Summary

Expansive Learning in a School Organisation
An Activity-based Theoretical Model for Primary Schools

Since the 1990s an increasing number of primary schools in the Netherlands have switched to Developmental Education (DE). The total number is still modest: Of the 7,000 primary schools, approximately 5% have implemented DE. The majority of schools employ Program Oriented Education (POE). The basis of the curriculum and educational methods consists in the application of this approach. An increasing number of school teams consider this approach to have a negative impact on student participation. They claim an incompatibility between a didactic method aimed at motivating children and rigid educational programmes. By contrast, DE schools strive to offer pupils more input regarding learning processes and educational resources, in order to ensure more challenging and effective training. Schools have discovered that the switch from POE to DE requires a change in their organisation. Teachers using the DE approach offer pupils more opportunities to provide input during class. The same principle applies regarding DE school leadership as teachers participate in shared governance. The basis of this dissertation is that the school team needs to be willing to become a learning organisation. This gives rise to the following questions: What does it mean for a DE school to be a learning organisation? And, having established the theoretical framework regarding this concept, how does it surface in actual practice? That is the primary objective of this research.

A theoretical model regarding primary schools that was aimed at expansively learning school organisations was developed in this study in order to document the process of change from POE to DE. This model is based on the ‘expansive learning’ concept first proposed by the Finnish educationalist Engeström. In his view, this concept represents a collective learning process in which an organisation (activity system) reflects on an existing, ill-functioning practice. The old system is critically evaluated and adapted to a new system. Specifically: a new practice is developed within the school team as a result of a new vision and new ideas, leading to a different educational approach. The model developed in this dissertation provides tools with which to examine current practice, specifically to what extent hallmarks of a learning organisation are evident at primary schools that have implemented DE.

Chapter 1 consists of an introduction to this study, containing the research questions, the theoretical framework, the research design and methodology. The main research question of this study is:

What are the characteristics of DE schools as learning organisations?

Specific objectives are:

a. Which factors promote or impede the transition to becoming a learning DE school?
b. What kind of leadership best serves a learning DE school?

This research aims to answer these questions, with an emphasis on theoretical exploration. The theoretical framework offers an insight into a DE school.

Chapter 2 formulates the basic principles of the DE concept. DE aims to provide a broad education in which pupils develop the ability to critically self-evaluate, also gaining a sense of responsibility for their actions and resulting consequences on society at large. Pupils also learn to become responsible for the group process in the classroom. DE aims to connect meaningful education to themes that relate to pupils’ perception of the world around them. The goal of education is to enable pupils to participate in the cultural practices of their communities, now and in the future. In order to achieve this goal, pupils need to acquire the following skills at school: communication, critical thinking, and gaining well-founded insights through research. These qualities are demanded by today’s society. DE is associated with Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory. Vygotsky considered humans to be inherently cultural and social beings. In the context of upbringing and education this implies that the goal of child development is the establishment of their personal and cultural identity. In the context of child development, the adult functions as someone who provides personalised support; s/he uses particular tools to that effect. Vygotsky summarised his view on the regular of human action in a triangle diagram (Figure A):

Figure A. The Subject/Object/Tools model (Vygotsky, 1978)
The Vygotsky model, applied to the specific situation of upbringing and education, is used as the basis for a model that describes the dynamic development of a school organisation. The school team also pursues a goal (such as becoming a learning organisation), and the question rises as to which tools need to be utilised for the regulation of teachers’ action. Activity theory, which models how a conglomerate of activities is implemented in a given context with a certain goal, can be regarded as a special example of Vygotsky’s cultural-historic theory.

Chapter 3 describes the aspects that matter most when school education undergoes renewal. Engeström expanded Vygotsky’s model. Based on Engeström’s theory we regard a primary school undergoing renewal as an activity system that develops over time. People learn, individually and in cooperation, but the system - developed by people - as a whole also learns. According to Engeström, the goal and the result of (expansive) learning is the development of novel forms of activity within the system. Figure B shows his original model:

![Engeström’s activity system](image)

In our research the above mentioned model has been developed further to make it applicable to a primary school implementing DE. Aspects of educational development are linked to the activity system model.

What does it mean for a developing organisation to be considered a learning organisation? This question is addressed in Chapter 4. One model that emerges from the organisation development literature is Van Emst’s diamond (Figure C).

