

## **IMPROVING SCHOOLS: THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE**

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### **Abstract**

Though formal quality assurance procedures have their place, meaningful long-term school improvement is founded on a shift in the cultures that underlie the surface operations of a school. The article outlines four cultural arenas with which leaders and teachers must engage in order to accomplish real change; global cultural pressures brought about by international trends, the cultures of local families and communities external to the school, the internal organisational culture of the school and, finally, the subcultures of teachers and learners. Avoiding the allure of homogenised so-called world-class practice, aligning school and community cultures, and working long term to adjust teachers' socialised culture in order to change pedagogy are the keys to improving education for all children.

## **An international view on improvement**

The pressures of globalisation and ever-expanding communication media have allowed nations to share practice and outcomes in school education with each other much more extensively than previously. However, this has resulted in pressure not only to share but to compare and to compete, for example through international comparative tables such as PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study). There is a danger that countries will be compelled to adopt similar strategies and measures in order to be comparable in their efforts to compete. Consequently, notions have taken root of a kind of world standard, with implications of homogeneity of practice and, more particularly, similarity in the values that underpin practice. This may not be in the best interests of children in schools, or the nations that nurture them. The perspective in this article is intended to challenge the trend towards surface quality assurance procedures and school improvement that have resulted in part from international competition. It is intended to enrich reflection, to make each reader more aware of the culture that informs individual practice, so that individuals are better able to evaluate decisions that have been made previously and be more informed in the future. Whatever way forward is devised to improve education, it must be appropriate for the local values and culture of a country and its people and not merely a reflection of so-called 'world-class' practice elsewhere. It takes as a starting point that long-term reform is always predicated on changes in culturally shaped practice.

## **The importance of the cultural context**

How then might we look to improve the education experience and outcomes for children in schools? A recent international review may be a good starting point to review what we know about improving education and, more particularly, what we do not know. The report (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012: 6) uses 'The Learning Curve Data Bank (LCDB), .... (and) brings together an extensive set of internationally comparable data on education inputs and outputs covering over 50 countries'. This in turn has enabled a wide-ranging correlation analysis, conducted to test the strength of relationships between inputs, outputs and various socio-economic outcomes. The report distilled five key messages from

analysis of the very large dataset:

1. There are no magic bullets
2. Respect teachers
3. Culture can be changed
4. Parents are neither impediments to, nor saviours of, education
5. Educate for the future, not just the present (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012: 11).

These lessons may not offer any surprises. However, the report noted that ‘the most striking result of the search for correlations is the overall paucity of clear linkages. In this, our study is not alone’ (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012: 11). There are no universal connections between a particular action and improvement. Further, the report suggests that any single element of the system, such as developing leadership, must be seen as part of a wider long-term strategy that involves not only matters internal to the school but the culture of the wider community, as part of a process which takes years to bring results. There are no magic bullets.

Another key finding may surprise some who appear to believe that investing considerable resource will bring results; that you can, in effect, buy good education for a nation’s children. Numerous national policy makers and education experts interviewed for the report concluded that the culture of the school and the culture of the environment of the school may be more important than the level of resource. This accords with research from many countries that suggests that if leaders wish to improve schools, the most significant lever likely to bring about real change is culture. The message is that culture matters very much, and that it is unique to each country. Despite this, policy makers and school leaders often focus primarily on other things, particularly those that can be measured.

Parthasarathi, an Indian educationalist, suggested that successful outcomes arise from:

... the interplay of several factors, some tangible, others intangible. What I've seen in any number of surveys is you measure what is measurable. The softer inputs of education get left out. These inputs, however, can be crucial, such as the cultural context in which education occurs (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012: 14).

Compliance with standards and quality assurance procedures related to measurables may have a part to play, but they should never be mistaken as the foundation of improving education. That lies with the leadership of those in national and regional education roles, the principal, and other leaders in schools whose primary task is to influence culture to secure quality education for all children.

