THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS ON A TEACHER

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Abstract

Introduction. *This paper outlines socio – cultural factors which may impact teachers' decisions and practices regarding instruction.* ***Goal.*** *To examine and assess the working behavior of teachers aiming at identifying the key school cultural factors that influence the effective working behavior.* ***Materials and methods.*** *Theoretical method: studies and analysis of literature sources, empirical method: questionnaire.* ***Results.*** *The four dimensions of school culture collectively exert a strong influence over teacher behavior in a number of ways.* ***Conclusions.*** *Based on what teachers report about their school culture, this study of school culture leads to a better understanding of the people working behaviors towards improving the schools performance.*
Key words: *socio-cultural factors, school culture, professional orientation.*

Introduction

More is known about how of social factors associated with the culture of the school influence teacher behaviour than the other two realms of social influences. Some researchers have asserted that school culture exhibits strong controls over how teachers perform their work (Schoen, 2005;Zīds, 2006). Not all norms of behavior in a schools cultural code are equally sacred. Hence, school culture exerts a strong controlling force over teacher behavior. Noted educational researcher (Halsall, 1998) even goes so far as to assert that "unless the issue of school culture is addressed, school improvement will never be achieved".

Research on school culture (Schoen, 2005) has described four dimensions of school culture: I. Professional Orientation, II. Organizational Structure, III. Quality of the Learning Environments, and IX. Student-centered Focus. Of these dimensions, the first two have the strongest impact on student achievement and probably exert the most influence over the way teachers think and act in their school setting.

Cultural Dimension I: Professional Orientation. The Professional Orientation of the faculty entails norms regarding the emphasis and value that is placed on the acquisition of Professional knowledge and the development of greater instructional skills. From an administrative stand point, it is possible to have an impact on these norms through a rigorous program of ongoing, on site, group Professional development that addresses the why, what and how of any change effort as well as providing an interactive forum for discussion of the problems encountered with implementation. When Professional development genuinely meets both the specific needs of individual teachers and the collective needs of the school organization, then teachers' beliefs and basic assumptions may begin to change and come into closer alingment with the school goals (Fulann, 1993).

Professional development, in this context, becomes a very integral part of the work life of teachers, who then begin to take initiative for their own continued learning. Over time,

norms of autonomy give way to a more collaborative culture as a spirit of teamwork is built and nurtured through focused, on – going, collective Professional development (Little,2001). Studies of school culture indicate that norms of behavior are strong controlling forces over the way teachers perform their jobs (Schoen, 2005). One possible implication of this may be that change initiatives may have a much greater chance of success if programs are implemented school - wider rather than being piloted by a select few. When the entire school is at least introduced to the why, what, and how of the new program, even if they were not directly involved in teaching it, then those implementing the initiative at least have the benefit of moral support from colleagues. This may reduce feelings of isolation that can occur when teachers are working independently without the benefit of a collaborative community. In cases where the targeted change is specific to a particular subject area, Professional development for the whole faculty could focus on aspects of the philosophical framework that are more general in nature, such as the principles of teaching and learning embedded in the new initiative. These are broad enough in scope that they have practical utility to all teachers.

Cultural Dimension II: Dimension II of school culture is the Organization Structure of the school. This involves the formal and informal leadership that has evolved at the school and the typical processes by which the school executes its business and day to day routines. That is what (Schoen, 2005) describes as pedagogical leadership. He provides a helpful distinction among four aspects of leadership which he terms bureaucratic, visionary, entrepreneurial, and pedagogical. Bureaucratic leadership, he suggests, is characterized by systems which emphasize supervision, evaluation and incentives. Visionary leadership relies on inspiration and a powerfully spoken sense of what must be done. Entrepreneurial leadership, applying market principles, encourages competition, incentives and sanctions for winners and losers. Pedagogical leadership invests in and builds capital. The capital which it builds is the professional and intellectual capacity of teachers. With this a school is in a position to enhance the social and academic capital of its students. In its popular connotation, "strong leadership is unlikely to equate with pedagogical leadership" as described by Schoen, yet strong may indeed be the most apt term for it because, among the four types, pedagogical leadership is the one that requires the greatest inner strength and moral integrity. It is not strong as in the exercise of personal or institutional power, but strong in inner conviction that goals will be achieved through strengthening the status and commitment of others, even at the cost of diminishing self. The primary mechanism of social control within this dimension is the attitude and actions of key influential people in the social network of the school. If the principal or a number of high status teachers or other personnel let it be known that they are not in favor of a program, policy or practice, then other teachers often follow their example of passive resistance. This can spell death to new initiatives, as teachers have demonstrated great capacity for surface level compliance without actually making any real substantial changes (Schoen, 2005). It may be possible to circumvent such occurrences by identifying key people in the informal social structure of the school and assigning them leadership roles in the implementation and/ or oversight of new programs. These people are usually easy to identify because they are held in high regard by the other teachers and may sometimes be sought out by the others for advice on school matters.

