

School Culture in a Private Secondary Institution in Mauritius

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This paper presents a case study of the school culture in a secondary school in Mauritius. It analyses how the school culture has an impact on the effectiveness of an educational organisation. The literature on school culture is reviewed and discussed. The education system in the Mauritian context is described; and its advantages and drawbacks highlighted. A case study of a private secondary school, Loreto Convent Port-Louis, is undertaken to illustrate school culture in an educational organisation. The way the school is organised, the goals are set and the outcomes in terms of effectiveness and achievement, are then analysed.

School culture, organisational effectiveness, educational administration,
role, task culture, educational goal

*“Never look upon thyself
As a conqueror,
Unless thou hath conquered thyself!”*

Mary Ward, Loreto Sister’s Mission

INTRODUCTION

The educational organisation this paper will focus upon is Loreto Convent Port Louis, a private Catholic secondary school in the capital of Mauritius. The particularity of this institution is that it was the first school to be built, by the Irish Missionaries, for girls in 1845 when Mauritius was still under the British rule. Throughout the centuries, the missionaries have contributed enormously in dispensing education, both academic and pastoral to the young girls in the island, regardless of their race, colour or religion; and respecting the ethnic background of the students. The school has created an environment conducive for learning and a culture based mainly on the formation of the individual and transmission of moral values, which are intended to guide the students through life (Hodgkinson, 1991).

This paper is organised into the following three major sections. First of all, a brief description of the education system in Mauritius is given while paying particular attention to the cultural diversity of the island. Secondly, a brief outlook on the literature on school culture is presented. Focus is then laid on the context of Loreto Convent Port-Louis secondary school; a description of the way the school is organised and its distinctive culture is given and the culture of Loreto Convent Port-Louis is discussed in relation to the theories. Finally, this paper analyses how this culture is developed and sustained, and how this relates to the effectiveness of the school.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON SCHOOL CULTURE

It is crucial, before discussing the relationship between the culture of a school and its organisational effectiveness, to have a closer look on what the literature has to say on school culture. According to Bush (1995, p.29), culture refers to the “values, beliefs and norms of individuals in the organisation” and is “manifested by symbols and rituals rather than through the formal structure of the organisation”. Furthermore, Bush (1995, p.130) argues that the technical aspects of institutions are inadequate for schools and colleges to aim at excellence and the only way to achieve a high standard is by focussing on values and attitudes which “produces a more balanced portrait of educational institutions”.

Bush (1995), writing about cultural models of organisations, put emphasis more on the “informal aspects” of the organisation rather than the “official elements”. These informal aspects highlight the great significance of symbols and rituals within a school organisation where leaders have a central role of influencing the culture of the school. Similarly, Hoyle (1986, p.150) claims that ritual is in fact at the heart of cultural models: “Symbols are key components of the culture of all schools” and they “have expressive tasks and symbols which are the only means whereby abstract values can be conveyed ... Symbols are central to the process of constructing meaning”.

Alternatively, for Fidler, Russell and Simkins (1997), the culture of an organisation represents a stabilising and unifying force for and within the organisation. They believe that one of the major roles of leaders therefore is to understand the existing culture of their institution before they can adequately manage both the organisation and its culture. They describe culture as “the distinctive way in which organisation members go about their work and relate to each other in a particular organisation” (Fidler, Russell and Simkins, 1997, p.35).

Bush (1995) and Bottery (1992) argue that the common values and beliefs shared by the different members of the organisation help to contribute to its effective running and uniqueness. Very often focus is laid on the “notion of a single or dominant culture in organisation” (Handy and Aitkin, 1986, p.132), that is, the shared norms and meanings lead to the development of a monoculture in the school; “the way we do things around here”. Added to that they state “cultural models assume the existence of heroes and heroines who embody the values and beliefs of the organisation. These honoured members typify the behaviours associated with the culture of the institution” (Handy and Aitkin, 1986, p.133); and, according to Bush (1995), it is the hero figure who will help individuals to identify themselves to the school and “sustain group unity” (Handy and Aitkin, 1986, p.133).

