Towards a Framework of Understanding the School Culture of Public Secondary Schools in the National Capital Region, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the patterns of school culture among selected public secondary schools in Metro Manila by profiling, categorizing, and analyzing their tangible and intangible cultural elements. The foundation for this study was built from the review and comparison of the conceptual studies on school cultures, which culminated on the development of a centralized framework. The framework points out similarity within the abstract (intangible) and concrete (tangible) elements prevailing in the school culture of all public secondary schools under study. These are significantly influenced by additional elements engrained in the culture of the public schools: the transitory school leadership, faculty departmentalization, and the practice of bureaucracy. This revealed the existence of hierarchical bureaucratic type of culture that needs further examination to establish a best-fit culture where there is congruence between and among its positive school features and becomes a foundation on which changes to classrooms may occur, enabling students to develop better protective behaviors and resilience. Understanding the school culture of public secondary schools is an essential ingredient to transform the schools into settings in which all students succeed academically and all teachers continually improve and a guide for school leaders to create solidarity, give meaning, and inspire commitment towards productivity within and among each members of the school community. The framework that emerged from this study serves as a guide in creating programs that will explore and exploit the power of school culture as an agent of change for the betterment of the public education in the country.

Keywords: cultural elements, school culture, leadership, departmentalization, bureaucracy

Problem and Review of Related Literature

Unlike private schools, public secondary schools in the Philippines suffer from poor public perception of their effectiveness as molders of Filipino youth. The image is reasonably well founded. Math and science study shows poor results in the 2003 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), among 45 countries that participated in the TIMSS for eighth-grade students, the Philippines ranked 41st in Math and 42nd in Science. Our score was more than 100 points lower than Malaysia and more than 200 points lower than Singapore, which ranked first! Among 25 countries that joined the study among fourth-grade students, we ranked 23rd in both Math and Science, again with scores more than 200 points lower than the first-ranked Singapore (Virola, 2007).

Reforming our nation's schools is essential if we are to provide our future citizens with the tools they need, and if we are to disrupt the perpetuation of failure. The

introduction of reforms in our public educational system in recent years promised to generate enthusiasm, revise curricula, raise standards, restore prestige to teaching, and intensify pre-service and in-service training of teachers. Policy makers and educational practitioners have experimented with various strategies for raising student achievement. However, efforts at full improvement have been swept away by drawing up plans without really understanding the factors that cause such a poor quality of education in public schools. While education and school leaders see the improvement of academic proficiency as an urgent goal, a more crucial challenge is not just achieving higher test scores but raising the quality of the Filipino youth as human beings through education. This task has to be done within the context of providing universal education while dealing with limited financial and technological resources. There is urgent need to think of a kind of reform that will lead to sustained improvement and not just a cosmetic change that does little to alter academic outcomes. Does the problem stem from sheer limitations in resources against an ever-growing student population, or does the failure in education reflect a deeper, more basic cultural structure within the public schools that work against any effort of improving the system?

Searching for an answer to that question means that we have to explore the complex of cultures and subcultures that work within the secondary public schools. In the past decades, educators around the world have become aware that an understanding of culture plays a crucial role in improving the way a student learns. Wagner and Hall-O'Phalen (1998) recognize this as the "missing link" in the school improvement conundrum. That "missing link" has much to do with the culture of the school than it does with elaborate curriculum alignment projects, scrimmage tests, and the latest buzz-word reform efforts. Cunningham and Gresso (1993) also recognize the value of the concept of culture in understanding schools. To them, "successful educators spend considerable time developing an effective culture, since nothing can be accomplished if the culture works against needed reforms."

How do we understand school culture? How important is such an understanding? Maslowksi (2005) defines school culture as "the basic assumptions, norms and values, and cultural artifacts that are shared by school members, and which influence their functioning at school." Wagner (2002) conceptualizes school culture as shared experiences, both in school and out of school (traditions and celebrations), a sense of community, of family and team. It is a shared and learned world of experiences, meanings, values, and understandings which inform people and which are expressed, reproduced, and communicated partly in symbolic form (Elsmore, 2001). Culture governs what is of worth for the group and how members should think, feel, and behave. The "stuff" of culture includes a school's customs and traditions; historical accounts; stated and unstated understandings, habits, norms, and expectations; common meanings; and shared assumptions. In addition, for Christensen (2006) culture includes observed behavioral regularities that occur when people interact, the norms that evolve in close working groups, the dominant values espoused by an organization, the philosophy that guides an organization's policy, the rules for getting along with

other people in the organization, and the feeling or climate of a particular organization.