![Van Emst’s diamond](image)

This model illustrates the relationship between structure and culture within learning organisations. Innovations in education often cause tensions between -for example - teachers, viewpoints, and methods, but also among teachers, or between the school organisation and the new modus operandi being implemented. In an organisation with its own structure and culture, the transition from POE to DE creates tensions. Activity theory states that tensions, dilemmas and confrontations are prerequisites to development. The question is how the school team handles those tensions. Do teachers engage in discussion with one another and with school leaders, and can they cope with the accompanying emotions? Do they make progress toward the common goal, or do they resist and give up?

In Chapter 5 Van Emst’s diamond is connected to Engeström’s triangle. The connections originate at the corners of the triangle that represent effective interventions to increase the organisation’s ability to self-improve. As a result of the interventions, tensions arise due to a need for rationalised (sometimes normative) choices to enable the organisation to develop. For example, do we choose a manager as a principal who will take care of an organisation’s structural aspects, or do we choose a principal who invests in the personal development of teachers? Or is a combination of the two possible? We have created our own version of the original Engeström model: the balance model (Figure D), which serves to understand and shape the implementation of DE. The reason for creating our own model lies in the fact that Engeström’s model appeared insufficient in connecting all of the aspects of educational reforms. We explain the various elements of the model (I through VII) relative to the original model, and state why it is called the balance model.
The Object (II), the target of reform, is the educational practice within the learning organisation of the school, which is on a trajectory towards DE.

The Subject (IV) needs to be viewed in broad terms: the DE school (or potentially a group of DE schools) with their actors (school teams, individual teachers, internal counsellor, principals).

In order to implement DE, Tools (III) need to be employed, such as (external) support via coaching or consultation with colleagues.

The system’s core cannot rotate: the Communities of Practice (VI), represented as a hexagon, provide energy to the propellers and determine the course. The choice of the plural form ‘communities’ is deliberate. There are several interrelated communities that interact: teachers; teachers and management; teachers and parents; teachers and pupils; teachers, management and the school inspection; etcetera. People’s learning experience is the central theme. Teacher professional development, and the formulation of vision statements regarding high-quality DE all take place within the hexagon. This is where choices need to be made regarding educational goals, primary goals, methods, etcetera, in consultation with all actors.

Teachers are active in a particular Role (I), which is dictated by the school management, in consultation with the teaching staff, via shared governance.

Demarcation occurs by delineating the Field and developing Rules (V). This includes facilitating, setting boundaries, supporting the team, and formulating internal agreements.

The end result of the entire change is called Institutionalisation (VII): the transition and consolidation from the old to the new system where the new educational concept has taken hold.

In Engeström’s model, ‘Outcome’ is the result of what happens on the line connecting ‘Subject’ and ‘Object’. This is, however, too static, and does not adequately express the dynamics associated with the evolution of the system. In the diagram showing the balance model this is visualized by the spinning diamond, which acts as a propeller. An activity system only develops when faced with tension, as previously mentioned in discussing Van Emst’s diamond.

A school principal can choose to allocate his or her time to investing in people through active coaching. That same time cannot also be allotted to the writing of a school management plan, the preparation of a school budget, or managing fiscal matters. The need to choose gives rise to tensions regarding time allocation. These and other tensions are incorporated in the model by adding propellers to components I, III and V. The ‘s’ (structure) and ‘c’ (culture) at the propellers represent the tension. As a result of these tensions, the propellers start to spin, boosting the entire system. There needs to be a certain balance for the system to take off, hence the term ‘balance model’. In case of an unbalance in one of the components, the model will deviate...
from its upward trajectory and stall. As mentioned, the system's core, the hexagon, is unable to spin.

The actors' accomplishment of gaining ownership of the concept is positioned in the heart of the system. It is not, as in Engeström's model, a single moment along the line between 'Subject' and 'Object', but a sequence of developments over time.

Up to this point, the research was primarily focused on the theory, which is indeed the main focus of this study. In the remainder of this dissertation, the 'balance model' is related to practice. Chapter 6 includes the experimental design and justification of the methods employed in this empirical exploration. It is a qualitative approach, for which we conducted 50 interviews at 14 schools. We investigated how the teachers, internal counsellors, and school principals experienced the implementation of DE. Following from this, we have attempted to list primary school characteristics that are required for successful implementation of DE as a learning organisation. In this, we distinguish 'closed DE codes' that originate from the literature, and 'open DE codes' that originate from practice.

