Probing School Culture as the Key to Effective Educational Change

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Introduction

Structure and culture are closely intertwined and both are key to effective leadership. Yet, given its complex and subtle nature, culture within schools merits a more detailed examination, one which can demystify its role in the change process. Leadership by any group of people within any organization is unlikely to yield results without an appropriate understanding of culture and its effect on action. Deal (1985) maintains that:

> Understanding the symbols and culture of a school is prerequisite to making the school more effective.… Unless improvement strategies and programs are guided by a sensitive awareness of the role played by school culture, the effective schools movement could collapse under its own weight. (p. 602)

Leadership loses direction and purpose and remains impotent when not built on a strong comprehension of culture as it pertains to individuals, schools, and nations at large.

The importance attached to culture, the software of schools as Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) call it, springs from the fact that it is eventually what makes change happen or fail. Barth (2002) states that:

> A school's culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the president, the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal, teachers, and parents can ever have. (p. 6)

There is a close relationship between cultures and practices within schools in the sense that effective cultures are often linked to productive teaching and learning practices and vice versa. It is how people think and feel that wields direct influence on student learning rather than policies, which are important for what they represent and express but not for what they accomplish (Deal, 1985). In this respect, Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) maintain that:

> However noble, sophisticated, or enlightened proposals for change and improvement might be, they come to nothing if teachers don't adopt them in their own classrooms and if they don't translate them into effective classroom practice. (p. 13)

In other words, what happens within schools is mainly a function of their overall cultures, which determine whether and how members proceed with creating or implementing ideas for change.

Definitions of School Culture

While there is no single agreed-upon definition of culture, there is a wide consensus among researchers (e.g. Maslowski, 2001; Schein, 2004; Deal & Peterson, 2009) about the ingredients of which it is composed, namely norms, rituals, ceremonies, and shared values and behaviors. These constitute the major components of culture, whether it be of schools, other organizations, or whole nations.

To start with, school culture mainly consists of rituals, ceremonies, and shared norms and values which shape people's attitudes, feelings, and behaviors and act as a code of conduct premised on previous experiences and meanings derived from them (Peterson, 2002; Barth, 2002; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991). Peterson (2002) defines school culture as:

> The set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the "persona" of the school. These unwritten expectations build up over time as teachers, administrators, parents, and students work together, solve problems, deal with challenges and, at times, cope with failures. (p. 1)

Similarly, Barth (2002) describes school culture as:

> A complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization. It is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act. (p. 6)

On the other hand, Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) describe culture in terms of the beliefs and expectations that drive action and govern relationships within the school environment. They (1991) point out that culture refers to:

> The guiding beliefs and expectations evident in the way a school operates, particularly in reference to how people relate (or fail to relate) to each other. In simple terms, culture is "the way we do things and relate to each other around here. (p. 37)

Moreover, Maslowski (2001) defines school culture as "the basic assumptions, norms and values, and cultural artifacts that are shared by school members, which influence their functioning at school" (p. 8-9). He draws a distinction among three interrelated facets of culture: content, homogeneity, and strength. The content of culture refers to "the meaning of its basic assumptions, norms and values as well as cultural artifacts that are shared by members of the school" (Maslowski, 2001, p. 12). Homogeneity represents the extent to which these assumptions, norms, and values are shared and endorsed across the school while the strength of culture concerns the level of influence it has on attitudes and behaviors (Maslowski, 2001). To provide a clearer understanding of culture, Tagiuri (1968) distinguishes culture from three other related concepts: ecology, milieu, and social system. He maintains that culture consists of "the norms, values, and meaning systems shared by members of a school" (cited in Higgins-D'Alessandro & Sadh, 1998, p. 554). It is distinct from the ecology of the school (the physical plant, equipment, and setting), its milieu (the sociocultural background of students, teachers, and community), and its social system (organizational structures and operating procedures) (cited in Higgins-D'Alessandro & Sadh, 1998).

Regarding culture in organizations in general, several definitions are cited here to further clarify the notion of culture, its essence, and its manifestations. For example, Schein (2004) describes organizational culture as:

> A pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group 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. 17)

Culture, as also indicated by Peterson (2002), Barth (2002), and Fullan and Hargreaves (1991), does not emerge or develop arbitrarily but is rather based on experiences and how they have been interpreted in terms of their effectiveness and benefits. Other definitions of

organizational culture include those formulated by Ouchi (1981), Deal and Peterson (2009), and Deal (1985). Ouchi (1981: 41) indicates that culture concerns the "systems, ceremonies, and myths that communicate the underlying values and beliefs of the organization to its employees" (qtd. in Hoy, 1990, p. 156). Deal and Peterson (2009) affirm that culture encompasses "the stable, underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behavior over time" (p. 6). Deal (1985) adds that culture is "an expression that tries to capture the informal, implicit–often unconscious–side of business of any human organization" (p. 605). The importance of these definitions lies in the fact that they all focus on the deeper levels of culture variably called "basic assumptions" (Schein, 2004), "underlying values and beliefs" (Ouchi, 1981), "underlying social meanings" (Deal & Peterson, 2009), and "the implicit– often unconscious–side of business" (Deal, 1985). These convey that culture essentially consists of the deep-seated beliefs shared by a group of people and expressed in rituals, norms, and ceremonies. As Busher (2006) emphasizes, the different components of culture mutually affect one another and no linear relationship exists among them.