Handy and Aitkin (1986) identify four cultures that contribute to give each school a distinctive feature and a unique ethos: ‘the club culture’, ‘the role culture’, ‘the task culture’ and ‘the person culture’. The club culture is when there is a dominant figure in the organisation, someone with a rich personality and where there is plenty of folklore from the past that will influence the organisation of the institution. The role culture concerns mainly organisation where specific roles are assigned to people who are fully trained to fulfil them. Handy and Aitkin (1986) claim role cultures apply mainly to secondary schools. The task culture is usually when there is a warm and very friendly attitude among different members of the school community. Everyone co-operates for a single purpose, that is, for the smooth running of the school. Whereas for the person culture, emphasis is laid on individual talent and this “puts the individual first and makes the organisation the resource for individual talents” (Handy and Aitkin, 1986, p.135).

From the above theories and concepts, it can be argued that the culture of the school inevitably has an impact on the learning of the pupils. The environment and atmosphere reigning in the school especially among heads, staffs and pupils, and the values shared by all of them definitely influences the smooth running of the institution.

In the next part of this study, an insight into the Mauritian education system is given in order to understand the cultural background and see how it affects the organisational effectiveness in schools.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT OF THE MAURITIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

The education system in Mauritius is largely based on the British system since Mauritius was a former British colony. After the country became independent in 1968, Education became one of the main preoccupations of the Mauritian Government to meet the new challenges awaiting the country. Considerable investment of resources, both human and material, has been put into the Education sector and impressive progress has been achieved in terms of free, universal, compulsory primary education, free textbooks, free secondary education and a fairly wide range of higher education courses at the University of Mauritius. Education has been free through the secondary level since 1976 and through the post-secondary level since 1988. The government has made an effort to provide adequate funding for education, occasionally straining tight budgets and even subsidised a great part of the expenditure in the Private Confessional schools, that is, schools under the control of the Catholic Church. However, the pre-primary schools are still privately owned.

The cultural diversity of Mauritius is one of the greatest riches of the country but it can also a great drawback regarding the way education is dispensed in the schools. Mauritius has a population of about 1.2 million inhabitants of whom the majority are from Indian origins. They are mostly Hindus and a minority are Muslims. A small section of the population is from China and the general section of the population is made up of Whites (mainly of French origin) and Creoles (of mixed European and African or Asian origin). The members of the general section of the population are normally Christians. When it comes to the field of education, the media of instruction at school is inevitably English, since the impact of colonialism is still very present. English is the official language of Mauritius but the paradoxical situation is that the majority of the population speaks French in their everyday interactions. However, the teaching of some Asian languages (Hindi, Urdu, Mandarin and Arabic) is also included in the curriculum.

The education system consists of the Primary and Secondary sectors. Children are enrolled in primary school from the age of six and enter Standard I and move automatically up to Standard IV. As the child reaches Standard IV, there is a streaming process that follows. The system is highly competitive and a two-year preparation starts since Standard V up to Standard VI for the end of primary school examinations, the CPE (Certificate of Primary Education). The CPE is a national examination carried out in all the schools of the island and there is a ranking system. Four subjects are compulsory and taken into account for the ranking process; English, French, Mathematics and EVS (Environmental Studies which is a combined science and geography course). The Asian languages are not included in the ranking process. This examination is like a bottleneck from primary to secondary schools. For instance, out of 25,629 candidates in 1996, 16,737 passed all grades included (Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, 1998). Among them, only about 8,000 are admitted to secondary schools, both State and Private of the island, and some 3,000 find their way to Basic Prevocational or technical school. Over 14,000 students are said to be, 'left without a future'. Those left without secondary education are the most exposed to the vagaries of social deprivation and their consequences.