### **Defining culture**

Part of the difficulty in shifting culture is that we cannot agree what we are talking about. Even the language shifts: culture, climate and ethos are argued to be different by some and used interchangeably by others (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008; Van Houtte, 2005). Definition of culture is notoriously difficult. Some have adopted the strategy of listing elements:

... an organized set of thoughts, beliefs, and norms for interaction and communication; it is about how people treat each other, how they value one another, how school staff work together and get along together in a professional and personal sense, it is the consensus about what is important (Sailes, 2008: 74–75).

Others adopt an all-inclusive generality. Culture is a 'peculiar and distinctive way of life' (Sparkes, 1991:

5) or, most famously, 'the way we do things around here' (Bolman & Deal, 1991: 252).

Recently there was much excitement in the scientific world with the discovery of the Higgs boson. People who are not physical scientists struggle to understand the nature and implications of this discovery. In simple terms, the Higgs boson might be understood as the matter in between all particles that gives everything else its mass and influences its capacity to move. Culture is the Higgs boson of schools. It is the element that gives shape and impels or prevents the movement of everything else. Culture shapes what can be done. Whatever practice is suggested, whatever standards are applied, the level of enthusiasm, the willingness to implement and the way it is interpreted will depend upon the culture of the individual and the organisation. If change is needed in schools, then culture needs to change.

Some give the impression that there is a single dominant culture of a school, when in fact there may be many. For example, the UK National College for School Leadership (NCSL) offers a range of publications where a recommended process is the production of a clear vision which is suggested to underpin the establishment of a strong unified and unifying organisational culture. An integrationist perspective assumes that a single organisational culture is linked to effectiveness (Martin, 2004) and can benefit all learners. It is doubtful if this is a credible position in the light of much evidence that schools do not work equally well for all learners, and that there are likely to be multiple cultures in any school (Bates, 2006)

Becher's (1988) metaphor of a theatre stage may capture how multiple cultures function. There is the public performance of culture projected from the stage to the audience. Backstage, hidden from the audience view, is activity essential to support the on-stage performance. Finally, there is under-stage activity, hidden from the view of all. On the stage are the symbols and rituals of the school culture, how people dress, the forms of greeting, the physical appearance of the building, the way promotional publications use images. Backstage are other, less-acknowledged cultural strategies, for example manipulation of data, criteria for entry to the school (Van Houtte, 2005). Under-stage are counter-cultures, where students, staff and parents engage in group solidarity and

actions to resist or to subvert what is intended by other groups, and particularly by those with more power than they (Prasad & Prasad, 2000).

### **Four cultural arenas**

In order to improve the process and outcomes of schools, leaders at regional and organisational level need awareness of the multiple cultures at play and the different directions in which cultures may be pushing, and also to work with cultures in a number of arenas. Lumby (2012) suggests four cultural arenas:

- The cultural context created by global phenomena external to the organisation, but which may nevertheless exert powerful internal pressures
- The cultures of local communities impacting on how learners and their families engage with the organisation and with learning
- The organisational culture, comprising the ways in which one school or college differs from another down the road

The sub- and counter-cultures of staff and learner groups within the organisation that may be aligned to, or in opposition to, the organisational culture.

### **Cultural arena one: Global pressures**

Looking in more detail at each arena in turn, the first to consider is the culture created by global phenomena, which translates into pressure to act in alignment with international trends. The evidence suggests wide- scale and similar cultural change across schools, colleges and universities in many parts of the world. For example, internationally many nations aspire to being 'world class'. This has become something of a mantra, not always accompanied by deep thought as to what is implied by the term, or what cultural pressures such an aspiration creates for those who support leaders/teachers and/or for teachers and leaders themselves.

Often the term is taken to imply the implementation of standards which originated in the Anglophone world, and relate to values and beliefs of a Western culture. The difficulty is that there is mounting evidence that this approach to education, with its emphasis on changes in education structure, accountability, competition and competency-based approaches to leadership, does not necessarily improve education.

