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## The Significance of Assumptions Underlying School Culture in the Process of Change

<sup>1</sup>Ergün RECEPOĞLU

<sup>1</sup>Kastamonu University, Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Sciences, Kastamonu/Turkey

### ABSTRACT

*This study investigates assumptions that form the tacit culture of schools and educational organizations. This study emphasizes the importance of assumptions and change process. Assumptions form the basis of the organizational culture and successful change can't be realized if these assumptions aren't addressed. One of the invisible reasons behind the failure of various change attempts is the disregard for the assumptions and beliefs which comprise the tacit culture of the schools and the subsequent inability to understand whether this culture is harmonious with reform attempts. In order for any kind of change to be efficient, it is imperative that the assumptions of the reform model be compatible with the culture of the school.*

**Keywords:** Process of Change, Assumptions, School Culture

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### INTRODUCTION

Teaching and education are the primary goals of educators. If these goals can be achieved precisely, teaching may be satisfactory and pleasurable. In this respect, an administrator, a teacher or an employee who makes himself comfortable and responsible at school as if he was at home will have a positive attitude towards his job. It is the same for students, too. If a student identifies himself with his school and feels himself as a member of the school, his success, development and socialization will improve substantially. On the contrary, if the personnel or students of a school alienate themselves from the school, which is a kind of family, educational activities will definitely have a problematic future. Each member of a school is an important and integral part of the school culture.

Especially the recent years have witnessed a full-court press to create a school environment where all employees and students of a school act in unison to enable the school to achieve its goals and purposes better, participate in decision-making processes, can express their opinions freely, internalize the practices determined and the decisions made, and accommodate to change. At this point, school culture is of vital importance. The school culture, which affects and guides the behaviours of the entire school population positively or negatively, may become a point of support or a big obstacle in front of change.

Gunter (1997) reflects the belief that everything changes. Her premise is that there are so many variables affecting all aspects of life that change is not only inevitable; but also it is unpredictable. Organizations have to adapt to changing conditions in order to survive. It is not that easy for organizations to adapt to the changing conditions; they face a variety of resistance.

Changes that took place in science and technology caused important changes in education as in many other fields. There have been important changes in contents and presentation of curricula, process of management, teaching and learning and the roles of educational leaders. Schools and educational organizations have to keep pace with the changes in order to achieve their aims. It is necessary for everyone in schools and educational organizations to participate in the change process for effectiveness and improvement. However, when looked today's educational organizations it can be seen that change process cannot be managed as it must be and there is resistance to change and as a result it results in failure.

It is essential to study different attitudes of different stakeholders towards the change and transformation practices in order to accomplish change initiatives successfully. Understanding the school culture correctly and realizing the importance of basic beliefs, values, and assumptions, which are the most important elements of the school culture, in achieving the change will help develop a broader perspective and think sophisticatedly for comprehending complex relations in the school, determining the obstacles in front of change, and settling problems.

## SCHOOL CULTURE AND CHANGE PROCESS

Studies support the argument that in order for successful reform to occur, practitioners must establish a culture of change (Sarason, 1996; Hollins, 1996; Hampel, 1999; Ancess, 2000). Understanding the school culture is an important factor in any change and reform attempt (Hinde, 2004). Understanding school culture can help us to use "a broader framework for understanding difficult problems and complex relationships within the school" (Stolp, 1994). The school culture either enhances or blocks change. The culture of each school drives everything that happens at schools. By understanding school culture deeply, how school evolves towards continuous improvement can be understood. Finnan (2000) states that success or failure of reform efforts depend on whether brought reform model is compatible with the culture of the school or whether it is supported by the majority to a large extent.

It is crucial to have a closer look on what the literature say on culture before exploring school culture. Culture is defined in Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (1994) as: (1) the growing of a particular crop, (2) the act of developing by education and training, (3) refinement of intellectual and artistic taste, (4) a particular form or stage of civilization (5) expert care and training, and (6) the customary beliefs, social forms, and materials traits of a racial, religious, or social group.

