

School culture: how can we discover the students' view?

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Abstract

Sheila Ball is a teaching and learning consultant for the local authority in Hertfordshire. Recently she has been seconded to Heathcote School to support and develop teaching and learning. In this article, she describes how, when she was a teacher in a secondary school, she developed and used a toolkit to evaluate her school's culture from the point of view of the students. She also reflects on the leadership dimension of this project with the benefit of several more years of experience and from the standpoint of someone who has worked to support pedagogy in a large number of schools.

Looking back to when I first experimented with student voice and its role in school improvement, it is clear that the policy climate has changed a great deal and practices which were then quite difficult to establish are now relatively common place. Nevertheless, I think it is helpful to reflect on this project and the implications for leadership. When I undertook the project described below I was a teacher with responsibility for Modern Foreign Languages and a form tutor. I was very interested in whole school development but had no role of responsibility for it.

Learning about school culture

My project stemmed from a growing interest in the culture or ethos of schools. When I was training to be a teacher I both taught in and visited a number of schools in the state and private sectors. I was intrigued by the fact that these schools 'felt' different to one another. I wondered how young people and teachers working with a similar curriculum could have such diverse experiences and expectations. Seven years and three schools later I remained equally fascinated by the 'feel phenomenon'. As I read more about schools I came to realise that what I was 'feeling' was the culture of a school. This is not just the outward expression of a school's norms and values which

is apparent to a visitor on first entering a school (MacBeath, 2001). Rather it is the values, attitudes and habits of the members of the school community at a given time (Holt, 2000). I wanted to find out more about school culture, about how it is expressed and how it can affect the learning experience of students.

I therefore decided to undertake a project which focused on discovering more about my own school's culture from the perspective of a particular group of students. I wanted to consider the students' values, their attitudes to teaching and learning and their perceptions of the conditions that affect teaching and learning in our school. I also wanted to experiment with a variety of self-evaluation tools, to discover which were most effective in helping me to understand more about school culture from a student's perspective. I hoped to be able to offer the leaders of my school a rich source of knowledge to support them in developing the school as a learning community.

An exploration of the literature on school culture helped me to understand more about this complex concept. I was interested to learn of the fundamental importance of values in cultural development and in particular, the centrality of shared values based on civic and moral responsibility in promoting effective learning (Cogan and Derricott, 1998). Our school mission statement described values which I suspected were not necessarily shared by all members of the school community. I wondered how the students would describe the culture of the school and whether they saw themselves having a role in shaping that culture (MacBeath, 1999). I was interested in Wenger's (1998) discussion of schools as learning communities, peopled by individuals who bring variety but also need a sense of belonging. I began to understand that cultures built on the imposition of values would result in conflict (Watson and Ashton, 1995) and would not support effective learning and teaching.

Developing tools to excavate the school culture

Armed with a greater understanding of school cultures, and the need for community building within them, I set out to design the tools which would allow me to explore our school culture from the students' point of view. I was not interested in developing tools to be used on a one-off basis. Instead I wanted to develop instruments which could be reviewed, developed and re-used to explore the students' perspective and involve them as active participants in building a learning community (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000).

Initially I wanted to gain a snapshot of students' perceptions of the values of their school. Each student received a school planner in which the Code of Conduct, a set of rules based on the school's mission statement, is laid out. The aim of this Code is to promote a learning community where all members can work, learn and play together in a supportive environment through relationships based on respect. I therefore devised the questionnaire below, based on this Code of Conduct.

This tool was based on a tried and tested design (MacBeath, 2005) which asked students to respond twice to each statement. It firstly asks students to say whether the statements given are 'a lot like', 'quite like', 'not much like' or 'not at all like' their school. It then asks them to state whether they view the statements as 'not at all important', 'of limited importance', 'important' or 'crucial'. I chose to work with students in my tutor group as I had established relationships with them based on trust and mutual respect. I already knew that these students had views about the school and were keen to voice their opinion. There were perhaps other reasons for this choice which were better understood with hindsight as I discuss later.

Figure 1: Student questionnaire

Perceptions about School Questionnaire

Please complete the questionnaire by reading the statements and ticking one box on each side of the statements.

A lot like my school	Quite like my school	Not much like my school	Not at all like my school	At my school ...	Not at all important	Of limited importance	Important	Crucial
				students are able to learn and teachers are able to teach.				
				lessons run in a friendly, relaxed and orderly manner.				
				everyone is able to work without distraction.				
				students are polite and considerate to others and treat others with respect.				
				students are listened to by staff and listen to staff.				
				students come to school prepared and ready to work and appropriately dressed.				
				students get to school on time.				
				students respect one another's belongings.				
				students respect the places where they work.				
				students help to create a caring atmosphere where they feel involved and valued.				