To take one example, we might compare Finland and the UK. Finland regularly tops international league tables of educational performance, yet it has no mandatory testing before the final school leaving examination. Schools and teachers have a great deal of freedom, for example, autonomy to plan their own curricula. This approach is very different from the UK's frequent testing, published competitive league tables, tight inspection controls and implementation of standards, but Finland not only performs better educationally but economically. It is not suggested that Finland's approach is appropriate in all locations; each needs to find its own way, based on its unique cultural identity. Adoption of those strategies used by the UK and that reflect worldwide trends in educational policy in many places does not bring the desired results. In fact, the UK has begun to learn that, rather than encouraging competition and stringent accountability, what may be required is a whole-system approach to improving schools, focused on classroom practice and underpinned by a coherent philosophy of education concerned with developing all children equally and preparing them for the entirety of their life: economic, certainly, but also spiritual and cultural (Innovation Unit, NCSL & Demos, 2007). This appears to be the approach in Finland. While such an approach may be universal in the rhetoric of education policy, it is contradicted in practice by the competitive, accountability-based approaches of the UK and elsewhere. The latter may not be effective, and should certainly be treated with great caution by education systems which need to consider their own characteristic philosophical, cultural and spiritual traditions. We can therefore identify the first foundational action of leaders at national, regional and organisational level to sustain a good educational system:

To protect leaders from inappropriate cultural pressures of 'international' trends and to ensure indigenous values and practices are valued and sustained in local leadership.

### **Cultural arena two: Local communities' cultures**

The second arena is the cultures of local communities. Very many schools now relate to diverse communities, their students reflecting different ethnic backgrounds, different tribes, different religions and different socio-economic status. Each of these characteristics may relate strongly to a home culture. There is overwhelming evidence of the fundamental impact of the culture of a child's family and wider social group on his or her attitude to schooling and educational success (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Lumby & Foskett, 2011; Riley, 2012).

There may be concern that cultural differentiation of school communities might lend itself to the kind of divisive and discriminatory practices evident historically, and some would argue still current, in South Africa. Two points might be made in response to this anxiety. First, most communities are in fact very diverse rather than monocultural, and distinguishing the range of beliefs, practices and, above all, attitudes to education in the various cultures within local communities, is a primary step in a school valuing and communicating with all. Second, too often, only certain cultures are acknowledged by the school, foregrounding and advantaging community members and families with the most social and economic capital. Differentiation of the range of cultures within any school community offers the opportunity to at least acknowledge and engage with all who make up the community in a more inclusive sense.

Children may encounter their school's culture in one of three ways. First, those whose home culture is similar to that of the school are very much advantaged. There may be no cultural dislocation for children whose family background and culture embed the kind of values and behaviour expected within school. Second, other children may see both the culture of the home and the culture of

the school as worthwhile but different and not connected, moving between two dissimilar experiences. Third, for some children the culture of school may be so alien that they see no connection between schooling and their wider life and future. In order for leaders to secure success for all children, they therefore need both to exert influence on community cultures and to shape the school's internal culture, to reduce friction between the two. Leaders and teachers need encouragement and support to establish trusting and respectful relationships between school staff and families and the wider community. A culture of looking outward to engage parents, carers and community leaders in the importance and process of education may be the primary foundation of successful education, particularly for those students who are disadvantaged. This might involve, for example, ensuring that every family has a positive relationship with at least one member of staff who is willing to understand the family's culture and to try genuinely to reach mutual accommodation of the goals of the family and school. If resources preclude such efforts in relation to all families, staff might agree criteria to prioritise those for whom such outreach work is most important (Carreón, Drake & Calabrese, 2005).

Whatever the official policy, most schools in most parts of the world engage only superficially with the external community, expecting parents to align with the school culture rather than making efforts to understand and accommodate the cultures of their communities. We can therefore distil a further area of activity for leaders to improve education:

Valuing and communicating with the schools' external communities, understanding the cultures and encouraging all to negotiate ways forward that are mutually respectful of different cultures.