Culture influences everything that happens in a school. Deal and Peterson (2002) go as far as to argue that school culture is a key factor in determining whether improvement in school is at all possible. The more understood, accepted, and cohesive the culture of a school, the better able it is to move toward ideals it holds and objectives it wishes to pursue. Such is the power of culture that any effort to improve school effectiveness must take it first into account (Barth, 2001, Wagner & Philips, 2003). Philips and Wagner (2003) explain that focusing on improving school culture assure positive results as the educators themselves become learners, and what they learn spell the difference whether their students learn or not.

Today's Filipino students are growing up in a global environment that is not only highly competitive economically but, more crucially, churning with a host of natural and man-made issues that call for intelligent, well-informed, and committed responses. They need to be well-equipped – both by the formal education system and by informal sources of life learning – to handle such an enormous challenge of the time. There is thus an urgent need for public schools to change meaningfully in order that the students can succeed and prosper in this environment. Otherwise, the nation will pay a high economic, social, and political price. To guarantee that such a meaningful change can even take place, we need first to explore and understand the prevailing complex of cultures that operate within public schools. To do this, an analysis of the school culture of the public secondary schools is in place.

This study hopes to create a framework for understanding the school culture in public secondary schools in Metro Manila that could form the basis of any meaningful reform and improvement efforts in the public school system.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The aim of this study was to develop a framework for understanding the school culture in public secondary schools in Metro Manila and to identify specific cultural elements which will best describe their schools' culture. Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions:

1. How does school culture evolve in public secondary schools in Metro Manila in terms of:
   a) abstract (intangible) elements?
   b) concrete (tangible) elements?
2. What are the other elements that shape the school culture in public secondary schools?
3. How do all these elements shape the school culture in the public secondary schools?
4. What framework of school culture in public secondary schools in Metro Manila can be developed from the data?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the use of qualitative method: the case study methodology. In this particular study, purposive sampling was employed wherein the participants included five selected schools as representative of the six divisions in the National Capital Region and a pilot school. These schools were selected on the basis of their site and size, being the national school in each division whose principals have been serving their schools for the last two to three years and their faculty members have been working in their schools for the last five years or more since the length of service in their respective school would make them more attuned to their school culture. In this study, structured interview and classroom and on –site/direct observations were relied solely as the main sources of data. However, to meet the criterion on triangulation, other sources of data were used by the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to Scott (2009), a school's culture is its unique expression of what it believes in and how it operates a social organization. It consists of interwoven tangible physical objects, symbols, written codes, rituals, and behaviors) and intangible (values, attitudes, ideals, and expectations) elements. The school culture of public secondary schools under study showed the presence of the tangible and intangible elements including assumptions on an unconscious level. Their school culture relates to such things as physical settings, language and stories (such as celebrating previous events or achievements), the ceremonies/customs and symbols (such as uniforms and logos), as well as the accepted standards of behavior (rules and procedures), the modes of communication, as well as the prevalence of bureaucratic practices. The fundamental assumptions and core values of the key players of the schools were more on a subconscious level.

Concrete (Tangible) Elements

Symbols, Stories, Traditions, and Ceremonies
Perhaps the most colorful and effective ways in which schools communicate their culture to both new and old members of the school are through the skillful use of stories. Valentine (2006) asserts: "Knowing its history, a school can capitalize on the accumulated shared wisdom that it gained from its experiences". Members of the school community can be guided by this knowledge, what worked and what did not. Hence, a cultural artifact such as a story is important because of how people interpret meaning."
Unfortunately, only the senior teachers and at least three principals who have been with their schools for more than three years could draw a flashback of the past events in their schools. In schools A, D, and E, the principals can relate only

how the school was founded and why they were installed in the said school – "to bring order", confided by one of them. Teachers, especially the least tenured, are not well informed of the history of the school unless they ask the tenured ones. All schools under study share the same activities prescribed by the education department.   Though there is dissimilarity on how each school celebrates its Teachers' Day, in all schools under study except for school E, teachers with exemplary performance are given recognition. In addition to certificates/plaques, the outstanding teachers of schools B, C, and E receive cash incentives though it is subject to availability of funds. In school C, students nominate and vote for their favorite teacher in their yearly program, "Idol Ko Si Ma'am". These teachers are given the merit to attend more seminars for professional development and could have the chance to be recommended for possible promotion. Acknowledgment is given to all students who are contest winners and those top academic achievers during their Recognition Day and Graduation Day. It is then through rituals and rites that recognition of achievements is possible, reinforcing cultural values through rewards (Lunenberg and Orstein, 2004).

