CREATING, FOSTERING, AND SUSTAINING SCHOOL CULTURE IN LATVIA: COMMUNICATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to explore communication process in schools provided by principals and the degree of stakeholders' involvement in the process of development of the desirable school culture. 357 principals, 152 teachers and 78 technical staff members anonymously completed specially developed questionnaires about school culture. It was revealed that the main target groups for principals are teachers, parents, community and pupils. There is still an opportunity to develop better communication with assistant staff members. Communication in schools is still realized in more traditional ways i.e. in oral form of communication with different size of groups and in written form as leaflets distributed in the staff rooms. This study demonstrates that electronic communication was rarely used in a respondent group or at least was not used systematically in the assistant staff group.
Key words: *school culture, principal, school culture implementation.*

Introduction

Culture is used, predominantly, to understand the underlying values, beliefs, assumptions, and behaviours of the organization (Schein, 2004). School culture is a complex and elusive concept and it could be viewed as something that most schools have. School culture embraces such organizational needs as shared concepts, defined organizational boundaries, common language, methods for selecting staff members for the school, methods of allocating authority, power, status, and resources, norms for handling interpersonal relationships, criteria for rewards and punishments, and ways of coping with unpredictable and stressful events (Schein, 2004).

Some researchers have made systematic attempts at exploring the influences of organizational culture on people in the organization (Goodman, Zammuto, & Gifford, 2001). The development of collaborative and collegiate school cultures has been proposed as vital to school improvement and effectiveness (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson & Hann, 2002; Fullan 2005). Having a school culture that promotes student learning and success is critical at every school level (Kelleher & Levenson, 2004). The basic purpose of leaders within a school is to enhance teaching and learning, a leader is also expected to promote and influence the development of a shared vision and set appropriate values and beliefs for the school (Ärlestig, 2008). Principals have a critical role in creating and shaping school culture by reinforcing the underlying values of a school (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Fullan, 2005). They can become aware of the culture

(Barth, 2002), and work on the culture of their schools (Deal & Kennedy 1999). Culture does not remain static but can change within organizations or schools.

As Schein suggested, there are several ways of implementing cultural changes in organizations. He believes that leaders can make a serious impact on organisational culture by primary tasks like use of human resources management procedures, especially recruitment and induction, mentoring, and staff development and secondary tasks like working on public relations, organizational design and procedures, habits and rituals by using communication with different groups of stakeholders (Schein, 2004). In almost all school activities, communication plays an important role. School leadership does not exist without communication. An ordinary working day for principals and teachers contains many meetings, interactions and negotiations. Through communication, the principal leads and unifies staff members in the work necessary for school improvement. Communication can support, reveal, hide, and eliminate problems (Handy, 1996, Hoy & Miskel, 2007).

The issue discussed in this paper is a part of larger school culture research project done in Latvia in 2007 which was conducted by author. This part of the study focuses primarily on in-school communications between principals and teachers, assistant staff members, pupils and their parents about values and school improvement issues, and attempts to address two questions:

- What are the main target groups for principal to communicate about the main principles of school operation?
- What are the main channels of information for schools' staff members?

Methodology of Research

This study was a part of a larger research project in Latvia on school culture. In this programme of research, qualitative and quantitative data have been collected since 2006. Using the findings from a pre-study, the survey themes in all questionnaires were constructed. All the questions in the questionnaires were formulated in a way that the answers from different groups could be compared. Only items regarding communication in the questionnaires are analysed in this study.

In the first phase of the research, principals of general education full time schools (N = 357 or 36.7% of 974), from all 26 regions of Latvia, anonymously completed the questionnaire. All questionnaires were distributed by researcher during further training courses for principals in 2007. Principals were also asked to name schools or persons who by their opinion are successful in working on their school culture. From the list of 47 schools in the second phase of the research, 5 general education full time schools were involved. Schools differ in size, history, socio-economical and geographical background they operate in. 152 teachers and 78 technical staff members anonymously completed specially developed questionnaires. Author wanted all questionnaires to be anonymous since it could contain sensitive data about their relation to school. All questionnaires were distributed and collected by researcher in spring of 2007. The total return rate was 87 per cent and the average missing items was 2.5 per cent.

Results of Research

One section in the questionnaire is about what are the main target groups for principals to communicate with different groups of stakeholders. The first research question regarding main target groups refers to various questions in the questionnaire.

