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The Learning School through a Daoist Lens

Abstract

The article provides an explicit philosophical basis of a ‘learning school’ by delineating a Daoist interpretation. A learning school is characterised by a student-centred vision, supportive leadership as well as a culture of collaboration and critical inquiry. With reference to the *Daodejing*, this paper expounds on the saliency of the concepts of *dao* (way-making), *wuwei* (non-coercive acting) and *wuzhi* (non-dogmatic knowing) to the learning school. It is argued that a Daoist learning school is one where all the staff, individually and together, engage in continuous learning in a spirit of deference and authenticity. It is further maintained that a Daoist perspective which emphasises harmony, accommodation and self-reflexivity avoids a key critique of a learning school as imposing desired outcomes on its members and pressuring them for conformity. Grounding the notion of a learning school in an ancient Chinese paradigm, this article contributes to the diverse understandings, possibilities and debates surrounding such a school model.

Keywords

Daoism; a learning organisation; a learning school; way-making

Introduction

The concept of a *learning school*, also known as a *school as a learning organisation*, has achieved wide circulation in the academic and popular discourses. Although there is a growing body of literature on the learning school (e.g. see Johnson & Caldwell, 2001; Kools & Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2016; Örtengren & Koris 2014; Retna & Ng, 2016; Senge et al, 2012; Tan, 2019a; Watkins & Marsick, 1996), what remains relatively under-explored is an explicit philosophical basis of such a model. Researchers have contended that the existing normative definitions of a *Learning Organisation* (hereinafter LO) – from which the notion of a learning school is derived – suffer from inadequate theoretical clarity and justification (Kools & Stoll; Örtengren, 2004, 2015, 2018). A case in point is Fielding’s (2001) critique of Senge’s formulation of a LO as lacking ontological grounding. Without a clearly articulated philosophical rationale for the notion of a learning school, there is a danger that such an ideal may be accepted and implemented in a superficial, truncated and/or unsustainable manner. As a result, a learning school may become just an educational fad for policymakers and educators to follow blindly – an outcome that contradicts the objective of purposeful, deep and continuous learning that is crucial for a LO. A convincing philosophical rationale for a learning school also serves to counter the existing criticisms of a LO/learning school. An example is the charge that a LO – and by implication, a learning school – is an authoritarian structure that imposes a set of visions, purposes and practices on the employees without sufficiently considering their needs, voices,

contributions and contextual constraints (Tan, 2019a; Easterby-Smith et al., 1998; Kools & Stoll, 2016; McHugh et al., 1998). It is therefore essential to go beyond mere cognisance of a learning school to investigate and bring to the fore the reasoning behind such a model.

Addressing the above-mentioned research gap, this article explores a Daoist foundation and conception of the learning school. The ancient Chinese philosophy of Daoism has been selected for our examination as researchers have reported the relevance of Daoist principles and practices to leadership and management (e.g. see Cheung & Chan, 2005; Johnson, 2000; Lee, 2003; Lee et al., 2008; Prince, 2005; Xing & Sims, 2011). To date, however, no study has been carried out on how Daoist teachings are applicable to the learning school. As I shall argue in this paper, policymakers and educators who regard the learning school as a good idea and who want to turn schools into learning schools would gain from knowing the philosophical underpinnings of such a school model from a Daoist viewpoint. The aim of this essay is therefore to provide what is hitherto under-theorised in the existing understandings of a learning school: a Daoist justification of a learning school that rejects indoctrination and promotes the shared vision of way-making through deference and authenticity. Three fundamental Daoist principles – *dao* (way-making), *wuwei* (noncoercive acting) and *wuzhi* (non-dogmatic knowing) from the *Daodejing* are discussed in this essay. The *Daodejing* is a Chinese classic written during the Warring States Period (403-221 BCE). It is believed to be written by Laozi although this claim as well as the identity of Laozi have been contested (Ames & Hall, 2003; Tan, 2019b; Yang, 2013).

