

**School Culture: does awareness matter?**

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*Abstract*

In the UK and in some other countries too, schools are publicly assessed with results published as 'league tables' showing which are the best and poorest schools. The criteria are predominantly based on test scores, which for obvious reasons are relevant and readily measured quantifiably. But is this really all? Does this take into account that school culture or ethos may have more lasting influence on school students? But how can it be measured? Four case studies of primary schools in Scotland illustrate the differences amongst schools, all 'good' in different ways, and demonstrate the difficulty in precisely identifying the slippery concept of school culture.

With a brief background of the study and the rationale behind, the discussion will mainly focus on what makes each school culture unique and therefore the learning

outcomes different, using examples from the case study schools.

### **Introduction**

The word ‘culture’ appears to have its roots in the Latin word ‘cultura’, meaning ‘cultivating’ or ‘tending’. This meaning links the word to agriculture. A newer meaning

of ‘culture’ was emphasised possibly around the 60s, highlighting the ‘high culture’ i. e. classical literature, music or art. Soon after, the sociologists started to use the word to interpret different styles of life. ‘School Culture’ is the latter interpretation but it is also open to a wider range of meanings.

In order to understand the complex teaching and learning process and moreover to have a conscious choice in shaping the reality in school, it is important to try and decode the meaning of the concept ‘school culture’ from different perspectives. After setting the background of the study and the rationale, using examples from a series of case study conducted in four primary schools in Scotland, the paper will discuss what makes each school culture unique and therefore the learning outcomes different.

### **‘Abstract, elusive and composite’**

In research literature the most commonly used words to describe the concept of school culture or ethos (These two terms will be used interchangeably here.) include – ‘abstract’, ‘elusive’ and ‘composite’. It is abstract due to the particular nature of its composition. The structure is based on combinations of a range of factors: patterns of behaviour, attitude, perceptions, which some authors have defined as the ‘personality’ of the institution (Hoy and Sabo, 1998); as well as history, tradition, fostered values, norms, emergent interactions (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). The former set of factors is described as school climate by the organisational psychologists and the latter as school culture or ethos by the anthropologists and sociologists (Lortie, 1975; Munn, 2002).

The concept is elusive, of course, because the above-mentioned factors are not visible in concrete form. Sometimes they are documented in the mission statements as aims or goals but often the real account appears to vary with the discretion of our understanding of the vague terms such as ‘achieving full potential’. This particular characteristic – ‘elusiveness’ perhaps reminds us of the term ‘hidden curriculum’, which by definition is the reverse of ‘written or overt curriculum’. The term seems to have been first coined by sociologist Jackson in 1968 in his book ‘Life in the Classroom’. He argued that education is a socialisation process and therefore schools not only facilitate learning to pass on textual knowledge to pupils but also are responsible for ‘transmission of norms and values’. The socially constructed learning process in schools helps pupils to learn the formal as well as the informal rules, beliefs and attitudes. How are these informal rules, beliefs and attitudes transmitted?

The school community, i. e. the members of staff as well as the pupils consciously and subconsciously contribute to shaping a particular learning environment in the school by transmitting certain practices. This may imply that that teachers as individuals create unique classroom cultures for different groups of pupils in the same school. However, Meighan (1981) argues that if general of social values influence the overall structure of the educational process, then it is likely that similar practices will be observed across all classrooms in one school. There is a flaw in this argument, as the structure of a society often accommodates different groups of people fostering different value systems. Moreover, the same values can be practised differently according to different levels of understanding and subjective interpretations amongst

individuals. Having said that, Meighan's assumption does highlight a strong point that the schools are likely to mirror some of the core values in our society. Thus once again, considering the complexity in understanding the concept of school ethos, this paper refers back to the composite structure of its making. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge the concept as a more powerful and complex phenomenon than any other area in educational research as it embraces all interlinked elements of everyday school life and thereby potentially shapes a desirable environment for teaching and learning.