Organizational culture is closely related to national or societal culture; neither one can thrive and achieve results without support from the other. The definitions assigned to national culture and organizational culture are similar in many ways, except that the former concern a whole nation while the latter pertain to organizations within a given nation. For instance, Dimmock and Walker (2000) describe societal culture as "the values, customs, traditions and ways of living which distinguish one group of people from another" (p. 308). For Hofstede et al. (2010), culture constitutes "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 6). They (2010) note that culture is learned unlike human nature, which is inherited, or personality, which represents the unique mental attributes that do not have to be shared with others.

Overall, culture is a complex concept intertwined with many variables such as social relationships, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, history, political context, and national discourse on education (Busher, 2006). It does not consist of enclosed and consistent meanings that can be derived independently of the temporal, spatial, and sociopolitical context (McLaren, 1991). Culture, for example, cannot escape the influence of power and privilege; it can be manipulated to express competing or conflicting discourses (McLaren, 1991). As Foucault (1977) indicates, culture can function as a conduit of power to advance and sustain the interests of the elites (cited in Busher, 2006). In short, culture has historical and ideological underpinnings. It is pervasive and dynamic rather than bounded and static, and it can serve to achieve common or self-interest.

Levels of Culture

There are three major levels of culture represented by basic assumptions, values and beliefs, and norms and artifacts (Hoy, 1990; Goldring, 2002; Schein, 2004). Basic assumptions, the deepest level of culture, concern people's fundamental beliefs about interpersonal relationships, human nature, truth, reality, and the environment (Hoy, 1990). They are unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that shape behaviors and actions (Schein, 2004; Goldring, 2002). Values and beliefs, which constitute a less abstract level of culture, comprise how people think and behave (Hoy, 1990) and their espoused strategies, goals, and philosophies (Schein, 2004). Examples of values include interaction, trust, cooperation, and teamwork (Hoy, 1990). These are deemed less abstract because they can be expressed in relationships and actions within organizations (Goldring, 2002). Norms and artifacts reflect the most visible layer of culture and consist of the unwritten or informal expectations that influence how people think, feel, and behave (Hoy, 1990). They include aspects such as how time and space are used, how meetings are organized, how communication and conflict are managed, and how celebrations are held

(Goldring, 2002). In brief, norms and artifacts concern all visible organizational structures and processes (Schein, 2004). While basic assumptions, the deepest level of culture, might have greater influence on the less abstract levels (shared values and beliefs, and norms and artifacts), all three mutually affect one another. Changes at any one of these levels can produce changes at the others (Goldring, 2002). In addition, the three layers of culture reveal that improving any sort of practice is a very delicate and complex task. Culture, as Schein (2004) affirms, involves deep-rooted beliefs or assumptions that can work as defense mechanisms against attempts to cultivate new cultures or against what could be seen as a cultural invasion. As a result, efforts need to be directed at reducing the fear and anxiety that often accompany change by exploring the beliefs and values underlying action and developing a well-deliberated scheme to influence assumptions towards achieving desired outcomes. Rather than ignoring, rejecting, or suppressing fear and anxiety, leaders need to show understanding and provide support so that members can display similar commitment to invest adequate time and effort in achieving the proposed change (Schein, 2004).

Composition of Culture

As previously mentioned, there is a wide agreement among researchers (e.g. Deal, 1985; Busher, 2006; Bolman & Deal, 2003) about the ingredients of which culture is made. For example, Busher (2006) summarizes the main components of culture into symbols and rituals, customs and myths, language and style of communication, actions and people praised or reprimanded, stories of success or failure, explicit and implicit rules of behavior, and goals and mission of the school. According to Bolman and Deal (2003), culture comprises rituals, ceremonies, stories, myths, metaphors, vision, and play and humor. In the school context, culture includes behaviors, rituals, ceremonies, rules, curriculum, language, facilities, uniforms, conceptions and metaphors, organizational aims and stories, crests and mottos, and how teaching and learning are approached (Busher, 2006). While focus is laid on school

culture, a brief overview of the key elements constituting culture in general is provided in order to further clarify the terminology and pinpoint the major cultural forces at work within organizations.

