An analysis of the relationship between the organizational culture and the performance of staff work groups in schools and the development of an explanatory model

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This article analyses the concept of organizational culture and the relationship between the organizational culture and the performance of staff work groups in schools. The article draws upon a study of 12 schools in Wales, UK, which despite being in disadvantaged settings have high levels of pupil attainment. A model is developed linking the organizational culture of the staff group to performance as measured by pupil attainment using the conceptual analysis and the interpretation of the research findings. In the model, organizational culture, as a root metaphor, is defined by the organizing metaphors ‘productive’, ‘strong’ and ‘highly inclusive’. The absence of substantial subcultures, the head teacher’s leadership and reflective practice are important influences on the overall organizational culture and play a part in linking organizational culture and performance. In the model, the organizational culture underpins practices that bear directly on the primary task which is in itself of considerable cultural importance. The primary task has two dimensions. The first is concerned with optimizing current teaching for learning and the second with improving future teaching for learning. A task of this kind, its cultural significance and an organizational culture that underpins work on the task are likely to lead to high performance.

Introduction

Academics and practitioners in leadership and management continue to be interested in the notion of organizational culture. The concept is valued for organizational analysis purposes (Martin 2002) and the right organizational culture is considered to be a requirement for high levels of organizational performance (Cameron and Quinn 1999). In the UK, the organizational culture of public sector institutions, including state-funded schools, is considered to be important because of government efforts to secure performance improvements (Fergusson 2000, Newman 2001, McLoughlin et al.)

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The concept of organizational culture

Organizational culture is a notoriously complex and problematic concept. It is unclear whether culture ‘resides’ in the world external to individuals or in their internal worlds, whether the nature of organizational culture is best described as a set of internal/external objects or internal processes, and whether organizational practices (structures and processes) are to be included in notions of organizational culture.

Smircich (1983) was the first to distinguish between organizational culture as a variable and organizational culture as a shared, subjectively construction in the mind, a distinction which is grounded in two contrasting world views (Hatch 1997). Those who hold the former view, realists, claim that there is an objective, measurable and real social world external to the individual. Organizational culture viewed from this perspective becomes, ‘another critical lever or key by which strategic managers can influence and direct the course of their organizations’ (Smircich 1983: 346). Arguably, the realist view of organizational culture dominates in the literature, certainly in the managerialist literature. So, culture is described as: how we do things around here (Fullan 2001); the agreed rules that govern cognitive and affective aspects of organizational membership (Kunda 1992); and as a way of ensuring that organizational members identify with organizational goals (Brown 1998). These depictions portray a notion of cultural rules where organizational culture is used as a means of management control. For those who maintain that organizational culture is simply a construction of the mind, nominalists or relativists, culture is a means of representation. It is a
metaphor, or more precisely a root metaphor, which Alvesson (2002: 19) defines as ‘a fundamental image of the world on which one is focussing’. It is thus a subjective phenomenon. A root metaphor contrasts with an organizing metaphor which frames a more limited part of the reality captured by the root metaphor (Mangham and Overington 1987). In practice, managers and academics tend to work with both the ‘culture-as-a-variable’ and ‘culture-as-a-metaphor’ perspectives (Alvesson 2002).

The notions of meaning, interpretation and symbolic significance are important in understanding organizational culture as a concept (Frost et al. 1991, Alvesson 2002). Meaning refers to how objects (artefacts and utterances) are interpreted, which shapes our relationships with them. A symbol is an object that stands ambiguously for something else or more than something else (Cohen 1974). Symbols must be interpreted to grasp what they represent. Culture from this perspective becomes a process of interpretation and importantly a collective process which takes place in ‘a shared frame of reference of beliefs, expressive symbols and values’ (Alvesson 2002: 5). This frame of reference reflects Schein’s analytical frameworks which analyses organizational culture at three levels:

(1) Artefacts—the visible organizational structures and processes.
(2) Espoused values—the strategies, goals and philosophies.
(3) The basic underlying assumptions—the unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings (Schein 1992).

Interestingly, however, Schein’s framework does not distinguish between culture and practices and the social structure created by practices through structuration (Giddens 1979).

