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## **The Cultural Approach to Studying Schools**

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## **Introduction**

Various aspects of a school's learning culture are related to the quality of the school's instructional program and the school's ability to implement reforms effectively (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Smith & O'Day, 1991). Among educators, researchers, and policymakers, enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 heightened interest in how the learning culture of a school affects the performance of all students (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002; Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003; Desimone, 2002).

This paper presents key concepts from the theoretical literature on organizational change and school learning cultures. It concludes with eight actions school leaders can take to help school communities develop or enhance learning cultures that are receptive to change.

## **Learning Culture and Its Role in School Reform**

Since the 1980s, the U.S. education system has experienced several waves of school reform—the effective schools movement; school restructuring; systemic reform; and comprehensive school reform. Interesting and creative curricular, pedagogical, governance, and structural innovations have arisen from this series of reforms; yet, frequently the reform effort breaks down and things return to the way they were. The most recent policy development in the reform agenda is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which seeks to make education systems more accountable by holding schools, principals, and teachers responsible to raise levels of student achievement. Schein's (1992) insight—that to change the way an organization functions, change must occur in the underlying belief structure of the organization members—is useful in understanding why reform efforts are so difficult to sustain.

As researchers investigate the success of the reform agenda, one aspect that interests them is the role of school culture in successful reform implementations. Organizational culture is one of the four lenses through which one can examine school reform, according to Bolman and Deal (2003). The other lenses—structure, human resources, and politics—offer insight into important aspects of school reform, but reform efforts will not have long-term effects if they are not embedded in the culture of the school (Kotter, 1996).

### **Organizational Culture**

The culture approach to analyzing and managing organizations employs a set of assumptions that differ from the other dominant approaches to organizational theory, which look at structure (Jaques, 1990) and systems (Scott, 1961). In both the structural and systems approaches, the assumptions are that the actions and behavior of organization members are directed and constrained by rules, by managerial authority, and by the norms of rational behavior (Ott, 1989). The organizational culture perspective, however, is rooted in the assumption that “many organizational behaviors and decisions are in effect predetermined by the patterns of basic assumptions that are held by members of the organization” (Shafritz & Ott, 2001, pp. 361-362). In other words, the organizational culture influences the behavior of members as much as or more than the formal rules and structures.

### **A Definition of Organizational Culture**

Many definitions of organizational culture exist. The simplest is Deal and Kennedy’s theory that it’s just the way things are done (1982). Kotter (1996) describes culture as “the norms of behaviors and shared values among a group of people” (p. 148). Schein (1992) defines culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (p. 12). This definition points out the

constructed nature of a culture. According to Ott (1989), “As in all cultures, all facts, truths, realities, beliefs and values are what the members agree they are—they are perceptions” (p. vii).

Schein (1992) analyzed culture at three levels—artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions. Artifacts are “surface-level” expressions of culture, such as space organization, language use, myths and stories, ceremonies and rites, and published materials. Espoused values help give meaning to the artifacts. These values are stated and are usually consciously held expressions of what an organization cares about and “what ought to be.” Espoused values may or may not be reflected in organizational practices. At the deepest level, culture consists of a set of underlying assumptions. These assumptions are largely unarticulated, unexpressed, and taken for granted, yet they powerfully shape what happens in the organization.

In a school, three important assumptions that shape culture are “what students are like and how to deal with them, what academics are like and how important they are, and how teachers should relate to each other” (Firestone & Louis, 1999, p. 304). Underlying assumptions are particularly relevant to school change. Unless those basic assumptions are brought to the surface so that individuals can engage in the process of “cognitive transformation” (Schein, 1992, p. 19), it will be difficult to make long-term changes in the way things are done.

### **Dimensions of Culture**

The eleven dimensions of culture examined in this review address the often unstated core beliefs that ultimately drive the actions of organization members (Detert, Louis, & Schroeder, 2001). Nine of these dimensions were identified by Detert, Schroeder, and Mauriel (2000) in their comprehensive review of the literature on organizational culture. Two additional dimensions specific to education organizations were identified by education

researchers Firestone and Louis (1999). Discussion of these dimensions of culture and their implications for reforming school practices are presented here.