Table 1.1 Summary of categories of Cases A – F on tangible elements

CASE A	CASE B	CASE C	CASE D	CASE E	CASE F
CONCRETE ELEMENTS					
Sense of History	Sense of History	Sense of History	Sense of History	Sense of History	Sense of History
Non-selective policy in students' admission	Non-selective policy in students' admission	Non-selective policy in students' admission	Non-selective policy in students' admission	Non-selective policy in students' admission	Non-selective policy in students' admission
Showcasing school's collective pride	Showcasing school's collective pride	Showcasing school's collective pride	Showcasing school's collective pride	Showcasing school's collective pride	Showcasing school's collective pride
Observance of school traditions and regulated school programs and festivities	Observance of school traditions and regulated school programs and festivities	Observance of school traditions and regulated school programs and festivities	Observance of school traditions and regulated school programs and festivities	Observance of school traditions and regulated school programs and festivities	Observance of school traditions and regulated school programs and festivities
Reward system	Reward system	Reward system	Reward system	Reward system	Reward system

School Ecology

Five of the six public secondary schools under study are located in areas with varying degrees of economic depression.   Schools B and D are in the most depressed areas, while the neighborhoods of Schools A and E used to be suburbs that have grown to be industrial-commercial areas. Only School C is located in a relatively well-to-do neighborhood, although its student population, being a public school, ranges in economic status from poor to middle-class. Schools A and E both started in a suburban setting, which gave them some advantage. Population was then relatively sparse, and they had time to nurture their school environment along with the growth in their respective areas.   Schools A and E inherited the blessings, as well as the weaknesses in their environment. Being in a relatively

small town, School A underwent a succession of principals who barely succeeded in getting the support they needed to manage the growth of their school. School E, on the other hand, is in a unique environmental predicament – the place is perennially flooded, especially when it rains. Nevertheless, teachers and students have learned to live with water under their knees and to keep school life going despite the floods. Still, School E suffers from the effects of inadequate funding and from the difficulty to attract competent teachers.

Table 1.2 Summary of categories of Cases A – F on school ecology

CASE A	CASE B	CASE C	CASE D	CASE E	CASE F
SCHOOL ECOLOGY					
Consequences of poor geographical location in education	Consequences of poor geographical location in education	Consequences of poor geographical location in education	Consequences of poor geographical location in education	Consequences of poor geographical location in education	Consequences of poor geographical location in education
Shortage of school resources, cause of teaching dilemma	Shortage in school resources	Shortage of school resources Educational subsidy from LGU and NGO	Facility conditions and shortage of school resources	Shortage of school resources	Shortage of school resources

Intangible (Abstract) Elements

Values and Beliefs

One obvious attempt at culture building is in the government's effort to inculcate a common goal for all the schools through a single mission statement. The DepEd's central office issues a single mission statement for the entire public education sector to be the basis of their vision mission. All public secondary schools under study have their vision-mission statement posted at the entrance so everybody can take a view of it. The researcher, however, observes that teachers and students are unmindful of its existence and significance. One would expect that the faculty should have known the vision mission statement by heart. The teachers' lack of knowledge of the statement shows lack of interest in their institution's aspirations. Almost all the schools visited have not taken seriously nor have widely communicated their vision and mission that describes what the school is and what it does. In all schools understudy, ineffective transmission (or lack of it) translates into unruly student behavior inside and outside the classrooms, low and diminishing teacher morale, disrepair and disorder in school properties, high drop-out and repetition rates, and discouraging overall academic performance.

Table 1.3 Summary of categories of Cases A – F on intangible elements

CASE A	CASE B	CASE C	CASE D	CASE E	CASE F
ABSTRACT ELEMENTS					
Culture of status quo and non-directionality	Culture of status quo and non-directionality	Culture of status quo and non-directionality	Culture of status quo and non-directionality	Culture of status quo and non-directionality	Culture of status quo and non-directionality
Inadequate in implementing firmly the school's discipline policy	Inadequate in implementing firmly the school's discipline policy	Inadequate in implementing firmly the school's discipline policy	Inadequate in implementing firmly the school's discipline policy	Inadequate in implementing firmly the school's discipline policy	Inadequate in implementing firmly the school's discipline policy
Issues on professional and personal integrity of teachers	Issues on professional and personal integrity of teachers	Issues on professional and personal integrity of teachers	Issues on professional and personal integrity of teachers	Issues on professional and personal integrity of teachers	Issues on professional and personal integrity of teachers
Factionalism	Isolation	Individualism	Departmenta-lization	Factionalism	Departmenta-lization
Conflict resolution management	Conflict resolution management	Conflict resolution management	Conflict resolution management	Conflict resolution management	Conflict resolution management
Departure from accepted standards of teachers' code of ethics	Departure from accepted standard of the teachers' code of ethics	Departure from accepted standards of teachers' code of ethics	Departure from accepted standards of teachers' code of ethics	Departure from accepted standards of teachers' code of ethics	Departure from accepted standards of teachers' code of ethics

