Culture of school improvement: Exploring its existence and effectiveness

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Abstract: This study seeks to investigate the existence and effectiveness of various forms of culture of school improvement in a secondary school. This school was selected as, it was labelled as a low performing school. Quantitative research design was employed for this study. The teachers were the participants, who voluntarily completed the School Cultural Elements Questionnaire. The findings suggested that out of six, culture of school improvement, only two existed and were positive. The other four did not exist or were very weak. The outcome could be helpful for the administrators of school for uplifting their school culture. There are limitations associated with the finding, as this study just concentrated on a single school, future studies can include more schools from the district.
Keywords: school culture, culture of professional values, culture of emphasis on learning, culture of collegiality, culture of collaboration, culture of shared planning, culture of transformational leadership

INTRODUCTION

Organizational culture, perhaps, is one of the essential elements influencing the performance of an organization. Organisations such as, schools could address low performances through awareness and promoting positive school culture. To begin, literature has defined organization culture in many ways. Kreitner [1] stated that organizational cultures are the myths, beliefs, values, stories, rituals and languages shared and narrated by the members of the organization. Similarly, organizational culture is 'the "personality" of an organization that guides how employees think and act on the job – is central to the values, beliefs, inter-personal behaviours, and attitudes to stakeholders that determine how the organization does its job' [2 p. 1]. Tharp [3] claimed that culture is 'considered the "glue" that holds an organization together and for others, the "compass" that provides direction'(p. 2).

Culture is vital for an organization, as it offers uniqueness to the organisation [4], is a key factor in acquiring the objective and drawing and maintaining needful workers, maintain a good public image, and acquiring a decent relationship with the stakeholders [2]. As well as, culture of an organization highly influences its various decisions and actions [3]. In addition, it influences the stability, cohesion, unity and adoption to reforms of an organization [5].

Schools have their own form of culture and probably it influences the stakeholders associated with them. In fact, college culture influences how academics, college directors, students, and alternative college actors students, and other school actors operate schools into meaningful and actionable practices [6-7]. Consequently, organisational culture of a school is closely related to its performance [8] .

A positive school culture would be desirable for any school. Some positive school cultures are linked to student and teacher motivation, student educational accomplishment, teacher job satisfaction, commitment, and collaboration and school community building [5]. Apparently, obtaining a positive school culture would be possible through effective leadership. Research affirmed that the positive school culture is influenced by strong principal and teacher leadership and is also highly dependent on school social structures [7].

Indeed, school culture is vital and is one of the essential elements influencing performance. It is paramount to delve into the culture for school improvement and measure its existence and the ways to improve the cultures. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the existence and effectiveness of various forms of culture of school improvement. The outcome of this study would be significant to the principals, administrators and the teachers. This would assist the principals, administrators and teachers to understand the stance of school culture. As well as, this may provide the administrators a method to assess their school culture. Finally, the outcome of this study may provide administrators the area for improvement in their school culture.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

This study was focused on a secondary school in a district of Fiji. This school is operated by a school

management committee and administers the facilities, but the major funding is provided by the Government of Fiji. The school atmosphere seemed to be friendly, inviting and formal. The classrooms are decorated with students' artwork and projects. The school has facilities, such as, science labs, home economics lab, industrial arts workshop and computer lab.

In addition, the school has 20 teachers, three auxiliary staffs and 360 students. The teachers in the school are trained and are employed by the Ministry of Education. Majority of the students in this school is from a farming background and most of them have financial difficulties. 270 students receive transport assistance vouchers from the Government of Fiji. It is an initiative of the Prime Minister of Fiji to provide transport assistance vouchers for the students facing financial challenges.

On the contrary, this particular school is labelled as a 'dumping ground' by the majority of teachers and the community. This metaphor describes that the community has a mental image of this school as a lower grade school where all failures and low achievers are enrolled [9]. Perhaps, there must be some issues within the school or with the administrators or within the teachers which has given school such a unique name. There are many questions one could

ponder upon, however, there is no research in this district to answer those questions.

