Deconstructing the familiar: Making sense of the complexities of secondary schools as organisations

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Abstract
This paper outlines a conceptual framework for a school as an organisation. In this, there are three core elements: people (including students), power to energise or prevent action, and culture that is constructed by a community’s members to reflect its norms, values and beliefs. However in this construction some people are more influential than others. An organisation’s culture is sometimes called a micro-culture to distinguish it from national or local community cultures. The curriculum, at the core of a school’s purpose and process, is a cultural construction legitimated by the authority of those responsible for a school’s management.

Key words: power; micro-culture; school organisations; critical perspectives

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So what’s in the mix?
people, power, culture/curriculum,
all of which are located in particular contexts which lead, through people’s interactions with them, to the construction of knowledge

People
Its people who make things happen (in schools):
• pupils aged about 11 years to 17 or 18 years who, even at the upper end of this range, are still (nominally) under the care of parent(s) or carers
• adults aged from early 20 something to 60 years or so
• Teachers, teaching assistants, clerical staff, site staff, some of whom are in leadership roles, who interact
• and parent(s) (and carers), too
• plus members of the social and business communities in which a school is embedded and who have an interest in it
People have multitudinous characteristics

- Male and female, pupils and staff
- From various ethnic origins and of different socio-economic status
- From different faiths and none
- With different qualities of social capital (Bourdieu, 1990)
- With different interests, enthusiasms and levels of energy, and capacities to learn in different ways
- With different talents, or lack of talent, in different areas of knowledge
- With different access to formal and informal, bureaucratic and personal sources of power and authority … and children can have charisma, too!

People are affected by various socio-political contexts in which they live and work

- The socio-economic status of students is a key indicator of academic under-achievement and over-representation in disciplinary confrontations with teachers and head teachers in schools.
- A report by Shelter, the charity for homeless people, studied the impact of homelessness on children’s education, health and job opportunities and found that all were affected deleteriously (TES, 4 June 2004:4).
- Such students tend to be massively over represented amongst excluded students, e.g.:
  
  *The child [who] gets looked after by social services. They get moved. They get put with one foster family. They’re moved again. Their schooling can be disrupted an endless number of times … they’re the children we need to be modelling how useful education is … otherwise they become the parents of the next set of children who get looked after*
  
  (Osler et al, 2000: 40)
- Less tangible qualities that students bring to school from their families - such as their attitude to reading – can help or hinder their educational achievement (Baumert and Schumer, 2002).
- Chinese origin students and in some cases Indian origin students, too, outperform all other groups of students whether they come from advantaged or disadvantaged social backgrounds (Francis and Archer, 2005; DfES 2005a)

So staff have contexts (histories), too

- Teachers and other staff come from a variety of contexts – where they were born / grew up –, in the experiences they have had growing up, and in the socio-economic locations in which they live … and leaders are other staff
- This will affect the way in which they perceive a school, schooling, and the pupils and parents in a school, and their colleagues on the staff (Ribbins, 1997)
- In turn this will influence the ways in which they interact with different pupils, staff and parents

Power

Power, Purpose and decision-making

- Schools are purposeful organisations: People in them try to implement action for particular purposes, which are often guided by values as well as reflecting various policy contexts.
The purpose of schools is to promote learning of both academic subjects and the personal and social aspects of students’ development (Education Reform Act, 1988).

To achieve this they are sites of policy processes (Grace, 1995; Bowe and Ball, 1992) that are sustained by asymmetrical and negotiable relationships of power between school members and between members and school stakeholders.

Organisational structures (hierarchies) are no more, though no less, than the historical outcomes of negotiative processes, the reflections of past and present power struggles within and about a school that are sustained and eroded by changing socio-political contexts.

But hierarchies shift through time, sometimes under pressure from the socio-political contexts within which school organisations are embedded.

These hierarchies give rise to bureaucratic power. Those with senior formal posts in such hierarchies have greater access to this source of power – often characterised as formal authority (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980) – than others.

