

# **School Culture and Change: An Examination of the Effects of School Culture on the Process of Change**

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## **Abstract**

School culture is a pervasive element of schools, yet it is elusive and difficult to define. Understanding school culture is an essential factor in any reform initiative. Any type of change introduced to schools is often met with resistance and is doomed to failure as a result of the reform being counter to this nebulous, yet all-encompassing facet – school culture. This article defines culture as it applies to schools and examines the effects of school culture on teachers and schools in general. Underlying assumptions held by school personnel that articulate the culture of schools is also examined. The reasons for change to be accepted or rejected are also discussed.

## **Introduction**

There is an old saying among anthropologists that fish would be the last creatures to discover water (Kluckhohn, 1949, as cited in Finnan, 2000) even though it is the most ubiquitous and influential aspect of a fish's existence. So it is with school culture and teaching. Just as water surrounds and envelopes fish shaping their perspectives and determining their courses of action, culture surrounds and envelopes teachers forming their perspectives and influencing their decisions and actions. Teachers work within a cultural context that influences every aspect of their pedagogy, yet this pervasive element of schools is elusive and difficult to define. Culture influences all aspects of schools, including such things as how the staff dresses (Peterson & Deal, 1998), what staff talk about in the teachers' lounge (Kottler, 1997), how teachers decorate their classrooms, their emphasis on certain aspects of the curriculum, and teachers' willingness to change (Hargreaves, 1997b). As Donahoe (1997) states, "If culture changes, everything changes" (p. 245).

This article reviews much of the literature on school culture and its effects on teachers and the process of change from the point of view of an experienced classroom teacher turned college professor. The following issues are addressed: the definition of school culture, the effects of culture on schools in general and teachers in particular, the assumptions held by school personnel which defines the culture of individual schools, and the possible reasons for change to be accepted or rejected by schools.

## **School Culture Defined**

Imagine entering a school. What do you see? What do you hear the teachers and other staff members saying? What do the bulletin boards look like? How easy was it to

enter the school? What are the children saying and doing? How noisy is it? Do you feel welcome or afraid? What is the general “feel” of the environment? All these questions and more pertain to the underlying stream of values and rituals that pervade schools. This underlying stream is the culture of that particular school. Culture is the stream of “norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals built up over time” (Peterson & Deal, 1998). It is a set of tacit expectations and assumptions that direct the activities of school personnel and students.

School culture is not a static entity. It is constantly being constructed and shaped through interactions with others and through reflections on life and the world in general (Finnan, 2000). School culture develops as staff members interact with each other, the students, and the community. It becomes the guide for behavior that is shared among members of the school at large. Culture is shaped by the interactions of the personnel, and the actions of the personnel become directed by culture. It is self-repeating cycle. To introduce change would necessitate an interruption of this cycle.

Hollins (1996) argues that “schools are shaped by cultural practices and values and reflect the norms of the society for which they have been developed” (p. 31). Just as hydrogen is a major element of water, so are societal values a major ingredient of school culture. The general ideologies of society at large and the communities surrounding individual schools become reflected in the culture of schooling. In Anyon’s study of inner city schools (1995), she identified three factors that vitiated reform efforts in the schools involved in her study: sociocultural differences among participants, an abusive school environment, and educators’ expectations of failed reform. These three factors combined to create a school culture that negated any attempt at reform. Efforts at reform continually failed in those schools because the underlying stream of values and norms was indicative of the poverty, negativity, and abuse of the surrounding community. Anyon’s study suggests that in order to reform the schools, the community’s expectations and values would have to be reformed which will be reflected in the culture of the schools.

The governance of schools also shapes culture (Hollins, 1996). The hierarchy of leadership at the state, district, and school levels creates the parameters within which cultures can be created. In other words, teachers are expected to follow the dictates of the principal and other administrators regardless of other cultural aspects of the school. Furthermore, students are expected to follow the dictates of teachers (and all other adults in the school) as well. This hierarchy contributes to the culture of schools heedless of individual teaching or leadership styles.

The rituals and procedures common to most public schools also play a part in defining a school’s culture (Goodlad, 1984; Deal, 1988; Donahoe, 1997; McLaren, 1999). For example, having children stand or walk in lines, ringing bells to move children from one place to another, organizing the students and curriculum by age and grade level (Hollins, 1996), and systematically rewarding or punishing children for behavior and/or academics (Miller, 1988) all add to the confluence of the culture of schools. These are examples of traditional ways of manipulating time and activity. Although there may be

variations in the method of performing these procedures (i.e. a “tone” instead of a bell to signal the end of class) the results are the same: students and staff members are relegated to their prescribed positions and activities by subtle and not-so-subtle procedures and rituals.

