

4

Organisational cultures

Introduction: defining culture

The concept of culture has become increasingly significant in education during the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. This enhanced interest may be understood as an example of dissatisfaction with the limitations of those leadership and management models which stress the structural and technical aspects of schools and colleges. The focus on the intangible world of values and attitudes is a useful counter to these bureaucratic assumptions and helps to produce a more balanced portrait of educational institutions.

Culture relates to the informal aspects of organisations rather than their official elements. They focus on the values, beliefs and norms of individuals in the organisation and how these individual perceptions coalesce into shared meanings. Culture is manifested by symbols and rituals rather than through the formal structure of the organization:

Beliefs, values and ideology are at the heart of organisations. Individuals hold certain ideas and value-preferences which influence how they behave and how they view the behaviour of other members. These norms become shared traditions which are communicated within the group and are reinforced by symbols and ritual. (Bush 2003, p.156).

The developing importance of culture arises partly from a wish to understand, and operate more effectively within, this informal domain of the values and beliefs of teachers, support staff and other stakeholders. Morgan (1997) and O'Neill (1994) both stress the increasing significance of cultural factors in leadership and management. The latter charts the appearance of cultural 'labels' and suggests why they have become more prevalent:

The increased use of such cultural descriptors in the literature of educational management is significant because it reflects a need for educational organizations to be able to articulate deeply held and shared values in more tangible ways and therefore respond more effectively to new, uncertain and potentially

threatening demands on their capabilities. Organizations, therefore, articulate values in order to provide form and meaning for the activities of organizational members in the absence of visible and certain organizational structures and relationships. In this sense the analysis and influence of organizational culture become essential management tools in the pursuit of increased organizational growth and effectiveness. (O'Neill, 1994, p.116)

The shift towards self-management in many countries reinforces the notion of schools and colleges as unique entities with their own distinctive features or 'culture'. It is inevitable that self-management will lead to greater diversity and, in England, this is one of the Government's explicit aims. Caldwell and Spinks (1992) argue that there is 'a culture of self-management'. The essential components of this culture are the *empowerment* of leaders and their acceptance of *responsibility*.

Societal culture

Most of the literature on culture in education relates to organisational culture and that is also the main focus of this chapter. However, there is also an emerging literature on the broader theme of national or societal culture. Dimmock and Walker (2002a, p.3) claim that 'the field of educational administration ... has largely ignored the influence of societal culture' but their work has contributed to an increasing awareness of this concept.

Given the globalisation of education, issues of societal culture are increasingly significant. Walker and Dimmock (2002) refer to issues of context and stress the need to avoid 'decontextualized paradigms' (p.1) in researching and analysing educational systems and institutions:

The field of educational leadership and management has developed along ethnocentric lines, being heavily dominated by Anglo-American paradigms and theories ... Frequently, either a narrow ethnicity pervades research and policy, or an implicit assumption is made that findings in one part of the world will necessarily apply in others. It is clear that a key factor missing from many debates on educational administration and leadership is context ... context is represented by societal culture and its mediating influence on theory, policy and practice. (Walker and Dimmock 2002, p.2)

Walker and Dimmock are by no means alone in advocating attention to issues of context. Crossley and Broadfoot (1992, p.100) say that 'policies and practice cannot be translated intact from one culture to another since the mediation of different cultural contexts can quite transform the latter's salience' while Bush et al. (1998, p.137) stress that 'all theories and interpretations of practice must be 'grounded' in the specific context ... before they can be regarded as useful'.

Dimmock and Walker (2002b, p.71) have given sustained attention to these issues and provide a helpful distinction between societal and organizational culture:

Societal cultures differ mostly at the level of basic values, while organizational cultures differ mostly at the level of more superficial practices, as reflected in the recognition of particular symbols, heroes and rituals. *This allows organizational cultures to be deliberately managed and changed*, whereas societal or national cultures are more enduring and change only gradually over longer time periods. School leaders influence, and in turn are influenced by, the organizational culture. Societal culture, on the other hand, is a given, being outside the sphere of influence of an individual school leader. (Our emphasis)

Dimmock and Walker (2002b) identify seven 'dimensions' of societal culture, each of which is expressed as a continuum:

- 1 *Power-distributed/power concentrated*: power is either distributed more equally among the various levels of a culture or is more concentrated.
- 2 *Group-oriented/self-oriented*: people in self-oriented cultures perceive themselves to be more independent and self-reliant. In group-oriented cultures, ties between people are tight, relationships are firmly structured and individual needs are subservient to the collective needs.
- 3 *Consideration/aggression*: in aggression cultures, achievement is stressed, competition dominates and conflicts are resolved through the exercise of power and assertiveness. In contrast, consideration societies emphasise relationship, solidarity and resolution of conflicts by compromise and negotiation.
- 4 *Proactivism/fatalism*: this dimension reflects the proactive or 'we can change things around here' attitude in some cultures, and the willingness to accept things as they are in others – a fatalistic perspective.
- 5 *Generative/replicative*: some cultures appear more predisposed towards innovation, or the generation of new ideas and methods, whereas other cultures appear more inclined to replicate or to adopt ideas and approaches from elsewhere.
- 6 *Limited relationship/holistic relationship*: in limited relationship cultures, interactions and relationships tend to be determined by explicit rules which are applied to everyone. In holistic cultures, greater attention is given to relationship obligations, for example kinship, patronage and friendship, than to impartially applied rules.
- 7 *Male influence/female influence*: in some societies, the male domination of decision-making in political, economic and professional life is perpetuated. In others, women have come to play a significant role. (adapted from Dimmock and Walker 2002b, pp.74–6).

This model can be applied to educational systems in different countries. Bush and Qiang (2000) show that most of these dimensions are relevant to Chinese education:

- *Power is concentrated* in the hands of a limited number of leaders. 'The principal has positional authority within an essentially bureaucratic system ... China might be regarded as the archetypal high power-distance (power-concentrated) society' (p.60).
- Chinese culture is *group oriented*. 'Collective benefits [are] seen as more important than individual needs' (p.61).
- Chinese culture stresses *consideration* rather than aggression. 'The Confucian scholars advocate modesty and encourage friendly co-operation, giving priority to people's relationships. The purpose of education is to mould every individual into a harmonious member of society' (p.62).
- *Patriarchal leadership* dominates in education, business, government and the Communist Party itself. There are no women principals in the 89 secondary schools in three counties of the Shaanxi province. Coleman et al. (1998, p.144) attribute such inequalities to the continuing dominance of patriarchy.

Societal culture is one important aspect of the context within which school leaders must operate. Leaders and managers must also be aware of organisational culture which provides a more immediate framework for leadership action. Principals and others can help to shape culture but they are also influenced by it. Chapter 7, for example, refers to the need for educational leaders to be aware of the societal culture underpinning schools and colleges so that appropriate equal opportunities policies and practices can be developed.

Central features of organisational culture

Organisational culture has the following major features (Bush 2003):

- 1 It focuses on the *values and beliefs* of members of organisations. These values underpin the behaviour and attitudes of individuals within schools and colleges but they may not always be explicit. These individual beliefs coalesce into shared values: 'Shared values, shared beliefs, shared meaning, shared understanding, and shared sensemaking are all different ways of describing culture ... These patterns of understanding also provide a basis for making one's own behaviour sensible and meaningful' (Morgan, 1997, p.138).

This does not necessarily mean that individual values are always in harmony with one another. Morgan (1997, p.137) suggests that 'there may be different and competing value systems that create a mosaic of organizational realities rather than a uniform corporate culture'. Dissonance is more likely in large, multipurpose organisations such as colleges and universities but Nias et al. (1989) note that they may also exist in primary education. Fullan and Hargreaves (1992, pp. 71–2) argue that some schools develop a 'balkanized' culture made up of separate and sometimes competing groups:

Teachers in balkanized cultures attach their loyalties and identities to particular groups of their colleagues. They are usually colleagues with whom they work most closely, spend most time, socialize most often in the staffroom. The existence of such groups in a school often reflects and reinforces very different group outlooks on learning, teaching styles, discipline and curriculum.