But teachers have access to it too, in order to do their job (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Power as flow

- Power flows through interactions between people (Foucault, 1986) and between people and systems and the rule structures that sustain those systems (Giddens, 1984).
- Power is used to get things done, as well as to stop things happening. It is constructed through present and past action and intimation of future action. It is not a process of exchange as Parsons (1986) claims, but exchange constitutes a projection of power.
- There is formal power (authority) and informal power (influence) (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980). The latter is also construed as personal sources of power (or influence) arising from people’s personal or professional knowledge, skills and resources, from personal presence (charisma), from personal relationships, from the range of communities of which they have membership.
- It is often related to Staff and students’ personal interests—technical / curriculum, work-oriented, social; individual people’s views, values and beliefs and interpersonal relationships (Busher, 2006); constructing shared values with other members of their communities in and out of school, e.g. other pupils in a class or other teachers in a department, position in their communities— at the core or on the periphery (Wenger, 1998).
- Formal power is linked to bureaucratic power arising from the offices (formal positions) people hold in an organisational hierarchy: Post of responsibility (formal and informal); membership of coalitions / interest groups / factions (formal and informal).
- Everybody has power and draws on what resources they have in the contexts in which they are interacting with organisational systems & other people to try to achieve their agenda – search for self-esteem (Benjamin, 2002) and construction of identity (Giddens, 1991).
- Power flows through negotiation: strategies of power and the rates of exchange for negotiation; cultures: formal and informal groups of participants of and in a school constructing...
Sources of power for teachers and middle leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal sources of power</th>
<th>Work-related sources of power</th>
<th>Institutional/ bureaucratic sources of power</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
<td>External contacts</td>
<td>Authority / status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Warm / supportive</td>
<td>Subject expertise</td>
<td>Cross-institutional links</td>
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<tr>
<td>Efficient / well organised</td>
<td>Pedagogic expertise</td>
<td>Access to resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dependable</td>
<td>Manages pupils effectively</td>
<td>Access to decision-making</td>
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<tr>
<td>Authoritative / Esteem</td>
<td>Cross-institutional links</td>
<td>Links with senior colleagues</td>
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<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
<td>Access to resources</td>
<td>Access to external authority</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tough negotiator</td>
<td>Part of the (department) team</td>
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<td>Focal point of communication</td>
<td>Prestige of the dept</td>
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<td>Person oriented leadership</td>
<td>Access to information</td>
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<td>style</td>
<td>Control of time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Knowledge of school system</td>
<td>Contacts with external agencies</td>
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<td>Alertness to change in contexts</td>
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<td>Influence over culture</td>
<td>Management of staff</td>
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(Busher, 2006)

Pupils have (legitimate) power, too

- In schools the hierarchy might consist of: school governors, head teacher, senior management team, middle / subject leaders, teachers and teaching assistants, clerical and site staff, and pupils
- But everybody has access to informal or personal power, sometimes called influence, through various sources which they can use to shape decisions & events
- Pupils are part of the hierarchy of a school because they are people (have agency) and interact with other people (e.g. Teachers) to shape the processes and culture of a school.
- Through their interactions they exert power (influence) and some are given authority through formal roles in school
- their interactions, like those of teachers, are more complex than the simplistic reductionism implied in neo-liberal notions of pupils as consumers
- Pupils also have access to bureaucratic power through children’s rights legislation, and welfare and learning support legislation, but rarely draw on this themselves, usually relying on proxies such as parents or school staff to do so for them.