All of the above factors contribute to a school’s culture and they each interact uniquely with students, teachers, administrators, parents, and everyone else involved with particular schools. This interaction is unique to each school, and sets the foundation for whether or not reform efforts will be successful. Furthermore, there are assumptions that underlie these factors, which will be addressed later.

### **The Effects of Culture on Teachers and Schools**

School culture has been described as being similar to the air we breathe. No one notices it unless it becomes foul (Freiberg, 1998). The culture of a school can be a positive influence on learning or it can seriously inhibit the functioning of the school. In any working environment, employees and clientele prefer to be in a situation that is appealing and invitational. Hanson and Childs (1998) describe a school with a positive school climate as “a place where students and teachers like to be” (p.15). It is a place that has a climate of support and encouragement (Hanson and Childs, 1998), where physical comfort levels are optimal (such as heating, cooling, and lighting – Freiberg, 1998), and, as Peterson and Deal (1998) describe:

- Where staff have a shared sense of purpose, where they pour their hearts into teaching;
- Where the underlying norms are of collegiality, improvement, and hard work;
- Where rituals and traditions celebrate student accomplishment, teacher innovation, and parental commitment;
- Where the informal network of storytellers, heroes, and heroines provides a social web of information, support, and history;
- Where success, joy, and humor abound (p.29).

Peterson and Deal further point out that a school with a positive school culture is a place with a “shared sense of what is important, a shared ethos of caring and concern, and a shared commitment to helping students learn” (p. 29). Schools that are conducted in a culture exhibiting these positive qualities have teachers and staff members who are willing to take risks and enact reforms.

On the other hand, schools with a toxic or negative culture are places where teachers are unwilling to change and where the tone is oppositional and acerbic. These are the types of places where nobody prefers to be. They are “places where negativity dominates conversations, interactions, and planning; where the only stories recounted are of failure” (Peterson and Deal, 1998). The shared ethos about reform among teachers in these schools is “this too shall pass” and “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” To these teachers, the way it has always been done is the right way. Whether positive or toxic, the

introduction of change will serve to bring the dominant features of the school's culture to the surface.

According to Sarason (1996) it is difficult to determine the nature of a school's culture because our own personal experiences and values "put blinders on what we look at, choose to change, and evaluate... Because our values and assumptions are usually implicit and 'second nature,' we proceed as if the way things are is the way things should or could be" (p.136-137). We view the rituals, policies, activities, traditions, curriculum, and pedagogy in the school through the filter of our own values and experiences. We must understand and analyze our own cultural influences before we can examine a school's. Sarason (1996) further points out that prior to observing a school, a person must:

...confront the fact that he or she was born into this society with its distinctive culture; that before entering any kind of school the observer had already developed conceptions of and attitudes toward being in school; that he or she had spent a dozen years in public schools during which pictures and conceptions of what schools are were crystallizing, if not being locked into conceptual and attitudinal concrete; and in the course of undergraduate and graduate education that same observer was hearing and reading about schools in the mass media and was being taught what schools are by college professors (p14).

This is true not only for people observing schools, but also of teachers and other school personnel. Teachers and other school workers are not culturally void when they enter a school. Their personal experiences, values, norms, and prior education all influence their views of curriculum, pedagogy, and change even before they step foot into a classroom. Any change that is proposed that runs counter to the teacher's already-developed culture and philosophy will be resisted. Teachers who contentedly stay in a school for a number of years do so because it is a place where the underlying stream of values and norms (the school culture) coincides with their own. On the other hand, a conflict of cultures may provide the impetus for teachers to leave (Hinde, 2002).

The bottom line for school change is that in order for any change to be effected it must correspond to the culture of the school.

### **Assumptions Underlying School Culture**

In her study of the interplay between the culture of the reform model "The Accelerated Schools Project" and school/classroom cultures, Finnan (2000) identified five underlying assumptions that influence the success or failure of reform implementation. She defines assumptions as things that are taken for granted and are accepted as truth (p. 7). The assumptions that Finnan identified are:

- Assumptions adults hold for students
- Assumptions about leadership and decision-making
- Assumptions about adult roles and responsibilities
- Assumptions about best practices and structures for educating students
- Assumptions about the value of change (p. 9).