A point of clarification here is that the Daoist ideas propounded in this paper apply equally to a learning school and a LO. Given that both models are concerned with learning, whether in the atmosphere, culture, climate and attitude towards learning to learn (OECD, 2016), the suggested philosophical basis of a learning school could just as well have been developed for LOs. But this essay has chosen schools as the target for two main reasons. First, the notion of a LO has already been widely researched and debated on for the past few decades, as evident in the impressive body of literature and the establishment of an international journal (*The Learning Organisation*) dedicated to research on this model. In comparison, relatively less attention has been devoted to the newer notion of a learning school with research gaining impetus only in the 1990s (Kools & Stoll, 2016). Secondly, research on a learning school is opportune as this model has gained global prominence in recent years, energised by the declaration from the Organisation for Economic and Co-operation Development (OECD) to develop learning schools in the world (OECD, 2016). A growing number of policymakers, researchers and educators have also called for schools to be reconceptualised as learning organisations (OECD, 2016). Given the ongoing and cross-national mission of creating learning schools, it is necessary to inquire into and clarify the theoretical base for a learning organisation in the specific context of education. The article begins with a brief introduction to the notion of a learning school, followed by an exposition of three Daoist concepts from the *Daodejing*. The second part of the essay sketches the contours of a learning school through a Daoist lens.

A Learning School

Given that the concept of a learning school is premised on the idea of a LO, it is instructive to begin this section by discussing the latter. There are currently different and competing definitions, types and aspects of a LO. A classic definition is by Senge (1990) who views a LO as “an organisation where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continuously learning to see the whole together”

(Senge *et al.*, 2010, p. 3). Despite the plurality of definitions of a LO, researchers generally agree that a LO is essentially an organisation that rallies people around a common vision so as to enable them to make sense of their changing circumstances and create knowledge (Watkins & Marsick, 1996; for a good discussion and critique of LO, see Caldwell, 2012; Diggins, 1997; Driver, 2002; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1998; Eijkman, 2011; Garvin, 1993; Garvin, Edmundson & Gino, 2008; Henderson, 1997; Fullan, 1995; Gandolfi, 2006; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Johnson & Caldwell, 2001; McHugh *et al.*, 1998; Senge *et al.*, 2010; Silins, Zarin & Mulford, 2002; Smith, 2008).

There are four broad types of LO as categorised by Yang, Watkins and Marsick (2004): systems thinking, learning perspective, strategic perspective and integrated perspective. *Systems thinking* is represented by the works of Senge and colleagues (1990) who describe a LO as encompassing team learning, shared vision, mental models, personal mastery and systems thinking. The second type is the *learning perspective* that is connected to organisational learning and parallels Örtenblad's (2002) notion of organisational learning (this is elaborated in the next paragraph). The third type is the *strategic perspective* that focuses on the building blocks needed to support a LO such as shared leadership, a culture of experimentation and teamwork (Kools & Stoll, 2016). The final type is the *integrative perspective* proposed by Yang, Watkins and Marsick (2004) who identify seven action imperatives for a LO: (1) Continuous learning that brings about ongoing learning opportunities for everyone; (2) Inquiry and dialogue that engender a culture of openness and tolerance of failure; (3) Team learning that advances collaboration; (4) Embedded system for storing and disseminating learning to all; (5) Empowerment that expresses an organisation's process to arrive at and realise its shared vision; (6) System connection that links the organisation to external developments and factors; and (7) Strategic leadership that guides leaders to utilise learning to bring about change and organisational progress.

Regardless of the types of LO, all LOs manifest the following four aspects, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees (Örtenblad, 2002, 2004, 2015): (1) *learning at work* where employees learn while working; (2) *organisational learning* where different levels of learning such as single- and double-loop learning are applied; (3) *climate for learning* which provides a conducive atmosphere that accepts failure and facilitates learning, experimentation and reflection; and (4) *learning structure* in the form of a decentralised, adaptable and loosely arranged system for collaboration and decision-making. Summarising the foregoing, a LO is distinguished by its pivot on sustained learning and learning to learn for its employees, as manifested in its vision and purposes, structure, relationships, ethos, culture, assumptions and interactions with external parties.