Assigning them an official position may send a message to the rest of the faculty that the program has their endorsement and may thereby decrease the likelihood of resistance. This form of positive peer pressure can be effective if teachers are well selected and trained. It also helps if they sincerely believe in the initiative.

Time is another important consideration in Dimension II of the school culture. In order to participate in enhanced professional development, collaborative planning, and personal reflection teachers work time must be structured to allow for these activities. Time is a valued commodity by both teachers and school administrators; that this is given high enough priority that time is scheduled for these activities also increases the chances that it will be accepted into

the culture of the school. However, time for collaborative planning does not automatically insure that this time will be used effectively for intended purposes (Lieberman, 1995). Without guidance or structure, some teachers may not be sure of what they should be doing during their allotted collaborative planning period. Rather than leaving teachers to find their way in the dark, it is advisable (Schoen, 2005) that structure be provided to teachers in the initial phases of implementing collaborative planning and reflection. This makes it more likely that the allotted time will be spent in productive ways.

Cultural Dimension III: The Quality of the Learning Environments.

This dimension of school culture seems to work as a mediating variable between the other three dimensions of school culture and student achievement; it is believed that more effective faculty behaviour in the other three dimensions, especially Dimension I, stands to have an impact on the mean quality of the learning experience in which students are routinely engaged in during classroom instruction (Schoen, 2005). In other words, in school cultures where there is a strong Professional Orientation in the faculty, an Organizational Structure with strong leadership that prioritizes teacher collaboration, and a strong Student-centered Focus, the norm is better classroom instruction, which collectively translates to higher student achievement (Schoen& Teddlie, 2005; Krastiņš.2006).

Cultural Dimension IV: Student-centered Focus. In schools that truly value student achievement and believe that every child can succeed if given the right opportunities and assistance, a number of mechanisms are in place to monitor and track student progress and to identify needs as soon as possible. These schools constantly rewiev the effectiveness of existing programs and have on- going communications between administrators, classroom teachers, special service teachers, and parents to identify or anticipate areas of need for individual students or groups of students. Teachers at these schools are innovative and resourceful in providing services to facilitate the maximum achievement of each and every student, not just special needs students. They are responsive to trends in student achievement data and perceived weaknesses verbalized by teachers, students, or parents. The trademark characteristic of schools with a strong Dimension IV is that the faculty is creative and finds ways to get things done, one way or another.

A strong culture with a strong Student-centered Focus exerts considerable social pressure on administrations, faculty members and parents to do their best to serve the needs of individual students – it is the norm. These teachers rarely accept no for an answer and are quick to point out to others alternative things to try in various situations. In schools with a strong student-centered focus, teachers who are perceived as ineffective by other faculty members tend to either change their schools.

Goal

To examine and assess the working behavior of teachers aiming at identifying the key organizational cultural factors that influence, the effective working behaviour.

Materials and methods

Theoretical method: studies and analysis of literature sources, empirical method: questionnaire

This paper addresses four key objectives of research:
- studying the teachers working behaviour grounded in headmaster-teacher relationship
- studying the teachers working behaviour grounded in co-teacher relationship
- assessing the variables which are well grounded in co-teacher relationship

- assessing the variables which are very stressful for teachers

In order to fulfill the objectives of the research I have defined variable working behavior by two directions:

- Superior-subordinate relationship with 10 items such as information about schools goals, strategies, clear roles and responsibilities, feed-back, information about school performance and so on.
- Co-teacher relationships with 6 items such as team environment, human resource overload, trust, efficiency, effectiveness, cooperation.

Beneath these relationships some of the key concerns of working behavior are grounded in school culture. Knowing the teachers attitude regarding the organizational culture aspects may generate possible answers to the question: What are the reasons behind the teachers working behaviour? Thus, in this study, we have depicted the organizational cultural values in two parts, asking the respondents to express their attitude regarding the following factors:

- Factors that create a positive working environment, such as: job prestige, Professional development opportunities, job safety, compensations, job benefits, working conditions, and promotion opportunities.
- Factors that create a negative working environment, such as: limited resources, zero sum games (the best teachers wins), lack of trust in colleagues, inequitable compensations, lack of consideration from superiors, the pressure to get things done, and lack of healthy work/life balance. The instrument of the research was questionnaire-based following the research objectives. The questionnaire was structured having an adequate pattern, starting with questions to evaluate the teachers' attitude. Open questions were used as well. Control questions have been used as respondent filter, too.

The questionnaire was distributed to 52 teachers. The sample consisted of 78 % teachers in non- managerial positions and 22 % in managerial positions structured as follows: 80% vice principal positions and 20 % method groups' leaders.

Results of Research

Analysis of teachers' behaviour with respect to headmaster – teacher relationships leads to the following key factor: knowing the most important aspects of the job – 4.48 (table 1). Teachers are likely to get directions from superiors than having their own initiatives. The high level of distance to power index highlights the need for clear and pyramidal structures through which the employee gets clear information about job responsibilities.

