

## **THE SELECTED ASPECTS OF SCHOOL CULTURE IN TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS**

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**Abstract.** The article presents theoretical assumptions of the organizational culture of an institution (school) offered e.g. by Cz. Sikorski, R. Harrison and others. With reference to international studies, it focuses on characteristic features of the organizational structure of educational institutions in Małopolska province. The summary presents the dominant type of culture and possible changes that can be adopted in this regard.

**Keywords:** school, culture, school organizational culture

### **Introduction**

Culture is a social concept associated with human society. Social context is its attribute. Culture refers to people, societies and members of other forms of collective life. It follows from a life of a given group of community, at the same time being a condition of the functioning of such a group and its members (Adrjan, 2011: 51).

The notion of 'culture' eludes easy interpretation due to the fact that the phenomenon it refers to is complex, multifaceted and dynamic. J. Bruner points out that the contemporary perception of culture as an "established and almost irreversibly stabilized mode of thinking, convictions, acts and opinions has ceased to be a useful heuristic fiction. Culture is always subject to changes, the pace of which increases as a result of migrations, trade and fast exchange of information" (Bruner, p. 138). The same applies to school culture, which is a culture per se, that is, a set of "techniques and procedures for understanding and coping with the world" (Bruner, p. 140).

Addressing the issue of school, we need to make a certain distinction. It follows from two perspectives of the functioning of culture and school. The first perspective, i.e. an external one, shows culture as a reality existing outside of school. School has certain obligations towards it since, as W. Burszta points out, "every culture exists, is sustained and enacted through social institutions" (Burszta,

1998: 43). The second perspective shows culture as an internal reality that can be called school culture (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2001: 3).

This article applies the second perspective of understanding culture, in which it becomes a certain inherent feature of school, a system of patterns and behaviors, norms and values, and a “way of life” (Szewczyk, 2002: 72) characteristic of every educational institution. School culture should be treated as its creation (Katz, Kahn, 1979: 108): something that is more enduring than e.g. school climate.

### **School Organizational Culture**

Cz. Sikorski presents organizational culture as a system of models of thinking and acting established in the organization environment that are important for the implementation of the organization’s formal goals (Sikorski, 2006).

Hargreaves and Hopkins define organizational culture both in terms of “procedures, values and expectations determining people’s behavior within an organization” and as “the way we do things around here” (Potulicka, 2001: 105). According to them, school culture is a complex phenomenon comprising three different levels:

- 1) transcendental – metaphysical values (beliefs, convictions),
- 2) rational – norms, customs, expectations, social standards,
- 3) subrational – individual preferences and feelings.

Considering its personal and institutional aspects, organizational culture can be viewed from an individual, group or organizational perspective. In the context of the conducted research school culture can be analyzed in the area of three mutually complementary elements or components:

- 1) personal or individual culture of all school entities,
- 2) interactions between these entities,
- 3) organizational culture, i.e. the quality of school management (Kuźma, 2009: 45).

These elements play an important role in the process of forming school culture and should be approached holistically, as they are mutually complementary.

There are numerous proposals of organizational culture typologies. One of them is the proposal put forward by R. Harrison. It is based on dichotomies: individualism versus collectivism and inner-directed versus outer-directed orientation. Taking the above into consideration, he distinguishes four types of organizational cultures:

1) Power-oriented culture is characteristic of organizations which try to dominate their environment, are competitive and uncompromising. Relations between employees are based on a power-related distance and strong competition. Employees are treated by authority as objects.

2) Role-oriented culture is characteristic of bureaucratic organizations, in which focus is placed on the legality of actions and responsibility. Duties and privileges are clearly expressed and depend on an occupied position. People’s predictabil-

ity is substantial, with stability and compliance with rules often valued more than knowledge and skills.

3) Task-oriented culture is to be found in the culture of flexible organizations, oriented towards fast adaptation to changes taking place in their environment. The qualities of social relations are viewed from the perspective of the implementation of organizations' goals in changing circumstances.

4) Person-oriented culture is typical of the culture of organizations that exist to fulfill the needs of their members. Power distance is small. Decision-making is based on a social consensus. Relations between people are based on cooperation and shared experience. Rules are based on customs and behavioral patterns established in a given environment (Harrison, 1972: 119 – 128).

