School culture

Louise Stoll

Department of Education, University of Bath

Take five scenarios. The first two involve improvement attempts from outside of schools; the other three, from inside. First, the external efforts. In the attempt to drive up educational standards, a national government mandates that all schools will use a "tried and tested" approach to teaching writing. This will be introduced through professional development and monitoring practices found effective when introducing changes elsewhere. Second, a Local Education Authority sets up a voluntary school improvement project for its schools in partnership with a university. It draws on an extensive knowledge base on the conditions that support school improvement. In both cases, the "pill" works in some participating schools, but not others.

Now for three internal improvement attempts. In the first, a headteacher newly arrived to her second primary headship sets up a scheme where staff observe each other in classrooms and give each other feedback, on the basis that it was popular and highly effective in her previous school. She receives a distinctly cool response. Elsewhere, an information technology teacher goes on an exciting course where she learns about benefits of and strategies for promoting literacy across the curriculum through ICT. Enthused, she returns and tries to persuade colleagues in other departments to "get involved", but there is little interest and take-up. In the third school, a new middle school headteacher observes that staff are not very involved in decision-making, forward planning is not systematic, and there is little emphasis on teaching and learning. Less than three years later the place is "buzzing". While three months after his arrival less than half the teachers agreed that "teachers at this school believe all students can learn", as recorded in a teacher survey, two-and-a-half years later the survey is repeated with the same teachers and 90 percent agree with the statement.

Anyone who works in or closely with schools can remember exciting new initiatives that have started with enthusiasm, commitment, and energy, at least on the part of some staff members. Two years later they have disappeared never to be seen again. What is going on here?

All of these scenarios are attempts at school improvement, whether originating from inside or outside the school.

What is school culture?

School culture is one of the most complex and important concepts in education. In relation to school improvement, it has also been one of the most neglected. Schein[2] considers the basic essence of an organisation's culture to be, "the deeper level of *basic assumptions* and *beliefs* that are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic 'taken-for-granted' fashion an organisation's view of itself and its environment". These are the heart of school culture, and what makes it so hard to grasp and change.

Culture describes how things are and acts as a screen or lens through which the world is viewed. In essence, it defines reality for those within a social organisation, gives them support and identity and creates a framework for occupational learning. Each school has a different reality or mindset of school life, often captured in the simple phrase "the way we do things around here".[3] It also has its own mindset in relation to what occurs in its external environment. Culture is, thus, "situationally unique",[4] as can be seen in the example of two ostensibly similar primary schools, located in the same area and drawing from the same population, with the same number of pupils attending them. These two schools view these pupils, their work and external constraints they faced in very different ways.

A school's culture is shaped by its history, context and the people in it.

1. **The school's age can impact cultural change.** Schein[5] identifies three significant developmental periods in a business organisation's life. Parallels can be drawn with schools. In *early years* of a new school, dominant values emanate from its "founders" and the school makes its culture explicit. It clarifies its values, finds and articulates a unique identity and shares these with newcomers, whether teachers, pupils or parents. Culture is the "glue" that holds everyone together, and can be seen as a positive development force. In *midlife*, the school is well established but needs to continue growing and renewing. Changes may have occurred to its external and internal contexts, altering strengths and weaknesses. The most important aspects of the culture are now embedded and taken for granted, and culture is increasingly implicit. Subcultures have also sprung up. Change becomes more difficult because of less consciousness of the culture; it is harder to articulate and understand. *Maturity and/or stagnation and decline* is most problematical from the cultural change perspective. This stage is reached if the school has ceased growing and responding to its environment. Dysfunctional elements have surfaced, and challenging old assumptions is resisted.[6]

2. **School culture is influenced by a school's external context.** Locally, a school's community, including the pupils' parents, may have their own conceptions of what a "real school" is:[7] "a real school is what I attended when I was a child." The Local Educational Authority (LEA) can also help create an improvement mindset, as well as having its own improvement orientation[8] and language (e.g. "The Learning Borough"). Political and economic forces or changes in national or local educational policies are also influences. For example, focusing the external assessment system only on core subjects at primary level, influences what is valued in schools. Teaching unions are another aspect of the external context that can impact on the school culture and, thus, its orientation to improvement.[9]