The first conclusion that can be drawn from the results is that the use of communication in different stakeholder groups can be divided into three groups. Regarding the specific actors, teachers and parents are those in the strongest position. The community and pupils are also seen as rather important (compared to the assistant staff). The fact that pupils are not in the first group could imply that principals in Latvian general education schools still believe that it is the adults who should be concerned in the agreement about the main principles of school operation (Table 1).

Table 1.   **Frequency of principals using communication for different groups of stakeholders in Latvian general educational schools.**

	$\overline{X}$	S.D
Teachers	1,23	0,52
Parents	1,34	0,79
Community	1,63	1,16
Pupils	1,75	1,19
Assistant staff	2,74	0,63

Scale: 1 = often, 2 = sometimes, 3 = rarely, 4=other answer
(formulated as an open-ended question)

What can be interesting in this context is the role of assistant staff members who, unlike parents and community members, are more involved into daily activities in the school. Although assistant staff members do not participate in lessons, they are a part of the school's community. It could be also said they are the first persons, pupils and visitors meet in schools as they work in halls, cloakrooms, canteens, swimming pools etc. The assistant staffs' role may be seen as rather limited, probably in view of the extent of their participation in the areas of desirable agreement about the values and mission. There is still an old fashioned tradition in Latvia to strictly divide staff members into two major subgroups and to pay less attention to the group of assistant staff in explaining them the main principles of school operation and desirable values. However, from the viewpoint of the management these results look undesirable as all staff members create and hold shared values and other aspects of organizational culture.

It is clear that almost all principals were aware of the importance to involve into school improvement activities as more actors as possible. School principals think it is important to communicate about the main principles of school operation. Principals, who are aware about various aspects of the organizational communication process, can use communication to support advisable dimensions of the schools' culture such as concentrating on teaching and learning, and school improvement issues.

In the second phase of the research staff members from five schools were asked to range the channels of information most typical for their schools. Channels of communication, meetings and leaflets in the staff rooms are the most widespread for both groups of school staff as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2.   **Frequency of the main information channels for staff members in Latvian general educational schools.**

	Teachers (n = 152)			Assistant staff (n = 78)		
	$\overline{X}$	S.D	Mode	$\overline{X}$	S.D	Mode
Official meetings	1,93	2,78	1	5,61	6,32	1
Leaflets/ bulletins in staff rooms	4,08	4,44	2	6,87	6,58	1
Negotiations with colleagues within school	4,66	4,05	3	5,61	6,32	1
Informal meetings	7,55	4,52	4	10,23	6	14
Celebrations	8,19	4,61	4	9,39	6,32	14
School's newspaper	8,84	4,78	14	12,32	4,43	14

	Teachers (n = 152)			Assistant staff (n = 78)		
	$\overline{\mathrm{X}}$	S.D	Mode	$\overline{\mathrm{X}}$	S.D	Mode
Negotiations with colleagues outside school	10,94	3,85	14	11,9	4,86	14
Pupils	11,21	3,7	14	11,48	5,22	14
School's web page	11,29	4,02	14	14	0	14
Mass media	11,65	3,38	14	13,58	2,36	14
E-mail	12,21	3,38	14	13,16	3,28	14
People outside school	12,86	2,52	14	13,58	2,36	14
Other	13,55	2,32	14	13,58	2,36	14

Scale: 1 = provides as the first, 2 = provides as the second, 3 = provides as the third, 4 = provides as the fourth, 5 = provides as the fifth, 6 = provides as the sixth, 7 = provides as the seventh, 8 = provides as the eighth, 9 = provides as the ninth, 10 = provides as the tenth, 11 = provides as the eleventh, 12 = provides as the twelfth; 13 = provides as the thirteenth, 14 = does not provide.

All schools have recurrent staff meetings that are scheduled. In meetings it is possible to provide a large number of people with the most current information. All the principals stated that they organize meetings with teachers at least once a week to inform them mainly about the current issues, and more rarely about the strategic and school improvement issues. On the other hand, the fact that these channels of information are among those that do not usually provide feedback; it is more likely one-way communication. It is clearly seen that meetings and negotiations with colleagues in smaller or larger groups dominate channels of information in these five schools. According to the assistant staff members, informal meetings and celebrations in school are less significant channels of information for them as for teachers.