Other School Culture Elements

Behavioral Norms and Deviation

All schools under study share almost the same share of headaches for deviant teachers and students. Dwindling commitment and dedication of teachers are two big challenges for the schools. This is evident in the absenteeism, tardiness, lack of lesson planning, disorganization, and poor classroom management of most members of the faculty. Problems concerning the students are getting worst every year, according to the principals and teachers of all schools under study, like: drug related problems, habitual tardiness, truancy, dropping out in the middle of the school year, vices, vandalism, gangs, fraternities, premarital sex, poor study habits, cutting classes, and so on. All the principals admitted the difficulty of handling these perennial problems in their schools. They all agree that these stemmed out from poverty, family problems, and poor environments.

Faculty Departmentalization/Isolation

Teachers in all schools understudy typically talk more to members of their own departments than other teachers in the school. It is not easy to establish familiarity of all teachers in each school because of the number of faculty members per subject area stationed far apart from each other. In schools B and C faction, of teachers is a common trend between the senior and novice teachers while In Schools D and E, departmentalization is a common thing. The downside of this kind of isolation according to Silver (1997) is that teachers working in isolation tend to repeat practices that they feel comfortable with. Because they

have no opportunity to witness alternative teaching methods, they remain unaware of different ways to teach and are unmotivated to implement innovative techniques. As Deal and Peterson (2002) stress: A school with a strong school culture will most likely have people in it working as a unified group rather than disjointed factions doing their own thing.

Bureaucratic Practices

The Department of Education demands strict compliance to all its directives by all public division schools as mandated by law, otherwise face sanctions or suffer from a civil or even criminal liability. This probably explains the hierarchical/ bureaucratic nature of the mode of communication between top management and school heads of public schools, a one-way communication line. Other issues included in this category are: hierarchical/bureaucratic mode of communication, restrictive school supervision, restrictive promotion and recruitment of teachers or principals, mandated national assessment, curriculum planning and design, and influence of politicking.

Leadership

All public secondary schools under study were handled by different principals. According to the principals, the reason of the central office is to avert over familiarity between them and the teachers that may lead to laxity, corruption, and stagnation. Apparently, this rotation of principals affects the school's culture when teachers tend to resist changes imposed by the new administrator, traditions vary, uncertainty prevails, and continuity of projects is disrupted. The difficulties faced by the principals lie on whether to remain status quo, how to get to know the members of the school community, to make the necessary adjustment to fit in or change the "way they do things" in the school thus, affecting the culture of the said school. One difficulty in establishing a much sound tradition is the practice of rotation of principals every three to five years by the division office. "To avoid over familiarity", one of the principals commented and "politics" lamented by another principal.

Underlying Assumptions

All the schools understudy exhibit this subconscious level of school culture as observed by the researcher: what the school leaders expect from the faculty, maintaining discipline and order, how teachers welcome innovations or willingness to take risk of trying it, in the attitude that "this is the way I've always done it", from achievements, students' behavior, appearance of buildings and grounds, the teaching taking place, responsibility for students in place of parents while at school, teachers act in the best interests of their students …that one cannot easily decipher. As Owens (2004) stated: basic assumptions are not values, which can be debated and discussed They are unconsciously taken for granted, rarely talked