These assumptions are tacit understandings that are rarely brought to the fore in school cultures. On the other hand, most reform models (whether total school or just one aspect of the curriculum) are explicit in their assumptions. Finnian concludes that in order for reforms to be accepted by schools, the assumptions between the reform model and the school must be compatible. This requires the culture of the schools to be analyzed and brought to the conscience level of staff and administrators.

Observers of school culture must account for each of these assumptions in their observations. For instance, in the case of the first assumption concerning expectations adults have for students, do the adults in a particular school assume that all students have gifts, talents, and abilities, and that they are people worthy of respect (Hanson and Childs, 1998)? Or, rather, do they believe that students require instruction in basic skills before they can master higher-level skills? How do they feel about youth in general and their ability to learn? The answer to these questions determines whether or not certain reform models will be effective. For example, if the general attitude of adults were that students must master basic skills before advancing to higher order ones, than a program like Accelerated Schools would be met with much resistance. However, in such a school a phonics-based reading program or a program such as C.I.R.C. (Comprehensive Integrated Reading Curriculum), developed at Johns Hopkins, would be more amenable.

Concerning the second assumption (leadership and decision-making), observers should note whether or not the school promotes democratic involvement and shared decision-making or if it promotes an authoritarian/dictatorial style of leadership. The National Council for the Social Studies (2004) espouses a curriculum that prepares students for integration into a democratic society; therefore school leaders (teachers and administrators) should provide the tools and experiences necessary for students to participate in a democracy. Darling-Hammond (1997) also strongly endorses a more democratic curriculum, but notes that in order to provide a democratic education reformers will have to overcome many long-standing traditions and obstacles. In other words, the culture of most schools does not support democratic procedures despite rhetoric that may seem otherwise. In schools where the governance structure is such that the principal makes most decisions and the staff and parents are not involved are less likely to embrace change. However, when the opposite is in effect – teachers and community members are involved in decision-making – than reforms such as Accelerated Schools, Slavin's Success For All (Weiler, 1998), and many other types of reform at the whole school level and at a smaller level would be more likely to be implemented successfully.

The third set of assumptions involves adults' roles and responsibilities in the schools. Is it assumed that adults have strengths and a desire to take responsibility for student learning? Is it assumed that the staff is effective in working collegially and with students? Is it assumed that the school leader's role is to foster a learning environment (Peterson and Deal, 1998)? What is the assumption that adults hold about parents in the community? Understanding the assumptions concerning the roles of adults is key in

revealing the culture of schools and thus the probability of any reform initiative's success or failure.

The fourth set of assumptions about best practices and structures for educating students is perhaps the most salient of all the assumptions. Structures relates to the rituals and procedures discussed in an earlier section. In the case of school procedures, a useful consideration is whether or not time and space are structured with the educational needs of the students in mind. Why are the lunch times in an elementary school scheduled when they are, for instance? Were they scheduled with the developmental needs of children in mind? Or perhaps they were scheduled for the purpose of maintaining order (for instance, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders should not have lunch during the same period because it is easier to maintain discipline). Examining scheduling and other structures provide a realistic glimpse of the culture of schools.

In the case of the assumption concerning best practices, one must ascertain what methods teachers frequently use and is endorsed by the leadership. Do the teachers apply methods that are in the students' educational best interests or to maintain order and discipline? Is cooperative learning prominent? How much time do teachers spend preparing for tests? It is useful to determine how or whether students are tracked or sorted as well. In schools where teachers spend a considerable amount of time sorting students and trying to develop learning experiences for students of varied ability, many reforms, like the Accelerated Schools Project (Finnan, 2000), will be unlikely to be implemented successfully.

The final set of assumptions Finnan identifies involves the value of change in the school culture. If the general attitude about change is that it can be challenging and invigorating, then it is more likely that a reform will be initiated (Fullan, 1997). However, in some schools change is avoided because nothing positive ever resulted from past reform initiatives, so the assumption is that nothing positive will result from change now or in the future (Sarason, 1996; Finnan, 2000). Suggesting a new way of teaching a concept or lesson to a teacher who has taught for a number of years will give the observer a good indication of the underlying assumptions that the teacher has regarding change. Does the teacher welcome the innovation and is he or she willing to take the risk of trying it, or does the attitude that "this is the way I've always done it" prevail?

These five sets of assumptions that Finnan identified provide useful benchmarks for determining the culture of schools. As stated earlier, in order for change to be implemented at any level in the schools, the assumptions of the school and those of the proposed change must coincide.