Drawing on Deal (1985), Busher (2006), and Bolman and Deal (2003), the core components of culture can be summarized in rituals, ceremonies, stories, and metaphors. Rituals represent the day-to-day behaviors and actions in relation to communication, management, and how work is conducted (Deal, 1985). They serve to achieve several important functions in schools; they create order and clarity, establish predictability to deal effectively with complex issues, reinforce positive traditions and values, and inject everyday practices with meaning and structure. Also among the functions of rituals are establishing bonds among members, providing socioemotional support in times of celebration or tragedy, and creating opportunities for entertainment in order to stimulate motivation and reduce stress (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Compared to rituals, ceremonies are usually "grander, more elaborate, less frequent occasions" (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 264). They are annual or semi-annual meetings for purposes such as rallies, retreats, assemblies, sports contests, graduation ceremonies, retirement parties, parents' nights, etc. (Deal, 1985). Ceremonies are important means for socialization, stabilization, reassurance, and communication; they serve to mark important moments in the history of the school and in the lives of faculty and staff (Bolman & Deal, 2003). On the other hand, stories are accounts of memorable events and accomplishments that reflect and promote cherished values within the school (Deal, 1985). They provide comfort, reassurance, direction, and hope, and communicate information, values, and ethics. Stories serve to honor the sacrifices and achievements of members and inspire those inside and outside schools (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Finally, metaphors involve a creative and refined use of language that bends the meanings of words to promote and accomplish shared goals. Metaphors rely on blending speech with important historical events

or figures to create inspiring images and convey powerful messages. They "capture subtle themes that normal language can overlook… [and] compress complicated issues into understandable images, influencing out attitudes, evaluations, and actions" (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 267-8). Clearly, the four components (rituals, ceremonies, stories, and metaphors) represent the observable levels of culture, but they remain strong indicators of the deeper aspects such as assumptions.

With respect to culture in the school context, researchers such as Busher (2006), Higgins-D'Alessandro and Sadh (1998), and Deal and Peterson (2009) put forward elaborate frameworks having somewhat different foci but all bringing forth various cultural aspects pertinent to schools. Busher (2006) provides a detailed framework of school culture consisting of four major components: customs and conventions, beliefs, rituals and symbols, and language. The characteristics of each of these components are outlined in table 1.1. A similar model of school culture is proposed by Higgins-D'Alessandro and Sadh (1998) and comprises four major dimensions: normative expectations, student-teacher/school relationships, student relationships, and educational opportunities. These dimensions and their characteristics are summarized in table 1.2. While it is similar to Busher's (2006) framework in many respects, Higgins-D'Alessandro and Sadh's (1998) model tends to assign more importance to students' values and behaviors inside and outside schools. Yet, both models underscore the values defining relationships between and among students, teachers, and administrators.

Given the centrality of beliefs and values in the makeup of culture, Deal and Peterson (2009) focus on the informal networks of social actors within schools. Such networks reflect the nature of attitudes and behaviors existing among teachers and therefore constitute a major component of school culture. Deal and Peterson (2009) classify these networks into positive

and pro-change, and negative and anti-change. Those deemed positive consist of players such as navigators, nodes, compasses, explorers and pioneers, and spirit guides, who all perform

Table 1.1: Components and characteristics of school culture (adapted from Busher, 2006)

Components of school culture	Characteristics
Customs and conventions	- Formal and informal rules - The values given most/least importance - The people deemed most/least powerful
Beliefs	Beliefs about: - students and their learning and social needs - colleagues and other people - teaching students of different age, sex, and ability - self-identity as teachers or administrators - mission of the school How teachers deal with competing beliefs about: - students' learning needs and standardized curriculum - the need for academic excellence and for social inclusivity The stories people tell about success or failure
Rituals and symbols	- How students are seated in rooms and listed in registers - The work displayed in schools/classrooms or mentioned in assemblies - How resources are allocated to different student groups - How parents are welcomed and involved in school processes - How students are assigned to classes and the impact of this on their self-esteem and self-identity
Language	The lexicon used to talk about: - other teachers and administrators - students of different age, sex, and ability - the problems faced and the changes proposed

Table 1.2: Dimensions and characteristics of school culture (adapted from Higgins D'Alessandro & Sadh, 1998)

Dimensions of school culture	Characteristics
Normative expectations about student behavior	These mainly concern: • physical fighting • cutting classes or skipping school • stealing • damaging school property • use of drugs or alcohol • verbal abuse or putting people down • cheating
Student-teacher/school relationships	The extent to which there is/are: • trust between students and teachers • interest in students' academic and personal lives and willingness to help them • open discussion of problems between students and teachers • respect and fairness towards students • student involvement in decision making
Student relationships	The extent to which these are present amongst students: • respect and fairness • trust and loyalty • support and cooperation • friendliness among members of different groups
Educational opportunities	The extent to which these goals are achieved: • providing quality education • cultivating responsibility and caring for others • developing students' ability to express opinions and listen to others • providing opportunities for thinking about and discussing real and relevant issues • instilling hope and providing a chance for a better future

several important roles elemental to improvement.