A learning school is fundamentally an educational institution that “has the capacity to change and adapt routinely to new environments and circumstances as its members, individually and together, learn their way to realising their vision” (Kools & Stoll, 2016, p. 5). The shared vision of a learning school, unlike other types of LOs, centres on enhancing the learning experiences and outcomes of all students (OECD, 2016). Given the close link between a LO and a learning school, it is not surprising that the latter shares many cardinal features of a LO. Researchers have underlined various traits of a learning school that correspond to a LO such as its shared vision, adoption of a learning orientation, ability to learn and respond to changing circumstances, building of new capacities for sustained learning, strategic leadership, strong staff collaboration and constant knowledge creation (Bowen, Rose & Ware, 2006; Brandt, 2003; Coppieters, 2005; DuFour, 1997; Liljenberg, 2014; Ng, 2005; Robinson, 2001; Schlechty, 2008; Silins, Zarins & Mulford, 2002; Watkins & Marsick, 1999). Kools and Stoll (2016) provide a good summary of the similarities between a LO and a learning school: “Through specific references to, for example, the environmental scanning to inform the internal operations (systems thinking), the focus on developing shared goals (strategic perspective) or

the establishment of collaborative learning and teaching environments (learning perspective) these scholars incorporate the strengths of the various learning organisation perspectives and have integrated these into a holistic definition that offers guidance to those wanting to transform their school into a learning organisation” (pp. 23-24).

Fullan (1995) maintains that what is quintessential in a learning school is not simply more time for learning but also a reinvention of the school around learning that “involves a wholesale change in the culture and organisation of schooling” (p. 233). The wholesale change includes rethinking the school culture, identity, strategy, structures and procedures, technical support, human resources, leadership, management and governance (Davidoff & Lazarus, 1997). The desired outcome is a learning school that fosters agency and capacity through codes, practices and institutional structures that express the values of active learning (Nixon et al., 1996). Collaborative professional learning within a collegial environment is also essential so that the staff could prepare their teaching materials together, observe each other’s lessons, give constructive feedback and share their teaching practices on a regular basis (Killion & Roy, 2009). It is therefore necessary for learning schools to encourage everyone in the system to articulate their aspirations and grow their capabilities together (Senge, 2012).

Summarising the extant literature on a learning school, such a school model espouses and demonstrates three defining characteristics: (1) a student-centred vision, (2) supportive leadership and (3) a culture of collaboration and critical inquiry. First, a learning school is *student-centred* in the sense that it unites its staff around the goal of doing what is best for its students. Unlike other non-schooling learning organisations, a learning school is geared towards furthering and enriching the learning experiences and achievements of all students. To achieve this vision, a learning school practises and promotes *supportive leadership* where the school principal does not impose one’s agendas and thinking on the staff. Instead, such a leader is non-coercive and empathetic, directing the school towards deep and sustained learning, distributed leadership and leadership capabilities for everyone. Finally, a learning school is situated within *a culture of collaboration and critical inquiry*. This means that the staff enjoy continuous learning opportunities, team learning and creative partnership. Structures for the collection, exchange and advancement of knowledge and learning within the school as well as between the school and the wider community are also put in place. The above three basic characteristics of a learning school – a student-centred vision, supportive leadership, and a culture of collaboration and critical inquiry – serve as a basis for the main argumentation of the paper on a search for a philosophical foundation for a learning school.

Key Concepts from the *Daodejing*: *Dao*, *Wuwei* and *Wuzhi*

This segment focuses on three Daoist concepts that are apposite to the three distinctive features of a learning school as outlined earlier. The three Daoist concepts are *dao*, *wuwei* and *wuzhi*.

Dao (Way-making)

At the outset, a clarification is needed on the definition and translation of *dao*. At first glance, an attempt to define *dao* appears to contradict the opening passage of the *Daodejing*:

Way-making (*dao*) that can be put into words is not really way-making. And naming (*ming*) that can assign fixed reference to things is not really naming (Chapter 1, Ames &

Hall, 2003; all subsequent citations from the *Daodejing* are taken from this text unless otherwise stated).