3. **School cultures vary between primary and secondary schools.**[10] In primary schools care and control influence their culture,[11] such that

when pupils leave primary schools there is a feeling that they have left a family.[12] In contrast, secondary school culture is influenced not only by larger size and department structures, but by the very fundamental nature of teachers' academic orientation[13]—the difference between being, for example, an art teacher and a science teacher—and the fragmented individualism[14] that pupils experience in moving from one subject and teacher to another.

4. **School culture is influenced by the school's pupils and their social class background.** Thrupp[15] argues that the social mix of the school plays a major role in how it functions, largely because of the cumulative effect of how the pupils relate to each other as a group. Essentially, pupils who attend the school flavour it in a particular way, through their own pupil culture. This takes on added significance when they reach adolescence and their identities and values are shifting.

5. **Changes in society pose challenges to a school's culture,** whether they be related to learning, the pupil population, organisational management, rapid technological developments or the changing role of women.[16] Such societal changes often demand rapid responses from a school. Yet while culture changes as participants change, it can also be a stabilising force, particularly for those who have been part of the culture for a longer period. It can therefore appear problematic for those in search of quick fix changes because it often seems as if it is an unmovable force. While culture presents, therefore, the paradox of both being static and dynamic,[17] in reality it is constantly evolving[18] and being reconstructed.[19]

What does school culture look like? What can you see and hear?

In an anthropologic sense, school culture manifests itself in customs, rituals, symbols, stories, and language[20]—culture's "artefacts". Thus, whether religion or spirituality, pupils' learning, sporting achievements, or discipline are emphasised in assemblies, provides a lens on one facet of school culture. Similarly, the school with an annual picnic for staff, parents and pupils, and the headteacher of Springvale School who welcomes new entrants to "the Springvale family", are making statements about what is considered important. Viewed more practically, MacGilchrist and colleagues[21] argue that school culture is expressed through "three inter-related generic dimensions": professional relationships, organisational arrangements, and opportunities for learning. School culture, therefore, is most clearly "seen" in the ways people relate to and work together; the management of the school's structures, systems and physical environment; and the extent to which there is a learning focus for both pupils and adults, including the nature of that focus.

Culture can take different forms. This paper's focus is school culture as a holistic concept. Within this, however, there may exist several cultures: pupil culture, teacher cultures, a leadership culture, non-teaching staff culture, and parent culture. Teacher cultures have received most attention in relation to school improvement. Andy Hargreaves highlights four existing teaching cultures (*see* Panel 1).

Panel 1

Four Teaching Cultures
- *Individualism* — classrooms as "egg-crates" or "castles". Autonomy, isolation and insulation prevail, and blame and support are avoided.
- *Collaboration* — teachers choose, spontaneously and voluntarily, to work together, without an external control agenda. Forms include: "comfortable" activities—sharing ideas and materials—and rigorous forms, including mutual observation and focused reflective enquiry.
- *Contrived collegiality* — teachers' collaborative working relationships

are compulsorily imposed, with fixed times and places set for collaboration, for example planning meetings during preparation time.
- *Balkanisation* — teachers are neither isolated nor work as a whole school. Smaller collaborative groups form, for example within secondary school departments, between infant and junior teachers, and class teachers and resource support teachers.
Hargreaves (1994)[22]

What can't you see?

Norms are the unspoken rules for what is regarded as customary or acceptable behaviour and action within the school.

> Life within a given culture flows smoothly only insofar as one's behaviour conforms with unwritten codes. Disrupt these norms and the ordered reality of life inevitably breaks down.
> Morgan (1997)[23]

Norms shape reactions to internally or externally proposed or imposed improvements. It is, therefore, important for those working in schools and outsiders supporting them to understand their norms because acceptance of improvement projects by a school depends on the fit between the norms embedded in the changes and those within the school's own culture.[24] Some norms are more sacred than others, for example some people's fundamental belief that ability is inherited—you either have it or you do not—and therefore some children are unable to learn, or a teacher's belief that teaching reading using a particular method does not work, based on 25 years of successful experience using a different method.