- Navigators help their schools navigate safely through challenges and crises by suggesting ideas, developing solutions for problems, and working to achieve desired outcomes.

- Nodes help circulate information of value to other members of the school, whether it be related to curriculum, instruction, official guidelines, or any other relevant news.

- Compasses act as role models for productive values; they promote positive attitudes and behaviors through actions and emotions.

- Explorers and pioneers contemplate and devise new ways of teaching and learning. They enjoy experimentation and show willingness for collaboration and sharing with colleagues.

- Spirit guides act as sources of wisdom and provide spiritual guidance for colleagues (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

The schools where such informal networks are dominant usually reflect substantial improvement sustained by dynamic actors, whose efforts culminate in organic change.

Conversely, the negative networks consist of players that seek to sabotage change and perpetuate the status quo by acting as saboteurs, pessimistic taletellers, keepers of the nightmare, negaholics, equipment and resource vultures, or rumor mongers. These think and behave in ways that impede progress and weaken schools.

- Saboteurs conspire and employ tactics to stop or fail attempts at improvement and innovation.

- Pessimistic taletellers constantly invoke and recount stories of failure, unresolved problems, and lost opportunities.

- Keepers of the nightmare always remind colleagues of ideas, dreams, and hopes that could not be achieved.

- Negaholics always have negative, unfavorable, or pessimistic views towards new ideas.

- Equipment and resource vultures monopolize and seize any materials available for use by faculty and staff.

- Rumor mongers try to find or make up stories to tarnish good reputations (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

The schools where such networks of players are dominant have little or no chance of success. Without proactive involvement on the part of teachers, achieving lasting and meaningful change remains very unlikely. The informal networks of players, therefore, constitute strong indicators of the strength or weakness of school culture. Because they reflect the deepest levels of culture and exert a powerful impact on other cultural aspects of schools, these networks need to receive close attention from leaders and decision makers.

The insights provided here by Busher (2006), Higgins-D'Alessandro and Sadh (1998), and Deal and Peterson (2009) reveal that culture permeates all levels of school life. Culture is everywhere; it is in what people say, how they think, how they behave and feel, what they do, and how they relate to one another (Deal & Peterson, 2009). In fact, the three insights can only provide an understanding into the core components of culture but cannot capture all possible aspects. There are other subtle, unspoken, and invisible features that vary across time and space and that escape description. Such features reside mainly in deep-seated beliefs and values prevalent among members of the school and community at large. The frameworks explored above are not by any means exhaustive in their description of what culture is. Instead, they are meant to be angles from which to approach and discern the nature of culture which, according to McLaren (1991), has no specific boundaries or unified and static meanings.

Strong versus Weak Cultures

There is no doubt that an appropriate understanding of culture is elemental to the success of school change. It is especially important to understand what cultural characteristics of the school are productive and need to be reinforced and what are negative and need to be reduced or contained. While it is difficult to identify with precision all different characteristics of strong and weak cultures, which are largely fluid and tacit, the focus is placed on more observable aspects, mainly norms and values. These latter, as indicated by Hoy (1990) and Goldring (2002), can help unearth and even transform the deepest levels of culture. The aim, therefore, is to provide an adequate understanding into the nature of strong and weak cultures by focusing on aspects that are visible but also predictive of those that are subtle and elusive.

Characteristics of Strong Cultures

Strong cultures have recognizable features consistent across time and space and agreed upon by researchers (e.g. Saphier & King, 1985; Peterson, 2002; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011; Goldring, 2002). The most important among these features are collaboration, shared decision making, innovation, communication, shared vision, and traditions (Negis-Isik & Gursel, 2013; Goldring, 2002; Busher, 2006). Each of these plays an important role in the success of the school: collaboration helps carry out school-wide improvement projects; shared decision making allows members to exert influence on events across the school; innovation helps establish and maintain the practice of challenging existing assumptions; communication creates understanding and strengthens coordination; shared vision provides direction and purpose; and traditions develop and communicate values (Goldring, 2002). Such cultural attributes, Busher (2006) notes, thrive in environments where there are trust and respect among colleagues, appropriate socioemotional and material support, profound knowledge of pedagogy, curriculum, and organizational processes, and

adequate time for teachers and administrators to meet and discuss the issues of importance to the school.