It is advisable here to recognize the determinants describing the type of organizational culture of school. In order to determine it, we need to consider that:

- It is shaped by human views, ways of thinking, behavior, and has a reverse impact on the behavior and thinking orientation of organization members;
- It determines and steers employees' actions by directing at them the expectations as to their attitudes;
- It implies members' behavior, it is contained in their minds and hearts and does not lend itself easily to direct observation and measurement;
- It is developed and shaped in a process;
- It affects aspirations and activities of employees in a formal, non-verbal and unnoticed way;
- It allows to identify with one's own organization;
- It serves as the memory of an organization, in which the experiences of a given organization have been certified (Użdzicki, 2011: 32).

To sum up, it can be stated that organizational culture has its own dynamic related to history and changes within an organization, as well as changes ensuing from implemented reforms. It is created and sustained by a defined group of people, and finds its manifestation through values, rituals and symbols. From a perspective of the studies presented herein, we should focus mainly on personal and organizational aspects of school culture.

### **Methodological Assumptions**

In order to gain an insight into school organizational culture, a study was conducted within the international project *Culture and leadership at educational organizations and organizations for social work*. The main research problem concerned the specification of organizational culture of educational and support institutions. Only 25 representatives of educational institutions from Małopolska province, including 23 women (92.00%) and 2 men (8.00%), participated in the project, although invitations to take part in the online survey had been sent to as many as 300 people. Respondents completed the survey questionnaire comprising

43 questions concerning the social and organizational school culture. The questions were developed based on Roger Harrison's theory of organizational culture and Gareth R. Jones and Jennifer M. George's theory of management.

The empirical analyses conducted in the next part of the article are based on R. Harrison's theory of culture and the specified four types of organizational cultures of institutions.

### **The Specificity of Educational Institutions in the Light of Research**

Organizational culture affects the functioning of organizations, finding its reflection in members' values, which are a normative reflection of the established system of values, and in artifacts (Lipski, 2005: 40).

Norms referring to the functioning of institutions are comprised in the fundamental legal acts regulating the framework for the functioning of a given institution, and in documents created on their basis. These include: the institution's mission statement, statutes, rules of procedure and regulations. To a considerable extent they define the foundations of organizational culture of an institution. According to studies, all respondents know the provisions contained in the basic documents characteristic of their institution. However, not all of them fully accept them (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Declared acceptance of norms and regulations which apply at respondents' institutions

Do you like norms and regulations which apply at your institution?		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Yes	68.0%	17
No	16.0%	4
I don't know	16.0%	4
Maybe (complete....)	0.0%	0

*answered question 25  
skipped question 0*

68.00% of respondents accept norms and regulations, whereas 16.00% of them do not accept them or have no opinion on the subject. Legal frameworks are part of the institutional culture and they determine the basic ways in which institutional entities function, including ethical and moral norms which are known to respondents and apply at their institution. It was therefore of considerable importance from the perspective of the studies of organizational culture to recognize the way in which the specificity of their institution's culture manifested itself. The data has been presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The specificity of the institution's culture in respondents' opinions

<b>How does the specificity of your institution's culture manifest itself?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
in norms and regulations	31.3%	5
in dress code	6.3%	1
in the way of communicating	43.8%	7
in workplace organization	37.5%	6
in good relations and kindness between employees	68.8%	11
in uncertainty and tensions between employees	6.3%	1
in the lack of interest	0.0%	0
in mutual respect and consideration for the opinion of other employees	37.5%	6
in good relations between employees and the institutions' clients	62.5%	10
in the improper attitude towards clients	0.0%	0
in maintaining a positive attitude towards clients even in crisis situations	50.0%	8
in close and positive relations between the institutions' employees	31.3%	5

*answered question 16  
skipped question 9*

The data presented in the table indicates that organizational culture in the opinion of subjects manifests itself in good and kind relations between an institution's employees (68.80%) and in the way they communicate with each other (43.80%), which at the same time has a bearing on good relations among all entities of the institution (students, parents, external environment, educational authorities, etc.) and good communication (respectively: 62.50% and 0.00%). According to subjects, the institution's culture also manifests itself in the possibility to voice one's opinion and have it taken into consideration in relation to activities characteristic of the institution (37.50%) and in its norms and regulations (31.30%).

Employees constitute the essence of the institution, determining its development and culture. They create it, change it, and foster its development. It could undoubtedly be claimed that organizational culture follows from individual cultural models of individuals creating it. Usually the convictions and behavior of individuals only partly coincide with organizational culture of the institution, however, in the case of educational institutions (schools) they are its basic component.

Considering the symptoms of school organizational culture, A. Marcinkowski distinguishes mainly those that are related to people (here: teachers and the principal). According to him, they include: leadership style, control level, a recognized image of an employee, team integration, a level of work commitment, cooperation model, a level of certainty (communication), and an attitude towards cooperation entities (cf. Marcinkowski, 2000). Therefore, it seems interesting to recognize the qualities that employees should possess from the perspective of school organizational culture (Table 3).