### **What is a desirable teaching and learning culture?**

Although some general statements such as – ‘to foster children’s learning in a safe and secure environment’, are found in many school handbooks, in reality the actual ‘desirable environment’ is reflected through the different approaches to fostering ethos. For example, some schools appear to have regimented structures of rules and norms. Their practised behaviour projects similar patterns of strict coding. Others may have a more ‘relaxed’ attitude, fostering the same value to create a sense of responsibility in pupils through assignments requiring mutual trust. The appropriateness of such practices may depend on the needs of the children coming from different socio-economic or religious backgrounds or other similar reasons. Some other schools may be so complacent about things as they are that they decline to experiment with new initiatives in order to move forward. This situation can give birth to a stagnant school culture. Sometimes it can be done deliberately to foster a different sense of security by practising old norms and values, in which case the type of schools are often called ‘traditional’. The potential danger in these situations is

that ultimately pupils in traditional schools may lack skills to adapt to the wider world once they finish primary education, especially where there is a conflict of values between the school and the wider society. Ironically, on closer analysis, it is not unlikely to find that these schools also claim as an objective to help children achieve their ‘full potential’ in the handbooks. It is how we approach that goal that becomes important in relation to its outcome. This is where school culture plays a crucial role in manifesting the approaches in different manners according to our conscious or sub-conscious choices.

Considering the above as a backdrop, the following questions were adopted to explore the concept school culture through a series of case studies.

Figure 1: Research Questions

<p>School Culture: how does the school community’s perception and understanding of the concept shape the multi-faceted reality?</p> <p>    What is school culture?</p> <p>    How does the school community perceive its culture? Is it individualistic or collective perception?</p> <p>    How does the school community’s awareness of its culture shape the learning environment?</p>
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### **Key Elements**

A review of the literature on school culture suggests that the elements, which comprise the concept can be categorised into three areas:

Figure 2: School Culture: Key Elements

1. Historical Factors:	
history	symbols
tradition	rituals
beliefs	stories
ceremonies	myths
2. Behavioural factors:	
goals/purpose	norms and
values	
code of conduct	expectations
sense of identity	attitude
3. Organisational factors:	
group dynamics	
structure to divide work and define relationship	
system of communication	

The history of a school, its tradition and beliefs etc. define the character of the organisation. The behavioural factors set the scene and the third category, the organisational factors, indicates activities and interrelationships between people in the school community. For the purpose of this study aiming to explore the interrelationships between school culture, school community and children's learning, the data collection and the analysis focused on the second and third categories of factors listed above. The first category of factors was taken into account only as a background. Based on the above categories, a working definition has been adopted to investigate school culture. Set out below the definition is being used as a hypothesis for the case studies. As Glaser and Strauss's 'grounded theory' (1980) suggests, the researcher revisits the hypothesis throughout the course of study, it is expected that the

adopted definition of school culture will be developed further in the process of exploring the above-mentioned relationships.

Figure 3: Hypothesis

An effective school culture can be defined as one where there is a sense of belonging to an organisation with a unique history, where people follow a certain code of practice, share a particular set of values, and respect a specific way of communication in pursuing a common goal towards children's learning.

The presence of an effective school culture creates a strong sense of security amongst the school community.

An anti-hypothesis has been developed against the definition in order to strengthen an 'analytic generalisation' (Yin, 1994) process for the cross-case data at a later stage.

Figure 4: Anti-hypothesis

The absence of a sense of belonging to an organisation with a unique history, where people do not follow a code of practice consistently or do not share a particular set of values coherently or do not respect a specific way of communication in pursuing a common goal towards children's learning, would identify a situation where an effective school culture does not prevail.

Therefore, the absence of an effective school culture is

liable to foster a lesser degree of security amongst the school community.

It is anticipated that the cases which will be studied will all have a unique culture or ethos, lying on the continuum between the two opposite statements marked by the hypothesis and the anti-hypothesis.

### **Methodology**

The word ‘culture’ involves a study of relationships. As a large part of this study involves investigating subjective ideas about the concept of school culture amongst the school community, a predominantly qualitative method has been adopted. A series of four case studies has been conducted in primary schools using an ethnographic approach to gathering data. In particular, the following data gathering techniques were used:

#### **Figure 5: Sources of Data**

interviews – with teachers, non-teaching staff, members of the senior management team;  
focus group activity – with the pupils;  
observation schedule – for the classrooms;  
researcher’s log; and  
school documents (secondary sources of data).

To study the social, academic and cultural process in each of the educational settings through a series of case studies, interactions between people in the school community were observed in the classrooms,

playgrounds, staff-rooms, meetings, assemblies, school trips and social gatherings. As Jeffrey and Troman (2004) stated, 'This type of ethnography captures the dynamics of a context, documenting the visible and less tangible social structures and relations' (p. 538).