Staff working in sub-units, such as departments, may develop their own distinctive 'subculture' and middle managers, or 'middle level leaders' as the NCSL prefers to call them, may wish to cultivate this as a way of developing and enhancing team effectiveness. However, as Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) imply, such subcultures may not be consistent with the whole-school or college culture.

- 2 Organisational culture emphasises the development of *shared norms and meanings*. The assumption is that interaction between members of the organisation, or its subgroups, eventually leads to behavioural norms that gradually become cultural features of the school or college. Nias et al.'s (1989, pp.39–40) research shows how group norms were established in their case-study schools:

As staff talked, worked and relaxed together, they began to negotiate shared meanings which enabled them to predict each others' behaviour. Consequently each staff developed its own taken-for-granted norms. Because shared meanings and ways of behaving became so taken for granted, existing staff were largely unaware of them. But they were visible to newcomers ... Researchers moving between schools were constantly reminded of the uniqueness of each school's norms.

These group norms sometimes allow the development of a monoculture in a school with meanings shared throughout the staff – 'the way we do things around here'. We have already noted, however, that there may be several subcultures based on the professional and personal interests of different groups. These typically have internal coherence but experience difficulty in relationships with other groups whose behavioural norms are different. Wallace and Hall (1994, pp.28 and 127) identify senior management teams (SMTs) as one example of group culture with clear internal norms but often weak connections to other groups and individuals:

SMTs in our research developed a 'culture of teamwork' ... A norm common to the SMTs was that decisions must be reached by achieving a working consensus, entailing the acknowledgement of any dissenting views ... there was a clear distinction between interaction inside the team and contact with those outside ... [who] were excluded from the inner world of the team.

- 3 Culture is typically expressed through *rituals and ceremonies* which are used to support and celebrate beliefs and norms. Schools, in particular, are rich in such symbols as assemblies, prize-givings and corporate worship. Hoyle (1986, pp.150

and 152) argues that ritual is at the heart of cultural models: 'Symbols are a key component of the culture of all schools ... [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'. (Hoyle 1986, pp.150–2).

School culture may be symbolized through three modes:

- (a) *Conceptually or verbally*, for example through use of language and the expression of organisational aims.
- (b) *Behaviourally*, through rituals, ceremonies, rules, support mechanisms, and patterns of social interaction.
- (c) *Visually or materially*, through facilities, equipment, memorabilia, mottoes, crests and uniforms. (Beare et al. 1989, p.176).

Schein (1997, p.248) argues that 'rites and rituals [are] central to the deciphering as well as to the communicating of cultural assumptions'.

- 4 Organisational culture assumes 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. Campbell-Evans (1993, p. 106) stresses that heroes or heroines are those whose achievements match the culture: 'Choice and recognition of heroes ... occurs within the cultural boundaries identified through the value filter ... The accomplishments of those individuals who come to be regarded as heroes are compatible with the cultural emphases.'

This feature is evident in South Africa, for example, where the huge interest in school sport means that sporting heroes are identified and celebrated. This was evident, for example, in a Durban school visited by one of the authors, where former student Shaun Pollock, the South African fast bowler, had numerous photographs on display and a room named after him. In celebrating the achievements of this cricketing 'hero', school managers are seeking to emphasise the centrality of sporting achievement to the ethos and culture of the school.

Developing a culture of learning in South Africa

As we noted earlier (p.000), societal or national culture underpins the organisational culture of individual schools and colleges. Nowhere is this more apparent than in South African schools where the predominant culture reflects the wider social structure of the post-apartheid era. Decades of institutionalised racism and injustice have been replaced by an overt commitment to democracy in all aspects of life, including education.

Ngcobo (2003) addresses issues of cultural diversity and, drawing on Irvine (1990), identifies nine dimensions of African culture:

- Spirituality: life is viewed as vitalistic rather than mechanistic.
- Harmony: humans and nature live interdependently and in harmony.

- Movement: rhythm, music and dance.
- Verve: high levels of stimulation.
- Affect: emotions and feelings.
- Communalism: social connectedness and an awareness of responsibilities to the group transcending individual privileges.
- Expressive individualism: genuine personal expression.
- Oral tradition: oral/aural metaphors and colourful forms.
- Social time perspective: time as social rather than material space (adapted from Ngcobo 2003, p.224).