Organizational practices are likely to be influenced by beliefs, symbols, values and assumptions, regardless of whether they are conceptualized as objective or subjective phenomena. Similarly, they will be influenced by the interpretation of artefacts, values and underpinning beliefs. Moreover, practices, especially those with cultural meaning and significance are likely to influence beliefs, values and assumptions thus creating an interplay between organizational culture and structure. Culture then elides into being ‘a way of life’ as Ricoeur, Williams and others have suggested (McCarthy 1996) and organizational culture becomes ‘the way we do things round here’ (Deal and Kennedy 1982) where the notions of culture and practice merge, with organizational culture becoming synonymous with organization. Culture then becomes what an organization is, as opposed to what an organization has. We would argue that this conceptualization of organizational culture is widespread in the analysis of schools as organizations and school culture and unhelpfully so.

The leadership and management of organizational culture

The view that managers can create and manage organizational culture was prevalent in the 1980s and that view has persisted (Cameron and Quinn 1999). So, leaders have been assigned various culture-related roles such as
interpreters and managers of meaning (Smircich and Morgan 1982) and builders of organizational culture (Kunda 1992, Barth 2002). Transformational leaders are considered to be especially powerful in influencing organizational cultures in educational settings (Firestone and Louis 1999, Leithword et al. 1999, Barth 2002), a view supported by education policy makers in the US and the UK (Curry et al. 2005). The capacity of leaders and managers to influence organizational culture is however open to question. Alvesson (2002: 108), whilst recognising a role for positional leaders in culture building, argues that ‘culture forms leadership rather than the other way round’ with cultural norms and beliefs informing and influencing the actions of those in formal leadership positions. The notion of distributed leadership (Spillane et al. 2001, Spillane 2006), where leadership becomes an organizational property reinforces Alvesson’s point. The values, beliefs and assumptions that underpin distributed leadership as an organizational property will represent a cultural influence on the practice of those in designated leadership positions.

Despite this emphasis on leadership, the literature also suggests (rightly in our view) that organizational culture is influenced by factors other than the practice of those in leadership and management positions, designated or otherwise. In educational settings, teachers’ professional values and codes, which may include shared values, a focus on student learning, de-privatized practice, reflective dialogue and a commitment to collaborative working (Little and McLoughlin 1993, Louis et al. 1996) are important cultural influences (Firestone and Louis 1999). If the organizational culture of the staff work group is a socially constructed phenomenon, its development will take place over time within a social environment. The temporal context—the history and traditions of the institution—is thus an important influence on staff work group culture. Any school and therefore the staff work group is part of a broader set of communities so there are also spatial cultural influences. In educational settings, parents and pupils will interact with the institution in varying ways, and will have expectations and experiences which will have cultural influences (Louis and Miles 1990). All institution-environment interactions are likely to influence the organizational culture of a school staff work group.

Sub-cultures and variations in culture across an organization

Sub-cultures and cultural variations in an organization will affect the overall culture. Uniform organizational cultures are rare, especially in large differentiated organizations (Gregory 1983, Sackman 1992) including schools (Firestone and Louis 1999). The presence of sub-cultures is less likely when there is a high level of social interaction in the organization, experience that is shared, similarity of personal characteristics, group cohesion, physical isolation and the experience of a crisis or threat (Trice and Bayer 1993). Moreover, different professional groups may have their own distinctive cultures (Hinshelwood and Skogstad 2000) which add variety to work group cultures.
Organizational culture and performance

The popularity of the notion of ‘culture’, at least in management discourse, owes much to the supposed link between (a strong) organizational culture and (high levels of) organizational performance. In the 1980s, a number of accounts stressed the connection in work organizations generally (Deal and Kennedy 1982, Peters and Waterman 1982, Kilmann et al. 1985) and in schools specifically (Deal and Kennedy 1983). The justification of the culture–performance link was largely the result of the then high performance of Japanese companies which was attributed to their cultures (Ouchi 1981, Pascale and Athos 1981). The rationale was that unitary, deeply held and consistent cultures facilitated goal alignment, engendered high levels of employee motivation and enabled learning from the past (Dennison 1990, Kotter and Heskett, 1992). This supposed organizational culture–performance linkage initiated a fascination with using culture change to improve the performance (see, for example, Dennison 1990, Kotter and Heskett 1992 and Bate 1994). For this reason, there was a similar interest in culture change in schools (Dalin et al. 1993, Stoll and Fink 1996, Deal and Peterson 1999).