Thank you for your co-operation.

Having gained this snapshot of the students' perceptions about their school as a learning community, I wanted to explore more fully their personal, everyday experiences of learning and teaching. I had read

that learning diaries is a powerful way to do this (MacBeath, 1999) and so gave students in my tutor group a diary in which to make notes on daily events both inside and outside of the classroom. I then had a formal dialogue with them in pairs in which I asked them to describe and explain the experiences they had recorded.

I also wanted to experiment with using photos to further empower students in interpreting school life (Schratz and Steiner-Loffler, 1998). I asked students to organise themselves into small groups and asked them to agree on five positive and five negative areas of the school to photograph. I then gave them the use of a digital camera and in registration time they took photographs around the school. Each group then organised their images to create a display including captions which explained the photograph and their reasons for including it in their display. I decided to talk with the students whilst they were making their displays in order to get a better understanding of the reasons for their choices and their view of the impact of the environment on their learning.

What did I learn?

My main aim had been to explore my school's culture from the perspective of a group of students in order to support my school's development as a learning community. I learned that the use of a variety of self-evaluation tools with a group of students can produce a wealth of knowledge about key aspects of school culture. For example, I learnt that, despite the existence of a code of conduct based on values of respect and consideration for others, these values are not shared by all the students. Students instead appeared to be selective about these values, depending on whether they respect individual teachers' classroom habits and practices. In addition, students seemed to have little understanding or acceptance of the idea that learning is the common purpose of the school community.

How did I explain what I found out? I might have concluded that the lack of shared values could be because the values expressed in the mission statement had not been successfully communicated in school, but I was convinced that shared values has to be seen as an outcome of a complex range of developmental strategies rather than a straight forward matter of transmission. For example I was aware that the school building had been intended for a community of half the size of the intake at that time and that was probably having a detrimental effect on the development of a harmonious learning community. I was also interested in looking at how these values are

modelled in the classroom by teachers' behaviour and the pedagogical approaches used.

I was mindful of the fact that these outcomes were only based on data from one group of students – my own form group – and although they might be indicative, they could not be claimed to be representative of the student population as a whole. Nevertheless, I thought that the insights generated from just this one group told us that there are serious challenges lurking below the surface and that, as a school, we needed to conduct a more comprehensive enquiry.

Perhaps the most important outcome of my project was the trial and development of a toolkit for exploring the students' perspective. I felt that the tools could be successfully developed and re-used to allow us as a school to learn more about students' views. This data would enable us to develop the conditions for supporting teaching and learning in our school but would also have a direct impact on students' dispositions by enabling them to have a voice and feel a sense of ownership and belonging (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007).

My recommendations

My assumption at that time was that the way forward was to communicate the outcomes of my project to the school's senior leadership team and perhaps other relevant committees within the school. They would then act on this useful information. I had a series of recommendations to put forward. These included:

- the setting up of a working party to look at the development of shared values, our teaching and learning policy and the limitations of the school site
- the further use of the toolkit by Year 8 tutors to find out more about the students' perspective
- the use of self-evaluation tools to help teachers explore the school culture
- the inclusion of self-evaluation as part of the School Improvement Plan.

These recommendations were founded on the belief that the potential for real and lasting school improvement lies with teachers who continuously engage in a process of reflection and action (Frost *et al.*, 2000). From my work I learned that school self-evaluation needs to become embedded in the practices of a school in order to allow the

‘bottom-up’ development which results in lasting change (MacBeath, 1999).

The problem was that my initial discussion with the senior leadership team had been discouraging and so I had shied away from further meetings to share the outcomes of the project. Instead I met with one member of the team who had been sympathetic to the project and had showed interest in the outcomes. He seemed genuinely moved by the students’ photo evaluations and this was very encouraging. However, no action plan emerged.

I subsequently went on maternity leave and feared that my attempts to initiate a student voice strategy in the school would soon disappear without trace. After the birth of my child, I went to see the Headteacher hoping to persuade him to act on the outcomes of my project. I provided a verbal overview of the project and what I had found out, but sadly my account met with indifference. I went home disappointed and dejected. With the benefit of hindsight informed by my subsequent experience working with schools as a consultant, I can see that I was a little naïve. I had focused, perhaps understandably, on the tools and techniques that would allow the students in my own form to express their views, but I had neglected the leadership dimension. So what were the barriers to change and what might I have done differently?