In an observational study concerned with discovering constitutional issues of classrooms (i.e. how rules and routines were established), Sarason (1996) identified certain assumptions underlying the reasoning of teachers. These assumptions dovetail with the general assumptions that were previously discussed that Finnan (2000)

identified. Sarason found that the underlying assumptions of teachers regarding classroom constitutional issues were thus:

1. Teacher knows best.
2. Children cannot participate constructively in the development of a classroom constitution.
3. Children want and expect the teacher to determine the rules of the game.
4. Children are not interested in constitutional issues.
5. Children should be governed by what a teacher thinks is right or wrong, but a teacher should not be governed by what children think is right or wrong.
6. The ethics of adults are obviously different from and superior to the ethics of children.
7. Children should not be given responsibility for something they cannot handle or for which they are not accountable.
8. If constitutional issues were handled differently, chaos might result (p. 217).

Given these assumptions it is imperative to analyze the type of change that is most likely to be accepted, or how these assumptions can be changed to accommodate the proposed reform. However, Sarason (1996) points out that if assumptions were changed then the roles of teachers would change, and that would amount to a change in the life of the classroom for both students and teachers (p. 217). This is a large and disconcerting undertaking indeed.

### **The Culture of Change**

The basis for the following remarks centers on the aforementioned theory that in order for change to be effected, the underlying assumptions of the school and of the reform must match (Sarason, 1996; Donahoe, 1997; Finnan 2000). Schools must be “recultured” (Hargreaves, 1997a) and not simply reformed or restructured. The culture of schools either frustrates or facilitates change (Schweiker-Marra, 1995). In some cases, a new culture must be instituted that will accommodate change.

In a study examining the relationship between school culture and teacher change, Schweiker-Marra (1995) determined that the presence of 12 particular norms of school culture facilitated change. The first six norms involve teacher knowledge and qualities. They are (1) collegiality, (2) experimentation, (3) high expectations, (4) trust and confidence, (5) tangible support, and (6) referring to a knowledge base. In addition, administrators provide opportunities for professional development, and support the teachers in other tangible ways. The remaining six norms demonstrate effective teacher interaction with each other and their administrators (p.4). They are: (7) appreciation and recognition, (8) caring and humor, (9) involvement in decision-making, (10) protection of what’s important (in this case, the educational needs of the students are paramount and are the guiding influence in the culture of the school), (11) traditions, and (12) honest, open communication. Schweiker-Marra discovered that not only do the presence of these norms promote change, but that the norms increase as change progresses (p.9).

There is still another aspect that is vital to promoting change: the role of the principal and other school leaders. School leaders include the principal, teachers, and parents. They all play a role in shaping the culture of schools (Peterson and Deal, 1998; Hinde, 2002). School leaders determine and enact the basic assumptions of the school culture. The school principal in particular is the key to enacting change or frustrating it. Fullan (1991) identified characteristics of principals that facilitated change. He labeled these principals as “initiators” (p.154). Initiator principals work closely with staff to clarify and support the innovation, and they work collaboratively with other change agents (i.e. vice-principal and lead teachers) throughout the school year. They develop supportive organizational arrangements, consult, monitor, and reinforce the change process. Schools with principals who have these qualities are amenable to change.

### **Factors Inhibiting Change**

There are myriad factors that inhibit change in the schools. In our current culture of standards and assessments, many reforms are being mandated for the schools at both the state and federal level. However, Fullan (1997) points out that mandated change is unlikely to be effective. He states, “Mandates alter some things, but they don’t affect what matters. When complex change is involved, people do not and cannot change by being told to do so” (p.38). Again, even mandated change will not be implemented if the culture of the schools does not correlate with the mandates.

Hargreaves (1997b) sums up the literature on failed reforms. He remarks that educational change falters or fails because

- the change is poorly conceptualized or not clearly demonstrated. It is obvious who will benefit and how. What the change will achieve for students is not spelled out.
- the change is too broad and ambitious so that teachers have to work on too many fronts, or it is too limited and specific so that little real change occurs at all.
- the change is too fast for people to cope with, or too slow so that they become impatient or bored and move on to something else
- the change is poorly resourced or resources are withdrawn once the first flush of innovation is over. There is not enough money for materials or time for teachers to plan.
- there is no long-term commitment to the change to carry people through the anxiety, frustration, and despair of early experimentation and unavoidable setbacks.