The empirical study results in a series of descriptions picturing the state of the art at certain moments ('photographs') and for one school during a longer period ('film'). A snapshot of 14 schools is created containing an analysis of the point at which a school assesses its development. Such an analysis is comparable to a photograph, a representation of what takes place at that moment. In addition, we have created a film of one of the 14 schools. This school was the first to implement DE, and the 'film' represents its development over a period of four consecutive years. Progress over time is measured by comparing data collected at two different moments. The combination of these two methods assesses whether the theoretical framework can be used to understand what takes place in the school organisation of the 14 different cases.

The results are presented in chapter 7, and chapter 8 contains the conclusions, discussion and recommendations. The force driving the balance model (i.e. the action required to enable the propellers to boost the model) are referred to as the four dimensions of development of a DE school as a learning organisation that we extracted from the data. These four developmental dimensions can also be presented as DE-school characteristics (answer to the main question):

- The personal development of all staff members of the school. It is important for team members to discuss and think about 'quality education'. It is critical for team members to be open and willing to reflect on their own teaching together with the pupils, and to operate as a team member. This creates an atmosphere that enables the team to learn and improve together. Each team member contributes to the improvement of daily practice. This results in self-assessing teachers gaining ownership of the DE concept, incorporating it in his or her personality. The result of this process then becomes an integral part of school development. The 'Object' of this communal self-assessment is the improvement of teaching practice, which subsequently influences the development and education of pupils in a positive way.

- A normative approach to quality education. Engeström has a materialistic view on humanity and the world. His views on the development of organisations have not progressed beyond the system level and his model is mostly technocratic, materialistic, and functionalistic in nature. He does not focus on normative questions even though questions such as these belong in a model for school development: Which values and norms do we convey to the pupils, given our points of view and ideas? DE and POE are fundamentally different; they are based on differing pedagogic-didactic sources. By placing emphasis on normativity, the learning teacher is given the opportunity to integrate his or her own normative personal identity and professionalism in being a DE teacher.

- The dynamics in the development of the overall system is apparent from the tension between structure and culture, as illustrated in the diamond. In a cooperatively self-assessing team, opinions will differ between teachers. A school principal will challenge his team to identify ways to decouple from the programmatic educational offerings and change to an approach in which pupils have more input and more responsibility. This change in the role of the teacher creates tension in the way s/he perceives his or her task, and generates a dynamic interaction among the team and the organisation as a whole.

- The developmental goal of the organisation to reach a dynamic balance to incorporate implementation goals of the DE concept in its activity system is important for the process of institutionalisation of the process. This developmental goal represents a striving for a sense of community, involving all participants in the organisation. The shared vision is to become an integral part of the organisation, which is then able to act effectively as a DE ambassador, informing others with conviction what the underlying principles are and why people act the way they do.

Based on the research it can be concluded that the balance model can indeed serve as a theoretical framework to explore and understand the process of change that a school undergoes in becoming a learning DE school. This enables us to answer the questions from Chapter 1. The main question was: What are the characteristics of DE schools as learning organisations? This has been answered above through the four developmental dimensions.
There were two secondary research questions:

a. Which factors stimulate or impede the transition towards a learning DE school? Stimulating factors are: ensuring the personal development of the teachers; sharing knowledge within the team; shared governance; and consolidation of components, which refers to the documentation of agreements made throughout the process. Impeding factors are often associated with structural elements in the school organisation, as has been shown in this research: isolationism (teachers forming units based on the grades they teach, while not fully participating in team activities); using school methods as the sole source and guiding principle (DE requires, in addition to using school methods, a flexible attitude towards other sources of information that are closely related to pupils’ experiences); weak leadership with a one-sided focus on structure; test-directed teaching (the strict monitoring of pupils with student scores being used as a measure of performance); a lack of decisiveness (joint implementation of POE and DE, with no clear selection of one over the other); management influence on structure. In the face of structural persistence of one or more impeding factors, and the incorporation of these factors in the process of institutionalisation, the ability of an organisation to self-improve will be impaired.

b. What kind of leadership is required in a learning DE school? Weak leadership may be prevented through a combination of educational leadership (which defines the structure) and transformational leadership (which ensures a culture of personal development of teachers).

The balance model, based on activity theory, connects the educational concepts ‘developmentally oriented education’ and ‘learning school organisation’. We emphasize that, based on the principals of DE and a learning organisation, a DE school is to present itself as learning organisation in order to match the theory that led to its very existence.