**Table 3.** The desired qualities of educational institutions' employees

<b>Which qualities of an employee are important for your institution? (Please select five (5) from the list below)</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
ambitious and hard-working	48.0%	12
broad-minded	20.0%	5
capable and competent	48.0%	12
cheerful, with a sense of humor	28.0%	7
well-organized	20.0%	5
not hesitating to express his views	4.0%	1
Understanding	16.0%	4
Obliging	12.0%	3
honest and sincere	28.0%	7
Creative	76.0%	19
Independent	0.0%	0
Intelligent	24.0%	6
consistent and rational	12.0%	3
Empathic	36.0%	9
Conscientious	28.0%	7
Polite	20.0%	5
Responsible	64.0%	16
Disciplined	16.0%	4

***answered question 25***  
***skipped question 0***

The most important quality of employees in terms of organizational culture of educational institutions is creativity (76.00% of respondents). This quality would suggest the type of person-oriented culture, focused on people's development and fulfillment of their basic needs. Other very important features according to subjects include: ambitious, hardworking, capable and competent (48.00% of respondents). The next in order of preference are: honest, sincere,

cheerful and with a sense of humor (28.00% of respondents). None of respondents indicated independence as their quality of choice. Failing to choose this quality stands in opposition to the indicated creativity. There can be no creativity without independence, and the lack of the latter suggests power-oriented culture (subordination, adaptation, outer-directed orientation). It is therefore possible that on an expressed level, the qualities of employees indicate person-oriented culture, whereas on an implied level they seem to point to power-oriented culture. This translates to opinions of respondents regarding the qualities of a good employee of an institution (Table 4).

**Table 4.** An image of a good employee of an institution  
in respondents' opinions

<b>How would you describe a good employee for your institution (select the statement that is the most important for you and to which you apply in your work) Pro</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
works a lot to implement the institution's tasks, complies with the norms and cares about the employer's interests;	16.0%	4
is responsible, reliable, and conscientious in the fulfillment of his duties;	24.0%	6
is task-oriented, open to new ideas and suggestions, willing to be managed by others if they have greater skills or potential;	44.0%	11
is interested in self-development and improving his qualifications, ready to help if needed, respectful of others' needs.	16.0%	4

*answered question 25  
skipped question 0*

Almost half of respondents (44.00%) decided that a good employee is the one that is task-oriented, open to new ideas and suggestions, and willing to be managed by others if they have greater skills or potential. Therefore, an employee who is self-sufficient, independent, creative, and merely willing to fulfill tasks designated by others is not desirable. Similarly, the second most frequent choice of a good employee was a person who is responsible, reliable, and conscientious in the fulfillment of his duties (24.00%). While the first profile is desirable in power-oriented culture, the second one is sought after in task-oriented culture, focused on a conscientious performance of tasks in the context of morality and responsibility. Characteristic features of good employees find their reflection in employees' priorities (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Priorities of a good employee

<b>For a good employee of your institution it is a priority to:</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
meet the requirements of the superior;	8.0%	2
fulfill professional duties in a responsible way;	60.0%	15
perform assigned tasks;	20.0%	5
meet the requirements of clients;	12.0%	3

*answered question 25  
skipped question 0*

According to respondents' responses, the basic priority of a good employee of an educational institution is to carry out his own professional tasks (60.00%) and assigned tasks (20.00%), which confirms the existence of power and role oriented culture. From the perspective of the conducted duty it was also important to determine when and in what circumstances the institution employees work in teams (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Respondents' opinions concerning team work

<b>Employees of your institution work in teams:</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
if it is required by direct superiors or when it is possible to use each other's competences to perform a task properly	36.0%	9
if cooperation and information exchange between units is part of a formal system;	0.0%	0
if work team leads to a better performance of an assigned task;	44.0%	11
if work team is satisfactory for employees, simulates them and motivates them to faster and more effective performance of a task.	20.0%	5

*answered question 25  
skipped question 0*

The data presented in the table indicates that by and large respondents work in teams when team work ensures a more effective performance of a task (44.00%), as well as when it has been required directly by superiors, or when there is a chance to

use each other's competences to perform a task properly (36.00%). While the first tendency implies task-oriented culture, the second one is a symptom characteristic of power-oriented culture. Team work as a way of ensuring employees' satisfaction and boosting their motivation for a better and more effective task performance was rated to be of low importance (20.00%) – this would be characteristic of person-oriented culture.

