

# **THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE**

**Thomas J. Sergiovanni**

Reflect on a school in your experience that worked particularly well—one in which teachers and students seemed to thrive and grow. Why was this school such an exciting place for teaching and learning? How did it function? How did people relate to one another? What characteristics of this school stand out? As you describe this school, you are likely to refer to principal leadership, warmth and support among teachers, the amount of emphasis put on getting the work done, sense of purpose, expectations teachers and principals shared and the number of responsibilities teachers assumed.

These descriptions are dimensions of the school's climate. Seven such descriptors appear persistently in the writings of organizational climate theorists and researchers (see, for example, Campbell et al; 1970; *DuBrin, 1984; Likert, 1967; and Payne and Pugh, 1976*). The seven are arrayed in exhibit 10 -1 in the form of an organizational climate inventory. As schools differ on these descriptors, they take on different personalities and recalled as functioning particularly well. Now describe a school in your experience that was not functioning very well. Your inventory responses for each of these schools provide a hint at differences in climate typically found when more and less effective schools are contrasted.

## **Why is Climate Important?**

School climate has obvious implications for improving the quality of work life for those who work in schools. But what is the link between climate and teacher motivation, school improvement efforts, student achievement, and other school effectiveness indicators? No easy answer exists, for the relationship is indeed complex. Schools characterized by a great deal of togetherness, familiarity, and trust among teachers may not be more effective – and indeed may be less effective – than schools in which this familiarity does not exist. In this sense, climate is a form of organizational energy whose telling effects on the school depend on how this energy is channeled and directed.

Principals can play key roles in directing climate energy into productive channels. Teachers, for example, often form closely knit and highly familiar groups or cliques. Some of these groups use their climate energy to help make the school work better, but other groups may use the same energy to promote and cause school problems and difficulties. Key is whether the group identifies with, and is committed to, the school and its purposes. The good feeling that

typically results from identification and commitment is referred to by Halpin and Croft (1962) as *esprit*. Quality of togetherness among teachers is referred to as *intimacy*. The school climate research of Halpin and Croft (1962) found that the intimacy quality was characteristic of both “open” and “closed” school climates. *Esprit*, however, was found to be high in open climate and low in closed. What conclusions might we reach about the relationship between school climate and school effectiveness? If one views climate as a condition representing a school’s capacity to act with efficiency, enthusiasm, and vigor, then the following generalizations can be made:

1. School improvement and enhanced school effectiveness will not likely be accomplished on a sustained basis without the presence of a favourable school climate.
2. However, favourable school climates alone cannot bring about school improvement and enhanced school effectiveness.
3. Favourable school climates can result in more or less effective schooling depending on the quality of educational leadership that exists to channel climate energy in the right directions.
4. Favourable school climates combined with quality educational leadership are essential keys to sustained school improvement and enhanced school effectiveness. Corollary: Unfavourable school climate hinder sustained school improvement of the quality of educational leadership.

It is in this sense that climate fit into the five forces leadership discussed in Chapter 5 and depicted in Table 5-17. Climate conceived psychologically as the shared perceptions of organizational life in the school is a concept related primarily to the human leadership force. Climates are largely built, shaped and channeled as a result of effective interpersonal leadership by the principal. Climate conceived as potential energy to act –the capacity to change, improve and achieve – is a concept primarily related to the educational leadership force. School improvement and enhanced effectiveness are products of the proper channeling of this potential capacity to act. Sound educational leadership provides the necessary know-how and direction.

## **The Concept of School Culture**

In every school there are observable behavioral regularities defined by the rules of the game for getting along. These rules are norms that define for people what is right and correct to do, what is acceptable, and what is expected. Norms are expressions of certain values and beliefs held by members of the

work group. When trying to understand how norms emerge and work, the metaphor of culture can be helpful. Some experts may debate whether schools really have cultures or not. But the issue is less the reality of culture and more what can be learned by thinking about schools as cultures. The metaphor school culture helps direct attention to the symbols, behavioral regularities, ceremonies, and even myths that communicate to people that underlying values and beliefs that are shared by members of the organization.

## ***School Climate and School Culture***

How are school climate and school culture linked? Both have similar characteristics, but climate is more interpersonal in tone and substances and is manifested in the attitudes and behaviours of teachers, supervisors, students and principals at work. It is a concept that enables the charting and interrelating of commonalities and consistencies of behavior that define, for better or for worse, the operating style of a school. Climate is concerned with the process and style of a school's organizational life rather than its content and substances.