In addition, Seashore Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) note that strong cultures are built around three major axes: a culture of excellent instruction, a culture of shared norms and values, and a culture of trust. The first is characterized by a wide involvement among teachers and administrators in instructional improvement driven by finding and solving problems and effectively exploiting available resources. The second involves productive professional networks and communities of teachers collectively engaged in developing effective practices, providing feedback on instruction and pedagogy, and setting up long-term plans for school improvement. The third is considered a prerequisite for the development of the first and second. Trust boosts commitment to instructional improvement and nurtures shared values, which are both unlikely without strong relationships based on positive interpersonal qualities and driven by common interest (Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). When meeting students' learning needs becomes the driving force of action within schools, a high level of trust is likely to develop. It is only when action is largely driven by self-interest that mistrust creeps into the minds of actors and impairs their willingness and ability to achieve results. As emphasized by Seashore Louis and Wahlstrom (2011), there is a reciprocal relationship among the three axes identified; they do not happen in a sequence but rather in parallel. Attempts to focus on one axis but not the others will result in limited or no improvement.

More specifically, strong cultures have identifiable norms which act as informal rules and expectations that shape how people think and behave (Deal & Peterson, 2009). According to Saphier and King (1985), strong cultures have twelve major norms: collegiality, experimentation, high expectations, trust and confidence, tangible support, reaching out to the knowledge bases, appreciation and recognition, caring, celebration, and humor, involvement in decision making, protection of what is important, traditions, and honest and open

communication. These perform several important functions necessary for school development.

- Collegiality includes cooperation, communication, sharing ideas, planning together, and joint development and evaluation of the curriculum.

- Experimentation involves exploring and trying new ideas without fear of being reprimanded for failure.

- High expectations imply high performance standards driven by collegiality and experimentation. Rewards are provided for those who meet the standards while those who do not are required to do better.

- Trust and confidence entail trust in teachers' commitment to improvement and confidence in their ability to achieve professional growth and develop effective instruction.

- Support consists of providing time and resources (e.g. sabbaticals, workshops, guest speakers, funds, etc.) for teachers who need help and seek improvement.

- Reaching out to the knowledge bases involves exploring what is being done in other classrooms and schools through attending workshops, visiting classes, sharing journals, etc.

- Appreciation and recognition take place through recognizing effective practice and desired behavior whether via awards, praise, notes, or emails.

- Caring, celebration, and humor include providing socioemotional support in times of celebration or tragedy in the lives of faculty and staff and arranging short gatherings for humor and laughter to stimulate motivation and enthusiasm.

- Involvement in decision making comprises seeking and implementing input from teachers on matters that affect them and their students.

- Traditions, whether related to the curriculum or ceremonies, consist of activities such as fairs, trips, and science Olympiads. Observing traditions helps build loyalty to and pride in the school.

- Honest and open communication implies freedom in voicing ideas and expressing beliefs without fear of losing esteem or damaging relationships with others.

- The protection of what's important concerns mainly protecting teachers' time for planning and instruction (Saphier & King, 1985).

These norms reflect the major characteristics of strong cultures and can serve to unveil the nature of the beliefs underlying action within schools. They are all closely interconnected; they do not happen in isolation from one another, nor do they occur in a sequence (Saphier & King, 1985). When examined carefully, the twelve norms somehow illustrate the three axes of strong cultures identified by Seashore Louis and Wahlstrom (2011). For example, experimentation, high expectations, and reaching out to the knowledge bases exemplify a culture of excellent instruction. Traditions, collegiality, and caring, celebration, and humor represent a culture of shared norms and values. Trust and confidence, honest and open communication, and involvement in decision making epitomize a culture of trust. In brief, strong cultures have specific norms that need to be nurtured and maintained in order to achieve success.

Characteristics of Weak Cultures

Weak or toxic cultures include destructive values and behaviors that obstruct improvement; their defining characteristics are essentially the opposite of those attributed to strong cultures. For example, Reynolds (1998) identifies the following characteristics of ineffective cultures: reluctance to innovation and experimentation, preference for preserving the status quo, blame on external forces for the lack of improvement, mistrust of outsiders and what they can offer the school, unproductive relationships among members characterized by

clashes, feuds, and cliques, and finally unwillingness to admit deficiencies in instruction and pedagogy. In addition to these, Deal and Peterson (2009) provide an extensive account of the characteristics of toxic cultures, which mostly include:

- a dominance of negative values and narrow self-interests coupled with a lack of enthusiasm and motivation. Emphasis is placed on rules and routine rather than experimentation and innovation.

- fragmentation and isolation evident in loyalty to subcultures of formal or informal groups rather than to the parent organization. There are widespread anti-student sentiments and a lack of collaboration and shared goals.

- hostile and destructive relationships involving deep mistrust, hostilities, and antagonism against those trying to make a difference.

- negative views towards students and a lack of interest in their academic and personal lives. Students are viewed as a burden; there is no genuine interest in addressing their learning and social needs.