Since the 1980s, the link between a strong organizational culture and high levels of performance has been challenged. Some of the high performing exemplar companies studied by Peters and Waterman (1982), which had strong cultures, ran into difficulties. A number of high performing Japanese companies failed and the strong organizational cultures of others were found to be authoritarian, exploitative and oppressive (Morrison 1998). Brown (1998) critiques the explanation for the strong organizational culture–high performance link on a number of counts. First, the goals to which the strong culture is aligned may not be ethically sound or helpful in achieving high performance. Second, strong cultures may not motivate organization members and indeed may have the opposite effect. Third, organizational culture is historically formed, which may lead to an inappropriate interpretation of present problems and/or an excessive concern with past successes instead of the resolution of present problems. Fourth, determining a causal link between strong organizational cultures and performance is problematic. High levels of performance, which are perhaps attributable to factors other than culture, may shape or consolidate cultures. Thus the causal relationship may run from performance to culture rather than from culture to performance, or may indeed be interactive and dynamic. Fifth, those seeking to establish a uni-directional culture–performance link do not acknowledge sufficiently that most organizations have many sub-cultures rather that one single culture.

Alvesson (2002) argues that much of the writing on the organizational culture–performance link can be criticized on the grounds of premature normativity, trivialization and managerialism. Premature normativity reduces a ‘good culture’ to simplistic notions. Trivialization over-emphasizes selected parts of culture that contribute to particular organizational outcomes such as competitive advantage, as exemplified by the work of Kilmann et al. (1985). Managerialization confuses a firm’s culture with its management ideology; the work of Peters and Waterman (1982) is a good
example. The quick fixes promised by such analyses do not materialize in practice and changing organizational culture can be very difficult (Weeks 2002). All these points lead Alvesson (2002: 69) to assert that: ‘There are no recipes for success that can just be copied and applied without consideration of time and space’. Gray (1990) similarly warned against the unthinking application of the characteristics of effective schools to improve a school’s educational outcomes.

A key part of the organizational culture–performance link is of course the concept of performance. The notions of organizational effectiveness and performance are contested and open to interpretation (Scott 1992) and the organizational culture may itself shape the idea of organizational performance. It is here that the concept of the primary task, which originated in group relations theory, can be useful. The primary task is what an organization must do to survive, that is, to continue and to carry on (Rice 1963). Although an apparently rather simplistic concept, especially given the complexities facing many institutions including schools, it can be a valuable heuristic device. For example, consideration of the primary task facilitates the analysis of: sequences of activities; the comparative value of different organizational models; and organizational practice (Miller and Rice 1967). Importantly, from a systems theory perspective, an organization that works on a primary task which leads to outcomes that meet the needs of the environment is likely to be successful (Miller and Rice 1967). Work groups may have a tendency to withdraw from the normative, given primary task because of the difficult feelings often associated with it (Zagier Roberts 1994). This withdrawal may be manifested in vague task definition, undue consideration of methods rather than what the methods are to achieve, or defining the task in a way that does not prioritise one system over another.

**Organizational culture and performance in schools**

In the literature on organizational culture and effective schools, various terms are frequently used synonymously with culture, such as atmosphere (Halpin and Croft 1963), ethos (Rutter et al. 1979) and climate (Mortimore et al. 1988). These terms are often used interchangeably and with little consideration for accuracy of meaning or appropriateness (Solvason 2004, Glover and Coleman 2005). Over time, definitions of ‘school culture’ have loosened. Moreover, school culture is typically considered from a realist perspective; for example, Hargreaves (1995), Deal and Peterson (1999) Stoll (1999), McMahon (2001) and Glover and Law (2004).

Performance in schools is usually depicted by the adjectives ‘effective’ and ‘improving’. An effective school is generally accepted to be one in which students progress further than might be expected from a consideration of its intake (Mortimore 1991) and an improving school is one that increases its effectiveness over time (Gray et al. 1999). There is a conceptual distinction to be made between low/high performance, which is an absolute measure of student attainment that takes no account of contextual factors such as the socio-economic disadvantage, and under/over performance, which is a lower/
higher level of performance than would be expected when contextual factors are taken into account. Although the definitions of effectiveness and performance of schools as organizations are contested (Morley and Rassool 1999), student attainment does provide a basis for considering the organizational performance of schools and staff work groups. This is especially so when pupils reach very high levels of attainment in schools in very disadvantaged settings, given the typical negative correlation between pupil attainment and socio-economic disadvantage (Teddlie et al. 2000). In addition, to pupil performance in standard tests, in the UK other sources such as the information contained in school inspection reports can give a broader sense of organizational performance.