School culture, by contrast, is more normative than school climate in the sense that it is a reflection of the shared values, beliefs, and commitments of school members across an array of dimensions that include but extend beyond interpersonal life. What the school stands for and believes about education, organization, human relationships; what it seeks to accomplish; its essential elements and features; and the image it seeks to project are the deep rooted defining characteristics shaping the substance of its culture.

## **External Adoption and Internal Integration**

Edgar Schein believes that the term culture “should be reserved for the deeper level of *basic assumptions and beliefs* that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic ‘taken-for-granted’ fashion an organization’s view of itself and its environment” (Schein, 1985:6). The concept of culture is very important, for its dimensions are much more likely to govern what it is that people think and do than is the official management system. Teachers, as suggested earlier, are much more likely to teach in ways that reflect the shared assumptions and beliefs of the faculty as a whole than they are in ways that administrators want, supervisors say, or teacher evaluation instruments require.

Following Parsons (1951), Merton, (1957), and Argyris (1964), Schein (1985) points out that schools and other organizations must solve two basic problems if they are to be effective: external adoption and survival and internal integration. The problems of *external adoption and survival* are themed to:

1. Mission and strategy (how to reach a shared understanding of the core mission of the school, and its primary task)
2. Goals (developing a consensus on goals that are linked to the core mission)
3. Means (reaching consensus on the managerial and organizational means to be used to reach goals)
4. Standards (reaching consensus on the criteria to be used to determine how well the group is doing in fulfilling its goals and whether it is meeting its commitments to agreed upon processes)
5. Correction (reaching consensus on what to do if goals are not being met) (Schein, 1985).

The problems of *internal integration* are themed to:

1. Developing a common set of understandings that facilitates communication, organizes perceptions, and helps to categorize and make common meanings.
2. Developing criteria for determining who is in and who is out and how one determines membership in the group.
3. Working out the criteria and rules for determining who gets, maintains and loses power.
4. Working out the rules for peer relationships and the manner in which openness and intimacy are to be handled as organizational tasks are pursued.
5. “Every group must know what its heroic and sinful behaviours are; what gets rewarded with property, status and power; and what gets punished in the form of withdrawal of the rewards and, ultimately, excommunication” (Schein, 1985:66).
6. Dealing with issues of ideology and sacredness: “Every organization, like every society, faces unexplainable and inexplicable events, which must be given meaning so that members can respond to them and avoid the anxiety of dealing with the unexplainable and uncontrollable” (Schein, 1985:66).

As issues of external adoption and internal integration are solved, schools and other organizations are better able to give full attention to the attainment of their goals and have the means for allowing people to derive sense and meaning from their work lives—to see their work as being significant.

In summarizing his stance, Stein (1985) notes that culture is “*a pattern of basic assumption—invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration—that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems*” (9). Since the assumption have resulted in decisions and behaviours that have worked repeatedly, they’re likely to be taken for granted. This point is important because the artifacts of culture, such as symbols, rites, traditions and behaviours are different from the actual content and substance of culture; the basic assumptions govern what is thought to be true, what is right, and for all intents and purposes what is reality for the school. As mentioned in earlier discussions of culture, the central zone that Shils (1961) speaks of is composed of assumptions, values and beliefs. The values and beliefs are often manifest, but the assumptions are typically tacit.

## ***Levels of Culture***

Since assumptions and basic beliefs are typically tacit, they are inferred from students of cultures such as the school’s climate (Dwyer, 1989) and the rites and rituals of the school’s organizational life (Deal, 1985). To account for both, it is useful to think about dimensions of school culture as existing at at least four levels (Schein, 1981; Dyer, 1982; Schein, 1985). The most tangible and observable level is represented by the artifacts of culture as manifested in what people say, how people behave, and how things look. Verbal artifacts include the language systems that are used, stories that are told, and examples that are used to illustrate important points. Behavioral artifacts are manifested in the ceremonies and rituals and other symbolic practices of the school. The interpersonal life of the school as represented by the concept of school climate is an important artifact of culture.

Less discernable but still important is the level of *perspectives*. Perspectives refer to the shared rules and norms to which people respond, the commonness that exists among solutions to similar problems, how people define the situations they face, and what are the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. Often, perspectives are included in statements of the school’s purposes or its covenant when these include ways in which people are to work together as well as the values that they share.

