MANAGING SCHOOLS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: SOME ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE CONSIDERATIONS

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A B S T R A C T

The Corona virus pandemic has led to a global lockdown which resulted in schools closure and interruption on teaching and learning. For health-related reasons schools have to adhere to recommendations that limit the spread of the virus and these include; social distancing, limiting the use of cooperative learning strategies in classrooms as well as strict regulation of collaborative working teams in schools. These changes to how work is carried out in schools indicate a need to adapt school organizational cultures to the new way of "doing things". Changes to how schools are managed, to curriculum and instructional design, and to how performance is measured in schools are a starting point. This paper looks at some of the changes that need to be implemented on school cultures in order to keep schools safe from the virus, as well as to maintain high levels of efficiency particularly during times of uncertainty.

INTRODUCTION

Research on the current corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic is just emerging, and understandably greatly skewed in favor of the global economic and health challenges (Islam & others, 2020). It is not likely that the true cost of the pandemic can be estimated with any certainty at this point although the immediate ripple effects are reaching far and wide. Economists vouch that against the background of economic fragility as a result of the global economic meltdown of 2008 most industries, particularly those lacking the agility to adapt, will take a hard knock. The latest estimate by the World Monetary Fund paints a bleak future and projects a drop in consumer spending and an unprecedented disruption in the value chains (Islam, 2013). With changing demand for goods and services, and a tight budget to work with, most organizations are reengineering their production processes; evaluating their business strategies, and scaling down on both production and staff to survive. The trickle-down effects are massive staff layoffs, global strive, and political unrest.

While the perils of the tourism industry are perhaps the easiest to see due to the complete dependence of the industry on the global movement of people, it may be businesses that are obscured from public observation, such as small and medium businesses operating in small communities that have great impact on people when they stifle and close. With less money available to specifically target ailing businesses at the community level governments are rolling out industry-specific packages to revamp the economy at the national level and there are indications that the help might be too late for small (and in some cases big) businesses that are dependent on a healthy rural economy (Anzum & Islam, 2021).

At the organizational level, the social distancing restrictions are shaping how organizations operate and how teamwork is organized and executed. Schools have, by virtue of having large numbers of students congregating in small areas, such as in classrooms, been particularly susceptible to spreading the corona virus (Alevizou, 2020, April 3). Recent reports also indicate a resurgence of infection in areas that have loosened restrictions, which is a clear indication of the lurking danger of recurrence should social distancing and other preventative measures be discarded too soon. Organizations in general and schools, in particular, are awaking to the need to re-engineer how work is done- in other words, their organizational cultures, to comply with the needs of the "new normal" (Azevedo et.al., 2020).

Organizational culture permeates all activities and processes in a school and is responsible for differences in the performance of otherwise identical schools (Madu, 2012). Culture reduces uncertainty in the schools by dictating how teachers respond to everyday organizational challenges, whether they are internal or external. Researchers often liken organizational culture to the organization's personality and argue that it is through probing and studying organizational culture that a better understanding of organizational life; how staff relate with one another,

what motivates them, what is acceptable and what is not and many other unique organizational idiosyncrasies can be understood.

But COVID-19 has put a dent on organizational life as we used to know it. Changes to how work is organized and performed as well as the nature of interactions between teams and across teams in the same organization have been pushed through rapid change (Green, 2020). Organizations have been thrown into uncertainty as all the procedures and processes have been forced to adapt to this single external pressure. As can be expected, schools have likewise been thrown into the quagmire of uncertainty and have to address both organizational concerns as well as a general panic about the safety of students and teachers. Frequent unplanned lockdowns have also been greatly disruptive to normal teaching and learning (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020).

The purpose of this study therefore was to identify cultural considerations in schools that management needs to look at to adapt to the rapid changes that result from the COVID-19 pandemic. Normally organizations experience incremental changes to how they operate but this has not been the case due to the corona virus. Change is not an option for schools but a necessity and the best way to start is to deal with entrenched values that guide how staff deal and feel about their work by changing school cultures.