Reframing the leadership dimension

The first problem that I can see looking back on my project, was the choice to work only with my own form. The rationale was that these students were accessible to me and willing to cooperate. It was all very convenient and practical. I had sufficient confidence to try out these strategies within the confines of my own form but I lacked the confidence to persuade colleagues to join me in this enterprise. I was conscious of the possibility that the project would be controversial and that it would be seen as opening Pandora’s box. It was already known that some students were disaffected and their views were likely to be negative. Coupled with this was the pressure of expectations that went with my role in the school. At that time the school could be characterised more as an organisation than a community with all that implies about the link between formal roles and authority. As a Head of Modern Languages I sensed that some colleagues would not be relaxed about my taking on a project which had implications for the school as a whole. This was reinforced by comments made by a university researcher who I had consulted

about my project; he seemed surprised that my project led me beyond the confines of my subject domain. It confirmed my assumption that a viable model for such a project would consist of: a) a pilot study with one class; b) dissemination of the outcomes to colleagues; c) implementation by the school as an organisation. This model has been subject to robust critique (Frost, 2007) and I can now see its limitations. Looking back it is easy to see that the project would have stood a greater chance of becoming embedded if I had persuaded colleagues to join me in this enterprise so that the idea would be promoted through the collaboration.

Another issue which stands out from my current perspective is the question of what might be called a mandate for action. I discussed the initial idea for my project with my 'line manager' who showed little interest but was happy for me to do whatever would help me to satisfy the requirements of the masters degree I was pursuing. Perhaps if I had pushed for an agreement to conduct my initial trials with a whole year group, the outcomes might have been more readily received. It might have been regarded as 'official'. To achieve this would have been challenging of course: it would have required some systematic consultation, tenacious lobbying, subtle trust building, persuasion and a carefully managed meeting. These leadership activities are more easily accomplished in a climate where an explicit model of distributed leadership prevails. These days, many schools have embraced such thinking and would subscribe to a greater or lesser extent to the idea of being a professional learning community (Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007) but when I carried out my project, that kind of discourse was not yet established.

It may have been unrealistic to hope that my proposals for this project would be welcomed by the senior leadership team. There is no ducking the question that arises in relation to teacher leadership: how can we proceed if our personal view of the priority for development is not accepted or recognised by the senior leadership team? In my case I might have done more to find allies who had more leverage than I did. This might have entailed one-to-one conversations with a range of people in different positions in the organisational hierarchy in order to find someone who would be prepared to present a proposal on my behalf. Sometimes we have to enable someone with more positional power to adopt an idea so that they proudly call it their own and steer it through the necessary committee structure.

What about the way in which my pilot study was disseminated? I had produced a twenty thousand word thesis but as far as I know, none of my colleagues at that time actually read it and it is perhaps unreasonable to expect them to do so. Schools are intense working environments and information has to be consumed quickly. The bullet point reigns supreme. When I spoke to the Headteacher, he told me that my study had not revealed anything that he didn't already know. In retrospect I should have concentrated on the process. I could have demonstrated that I had effectively evaluated and developed some tools and techniques for student voice and school self-evaluation which was the coming thing. If I had offered a process that would foster student participation and help to combat disaffection I might have succeeded in persuading sceptical colleagues to adopt my proposals.

Overall, I have to say that I learnt a great deal from the project. I learnt a great deal about how to facilitate student voice which had major implications for my understanding of school development, but I experienced frustration because these practices were not immediately taken up at a whole school level. There are some interesting lessons here about the nature of leadership. It has become clear to me over the intervening period that, if you want to embed new practices in the fabric of the school, you need to act strategically in the ways I have indicated above. This is challenging in an interpersonal sense of course and demands an accurate reading of the organisational climate.

Engaging in dialogue with colleagues within and across formal structures is essential in creating the social capital and intellectual capital from which leadership can emerge (Hargreaves, 2001). Such dialogue does not necessarily have to take place in formal settings, it can be a chat in the staffroom, an email, an exploratory conversation with a colleague at the end of the day. It is about planting seeds strategically. It is about seeing the value of sharing ideas with others who might express concerns, leading to possible solutions and ways forward. If the climate or language does not exist within your school, you need to grow it – by modelling the language and behaviour of leadership – by using the skills of consultation and collaboration, involving others and persuading them of the validity of your proposals.

Reflecting back on this project has reminded me how the capacity to think and act strategically is not automatic. It takes time and

experience to develop. Perhaps we need to think big but start small and allow time to reflect on the lessons learnt.

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