

COLLABORATIVE CULTURE AS A CHALLENGE OF CONTEMPORARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Different authors stress that traditional culture is still the most common culture in schools. This culture prefers high educational goals, high expectations and productivity. Under such circumstances, there is no room for cooperation and helping each other. On the contrary, these stimulate competitiveness that causes tension between the participants.

One of the fundamental aims of today's and future education is also to stimulate cooperation that provides each individual with the strength to come to know him or herself and to behave in accordance with his or her tradition and beliefs, while at the same time staying open to other and different people. This can be achieved only in a culture of good relationships that includes the values of tolerance, solidarity, critical thinking and independence. Research has shown that collaborative culture also has many other benefits over traditional culture reflecting itself in the well-being and effectiveness of teachers and students and also in the development of the institution as a whole.

Nowadays, it is impossible to imagine effective schools without cooperation at all school levels. Since school culture is a relatively stable phenomenon, it takes a long time to change and such a change cannot be achieved with external orders. The most important initial step towards changing school culture is that all school staff realise its importance, influence and extent in creating an effective school. This can be a starting point and encouragement to think about the existing school climate, make plans for the future and find ways to change it.

Key words: *collaborative culture, democratic school, multicultural education, school culture, school climate, school effectiveness.*

Introduction

The Elementary School Act (Zakon o osnovni šoli, 1996, 2007) determines individual goals to be achieved by elementary education in the Republic of Slovenia. Among them are to educate for mutual tolerance and respect for being different, willingness to cooperate, respect for human rights and basic freedoms and, consequently, develop the ability to live in a democratic society. The goals also determine that we should foster the feeling of citizenship and national identity as well as the knowledge of Slovene history and culture, foster and preserve our own cultural tradition and at the same time learn about other cultures and foreign languages. The goals also stress that students should be taught about general cultural values and civilization stemming from European tradition and that schools should promote a well-coordinated cognitive, emotional, spiritual and social development of individuals.

It is obvious today that education in modern society should not focus only on cognitive

dimensions but urgently address also other dimensions. One of the fundamental aims of today's and future education is to stimulate cooperation that provides each individual with the strength to come to know him or herself and to behave in accordance with his or her tradition and beliefs, while at the same time staying open to other and different people.

In this rapidly changing world, teachers are faced with demanding tasks. In order for them to be successful in the teaching profession, conventional competencies related to working with children, learning and teaching no longer suffice. There are other teacher competencies that are needed today, as described by Razdevšek Pučko (2004): use of adequate teaching methods and approaches according to social, cultural and ethnical diversity in the classroom, teamwork and collaboration with other teachers, cooperation with school management, parents and others social partners, conflict management, teacher's professional development and others. In her study, the author learned that headmasters expect similar competencies from their teachers – above all teamwork and collaboration – while she is at the same time critical that the latter do not receive enough attention in the school syllabus.

Questions relating to collaborative culture are very much relevant today. Aspirations to establish a collaborative culture in schools first require an awareness of the importance and necessity of mutual cooperation. This article is intended to initiate thoughts on the meaning of school culture and the influence it has over our lives, work and the general well-being of all subjects involved in the educational process. For students, the school is their second home so the prevailing school culture has an indisputable importance. Ramsey (2008, p. 1) points out the importance of school culture with these words: "It's more important to student success than the curriculum. The reading program. The basic texts. The physical plant. Or even the testing program. And it's more important to teacher morale and effectiveness than wages, benefits, or working conditions".

In the first part of the article, we will give some definitions and characteristics of the school culture concept. As this concept is often used in connection with the concept of school climate, we will focus our attention also on this concept and try to find the relationship between school culture and school climate.

In the continuation of the article, we will try to answer the questions of what the prevalent culture in our schools is. The fundamental aim of this article is to answer the question about the main characteristics of the type of culture that is supposed to prevail in the contemporary school. The prevailing school values undoubtedly need to be compatible with the values that the school wishes to foster in its students. This means that a school that wishes to foster the values of tolerance, solidarity, critical thinking and independence in its students first needs to appreciate, support and implement these values itself. These are precisely the values that professional literature sees as values of a collaborative culture. Research has shown that such culture also has many other benefits over traditional culture which the present article addresses in more detail.