Children are admitted to secondary schools or colleges on the basis of the ranking and this creates a great disparity among the different colleges of the island. Some colleges are classified as 'star schools' and other are regarded as 'low-performing schools' and this definitely plays an important role in the development of the adolescents who very often tend to identify themselves with the

image of the college. On the whole, the CPE examination is basically like a kind of streaming at the national level.

As has been mentioned earlier, the CPE determines admission to a secondary college. Most of the colleges, whether they are State owned or Privately owned are like English-style grammar schools. The child enters college in Form I and progresses through to Form VI, requiring seven years of schooling since there is two years preparation for the A Level examinations. From Form I to III, there is no major nationally devised curriculum since each school has to plan its work according to the level of the students. However, some subjects are compulsory, like English, French, Mathematics, Sciences and Social Studies (including Geography and History). When students reach Form IV, they have to choose six major subjects for their O Level examinations. Then students have to specialise in 3 main subjects and 2 subsidiary ones for the A Level examination. The O Level and A Level examinations are carried out by Cambridge University, where they devise the syllabus, prepare the examinations papers and Cambridge examiners even do the correction.

Unfortunately, as it is, the System is grossly inequitable; it has its major structural weaknesses, and it is covertly discriminating and nurtures frustration and failures. It has many limitations; it cannot provide increased access to secondary and tertiary education; it breeds inequalities that seriously affect social harmony. The system caters for only some segments of the Mauritian society, for instance, only 52 per cent of the population within the age group 11 to 19 years are enrolled in secondary schools. It is too exam-oriented and promotes the development of memorisation and lower order thinking skills at the expense of creativity and higher order thinking. Added to that, there is inadequate and under-utilisation of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities mainly because of the constraining influence of the end of year examinations.

It is necessary to make a detailed case study of an educational institution in Mauritius in order to obtain an insight into the culture of a school in a multi-cultural society. The secondary school selected for the purpose of the argument, is Loreto Convent Port-Louis. Focus is laid on a private educational organisation and an analysis is made on whether there is a link between the school culture and the effectiveness of the school.

CASE STUDY: THE CULTURE OF LORETO CONVENT PORT-LOUIS

Background of the School

Loreto Convent Port-Louis is one of the oldest secondary schools in Mauritius for girls. Today, it is one of the most prestigious secondary institutions on the island. It is a Private school under the direction of the Church and the PSSA (Private Secondary School Association), although it is partly subsidised by the government. The School is located very near the City centre at the foot of a hill. It is a very big and spacious school, the buildings are relatively new and there are vast open spaces and playgrounds, several volleyball pitches, a basketball pitch and recently a tennis court. Added to that there is a gymnasium for Physical Education classes and table tennis, an audio-visual room, and a big kitchen for those doing the subject of Food and Nutrition. There are four modern and very well equipped science laboratories, a junior laboratory for the Forms I to III and three laboratories for the students of O and A Levels. The classes are quite large with about 30 students per class. The school population consists mainly of about 1000 students, all girls, and 80 staff, including 15 non-teaching staff. The head of the school is an Irish nun who has worked for over 20 years in the school.

The school has a very good reputation and has been associated with the success of many women on the island. In fact, the school culture is so strong that it is like a family tradition for one or two

generations, mothers and daughters, to be educated in Loreto Convent Port-Louis. The academic level of Loreto is quite high since the admission of students is based on very good ranking after the CPE exams; in other words only those who are ranked among the first 500 are eligible to apply for a seat in the college. Usually only about 130 students are admitted every year to Form I (first year of secondary school), and this is relatively few compared to the very high demand. But the policy and aim of the school are not those of the mass production of educated people but stress is laid essentially on the quality of education, the personal development and moral formation of the individual (Hodgkinson, 1991). Thus, the whole culture of the school is determined by the kind of relationships that exist among different members of the school community; and this culture is the bedrock for the effective running of the organisation. Aspects of this culture are discussed later.