Power, Values and decision-making

- Values are central to people’s choices of action (Begley, 1999), even if those values are only poorly articulated – actions manifest values – leads to people trying to live moral lives (i.e. in tune with their values) whether staff or pupils, through schooling in order to have experiences of schooling that are satisfying to their constructed identities / self-esteem (Begley 2007), leaders learning to be moral by engaging the morality of learning (Starratt, 2007)
- Influence (informal power) and authority (formal power) are used to implement the work-related and social values that people prefer for the purposes for which they are working in particular socio-political and organisational contexts.
all decision-making in schools involves political acts that encompass value-laden choices involving moral, financial and personnel judgements about different courses of action (Ribbins 1999). Choices that enable one course prevent others being chosen.

to implement or sustain policy or practice successfully people need to use a combination of formal power and personal sources of power, (teacher in classroom; middle leader in dept; head teacher where ever)

E.g. middle leaders offer colleagues & pupils a range of social, symbolic, intellectual and material resources as sources of power to shape or support their colleagues’ actions, when developing preferred departmental practices within the contexts of the organisational system, and the processes of national and local government policy

Power and inequality

- Consequently some people are more equal than others in influencing decisions and events and shaping the cultures of organisations and the informal and formal groups of staff (departments) within them
- Leaders not only have the authority to coerce, but the power to reward
- Which can be plugged into people’s different interests
- People acting as formal and informal leaders can use power linked to shared values to persuade others to comply, apparently through their own choices (Lenski, 1986)
- People can be persuaded to survey and regulate their own practice (Foucault, 1986) through agreeing to shared values, making processes of leadership less corrosive of community
- But groups of people have power, too, which they can exert to limit the actions of members and formally appointed and informal leaders (Lukes, 1974). Such power is often asserted through appeal to cultural norms and values of the group (Hoyle, 1981)

International and National policy contexts and power

- The external contexts relevant to a study of schools in England, UK, include international, central and local government policies, as well as shifts in public attitudes to education and its practitioners and beneficiaries, and the socio-economic status of members of the communities which each school serves (Riley et al. 2000).
- The impact on schooling and education of globalisation; of the OECD emphasising in the 1980s decentralised finances; and of models of New Public Management (NPM) emphasising systems thinking, personal mastery and tight hands-on management, explicit standards and measures of performance (Moos, 2000).
- Neo-liberal education policies were implemented in England and Wales during and after the mid 1980s by central government. These policies were enacted by creating quasi-markets for public services, in the belief that such approaches best achieved a reasonable distribution of resources (Lauder et al, 1999). The New Labour government of 1997 continued this policy through the Standards and Framework Act (1998) and then by developing a framework of specialist colleges and city academies under the Education Act (2002), amongst other legislation.
- Central control of schools is exerted from national government level by policies such as OFSTED inspections, National Curriculum, Key Stage Three strategies and the introduction of performance management into schools. The remodelling of the school workforce (DfES 2005b) has the potential to alter dramatically teachers (and middle leaders) work,
introducing what some say is sustainable and beneficial change (Hammersley-Fletcher and Lowe, 2005).

**Local and internal policy contexts**

- At local or regional government level policies define from which communities a schools’ students may come, what levels of welfare and learning support particular students might receive, and how schools can improve the quality of learning and teaching. Local welfare and education provision are linked through ECM (2004) & the Children Act (2005)
- Other local or regional bodies that set contexts for schools include the sponsoring bodies of Academies; Specialist Schools Trust; Excellence in Cities Project; Educational Improvement Partnerships
- The internal policy contexts are constructed and projected by a school’s senior management team (Grace, 1995) and by a school’s governors.
- Formal and informal leaders mediate the values and demands from these contexts to their colleagues, students and their students’ parents and carers, but also have to take account of other people’s values and beliefs when negotiating decisions.

**Culture**

- Cultures of organisations and work groups are what members of them construct to represent their work-related values and identities (Wenger, 1998) to define what it means to carry out their work successfully in the asymmetrical power relationships of the school organisations in which they work
- It is different from organisational climate, which focuses on some people’s perspectives of other people’s work
- Some participants are more influential than others in constructing organisational (school) and group (e.g. department) cultures because they are able to exert more formal power and / or influence
- Organisational culture is related to societal culture but is an interpretation and reflection of it rather than a subset or subculture of it.
- An organisation’s culture contain within it micro-cultures (Mittendorf et al 2005) / small cultures (Holliday, 2004) which belong to / are constructed by the people who form the departments (formal groups) or informal groups or communities in a school among staff and pupils.
- These hybrid (micro) cultural entities (Bhabha, 1994) are constructed from their participants’ experiences of organisational culture and of their lives in school and in communities outside school.