**The empirical base**

Our empirical base is the case study of 12 primary schools in Wales, UK. All the schools were recommended by their local authorities as performing well and all had recently received a favourable inspection report from Estyn, the school inspection service in Wales. In each of the previous three years, the schools had been in the upper quartile of all the schools in Wales for the percentage of their pupils attaining the Key Stage 1 and/or Key Stage 2 benchmark standard in mathematics, science and English or Welsh. All the schools were thus high-performing in absolute terms. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals (FSM) over the preceding three years was used as an indicator of socio-economic disadvantage. Across the sample FSM entitlement was 24% to over 50%. All the schools were thus in the upper third of the range of socio-economic disadvantage (Welsh Assembly Government 2005). The sample is described in Table 1.

The overall intention of the research was to analyse how schools enabled the pupils to reach high levels of attainment, particularly given the high level of socio-economic disadvantage experienced by the pupils, and to develop reasons why such practices were successful. Data collection sought to identify practices, and importantly the rationales for those practices. In each school, data were collected from pupils, parents, support staff, teachers, senior staff and the head teacher using semi-structured interviews and group discussions. The chairs of the governing body and/or governors were interviewed in each school. In Wales, the governing body takes general responsibility for the conduct of the school, promotes high standards of educational attainment; sets targets for pupil achievement; oversees the budget, monitors the curriculum and takes part in staff appointments. We also analysed a range of documents, including policies, inspection reports and development plans. During the visits, numerous transactions and informal meetings were observed. Typically, pupils were interviewed in groups and parents were interviewed in a similar manner. Support staff, teachers and senior members of staff were interviewed both individually and in groups, sometimes with the head teacher present and in some instances more than once. The head teacher was interviewed individually, typically several times. The chair of the governing body and governors were interviewed individually.
Table 1. A summary of the main characteristics of the schools studied. In Welsh medium schools, pupils are taught solely or mainly through the medium of Welsh. In non-Welsh medium schools, Welsh is taught as a second language only. CP = community primary (maintained by the local authority); VAP = voluntary aided primary (maintained jointly by the local authority and in this case the Roman Catholic church). FSM is the free school meal entitlement bands in the previous three years: 4 = 24%–32% of pupils; 5 is more than 35% of pupils

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>No. of pupils</th>
<th>Welsh medium</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>FSM band</th>
<th>Location and description of the area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3–11</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>CP</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>A slate quarrying town in north Wales where employment opportunities are limited. The local community is ‘economically poor’ (Head teacher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3–11</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>CP</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>A group of small former quarrying villages in north west Wales. ‘An area of low incomes and low expectations’ (Head teacher).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>3–11</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>VAP</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>The poorest area of a town in north Wales. Most of the pupils live locally. Family incomes are low and male unemployment is high.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>5–11</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>CP</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>A small former mining village in west Wales. There is substantial disadvantage in the local community. ‘Only a very small percentage of children come from professional backgrounds’ (Chair of governing body).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>7–11</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>CP</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>A very disadvantaged area near a large town in south Wales. Drug abuse is a problem locally, and male unemployment is high. ‘Only one pupil is from professional family’ (Head teacher).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>3–11</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>CP</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>A school close to a large town in south Wales. The catchment area is mixed but predominantly disadvantaged. ‘Low pay rather than low employment is the problem’ (Head teacher).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>3–11</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>CP</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>A semi-urban area in the south Wales valleys serving disadvantaged former mining communities near the school. There is a significant drug abuse problem locally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>3–11</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>CP</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>A former mining village in the south Wales valleys. The local area is ‘economically OK but it’s a struggle’ (Head teacher). The children have ‘restricted experience’ (Head teacher).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>5–11</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>CP</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>A former mining village south Wales. The socio-economic context is ‘grim’ (Head teacher) with very low employment; extensive social problems; widespread drug abuse and unstable parent/carer relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>3–7</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>CP</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>A village in south east Wales. Very few parents have professional occupations or are skilled workers. For those in employment, ‘the rates of pay are pitiful’ (Head teacher).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>3–11</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>CP</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>A large city in south Wales. Employment levels are low in the local community and there is a high dependency on social security benefits. The pupils are ‘socially and materially disadvantaged’ (Teacher).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3–11</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>CP</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>The centre of a large city in south Wales. Incomes are low and unemployment high locally. The level of parenting skills has ‘taken a dive in the last 10 years’ (Deputy head teacher).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data from each case were analysed and emergent themes identified. The cross-case analysis identified themes that consistently recurred in all the cases. The interpretation of the practices and the underpinning rationales for them gave insights into the organizational culture and, in particular, the deeper cultural levels articulated by Schein (1992) which are the espoused values and the basic underlying assumptions.