The Chinese characters for “can be put into words” are “kedao” which can also be rendered as “can be spoken of” (de Bary & Bloom, 1963; Lau, 1963) or “can be told” (Chan, 1963). If *dao* cannot be articulated, is the endeavour to describe or speak of *dao* a violation of the teaching in the *Daodejing*? Commenting on this passage, Chan (1963) explains that the above-cited passage is a response to a tendency among the philosophical schools in ancient China to insist on the correspondence of names and actualities. Correcting this practice, Laozi stresses that *dao* is “the simplicity without names, and when names arise, that is, when the simple oneness of Tao [*dao*] is split into individual things with names, it is time to stop” (Chan, 1963, p. 140). The point here is not that we should not define or talk about *dao* at all. Rather, *Daodejing* is cautioning against a fixation with labelling and objectifying people and things. That *dao* resists simplistic categorisation and essentialisation means that we need to interpret *dao* generally as an active and evolving process rather than a passive and finished product. Scholars have translated *dao* as “way” when taken as a noun or “way-making” when used as a verb (Ames & Hall, 2003; Chan, 1963; de Bary & Bloom, 1999; Lau, 1963). For the purpose of this study, I have followed Ames and Hall (2003) in rendering *dao* as “way-making” for two reasons. First, such a translation highlights the fact that *dao* is not finalised and objectified but continuous and experiential. As maintained by Ames and Hall (2003), viewing *dao* as “a ‘way’ that has already been laid” is to ignore its “fluidity and reflexivity” (p. 59). Secondly, the accent on the unceasing and dynamic process of *dao* complements the idea of continuous learning in a learning (not ‘learned’) school.

Way-making (*dao*) underscores “the flowing together of all things” (Chapter 62). Chapter 62 states that way-making “is the most valuable thing in the world” as it “enables those who seek to get what they want”. Proper way-making is “getting the most out of these relationships as we make our way in the world: It is making this life significant” (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 87). Way-making is about living a purposeful and worthwhile life that is embedded in and thrives through inter-connected human relationships. Implicit in the idea of way-making are interdependence and harmony. The attainment of way-making is not possible without human beings “flowing together” (Chapter 62). While *dao* emphasises harmony with Nature, *de* (virtue or power) as mentioned in the book title ‘*Daodejing*’ stresses harmony with other human beings. Chan (1963) points out that *dao* becomes part of a person’s character or virtue of a person when that person possesses *dao*. Ames and Hall (2003) add that “*de* is both process and product – both the potency and achieved character of any particular disposition within the unsummed totality of experience” (pp. 59-60). The shared vision of all human beings, it follows, is to individually and collectively engage in way-making so as to create meaning and impact in our lives. It is from way-making that each of us can be directed, inspired and strengthened to find our place in our community.

How then can human beings relate and respond to each other in a manner that realise way-making? For a start, it is not through control and coercion. Chapter 75 comments, “The people’s lack of order is because those above manipulate them”. The text criticises the propensity and prevailing practice of human beings “tak[ing] away from those who do not have enough in order to give more to those who already have too much” (Chapter 77). Rather than resorting to power that engenders exploitation and oppression, Daoism advocates *wuwei* (noncoercive acting) and *wuzhi* (non-dogmatic knowing). The prefix ‘wu’ in *wuwei* and *wuzhi* should not be interpreted literally as the absence of something. Instead of emptiness or passivity, the *wu*-forms “describe an active disposition that is conducive to getting the most out of the relationships that locate one within any particular situation” (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 175). The next section gives details on the meanings of *wuwei* and *wuzhi*.

Wuwei (Non-coercive acting)

Wuwei, literally ‘non-action’, is better rendered as “non-coercive acting” that is spontaneous and in tandem with way-making (Ames & Hall, 2003). It is unhindered acting that accords with nature and liberates oneself from burdens and stress (Peterson, Plaks & Yu, 1994; Xing & Sims, 2011). *Wuzhi* lets Nature take its own course through simplicity, spontaneity and non-interference (Chan, 1963). It is not about “inertia, indifference, laziness, status quo, laissez-faire, pessimism or passivity” or “subjective intervention, unilateral control, or propensity to overdo” (Lee, Yang & Wang, 2009, p. 73). Rather, letting Nature take its own course revolves around the “flow or well-being that allows one to be in harmony with all” by acting within the true nature of things” (Lee, Yang & Wang, 2009, p. 72, also see Lee, 2003; Watts, 1975).

