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LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT



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Markers of school culture as important factors in shaping educators' attitudes towards an educational change

**Daniela Andonovska-Trajkovska, PhD, Associate professor,
Faculty of education- Bitola, University “St. Kliment Ohridski”-Bitola,
R. Macedonia**

Abstract. Knowing the fact that information can be spread with the speed of light nowadays, because of our civilization's growth and intelligence, we are aware of the need of constant change inside educational institutions in order to stay modern and future oriented. In addition, the majority of the human's society have a tendency to keep things as they are, because they feel safe with known and familiar objects. How can we constantly change ourselves if it is in our nature to resist change? How can school culture shape our behavior and attitudes towards educational change? This paper tries to identify several markers of school culture that ensure safer and more pleasant transition toward the envisioned educational change. Mutual cooperation and collaboration, mutual understanding, open communication and trust are the key factors that are participating in building school culture that will embrace educational change as something that is not threatening, but – something that is expected step towards success and towards the future.

Key words: educational change, attitudes, school culture

Educational change as a necessity

We live in times where everything happens too fast and everyone knows about it, thanks to the globalization as a resulting process of information and communication technologies' development. The societal changes are influenced by the changes that are happening at the global level, and they are reflected in all educational systems that are linked horizontally and vertically and that act as open systems with fluctuant content.

Educational change can address many issues and levels of an educational institution. It can be related to:

- The curriculum (planning, organizing and evaluating the teaching process of all school subjects or selected school subjects, overall plan for specific subject area, lesson plans, teaching content);
- Educational environment (material and technical conditions, environmental issues);
- Process organization (of the teaching process or of the working process that administrative staff is involved into);
- The needed competencies (of the teaching staff or of the administrative staff);
- School culture and school climate,
- Financial issues related to an educational institution;
- The attitudes (of the teachers, of the administrative staff, of the educators) (Andonovska-Trajkovska, 2013, 40)

If we think of a change as a process that is either developmental, transitional or transformational (Costello, 1994), depending on the level of attitudinal changes and the level of structural changes that most of the times are related to the type of ideology that the agents of change have in mind, we can conclude that the developmental change is less difficult to be implemented. Contrary, the transformational change takes many risks related to the outcomes, the resources, but also – to the individuals themselves, which influences the attitudes and feelings towards the envisioned change that needs to take place. If we are talking about the top-down approach, which is usually very well planned and organized, but also – may be very strict, nonflexible and rigid, we may also expect that the professionals that should convey the

change, will resist the process of whom they think that will bring them unsecure future, at least at that point of view.

Educational institutions, especially, state primary schools can be best described with the image *The political arena: school as town meeting*, because knowledge, position and power matters, *but in a sense also as a Temple* because of the stability, coherence and hierarchical structure in terms of Clabaugh and Rozycki (1990). In the process of making decisions, there are many parties involved: ministry of education, educators, administrative staff, parents and the local community.

Ministry of education as representative of the government tries to negotiate the power among many sides involved. The ministry is involved in the decision making process on macro level by preparing laws and all kinds of regulations for all level of education (higher, secondary and primary education) that are related to the procedures of electing academic/teaching staff, enrollment of the students policy, comprehensive education for all levels of compulsory education, educational process and so on. It also plays very important role in connecting the various kinds of educational levels (primary, secondary, high education,...) with the institutions that are dealing with science such as institutes and faculties.

University, as educational and academic institution, has very important part in organizing educational institutions at lower lever, too. University has to carry out the general laws provided by the ministry of education and to make those laws more specific in order to be applied to the needs of the faculties such as number of students, specifying the procedure of enrollment, providing more specific regulations for the educational process, organizing self-evaluation process and so on. University is representative of the scientists and professors, but there are also administrators. The dean of Faculty of education as a representative of the administration that is responsible for following the policy that is presupposed by the ministry of education and university. The teaching and the scientific council is a representative of the professors that are doing educational researches and are teaching. They have a responsibility to take care of the teaching profession and adjust the laws and regulations according to this intent. Students as a group have their own representatives in the teaching council. They actively participate in the process of making decisions about the teaching and learning activities, about the enrollment procedure in specific academic year, self-evaluation process, election of teachers (professors),... Labor market participates as passive negotiator by providing information about the teachers needed to be employed in primary schools. Government, academic staff, administration, students and labor market each are included in the process of negotiation in order to prevail the other participants and to gain more power. In the case of primary education, there are also parents and the local community that have important role in the process of decision making, shaping the image of the school and, of course, participating in developing the school culture.