The findings

In reporting the data, we have focussed on the consistent themes that are relevant to our focus, the link between organizational culture and performance, in order to lay the ground for the development of a model. We outline the nature and significance of the primary task, our use of organizing metaphors to characterise the organizational cultures of the staff work groups, the cultural uniformity in the staff work groups, the importance of reflective practice, and the influence of the head teacher.

The nature and significance of the primary task

Across the data set, the primary task of the staff groups was clearly evident. From the data, we have synthesised a common definition: ‘ensuring effective and enriched teaching for learning for all pupils and improving and further enriching teaching for learning for all pupils’. This primary task has two dimensions, one of which is concerned with optimizing current teaching, the other with improving future teaching. In addition, there are two elements to each dimension. One element is concerned with effectiveness (as measured by pupil attainment in national tests) and the other with enrichment (teaching that was varied, motivating and stimulating). The two dimensions meant that present teaching was optimal—as good as it could be—and that future teaching would probably be better.

The primary task was highly meaningful to the staff groups; it was a very significant goal for them. Within the groups there was a collective and shared understanding that their work on the primary task would make a difference to the lives of the pupils, many of whom were experiencing considerable social and economic disadvantage. The members of the staff groups were highly motivated by their work on the task. It was as if the defining of the primary task—explicitly or implicitly—was itself powerfully influenced by the values, beliefs and taken for granted assumptions that were prevalent in the staff group. There was widespread valuing and validation of the task by the members of the staff groups themselves, the pupils and very importantly by key external stakeholders such as the pupils’ parents. Importantly, the structures, processes and strategies focused on enabling practices that would achieve the primary task. There was a basic underlying assumption that the work of the staff group was to achieve the task. In itself, the primary task had cultural significance.

The key point here is that if the espoused values and the unconscious basic assumptions underpin practices that bear directly on a work organization’s
primary task, which has both current effectiveness and future improvement dimensions, then high levels of performance are likely. A culture–performance link may be established. However, the high levels of performance that result from improving practice may reinforce a particular kind of culture because successful performance validates particular cultural features. They are deemed to be right because they bring about the accomplishment of a valued and significant primary task. Thus organizational culture and high levels of performance are linked through practices that bear on the primary task, but the link may be best characterized as an interplay not a uni-directional, causal phenomenon.

The organizing metaphors

We use the term ‘organizational culture’ as a root metaphor and the organizing metaphors ‘productive’, ‘strong’ and ‘highly inclusive’ are then used to characterise the cultures of the staff work groups.

Productive organizational cultures

At all levels the espoused values and underlying assumptions are related directly to the significance and accomplishment of the primary task. Moreover, there was a widespread shared understanding of these values and assumptions in the staff groups. We have thus used the organizing metaphor ‘productive’ to depict the organizational cultures.

In particular, the cultural rules shaped teaching practices which ensured that the pupils performed well in national tests and were motivated to learn. This teaching for learning was central. The head teacher of School C was clear that the high level of pupil performance ‘all comes down to teaching in the classroom’. Praising and celebrating successful work on the primary task by the staff featured prominently. The head teachers were central in this regard. The staff of School B agreed in a group discussion that the head teacher ‘was always encouraging and supportive’. So too were the governors. The head teacher of School I described the chair of the governing body as ‘ready and willing to praise’. The teachers created and took advantage of opportunities to enhance and enrich their teaching. There were numerous examples of visitors to the schools such as members of the local community, dance groups, bands and poets. In every school, the staff group provided educational experiences for the pupils beyond the confines of the school and a wide range of extra-curricular activities. The head teacher of School L explained the reason for this practice very simply: ‘Our view is that if we don’t give these opportunities, nobody does, it doesn’t happen’. New technologies were widely used to enhance teaching. The staff groups had very high expectations of pupil attainment. The head teacher of School I used the epithet ‘no lids on kids’ to describe the staff group’s desire not to put any limit on pupil attainment. The head teacher of School N adamantly eschewed the use of benchmarking data: ‘When pupils leave school, no one will be interested in whether their school had lots of pupils who had free
school meals. So we’ve got to make sure they get as good qualifications as everyone else, if not better.’