School Culture and School Climate – the Meaning of the Two Concepts

In professional literature, there exist a few synonyms for school culture: organisational culture, culture of organisations, and others. We will principally use the term school culture in this article.

In the pedagogical literature, as was described by Hargreavers (1995, p. 25), most writers employ the anthropological definition of school culture, which includes the "knowledge, beliefs, values, customs, morals, rituals, symbols and language of a group: some "way of life", in short". Also Ramsey (2008) wrote that organisational culture incorporates "core values, cherished beliefs, ingrained expectations, norms of behaviour, and the unwritten rules, roles, and rituals that make up the context in which everyday teaching and learning take place" (p. 1). Similarly school culture was explained by Bečaj (2001, p. 36). He wrote that school culture could be understood as a collection of prevalent basic beliefs and values with which members of an individual social system give meaning to the environment and their activities within such an environment. School culture is

like a collection of recipes telling us how to understand events in the school environment and what is the most appropriate reaction to them. School culture determines the meaning of learning and teaching and also the main values, goals and ideals, all of which form guidelines for the majority of teachers during their everyday work.

Hargreaves (1995) distinguished four main types of school culture according to two main dimensions. The first dimension is the instrumental domain which represents social control and orientation to task, and the second one is the expressive domain which represents social cohesion through maintaining positive relationships. In different and extreme places on the two dimensions sit four types of school cultures:

- the traditional, formal culture characterised by low social cohesion, high social control, is formal and unapproachable;
- the welfarist culture is characterised by low social control, high social cohesion, is caring and cosy;
- the hothouse culture is characterised by high social control, high social cohesion, is pressured and controlled;
- the survivalist culture is characterised by low social cohesion, low social control, is alienated and isolated.

According to Hargreaves, there is also a fifth culture – that of an effective school. This is the ideal culture characterised by optimal social cohesion and optimal social control, with fairly high expectations and support for achieving standards. This school is demanding for teachers and students, but at the same time a very enjoyable place to be.

Among these, two types of school culture perhaps stand out: traditional culture and culture of good relationships explained in more detail by Fullan and Hargreaves (2000). The same was also pointed out by Bečaj (2005). He explained that traditional culture stresses high educational goals, high expectations, productivity, school achievement, working habits and discipline. Under such circumstances, there is no room for cooperation and helping each other. On the contrary, these stimulate egoistic behaviour and competitiveness that cause tension between the participants. The problem of traditional culture is also that it does not promote originality, critical thinking and independence, as it is characterised by the content-based approach (factual summaries, learning by heart, positivistic understanding of knowledge, etc.). The culture of good relationships on the other hand stresses the shaping of the community and a feeling of security for all its individuals foregrounding close cooperation, assistance, acceptance and tolerance.

In addition to the concept of school culture, professional literature also talks of the concept of a school climate. The question arises whether culture and climate encompass the same things, if they are interchangeable or if they are completely different. Authors have different views on these questions.

On the basis of studies of many authors, Van Houtte (2005, p. 84) assessed that the concepts of school culture and school climate are not interchangeable. "If one wishes to gain an insight into what members of an organisation assume, believe, think, and so on, culture is better suited than climate is. Using the phrase (*normative*) *climate* while referring to the same thing should be avoided because it only complicates matters. Climate entails the total environmental quality of the organisation, and is, as such, broader than culture. Moreover, climate, being a multidimensional construct, encompasses culture". He described school culture as a component of school climate. Although he concluded that school culture was the better frame from which to study school effectiveness and school improvement, he stressed that the culture concept is not without problems. The first problem lies in the lack of consensus, because this concept is still developing. While some authors agree that culture is something the organisation *is*, other mean that it is something the organisation *has*. Another problem is whether there is one integrated organisational culture or whether different (sub) cultures exist next to one another in the same organisation. As pointed out by authors, this last question seems resolved, since most educational scholars accepted the distinction between the culture of the pupil and the culture of the staff.