Many times, people are keen to put blame on other parties in order to defend themselves as a part of their own psychological self-defense system, without taking into consideration the fact that every member in an organization should consider his/her own participation in the process of reaching the previously set goals. There are not isolated cases in which the blame is being put on the principals or even more often to the Minister of education for not succeeding in implementation of a new policy or some educational reform. This is so, because the majority of the changes in education are being set by using the top-down approach, which generates explicit mechanisms of implementation and control, from one side, but on the other side, it is focused on realization of the broader goal, which, many times puts individual specific needs aside. Top-down change does not take place as it is intended originally, at the real spot of happening – the classroom (Elmore, 2004). Therefore, many scholars (Fullan, 1994; Clarke, 1999; Hendry, 1996; Frohman, 1997; Beer, Eisenstat, Spector, 1999) defend strategy that includes integrated approach to the educational change, which puts accent to the

individual powers and abilities to shape the environment by using positive practice, i.e. practice that fully functions in specific context. Agents of change is the main focus of the integrated approach, which presupposes selection of individuals with sufficient knowledge of the process of change, and sufficient will and eagerness to work towards the change by truly believing that that kind of future will bring only success and progress for the individuals and for the organization at the same time. They demonstrate operation of new methods and techniques in a natural and non-violent manner, and doing so, they serve as role models for the rest ones.

In addition, if the schoolteachers function in a safe school climate that depends on the school culture, of course, they would feel motivated enough and eager enough to proceed with what have been set before as part of the educational change. If teachers become familiar with the organizational theory, they might come to a conclusion that schools as organizations are open systems that welcomes many parties to be involved in the decision making process (teachers, principals, school boards – parents and local community, administration staff, policy makers,...). That kind of openness also creates the complexity of actions. Therefore, each person should undertake responsibility in the process of making change in the educational system.

School culture as an entity that functions in schools

School culture is an entity that functions in schools that has unique characteristics based on individuals' vision, beliefs, attitudes and shared values. It is something that coexists with all discourses recognized in an organization and at the same time, it acts as subject, and object of change. "School culture is the shared experiences both in school and out of school (traditions and celebrations) that create a sense of community, family, and team membership." (Wagner, 1996, 41).

School culture as a notion has various definitions, determinations and understandings that are based on various ideologies. All of them still grasp the idea that school culture is complex phenomenon that needs to be analyzed, juxtaposed, synthesized and compared in order to be determined having in mind various perspectives and views. As Nikolaeva points out:

"School culture may exist and it exists, also out of our conscious and active attitudes towards its characteristics and influences. Then, it functions as an objective fact or determination with characteristics that have natural impact on the school events, subjects, processes and activities. Understood as objective determination or a fact, it is self-created spontaneously based on the specific balance among the ones that are building it, formal and non-formal cultural and subcultural elements – rules, stereotypes, traditions, non-formal subcultures, formal group norms and practices and so on." (Николаева, 2013, 126)

There are four types of culture in an organization: clan oriented, adhocracy oriented, market oriented and hierarchically oriented (Tharp, 2005). Clan oriented type is based on the cooperation between workers. They take care of each other, motivate, and support each other in order to achieve organizational goals. This type of organization functions as a family that appreciates the participation of its members. Adhocracy oriented organizations value creativity and taking risks in order to introduce innovation. Market oriented organizations are results oriented. In these kinds of organizations, competition and achievement are recognized and appreciated. Hierarchical organizations value structure that is built upon control, efficiency and stability.

Remarkable is the fact that each of these types of organizational culture works best in specific contexts. In many internationally recognized companies, all of these types of culture can be identified, there for none of this cultural type is said to be most effective and the best option to choose, because it depends on the context and on the mission and vision that an organization has envisioned.

In the primary schools in Macedonia, there is hierarchical oriented type of culture. The school is internal oriented in terms of establishing common goals through a well organized structure that is hierarchically controlled. Stability and control is appreciated and the decision making process is very important to be directed to achieving integration of the organizational parts and to maintain success, stability and trust.

Markers of school culture that ease educational change

According to Wagner (1996) and the Triage survey *The school Leader's Tool for assessing and improving school culture* there are three markers of behaviors that are reflecting the school culture: professional collaboration, affiliative and collegial relations, and self-determination or efficacy. In schools, educators often discuss instructional strategies but not as much as often, they discuss other curriculum issues. They collaborate among themselves in order to prepare schedule for organizing the teaching process. Knowing that the professional collaboration should be on satisfying level, we can freely say that there is no such thing as too much collaboration among professionals. In a school with positive climate, collaboration is key factor for students' and educators' success, i.e. for the school progress. Collaboration among professionals and educators will create a situation of shared leadership in contexts that are integrating educational change. Thus, the more educators collaborate among themselves and share responsibility, the more they will feel educational change as necessity and as ending point, because responsibility, efforts, difficulties, resources, and energy are shared and are appreciated. Fleet, A., Patterson, C. & De Gioia, K., O'Brien, K. & O'Connor, F. (2009) convey a study in order to investigate the effects of practitioner enquiry work in the times of introducing educational change. They prove that the students have most benefits from this approach, but also the practitioners, the classroom teachers, specialists and administrators. The findings "...indicate clearly (Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 1998; Levin, 2007) that teachers are the key component in education, in optimizing children's experience, supporting learning and engagement, providing teaching and creating enriching environments. Therefore in scaffolding excellence, ongoing, respectful, sustainable professional learning opportunities are essential."