- key staff who can contribute to the change, or might be affected by it, are not committed. Conversely, key staff might become overinvolved as an administrative or innovative elite, from which other teachers feel excluded.
- parents oppose the change because they are kept at a distance from it.
- leaders are either too controlling, too ineffectual, or cash in on the early success of the innovation to move on to higher things.
- the change is pursued in isolation and gets undermined by other unchanged structures (p. viii).

Many well-intentioned reforms have been abandoned because of a combination of these negating effects. They all point to the need for examining the culture of schools before and during the change process.

School culture affects the lives of all school personnel, including and especially teachers in their classrooms. Berman and McLaughlin (cited in Sarason, 1996) assessed the outcomes of efforts of educational change over several years. Among other things, they noted that a great deal of federally mandated reforms failed due to “school organizational climate and leadership” and “characteristics of schools and teachers” (p. 77). They are indicative of the effect of school culture on the change process. Their findings reinforce the above-mentioned findings of Hargreaves (1997b) as well. Of particular interest here is their findings about teacher attributes regarding proposed reforms. They noted three teacher characteristics that had an effect on the outcome of the projects: years of teaching, sense of efficacy, and verbal ability. They discovered that number of years teaching had a negative effect on the change process – the longer a teacher taught the less likely the change was to improve student achievement and the less likely the project was going to achieve its goals. They also discovered that teachers with many years of experience were less likely to change their practices and more likely to abandon the reform project once federal funding ran out. They found that teacher efficacy, the belief that a teacher can help even the most unmotivated student, had a positive effect on all outcomes. The study also concluded that teacher’s verbal ability had a strong correlation with improved student achievement only (p. 77).

Another characteristic of teachers that can facilitate, but more often frustrates, change is that teachers tend to teach the way they have been taught (Sarason, 1996). This includes not only elementary and secondary schooling experiences, but college/university experiences as well. The culture of the classroom reflects to some extent the aspects of other educational cultures to which the teacher has been exposed. Change that is introduced that is foreign to a teacher’s lived experiences is likely to be met with resistance.

In summing up his years of examination of research on school culture and change, Sarason (1996) recounts that of all the factors that defeat change proposals,

nothing presents a more potent barrier to change than the power relationships in schools. The culture of schools is not only determined by these relationships, but they are subject to the least amount of scrutiny. In his words:

...schools were places where the students did what they were told to do. They answered questions-they did not ask them; their special (or not so special) interests and curiosities were to be kept private; they were not to take time away from the predetermined curriculum. *In short, the culture of the classroom lacked almost all of the hallmarks of productive learning. And each level of the educational hierarchy viewed the level below it as teachers viewed students* (emphasis in original, p. 333).

As Sarason points out, the problem of change is a problem of power. In order for the culture of schools to adjust to allow for change then power must be wielded in such a way as to allow others to gain a sense of ownership with the goals and process of change. It is often a delicate balance between mandating change (a process that is usually unsuccessful, as stated earlier) and bringing teachers to believe in the need for and efficacy of the reform so that they feel a sense of ownership. Schools that are successful in this endeavor will be able to enact lasting and effective change.

### **Final Thoughts**

Sarason (1996) relates the following story that was anonymously left in the mailbox of Dr. Emory Cowen of the University of Rochester:

Common advice from knowledgeable horse trainers includes the adage, "*If the horse you're riding dies, get off.*" Seems simple enough, yet, in the education business we don't always follow that advice. Instead, we often choose from an array of alternatives which include:

1. Buying a stronger whip.
2. Trying a new bit or bridle.
3. Switching riders.
4. Moving the horse to a new location.
5. Riding the horse for longer periods of time.
6. Saying things like, "This is the way we've always ridden this horse."
7. Appointing a committee to study horses.
8. Arranging to visit other sites where they ride dead horses efficiently.
9. Increasing the standards for riding dead horses.
10. Creating a test for measuring our riding ability.
11. Comparing how we're riding now with how we did it 10 or 20 years ago.
12. Complaining about the state of horses these days.
13. Coming up with new styles of riding.
14. Blaming the horse's parents. The problem is in the breeding.

## 15. Tightening the cinch.

This horse story encapsulates what many people think and feel about reform efforts in schools. The alternatives listed serve to examine and change superficial aspects of riding and of horses in general, but the horse is still dead. Many reform efforts target the superficial aspects of schools, but disregard the “values, beliefs, behaviors, rules, products, signs, and symbols” (Donahoe, 1997), which serve as the very foundation of the school – the culture.

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