The processes, strategies and underlying beliefs also framed the staff groups’ engagement in practices that were intended to improve pupil attainment, to enhance pupil motivation and to further enrich the pupils’ educational experience – the second element of the primary task. For example, in all cases, self-evaluation and classroom monitoring processes were in place and were highly valued. School development plans were important in all the schools and appeared to have symbolic significance: ‘It is the spine of the school’ (head teacher of School M). Professional development activities that were intended to improve teaching practice were similarly highly valued and engagement in them seemed to be a natural part of the work; it was assumed that they would take place. The members of the teaching staff were ready to engage in initiatives that would bring about improved practice.

Strong organizational cultures

The members of the staff groups had very strong educational values and beliefs. Secure, durable and consistent teaching and organizational strategies were valued. The head teacher of School J was clear: ‘No fancy new methods here, the traditional ones work for us.’ Professional development sessions for the staff work group took place regularly and frequently ‘without fail’ as the head teacher of School G put it (his emphasis) as if reinforcing a cultural norm. There was a persistent and relentless commitment to the work. As two teachers in different schools said, ‘We must keep going’ (School B) and ‘We will not let these kids down’ (School I) (their emphases). In particular, there was a relentless determination to meet the needs of all pupils with learning difficulties. ‘We never give up’, said a teacher from School A, typical of many. There appeared to be high levels of trust in the staff work groups; it was a term used often by respondents. High levels of trust probably strengthened the organizational culture. The cultures of some of the staff groups appeared to be further strengthened by being Welsh medium schools, a designation which was valued by the staff and used as a rationale for particular ways of working. In one case, being a voluntary aided school (jointly maintained by the local authority and the Roman Catholic Church) was considered important in underpinning and justifying particular teaching and organizational practices.

Highly inclusive organizational cultures

Cultural symbols emphasised inclusion and collectivity and underpinned highly inclusive and collaborative teaching and organizational practices. Classroom assistants and nursery nurses were included in the staff groups and attended professional development sessions for the teaching staff. Those connected with the schools, for example, parents and members of the local community and the schools’ wider communities, were all viewed as having a role in supporting the work of the staff group on the primary task. Work by
the staff group was clearly a collective endeavour from the way it was talked
about and through other symbols. For example, respondents typically used
the term ‘we’ when describing the practice of the staff group, shared lesson
plans were the norm and professional development sessions were group-
based. This collaborative approach was highly valued. The head teacher of
School J felt that the teaching staff had ‘collaborative strength’. It was as if
he was making explicit an important value. Despite our efforts during inter-
views and observations, we could find no evidence of organizational splits or
excluded groups or individuals, quite the opposite. Interactions seemed very
affirming and constructive. The parent of a pupil in school H felt that ‘the
staff were always positive’ (his emphasis), an approach which was wide-
spread in the different schools. Generally, the staff we spoke to were good
humoured and cheerful. A pupil in School E when asked why the pupils did
well in the school said simply that it had ‘happy teachers and happy pupils’.

Important influences on organizational culture

Cultural uniformity in the staff work groups. The cultures of the individual
staff work groups appeared to be relatively uniform, especially in those
aspects that directly influenced work on the primary task. This apparent
absence of sub-cultures may have various explanations. First, the staff
groups were relatively small organizations, which may have limited the
development of sub-cultures and enabled a single positional leader—the
head teacher—to significantly influence cultural symbols. Second, many of
the schools had a high proportion of female staff which may have restricted
the development of contrasting male and female sub-cultures. Third, there
was extensive collaborative working which may have helped to develop a
shared set of values and beliefs. Fourth, there was a very high level of inclu-
sivity in the ways the staff groups in the schools worked which may have prevented
the development of sub-groups. Fifth, new staff was selected care-
fully and typically on the basis that ‘they would fit in’ (head teacher of School
G). Sixth, the socialisation process was robust and newly appointed staff
were expected to conform. ‘The staff are very helpful when you’re new but
they are uncompromising’ (teacher in School H). Finally, the widespread
acceptance of, commitment to, and interpretation of, the primary task and
the shared interpretation of it may have supported the development of
cultural uniformity within the staff groups.