Stoll and Fink identified 10 cultural norms that influence school improvement (see summary in Panel 2). Because norms are frequently unspoken, catchphrases articulate their core messages.

Panel 2

Norms of Improving Schools
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"
Stoll and Fink (1996)[25]

The norms are interconnected and feed off each other. They do not just represent a snapshot of an effective school. They focus on fundamental issues of how people relate to and value each other.

Collegiality

Collegiality merits further discussion because of the attention paid to it in the school improvement literature. This much used but complex concept involves: mutual sharing and assistance; an orientation towards the school as a whole; and is spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, unscheduled, and unpredictable.

Judith Warren Little[26] identifies four types of collegial relations, the first three of which she views as weak forms: scanning and story telling, general help and assistance, and sharing. The fourth form, joint work, is most likely to lead to improvement. Examples of joint work include team

teaching, mentoring, action research, peer coaching, planning and mutual observation and feedback. These are stronger because they create greater interdependence, collective commitment, shared responsibility, and, perhaps most important, "greater readiness to participate in the difficult business of review and critiques".[27]
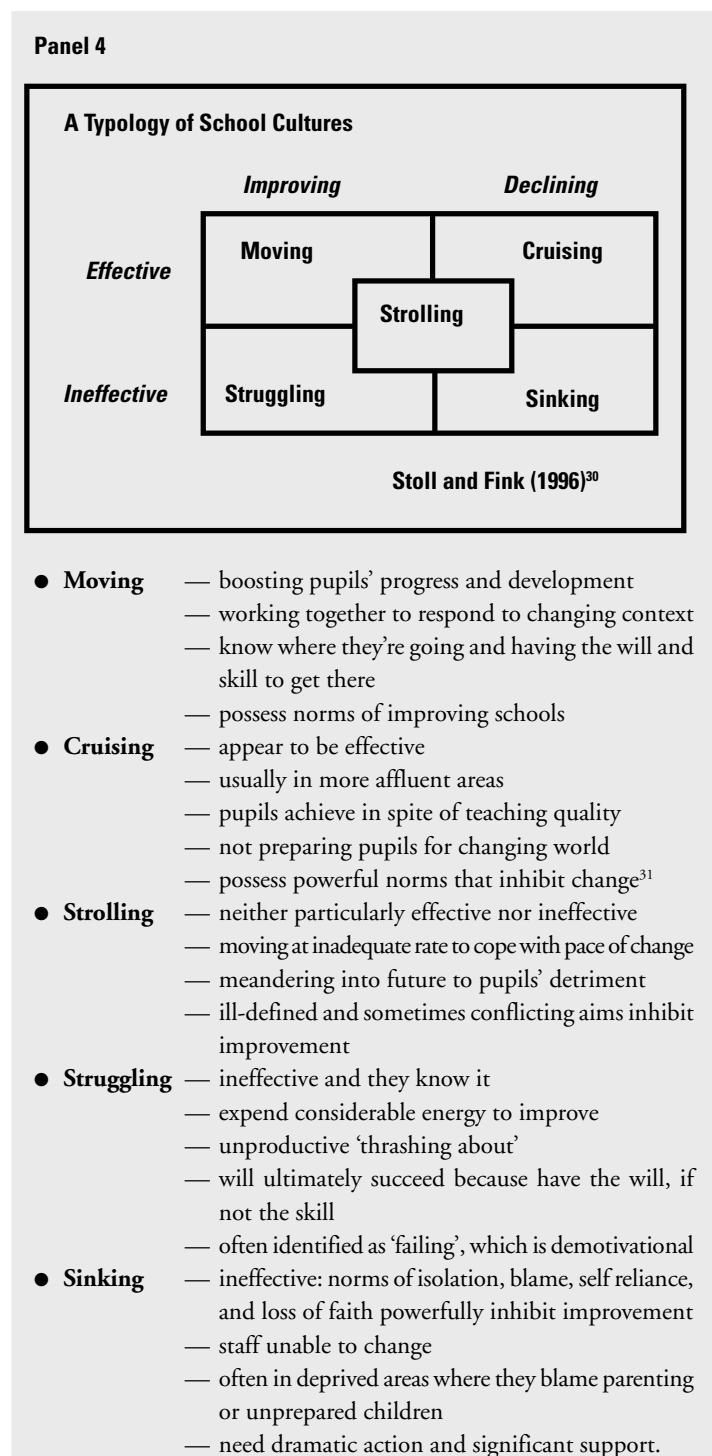
Do schools have different cultures?