### **Cultural arena three: The school's organisational culture**

The third arena is the culture of the school itself, that is, the dominant culture, the ways of behaving and thinking that perhaps unconsciously shape the actions of leaders, teachers and pupils. The challenge is to make all schools consistently good and for leadership to sustain good schools for all, rather than just some learners. In the UK accountability regimes have not reduced inequality, with a 2010 UNICEF report indicating that the UK ranks only in the middle of comparisons of educational inequality across OECD countries (Adamson, 2010). The UK may be notable for the degree to which economic background appears to shape the educational outcomes of the child, but there is no room for complacency anywhere. Every rich nation has wide disparities in the attainment of learners. Some children exit school behind the majority by the equivalent of many school years. Even in a top-performing country such as Finland, low-achieving 8th grade pupils are approximately 3.5 years behind the average Finnish 8th grader in mathematics.

Growing emphasis on the importance of equality, that is reducing the degree to which a learner's background predicts their educational outcomes, has led a shift to system leadership approaches, to some extent. System leadership seems to offer an alternative and a way forward from the negative impact of the competitive environment prevalent in much of the world. There are different understandings of what is implied by the term. One possible way of seeing the distinctiveness of system leadership is as a change in mindset leading to different goals. In system leadership the aim is not excellence of individual schools, assuming a bell curve differentiation in terms of quality and achievement, but rather consistency of leadership and teaching and outcomes across an area in which there are a number of schools:

System leadership is not leading just one or more schools, not even many schools, but leading the education system as a whole and doing so with an explicit moral purpose in mind, with the implications for action (Hargreaves, 2007).

The question posed is how practitioners can ensure that no individual school forges forward to excellence leaving other schools behind. System leadership implies giving priority to narrowing the gap more than just raising attainment. It does not mean that raising attainment and achievement is not important; rather, it recognises that for the well-being of all children and future society, education requires a cultural shift from a competitive to a collaborative culture. The culture change required implies moving from looking inwards taking responsibility only for one's own school, department or class, to looking outwards and taking mutual responsibility for the well-being of all within a larger unit. Consequently, all leaders are encouraged to work together, to support each other within each school and across schools. It is not a question of establishing a productive school culture looking inward, but a productive culture looking across the whole education system:

The hardest part of sustainable leadership is the part that provokes us to think beyond our own schools and ourselves. It is the part that calls us to serve the public good of all people's children within and beyond our community (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006: 158).

Consequently, token gestures of support from more privileged and better resourced schools to those cited in impoverished communities are no longer sufficient. System leaders:

engage deeply with the organisation of teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment to ensure that learning is personalised for all students develop their schools as professional learning communities, with developmental relationships built across and beyond each school strive for equity and meeting the needs of all appreciate that classroom, school and system all influence each other (Adapted from Hopkins, 2009: 743).

Such ideas may be widely promoted, including in those nations which stress standards-based, competitive and accountability driven policies. To make a reality of such aspirations, at the macro level national structures and policies,

which inhibit collaboration and promote competition, need to be dismantled. At the micro level, mutual support of teachers within schools and across schools to develop pedagogy would become the greatest priority. While such an endeavour involves practical actions, it is fundamentally driven by moral purpose. This is the primary task of leadership: to understand that education is a moral endeavour, with an obligation to assure the well-being and development of all children to the benefit of society and the economy, and that there is a duty for leaders to work with each other in a respectful way, helping leaders and staff in other schools in order to ensure that all children receive a good education. Therefore, the third message for leadership is:

To look at how resources can be pooled across a system rather than within an individual school, to focus on the development, attainment and achievement of all children equally.

While many might agree that this is indeed the mission of education in any nation, achieving it is anything but straightforward. This may be because in many organisations there are sub- and counter-cultures that may inhibit development. This is the fourth cultural arena in which leaders must work.

Cultural arena four: the school's subcultures

South Africa provides an interesting case of a nation attempting to develop its schools and school leaders in an environment which, due to historical factors, had little culture of learning in many schools. Professional behaviour taken for granted in some parts of the world such as staff attendance, adoption of appropriate pedagogy and even assuring the safety of pupils, is not always present. Changing the cultures within schools to focus on and support learning has proved an immensely difficult task.