A closer look reveals that teachers and assistant staff members in all five schools think that electronic channels of information like e-mail and school's web-page is still rarely used. All five principals do not use e-mail to distribute information, because there is no officially developed system of Intranet. Officially, all five schools had their home-pages when the research was conducted, but all five of them provide a limited amount of information and very few or no latest news about the school's life. Therefore the development of electronic channels of communication could be seen as an opportunity for schools to create new sources of information for all community in and out side the school.

It is important to stress that the majority of information in these five schools was communicated through formal and direct channels of communication providing fewer possibilities for rumours and misinterpretations to develop.

The data clearly demonstrate the involvement of all groups of stakeholders in creating, fostering and sustaining desirable school culture. As all principals of public general education schools in Latvia have teacher's diploma, they are expected to be good communicators. Well developed communication system in the schools involved into the second phase of the research was predictable as all five principals were characterised as very active and successful in creating a desirable school culture.

Discussion

The main results in this study reveal that there is a difference between assistant staff member and teacher involvement in communication regarding school culture. In order for communication to be effective, it is important principals' and all groups of stakeholders' mutual understanding of the information and guidelines. The results of a number of research studies, (Ärlestig, 2008; Pol, Hlou kova, Novotny & Zounek, 2006) show that the differences between principals' and other stakeholders' points of view towards the main principles of school operation and values creates an undesirable

culture of isolation and appearance of sub-cultures which is the major obstacle for school improvement. Earlier research highlights the importance of a strategic and conscious communication process towards shared mental models (Senge, 2000; Zmuda, Kuklis & Kline 2004).

The principals report that they mainly spend their time for all groups of stakeholders and communicate about a variety of issues. On the other hand, many assistant staff members, as the second largest subgroup of employees in a school, are not perceived as important actors in creating shared values and behavioural patterns.

From a practical viewpoint, these data suggest several lessons for school administrators. They suggest that more attention could be paid to development of electronic resources of communication, in particular school web-pages and internal network of electronic communication via e-mail. Awareness of existing school culture in all groups of stakeholders means to know its values, beliefs, strengths, and weaknesses. Not only principals should know about their school culture, but they need to communicate this culture to all groups of actors. Creating more homogeneous school culture is beneficial for all, as there are fewer conflicts and emotional tension. Most of the principals also understand that values and basic assumptions of staff members will never be completely congruent with those of others, but without efforts to work on some desirable aspects by communicating desirable values, mental models of all actors, and vision this goal will never be achieved.

There are several limitations of this study. First, other variables besides communication might be associated with creating, fostering, and sustaining school culture school culture and leadership behaviours of school principals. Secondly, the present study was not causal- comparative, and therefore, does not establish a cause-effect relationship. The disadvantage of using this kind of data and analysis is its lack of depth and specificity. Items from survey questionnaires can usually provide limited depth and detail on the content and character of the communication with-in the school. For example, although the survey inquired principals to indicate to which groups of actors they communicate about the principles of school operation and the channels of information, little or no information was obtained on the intensity, duration, quality, amount of persons involved into it. Thirdly, information about the communication channels may not be representative of other schools in Latvia. Fourthly, the study was not designed to be predictive, and any results obtained should be viewed in light of this knowledge. Finally, results of the second phase of this study cannot be generalized to other geographic regions and to other populations.

Conclusion

Communication can be used as a basis for analyzing principals' leadership, as well as for gaining insights into school culture. A lot of a principals' communication mirrors his or hers aims, values, and knowledge about education and leadership.

The primary purpose of this study was to explore communication process in schools provided by principals and the degree of stakeholders' involvement in the process of development of the desirable school culture. It was revealed that the main target groups to communicate the desirable school culture for principals are teachers, parents, community and pupils. There is still an opportunity to develop better communication with assistant staff members. The assistant staffs are displaced into a position in which they might be detached from the main principles and values or the shared school culture.

The differences in the teachers' and the assistant staff' answers reveal leadership blindness. Principals still neglect the second largest subgroup of employees into discussion about the school development issues.

Individual staff members might have different needs and expectations about how and when they need to learn about school improvement. The results of this study indicate that communication in schools is still realized in more traditional ways such as oral communication with different size of groups and in written form as leaflets distributed in the staff rooms. This study demonstrates that electronic communication was rarely used in a respondent group or at least is not used systematically in the assistant staff group. The findings of the study could have application in school improvement, pedagogical leadership and school culture.

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