1.3 School culture

The use of the term ‘culture’ in the school context refers to the basic assumptions, beliefs and practices that are shared by the members of a school community. These assumptions, beliefs and practices mould how a school views itself and its environment. They shape its operations and how it functions. School culture affects the way people in a school think, perform and learn. Simply put, someone might describe a school’s culture as ‘the way we do things here’.

Working out what constitutes a school’s culture is not straightforward. Members of the school community are not always conscious of the assumptions, beliefs and practices that they hold in common because they take for granted that things will be done, or people will behave in certain ways. These underlying assumptions, beliefs and practices become increasingly apparent the longer you are part of a functioning school.

Visible, discernible components of a school’s culture fall into three categories - verbal (both written and spoken), behavioural and visual.

Verbal indications of a school’s culture include the school’s motto, its statement of purpose and its goals or underlying philosophy. Sometimes there can be differences between the stated philosophy and what actually happens. Other verbal manifestations are the stories people tell about the way the school operates, the myths of the school and the metaphors that teachers use in their conversations.

Behavioural indications of a school’s culture include the procedures, ceremonies, rules, regulations, rewards, sanctions, structures and the curricula of the school.

Visual indications of a school’s culture include things such as school symbols, the uniforms, the facilities and the icons of the school.

Becoming familiar with the culture of a particular school takes time. Some tangible things that may give an initial indication include the:

- school’s statement of purpose
- school management plan
- school policies such as the student welfare policy
- school’s prospectus
- motto
- information booklet for casual teachers
- information/induction booklet for newly appointed staff
- school’s newsletter (usually targeting parents and the school community)
- interactions between teachers and students.
Levels of culture

The following diagram helps us imagine the school as being comprised of layers resembling an onion. The surface layer represents the operational level of the school. This is the level of school life which one experiences on walking into a school building, seeing children on their way to class etc.

Underneath that layer is the organisational level of the school. This layer is made up of all those organising structures of the school such as the weekly schedule of classes.

The next layer is made up of the programs of the school. This includes the various components of the academic program, as well as the extra curricular programs. Under the program layer, is the policy layer. It is here that we find the policies by which the school is run.

Beneath that layer we find the goals and purposes level. Here we find the general goals of the school, the mission statement if there is one, sometimes even a philosophy statement. These statements tell what the school community is striving to do, or become, or achieve.

Nearing the centre or core of the onion, we find the level of beliefs and assumptions. Here would be what might be called the school's tacit educational platform. We say tacit, because most of the beliefs and assumptions are rarely explicated. We assume that children come to school to learn, we believe that parents have the best intentions for their children, we assume that teachers want children to learn something in their classes, we assume people are rational, we believe that the state has the best interests of the children at heart in enforcing mandatory school attendance laws etc. The list of beliefs and assumptions is potentially infinite, for they include beliefs about the most basic matters in life.
At the core of the onion, sometimes flowing into the layer of beliefs and assumptions, are the *myths and meanings* by which people make sense out of their lives, by which they define value, by which human striving is to be judged, which help to place oneself in a definable order of things. This core is almost beyond articulation.

Nevertheless, it is in that core of myth, meaning, and belief that leaders find the grounding for their vision of what the school might or ought to become. At the core we find myths of heroism, of human destiny and of the nature of human society. Those myths are usually embodied in story, in poems, in highly symbolic literature. They shape our convictions, our beliefs, and our attitudes towards most things. Because of them, we can reach consensus on our beliefs and assumptions.

We can experience a school in which those deep meanings are seldom referred to, in which the core might just as well be empty, because of the total focus on the surface tasks in the school. We can see another school where the myths and beliefs at the core of the school, articulated in the vision, inter-penetrate every layer of the onion. In every program or policy, we can find reference to a core of meanings that unify and provide identity to the school community.

*Levels of culture* is adapted from Starratt, R. 1993. “Transforming life in schools”. Staff development and appraisal. ACEA. Adapted from School focused training and development, NSW DET 1999.