E.H. Schein (similarly to P. Selznick (1957), B.R. Clark (1972) A.M. Pettigrew 1979, V. Sathe (1985)) stresses that the role of the principal/leader is of particular importance in terms of the formation of the institution's organizational culture. All institutions face the problem of status and power distribution. In schools, this problem finds its reflection in assumptions concerning the good principal/leader so that the relations between him and employees (and other entities) would work towards the development of organizational culture of the managed institution (Table 7).

**Table 7.** Characteristics of respondents' principals in their opinions

<b>Your direct superior is a person who: (more than one answer allowed)</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
evokes positive feelings and can motivate to the effective performance of assigned tasks;	52.0%	13
always has a positive attitude towards people and a sense of humor;	32.0%	8
evokes negative feeling, causing low self-esteem and a critical attitude towards others;	12.0%	3
does not evoke negative feelings, seldom criticizes and is not pessimistic;	12.0%	3
is communicative, polite, kind and caring;	56.0%	14
keeps others at a distance, is impolite and difficult to work with;	8.0%	2
is organized and disciplined;	40.0%	10
is disorganized, undisciplined and irresponsible;	4.0%	1
can act outside the box, has broad interests, is open to people and confident in making decisions in crisis situations;	32.0%	8
cannot effectively solve problems, is conservative when faced with new situations	12.0%	3

*answered question 25  
skipped question 0*

In the opinions of responders, their superior is first and foremost communicative, polite, kind and caring (56.00%). Moreover, 52.00 % of responders described them as evoking positive feelings and motivating to better perform assigned tasks. Subsequently, respondents indicated features connected with an organizational aspect, such as: organized and disciplined (42.00%), as well as the ones related to a personality aspect: a positive attitude to others and a sense of humor, followed by openness and empathy allowing to act outside the box and make decisions in crisis situations (32.00%). According to respondents, such qualities in most cases authorize their principals to make all decisions (Table 8).

**Table 8.** Principal's tasks in respondents' opinions

<b>Decisions at your institution are made by:</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Principal	80.0%	20
unit/department manager	16.0%	4
person with the best knowledge of the issue	0.0%	0
persons who are the most engaged and interested in achieving the goal	4.0%	1

*answered question 25  
skipped question 0*

The respondents indicate that all decisions at institutions are made by the institution authorities (principals or directors). In their opinions there is no mention of a person who would be more knowledgeable in a given area to make a certain decision, or a team in relation to which decisions are made. This confirms that the dominant organizational culture at respondents' institutions is power-oriented culture. This also finds its confirmation in respondents' opinions as they directly indicate the factors that are not fully utilized by the management/leader to increase the effectiveness of the institution's operation (Table 9).

**Table 9.** Factors which are not utilized to increase the effectiveness of the institution's operation

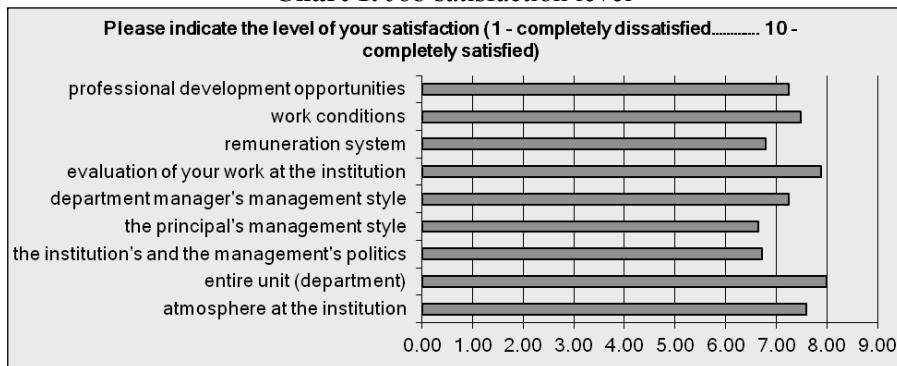
<b>Which factors are not utilized to increase the effectiveness of work at your institution?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
institution's employees' own initiative;	28.0%	7
willingness to assume responsibility;	28.0%	7
creative potential of institution's employees;	32.0%	8

possibility to participate in external or internal trainings required by employees;	28.0%	7
discipline;	16.0%	4
meeting task performance deadlines;	24.0%	6
esprit de corps;	20.0%	5
updated information necessary for performing current and strategic tasks;	4.0%	1
effective system of remuneration;	36.0%	9
other (please provide details)	4.0%	1
- and.....	4.0%	1

**answered question 25**  
**skipped question 0**

From the above presented data it follows that apart from the employee remuneration system (36.00% of respondents), the institutions under study largely fail to utilize the features that determine institution's development. Among the factors that are not fully utilized to increase the effectiveness of work, the most frequently indicated are the following: employees' creative potential (32.00% of respondents) and employees' own initiative and willingness to assume responsibility for task performance (28.00% of respondents). This once again proves that the dominant power-oriented culture is characteristic of the institutions of respondents participating in the study. Furthermore, it has a bearing on the evaluation of respondents' job satisfaction level (Chart 1).