about, accepted as true or non- negotiable. Figure 1 depicts the proposed framework of the school culture of Public Secondary Schools in Metro Manila, Philippines.
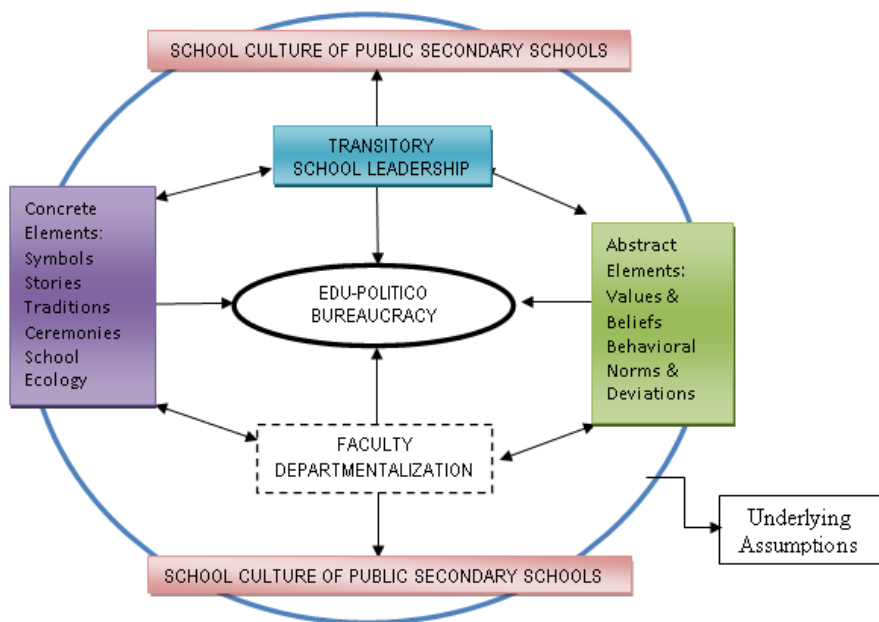

Figure 1 The School Culture Framework of the Public Secondary Schools in Metro Manila, Philippines.

The school culture framework of the public secondary schools in Metro Manila shows the concrete and the vague elements of their school culture. Underlying assumptions and core values are represented by dotted lines since they operate subconsciously among the key players of these educational institutions. It provides a representation of the manifestations of the elements of a school culture. The hub of the framework showed the culture of the public schools under study is centered foremost in the political/bureaucratic practices that have much effect on the interactions of the concrete/tangible and vague/intangible elements of school culture, including school leadership and faculty departmentalization prevailing in the existing school culture of the these public schools. In such centralized arena, the principal controls very little and often has to be ready for any change of school assignment any time. He is not the true CEO (chief executive officer) of his school. Most major decisions are made by the central office; thus, principals have turned into good "followers of the rules" not great managers and instructional leaders or simply the CCO's (chief compliance officer) of their school. Radiating from the hub are the concrete/seen/tangible, vague/unseen/intangible/ and the core values that are affected by the bureaucratic practices and their interrelatedness in the expression of the school culture of the public schools.

Conclusions

Today, shaping public schools' culture is even more important because of the national focus on higher curriculum standards, assessments, and accountability. The public school system exhibits a generic type of school culture and there is a need to revisit its school cultures to look into how it could improve on the following aspects: a) a set of shared core beliefs and values reflected in the school's vision mission and philosophy, committing the school and everyone in it to high standards and expectations (academic, professional, and moral-ethical) and giving primacy to student excellence in academics and character while seeking to promote the integral human development, b) professional commitment, collegiality, and collaboration on the part of the teachers, administrators, and staff, c) the teachers' sense of efficacy to affect student learning d) a learning and work environment that is demanding and supportive, that is basically defined by the school's physical environment, its organizational structures, systems, and policies and the kind of professional and personal relationships existing among the school's constituents, and that fosters the habit of inquiry, thoughts, reflections, and open communication, especially among the teachers and administrators, e) a strong sense of community, f) shared leadership and accountability, g) a clear up on the issues on politics and bureaucracy to hasten the upgrading of the condition in the public school system by deregulating and dismantling the edu-politico bureaucracy in the public school system; and h) change of the school finance to a weighted student-funding formula where state revenue follows the child to upgrade instructional programs in the public schools.

The key players (students, teachers, and staff) within the school especially the school leader should not overstate the importance of their school culture and its relationship to improved student learning and make the teachers discern what is expected of them. The positive interactions of both the seen/tangible/concrete and unseen/intangible/vague elements of a school culture could help build and sustain a vibrant school culture for the public school system in the country.

Recommendations

Results of this study can serve as a guide for program development based on the extent of the cultural elements manifested in the different public secondary schools in Metro Manila. The framework that emerged from this study can serve as a guide in coming up with a program to explore the power of school culture as an agent of change for the betterment of the public education in the country. School leaders should help build shared meanings about their purposes, create high levels of commitment to accomplish these purposes and encourage openness to new ideas and practices among the members of the school community. Create an environment that focuses on students as clients and eliminates politics external to schools. For the Department of Education people, they should look into the incorporation of other policies in the Implementing Rules and Regulations

of Republic Act No. 9155 (Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001) for the betterment of the delivery of quality education in the public education sector in the country. The framework that emerged in the actual school culture of the public secondary schools in Metro Manila as viewed, practiced, and experienced by the public secondary principals and teachers may also lead to another research. This research could be a validation of the existing framework of school culture in other public school sector in other geographical areas.

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