The particular reason for choosing the case study method is that it allows each individual school to be treated as a unique context in terms of its own culture. This is an attempt to combine subjectivity with the value-neutral approach of objectivity. Although it can be argued whether it is at all possible for a researcher to be value-neutral (Greenbank, 2003), it is essential to adopt such an approach while conducting a partially explorative study. It is true that researcher's own beliefs and choice of the area of research can impose values from the very start of the study, but as long as an impartial approach is adopted, the process should provide us with the closest possible encounter with the reality inside the school.

#### **Four Primary Schools**

To begin with, a pilot study (CS1) was conducted in September 2003 in a local primary school (School A) in a predominantly middle class area of Aberdeen. It was reported by the members of staff that a lot of the wealthy parents were keen on high academic achievement and believed that the school should put pressure on the pupils to reach their targets. However, along with producing good academic results, the school also managed to focus on developing pupils' affective skills. In some cases, parents' demands were encountered with a certain degree of resistance in order to keep a balanced focus on both cognitive and social skill development. The primary aim of the pilot study was to test the data gathering

instruments and find out whether the design of the study was sufficiently logical and capable of producing insights into school ethos or culture.

After analysing CS1 data and revisiting the hypothesis, a second case study (CS2) was conducted in a school (School B) where children came from a very mixed background of middle class as well as working class families. A new Head Teacher had started working in School B about a year and a half ago, who appeared to have a democratic approach to dealing with management matters. This approach however appeared to have been facing a benign resistance from some other senior members of the management team, who were more used to the previous Head's authoritative style of management. During the period of study some members of the staff seemed to be a little confused about adopting a changed approach of management in the school. Nevertheless, generally their response to this new approach was positive.

School C (CS3) was chosen from an area where the school historically served a distinct fishing community. Pupils in this school came from a predominantly working class background. The school was reported to have severe problems with behaviour management until a few years ago. As a result, they decided to develop and maintain a strict code of discipline for the pupils. Being a big school and the need to control situations like this brought in this new approach, which seemed to be beneficial in many ways. However, as a negative effect, the pupils didn't seem to have much say in regular school activities. Although they felt quite safe and secure in the

school, they didn't seem to have a voice in organising school activities.

School D (CS4) could be described as a small urban school in an inner city area of Aberdeen. This was categorised as a deprived area, where often pupils came from families, who lived on social benefits provided by the Government. The school also faced closure a few times in the past due to competition from other schools in the area. According to the members of staff they survived by 'sticking together'.

Four different schools had four different sizes as well as backgrounds.

Figure 5: The Series of Case Studies

- Case Study One (pilot study) – School A (CS1)  
roll – 470, 3% free school meal entitlement\*
- Case Study Two – School B (CS2)  
roll – 190, 31% free school meal entitlement
- Case Study Three – School C (CS3)  
roll – 343, 32% free school meal entitlement
- Case Study Four – School D (CS4)  
roll – 117, 71% free school meal entitlement

\* In the UK, 'free school meal entitlement' is used as a socio-economic background indicator.

The following section of the paper will discuss how not only the background factors contributed in creating four unique school cultures, but also how different focuses on the key elements (in each school) and adopting different

approaches to dealing with them, produced different teaching and learning environments.

### **What makes them unique?**

More or less similar factors are involved in shaping any school culture and yet they are all unique. What is it that makes them unique? Is it the same factors treated differently or different factors treated differently or a combination of some common and some different factors treated differently, contributes to creating different shapes for school cultures?

### **Same factors, different components, different approaches, different outcomes**

Emerging themes from the data sets in School A, C and D highlighted the fact that all three schools focused on their past history and tradition in guiding certain activities in the school. But the ways they dealt with them and the way the components they focused on were different from each other. For example School A's approach to make use of their history and tradition focuses on 'what made us' and 'what has changed'. During the course of the study the annual picnic day was observed as an occasion to invite the past pupils (of different ages) of the school and publish booklets to emphasise how much the school had changed over the years for appropriate reasons. The Head Teacher mentioned how old practices were left behind with the change of time. Some values from the past such as maintaining a code of discipline, are still fostered but the manners have changed. Nowadays the pupils get a say in deciding how best they can maintain discipline in the school. School C also used the history of the area and the establishment of the school as an important component to

focus on creating a sense of identity amongst the pupils. They organised co-curricular activities e. g. project work around relevant themes to highlight who they are. (This will again be mentioned in relation to another factor in the next part of this section.) Unlike School A, School C however gave priority to maintaining a strict code of discipline rather than establishing a democratic teaching and learning atmosphere where pupils have a say in making decisions. Some years ago the school needed to establish a strict code of discipline to control behaviour problems amongst the pupils and currently it is still practised without modifying the approach. School D had a completely different approach to dealing with their history. They recently celebrated their 50th anniversary, when photographs from the past and the invitees' speeches mostly highlighted 'what it was like before' and 'what is happening now' without much reflection on the process of change.