**Cultural manifestations and contexts**

- Cultures are visible in the behavioural manifestations of people – rituals, ceremonies, rules, how teaching and learning is carried out; conceptual manifestations and metaphors – curriculum, language used, organisational aims and stories; and physical manifestations – facilities, uniforms, crests and mottos (Beare et al, 1989) and allocation and use of space .
- The cultures people construct in schools are shaped by a wide range of policy, economic and social contexts; the organisational contexts of the schools in which they work;
• And by epistemological contexts: their theoretical and practical work-related knowledge of curriculum, pedagogy, social and psychological processes (Mortimore, 1993), that suffuse teachers’ thinking about teaching, learning and what constitutes subject knowledge, and their knowledge of organisational systems, policy processes and micro-political strategies (Busher 2001, 2006)

Constructing purposeful cultures to facilitate learning
• The purpose of schools is to promote learning of academic subjects and *the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society ... The preparation of pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life* (Education Reform Act (ERA) 1988, Section 1, para. 2)
• School leaders at all levels are responsible for helping teachers to implement these curriculum policies successfully and inclusively by creating and sustaining appropriate cultures, i.e. the curriculum is a reflection of particular cultural perspectives given legitimacy (power) by accepted social processes. It is intended to help society reproduce itself.
• Teachers’ work is shaped strongly by central government, the curriculum it deems appropriate for children of different ages, and by the accountability mechanisms it puts in place to monitor schools’ and teachers’ work
• Teachers are also influenced by the views of the subject associations to which they belong, by contacts with other teachers of the same subject or age group of students, by their academic histories (e.g. the university they attended), and by the media.
• The views of other staff reflect their own experiences of schooling historically and in the present
• Pupils views of schooling are constructed partly from their own experiences but also from those expressed by their parents, other adults in their communities, friends and siblings

Purposeful cultures engage students in learning
Schools that successfully promote children’s engagement with learning:
• A clearly articulated philosophy or statement of goals
• Clear patterns of formal and informal communications
• Democratic decision-making processes
• Systematic attention to student records (to enhance performance rather than as a surveillance mechanism)
• Parents involved as helpers, teachers and in decision-making,
• students working in projects outside the school used school resources
• Students and teachers worked together to improve the school environment
• Senior staff took responsibility for ensuring that teachers’ morale was high
  (Slee, 1991:57) but see also Chapman and Harris (2004)

Creating (micro) cultures, contesting contexts
• Allowing student voices to be heard successfully means they have to speak directly in the dialogues in school that are normally dominated by staff, and powerful members of staff at that, about the construction of the school as a community (Fielding, 2004).
• Staff, and teachers in particular, often experience this level of student engagement as a threat to their authority – their power over the processes of schooling, a revolt by the
under-classes of school society against the dominant (staff) discourses that shape the culture and policy of the school

- Pupils respond to this conflict with the constructed system of the school in various ways e.g. Willis (1977) found white working class boys at secondary school discovered ways to colonise school processes (including space) that saved them from getting bored, even if they gained little formally from school.
- Benjamin (2002) studied girls with learning difficulties from minority ethnic groups who engaged in micro-cultural / political activity to ensure they maximised their self-esteem by playing roles that their peers and adults would accept
- But staff, too contest the dominant discourses of schooling projected by senior staff. This can help to develop dynamic communities focused on learning (Bottery 2003), or can lead to disaffection, alienation and fragmented working practices if senior staff coerce or manipulate (manage?) their colleagues into compliance

Leading the construction of knowledge in educational organisations: What’s in the mix?
A dynamic interaction in overlapping contexts of people, power, culture, curriculum that leaders try to steer by a utopian loadstone

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