### **Dimension 1: Control, Coordination, and Responsibility**

Both the organizational and educational literatures report that organizations that are high performing or attempting to improve quality hold corporate beliefs that it is necessary to have a shared vision and a set of shared goals. Studies (Kruse & Louis, 1995; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996) suggest that schools with a greater degree of consensus on school goals were also those that were demonstrating higher levels of student academic performance.

### **Dimension 2: Orientation and Focus**

In the early part of the twentieth century, there was a move to centralize control of public education, theoretically giving education experts the authority to make education decisions. In contrast, the quality management literature of the 1990s holds that education needs should be decided primarily by those served by schools—students, parents, community groups, and other stakeholders, and that teacher professional knowledge about curricula matters needs to be combined with the contributions of all education stakeholders.

Research on this belief has compared student academic results of public and private schools (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Private schools, especially the Catholic schools that Coleman and Hoffer examined, had governance structures that were more responsive to community and parents' educational goals and aims for their children. A review of the vigorous debate over this issue indicates that stakeholder participation in education decisions was associated with improved student academic performance (Boerema, 2005).

### **Dimension 3: The Nature of Time and Time Horizon**

The important question here for schools is whether to plan and act for short-term or long-term objectives and gain. Schools are experiencing two contradictory sets of pressures relating to their time horizon. The first comes from the establishment of statewide testing. This has created incentives for administrators and teachers to teach to the test for short-term gains, as opposed to implementing proven pedagogical approaches and focusing on long-term student gains. Newmann, Bryk, and Nagoaka (2001) reported that higher gains were achieved in classes in which more intellectually stimulating pedagogical activities were used.

The second pressure is the move to site-based management in many jurisdictions, which encourages schools to make strategic long-term plans. Schools that wish to establish a culture that focuses on continual student improvement must take the long-term approach (Detert et al., 2000).

### **Dimension 4: Stability Versus Change**

Based on their dispositions and experiences, organizations and their members hold assumptions about the relative merits of stability and change. Schools that have a norm of continuous critical inquiry understand that all schools have areas of strength and weakness, and they need to be open to addressing the areas of weakness (Saphier & King, 1985). Druian and Butler (1987) reported that schools where the atmosphere allows the expression of criticism are schools that recognize and respond to weaknesses in more productive ways.

### **Dimension 5: Orientation to Work, Task, and Coworkers**

The quality management literature indicates that organizations that are improving and functioning at a high level hold the view that workers at all levels should be active in improving overall performance. In schools, this belief is expressed in practices that seek teacher input on curricular and education matters. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of data collected from a sample of 24 restructuring schools indicated that improved student

learning was strongly related to the empowerment of teachers to make decisions about quality educational practices (Louis & Marks, 1998).

Organizational learning can help advance overall school and district performance. Leithwood, Leonard, and Sharratt (1998) found a strong correlation between teachers learning to improve their teaching and the school district's culture—its mission, policies, and resources.

### **Dimension 6: Isolation Versus Collaboration/Cooperation**

The literature on quality management holds that collaboration is essential for achieving maximum effectiveness (e.g., *The Deming Management Method*, Walton, 1986). Research conducted by Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1997) showed that teacher collective responsibility for student learning was positively associated with both effectiveness and equity in student learning. In addition, Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) found that one factor related to the high productivity in the Catholic schools they examined was the collegial approach in those schools. Belief in the importance of collaborative work was part of virtually every framework for quality improvement reviewed by Detert and colleagues (2000).

### **Dimension 7: The Basis of Truth and Rationality in the Organization**

A seldom-discussed component of school culture is the way in which members of the organization determine what is real (true) and what is not. While physical aspects of a school are evident just by looking, other aspects are more ephemeral, and this component deals with those aspects of a culture. The way the organization decides what is real or not real is an important aspect of organizational culture. For schools that want to improve student performance, decisions must be based on data rather than on intuition or pronouncement by authority (Detert et al., 2000).