Pupils in all three school mentioned above are learning about their history and tradition in some way or the other but the learning outcome may be different in each case. In School A the focus is on being open-minded and reflective. In School C, however, history is celebrated and tradition is maintained by holding on to a practice which was considered a necessity for survival. Here pupils don't have a choice. In most cases choice is made for them with regard to discipline. In School D, it appeared that the occasion to celebrate the anniversary was used mainly to involved pupils into extra-curricular activities and to create a sense of identity, without reflecting on why the changes occurred over the years. Creating a sense of identity was a part of all three schools' hidden goals behind the

activities but they all adopted different approaches to achieve them and of course they had produced different outcomes.

### **Same goal, different approaches, different outcomes**

School B, School C and School D all want to focus on creating a sense of identity, a belonging amongst the pupils. This paragraph illustrates how they all approached it in different ways. For example School B had a system of helping each other through the ‘Sunny Squad’. This team is made up of elected members of pupils from each class and their role mainly is to help other pupils in the playground. The values that are focused on during the ‘Sunny Squad’ meetings are ‘sharing’ and ‘caring’, ‘friendship’ and being a ‘team player’. The active team members in the field wear a cap, which carries their school logo on the front. School C as opposed to the approach of School B (as mentioned above) has a more traditional way of creating an identity through project work in history lessons. Both schools have similar aims but the ‘Sunny Squad’ initiative in School B has implications for pupils’ social skills development, with regard to building relationships with peers. Unlike these two schools, School D focuses mainly on the after-school football club to create this sense of identity. But as not all the age groups of pupils are involved, this activity offers only limited opportunity for establishing identity.

### **Different focus, same goals, different outcomes**

Both School A and School D stated in their school handbook that they aim to achieve a ‘secure and happy environment’ for the pupils in the school. One of the

ways School A focuses on achieving this goal is by creating opportunities to build relationships between pupils through both curricular and cross-curricular activities. Pair work and group work is emphasised during lessons throughout the day as is a ‘buddy system’ in the playground. A range of after-school activities is offered for the pupils to learn additional skills as well as building friendships with peers. In School D the focus is more on the co-curricular activities and even there the range is limited. During lessons in the classrooms only a few occasions were observed as being particularly encouraging to be creative or co-operative with the help of the peers in a group or pairs. In general pupils appeared to be happier and more confident in School A than School D.

### **Same focus, different outcomes**

Building good relationships with colleagues is considered as an important focus in establishing a, ‘effective’ school culture in both School C and School D. To some extent they both have established this goal but their approaches are different. Since School C is a much bigger school than School D, in a way it is perhaps easier to build good relationship amongst the members of staff in the school. School C appeared to be operating in a balkanised manner (Hargreaves’s typology is relevant here.). They work in smaller groups (infant, junior and upper stages) much of the time and make decisions about matters accordingly. The groups are closely monitored by a senior member of staff heading each team. Most of the time this arrangement works well, except on certain matters where the whole school is concerned, sometimes staff feel that decisions are being made at another end of the school without much scope for discussion. This was

pointed out as a less than ideal scenario. Relationships amongst the staff at a social level somehow work well, in that generally people are cordial to each other in the staff-room. But on professional matters, sometimes disputes take place due to lack of proper communication.

In School D, a small team of staff work together all the time. Their efforts appear to be well coordinated and a supportive network contributes to a strong sense of security. However, they also seem to have forgotten to question their own practices. Most of the time they are so convinced to follow a certain code of practice that the thought of probing into the reasons behind certain learning outcomes does not occur in their mind.

### **Sense of security**

Sense of security amongst the members of staff is also considered to be an essential component of effective school culture. The Senior Management Team in School A provides the staff with such a feeling by being supportive in different ways. They believe in a democratic approach to resolving any problem. Impartial judgements on matters by them are welcomed by the members of staff in general. Senior members of staff also are very helpful to the junior members. They are always happy to pass on the benefit of their experience to their colleagues. When it comes to resolving a problem situation with the involvement of the parents, a senior member is often present during the meeting between the parents and the teacher. They also investigate the matter thoroughly prior to lending their supporting hand. This kind of support system often are capable of producing harmonious relationships amongst the members of staff as well as a steady level of academic performance in the

school. School B portrays a slightly different scenario. The Head Teacher had joined the school only recently, before which the staff were used to an authoritative approach to management. Most of the staff seem to like the open and democratic approach of the new Head Teacher but at the same time they appeared to be confused at times. Some of the senior members of staff are still inclined to hold on to the previous ways of doing things in a hierarchical manner, whereas in staff meetings the new Head Teacher encourages different voices of opinion. School B is going through a process of transition but in the meantime, while they are adapting to the new style of management, their classroom practices have implications for pupils learning. Some quite structured and formal teacher-centred classroom cultures were observed along with less structured and semi-formal classroom environments.