Ngcobo (2003) notes that these cultural features are very different from European cultures. Such cultural differences became particularly significant as schools began to change their racial composition in response to the South African Schools Act (1996), which made it illegal to deny admission to students on the basis of race. Formerly white schools, with a predominantly 'European' culture, began to assimilate learners, and to a lesser extent educators, from different cultural backgrounds. Ngcobo (2003) gives two contrasting examples of how school leaders responded to these cultural changes. Vryburg high school avoided cultural diversity by dividing the premises into two sections (white and black). This had several deleterious consequences, including conflict leading to charges of assault being laid against 14 black learners and seven parents of white students. Greenland secondary school in Durban adopted a different approach, aiming at cultural diversity and encouraging learners and staff to express and celebrate their own cultures. This school has been very successful academically which the principal attributes to 'the strong integrative culture it promotes' (Ngcobo 2003, p.230).

The years of struggle against apartheid inevitably affected schools, particularly those in the townships. One of the 'weapons' of the black majority was for youngsters to 'strike' and demonstrate against the policies of the white government. Similarly, teacher unions were an important aspect of the liberation movement and teachers would frequently be absent from school to engage in protest activity. It is perhaps inevitable that a culture of learning was difficult to establish in such a hostile climate. Badat (1995, p.143) claims that 'the crisis in black education, including what has come to be referred to as the "breakdown" in the "culture of learning" ... continued unabated'.

This issue surfaced in Bush and Anderson's (2003) survey of school principals in the KwaZulu/Natal province. In response to a question about the aims of the school, principals stated that:

- the school is striving to instill in the minds of learners that 'education is their future'
- to show the importance of education within and outside the school
- to provide a conducive educational environment
- to develop a culture of learning.

The absence of a culture of learning in many South African schools illustrates the long-term and uncertain nature of cultural change. The long years of resistance to apartheid education have to be replaced by a commitment to teaching and learning if South Africa is to thrive in an increasingly competitive world economy. However, educational values have to compete with the still prevalent discourse of struggle and also have to reconcile the diverse value systems of the different sub-cultures in South Africa's integrated schools. It seems likely that the development of a genuine culture of learning will be slow and dependent on the quality of leadership in individual schools.

Leadership and culture

We noted earlier (p.000) that societal culture is beyond the control of educational leaders but heads and principals are able to influence organisational culture. Arguably, they have the main responsibility for generating and sustaining culture and communicating core values and beliefs both within the organization and to external stakeholders (Bush 1998, p.43). Heads and principals have their own values and beliefs arising from many years of successful professional practice. They are also expected to embody the culture of the school or college. Hoyle (1986, pp.155–6) stresses the symbolic dimension of leadership and the central role of heads in defining school culture:

Few heads will avoid constructing an image of the school. They will differ in the degree to which this is a deliberate and charismatic task. Some heads ... will self-consciously seek to construct a great mission for the school. Others will convey their idea of the school less dramatically and construct a meaning from the basic materials of symbol-making: words, actions, artefacts and settings.

Schein (1997, p.211) argues that cultures spring primarily from the beliefs, values and assumptions of founders of organisations. Nias et al. (1989, p. 103) suggest that heads are 'founders' of their school's culture. They refer to two of their English case study schools where new heads dismantled the existing culture in order to create a new one based on their own values. The culture was rebuilt through example: 'All the heads of the project schools were aware of the power of example. Each head expected to influence staff through his/her example. Yet their actions may also have been symbolic of the values they tried to represent.' Nias et al. (1989) also mention the significance of co-leaders, such as deputy heads and curriculum co-ordinators, in disseminating school culture.

Deal (1985, pp.615–18) suggests several strategies for leaders who wish to generate culture:

- Document the school's history to be codified and passed on.
- Anoint and celebrate heroes and heroines.

- Review the school's rituals to convey cultural values and beliefs.
- Exploit and develop ceremony.
- Identify priests, priestesses and gossips, and incorporate them into mainstream activity. This provides access to the informal communications network.