AIM

This study seeks to investigate the existence and effectiveness of various forms of culture of school improvement.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the teachers' perceptions towards various forms of school culture of improvement?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework this study utilizes is culture of school improvement. The School Cultural Elements Questionnaire (SCEQ) was very helpful as a means of collecting a wealth of quantitative data on the existence of school culture. To conceptualize school culture the following literature was used. Neville [10] analysis of school culture and effectiveness, Samier [11] study on administrative ritual and ceremony, Shapira-Lishchinsky and Rosenblatt [12] study on positive school climate, Sweetland and Hoy [13] study of spinning the truth in school and Kuen [14] three approaches to understanding and investigating the concept of school culture and school culture phenomena. These six studies perceived to be relevant in building the conceptual framework for culture of school improvement.
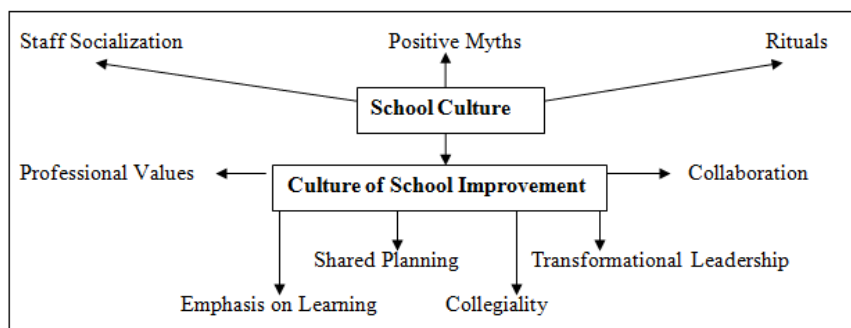
Fig-1: Conceptual Model of Culture of School Improvement

The literature suggested some of the strong positive school cultures;
- Safe and caring environment in which all students feel welcomed, valued and have a sense of ownership of their school [15]
- Staff have a shared sense of purpose, where they pour their hearts into teaching (Emphasis on Learning) [6- 16]
- The underlying norms are of collegiality, improvement, and hard work (Collegiality) [6-16]
- Opportunities for staff reflection, collective inquiry, and sharing personal practice (Collaboration) [16]
- Rituals and traditions celebrate student accomplishment, teacher innovation and parental commitment (Rituals) [6-15]

- Staff and students have a voice, and shared responsibility for solving issues and making choices that have an effect on the school surroundings and their common life (Transformation Leadership) [15]
- Effectively partnering with parents to support students' learning and character growth [15]
- Success, joy and humour abound [6]

METHOD

This study utilizes quantitative research design. Creswell [17] claimed that quantitative research is all about explaining phenomena by assembling numerical information that are analysed using mathematically based strategies notably statistics. The quantitative research survey is aimed specifically at

converting teachers' perception that do not naturally exist in quantitative form into quantitative data. These attitudes obviously do not naturally exist in quantitative form. However, a questionnaire was utilized that requested teachers to rate a number of statements as either strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree or strongly disagree, and give the answers a number (e.g. 1 for disagree strongly, 5 for agree strongly). This provided quantitative data on teachers' attitudes towards school culture.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The data were collected using a closed ended self-completion questionnaire which has been developed by Cavanagh and Dellar [18] the School Cultural Elements Questionnaire (SCEQ). The SCEQ comprised of teaching staffs' perceptions of the prevailing culture and contains 42 items to measure the six aspects of school culture: professional values, emphasis on learning, collegiality, collaboration, shared planning, and transformational leadership. These items were already classified into six aspects of school culture. The response for the items were 5-points Likert scale from strongly agree (score = 5) to strongly disagree (score = 1). SCEQ was selected for this study, since this instrument is suitable to measure the effectiveness of school culture and could be utilized for school improvement.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were teachers from a secondary school in a district, who voluntarily completed the questionnaire which was used for this study. This particular school was selected as, this school was regarded as a low achieving school. The participants were professionally qualified teachers with a teacher's certificate from the teaching institutes, Fiji National University, University of the South Pacific and University of Fiji. Two teachers have completed master degree in educational leadership and two teachers have completed postgraduate diploma in educational leadership from University of Fiji. There are 20 teachers in the school and only 16 teachers completed the questionnaire. This represented 80% participation from the school teachers.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analysed by first classifying the statements (items) into following six categories professional values, emphasis on learning, collegiality, collaboration, shared planning, and transformational leadership. Each statement (item) from the questionnaire was checked, where an asterisk (*) occurs, the score of that particular item was reversed. That is 5 = 1, 4 = 2, 3 = 3, 2 = 4 and 1 = 5. Items 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 21, 23, 25, 28, 35, 40 and 41 scores were reversed. The mean for each category was calculated. The mean greater than or equal to 4 depicted strong and effective culture, mean of 3 to 4 would depict weak and ineffective culture and a mean less than 3 would depict culture does not exist. The findings were tabulated.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