Given the different contextual influences described earlier, it is not surprising that schools' cultures vary. What is interesting, however, is that schools with similar contextual characteristics have different mindsets. Over recent years, typologies that describe and label different "idealised" types of school culture have been created. While such typologies cannot capture subtle nuances of individual schools and possible sub-cultures within schools, they are useful as discussion starters to help teachers consider different facets of their school's culture. David Hargreaves offers one model based on two dimensions: the instrumental domain, representing social control and orientation to task; and the expressive domain, reflecting social cohesion through maintaining positive relationships. Four types of ineffective school cultures sit in different and extreme places on the two dimensions (see Panel 3):

Panel 3

A Typology of School Cultures

Instrumental domain
– social control –

	HIGH	OPTIMUM	LOW
HIGH	Hothouse		Welfarist
OPTIMUM		Ideal	
LOW	Traditional		Anomic

Expressive domain – social cohesion –

- *Traditional* — low social cohesion, high social control—custodial, formal, unapproachable;
- *Welfarist* — low social control, high social cohesion—relaxed, caring, cosy;
- *Hothouse* — high social control, high social cohesion—claustrophobic, pressured, controlled;
- *Anomic* — low social cohesion, low social control—insecure, alienated, isolated, "at risk".

Hargreaves (1995)[28]

The fifth culture, in the centre, is an effective school with optimal social cohesion and optimal social control—fairly high expectations and support for achieving standards. Hargreaves emphasises these are "ideal cultures" because real schools "move around". Indeed, departments within schools may fall within different parts of this model.

Rosenholtz's[29] "moving" and "stuck" schools model, although simplistic, powerfully conveys stark contrasts. You visualise two schools next door to each other, with similar intakes, in the same school system, facing the same external government mandates, but their mindsets are different. The moving school feels "freedom to" focus on its priorities; the stuck school seeks "freedom from" outside demands.

Stoll and Fink's model develops these ideas. They focus on the school's current effectiveness, but also argue that the rapidly accelerating pace of change makes standing still impossible and therefore schools are either getting better or getting worse. These two concepts enable school cultures to be examined on two dimensions, effectiveness-ineffectiveness, and improving-declining (see Panel 4). As in David Hargreaves' model, within most schools, one can find sub-cultures exemplifying several, if not all, of the types.

Panel 4

A Typology of School Cultures

	Improving	Declining
Effective	Moving	Cruising
	Strolling	
Ineffective	Struggling	Sinking

Stoll and Fink (1996)[30]

- **Moving** — boosting pupils' progress and development
  — working together to respond to changing context
  — know where they're going and having the will and skill to get there
  — possess norms of improving schools
- **Cruising** — appear to be effective
  — usually in more affluent areas
  — pupils achieve in spite of teaching quality
  — not preparing pupils for changing world
  — possess powerful norms that inhibit change[31]
- **Strolling** — neither particularly effective nor ineffective
  — moving at inadequate rate to cope with pace of change
  — meandering into future to pupils' detriment
  — ill-defined and sometimes conflicting aims inhibit improvement
- **Struggling** — ineffective and they know it
  — expend considerable energy to improve
  — unproductive 'thrashing about'
  — will ultimately succeed because have the will, if not the skill
  — often identified as 'failing', which is demotivational
- **Sinking** — ineffective: norms of isolation, blame, self reliance, and loss of faith powerfully inhibit improvement
  — staff unable to change
  — often in deprived areas where they blame parenting or unprepared children
  — need dramatic action and significant support.