- a lifeless and fractured spiritual atmosphere. There is a lack of enthusiasm, passion, excitement, and emotional connection to students. There are instead hopelessness, selfishness, and a sense of depression and disengagement.

- few positive rituals or ceremonies that bring people together. There are hardly any opportunities for celebrating accomplishments, showing appreciation for the hard work of faculty and staff, and for connecting members with the deeper purpose of the school.

- incompetence, low expectations, and apathy. Stories of incompetent and uncaring teachers, poorly performing or misbehaving students, and indifferent and strange parents abound at the school.

- opposition to change and hostile, pessimistic, and self-interested informal networks of players (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Put briefly, toxic cultures are characterized by negativity and self-interest, fragmentation and isolation, unproductive working relationships, widespread apathy and negative views towards students, lack of positive rituals and ceremonies, incompetence and low expectations, opposition to change, and hostile informal networks (Deal & Peterson, 2009). To identify the presence of these values and behaviors within schools, a systematic reading and analysis of culture are required. To limit their effects, a preemptive strategy is necessary. Efforts need to be focused on shielding schools against the emergence and spread of damaging values. To fulfil this task, attention needs to be directed at strengthening the positive aspects of culture, mainly those indicated by Saphier and King (1985), as a strategy to prevent or counteract the conditions that give rise to destructive cultures. Nevertheless, the task of building strong cultures within schools cannot be achieved by school leaders alone even when shaping culture is at the center of their attention. Changing culture is a very complex process influenced by many different variables inside and outside schools related to political ideologies, social statuses, religious beliefs, and overall national cultures. In fact, an examination of the role of national culture in shaping school culture is vital.

Role of National Culture

National culture, or the common cultural characteristics of a whole nation, plays an important role in the shaping of school culture (Hofstede et al., 2010; Dimmock & Walker, 2000). While the latter is acquired only upon joining a school, the former is usually developed during the early years of one's life as a result of interaction with the immediate environment. Therefore, national culture comprises deeply ingrained values and beliefs since people's patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting are mostly acquired during childhood. These patterns can be modified over time but only through unlearning previously acquired values and

learning new ones. Unlearning, however, is deemed more difficult than learning something

new for the first time. It follows then that a strong national culture would facilitate the

development of effective school culture while a weak national culture would have the

opposite effect. In the latter case, national culture would be in contradiction with the

principles of effective school culture, which would require a great deal of unlearning. In the

former case, national culture would be in alignment with the tenets of productive school

culture, which would involve far less unlearning (Hofstede et al., 2010). How national

cultures exactly facilitate or hinder the development of effective school cultures is examined

based on specific criteria delineating general patterns of thinking and behavior across nations.

For Hofstede et al. (2010), these criteria include four dimensions of national culture:

power distance, *collectivism versus individualism*, *femininity versus masculinity*, and

uncertainty avoidance. Power distance refers to "the extent to which the less powerful

members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is

distributed unequally" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 61). Collectivism versus individualism

concerns the extent to which the interests of the group override those of individuals

(collectivism) or vice versa, the interests of individuals supersede those of the group

(individualism). Hofstede et al. (2010) state that:

> Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose:
> everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family.
> Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth
> onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's
> lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. (p. 92)

Femininity versus masculinity addresses the extent to which a society is masculine or

feminine. In a masculine society, gender roles are clearly distinct: men are assertive, tough,

and focused on material success while women are soft, modest, and tender. In a feminine

society, gender roles overlap: both men and women are modest, tender, and concerned with

the quality of life. Lastly, uncertainty avoidance refers to "the extent to which the members of

a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 191).

The degree of intolerance towards ambiguity or uncertainty is usually expressed in the level of stress and nervousness people display in unpredictable situations, where there are no clear rules, procedures, or outcomes. According to Hofstede et al. (2010), an effective national culture conducive to building a strong school culture is that in which power is distributed more equally (limited power distance), common interest overrides self-interest (collectivism), men and women have equal rights and overlapping roles (femininity), and members tolerate uncertainty and view it as an opportunity (uncertainty acceptance). On the other hand, an ineffective national culture detrimental to school culture is that which is characterized by a large power distance, individualism, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede et al., 2010). Certainly, culture is not either effective or ineffective but rather varies along a continuum. It is not static or unchangeable, nor is it an external force beyond the influence of individuals and organizations. Culture, whether of a whole nation or an organization, is dynamic in nature and changes over time either positively or negatively depending on how people interact with and relate to one another (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004).