The third level is that of *values*. Values provide the basis for people to judge or evaluate the situations they face, the worth of their actions and activities, their

priorities and the behaviours of people with whom they work. Values not only specify what is important but often the things that are not important. In schools the values are arranged in a fashion that represents the covenant that the principal, teachers and others share. This covenant might be in the form of an educational or management platform, statements of school philosophy, mission statements, and so on.

The fourth level is that of *assumptions*. Assumptions are “the tacit beliefs that members hold about themselves and others, their relationships to other persons, and the nature of the organization in which they live. Assumptions are the non-conscious underpinnings of the first three levels – that is, the implicit, abstract axioms that determine the more explicit system of meanings” (Lundberg, 1985:172).

### ***Identifying the Culture of Your School***

The four levels provide a framework for analyzing the culture of a school. Since are difficult to identify firsthand, they often must be inferred from what is at the artifacts, perspectives and values levels. Much can be learned from examining the school’s history. Terrence E. Deal (1985) points out, for example, that

*[e]ach school has its story of origin, the people or circumstances that launched it, and the who presided over its course thereafter. Through evolutionary development – crisis and resolutions, internal innovations and external pressures, plans and chance occurrences the original concept was shaped and reshaped into an organic collection of traditions and distinctive ways. Throughout a school’s history, a parade of students, teachers, principal and parents cast sustaining memories. Great accomplishments meld with dramatic failure to form a potentially cherishable lore. (615)*

The following questions might be helpful in uncovering a school’s history. How does the school’s past live in the present? What traditions are still carried on? What stories are told and retold? What events in the school’s history are overlooked or forgotten? Are heroes and heroines exist among teachers and students whose idiosyncrasies and exploits are still remembered? In what ways are the school’s traditions and historical incidents modified through reinterpretation over the years? Can you recall, for example, a historical event that has evolved from fact to myth? Believing that an organization’s basic assumption about itself can be revealed through its history, Schein (1935) suggests that the organization’s history be analyzed by identifying all major crisis, crucial transitions, and other times of high emotion. For each event identified reconstruct how management dealt with the issue, how it identified its role, what it did and why. Patterns and themes across the various events identified should then be analyzed and checked against current practices. The next step is to identify the assumptions are still relevant for present actions.

To uncover beliefs, ask what are the assumptions and understandings that are shared by teachers and others, though they may not be explicitly stated. These may relate to how the school is structured, how teaching takes place, the roles of teachers and students, what is believed about discipline, the relationship of parents to the school. Sometimes assumptions and understandings are written down somewhere in the form of a philosophy or other value statements. Whether that is the case or not, beliefs can best be understood by being inferred from examples of current practices.

According to Schein, one important set of basic assumptions revolves around the theme of what is believed about human nature and how these beliefs then affect policies and decisions. To address this issue, he suggests that an attempt be made to identify organizational heroes and villains, successful people and those who are less successful, and compare the stories that are told about them. He recommends as well that recruitment selection and promotion criteria be examined to see if indeed they are biased toward selecting a certain type of person into the organization and promoting that type. An analysis of who gets rewarded and who gets punished can also be revealing. Do patterns emerge from this sort of analysis? Are there common assumptions about people that begin to emerge?

Values can be identified by asking what things the schools prizes. That is, when teachers and principals talk about the school, what are the major and recurring value themes underlying what they say? When problems emerge, what are the values that seem to surface as being relied upon in developing solutions?

Norms and standards can be identified by asking what are the oughts, shoulds, do's and don'ts that govern the behavior of teachers and principals, and examining what are the accepted and recurring ways of doing things, the patterns of behavior, habits and rituals that prevail?

Corwith Hansen (1986) suggests that teachers discuss the following questions when seeking to identify the culture of their school: Describe your work day both in and outside of the school. On what do you spend your time and energy? Given that most students forget what they learn, what do you hope your student will retain over time from your teaching? Think of students that you are attracted to – those that you admire, respect, or enjoy. What common characteristics do these students share? What does it take for a teacher to be successful? What do you remember about past faculty members and students in your school? If you were to draw a picture or take a photo or make a collage that represented some aspect of your school, what would it look like? How are students rewarded?