Chapter 33 contrasts power which is the way of human beings that seeks to conquer others with non-coercion that typifies the way of *tian* (heaven). Chapter 77 states that “sages act on behalf of things but do not make any claim on them, they see things through to fruition but do not take credit for them”. Rather than “making a display of their worth” (Chapter 77), sages are “always non-interfering in going about its business” (Chapter 48). The *Daodejing* declares that it is only by “do[ing] everything noncoercively” that “nothing goes undone” (Chapter 48, also see Chapters 63 and 67). *Wuzhi* are mindful attitudes, dispositions and acts that accomplish an actor’s objective (“nothing gets undone”) without imposing one’s will on others (“non-interfering”). A prominent analogy used in the *Daodejing* is that of water, a comparison that has been alluded to earlier in the mention of way-making as “the flowing together of all things (Chapter 62). The formlessness and fluidity of water illustrate its non-coercive nature. At the same time, water “comes nearest to the proper way-making” as it “benefits everything (*wanwu*), yet vies to dwell in places loathed by the crowd” (Chapter 8). Like water, the leader and all members of a community should seek the well-being of all without discrimination (“benefits everything”), and be inclusive by embracing even the most despised members of the community (“dwell in places loathed by the crowd”). Clarifying the metaphor of water, Lee, Yang and Wang (2009) aver, “Just as the sea accepts and embraces all rivers joining – muddy or clear, large or small – leaders who humble themselves before people draw people towards them and gain people’s trust” (p. 74; also see Lee et al., 2008). The desired outcome of *wuwei* is a community where everyone conducts oneself non-coercively by acting spontaneously and interdependently.

Non-coercive acting stems from a spirit of deference that is evident through accommodation and empathy. As elaborated by Ames and Hall (2003):

Deference involves a yielding (and being yielded to) grounded in an acknowledgement of the shared excellence of particular foci (*de*) in the process of one’s own self-cultivation. Deferential acts require that one put oneself literally in the place of the other, and in so doing, incorporate what was the object of deference into what is one’s own developing disposition, and one’s own disposition thus fortified becomes available as a locus of deference for others (p. 38).

The exercise of *wuwei* requires an individual to respect the worth of others and be sensitive to their interests and needs. It involves a personal and persistent effort to treat others the way one wishes to be treated as members of a community of way-making. United by mutual deference, “there is no contentiousness in proper way-making, that it incurs no blame” (Chapter 8).

A central figure in a way-making community is the leader who aspires to “do without contending” and “benefit without harming” (Chapter 81). Chapter 11 compares the *wuwei* of a ruler to the hub at the centre of the wheel: “The thirty spokes converge at one hub, but the utility of the cart is a function of the nothingness (*wu*) inside the hub”. Moeller (2006) explains

that “the ruler is the empty, non-moving hub at the centre of the wheel that enables all movement around it to operate in perfect balance, harmony, and efficacy” (p. 519). Rather than adopting a top-down and authoritarian management style, a *wuwei* leader serves alongside the followers, bringing together and enabling all to perform their roles and support each other. A *wuwei* leader knows that “a very slight action may be enough to have extraordinary results, if done at the right time” (Loy, 1985, p. 75). Chapter 67 spells out the “three prized possession” of a *wuwei* leader:

It is because of my compassion that I can be courageous;
It is because of my frugality that I can be generous;
It is because of my reluctance to try to become preeminent in the world that I am able to become chief among all things.

The above passage identifies a *wuwei* leader as one who is compassionate, frugal and reluctant to try to become preeminent in the world. The attribute of compassion brings to mind the analogy of water that nourishes all without discrimination. It underlines not just acts of kindness but also the feelings of empathy and humanity towards others as fellow way-makers. Frugality refers to “an abiding respect for the integrity of things and an unwillingness to compromise them” (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 184). Frugality turns away from any coercive means to change or manipulate circumstances, people and things to fit one’s self-centred agenda. Instead, frugality frees and fortifies the leader to accept the realities and generously accommodates others so as to bring out the best in them. Finally, the reluctance to try to become preeminent in the world shows up the humility and sacrifice of the leader. By giving up one’s ambition to gain power and fame by lording over others, the leader paradoxically wins the whole-hearted respect, support and admiration of the followers.