**Chart 1. Job satisfaction level**



Respondents were the least satisfied with their remuneration, the principal's management style and his institutional politics. This translates to the type of organizational culture and the quality and effectiveness of respondents' work

(Table 10).

**Table 10.** Organizational culture and the quality of work in respondents' opinions

<b>How does organizational culture affect your work? (more than one answer allowed)</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
it affects the quality of cooperation	60.0%	15
it ensures stable and calm conditions for the best performance of tasks	32.0%	8
it adversely affects me because it overburdens me and makes me feel uncertain in my position	8.0%	2
it fosters my creativity and inspires me to look for new solutions	32.0%	8
it creates favorable climate for team work, as expected by the institution's management	28.0%	7
it mobilizes me to provide faster and better task performance	24.0%	6
it ensures a positive attitude and facilitates the performance of everyday tasks	40.0%	10
I feel anxious and not confident in my position	8.0%	2
I feel dispirited because the management does not support my initiatives	4.0%	1
I am enthusiastic about my work because the management supports me in my undertakings	20.0%	5

***answered question 25***  
***skipped question 0***

Respondents indicate that organizational culture of an institution has a substantial influence on the quality of cooperation (60.00%). Although the relations between principals and employees as well as among employees are proper, the distribution of power that belongs to the management and is characteristic of power-oriented culture determines the well-being at the workplace. According to the opinions of respondents, organizational culture fosters the execution of everyday tasks (40.00% of respondents) and ensures stable conditions for their implementation (32.00% of respondents); however, this has little bearing on the fulfillment of employees' needs and potential, self-determination, work

autonomy, independence in making decisions and performing tasks that may be unconventional and independent of the principal's decision. If we were to indicate positive aspects of respondents' organizational culture, these would include a limited amount of negative emotional states of respondents, such as work uncertainty and overburdening (8.00%), and of feeling dispirited due to the lack of support from the principal (4.00%).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

School organizational culture consists of three components: thinking patterns (thanks to which members of a group receive the criteria for assessing various phenomena and situations), behavioral patterns (concerning proper forms of responding to those phenomena and situations) and symbols (which allow to disseminate and reinforce thinking and behavioral patterns among group members) (Sikorski, 2006: 8). The selected fragmentary opinions presented in the article refer mainly to behavioral patterns determining the type of school organizational culture (relations between employees and the management, a sense of well-being at the workplace, and the perception of school organizational culture in terms of utilizing individual potential) in the context of R. Harrison's type of culture and incline one to conclude that the dominant culture is the one oriented towards power. It is first and foremost the principal who makes decisions concerning the essence of school culture. He (or normative acts) decides about the quality of tasks and the manner of their execution. Employees' needs and potential are not necessarily taken into consideration, with more focus placed upon the authorities' expectations and tasks to perform so that these expectations be met. This affects a sense of well-being of employees and the way in which they interpret school organizational culture which they form, and by so doing shape.

Organizational culture of respondents needs altering. Respondents exhibit a great potential (creativity, resourcefulness, etc.) which is not used as principals' expectations differ in this respect. Principals do not allow independence but rather demand that tasks and obligations be fulfilled (holding teachers accountable) as principals themselves are held accountable by the supervisory bodies. Therefore, there is a call for change both in terms of educational policy and the management style of principals/leaders. The basis for the implementation of the most desirable type of organizational culture, i.e. one oriented towards the development of people and institutions, is to combine individual aspirations of teachers and school. This, in fact, is one of the key tasks. Its implementation may be facilitated by charismatic leadership that combines the fulfillment of individual needs and expectations of employees with the ones attributed to institutions (Michałak, 2012; Maikin et al., 2000).

## NOTES

1. Cz. Sikorski describes four types of cultures distinguished on the basis of reaction to cultural dissonance. These include: the culture of domination (with importance placed on standards, e.g. behavioral patterns, shared norms), competition (its characteristic feature is the coexistence of many subcultures, which often leads to conflicts within an organization), cooperation (created by cooperating subgroups which utilize their diversity) and adaptation (based on the implementation of goals of an organization, the needs of which are superior) (Sikorski 2006).

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