That school climate is a broader construct than school culture and that school culture is a

part of school climate was also acknowledged by some other others. Anderson (1982, in Shann, 1999) stated that school climate is constructed from four components, and one of them is culture. These components are:

- the ecology (physical and material aspect),
- milieu (presence of persons and groups),
- social system (patterns or rules of operating and interacting), and
- culture (belief system, attitudes, values, norms, and meaning reflected in behaviour).

Contrary, Schoen and Teddlie (2008) propose that school climate is subset of the broader construct of school culture. They believe that the climate is better understood as a level of school culture. They formed a new integrated model of school culture, which describes school culture as being comprised of four different dimensions:

- Professional Orientation (the activities and attitudes that characterise the degree of professionalism present in the faculty);
- Organisational Structure (the style of leadership, communication and processes that characterise the way the school conducts its business);
- Quality of the Learning Environment (the intellectual merit of the activities in which students are typically engaged), and
- Student-Centre Focus (the collective efforts and programmes offered to support student achievement).

According to these authors, this conceptualisation presents school climate as the second level of school culture.

We have shown the concepts of school culture and school climate and their interrelation as seen by individual authors. Although there are many definitions of school culture in professional literature, most of them show some agreement. In this article, the term school culture shall denote the main values, goals and ideals that guide teachers during their everyday work and determine the meaning of learning and teaching. Different authors have shown that the relation between school climate and school culture can be understood in different ways and that the concepts of school culture and school climate are closely related regardless of how we define them.

As numerous research studies into educational effectiveness emphasised the influence of school culture and school climate on school effectiveness and improvements, we will also give a brief explanation of these two concepts. The study of school effectiveness has two aims: “to distinguish factors that are characteristic of effective schools and to identify differences between school outcomes” (Sun et al, 2007). School effectiveness was similarly explained by Luyten, Visscher and Witziers (2005). They stated that school effectiveness research “investigates performance differences between and within schools, as well as the malleable factors that enhance school performance (usually using student achievement scores to measure the latter)”. The majority of effectiveness research, as stated by Creemers (2002, p. 346), defines the output criterion an achievement in basic cognitive skills and stressed that this traditional concept on school effectiveness should be broadened to a new “operational definition of educational effectiveness in terms of the realisation of other and more ambitious cognitive and metacognitive goals, such as problem solving, creative thinking, and other higher cognitive skills, transfer of knowledge, and learning to learn”.

The school effectiveness concept is frequently in close connection with the school improvement concept, but it is nevertheless important to know the differences between them. Creemers (2002, p. 343) explained that school effectiveness and school improvement have different origins: “While school effectiveness is more directed to finding out “what works” in education and “why”; school improvement is practice and policy oriented and intended to change education in the desired direction”.

What is the Prevalent Culture in Our Schools?

In searching for the answer to this question, we would first like to draw upon the reflections of the Delors (Delors, 1996) Commission in the report prepared for UNESCO. The Commission stressed the problem of the general air of competition that is characteristic for economic activities and which gives preference to rivalry and success of an individual. The report establishes that competition has turned into a fierce economic war and tension between the rich and the poor causing a gap among nations and the world. At the same time, the Commission regrets that education misinterprets the concept of competition and at times helps to maintain such a situation.

Similar was established by Bečaj (2005) with regard to school environment. He finds school culture as still being rather traditional: life and work are subordinate to efficiency and performance, the stress is on ambitiously set objectives and expectations, school achievements, working habits and discipline. The emphasis is on competition and there is only little room for cooperation among individuals, mutual help and support. Quite the contrary, there is a lot of tension and conflicts. The content-based approach, which does not foster originality, critical thinking and independence, prevails.