Organizational culture is composed of values, beliefs, assumptions, ceremonies, celebrations, symbols and stories that form the identity of the organization (Balci, 2002; Çelik, 2002; Hoy & Miskel, 1991; Şişman, 1993, 1994; Finnan, 2000). Schein (2000) defined culture by stating "culture usually refers to how people feel about the organization, the authority system, and the degree of employee involvement and commitment" (p. xxiii). Yukl (2006) purported that "A major function of culture is to help us understand the environment and determine how to respond to it" (p. 291). According to Bush (1995), culture refers to the "values, beliefs and norms of individuals in the organization" and is "manifested by symbols and rituals rather than through the formal structure of the organization" (p.29). Fidler, Russell and Simkins (1997) describe culture as "the distinctive way in which organization members go about their work and relate to each other in a particular organization" (p.35). In addition, Sergiovanni (2000) stated:

Changing a culture requires that people, both individually and collectively, move from something familiar and important into an empty space. And then, once they are in this empty space, they are obliged to build a new set of meanings and norms and a new cultural order to fill up the space. (p. 148)

Culture is the "substantive attitudes, beliefs, values and ways of life that members of an organization, or a subgroup within it, hold in common" (Hargreaves, 1997). Culture influences all aspects of schools, including such things as how the staff dresses (Peterson & Deal, 1998), what staff talk about in the teachers' lounge (Kottler, 1997), how teachers decorate their classrooms, their emphasis on certain aspects of the curriculum, and teachers' willingness to change (Hargreaves, 1997). In fact, as Donahoe (1997) states, "If culture changes, everything changes"

It is very difficult to define school culture although it is the most common and comprehensive element of the schools (Hinde, 2004). School culture can be defined as the historical patterns that include the norms, values, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, traditions, and myths understood by members of the school community (Stolp & Smith, 1994). Peterson (2002) also defines school culture as the underlying set of norms, values, beliefs, rituals, and traditions that make up the unwritten rules of how to think, feel, and act in an organization. Phillips (1993, n.d.) characterizes school culture as the "beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that characterize a school in terms of: how people treat and feel about each other, the extent to which people feel included and appreciated, and rituals and traditions reflecting collaboration and collegiality."

Geertz (1973) has made a large contribution to our current understanding of the term. For Geertz, culture represents a "historically transmitted pattern of meaning." Those patterns of meaning are expressed both (explicitly) through symbols and (implicitly) in our taken-for-granted beliefs. A review of the literature on school culture reveals much of Geertz's perspective. Deal and Peterson (1990) note that the definition of culture includes "deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed over the course of [the school's] history." Heckman (1993) reminds us that school culture lies in "the commonly held beliefs of teachers, students, and principals." These definitions go beyond the business of creating an efficient learning environment. They focus more on the core values necessary to teach and influence young minds. Peter Senge (1990) stressed that the future is always changing, and different images of the future will continue to evolve. The principal who adapts a vision as new challenges occur will be more successful in building a strong school culture (Senge, 1990). The culture, which is often the unspoken word within an organization, is powerful. It influences not only the actions of the school population, but also its motivations and spirit. Deal and Peterson (1990) state that it shapes how they interpret hundreds of daily transactions. This deeper structure of life in organizations is reflected and transmitted through symbolic language and expressive action. Culture consists of the stable, underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behaviour over time (p. 7).

At the present time, humanity is going through the biggest and fastest change ever. This change manifests itself in structures, mentalities, practices in different fields, and thus educational organizations and schools. This is because; knowledge and the ways of accessing the knowledge change. The changes and variations in social life, technology and the tools used took place over many years in the past. However, they are observed and experienced in one year, one month, or even one day at the present time. This situation requires schools to keep pace with the change.

According to Başaran (1992), a change refers to a quantitatively or qualitatively observable difference (in comparison to the former form[s]) in the constituents of a whole or in the relations of such constituents with one another. Economic, social and political developments and scientific research findings affect and force societies to change. The accommodation of an organization to change is essential for ensuring the effectiveness of the organization and increasing the job satisfaction of personnel in the short term, improving the accommodation of the organization to its environment in the medium term, and enabling the organization to continue its existence in the long-term (Özdemir and Cemaloğlu, 2000).

In a school culture, the need to change arises as a result of the efforts to accommodate to the internal and external environments of the school. The change of a school administrator is an important factor that affects the change of the school culture. Other factors forcing the school culture to change are the change of organizational philosophy of the school, the development of new values and norms, and the determination of new strategies and policies (Çelik, 2002).