## **The Power of Culture**

School culture represents a double-edged sword for principals, if allowed to emerge and progress informally, principals cannot be sure whether basic assumptions and ensuing practices will be aligned with goals and purposes that support teaching and learning. Sometimes informal or wild cultures actually result in the development of a normal system that forces teachers to work in ways that compromise official goals and purposes. When domesticated, however, the school culture can replace detailed plans and systems of monitoring as quality-control measures. Further, culture provides a means for coordinating the efforts of people even though structurally the school may be loosely connected. As Bresser and Bishop explain:

*If values, beliefs and exemplars are widely shared, formal symbolic generalizations (such as detailed plans, monitoring systems and other controls) can be parsimonious. In effect, a well developed organizational culture directs and coordinates activities, by contrast, if an organization is characterized by many different and conflicting values, beliefs and exemplars, those authority dominates the organization cannot expect that their preferences for action will be carried out voluntarily and automatically. Instead, considerable direction and coordination will be required, resulting in symbolic generalizations formalized in plans, procedures, programs, budget and so on. (quoted in Welck, 1985:383)*

When wild cultures are in place or when beliefs and values emerge either in idiosyncratic ways or are in conflict with each other, more emphasis needs to be given to detailed planning and the other management functions.

*There is also a greater probability that the detailed plans will not be implemented as intended, because they will be interpreted in diverse ways and lead to divergent actions. Thus the substitutability of culture for strategic plans may be asymmetrical. Culture can substitute for plans more effectively than plans can substitute for culture. (Welck, 1985:383)*

## **The Dark Side of School Culture**

The benefits of a strong school culture are clear. Culture represents an effective means of coordination and control in a loosely connected and nonlinear world. Its covenant or center of purposes and shared values represents a source of inspiration, meaning, and enhanced commitment and performance that are beyond expectations. And as a result the school is better able to achieve its goals.

But there is a dark side to the concept of school culture, as well. Weick (1985) points out, for example, that



*A coherent statement of who we are makes it harder for us to become something else. Strong cultures are tenacious cultures. Because a tenacious culture can be a rigid culture that is how to detect changes and opportunities and slow to change once opportunities are sensed, strong cultures can be backward, conservative instruments of adaptation. (385)*

Further, the presence of a strong norm system in a school can collectively program the minds of people in such a way that issues of reality come into question. If this is carried to the extreme, the school might come to see reality in one way but its environment in another. And, finally, there is the question of rationality. As commitment to a course of action increases, people become less rational in their actions (Staw, 1984). Strong cultures are committed cultures, and in excess, commitment takes its toll on rational action.

Schein points out that as organizations mature, the prevailing culture becomes so entrenched that it becomes a constraint on innovation. Culture preserves the glories of the past and hence becomes valued as a source of self-esteem and as a means of defense rather than for what it represents and the extent to which it serves purposes (Schein, 1995).

## **The importance of a Loyal Opposition**

If the purposes and covenants that constitute cultural centers are highly dynamic and fluid, school cultures are likely to be weak and ineffectual. By the same token, if they are cast in granite they can squelch individuality and innovation. The alternative is to build a resilient culture – one that can bend to change here and there but not break, that can stretch in a new direction and shrink from an old but still maintain its integrity, a culture that is able to bounce back and recover its strength and spirit, always maintaining its identity. Key to resiliency is the cultivation of a small but energetic loyal opposition made of

*People with whom we enjoy an honest, high-trusting relationship but who have conflicting visions, goals or methods.... The task of the (loyal opposition) is to bring out the best in us. We need to be grateful for those who oppose us in a high-trust way, for they bring the picture of reality and practicality to our plans. (Block, 1987:135-136)*

Block believes that it is important when working with the loyal opposition that the leader communicates the extent to which they are valued. Leaders can do this, in his view, by reaffirming the quality of the relationship and the fact that it's based on trust. They should be clear in stating their positions and the reasons why they hold them. They should also state in a neutral way what they think positions of the loyal opposition are. The leader reasons as follows:

We disagree with respect to purpose, goals, and perhaps even visions. Our task is to understand their position. Our way of fulfilling that task is to be able to state to them their arguments in a positive way. They should feel understood and acknowledged by our statement of their disagreement with us. (Block, 1987: 1.17)

With this kind of relationship in place, the leadership and the loyal opposition are in a position to negotiate differences in good faith.