Nevertheless, the validity of the criteria identified by Hofstede et al. (2010) has been questioned by Dimmock and Walker (2000), who suggest several alternative dimensions for examining societal culture. They (2000) argue that Hofstede et al.'s dimensions are simplistic and vague because they rely on polarities that are too general to appropriately pinpoint the complex nature of today's societies. These latter have become increasingly multicultural and therefore attempts to reduce whole national cultures to either end of the polarities are unlikely to yield accurate results. For a more appropriate investigation and understanding of national cultures, Dimmock and Walker (2000) suggest six alternative dimensions: *power distribution versus power concentration*, *group orientation versus self-orientation*, *consideration versus aggression*, *proactivism versus fatalism*, *generation versus replication*, and *limited*

relationships versus holistic relationships. The first dimension concerns whether power within a society is distributed more equally or rather concentrated in the hands of a few. The second explores whether people give priority to self- or common interest. In self-oriented cultures, people emphasize independence, and relationships are largely driven by self-interest. In group-oriented cultures, there are strong ties among members, and high value is attached to harmony, face-saving, and equality. The third dimension concerns whether emphasis is placed on achievement, competition, assertiveness, and power (aggression cultures) or rather on relationships, solidarity, compromise, and negotiation (consideration societies). The fourth deals with people's fundamental beliefs about change and whether they believe that they can change events around them or not. In proactive societies, people believe that they have some control over reality and are tolerant of unpredictability and difference. In fatalistic cultures, people believe that "what is meant to be, will be" (Dimmock & Walker, 2000, p. 309) and are intolerant of uncertainty and risk. The fifth dimension investigates whether a culture is inclined towards creativity and innovation (generative) or replication and adoption of others' ideas (replicative). Finally, the sixth dimension deals with the nature of relationships within a society. In limited relationship cultures, there are evenhanded rules guaranteeing equitable rights for all members of the group regardless of social status and family relationships. In holistic cultures, family, friendship, sociopolitical affiliation, and social connections exert great influence on people's decisions and the nature of relationships among them (Dimmock & Walker, 2000).

These six dimensions of national culture have considerable influence on schools' cultural characteristics. For example, whether power is concentrated or distributed within a society affects whether and how teachers are involved in decision making and consulted about issues of importance to them and their students. Also, developing innovative instruction, creating individualized curricula, and promoting autonomous learning are more likely to take

place in self-oriented than in group-oriented cultures, where innovation and autonomy might be viewed as selfishness and nonconformity. Similarly, practices such as setting goals and developing plans for school improvement are more likely to take place in proactive than in fatalistic cultures, in which the role of human agency is undermined and change is considered a function of circumstance rather than choice. Further, generative cultures facilitate the development of effective curricula and instruction which focus on problem solving and higher-order thinking skills. Such goals, however, are difficult to attain in replicative cultures. Finally, recruiting competent teachers, an important factor in school improvement, is more likely to take place in limited relationship cultures, in which appointment and promotion are based on merit, than in holistic relationship cultures, where family, friendship, and sociopolitical affiliation influence the recruiting process (Dimmock & Walker, 2000).

Regardless of their validity and reliability, all cited dimensions reveal an important role of national culture in shaping school culture. Compared to those acquired later in life (e.g. upon joining a school, club, team, etc.), the values and behaviors learned during childhood are relatively more difficult to change and some can even accompany people for the rest of their lives (Hofstede et al., 2010). National culture, therefore, plays a key role in shaping people's fundamental beliefs and values, which turn out to be either in accordance or in contradiction with the cultures desired at schools. Change is easier to accomplish in the case of accordance than in the case of contradiction. Yet, schools do also have a role to play in shaping national culture. How people interact in a single set of organizations, schools for example, does influence ideas and behaviors in other organizations and the nation at large. Efforts, therefore, need to be made in order to cultivate effective cultures within schools and eventually create a productive harmony between the cultures prevailing inside and outside schools.

Implications for School Leaders

School leaders play a pivotal role in the development of effective cultures. Through collaboration with teachers, parents, and communities, they can forge productive cultures premised on excellent instruction, trust, and shared norms and values (Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). Undoubtedly, there is no single way or proven method for shaping culture since schools have different contexts. There are instead mechanisms and roles that can help in cultivating effective cultures.

According to Peterson (2002), leaders need to follow three major steps in their efforts to nurture positive cultures. The first consists of reading culture and exploring the history of the school through examining past experiences and analyzing values, norms, rituals, and ceremonies. The second involves assessing culture and the extent to which it facilitates or hinders improvement. The third includes shaping culture by reinforcing the positive aspects of a school's culture and reducing the impact of the negative features. Based on the three steps, reading and assessing culture are considered prerequisites for effectively shaping culture.