Open cooperation, extensive talks with colleagues, sitting in on classes held by colleagues and interactive professionalism are still not a component part of their professional life for the majority of teachers as stated by Fullan and Hargreaves (2000). Privacy, individualism and seclusion prevail in schools. Similarly Sawyer and Rimm-Kaufman (2007) summarised cognition of some other authors about the characteristics of teacher collaboration in today's school. They stated that teacher collaboration occurs infrequently, teachers interact with colleagues only 5-10 hours per week, and when collaboration does occur, it generally happens in informal contexts. Teachers seldom collaborate on more teacher-oriented topics, such as methods, objectives, lecturing, questioning, reinforcing, evaluating and room organisation.

Fullan and Hargreaves (2000) warn that such a condition may not be attributed solely as being the fault of teachers, as teaching conditions must not be overlooked, i.e. separate buildings, separate classes, separate studies and traditional norms. High expectations of teachers need to be specifically stressed. Regardless of what the fundamental reason of an individualistic school culture is, it limits growth and improvement, as it prevents access to new ideas and practices that might enable teachers to work better. Teachers therefore use safe teaching methods that involve little risk and this does not have much in common with facilitating learner achievements.

There are also other authors stating that school culture is rather traditional even if we might wish for a different one. Bečaj warned (2005) that an important characteristic of school culture is precisely the poor division between values that are only promulgated from the ones truly determining teacher behaviour. While schools like to include values in their mission and vision statements, an analysis of everyday work indicates that actual teacher activities do not lead towards the set objectives. Having wishes therefore does not automatically mean that these are harmonised with actual activities.

What Kind of Culture Should Prevail in Our School and Why?

Let us first focus on the deliberations provided by Stoll and Fink (in Prosser, 1999, p. 36-37). They identified ten cultural norms that influence school effectiveness and school improvement. These norms are:

1. Shared goals – “we know where we’re going”
2. Responsibility for success – “we must succeed”
3. Collegiality – “we’re working on this together”
4. Continuous improvement – “we can get better”
5. Lifelong learning – “learning is for everyone”
6. Risk taking – “we learn by trying something new”

7. Support – “there’s always someone there to help”
8. Mutual respect – “everyone has something to offer”
9. Openness – “we can discuss our differences”
10. Celebration and humour – “we feel good about ourselves”.

As these authors stated, these norms are “interconnected and feed off each other. Many are basic to human rights of equality and respect. They do not just represent a snapshot of an effective school that it is impossible to attain if you are currently in a school experiencing difficulties. They focus on fundamental issues of how people relate to and value each other”.

The school improvement literature of recent years pays attention particularly to one norm – collegiality. Why are collegiality and collaborative culture so important for educational institutions? In searching for this answer, we will first focus on the starting points provided by the Delors Commission (Delors, 1996) in the report prepared for UNESCO something over a decade ago. This report provides guidelines on how to organise education in the future. Education should be directed towards the preparation of individuals who will be able to adapt to the rapidly changing world. The starting points of such education are the well-known four pillars of education:

- learning to know,
- learning to do,
- learning to live together, and
- learning to be.

Even though these pillars represent a unity with numerous common points, we will focus our attention on the pillar relating to learning to live in a community and with others. The Commission included such learning among the fundamental tasks of education in the future. Such learning should include the developing of an understanding of others and their history, traditions, values and peaceful conflict resolution and creation of harmonious mutual relations and on this basis the creation of a new spirit of cooperation that is under-stressed in this modern world.

Today, we cannot overlook religious, racial, social, cultural and other differences or diversities present in the global society. Being different is often subject to prejudice leading to conflicts. The school of the future should play a difficult yet important role in overcoming prejudice. One of the fundamental aims of today's and future education is also to stimulate cooperation that provides each individual with the strength to come to know him or herself and to behave in accordance with his or her tradition and beliefs, while at the same time staying open to other and different people. Values such as tolerance, critical thinking, independence and solidarity can only be achieved within a culture of good relationships. The school should therefore not be a place that segregates different individuals but should provide such a school community where each individual is accepted, respected and appreciated and where the rights of each individual are considered. Being different should not be a reason to exclude such an individual but an opportunity to get to know other or different individuals, overcome prejudice against different individuals and learn how to accept people who are different.