One of the ways in which leaders can shape or change culture is through the appointment of other staff who have the same values and beliefs, leading to cultural consonance. In this view, the staff selection process provides an opportunity to set out the values of the school, or its leaders, in the hope that those who hold similar values will be attracted to the post while others will be deterred from making or pursuing an application. Over time, the culture of the school will shift in the direction sought by the principal. The literature on collegiality (e.g. Bush 2003) shows that leaders are more likely to cede power to others when they are confident that their own educational values will not be compromised by doing so.

Foskett and Lumby (2003) point out that staff selection processes are themselves subject to cultural variables. They draw on Akinnusi (1991) to distinguish between 'universalistic' and 'particularistic' approaches to selection. The universalistic approach, as discussed in Chapter 9 of this volume, for example, attempts to match applicants to objective criteria and is thought to be 'more successful in identifying the best match to the vacant post' (Foskett and Lumby 2003, p.71). These authors contrast this model with the particularistic approach adopted, for example, in Africa and in China. Here, 'selection is shaped by the personal affiliation of the players, for example kinship, religion, ethnic or political similarities' (p.70). This approach is likely to be successful in ensuring that the appointees have similar values to the leaders.

Using cultural criteria to appoint new staff may help to modify culture but the established staff, and inertia, may still ensure that change is highly problematic. Reynolds (1996) refers to one school where the prevailing culture was 'posing severe difficulties for any purported change attempts' (p.153). He points to 'multiple barriers to change' including:

- staff wanted 'top down' change and not 'ownership'
- 'we've always done it this way'
- individual reluctance to challenge the prevailing culture
- staff blaming children's home background for examination failure
- numerous personality clashes, personal agendas and fractured interpersonal relationships (Reynolds 1996, pp.153–4).

This example illustrates the difficulty of attempting to impose cultural change. As one former college principal stresses, '[it is] dangerous ... for managers to move too fast on cultural change' (Bridge 1994, p.197). Turner (1990, p.11) acknowledges the pressures on leaders to 'mould' culture but rejects the belief that 'something as powerful as culture can be much affected by the puny efforts of top managers'.

Hargreaves (1999, p.59) makes a similar point, claiming that 'most people's beliefs, attitudes and values are far more resistant to change than leaders typically allow'. He identifies three circumstances when culture may be subject to rapid change:

- The school faces an obvious crisis, for example a highly critical inspection report or falling pupil numbers, leading to the prospect of staff redundancies or school closure.
- The leader is very charismatic, commanding instant trust, loyalty and fellowship. This may enable cultural change to be more radical and be achieved more quickly.
- The leader succeeds a very poor principal. Staff will be looking for change to instil a new sense of direction (adapted from Hargreaves 1999, pp.59–60).

These points may also apply to sub-units and subcultures. Hargreaves (1999, p.60) concludes that, 'if none of these special conditions applies, assume that cultural change will be rather slow'.

Leaders also have responsibility for sustaining culture, and cultural maintenance is often regarded as a central feature of effective leadership. Sergiovanni (1984, p.9) claims that the cultural aspect is the most important dimension of leadership. Within his 'leadership forces hierarchy', the cultural element is more significant than the technical, human and educational aspects of leadership:

The net effect of the cultural force of leadership is to bond together students, teachers, and others as believers in the work of the school ... As persons become members of this strong and binding culture, they are provided with opportunities for enjoying a special sense of personal importance and significance.

Limitations of organisational culture

The concept of organisational culture provides several useful elements to the leadership and management of people in schools and colleges. The focus on the informal dimension is a valuable counter to the rigid and official components of the formal models. By stressing the values and beliefs of participants, culture reinforces the human aspects of management rather than their structural elements. However, this approach has three significant weaknesses (Bush 2003):

- 1 The notion of 'organisational culture' may simply be the imposition of the leaders' values on other members of the organisation. The search for a monoculture may mean subordinating the values and beliefs of some participants to those of leaders or the dominant group. 'Shared' cultures may be simply the values of leaders imposed on less powerful people. Morgan (1997) refers to 'a process of ideological

control' and warns of the risk of 'manipulation':

Ideological manipulation and control is being advocated as an essential managerial strategy ... such manipulation may well be accompanied by resistance, resentment and mistrust ... where the culture controls rather than expresses human character, the metaphor may thus prove quite manipulative and totalitarian in its influence. (pp.150–1)

Prosser (1999, p.4) refers to the 'dark underworld' of school culture and links it to the concept of micropolitics: 'The micro-political perspective recognized that formal powers, rules, regulations, traditions and rituals were capable of being subverted by individuals, groups or affiliations in schools'. Hargreaves (1999, p.60) uses the term 'resistance group' to refer to sub-units seeking to subvert leaders and their intended cultural change. However, this may simply be a legitimate attempt to enunciate the specific values of, for example, departmental culture.

