School Culture

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Abstract: The influence of school culture on the smooth operation of the school unit has been the subject of extensive study for many researchers abroad, while of particular interest has been noted in Greece in recent years. The research interest was developed around the operation and the way in which the school unit can develop those positive actions that will lead it to upgrade the content of the education provided to the students, but also to the improvement of the educational conditions for the teachers. This paper will describe the concept of school culture, the changes it can bring to the school unit, the role of the principal, teachers and students in shaping it as well as the positive results it can produce. The elements of the school culture that can contribute to the quality upgrade of the provided education and the school environment will be presented.

Key words: school culture, principal's role

The internal and relational-dynamic organization of the school units feeds with undiminished interest the studies that examine those factors which highlight the education provided and the general conditions in which the educational process develops. Researches claim that school culture is an important factor, which shapes those particular characteristics, which compose the image of each educational organization.

Elements of culture are referred to all the material and intangible, animate or inanimate elements of a school unit. Even the image of the building itself that houses the school unit is a presumption of the school culture. The respect shown by the educational organization to the building that houses it and consequently to its human resources, reflects and specifies its characteristics (Dimitropoulos, 1999).

If a definition is to be given to school culture, we would say that culture means the common orientations that hold the organization together as a unit and give it its own separate identity (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). Specifically, it refers to issues that are accepted by all members of a school unit (the principal, teachers, students, parents) and that are closely related to them, as they also acquire a different identity from the members of another school unit. It is a model of basic assumptions, which has been tested enough to be considered valid and is therefore taught to new members as the right way to perceive, feel and think about these problems (Schein, 1985). According to Mintzberg, culture is the ideology of the organization, which includes its perceptions and habits to differentiate from other organizations (Hatzipanagiotou, 2008).

Common traditions, values, beliefs, meanings, concepts are believed to be key elements in defining a culture, "they operate unconsciously and define in a basic way the organization's view of itself and its environment" (Schein, 1985). On the other hand, the expression of a culture is the common symbols, celebrations and rituals,

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such as the established gatherings, the diplomas' award ceremony, the use of school uniforms, etc. (Katsaros, 2008).

Katsaros (2008) in the framework of the program "Training of Education Management Executives" of the Pedagogical Institute distinguishes four elements that characterize the model of organizational culture:

- The *structure of the organization* is a material reflection of the culture of the organization and the wider society.
- The *purposes* that reflect the culture of the school, the core values, beliefs, traditions and the ways which all these ones are expressed, but at the same time they are considered to be a means to form a strong culture.
- *-Relationships with the external* environment are viewed as an interactive process, where the environment is the key source for many of the values and beliefs that are conjoined to form the culture of an educational organization.
- In the context of these approaches, the *principal - leader* has a key role in creating and supporting the core values and beliefs that shape the school culture, but also in the dissemination of these values in the local community.

But culture is not made up of individual elements, but of a combination of external and internal elements. On the one hand, the external elements refer to the space, the aesthetics and the facilities it provides. It could be the architecture of the building, the equipment, the uniform (Raptis & Vitsilaki, as cited in Hatzipanagiotou). On the other hand, internal elements are the core of culture, they have to do with human relationships and emotions. They are the ones that form attitudes and patterns of behavior among the members of the organization (Hatzipanagiotou, 2008).

According to Schein (1985) there are three levels of culture:

- Norms (artifacts): are the unwritten informal expectations, as expressed through the visible structures and processes of the organization (e.g., support to colleagues, avoidance of criticism of the director).
- The espoused values and beliefs are the strategies, goals, philosophies according to the wishes of the members of the organization (e.g., trust, cooperation, intimacy, teamwork).
- The basic underlying assumptions, are the unconscious, abstract beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings of the members of the organization about human relationships, human nature, truth, reality, environment.

Naturally many of the above characteristics move in the realm of the specific. But there are also assumptions that move to the limits of the abstract and are accepted as self-evident truths. For example, the truth is determined by the most experienced, as a proposition it is valid and applied to many school units. But it is not something that can be proven nor does it mean that it should always be applied as a rule. In a volatile environment, truth is something that can take many forms.

As for the importance of culture, Robbins (1991) has written that it creates boundaries in the organism, so that they can be distinguished from each other. It provides a sense of identity. It facilitates the development of commitment to the team. It increases the stability in the social system. It is a connecting link that holds the body united. Finally, the most important thing may be the fact that culture provides the fitting levels of behavior.

The culture is not the same in all school organizations. The social environment of the organization, its internal structure, but also the actions of the leader principal can impel the organizational culture to a specific direction, which will "strengthen" some values and patterns of behavior. Culture is directly related to the

management of human resources, with the human relationships that develop, but also with the communication between the teams of the organization. The strengthening of the stability of the organization, which is one of the functions of the culture, is achieved by the formation of stable behaviors and attitudes by the members of the organization, which will stress the trust and cohesion of the organization (Hatzipanagiotou, 2008).

The powerful culture emerges where there are many common values, a common sense of purpose among the teachers of the school unit. Also, when behaviors and practices converge; when there are common learning practices that lead to school improvement; when there is a common sense of responsibility for students' learning; when there are strong working relationships among members of staff; when emphasis is placed on the professional development of teachers; when there is recognition of teachers who work hard and come up with new ideas. The powerful culture contributes substantially to school improvement initiatives (Leith, 1996).