How are culture and structure related?

Culture and structure are interdependent. Most school improvement efforts focus on changes to structures:

- *time*—e.g., rearranging the school year into four or five periods with shorter breaks between;
- *space*—e.g., moving the science and mathematics departments of a secondary school on to the same corridor to promote collaboration;
- *roles and responsibilities*—e.g., creating a school improvement coordinator post.

This is because structures are relatively easy to manipulate and are visible, but for structures to effect change, it is also necessary to attend to the underlying culture. Culture affects the structures put into place in a new initiative, for example a school may purchase two computers for every classroom, but because of norms of contentment, a lack of risk taking, or support, in many classrooms computers remain in their boxes. Structures can also, however, influence culture. If greater collegiality between teachers in schools is desirable, but the timetable doesn't allow teachers to meet during the day, this will act as a barrier. Andy Hargreaves[32] argues it is no surprise that teaching is an isolated activity, because: "Structures of teacher isolation have their roots in schools that have been organized like egg crates since the mid nineteenth century." Collaboration does not just happen, and it is through structures—"real tasks on which teachers can collaborate"[33]—that cultures can be modified.

How can culture inhibit school improvement?

Although all the scenarios at the beginning of this paper were well intentioned, most were ultimately unsuccessful. Many school improvement initiatives, particularly those introduced by national and other policymakers, tend to emphasise what are described as empirical-rational change strategies.[34] These are based on the fundamental assumption that schools are rational places and that people within them will adopt proposed changes if it has been shown that it will benefit them. This "research, development and diffusion" (R, D+D) model of educational change emanates from Clark and Guba's[35] linear analysis of four aspects of educational change (see Panel 5).

Panel 5

Clark and Guba's model of the stages of educational change

Research	— to advance knowledge to serve as a basis for development
Development	— to invent and build a solution to an operating problem
Diffusion	— to introduce the innovation to practitioners
Adoption	— to incorporate the innovation into schools

Based on House (1974)[36]

Current US examples of this approach can be seen in some designs of the New American Schools initiative and attempts at their "scale-up" (the attempt to spread ideas from pilot schools to a much larger group of schools).[37] England and Wales' Literacy Hour[38] could be viewed as another example. Drawing on a range of research on effective literacy strategies and aspects of the educational change and improvement literature, the model, while not compulsory, is intended to be implemented in every primary school, unless schools produce evidence of effectiveness using an alternative strategy.

Interestingly, the school improvement research knowledge base resulted from reflection on failed change efforts in the 1960s and 1970s, when a wide variety of changes were adopted by schools with little lasting effect.[39] Revisiting the Rand Change Agent Study of the 1970s in the United States, McLaughlin[40] concluded that "the net return to the general investment was the adoption of many innovations, the successful implementation of a few, and the long-run continuation of still fewer". The inherent problem in the R,D+D approach is that "situational constraints" are more important than the characteristics of particular change programmes. As House[41] explains, behaviour is determined more by the "complex nature of the school as a social system" than by staff development opportunities where teachers learn about and are demonstrated new teaching strategies.

> Avoid the primary pursuit of transferable innovations. Distributed problems cannot be solved by a single innovation that will work in all local settings, for those settings are not only different and unpredictable in specifics, but they are also constantly changing... Different innovations will be more or less useful under widely different specific circumstances of their application. There is no Golden Fleece. House (1974)[42]

How do we make sense of those "situational constraints"? Morgan[43] recommends using metaphors because they "lead us to see, understand and manage organisations in distinctive yet partial ways". He argues that those who try to study or manage organisations drawing only on a single perspective do not have a complete picture of the organisation. One of several metaphors Morgan applies is the cultural metaphor: "It focuses attention on a human side that other metaphors ignore or gloss over... it shows how organisation ultimately rests in shared systems of meaning..."[44] It is an important metaphor, but it is important to remember that it is not the only one, and that culture can interact with other metaphors.