Nowadays, it is impossible to imagine effective schools without cooperation at all school levels especially due to certain other facts. Numerous research studies have confirmed the impact school culture has on school achievements and learner behaviour. On the basis of the review of many studies that examine school climate, Gottfredson and co workers (1989, in Hernandez, Seem, 2004) summarise that schools in which administration and faculty lack communication and do not work together to solve problems have lower teacher morale and higher student disorder. They also stated that schools in which students do not believe they belong and feel uncared for by school personnel experience higher levels of disorder. The results of the study made by Shann (1999) gave proof that the school differences favouring more positive perception of teacher caring and commitment correspond to higher rates of academic achievement in schools. Also schools with higher rates of achievement had higher rates of prosocial behaviours and lower rates of

antisocial behaviours, and conversely.

Roland and Galloway (2004) investigated how social processes within the school contribute to the amount of bullying at school. More specifically, they investigated the relationship between bullying and the professional cultures of the pupils' teachers. They believed that teachers' professional culture is important not only because it "is likely to be related to pupil behaviour in general as well as to bullying in particular, but also because improvements in pupil behaviour may be a necessary prerequisite to improvement in educational standards" (Roland and Galloway, 2004, p. 242). They summarised that improvement of staff-level interactions can reduce behavioural problems in general as well as bullying in particular, and suggested that this cognition could help schools to recognise the importance of staff level interactions, and give them a higher priority in school improvement programmes (Roland and Galloway, 2004, p. 254).

A cooperative school culture has a positive effect also on teachers. Today, teachers often face heavy workloads and increased responsibilities. They are faced with high expectations and educational goals, while they often set such high expectations also themselves. At the same time, we cannot overlook the rather extensive discipline problems whereby substantial problems are caused by different forms of violence. Besides, being a teacher today is a less respectable position than in the past which is reflected also in teacher salaries. These are only a few facts influencing the increasingly higher number of teachers who are dissatisfied with their job and who often see it as very stressful. Under such circumstances, collegial help and support at the workplace are even more important and at the same time increase professionalism and satisfaction of teachers at their workplace.

In one study, Aelterman, and co-workers (2007), tried to identify school-related conditions relevant for teachers' professional well-being. They summarised also the opinion of some other authors that factors influencing teachers' well-being can be divided into three categories: factors related to the person, factors related to the profession and the workplace, and factors related to society. The most interesting for our article are workplace related factors which can positively influence job satisfaction and teachers' well-being. Among them it is possible to find content of the job, role conflicts and role ambiguity, pressure of work and autonomy, physical and material working conditions, school management, school climate and interpersonal relationship. With research on a sample of elementary and secondary school teachers, Aelterman and co-workers found that there are factors influencing teachers' well-being which can be optimised at the school level. Among them is support from colleagues that is related to school culture. They explained that "when teachers collaborate, and when there is a feeling of trust within the teaching team, beginning teachers are coached, teachers are encouraged to undertake in-service training and the principal appreciates the efforts made by teachers, then teachers feel better because they are better equipped to deal with external pressures" (Aelterman, 2007, p. 296). At the same time, it is important to notice that "quality of the task performance coheres with degrees to which the employee feels satisfied with and appreciated in the working environment" (Aelterman, 2007, p. 286) and also that "teachers play a crucial role in well-being of pupils" (Aelterman, 2007, p. 296).

Similar is found also by Fuller and Hargreaves (2000) who are convinced that cooperative culture promotes a more stimulating and productive working environment. Cooperative culture reduces the teacher's feelings of insecurity and helplessness, has a positive influence on his self-confidence and thus increases the teacher's performance and efficiency which is reflected also in the attitude towards learners and in their school achievements. Mutual cooperation is also the prerequisite for an ongoing development of the school and the most important factor in teacher development.

The Possibilities of Improving School Culture

All this allows us to conclude that traditional culture still prevails in schools, while numerous indicators show that the society of the 21st century should strive to attain a culture of good interpersonal relationships. Establishing a cooperative culture is however not an easy but a

rather demanding task. So what can schools do about it?