This study adhered to the highest possible ethical and professional research code of conduct. Initially, the permission was granted by the principal of the school. The participants were informed regarding the research and the aim of the research. Also, participants were informed that they are free to withdraw in case they felt uncomfortable. Finally, the participants were requested not to write their names on the questionnaires.

In addition, all the data obtained in this research were presented accurately. None of the data was omitted that would have affected the analysis of findings. The schools and the participants' identity were kept undisclosed. The participants' confidentiality is kept safe. Finally, the questionnaires were kept safe and no one except the researcher will have the access.

FINDINGS

The School Cultural Elements Questionnaire (SCEQ) was completed by 16 teachers of the school. Four teaching staff were absent during this session. The teachers were expected to circle their perception on a 5-points Likert scale from strongly agree (score = 5) to strongly disagree (score = 1). The table below shows the response of teachers for the category professional value.

Table-1: The results from The School Cultural Elements Questionnaire (SCEQ) for professional value category

Item Number	Question	Total score	Mean
1	Students are not provided with the skills needed for future educational or vocational experiences	64	4
7	Educational programs don't contribute to improving the quality of life in our society	66	4.12
13	The creative potential of students is not realized.	58	3.62
19	I have a clear understanding of how I can contribute to realising the future vision for the school.	75	4.69
25	Individual differences between students are not catered for.	50	3.13
31	I work towards achieving the school vision.	72	4.5
37	Improvements in student achievement are rewarded.	68	4.25

The data presented in the table 1 above shows item 1, 7, 19, 31 and 37 has a mean greater than four. These items seemed to strongly exist in this school.

Items 13 and 25 have a mean between 3 and 4, implying weak culture. Overall, the culture of professional value implied to be strongly existing.

Table-2: The results from The School Cultural Elements Questionnaire (SCEQ) for emphasis on learning category

Item Number	Question	Total score	Mean
2	I am proud to be an educator.	75	4.7
8	I spend time in personal reflection about my work.	62	3.87
14	Developing the social skills of students is important	78	4.88
20	Teachers learn from each other	78	4.88
26	I am receptive to advice from colleagues about my teaching	73	4.56
32	We believe that every child can learn	75	4.69
38	I still find new ways to improve my teaching.	74	4.63

The data presented in table 2 above shows the items from category emphasis on learning. Item 2, 14, 20, 26, 32 and 38 has a mean of greater than four, implying strong culture. Item 8 has a mean between three and four, implying weak culture. The overall score for this culture is 4.63, implying this as a strong culture in this school.

Table-3: The results from The School Cultural Elements Questionnaire (SCEQ) for collegiality category

Item Number	Question	Total score	Mean
3	Teachers have an understanding of how to support each other	63	3.9
9	Teachers are reluctant to share problems with each other.	42	2.63
15	Teachers do not make an effort to maintain positive relationships with colleagues.	59	3.69
21	My professional decisions are not usually supported by colleagues	52	3.25
27	We are willing to help each other when problems arise.	73	4.56
33	We always encourage each other to exercise our professional judgments	70	4.38
39	We encourage each other to take responsibility for new projects	69	4.31

The data in table 3 above represented items from category collegiality. Items 27, 33 and 39 have mean greater than four implying strong culture. Items 3, 15 and 21 has a mean between three and four, implying items are weak. Item 9 has a mean lower than three, implying the item do not exist in the school.

