

Visions of 21st Century Education and Evolutionary-Teal – A Diffractive Analysis

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Abstract

The earth is currently in a phase of rapid transformation; climate change, globalization, digitalization to mention a few of the challenges. As a response, organizations such as OECD and the United Nations have proposed a variety of visionary documents for '21st century education'. These documents focus primarily on the role of competences such as digital literacy and intercultural communication. This paper will investigate how education can be understood also from a holistic perspective based on the needs of humans and the earth.

The paper is based on Frederic Laloux's organization model 'evolutionary-teal', which constructs a holistic approach to organizations and the humans in them based on Ken Wilber's integral perspective on human cognition.

The paper benefits methodologically from a diffractive reading, based on Karen Barad and the author's previous work where a variety of materials are read through one another. The purpose is to push ideas forward in an affirmative manner, rather than only to critique what is problematic.

The analysis will show that even visionary documents lack the vision to think about education beyond an instrumental paradigm. However, the diffractive reading will provide a few openings for formulating the challenges of education as an opportunity to educate while still putting the earthly and human wellbeing first.

Keywords: 21st century education, evolutionary-teal, diffractive analysis.

1. Background: 21st century education

The earth is currently in a phase of rapid transformation; climate change, globalization, digitalization to mention a few of the challenges. Yet, schooling today remains organized much the same as it was in the previous century. As a response, a range of organizations such as OECD, P21, and the United Nations have proposed a variety of visionary documents for 21st century education (also 21st century learning/skills/knowledge). Previous research concludes that documents on 21st century education focus primarily on two main justifications: technological modernization and globalization [1]. Based on these two justifications, the documents propose skills such as digital literacy and intercultural communication. However, the interests of the organizations also affect the themes highlighted in the documents. Some stakeholders, for example in the P21 framework, are involved in the technology business and others are concerned about the future economy. Each stakeholder has their own point of departure, and the documents put these aspects together in a summative manner. How can 21st century education instead be understood from a holistic perspective?

Lately, the organization model "evolutionary-teal", as developed by Frederic Laloux, have gained popularity thanks to its clear analysis of today's organizations and society [2]. In 'Reinventing Organizations', Laloux lists the problems of today's organizational models: a majority of employees are disengaged at work; to be a leader of an organization is a coveted position but many feel tired by the demand for successful achievements; customers, patients and students are seen as exchangeable players in a profit based market; corporations and nation states are too focused on competition and as an effect they deplete the planet, pollutes and destroys its ecosystems. Laloux does not use this critique for a political argument; rather, he argues that the way we construct organizations – companies, governments, healthcare, and schools – is a reflection of the society. And that we currently can see a new organizational paradigm emerging, which he calls evolutionary-teal.

Given this background, the aim of this paper is to explore how the concept of 21st century education can be developed when read through evolutionary-teal. This analysis will provide an initial suggestion for a holistic vision of 21st century education.



2. Methodology: Diffractive analysis

This paper consists of a theoretical analysis benefitting methodologically on a diffractive reading [3][4]. The main idea is that a variety of materials are read through one another. The materials of the analysis of this paper are documents and research articles on 21st century education, and theory on evolutionary-teal. It is not a traditional analysis of documents as empirical material *using* a theoretical perspective that is placed on top of the empirical. Rather, the two materials are read *through each other*, both accompanying the process of developing ideas on 21st century education.

3. Theory: Evolutionary-teal

Frederic Laloux's organization model 'evolutionary-teal' constructs a holistic approach to organizations, the humans in them and the surrounding environment. Laloux explains that humanity evolves through sudden leaps from one stage to another. In a society, many different aspects are usually connected to the particular thinking in a particular stage. Based on Ken Wilber's integral theory [5], Laloux uses colors and metaphors to distinguish a few stages that organizations can be analyzed through. This paper focus on the orange and teal stages.

Most organizations today are grounded in an orange stage, usually described using the metaphor of the machine. Concepts such as efficiency, output, achievements, success, human resources, etc. indicates that organizations are based on a hierarchical model. This stage has been highly successful in creating large companies, political organizations, NGO's etc. However, it not without problems: many employees lack engagement and the environmental aspects are not taken into consideration unless it increases profit.