- 2 The portrayal of culture may be unduly mechanistic, assuming that leaders can determine the culture of the organisation (Morgan 1997). While they have influence over the evolution of culture by espousing desired values, they cannot ensure the emergence of a monoculture. As we have seen, secondary schools and colleges may have several subcultures operating in departments and other sections. This is not necessarily dysfunctional because successful sub-units are vital components of thriving institutions, and successful middle-level leadership and management are increasingly regarded as essential to school and college effectiveness (Harris 2002; Briggs 2003).

In an era of self-managing schools and colleges in many countries, lay influences on policy are increasingly significant. Governing bodies often have the formal responsibility for major decisions and they share in the creation of institutional culture. This does not mean simple acquiescence to the values of the head or principal. Rather, there may be negotiation leading to the possibility of conflict and the adoption of policies inconsistent with the leader's own values.

- 3 Hoyle (1986) argues that symbols may misrepresent the reality of the school or college. He suggests that schools may go through the appearance of change but the reality continues as before:

A symbol can represent something which is 'real' in the sense that it ... acts as a surrogate for reality ... there will be a mutual recognition by the parties concerned that the substance has not been evoked but they are nevertheless content to sustain the fiction that it has if there has been some symbolization of the substance ... in reality the system carries on as formerly. (p.166)

Schein (1997, p.249) also warns against placing too much reliance on ritual.

When the only salient data we have are the rites and rituals that have survived over a period of time, we must, of course, use them as best we

can ... however ... it is difficult to decipher just what assumptions leaders have held that have led to the creation of particular rites and rituals.

Conclusion: people and culture

The belief that schools and colleges are unique entities is gaining ground as people increasingly recognise the importance of the specific contexts, internal and external, which provide the frameworks within which leaders and managers must operate. Despite the pressures of globalisation, understanding and managing the school context is a vital dimension of leadership in the twenty-first century. Values and beliefs are not universal and a 'one size fits all' model does not work for nations any more than it does for schools.

The recognition that school and college development needs to be preceded by attitudinal change is also salutary, and is consistent with the view that teachers must feel 'ownership' of change if it is to be implemented effectively. Externally imposed innovation often fails because it is out of tune with the values of the teachers who have to implement it. 'Since organization ultimately resides in the heads of the people involved, effective organizational change always implies cultural change' (Morgan 1997, p.150).

The emphasis on values and symbols may also help to balance the focus on structure and process in many of the other models. The informal world of norms and ritual behaviour may be just as significant as the formal elements of schools and colleges. 'Even the most concrete and rational aspects of organization – whether structures, hierarchies, rules, or organizational routines – embody social constructions and meanings that are crucial for understanding how organization functions day to day' (Morgan 1997, p.146).

Culture also provides a focus for organisational action. Effective leaders often seek to influence values so that they become closer to, if not identical with, their own beliefs. In this way, they hope to achieve widespread support for, or 'ownership' of, new policies. By working through this informal domain, rather than imposing change through positional authority or political processes, heads, principals and other leaders, including middle managers, are more likely to gain support for innovation.

An understanding of both societal and organisational culture also provides a sound basis for leading and managing people in education. In many countries, schools and colleges are becoming multicultural, and recognition of the rich diversity of the cultural backgrounds of students, parents and staff is an essential element in school management. Similarly, all educational organisations have certain distinctive features and understanding and managing this cultural apparatus is vital if leadership is to be 'in tune' with the prevailing norms and values. An appreciation of the relevance of both societal and organisational culture, and of the values, beliefs and rituals that underpin them, is an important element in the leadership

and management of schools and colleges.

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