Reflective practice. The ways in which the members of the staff group
reflected upon all aspects of their work with a view to improving it was an
important feature of the prevailing mindset. Reflection in action (Schon
1983) enabled teaching and organizational practice to be optimally appro-
priate—‘getting it right in the classroom’ (head teacher of School M). By
reflecting on their practice (Schon 1983), the staff were able to consider the
appropriateness and effectiveness of it with a view to improving it. There
were numerous systems and processes in place, such as regular and frequent
professional development sessions, that enabled this reflection on practice to
happen collectively by the members of the staff group. Joint working shaped
the norms for reflection in action and facilitated reflection on action. Thus reflection in action ensured that current practice was optimal and reflection on action enabled learning from and improvement on current practice. This learning from current practice through reflection supports the notion of interplay between practice and performance. Certain practices may be adopted to bring about high levels of performance. Equally, high levels of performance may reinforce the use and promote the adoption of certain practices.

The leadership of the head teacher. A final important influence was the apparently substantial role of the head teachers in setting and reinforcing the organization cultures of the staff work groups in the schools. In different ways respondents referred to the head teachers’ considerable experience, expertise and authority. They appeared to represent and embody the cultural values of the staff of the school and were thus very important cultural icons in the minds of staff group members. Thus their values and assumptions which underpinned their practice could be depicted metaphorically as productive, strong and highly inclusive—the same organizing metaphors that we have used to characterise the organizational cultures of the staff work groups. So, the primary task was significant to the head teachers. ‘The children deserve the best’ as the head teacher of School G put it. The deputy head teacher of School I spoke glowingly of the head teacher’s ‘utter dedication’ to the work of the school. A teacher in School B felt that the head teacher ‘gives time and commitment, takes trouble and makes an effort’. The head teachers clearly believed in being highly inclusive in the way they worked. There were numerous examples of collective decision making and head teacher’s efforts to involve pupils, parents and the wider community in the work of the school. During a discussion of the way change is managed in the staff group, a teacher in School L said that the head teacher ‘always makes sure we’re all on board’.

The inter-relationship between organizational culture and performance and the development of a model

The analysis of the notion of organizational culture and performance in the first part of the paper, and the subsequent interpretation of the research outcomes illustrate a number of issues that may help to establish a link between organizational culture and performance of the staff work groups.

The primary task is significant in linking organizational culture and performance. The members of the staff groups in these schools had a very clear sense of their primary task and we have synthesised a common definition of it. Importantly, the primary task has two dimensions: (1) ensuring current optimisation; and (2) ensuring future improvement. From a theoretical standpoint and from our empirical study, we would argue that clarifying the primary task, ensuring that the primary task has both current optimisation and future improvement dimensions and
making sure that cultural symbols shape practices that bear directly on
the primary task are central in establishing an organizational culture-
performance link. This link is likely to be strengthened when the primary
task is meaningful to organization members and when the interpretation
of the primary task is widely shared by organization members and vali-
dated by key stakeholders.

The organizational culture–performance link will be enhanced by
reflective practice. It both enables optimally appropriate work on the
primary task through reflection in action within cultural and practice
norms, and improvement in practice again within cultural and practice
norms through reflection on action. The link will also be enhanced by
cultural uniformity, providing the organizational culture underpins prac-
tices that bear directly on the primary task. The head teachers’ role as
cultural icons and their leadership practice—representative symbols—also
play a part in influencing the culture of the staff work groups. A model
which depicts the inter-relationship between organizational culture and
performance is shown in Figure 1.

Discussion

In reflecting on the analysis and in particular the model we have developed,
a number of salient points which we raised in the literature review need to
be revisited.