More specifically, Schein (2004) identifies twelve mechanisms for building effective school cultures: six are primary and others secondary. The primary mechanisms include mainly the ways in which leaders promote desired values and practices, react in times of crises, allocate resources, rewards, and status, use role modeling and coaching to achieve the target outcomes, and recruit, select, promote, and excommunicate (laying off employees or assigning them to a less important position). The secondary mechanisms comprise the school's design and structure, systems and procedures, rites and rituals, stories about important events and people, organizational philosophy and character, and physical space, facades, and buildings. These are considered secondary because they are more difficult to control by leaders and have less influence on members compared to the primary mechanisms, which are easier for leaders to control and have far more influence on the school community.

However, both types of mechanisms serve to communicate and foster productive cultures and therefore need to receive close attention from school leaders. Whether to place emphasis on the primary or secondary mechanisms depends on the developmental stage of the school. For emerging or new schools, it is important to focus attention on the primary mechanisms in order to help members acquire new ways of perceiving, thinking, and behaving. For midlife or mature schools, attention needs to shift towards the secondary mechanisms because such schools usually enjoy a large repertoire of experience which they can capitalize on in the socialization of newcomers. Shifting focus towards the secondary mechanisms is therefore unlikely to undermine the primary ones; rather, it would create an equilibrium between both types of mechanisms and help sustain increased improvement (Schein, 2004).

In their turn, Deal and Peterson (2009) specify eight major roles that leaders can play in the development of effective school cultures. Leaders can act as historians, anthropological sleuths, visionaries, poets, actors, healers, icons, or potters. Historians seek to understand the history of the school in terms of its past social norms and values, whereas anthropological sleuths analyze the values and practices within the school to determine the extent to which they are effective or otherwise. Visionaries coordinate with faculty, staff, and community members to formulate goals and missions both in the short and long run while poets use expressive language to foster positive values and enhance the school's image. Actors provide support and show concern in times of tragedy in order to reaffirm values and insure continuity. In times of celebration, they act in comedies and talent shows to express the human side of their lives. Actors can also intervene in times of conflict to redirect efforts and values. Healers provide emotional support and work to heal the wounds inflected by conflict or loss. They recognize important transitions in the lives of faculty and staff, such as retirement and tenure, and provide emotional comfort in difficult times such as the death of a student or teacher. Icons deal with several important matters such as:

design, accessibility, decoration, and location of classrooms and offices,

recognition of students and teachers' accomplishments,

availability of appropriate learning and teaching activities and materials,

appearances and emotions,

general climate (humor, warmth, caring, etc.),

support, interpersonal relationships, and communication patterns (emails, newsletters,

websites, etc.), and

time and how it is used.

Icons attempt to make a difference at all levels by acting as role models for productive values and practices. Finally, potters seek to reinforce the school's rituals, traditions, and ceremonies through powerful metaphors and coordinated action with members of faculty and staff. They employ anecdotes and stories of important figures and events in the history of the school to create meanings and stimulate motivation among members. Potters communicate beliefs and values through mottos and slogans, and during meetings, parties, informal lunches, and school openings and closings (Deal & Peterson, 2009). The fact is that there are countless ways in which teachers and administrators can contribute to school improvement. Given the many responsibilities they have to honor, actors need to be selective in how they allocate their time and effort depending on the needs of the situation.

Conclusion

Change in education can only be effective when grounded in an appropriate understanding of culture, i.e. how people think and perceive life, how they relate to one another, and how they interact with the environment where they operate, whether at the macro (national) or micro (organizational) level. In order to identify the values and norms that are productive and need to be reinforced and those that are negative and need to be reduced, a systematic investigation of the thinking and behavior patterns common inside and outside the

school is necessary (Peterson, 2002). Undoubtedly, what leaders can do in schools cannot escape the influence of the situation where they function, which can either constrain or enable action (Spillane et al., 2004). For example, unfavorable socioeconomic and political conditions (lack of infrastructure, poverty, corruption, war, etc.) do limit improvement and can even worsen the quality of education provided. The responsibility for improvement, therefore, does not lie with schools alone but also with other political, economic, and socio-educational institutions. As Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) argue, the problem of education is systemic, and the system can only improve through collaboration, trust, and dedication within and across all institutions of a nation.

Change is not a product of circumstance but rather an outcome of interaction between people and their environment. The role of human agency constituted in how people view themselves and others and how they interact with each other is key (Spillane et al., 2004). Therefore, there is no room or excuse for fatalism within or outside schools; no matter how difficult the situation could be, people will still have some control over the course of events around them. By being self conscious about their words, views, beliefs, behaviors, and actions, people can make a difference that may be small in magnitude but durable and meaningful. In fact, by being proactive, people can further increase their control over the forces of circumstance. When most, if not all, individuals within and across organizations work together to fulfil their duties effectively and help others do likewise, success does occur. It is the value system within schools and the nation at large that is the most decisive factor in the change process; values are admittedly difficult to change, but they are never completely outside the influence or control of people.

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