Wuzhi (Non-dogmatic knowing)

Wuzhi, literally ‘no knowledge’, does not mean ignorance or the rejection of information. Rather, it refers to ‘non-dogmatic knowing’ that rejects holding on to stored data, ingrained habits and rules of discrimination in an opinionated and uncritical manner. Chapter 1 and Chapter 32 teach that we need to know when to stop once names have been assigned. The ‘names’ refers to distinctions introduced by human beings to control and manage their environments. Although naming itself is not always harmful and can be practical and even necessary, it may have deleterious effects on human relationships if artificial categories and distinctions are not introspectively and critically examined. As noted by Ames and Hall (2003), rational structures, when institutionalised and taken for granted, convey “regimen of values” that empower some against others (p. 127). It is therefore crucial that one knows what one does not know (Chapter 71), that is, be self-reflexive of the limitation and fallibility of human knowledge.

Besides cautioning against a blind acceptance of received knowledge, *wuzhi* also brings to light a Daoist emphasis on authentic knowing. This form of knowing is situated within ‘radical contextualisation’ where human beings are “constituted by those roles and relationships that locate us within our social, natural, and cultural environments” (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 87). Playing up genuine, personal and immediate experiences, Chapter 47 advises, “Venture not beyond your doors to know the world; Peer not outside your window to know the way-making (*dao*) of *tian* [heaven]”. The message here is that “the world is always known from one perspective of another, and never from nowhere” (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 150).

Furthermore, *wuzhi* is not about knowledge which is theoretical and complete but about *knowing* –an ongoing process of experiencing, experimenting, appropriating and realising what one knows through human interactions. Amplifying the experiential, context-specific and particular nature of knowing, Chapter 8 explains as follows:

In dwelling, the question is where is the right place.
In thinking and feeling, it is how deeply.
In giving, it is how much like nature's bounty.
In speaking, it is how credibly.
In governing, it is how effectively.
In serving, it is how capably.
In acting, it is how timely.

The above highlights the primacy of “always knowing where to be, committing ourselves utterly in our relationships, being generous in our transactions, making good on what we say, being successful both in service and in governance, and seizing the moment” (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 88). Another passage propagates the action-oriented and human-centred aspects of *wuzhi* by pointing out that knowing others is wisdom while knowing oneself is acuity (Chapter 33). The inseparable and symbiotic relationships of human beings is reiterated in Chapter 81 that exhorts that the more one does for others, the more one will gain for oneself.

Taken as a whole, it can be observed that Daoist principles are correlative by rejecting a simplistic ‘either-or’ logic. In particular, Daoism exemplifies dialectical thinking in Chinese thought (Tan, 2016). As pointed out by Peng and Nisbett (1999) who cite the *Daodejing*, dialectical thinking in Daoism views the two sides of any contradiction as existing in an active harmony. According to a Daoist worldview, human beings achieve more by doing less – eliminating coercive actions through *wuwei* and fossilised knowledge through *wuzhi*. Noting how the *Daodejing* assumes the mutual transformation of opposites, Yang (2013) posits that Daoist harmony appreciates and adheres to contrasting positions simultaneously in an interconnected web of life (also see Lee, 2000).

A Learning School through a Daoist Lens

This section relates the Daoist ideas sketched in the previous sections to the notion of a learning school. The attention is the pertinence of *dao* (way-making), *wuwei* (non-coercive acting) and *wuzhi* (non-dogmatic knowing) to the three essential features of a learning school: a student-centred vision, supportive leadership, and a culture of collaboration and critical inquiry. First, a learning school, from a Daoist viewpoint, develops a shared vision of way-making by advancing and enhancing the learning experiences and achievements of all students. All the staff, parents and other agents subscribe to this inclusive vision as it is an integral component of way-making – making the most of relationships and making one's life significant. The Daoist presupposition of interdependence where all educational stakeholders work together gives justification for human beings to go beyond their self-interests and competing agendas to prioritise the learning of all students. All members, individually and together, engage in continuous learning in a spirit of deference and authenticity.