The Access to the key information is ranged on the second place – 3.98 (Table 1).

Table 1. Key factors arithmetic mean for headmaster- teacher relationship evaluation.

No.	Key factors	Mean
1.	Knowing the most important aspect of the job	4.48
2.	Access to the key information	3.98
3.	Asking for own opinion about problem	3.77
4.	Asking for creative solution	3.61
5.	Responsibility for settle down the job objectives	3.52
6.	Involving in decision process	3.39
7.	Clear and relevant information	3.14
8.	Information about school goals, strategies	2.98
9.	Getting regularly feed- back about own performance	2.98
10.	Information about schools performance	2.91

This finding may be explained through high level of anxiety of managers who are confronted with fear of disclosing important information about organization. Trusting the others may be dangerous for organizational performance and it supposes a certain level of risk tolerance.

Another finding of the research refers to the situations in which superiors are asking for subordinate opinion – 3.77 (Table 1). There is a paradox situation, because of the differences between observable behavior and attitude of teachers: at declarative level, the teachers are asking for a consultative style, while at behavioral level there is no implication in performing tasks in a creative way.

Consequently, studying the teachers working behavior from the co-teacher relationship point of view stresses the significant of cooperation between colleagues – 4.27 (Table 2). The collectivist dimension of our organizational culture steers the teachers towards appreciating the good relationships with co- teachers to the detriment of improving efficacy of job.

Table 2. Key factors arithmetic mean for co- teachers' relationships evaluation.

No.	Key factors	Mean
1.	To be a cooperative colleague	4.27
2.	To be an effective colleague	4.23
3.	To be a trustful colleague	4.07
4.	Good relationships developed only by confident co-teacher	3.45
5.	Job environment stimulates team working	3.09
6.	Anxious relationships caused by teachers overload	3.09

Effectiveness is another aspect that is mostly appreciated in co-teacher relationships – 4.23 (Table 2). This finding is linked to our "collectivist society" in which conforming to the rules and norms are an important aspect of organizational culture environment.

Although, deciphering the organizational culture is a highly interpretative and subjective process, this research helps define what is significant for teachers. Data analysis yields clues about the most representative dimension of our school culture, such as reward criteria dimension. Professional development and promotion opportunities are significantly appreciated by the teachers (Table 3).

Table 3. Key factors arithmetic means for positive factors assessment.

No.	Question: Which are the most appreciated factors within your school culture? Key factors	Mean
1.	Professional development opportunity	4.18
2.	Promotion opportunities	3.68
3.	Working conditions	3.68
4.	Job prestige	3.63
5.	Compensations	3.63
6.	Job safety	3.27
7.	Job benefits	3.18

A second important positive cultural factor is represented by working condition (Table 3). The physical environment in which teachers work, as well as how buildings and offices are

used to signal authority and status within the school are also paying close attention to the teachers.

Finally, the effort to identify the cultural characteristics provides considerable clues about diagnosing the negative aspects of school culture. The key issue is the lack of sufficient resources – 3.15 (Table 4). The implications of this factor are obviously important for the health of school life. Within this cultural context, the teachers are more likely to develop political behaviors aiming at accessing the desired resources.

Another insight into the school culture is represented by the lack of healthy work/life balance – 3.04 (Table 4). The teachers are attempting to make the Professional life more suitable for the personal needs and aspirations.

Table 4. Key factors arithmetic mean for negative factors assessment.

No.	Question: Which are the most disliked factors within your school culture? Key factors	Mean
1.	Limited resources	3.15
2.	Lack of healthy work/ life balance	3.04
3.	Inequitable compensations	3.00
4.	Lack of consideration from headmaster	2.93
5.	The pressure to get things done	2.81
6.	Lack of trust in colleagues	2.70
7.	Zero sum games (the best teachers wins)	2.45

The inequitable compensations practices are obviously highly representative in our school culture (Table 4). This leads to the conclusion that teachers do not think they are being rewarded equitably according to their performance. This could involve changes of attitude and working behaviour aiming at addressing the feeling of distributive justice. Likewise, a highly competitive organizational environment, sharpened by the existences of zero sum games within organization, is not a representative factor for our culture.

Conclusions

The observations and recommendations presented in this paper were derived from case studies of school culture, which is believed to be a major source of social influence over teachers.

Although this survey extremely limited (number of respondents) it provides interesting findings. Based on what teachers report about their school culture, this study of school culture leads to a better understanding of school strengths and weaknesses, and more efficient utilization of the people working and associated with the organization.

The cultural values are forming the mental baggage for people working and living in a society, ensuing schools to be derived from cultural values of its teachers. School principals are responsible for knowing the meanings of teachers' cultural values and then capitalizing on their strength in order to accomplish the organizations goals. This approach helps directing the teachers' behaviors towards improving the schools performance.

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