An Analysis of the School Culture at Loreto Convent Port-Louis

The Role of the Head

As stated earlier, Loreto Convent Port-Louis has a specific culture where stress is often laid on the family relationship that exists among the members of the school community. So each one in the school, from the head to the pupils, including the teaching and non-teaching staff feels a member of this so-called 'big family', and they work together for the honour of this prestigious institution. Being a Catholic school, the Head, an Irish nun, has a vital role in the smooth and effective running of the institution. She can be considered to be the heroine figure and helps to sustain unity in the school community (Bush, 1995; Hoy and Miskel, 1996). She can be said to be a 'role model' since she knows every member of the staff individually and is always there whenever a teacher needs her to solve a problem, whether regarding academic or personal ones (Meyerson and Martin, 1997). She is very supportive and always motivates the staff and the pupils to give the best of themselves. She can be very firm sometimes in decision making but she is always open to any suggestion from staff, parents and pupils. She is the central figure of the school and her presence creates a great impact whereby everyone feels secure and highly motivated.

Bush (1995, p.135) points out that the culture of a school may be "expressed by its goals". Referring to Loreto Convent Port-Louis, it is clear that the school has well-defined goals. First, it sets and maintains a good academic standard. Secondly, it seeks to provide the possibility for each child to develop her potential in the specific area of her interest and ability. Finally, pupils are supported by remedial measures, pastoral care and counselling, that closely involve the home and school. The motto of the Head involves the formation of the child to make her someone responsible in life afterwards, to be "*des femmes debout*"; women who will be confident and face life with courage and dignity. Emphasis is placed on success rather than failure so as to build confidence in the child, regardless of her social, cultural or ethnic background. These goals, as Bush (1995, p.135) stated, definitely provide "a common vision and set of values". As such, how effective the school is depends on the structure of its organisation.

Are the Educational Goals Reinforced by the School Culture?

One of the main goals of the school as such is to promote unity and security for all members of the school community. Since Mauritius is a multi-cultural society, the school consists of pupils from different ethnic and religious backgrounds even though the majority is Catholic. So the school regulation lays considerable stress on uniform especially regarding the students. The uniform represents the equal status of students regardless of their class, race, colour or religion. Throughout the years, the Loreto uniform has become a symbol of pride for the pupils and the college. Concerning the curriculum, the college usually follows the one set up by the Government but the system is a little decentralised, especially for Private Schools. In Loreto Convent Port-

Louis, there is a more open curriculum whereby classes on moral values and catechism are included in the timetable. Basically these classes are carried out in small groups, in an informal setting, that is, outside the classroom and students are encouraged to participate and voice out their opinions and views about topics and issues that are of great concern to them. In fact, these classes on values contribute enormously to the formation of the personality of each individual student.

A particular feature of the school is the devotion of the teachers. Some of them usually stay after school hours to carry out remedial classes to help students who are weak in a particular subject. Sometimes, even the students from upper forms are willing to stay after school to help those from lower forms. Everything is done on a voluntary basis and this creates a strong bond among the pupils of the school. Although the education system is very competitive in Mauritius, the Head and teachers always focus on the notion of sharing and group work (Busher and Harris, 1999). Thus, the students work in a more relaxed atmosphere and this contributes largely to their very good performance at examinations, whether they are internal or the Cambridge external examinations. The percentage of passes at all levels, from lower Forms to upper Forms, is always above 98 per cent.

Loreto Convent Port-Louis is a very big organisation and since very often the subsidy of the Government is not sufficient for the running of the school, fund raising activities are undertaken to raise money for diverse projects. Parents are very much concerned with the development of the school and participate actively in these special activities. Money raised from these activities is used to finance projects such as the construction of a new tennis court or investment in Information Technology.