Secondly, a Daoist learning school is led by someone who does not manipulate and control the staff but is instead accommodating and empathetic. Enacting ‘flow’ without manipulation and control in a learning school does not mean that the leader adopts a *laissez-faire* management style. Rather, a Daoist school leader subscribes to supportive leadership by encouraging all the staff to “flow together” (Chapter 62) through harmonious relationships and

collaborative meaning-making. It is about empowering all the staff to make their own lives as well as the lives of others, particularly their students, significant in a spirit of deference and authenticity. The leader, like the sage described in the *Daodejing*, models learning leadership through humility, openness and admission of what one does not know, rather than arrogance, showmanship and dogmatism. Like the hub of a wheel, the leader is instrumental in harmonising people so that they can ‘flow together’ through continuous professional learning, team learning and collaboration for all. Motivated and energised by way-making, the school leader sees others as whole persons and makers of their own liberation (Roberts, 2013). Like water that gives life and maintains the eco-system, the leader gives all staff the autonomy and space for personal and professional participation and growth (Yang, 2013). Garvin, Edmundson and Gino (2008) report that employees are encouraged to learn when leaders take the time to listen to them through dialogue and debate. The core values of engaged learning, trust, mutual respect in a learning school are underpinned by the qualities of accommodation, empathy and productive concord in *wuwei*.

Thirdly, a culture of collaboration and critical inquiry in a Daoist learning school is acknowledged and fortified by *wuzhi* that brings authenticity to the fore. Such a school establishes a climate of exploration and innovation by embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge as well as learning with and from the external environment and larger system (OECD, 2016). *Wuzhi* replaces dogmatism with authenticity in a learning school through the two main ways: (1) the interrogation of rationalised and taken-for-granted knowledge and practices, and (2) a focus on genuine, context-specific and particular experiences. First, varied channels of communication are put in place for staff to analyse and critique examples of prevailing practices, whether in school management, teaching, learning, assessment and so on. The routine practice of questioning established traditions, institutionalised thought and entrenched biases guards the school against the constraints of current hegemonic frameworks (Fielding, 2001). The promotion of *wuzhi* which castigates a blind acceptance of received knowledge and traditions is key to fostering a climate of self-reflexivity, mindfulness and peer evaluation in a learning school. Kools and Stoll (2016) point out that feedback and other reflection-promoting approaches enhance professional learning as they prompt educators to question the thinking and presuppositions regarding of their own practices. Yang (2013) contends that “Daoism questions societal conventions that block the spontaneous movement of nature and rigorously calls for unlearning those ideas and practices” (p. 70). He lists some of the issues for a learning school to reflect, debate and interrogate: “labelling and tracking of students, focussing on developing students’ intellectual power at the expense of emotional and spiritual growth, rewarding students’ obedience rather than their critical thinking” (Yang, 2013, p. 77).

Besides challenging taken-for-granted educational beliefs and practices through introspection and critical thinking, *wuzhi* also inspires all the educational stakeholders to explore and learn from genuine, context-specific and particular experiences. Whether as school leaders, teachers, students or parents, everyone is motivated to reflect on their own learning based on their immediate perspectives and lived experiences. In addition, all members of the learning school are invited to experiment and innovate as part of authentic knowing. The processual nature of knowledge – *knowing* rather than *knowledge* – signifies that problems and mistakes are not seen as deviation from the norms or pre-determined outcomes but as opportunities for learning. The context-specific and timeliness of *wuzhi* are also useful to guide the school to react appropriately and strategically to surrounding developments and factors. For instance, cutting-edge educational ideas such as Maker Learning and digital citizenship should not be accepted unquestioningly by the school but instead interpreted and adapted based on their suitability for the learning of all students.