When talking about changes of school culture, we must first stress that school culture is a rather stable phenomenon. For this reason, cultures of institutions, including schools, take time to change. Furthermore, schools have a culture that is directly influenced by the wider school context. On the basis of several research studies, Van Houtte (2005) states that: "What the originating culture looks like is largely dependent upon what is going on in the social environment in the school. Beliefs and assumptions within an organisation are more or less formed by the surrounding society..." (p. 80). The author stressed that the knowledge of the origin of culture is important for educational research and practice and explained that it should be possible to alter culture only when the sources of culture are known. He summarised three sources of culture by Ott (Van Houtte, 2005, p. 81) which may form a starting point to change a particular school culture:

1. the first one – the social environment of the school – is the most difficult to handle, because this implies a change of mentality in the surrounding social environment.
2. the second source of culture – school internal structure – is difficult to change, because it is pretty defined by wider society; after all, many features concerning the internal structure are officially established.
3. The third source of culture and the most obvious way to alter the culture of the school is by action of the school leader.

The leader of the organisation therefore undoubtedly plays a major role in changing school culture while he is however not the only one who can successfully contribute to such changes. Individual authors (Maehr & Midgley, 1996 in Van Houtte, 2005) warn about the importance of a system approach in changing school culture that needs to include all school participants: pupils, teachers, parents, etc.

The initial step to take in changing the culture of an institution is undoubtedly to recognise the current condition and establish the need for changes. Only if we know where we are and where we wish to go, can we have a realistic possibility of starting to implement this. The desire to change is undoubtedly necessary along with the inclination to and support for moving away from a traditional school culture and striving to create a culture of good relationships. Cooperative culture cannot be demanded or evoked. It is a culture that develops from internal initiatives and from values and beliefs on the importance of mutual cooperation.

We also need to be aware that school culture cannot fully change instantaneously but that we need to start changing it in individual departments with these changes then spreading to the entire school environment. The formation of department communities, where good relations prevail together with cooperation, tolerance, mutual help and support in a cooperative climate, is of key importance for forming cooperative culture on school level (see also Bečaj, 2001).

The Delors (1996) Commission states two complementary approaches to attaining the objective of learning to live in a community and with others. The first includes the gradual discovery of others. As the way to discover others is only possible through discovering oneself, education should first help children to discover themselves and at the same time develop empathy. Meetings of dialogue and exchange of opinions play an important part. Such an approach might however even be risky if different religious, ethnical and other groups compete or do not hold an equal position in their common environment. It might instigate hidden tensions and turn to conflicts. For this reason, the Commission sees another stage as being important inducing people to implement common tasks through their lives. Common projects initiate new identities enabling participants to overcome their personal habits and stressing what they have in common and not the points in which they differ.

Such an approach, which provides good possibilities to overcome interpersonal differences and disputes while at the same time enriching teacher-student relations, requires a lot of will, time and energy. We can however not neglect the fact that in schools, the key role in learning to live in a community and with others is played by teachers who are role models for the students. It would

therefore not be acceptable for teachers to behave in a manner hindering the development of the students' ability of being open to others and the ability to confront inevitable tensions among individuals, groups and nations.

Conclusion

We can therefore conclude that a contemporary school culture of good interpersonal relationship which differs from an achievement-oriented culture should be developed. We listed numerous advantages of a collaborative school culture affecting also the teachers' well being, their satisfaction, effectiveness and professional development and also the students' well being, their achievement and behaviour. An institution as a whole, teachers and individuals cannot develop without mutual cooperation.

We must however not overlook the fact that the education of the future should be directed towards stimulating the students' active role, a harmonised physical, mental, cognitive, emotional, social and other development of an individual and his abilities of independent creativity, critical thinking and opinions. As traditional school culture is not inclined towards these objectives, numerous authors point out that we need to focus all our care and attention towards developing a collaborative school culture. "Tolerance, critical thinking, independence and solidarity can be achieved only in a school environment enabling sufficient security and acceptance – that is in a culture of good relationships" (Bečaj, 2005, p. 19). We agree that in the modern world cooperative culture is of vital importance but as pointed out by the Delors Commission (1996), we must not neglect the fact that some see it as utopia.



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