Nevertheless, a powerful culture does not always have beneficial effects on the educational organization in times of great change because it is ingrained, and prevents adaptation to new situations that arise (Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Robbin, 1993). An effective powerful culture must be characterized by its ability to adapt to new conditions.

The negative weak culture is characterized by the absence of a common purpose. Staff and students are isolated. There are groupings and the creation of groups that operate subversively defending their own minor interests. There are negative expectations, both for the development of the school unit and for the development of the students. Responsibilities are laid on others, especially on those that act outside school. Finally, the most important thing is the work for teachers is formal and perfunctory and not substantive. It is characterized by feelings of mere fulfillment of an obligation and not by creativity and willingness to offer.

According to Hoy & Miskel (2008) the culture of most organizations is characterized by seven key elements:

Innovation: the degree to which employees are creative and take risks for their choices.

Stability: the degree to which activities reinforce a stable regime in the organization, rather than cause subversive changes.

Attention to detail: the degree to which there is an interest in accuracy and detail.

Outcome orientation: the degree to which management is interested in the results of the activities.

Human resources orientation: the degree to which administrative decisions take into account the human factor.

Orientation to the team: the degree of cooperation and teamwork of the members

Combativeness: the degree to which members of the organization compete and create.

The school culture influences the educational organization itself and is that which will lead it either to innovation and growth, or to a standstill and decline. Determining the school culture of an educational organization is a complex process. Stoll and Fink (1996) came up with four types of school units with different cultures: the evolving school, the school that moves forward, the school that struggles to survive, and the school that sinks.

Rosenholtz (1989), earlier, had examined schools with two diametrically opposed cultures. The moving and stuck schools. According to Cameron and Quinn, the culture of an organization is determined by the values and assumptions that shape an organization's performance. They distinguished four types of culture:

1) The hierarchical culture emphasizes stability, control, predictability and harmony. The goal of the organization is to operate within the traditional bureaucracy, where control is exercised internally and the focus is placed on the effective operation of the organization.

2) The market culture is determined by stability, diversification, control and the effort to adapt and respond

to changes in the environment, so that the organization can survive the competition. Also, survival means expectation for victory and success in achieving the goals of the organization. The market culture is common in private schools.

3) The culture of company focuses on basic values such as the cooperation, the participation, the cohesion and the dedication. The purpose of the organization is good interpersonal relationships and usually the culture of company is found in rural school organizations.

4) The culture of conditions seeks discernment, creativity, risk. The organization aims at the development of new products and services and the undertaking of innovations is typical of the organization (Hatzipanagiotou, 2008).

However, the principal is responsible for the procedures. He is mainly responsible for the school climate, because he is the one who determines the interpersonal relationships and determines the operation of the school. He is the one who represents the school in its relations with society and is the responsible administrative agent.

The school climate refers to the special atmosphere of a school. For example, if it is friendly, hostile, competitive. What's more, it refers to the nature of relationships among people at school. Relationships between teachers, between the principal and the teachers, between the teachers and the students, but also between teachers and parents.

The climate greatly affects the mood of teachers to perform their duties. It has an effect on the availability of teachers for their educational work but also the general productivity of teachers in terms of achieving their goals and generally the performance of their work. In an open organizational climate, the principal supports the teachers. There is a low degree of guidance. Teachers work harmoniously with each other with a high sense of professional responsibility.

In a closed environment, the manager directs more and sets limits. It neither encourages nor supports teachers. Regarding teachers, they are distinguished for their indifference and isolation.

In the climate of distancing, the principal does not restrict or direct the teachers. Teachers show a low degree of cooperation and intimacy with each other.

In the climate of active engagement, the principal is more directing and setting limits. It does not encourage or support teachers. Teachers on the other hand are united, engaged in their educational work and the students, indifferent to the behavior of principals.

The role of the principal shapes the school climate and consequently the school culture. He bears the responsibility if the school is driven to isolation, perpetuation of bad practices and state of inactivity. The instability and uncertainty of the environment make it indispensable for the school to have a flexible structure, as well as a flexible and adaptable leadership (Katsaros, 2008). Referring to the education leaders, he points out: "…they must show a high level of mental and technical skills related to the purpose of the training. These skills must be complemented by a high level of emotional intelligence, like skills of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management". Highlighting the leadership skills, major for the leadership in education, he emphasizes, among other things, on the:

- Shaping the future, creating a vision, connecting with the "daily routine", promoting "change-innovation";
- Development of a collaborative culture/development of all;
- Development of a sense of responsibility, development of responsibility and co-responsibility of all;
- Management of the organization, development of structures, strategies, culture, systems;

- Empowerment of school community, parents, local community, monitoring, management of changes and pressure of the environment, correlation of education-society.

The Principal of School Units should be characterized as an orchestrator of special skills, since the role he plays is highly regulatory and decisive and is the one that ensures the most efficient operation of the school. Every Principal has a unique complex system of bodies that he must orchestrate, orient, inspire. The effectiveness of the school will depend on his own actions, on his own initiative or even on his own failures. It is a centralizing and demanding role. The culture of an organization, such as school that remains open and at all times reality is shaped by the actors operating in and around it, must have the ability to process the new data that arise daily and process them directly so that its objectives can be formed quickly and efficiently.

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