The first point is the truism that organizational culture is complex and
cannot be easily understood. However, in the model and in our analysis, we
make a distinction between organizational practices and organizational
culture and take the view that culture as something an organization has
rather than something an organization is. We consider this standpoint to be
helpful analytically although we recognise that the nature of the boundary
between organizational culture and practice is a matter for further consider-
ation and analysis.

Secondly, the link between an organizational culture of a particular
kind and high performance is problematic as we asserted at the outset.
The connection is complex, although the model we have developed does
elucidate the relationship and makes clear that culture does not of itself
determine performance. A significant feature of the relationship between
organizational culture and performance is reflective practice, in which
practice that relates to performance is interpreted and adapted in relation
to the context and cultural influences and developed over time. In addi-
tion, incorporating the primary task into the model helps to establish a
link between culture and performance. Including the primary task in the
model is particularly important given the likely cultural significance and
meaning of the task in educational settings. For a variety of important
reasons, the model incorporates the role of the head teacher as a factor in
establishing an organizational culture that will lead to high performance.
However, the leadership and management of the head teacher is only one
factor. As we assert earlier in the literature review sections, there are other
important factors.
Thirdly, the influence and contribution of sub-cultures to the whole organizational culture is problematic. It is debateable whether the organizational culture of any staff group in a school can ever be unified and uniform. It is likely that there will always be sub-cultures of some kind. However, as we argue earlier, high levels of inclusion are likely to reduce the potential for organizational splits and the development of sub-groups each with their own culture. The use of ‘highly inclusive’ in the model as an organizing metaphor
for the root metaphor of ‘organizational culture’ addresses this issue and is therefore important.

Four final matters are worthy of consideration. First, we are conscious that the study we are drawing on in this analysis was undertaken in a part of the UK that following devolution in the UK in 1999 is now responsible for its own education system. Nonetheless we would argue that the issues the analysis addresses are significant to educational systems internationally and the schools within those systems. The link between the culture of staff groups in schools and their performance is a widespread and significant concern and the analysis is likely to have implications for practitioners and researchers in educational leadership in other very different settings.

Second, the findings point to an interplay between organizational culture and performance, rather than a unidirectional causal relationship. Organizational culture can underpin practices which are successful in achieving the primary task. Equally, successful accomplishment of the primary task may promote the development of a particular kind of organizational culture and reinforce particular practices. This interpretation explains our use of the arrows from performance back to culture and practices in Figure 1. Exploration of this interplay between culture and performance could be the focus of future research. In terms of the application of these findings however, on balance we would argue that schools with under-performance and ‘culture problems’, are more likely to improve their performance by working more directly on the primary task than explicitly attempting to change the culture. Of course, developing such a focus on the primary task is in itself a culture change but regardless, work on the primary task is likely to have a direct impact on performance. Both the task focus and the improved performance that will probably result are then likely to change the organizational culture.

Third, it is easy to load too much into the concept of organizational culture. This overloading can occur if organizational culture is seen as both the symbols, meanings and interpretations and the practices that are framed by such symbols, meanings and interpretations. We would argue that the conflation of symbols, meanings and interpretations and practices has been an unhelpful feature of much of the literature on culture and school performance. The boundary between the two sets—culture and social practices—is of course unclear, if only because some practices, particularly those of the organizational leaders, may be symbolically and thus culturally, significant. Moreover, there is interplay between organizational culture and social interaction and in a theoretical sense we would argue the two are inseparable. Nonetheless, for the concept of organizational culture to be of value in explaining the performance of staff work groups in schools, the boundary and the interplay between culture and practice needs to be considered and clarified. Again, this clarification could be addressed in future research.

Fourth, while snapshots of schools as organizations of the kind we are drawing upon here may be of value in establishing the nature of the link between culture and performance, longitudinal studies may complement and further illuminate this relationship. Such studies could for example examine
the ways in which staff groups in schools adapt to contextual changes over time in order to sustain an organizational culture and practices that maintain and improve performance. We are also conscious that our data collection processes may have missed important organizational processes within the staff groups such as the activities of organizational sub-groups which have particular sub-cultures that were hidden from us. Nonetheless, this study does point to ways of establishing an organizational culture–performance link which intuitively managers and indeed many academic feel should be there. It also forces us to recognise the complex and dynamic nature of the relationship between organizational culture, a nebulous, slippery, though real concept, and performance, a contested notion, and to warn against making easy and unwarranted statements about the link between the two.

References