### **Relationships with parents**

The evidence from the interviews indicates that all four case study schools had different views and approaches to parental involvement. School A found their middle-class parents often to be quite ‘pushy’. Many parents want their children to perform at a higher level than they are presently achieving. Teachers in this school on occasions found themselves advising parents against this kind of pressure as possibly harmful to the development of the children’s overall skills.

School B had a ‘love-hate’ relationship with the parents. Parents in this school are often vocal about their rights and they are not hesitant to organise a ‘group complaint’. However, they are also happy to offer their help for school activities. The school appreciates their

contribution and tries to keep a clear channel of communication between the parents and the school.

School C values their parental support to a great extent. They make an effort to communicate with them on a regular basis. However, there was little evidence of encouraging parental involvement in school activities. Teachers also complained that although parents are supportive and are 'grateful' (as they say) for what the school is doing for their children, they are inclined to see the leave it all to the school. In the opinion of the teachers, if the parents were a 'little more ambitious' and had higher expectation from their children, then the pupils' learning would benefit. A key factor here is the socio-economic background. School C caters for pupils coming from predominantly working class families.

School D finds their parents to be generally supportive -- especially when the school was threatened with closure and they organised petitions. Being a small school, the school is perceived as an island centre of the community around. However, parental support appeared to be a 'grey area' in that strong indirect support from the parents in the community is always present but the school seems reluctant at times to encourage active parental involvement. Nevertheless, they had set up a 'home-school partnership unit' which was reported to made efforts to work with parents on different occasions, but a resulting lack of enthusiasm proved disappointing.

All these different approaches to and different perceptions of handling matters appeared to have produced different shapes of school culture in these schools even though they may have the same institutional

goals, resulting in different learning outcomes for the pupils. An important point emerging from these case studies is that a cause of fundamental differences between cultures is the level of awareness (amongst those who live in it) of individual school cultures and their effect on students learning.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of school culture is complex in nature. It is also abstract, which adds to the complexity. The reason why school culture is abstract is because it embraces some observable factors such as a code of conduct, norm and values as well as some not so observable factors such as history or tradition. Also to grasp the concept of culture as a coherent whole, we need to take into account how people (individual as well as groups) in the school community perceive their culture and contribute to shaping it in different ways.

This process of ‘shaping culture’ is sometimes conscious but at other times it is sub-conscious or even unconscious! Dalin’s (1993) typology of organisational culture captures in essence the ‘conscious’ and the ‘sub-conscious’ process. Focusing exclusively on the locus of values in a school community, he argues that the ‘rational’ level of culture requires ‘collective justification’ as opposed to the ‘sub-rational’ which is based on personal preferences and biases. However, as discussed and illustrated above it can be argued that even though values are possibly at the centre of any discourse on culture, there are other factors (see page 3), which also contribute to certain shapes of school cultures. Moreover, even though the ideal scenario of shaping an ‘effective’ school culture (see page 4) does require our

conscious effort and understanding about the culture of a school, in reality most school cultures would fit into the continuum between the hypothesis and the anti-hypothesis (see page 4) depending on the varied level of awareness about the concept and its effect amongst the members of staff in the school community. This is where the ‘unconscious’ process of living a culture comes in.

If it is an organisation like School D, where apparently people have a ‘collective justification’ for following certain practises, (which categorises their culture at a ‘rational’ level), the school community still appeared to lack a certain level of awareness about their culture. In this school since the reason behind following certain practices seemed to be primarily ‘working together for survival’, the whole school community forgot to question each other opinions or practises. In other words, the main goal stated in the handbook regarding the schooling process, i. e. ‘pupils achieving full potential’ became a secondary focus to survival. It is at this level when school culture could be described as being ‘unconscious’. The question is - do we want to leave it at that or do we want to focus on the main goal with increased level of awareness about school culture? – the choice is ours.



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