The national introduction of an outcomes-based curriculum was intended to impact on pedagogy but, arguably, its over-hasty, under-planned introduction and cultural misfit has rendered it largely ineffective (Jansen, 1998). The South African government has learned that changing schools to incorporate a culture of learning, and breaking down those cultures which are counter-productive amongst teachers and leaders such as acceptance of frequent absenteeism is a long-term project, dependent on working with staff rather than imposing new systems upon them, and particular systems with their provenance outside the country.

There is evidence from many parts of the world that teachers' cultures are not necessarily focused on supporting learning (Bjork, 2003; Pajak, 2012; Waller, 1932). Teachers may have a particular culture that values preserving and communicating their subject above learning, or which unconsciously holds assumptions about the ability of all children to learn, or which sees good teaching as adoption of a particular pedagogic pattern that resists changes, whatever the outcomes for learners. As long ago as, 1932, Waller argued that schools embed what he termed a grammar of schooling, where teachers are socialised into particular ways of behaving which relate primarily to their own identity needs and to surviving in a particular work environment, rather than meeting the needs of diverse learners. Research since then has repeatedly found the persistence of such structures (Pajak, 2012: 1187), and the tendency of schools to reflect and maintain what is rather than to challenge or to promote new and more equitable social relationships (Reay, 2001).

The issues are illuminated by the example of an Australian research project focused on teaching in four schools in high-poverty areas. Members of the research team and a respected leader in the school cooperated to produce a non-judgemental description in the form of a day diary of what a class of children experienced in one day. The teaching practices they observed were largely repetitive, focused on maintaining order, and did not support many children to learn:

Each lesson looked remarkably similar and... went something like this: enter

classroom, sit down, pay attention to the teacher, answer questions, receive resource (usually a worksheet), listen to instructions, work individually (or occasionally in groups) on a set task, hand in work or make available for inspection, pack up, and exit room (Hayes, Johnston & King, 2009: 256).

Teachers recognised the descriptions of their lessons and it was clear they had built up habitual practice, not so much from their initial training or continuing professional development but from knowing what worked in the classroom, from their point of view, to maintain a quiet classroom where pupils appeared to be taking part in a ritual of learning. Actual learning was not happening in many cases. In other words, teachers had a deeply embedded culture of teaching that was not adequately productive for all learners. Changing such a deeply embedded culture is very challenging. In the case of the Australian schools and leaders, teachers and researchers worked together over time to find ways to transform pedagogy.

This was a long-term and difficult process of innovation requiring persistence, determination and stamina.

Other more radical strategies are being trialled to break down the embedded grammar of pedagogy. In some parts of the world, for example Chile and the UK, learners themselves, even very young learners, are being enrolled as part of investigative teams within schools and across schools to understand better what is happening in classrooms and contribute to how it can be improved (Crane, 2001; Harding, 2001; Prieto, 2001).

Therefore, the fourth message for leadership is:

To recognise the powerful influence of the culture of teachers and teaching both to impede and to propel change, and invest resources, including learners themselves, to achieve a more emancipatory and inclusive pedagogy.

### **Leading improvement in four cultural arenas**

In summary, rather than aspiring to be 'world class' or importing performative practices based on competition and accountability, the way forward may be to work with leaders to transform the multiple levels of culture that shape schools and schooling. Four key areas of support have been distilled, which can be offered to leaders and through them, to teachers:

Protect leaders from inappropriate cultural pressures of 'international' trends and ensure indigenous values and practices are valued and sustained in local leadership.

Encourage communication with schools' external communities, engaging with the cultures and negotiating ways forward that are mutually respectful of different cultures.

Pool resources across a system rather than within an individual school, to focus on the development, attainment and achievement of all children equally.

Recognise the powerful influence of the culture of teachers and teaching both to impede and to propel change, and invest resources, including learners themselves, to achieve a more emancipatory and inclusive pedagogy.

Though there is no such thing as a magic bullet in education, there may be a first principle, which is to work more deeply with culture.

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