Avoiding imposition of visions and pressure for conformity

A learning school that is premised on and guided by the Daoist concepts of *dao*, *wuwei* and *wuzi* avoids a fundamental critique of LO and a learning school – the imposition of visions and pressure for conformity. As articulated by Kools and Stoll (2016),

Some have argued that it [LO] may serve to bind workers to visions and purposes that do not serve their best interests, while garnering commitment for something that seems to be for the workers' own good (Easterby-Smith et al., 1998). Without seeking to exert 'coercive persuasion' (Schein, 1999), a tightly woven learning organisation may be experienced as increased pressure for conformity by its members, who may question whether they are learning to transform the organisation or rather learning to be transformed by the organisation (McHugh et al., 1998) (pp. 24-25).

The preceding has already explained that way-making contributes to creating and sustaining a shared vision for a learning school that is based on human interdependence. Such a vision, far from not imperilling the interests of the staff, contribute to their well-being by directing them to make the most of their relationships and living fulfilling lives. Stressing the primacy of overcoming the dominant distrust among the educational stakeholders, Senge (2012) opines, "In a school that learns, people who traditionally may have been suspicious of one another – parents and teachers, educators and local business people, administrators and union members, people inside and outside the school walls, students and adults – recognise their common stake in the future of the school system and the things they can learn from one another" (p. 5). A learning school that is motivated by and exhibits *wuwei* does not pressure its members to conform since such a school opposes coercion and champions deference that is manifested through yielding, empathy and harmony. The practice of *wuzhi* also brings about an atmosphere of introspection and critical reflection to ensure that members are learning to transform the organisation and not learning to be transformed by the organisation. Guided by *dao*, *wuwei* and *wuzi*, a learning school minimises the "tensions between opportunities for individual growth and traditional values which constrained that growth beyond the individual" (Betts & Holden, 2003, p. 280).

Vince (2018) draws our attention to the realities of "contradictions of learning" in organisational paradox (p. 277). The contradictions are the desirability of 'learning-in-action' for all staff for the purpose of continuous improvements on the one hand, and 'learning inaction' which seeks to preserve the status quo on the other (Vince, 2018). A Daoist approach, as exemplified in *wuwei* and *wuzhi*, resolves the organisational paradox by transcending an 'either-or' thinking to 'both/and' perspective. Learning-in-action is learning to act in accordance with way-making. Such forms of learning and acting are compatible with and demand learning inaction – the giving up of power to control others and accepting established knowledge unthinkingly. Learning-in-action and learning inaction, rather than contradictory, are two sides of the coin, mutually reinforcing each other in a Daoist learning school. Commenting on the embrace of paradox in Daoism, Lewin and Orgas (2018) claim that "Daoists engage in a more subversive and playful logic in order to break open common ideas about progress, development, knowledge and learning" (p. 490).

Conclusion

This paper has added to the knowledge on a learning school by providing an explicit philosophical basis of such a school. This paper has extended the existing research on the diverse conceptions of a learning school by presenting a Daoist version – one that revolves around the concepts of *dao* (way-making), *wuwei* (non-coercive acting) and *wuzhi* (non-dogmatic knowing). It has been argued that a Daoist learning school is one that develops a shared vision of way-making, is led by an accommodating and empathetic educator, and welcomes a climate of exploration and innovation. Such a school affirms harmony, accommodation and self-reflexivity, thereby avoiding a key critique of a learning school as imposing visions on its members and pressuring them for conformity. A major implication for practitioners from our exploration of a Daoist learning school is a need for school leaders to engage all the staff in learning through deference and authenticity. In terms of limitations of this study, my discussion of Daoism relies primarily on one book of translation – Ames and Hall (2003) – as the source of understanding the *Daodejing*. It should be noted that their interpretation is not the only reading of Daoist ideas; there are more English translations of the *Daodejing* than any other Chinese books, with no consensus among scholars on how to explicate many parts of the text and key ideas (Chan, 1963). Adding to the challenge is the general difficulty in defining abstract Daoist concepts and applying them to the contemporary notion of a learning school. Space constraints also mean that other related topics concerning a learning school such as its pedagogical approaches, assessment modes and home-school partnership are not explored in this essay. Despite these limitations, it is hoped that the proposed conception of a Daoist learning school will provide a platform to generate further investigation, debates and conversations among policymakers, researchers and educators on the philosophical foundations of a learning school.

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