When Laloux in his research studied organizations that seemed to have moved past the orange stage, he noticed that even if they were all very different they all shared a common ground. One similarity was the use of the metaphor of the organism as a living system. Laloux localized three 'breakthroughs' that these organizations had experienced to various degrees: self-management, wholeness, and evolutionary purpose. In teal, the organization is seen as a place for individual and collective unfolding, which requires taming the will of the ego, using internal instead of external yardsticks in decision-making and to yearn for wholeness for individuals, organizations, and the world. This model is today used by a large number of organizations around the world. A few examples are: the Dutch home care company Buurtzorg (10 000 employees), the Berlin school ESBZ, the outdoor company Patagonia, and the electricity distributor AES (40 000 employees).

4. Analysis

One of the most comprehensive analyses of 21st century education is by Kereluik et al [1]. They conclude that the analyzed documents contain quite traditional educational aspects such as core content knowledge, digital literacy, cultural competence, and collaboration. At the same time, the conditions for these core ideas have shifted due to globalization and technological modernization. Kereluik et al. calls it the paradox of the 21st century knowledge: nothing has changed and everything has changed. This paper sees this paradox differently. In order for everything to change, what is needed is also a shift from orange to teal organization stage. This is a change that is already happening in organizations in society, as argued above, and slowly trickling into the educational system.

Sustainable values

Ta, Chua and Goh [6] performed a critical analysis of documents by policy makers and educators presenting frameworks for 21st century education. They argue that a central theme in the studied documents is their reliance in an individualistic view on education. They suggest instead an approach to education that to a larger extent focuses on the family and community. However, these aspects are concerned merely with interhuman relationships. This anthropocentrism is significant also for documents on 21st century education, and for academic analyses on 21st century education.

The second example is from Kereluik et al [1], who summarized documents on 21st century knowledge into three categories: foundational knowledge, meta knowledge, and humanistic knowledge. One of the "humanistic knowledges" is "Ethical and emotional awareness" which is characterized as "success in social and economical realms necessitates a deep understanding of human emotions and successful human interactions" [1, p. 131]. Here we see that the ethical and emotional awareness is



seen as a competence between human beings and nothing is said about nonhumans or environmental concerns. Today, there is a growing movement for earthly responsibilities: reducing global warming, working towards cleaner air and water, allowing biodiversity to flourish, and limiting the harm of animals in captivity. Theoretically, researchers turn to ideas of posthuman thinking to overcome humanistic knowledges and the anthropocentric position it is embedded in [7].

Brett Joseph discusses global sustainability education from an integral and posthuman position. Departing from these perspectives Joseph argues for a sustainable 21st century education: “Educational systems must empower learners to alter the current trajectory of socio-ecological change by leading strategic interventions that will restore the integrity and resilience of our communities with reference to sustainable values” [8, p. 6]. In one of the most significant frameworks for 21st century education, the “Partnership for 21st century skills”, in short P21, environmental literacy is presented as one of five interdisciplinary themes (the last one) that complements the traditional core subjects. Worth noting is that the theme of environmental literacy is phrased in a manner resembling an orange worldview. The student should “demonstrate knowledge”, “understand”, “investigate”, “analyse”, “take action”, and “make accurate conclusions about effective solutions” [9]. These share an expectation on the student to take action based on rational, scientific, accurate standpoints. This can easily be connected to the orange stage of organizations; the students are brought up to be gears in the societal machine that will need to handle the environmental crises ahead. If this text was written from a teal perspective, reflection on the instrumentality, modernity, and anthropocentrism that causes the crises could be included. Read through the articles discussed above, a teal perspective would offer a reflection on how the environment can be included in the “family and community” respective in the “Ethical and emotional awareness”.

Wholeness

In the analysis of Kereluik et al., the aspect of ‘Ethical and emotional awareness’ within ‘humanistic knowledge’ is described as a competence for success. This is an instrumental way of using people and emotions for the success of the individual or the organization. However, in a later section they write: “teachers need to know how to foster cultural competence, emotional awareness, and leadership skills to facilitate not just interactions, but *meaningful* interactions and relationships” [1, p. 133, italic in original]. Reading this through Laloux’s model, what appears is a dissonance between two organizational stages orange and teal. According to the orange stage, the outcome and success are the main objective of the organization. For teal organizations, Laloux describes wholeness as one of three important breakthroughs. Wholeness means to allow the whole individual to find its place in the organization. In the teal organizations more people expressed that they felt they could be themselves in the organization instead of hiding behind a professional mask when arriving to the workplace. Education has a long humanistic tradition with influence from the Enlightenment which has privileged mind before body and thinking before feeling. Wholeness as an aspect for 21st century education would mean a to continue the work in overcoming these dualistic ideas.

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