Another metaphor offered to draw together rational, structural and human aspects is that of an iceberg. It has been used to convey the difference between surface aspects and those below the surface when considering the management of change.[45] As all improvement is change, anyone who is trying to bring about improvement needs to understand how what goes on below the surface is likely to influence surface aspects of improvement. So, for example, the organisation, structures, roles and responsibilities, and necessary professional development opportunities for externally mandated literacy hours and school-selected technology projects are surface aspects. What goes on below the surface, however, is the real essence of school culture—people's beliefs, values and the norms that will influence how they react to these initiatives—as well as micropolitical issues and the emotions people bring to their work.

School culture and micro-politics

Most observers of micro-politics in schools consider this is the underlying frame with which to view how schools change or stay the same.[46] In considering understandings of reality ("what a school is like") and normative behaviour ("what is done here") which evolve between teachers, pupils, parents and others, Pollard[47] rejects terms such as "ethos" or "climate", "because of the unquestionable impression of cohesion which they sometimes tend to convey and because of their weak treatment of the issues of power and influence in a school". Power issues are particularly relevant to the issue of *subcultures* within schools. Some writers view the cultural world of teachers in the workplace as an agglomeration of several subcultures.[48] Any school may be composed of different and competing value systems, based on gender, race, language, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, friendship, and professional affiliation, all of which have the power to create "a mosaic of organisational realities".[49] If role differences are added to these—between teachers, pupils, senior managers, non-teaching staffs and parents—groups with their own common interests potentially could pull a school in several directions.

Taking one example, closer "webs" are often formed by subsets of teachers in large secondary schools with different beliefs, attitudes, norms and social relationships. Departmental divisions can prove powerful barriers to whole-school communication and collegiality. While Hargreaves argues that small group collaboration, itself, is not a problem, balkanised cultures are characterised by insulation of subgroups from each other; little movement between them; strong identification, for example, seeing oneself as a primary teacher or chemistry teacher, and with views of learning associated with that subgroup; and micropolitical issues of status, promotion, and power dynamics.[50]

Essentially, "Where two or more cultures coexist and interact, there will be conflicts of values in the day-to-day interaction".[51] This means that even if one group of teachers believes it important to change their teaching practice, for example introducing ICT [Information Communications Technology] across the curriculum, another group may have very different beliefs about the importance of ICT. The school can then become a location for struggles for control, in-fighting and competition. Status issues are also involved, so in the case of national primary literacy initiatives, the literacy co-ordinator may be seen as having assumed power while specialist subject teachers, for example music, may feel marginalised, especially if primary schools use the flexibility they have to focus on "the basics". Similarly, in a secondary school, certain departments may be favoured in the introduction of technology, whether it is through extra hardware and software, location of ICT laboratories next to certain departments, lowering of class size to accommodate ICT, or choice of staff to oversee the initiative's implementation.

Resolving these inter-group issues is often viewed as essential to the development of shared values, a necessary prerequisite of school improvement.

How can culture support school improvement?

The role of leadership in relation to school culture is central. Leaders have been described as the culture founders, their contribution or responsibility being the change of school culture by installing new values and beliefs. Schein[52] argues the possibility that the "only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture".

Understanding the school's culture is an essential prerequisite for any internal or external change agent. Deal and Kennedy offer practical guidance on three steps those in leadership roles can take (see Panel 6).

Panel 6

Practical guidance for leaders
1. Get to know your culture, by asking all involved participants what the school really stands for.
2. Note how people spend their time.
3. Find out who play key roles in the cultural network, and reflect on the values they represent.
   Deal and Kennedy (1983)[53]

Morgan offers slightly different advice for understanding culture and subcultures (see Panel 7).

Panel 7

Understanding culture and sub-cultures
1. Observe the day-to-day functioning as if you were an outsider.
2. Consider how the school culture encourages or inhibits pupil progress, development, and achievement, and accomplishment of school goals. To what extent is balkanisation evident?