The process of sharing of new ideas among the educators should be highly appreciated and valued, because it helps in making closer relations that will result in more effective and more important communication. Many educators collaborate in the frames of the schoolwork, but they also develop friendships that they practice outside work. They meet outside work in order to enjoy each other's company, they are together to celebrate common holidays or other important events. Usually, the common goals, vision and mission, results in developing closer relations among people. The affiliate collegiality will be on satisfactory level if educators in an educational institution tell stories of celebrations that support their organization's values. Celebration as a process of maintaining and shaping school culture is very important, because individuals feel safe, protected and valued when they are object of recognition and they recognize core shared values that integrates them as a community (DuFur, 1998). If they feel that educational change integrates them all as a whole, they will sooner adopt the new strategy or the envisioned change, because they will know that their efforts will be recognized.

As far as efficacy is concerned, educators should seek to define the problems rather than blaming others. Educators should feel safe and empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting for supervisions to tell them what to do. This will encourage bottom-up change as a real change that arises out of the real place of happening and it addresses participants' needs and interests.

John Saphier and Matthew King (1985) point out that there are several aspects of school organization that need to be taken seriously in order to build healthy school culture. Those important areas of influence and the areas that need to grasp leader's attention are as following: collegiality, experimentation, high expectations, trust and confidence, tangible

support, reaching out to the knowledge base, appreciation and recognition, caring, celebration, and humor, involvement in decision making, protection of what's important, traditions, and honest, open communication. Having all this markers of healthy school culture on mind, we can assume that openness, trustiness, care and appreciation of efforts are the key features that an educator needs to possess in order to be active participant and creator of the school culture in times of educational change.

Every individual is in constant process of learning. Each context of learning does not take place in schools. In addition, schools have become places for learning on force with strict rules and regulations of behavior and actions, which sometimes, or many times can be rigid or non-motivating. As Eckert, Goldman and Wenger note (1997, 2) "...learning becomes problematic in school to the extent that the school focuses on learning as an endeavor in itself, rather than as a means to building social relations and engaging in meaningful activity". The truth is that students learn when they are out of school and playing football, when they are watching movie and are having a discussion afterwards, when they are communicating face to face or on the Internet, when they are observing the behavior of the adults (parents, teachers, relatives,...), when they are playing games, when they are participating in an extracurricular activities inside school, ets. Therefore, school with positive school climate provides many opportunities for the students in order to embrace their capabilities, interests and preferences such as: literary clubs, participation in preparation of a school journal, chorus, music clubs, rhetorical clubs, and so on. Students also should feel to be a part of the community, as they are important in the process of decision-making process and in the process of taking care for each other.

Students should be engaged learners, because they learn naturally by interacting among each other, by practicing acquainted knowledge in specific contexts and by resolving problem situations related to the curriculum. In addition, learning as a process must address diversity as a feature of contemporary society, since the learners themselves come from different families with different family values that are influenced by many factors such as specific cultural and subcultural features, specific religious beliefs, specific discourses, specific background, and so on. Therefore, "...for each student, the process must be different, and that difference will be part of who the student is and part of the student's unique contribution to his or her various communities" (Eckert, Goldman and Wenger, 1997, 4).

Conclusion

School culture is reflecting on the humans' behavior, feelings and attitudes that they perform and have in the organization. We should look markers of school culture in: school's vision and mission statement; in the curriculum; in the learning environment and, of course; in the relations among all of the school members - i.e. internal subjective factors of communication (teachers, students, administrative and managerial staff, as well as external factors of communication such as parents, local community and policy makers).

The most important markers of school culture are: Collaboration; Theory and practice connectedness; Engaged learners and, Collegiality.

Collaboration among teachers is very important in the process of organizing teaching and learning as well as for their own personal growth and the mission accomplishment of the school. In schools where teachers actively discuss about curriculum issues, themes and topic elaboration in the schoolbooks, teaching and learning aids, managing organizational problems the positive attitudes towards teaching and learning process are welcomed. The teacher in this kind of environment feels safe, appreciated and supported. Problems related to instructional, organizational or curricular issues that a teacher might face is grasped and approached in the common spirit. Therefore, the stress situations that accompany educational change are easier to be overcome.

Theory and practice connectedness also contributes to the building and nurturing positive climate and healthy school culture, because teachers serve as models for their students. If a teacher successfully combines theory and practice in the teaching and learning process, then the students will learn better, that kind of knowledge would be more profound and more useful. In addition, the students will appreciate knowledge and learning more than in a situation where only theory without practice is introduced.

Connecting theory to practice will also lead to reaching a situation of engaged learners, which is also very important in the process of building healthy school culture. Positive culture is recognized in a context where students are actively engaged in the process of learning during classes (schooling) and out of classes in order to achieve aims and objectives related to cognitive, affective and psychomotor abilities. Engaged learners are to become the true learners that will appreciate the joy and usefulness of learning and practicing the knowledge in and out of school. Students should feel safe, welcomed and appreciated for their similarities and differences. Therefore, enabling and celebrating diversity and inclusion as processes are crucial when school climate and culture is discussed.

Collegiality is also very important marker for the school culture. In schools where collegiality is on very high level, teachers like to be in each other's company. Therefore, they meet outside school; they celebrate important events together and are empathetic towards each other. In that kind of environment, all participants in the school organization welcome new ideas, thus it is much easier to face educational change.

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