### **Dimension 8: Motivation**

Members of an organization who do their best work because the task is worth giving their best are motivated by internal forces, while those who do what they need to do to avoid punishment or to get a reward are externally motivated (Deci & Ryan, 1981). In education settings, the issue of motivation is related to both teacher and student performance. Do students work because learning is intrinsically worthwhile or because they want high marks or are trying to avoid punishment for not doing the assigned work?

One way to think about improving student and teacher performance might be to think about the structural elements of schools and how these encourage or prevent top performance. An evaluation system, for example, that has a grade as the final product might not be providing the best incentives to do quality work.

### **Dimension 9: Resources**

The importance of resources in raising educational quality has been frequently stated in the popular press. Detert et al. (2001) assert that business managers know there is a cost to quality, and there are also areas where quality can be improved without consuming additional resources. In a school, teachers and principals who hold the view that quality can come about only through the infusion of additional resources are impeding improvement. “Improving internal processes, focusing on customers’ needs, and preventing quality problems from occurring in the first place can achieve improvements. . . . If one believes that quality can always be improved within any set of resource constraints . . . , then one is always searching for ways to improve the system” (pp. 201-202).

### **Dimension 10: The Nature of Students**

Firestone and Louis (1999) add this dimension to the list, arguing that teacher and principal beliefs about their students make up a central dimension of school culture and have profound effects on the ways schools and classrooms are managed. Further, teachers’ beliefs

range from viewing students as serious academic learners to seeing students as problems to be managed.

The beliefs about intelligence—that is, whether it is a fixed trait or something developed through school and life experiences—that teachers bring to their classrooms will influence their pedagogical choices. If teachers believe each student has a fixed amount of intelligence, they will not provide challenging activities for those they see as having less intelligence.

### **Dimension 11: The Nature of Academics**

Beliefs about the importance of academics are important aspects of school culture that will determine school effectiveness. Beliefs about the centrality of academic work will determine the degree of academic pressure found in a school and the approach that teachers take to teaching. One approach, the incorporative (Firestone & Louis, 1999), emphasizes teaching a prescribed curriculum to students who are vessels to be filled. Another approach, called *developmental* (Firestone & Louis, 1999), *authentic* (Newmann & Associates, 1996), or *constructivist* (Brooks & Brooks, 1993), views students as active learners who construct knowledge through the learning activities they engage in. A growing body of literature suggests that the latter approach has greater and longer-term outcomes.

### **Actions Leaders Can Take That May Build Cultures Receptive to Change**

Leaders have significant tools they can use to influence the cultures in the organizations they lead. An examination of the literature on organizational and school culture suggests these actions that principals can take:

- Recognize that changing culture takes time. Senge (1990) noted that in making deep changes, slower is faster.
- Provide opportunities for meaningful conversations among organization members so they can surface their underlying beliefs about schools, change, and quality—and jointly identify contradictions, inconsistencies, and the need for change (Kotter, 1996).
- Include the wider community of stakeholders—parents, students, and representatives of community groups—in conversations about schools, change, and quality. This wider conversation helps the school to be responsive to the desires and needs of those who have the greatest stake in its performance (Leonard, 1999).
- Create opportunities for collaborative work. Carve out quality time for staff members to meet together and create work assignments that give opportunity for collaborative work (Borko, Wolf, Simone, & Uchiyama, 2003).
- Give away power. Giving others in the organization power to make decisions at their level of expertise and relevance frees leaders to focus on solving problems at their level, which gives the organization as a whole more degrees of freedom in responding to its environment (Follett, 1924).
- Keep continuous improvement at the top of the agenda. Unless the leader is always vigilant, the immediate issues will take precedence over important long-term improvement issues (Borko et al., 2003).
- Base decisions on data that have been interpreted communally (Mason, 2001).
- When addressing performance issues, begin the search for solutions by looking for problems in the organizational system rather than in its people (Hammer & Champy, 1993).

Based on a Literature Review by Albert J. Boerema  
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Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) at Edvantia, Charleston, West Virginia

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