core which we're going to improve. That's my message. I would never have said that before.

One other member of the SMT had found the visit a clear model of how a learning organization might operate, and had no difficulty in applying it in the educational context:

we learned a lot because it was about the way in which MultiNational Oil were seeking to work ... which itself was seeking to learn, and the entire strategy as far as I'm concerned, is one that will bring about good focus, a good collaboration and a wide, a very wide use of evidence based approaches in what we're doing within our schools ...

However, the other members of the SMT were noticeably less influenced by the visit, at least when they were viewing it with hindsight. The only significance they attached to the visit was the way MultiNational Oil illustrated workforce restructuring through delayering and the formation of multidisciplinary teams. The SMT members had

encountered concepts such as delayering in the McCrone policy documents; arguably, the visit gave most of them their first concrete example of what it meant:

the way they de-layered, the way they did the kind of cross training and reducing the number of very separate jobs - that's interesting. In the secondary context that's particularly interesting because that is a real challenge.

the McCrone implementation and what they've done in MultiNational Oil with their de-layering seem to reflect quite well, and how they had managed to utilize the ideas and talents of individuals ... The fact that it had worked in MultiNational Oil was very powerful

one thing that's impressed me about the MultiNational Oil initiative was getting people with specific skills coming together in a multi-skilled team and looking at what they could lend to each other to find a solution to the whole problem. If we can get people into that mind set, that would make a difference

I'm really interested in the idea of the self-managing teams because I think that could work. I don't see any, you know, barriers to that working. I think that should definitely be given an opportunity to work.

## **7. Discussion**

Despite the parallels people saw between the improvement strategies at Burnham and MultiNational Oil, and the former's willingness to describe Succeeding Together as 'organizational learning' and 'a proven business strategy', many aspects of MultiNational Oil's strategy – including some which were heavily underlined by Wayne – were not adopted by Burnham. This might indicate the essential differences between organizational learning in the two sectors, or the existence of barriers in the public sector which make it difficult to implement organizational learning in that environment.

At time of writing, many months after the launch, the consultants' suggestion that schools share their improvement plans with each other has not been implemented. Instead, the QDOs are insisting that each school submit its plan to them, they assess it and return it to the school. Thus in Burnham, the old QA hierarchy is still very much in existence. At MultiNational Oil, as we have remarked, these grades were simply stripped out. Clearly, there are significant structural differences between the public and private sectors. At MultiNational Oil refinery, all staff are answerable to the site manager and him/her alone. However, the improvement process in Burnham is not controlled by the Director of Education alone. Under the new arrangements for 'proportionate' HMIE inspection of schools, the Authority's QDOs have been partly co-opted to the inspectorate - and thus they now have a dual loyalty, since some of the quality assurance work they perform comes directly under the Scottish Executive and not their Local Authority management. This is a very interesting innovation which is raising the suspicion among some Authorities that they are going to be cut out of education altogether.

The idea of applying 'proven business strategies' to the improvement of education dates from the period of high-Thatcherism, when figures such as Sir Keith Joseph,

Kenneth Baker and Sir Ron Dearing installed the techniques of industrial management and the disciplines of the market economy into the educational system. Whilst educationalists' protestations of outrage - possibly overplayed at the time - have since diminished, structural and cultural differences between the private and public sectors remain, and many social scientists have argued that these limit the transferability of the concept of the learning organization to education and the civil service ( see Edmonstone, 1990; Smith and Taylor, 2000). Local authorities are constituted for the top-down implementation of policies decided by the elected members of national and local governments, limiting the delegation of authority to front-line staff. Moreover, the hierarchy of fixed roles is locked in by a complex of nationally negotiated employment contracts and national legislation which cannot be dissolved by an individual local government employer.

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<sup>1</sup> In this sense, SA seems to promote a mastery-approach to problems. Boreham and Morgan (2001, p.97) quote an interviewee who stated, “The systematic approach has made a lot of people more aware of how you go about getting something done if there’s a problem, rather than whinge about it .. You tend to do something about it”. Diener and Dweck (1978) found that when individuals adopted a mastery approach towards tasks, they were more likely to persist in the face of failure. Contrariwise, individuals who felt under pressure to perform adopted what they labeled a “helpless” approach, that is, believing they could not alter the outcome and/or desisting from the task. Because the systematic approach specifically promotes a mastery-orientation towards problems, it was experienced positively by employees (Remedios and Boreham, 2004).