Schools are affected by the changes occurring in their environments directly or indirectly. They have to prepare themselves for these changes. Bursalıoğlu (1987) argues that the system of education, which affects and is affected by economic, political and social systems, fulfills the function of ensuring the continuance of a nation socially, economically and culturally through educational organizations, and that schools have a special position obliged to ensure the socialization of children, transfer the culture of society to them, enable the generation which it cultivates to accommodate to the political structure of the society, bring to light the young people who have leadership abilities, and cultivate qualified work force. It becomes necessary (in terms of their goals and functions) for educational organizations to perform innovative practices in accordance with their own structural characteristics and the expectations of their environments, teachers, parents, and students (Çalık, 1997). It is impossible for educational organizations and schools which aim to change human behaviors positively not to be affected by the process of change. If the educational organizations that take on the task of spreading culture fail to keep pace with changes and innovations, the societies affected by these organizations will fall behind the innovations (Can, 2002). The achievement of any change and any innovation at schools depends on the degree to which employees do their best and identify themselves with the school culture. If new approaches are regarded as short-term fast solutions to the perceived problems, they will have a superficial effect on a couple of participants alone. Thus, not a satisfactory effect will be achieved. In this regard, the important question is, "How do schools ensure long-term and permanent success in the process of change?"

If a school is to be the centre of change for continuous innovation, teachers need to be participatory in creating and maintaining the change across the school besides the efforts they make in their classrooms (Senge, 2000). There are some obstacles preventing teachers from being participatory and willing. Berman and McLaughlin (cited by Sarason, 1996) found out that the term of employment in teaching profession had a negative impact on the process of change. The longer this term is, the less possible it is for the change to improve student achievement and for the project to achieve its goals. In addition, it was determined that it is less likely for the teachers with a long term of employment to change their old habits and practices. Another factor having a negative effect on the process of change is that teachers have a tendency to teach students in the same manner as they were taught in the past (Sarason, 1996). A change which teachers are unfamiliar with will most probably face a resistance (Hinde, 2004).

Basic assumptions are the most critical cultural components in realizing a change at schools. Basic assumptions must not be immutable or hinder progress. Changing the school culture depends on whether or not it is possible to alter the basic assumptions which govern and mould values, ways of thinking, styles of administration, paradigms, and approaches. If not, change will remain highly unlikely. For instance, if people cling to the assumption that change has never benefited them (and will never do so in the future), it will not be possible to facilitate change successfully, even if all other obstacles are to be removed. School culture makes change easy or prevents it (Schweiker-Marra, 1995). For the realization of change, reform and assumptions of the school must be in the same direction with each other (Sarason, 1996; Finnan, 2000).

#### **ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING SCHOOL CULTURE**

Reform and change efforts require a very large cost and also lead people to spend their time and energy in that direction. The cause of the failed reform efforts in implementation processes were investigated by

many researches. It was seen that reasons ranging from the school principal's being an obstacle, the lack of support in the region, changing population of the school have been effective in the failure of these reform efforts (Tyack & Cuban 1995; Sarason, 1996; Fullan&Hargreaves, 1996). This kind of blocker reasons uncovered by research findings are mostly visible and distinguishable forms part of the iceberg. Finnan (2000) states that the change in school covers organization change, more importantly, it covers the exchange of employees within the organization. Each individual in the school has assumptions shaped by their values and behaviour and that shape them. Bozkurt (2000) states that assumptions direct values, beliefs and norms of organizational culture. These assumptions and the interaction of values and behaviors determine the responsibilities that person will take willingly to change the school. Participation to school reform efforts requires people to take on new responsibilities willingly and this participation is only possible if these new responsibilities are compatible with the values and assumptions of individuals (Finnan, 2000).

Finnan (2000) described five underlying assumptions that influence the success or failure of reform efforts. She defines assumptions as things that are taken for granted and are accepted as truth. The assumptions that Finnan (2000) described are: (1) Assumptions adults (Managers, teachers, workers and parents) hold for students, (2) Assumptions about leadership and decision-making, (3) Assumptions about roles and responsibilities of adults, (4) Assumptions about best practices and structures for educating students, (5) Assumptions about the value of change.

With respect to the first set of assumptions, while some school cultures adopt assumptions of that students would behave responsibly if given the opportunity and they would made efforts to learn (Wasley, Hampel& Clark, 1997), some school cultures adopt assumptions of that students are irresponsible and needs to be checked (Fine, 1991 &McQuillan, 1998 cited from Finnan, 2000), In the case of the first assumption concerning expectations adults have for students, do the adults in a particular school assume that all students have gifts, talents, and abilities, and that they are people worthy of respect (Hansen & Childs, 1998)? Or, rather, do they believe that students require instruction in basic skills before they can master higher-level skills? How do they feel about youth in general and their ability to learn? The answer to these questions determines whether or not certain reform models will be effective. (Hinde, 2004).