3. Arrange opportunities where people can discuss and re-examine their values. (This third step, while appearing simple, is frequently neglected.)
   Morgan (1997)[54]

Morgan helpfully distinguishes between the need to create networks of shared meaning, linking people around positive visions, values and norms and the use of culture as a manipulative management tool—"values engineering". He suggests leaders and managers should ask themselves, "What impact am I having on the social construction of reality in my organisation?" and "What can I do to have a different and more positive impact?" (p. 148).

Ultimately, however, it is most likely that school improvement will depend on reculturing.

Reculturing

Reculturing is "the process of developing new values, beliefs and norms. For systematic reform it involves building new conceptions about instruction... and new forms of professionalism for teachers...".[55]

Reculturing
a challenge of transforming mindsets, visions, paradigms, images, metaphors, beliefs, and shared meanings that sustain existing... realities and of creating a detailed language and code of behaviour through which the desired new reality can be lived on a daily basis... It is about inventing what amounts to a new way of life.
Morgan (1997)[56]

For such change to occur, "normative re-educative" strategies are needed. These emphasise the pivotal importance of clarifying and reconstructing values, and "centre on the notion that people technology is just as necessary as thing technology in working out desirable changes in human affairs".[57] Most significantly, they focus on the need to improve problem-solving capacities of those within organisations, a key capacity for school improvement.

If schools are to continue to be effective in the future, they will need to build structures which promote interrelationships and interconnections, and simultaneously develop cultures that promote collegiality and individuality.[58] Although it sounds paradoxical, not only must the school's culture promote group learning, it must honour individual "mavericks", because creativity and novelty will be required to deal with an unknowable future and prevent "groupthink".[59]

In effect, cultures and counter-cultures will need to interact to find innovative solutions to complex and unpredictable circumstances.[60] Hargreaves[61] promotes the notion of teachers flexibly and creatively engaged in different problem-solving tasks: the moving mosaic.[62] Their orientation is one of continuous learning and improvement. They are characterised by collaboration, opportunism, adaptable partnerships, and alliances. Thus membership of groups overlaps and shifts over time to meet the needs of the circumstance and context.

Reculturing, however, needs to go beyond redefining teacher cultures; it must include pupil and community cultures as well. Pupils can be a conservative force when teachers attempt to change their practice.[63] Similarly, as noted earlier, communities are often resistant to change. Change agents must therefore attend to both.

Conclusion

Real improvement cannot come from anywhere other than within schools themselves, and "within" is a complex web of values and beliefs, norms, social and power relationships and emotions. Changing schools is not just about changing curricula, teaching and learning strategies, assessment, structures, and roles and responsibilities. It does not happen just by

producing plans as a result of external inspections or reviews. Nor does it happen just by setting targets because data, even valid and sensitively analysed data, has suggested that all pupils or certain groups of pupils could be doing better. It requires an understanding of and respect for the different meanings and interpretations people bring to educational initiatives, and work to develop shared meanings underpinned by norms that will promote sustainable school improvement.

Louise Stoll
Department of Education, University of Bath
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Institute of Education, University of London

Issues for reflection and discussion

● What different subcultures can you see in your school/the schools you work with?

● Can contrived collegiality (*see* Panel 1) ever lead to true collegiality?

● Which three norms in Panel 2 is it most necessary for you to address first in your particular circumstance? Why? Work with colleagues to determine how you might go about this.

● Using the both Hargreaves' and Stoll and Fink's typologies of schools (Panels 3 and 4):
  1. Try to identify/locate your school/schools you work with as a whole on the typologies (best fit). Why have you placed it/them there?
  2. Identify at least one part of your school/schools you work with (e.g., assessment policy, relationships with parents etc.) you would place in each of the five types. Explain why.

● How do structures in your school/the schools you work with affect school culture? How does school culture affect the structures?

● What are the main power issues in your school/the schools you work with? How can conflicts best be addressed?

Notes

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