Table-4: The results from The School Cultural Elements Questionnaire (SCEQ) for collaboration category

Item Number	Question	Total score	Mean
4	Items for discussion at meetings always come from the same people.	48	3
10	There is little debate in meetings.	32	2
16	We work together to implement the decisions of meetings.	65	4.06
22	We frequently discuss what should be taught in particular curricula or courses.	58	3.63
28	Teaching methods and strategies are not discussed sufficiently	55	3.44
34	We often compare how we assess student achievement.	67	4.19
40	Student behaviour management strategies are not discussed sufficiently	54	3.88

The data in table 4 above represented items from category collaboration. Items 16 and 34 have a mean greater than four, implying strong culture. Items 22, 28, and 40 have a mean between three and four, implying weak culture. Items 4 and 10 have a mean of less than of equal to three, implying these items do not exist.

Table-5: The results from The School Cultural Elements Questionnaire (SCEQ) for shared planning category

Item Number	Question	Total score	Mean
5	Expressions of the school's future vision do not reflect staff consensus	56	3.7
11	We have not developed a common vision for the school's future.	62	3.88
17	We do not gather data for gauging the success of school programs	54	3.38
23	We do not always evaluate the success of existing school programs	52	3.25
29	We have identified ways of determining if school priorities are achieved	68	4.25
35	Teachers are not unified in working towards the school's future vision	53	3.31
41	Teachers have not implemented school priorities	58	3.63

The data in table 5 above represent items from category shared planning. Item 29 has a mean of greater than four, implying strong culture. Items 5, 11, 17, 23, 35 and 41has mean between three and four, suggesting weak culture.

Table-6: The results from The School Cultural Elements Questionnaire (SCEQ) for transformational leadership category

Item Number	Question	Total score	Mean
6	The principal and deputies are the most influential members of the staff	35	2.19
12	The school administration does not encourage others to take control of new projects.	59	3.69
18	The principal and deputies do not encourage the professional growth of teachers.	68	4.25
24	Members of the administration show a genuine concern for me as a person.	57	3.56
30	The principal and deputies give teachers sufficient "space" to get on with their work.	70	4.38
36	Members of the administration generate a personal commitment from teachers that ensures the success of innovations.	66	4.13
42	The persistence of successful innovations is assisted by visible ongoing support from the administration.	64	4

The data in the table 6 above represent items from transformational leadership category. Items 18, 30, 36 and 42 have a mean greater than four. All these four items seemed to strongly exist in this school. Items 12 and 24 has a mean between three and four, implying weak culture. Finally, item 6 has a mean less than 3, implying item do not exist in this school.

DISCUSSION

This study seeks to delve into the existence and effectiveness of various forms of school culture which perhaps are beneficial for the school. The focus of the study was on the teachers' perception of the six different forms of culture of school improvement. A closed ended self-completion questionnaire which was developed by Cavanagh and Dellar [18], the School Cultural Elements Questionnaire (SCEQ) was utilized to collect data from the school teachers. This section would discuss the findings, according to each culture of school improvement.

CULTURE OF PROFESSIONAL VALUES

The findings implied that students are provided with the skills needed for future educational or vocational experiences. Also, educational programs contribute to improving the quality of life in our society. It was illustrated that teachers have a clear understanding of how they can contribute towards the vision of the school and the teachers are also working towards achieving the school vision.

However, the findings suggested that the creative potential of students is not realized. Probably, the teachers are really engrossed in preparing students for examinations and not enough attention or time is given to develop students' creativity. Moorefield-Lang [19] claimed that the creative potential of students can be enhanced through the use of arts in our school classroom.

In addition, the finding implied that the individual differences between students are not catered for and often slow learners are left behind. As described in the literature the slow learners struggle to cope with the academic demands of the regular classroom and have difficulty in writing, reading and mathematics [20].

CULTURE OF EMPHASIS ON LEARNING

The culture of emphasis on learning seemed to exist and was strong. Six out of seven items seemed to be strong. The findings illustrated that most teachers are proud to be an educator and regard developing social skills of students as vital. Also, the finding suggested

that teachers learn from each other and teachers are receptive to positive critique from the colleagues. In addition, teachers believe that every child can learn and always adapt new ways to improve their teaching.

Nevertheless, the findings implied that teachers do not spend time in personal reflection about their work. Probably, teachers do not have enough time due to heavy teaching hours. Literature suggests that teachers must seek to reflect on and learn from confusing and difficult experiences [21].