In the second series of assumptions which relate to leadership and the decision-making process, the supervisors must note whether the school supports democratic participation and joint decision making or a dictatorial and authoritarian leadership style. In schools where principals make the majority of decisions (to the exclusion of employees and families) it will not be very easy to realize a change. In the opposite scenario, i.e. in schools where employers and other individuals participate in the decision making process, it will be possible to implement the reforms successfully (Hinde, 2004). If the school in question has a principal who believes that he must make all the decisions and who disregards the opinions of his colleagues, there will be a fundamental contradiction in terms of joint decision making and democratic participation and any efforts towards change will be inevitably abortive.

The third series of assumptions relate to the roles adults play in the schools (administrators, teachers, employees, and families). Is it presupposed that adults are willing to take responsibilities in order to improve the education of students? Is it presupposed that the employees have an impact on their colleagues and students? Is it presupposed that the role of the school principal is to create an atmosphere of learning (Peterson and Deal, 1998)? At schools where teachers lack the necessary skills (and thus are ineffective in terms of decision-making and working with students), it will be in vain to expect the desired degree of success from the practices which presuppose an adequate level of skill in teachers and a considerable level of confidence in all employees. In unmasking the culture of the school and in predicting whether or not the efforts towards change will be successful, understanding these assumptions which concern the roles of the adults is of paramount importance.

Assumptions as to which structures and practices are ideal in the education of students comprise the fourth series. The structures in question are about procedures and ceremonies. The structural dimension of these assumptions concerns how school procedures and ceremonies organize time and space in accordance with student needs, e.g. how breaks and lunch breaks are structured according to the educational and developmental needs of the students (Finnan, 2000). For example, an assumption such as "in order to ensure discipline, 7th and 8th year students must not have lunch break together with other students" would give strong hints regarding the overall culture dominating the school.

Assumptions regarding the best practices generally concern the methods and techniques used by teachers. Do teachers use the methods appropriate for the educational needs of students? Does collaborative learning exist? How much time do teachers devote to preparing tests (Hinde, 2004)? These kinds of questions will reveal to what extent school culture and the reforms to be implemented are harmonious with each other.

The value attributed to change is at the heart of assumptions (Finnan, 2000). If the general attitude towards change is positive in the school and if there is a predominant belief that change will bring about improvement, it will be possible to start the reform. However, if there is a negative attitude towards change owing to previous unsuccessful experiences (which is the case in our country), if people avoid and fear of change, then any attempts for reform will face strong resistance from the very beginning. People who hold such thoughts cling to the assumption that "if previous changes have done nothing but worsened our condition, why should present and future changes yield positive results?" At schools of this sort, people usually believe that problems originate not from themselves but from the incompetence of others. This is because efforts towards change are either state-based or regional and, again as in our country, are far from reflecting and answering the needs and demands of that particular school – which is to say they are imposed from outside. If such efforts towards change are accepted by employees, in other words, if the assumptions are oriented towards the acceptance of change, it will be easier to commence and perpetuate the reform attempts. For example, if teachers can free themselves from the *idée fixe* that their habitual methods are necessarily the best and if they happen to be amiable towards innovation and reforms, this means that they comprehend the value of change.

These assumptions are of great importance in terms of determining the culture of a school. In order to realize a change at a particular school, it is imperative that the assumptions of the school be harmonious with the assumptions of the model of change. At this point, assumptions about the value of change are the subject of research in this study.

## CONCLUSION

Successful organizational change ease with planned change initiatives that aim corporate culture and integrate this culture with change process, but this raises a problem: In order to understand the culture of an organization, hidden elements of the culture, that is, hidden beliefs and assumptions must be uncovered. This hidden beliefs and assumptions shape cultural elements such as behaviors and visible organizational structures and processes and therefore affect results of the change in the organization (Hall, 1997). These assumptions are tacit understandings that are rarely brought to the fore in school cultures (Hinde, 2004). The key to successful organizational change is the unspoken beliefs and assumptions of the organizational members about the organization and the world, that is, tacit culture. Wilkins and Patterson (1985 cited from Hall, 1997) states that the cause of the failure of many change efforts is that they don't address the tacit culture. The power of beliefs and assumptions, that is tacit culture stems from the fact that they affects behaviors of the people although they are not aware. Schein (1999) states that assumptions form the basis of the organizational culture and successful change can't be realized if these assumptions aren't addressed.

The most significant reason that is invisible behind the failure of various change attempts is the disregard for the assumptions and beliefs which comprise the hidden culture of the schools and the subsequent inability to understand whether this culture is harmonious with reform attempts. In order for any kind of change to be efficient, it is imperative that the assumptions of the reform model be compatible with the culture of the school (and, by extension, with the assumptions which shape and mould the school culture in every aspect).

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