Bush (1995) believes that, in order to support the structures and celebrate the beliefs and norms, schools use rituals and ceremonies. The latter forms an integral part of the culture of the institution. Loreto Convent Port-Louis is an institution where a lot of importance is attached to rituals and traditions. The Annual school Mass, The Prize-Giving Ceremony, the Music Day and Annual Sports Day are among the activities organised during the year, and these help to reinforce the strong ethos. The activities allow both teachers and pupils to work together in a very friendly atmosphere to develop their artistic talents. The Prize Giving Day is an important ceremony during the academic year. The idea of reward is a great source of motivation since it helps the students to understand how hard work is valued. The best students in both academic and sport fields are rewarded, and parents are invited to assist the ceremony. Added to that, the Annual School Mass is an occasion where all the pupils participate, even the non-Catholic pupils, where values such as sharing and tolerance are inculcated.

The Parent Teacher's Association (PTA) is a very important body whenever decision-making is involved. So the Head, teachers and parents work in collaboration for the effective running of the organisation and this creates a great sense of belonging to the school. This is reinforced by the fact that most of the staff are former pupils of Loreto Convent Port-Louis and, thus, they contribute largely to maintaining and even reinforcing the existing culture.

Fidler, et.al (1997, p.35) see the concept of culture as a "unifying force within the organisations" and relates to the ethos as "the way in which the pupils experienced the school". Furthermore, they argue that there can exist two different cultures within the same school community; "in school the culture for pupils is called the school ethos whilst the term culture has been reserved for the shared assumptions of the staff" (Fidler, et.al, 1997, p.44). To support this argument, the case of Loreto Convent Port-Louis can be taken where there are different sub-cultures or ethos among the students, which can sometimes, totally contrast with the culture espoused by the head and staff. Very often, a group of pupils will tend to adopt a particular attitude to try to create their

own identity instead of following blindly what has been decided for them. They try to rebel against the values of the school and it is very important in this case to know which approach to adopt towards them (Henson, 1993; Senge, 1990). Instead of applying the rules of punishment, the policy of the school is to give proper support to these particularly difficult cases, which contrast to the way these disciplinary matters are dealt with in other State schools. If this fails, only then strict disciplinary measures are applied. The students are always given a chance first to improve their behaviour.

THE SCHOOL CULTURE IN RELATION TO SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

As a matter of fact, Loreto Convent Port-Louis, during the years has proved to be one of the best performing schools of the island whether it is at an academic level or concerning extra-curricular activities. It could be argued that the good performance of the students depends largely on the fact that they are among the best ones who succeeds their CPE exams, but it cannot be denied that the environment of the school in addition to the motivated staff is really conducive for learning and shaping the students to be their very best. Loreto Convent Port-Louis has won twice the National Award in 1992 and 1993 for the Best School whose criteria are based mainly on the infrastructure of the school in general and the academic performance of the students. No need to say that the Head has a key role in the institution since she is always motivating the staff and the students and encouraging each individual to give the best of themselves. The percentage of Pass for the O Level and A Level is always above 97 per cent, and many students from the school obtain Government scholarships for University studies abroad. It goes without saying that Loreto distinguishes itself from other State schools on the island.

The ethos of the school can be considered to be unique. The main objective of the school is always to allow the pupils to blossom to their full potential, to be creative, to develop their capacity to think and decide for themselves in a school culture based on co-operation rather than competition. In a rather conservative society like Mauritius, it is crucial that girls are given the proper education so that they may find their way in the job market and through life with good qualifications and strong moral values; so that they may become more independent and be able to make their own stance in society.

CONCLUSION

In summary, it can be said that considering the particular case of Mauritius, the culture of a school is very often a crucial factor in determining its effectiveness. The case study of Loreto Convent Port-Louis reveals how the values and policies of the school lead to better achievement of the students. It is crucial for students to perform well, to have a proper environment, and to receive proper moral and academic support. All these factors, added to the relationships between Head, teachers, pupils and staff contribute largely to the effectiveness of this institution.

In other words, a stable and convivial environment within the school, where individuals share the same motivation and norms, are likely to contribute to the effective organisation of the institution. In such a context where the interest of the school is always put forward, collaboration is a key word especially when dealing with problems or while taking decisions. It is only in this way that the school is able to achieve its goals.

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