CULTURE OF COLLEGIALITY

The overall culture of collegiality seems to be weak in this school. It can be suggested from the findings that teachers do not have an understanding how to support each other and majority of the teachers are reluctant to share problem. Also, findings suggested that the teachers have a poor attitude towards maintaining positive relationship with colleagues and most teachers' professional decisions are not supported by their colleagues. Perhaps, these teachers are mainly occupied with their heavy workload and tend to become individualist.

However, the teachers suggested that they are willing to help each other in difficult times and teachers do encourage each other to take responsibility for new projects.

CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

The findings implied that the culture of collaboration is the weakest culture. The five items from the culture of collaboration are weak and only two items are strong. The findings suggested that teachers work together to implement decision of meetings and assessment methods are also discussed and compared.

Whereas, the findings suggested that only a few teachers speak in meetings and there is very little debate in meetings. Apparently, the teachers are not given opportunity to speak at meetings or the teachers' views are not taken into consideration, thus most teachers decided not to speak. As stated by Shah [22] if teacher's feedback is considered and responded to, then in turn they feel more committed to the school.

Moreover, the findings suggested that teachers do not discuss frequently on the things to teach in particular subjects and the teaching methods and strategies are not well discussed. Also, the teachers do not discuss the student behaviour management strategies. Probably, teachers are not encouraged to work in collaboration and there may not be a forum for discussing teaching methods, strategies and the behaviour management strategies. Wilson and Wells [23] believed that principals can encourage a positive school culture of collaboration and active working

relationship between teachers to enhance classroom instruction.

CULTURE OF SHARED PLANNING

The culture of shared planning implied to be weak. Six items in this school culture are weak and only one item is strong. The findings suggested that teachers have identified ways of determining if school priorities are achieved.

On the other hand, the teachers suggested that school's future vision does not reflect staff consensus and the vision were not developed by the teachers. The findings also suggested that teachers do not gather data to gauge or evaluate the success of any school program. Lastly the findings showed that teachers are not unified in working towards the school's future vision and they have not implemented school priorities.

CULTURE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The culture of transformational leadership implied to be weak in the school. There are three weak items in this category and four strong items in this category. The findings illustrate that the principal and deputies encourage the professional growth of teachers and provide teachers sufficient space to get on with the work. Also, the findings depicted that administration generates a personal commitment from teachers that ensures the success of change and during change the administration fully support the teachers.

On the contrary, the findings suggested that the principal and deputies are the most influential members of the staff. The school administration does not encourage others to take control of new projects. Finally, the members of the administration show a little concern for the teachers. According to Mckinney, Labat, and Labat [24] the administration should develop cooperative relationship amongst teachers, actively listening to teachers, treating teachers and staff with respect, supporting teachers with progressive decisions and giving teachers a chance to grow through professional development.

IMPLICATIONS

This study highlighted some valuable findings and these findings may be useful for improving the culture of school improvement. It seemed that out of six school cultures only two cultures were strong, effective and four cultures were weak and ineffective. These ineffective and weak culture, perhaps, is influencing this particular school and probably the reason it has been labelled as a lower grade school. Culture of professional values and emphasis on learning implied to be strong. The four weak cultures were discovered as collegiality, collaboration, shared planning and transformational leadership. Administrators may

implement procedures to strengthen these weak cultures.

The administrators with the help of teachers may organise programmes to enhance the creative potential of all students. These programmes could be conducted throughout the school year. In addition, the administrators could organize regular staff development programmes where the significance of school culture can be emphasized. Additionally, teachers could be given the opportunity in these staff development programmes to share their problems and can discuss the student behaviour management strategies. Also, these programmes can be used to develop the school's future vision with teachers consensus. Finally, the Head's of Department can organize regular department meetings and could discuss the teaching strategies for enhancing students performance.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study illustrates the value of evaluating teachers' perception towards the school culture. There were noteworthy findings however, this study had some limitations. This study was limited to quantitative study, where only closed ended questionnaire was utilised for data collection. Future research can collect data using qualitative inquiry to delve into school culture in depth. Likewise, this study just concentrated on a single school, future studies can include more schools from the district.

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