DEFINITION OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Although research on organizational culture is well developed in management literature there is still no consensus on the definition of organizational culture, as well as disagreements on what it comprises of (Tanase, 2015). From the literature on organizational culture three points are clear. First, the concept of organizational culture has been studied and conceptualized from different fields and disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, and sociology, and research has developed parallel in these fields therefore resulting in multiple, and often, irreconcilable conceptualization of the same phenomena. Second, there have been multiple suggestions and arguments about what constitutes an appropriate organizational culture that can drive organizational objectives (Ahmed, 1998; Alvesson, 2013). Although research on organizational culture has intensified in management sciences in the last few decades there are still a lot of grey areas that management scholars have not been able to agree on. Third, the literature is still inconclusive on the link between organizational culture and the financial performance of organizations. At best the notion of culture is conceptualized as a soft, people-centric way to assess organizational life and not so tied to the market and external forces that make organizations financially competitive (Abu-Jarad, Yusof, & Nikbin, 2010). Organizations that place a lot of importance on organizational culture are mostly those that have an internal focus on staff satisfaction and less on market share and competition, although a link has been found by management scholars between staff satisfaction and performance (Yesil & Salih, 2013).

Simply put, organizational culture entails three things; what people think and feel in relation to organizational life, what people do- that is the processes and activities in an organization and what people make of their current position, their surroundings, and the social environment in an organization (Cameron & Quinn, 2006). Other common properties of OC across disciplines are that it is shared by a social unit of people, it is learned both passively and actively, transmitted to new members through formal and informal communication, symbolic in nature, crosses the generational divide, and it is versatile (Duke II & Edet, 2012).

A commonly used definition of organizational culture is proposed by Edgar Schein who defines OC as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 2004, p.35). Schein developed the notion of OC further by arguing that OC exists at both surface and deep structure levels, just like an iceberg, and that what is readily visible and obvious is a fraction of the deeper and symbolic properties of OC that lie deeper in the subconscious of staff and can only be understood by probing the subjective subconscious mind (Fekete & Bocskei, 2011).

The persisting interest in organizational culture demonstrates the ever-changing demand for organizations to be versatile and to adapt to external pressures. In the last twenty years, organizations have had to adapt to the fast pace of technology which changed how businesses produced goods, marketed these goods, sold them, and related with their customers (Han, Kim, & Srivasta, 1998; Serpa, 20116). Organizations that had the necessary agility to adapt quickly flourished while organizations whose cultures inhibited speedy reaction perished. More than ever managers are compelled to be culture-savvy and to constantly make incremental changes to their organizational cultures to adapt to the ever-changing business landscape.

Likewise, schools are compelled to adapt their cultures to the needs of the communities and the environment in which they operate (Barroso, 2006; Costa, 2003). In recent months the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a complete overhaul of school cultures and ushered in a new era of hybrid schools that infuse as much technology as is possible in their everyday activities. While no doubt this has come at a cost to schools and learners alike it has become a necessary inconvenience. Since schools have to change how they operate this cannot just take place at the classroom level (Hargreaves, 1998). It has to be a process that cascades from the top since by extension school managers have to change how they manage their schools, how schools to design curriculum and instructional material, how they administer assessment as well as how teachers' appraisals and hours of service are designed (Dauber, Fink, & Yolles, 2012; Lima, 2002; Hargreaves, 1998).

SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Research on school management shows that there is a shift from focused leadership towards a more democratic and inclusive distributed leadership as an increasing number of school managers are enjoying the wisdom of delegation and participative decision making (Louis, Murphy, & Smylie, 2016; Bogler & Nir, 2012). Since decision-making in schools in no longer a prerogative of people at the top organizational cultures have become more complex and multi-pronged and do not cascade downwards as they used to do (Prosser, 1999). Since one of the responsibilities of managers is to manage how work is done in an organization, in other words, organizational culture, the new model of school management that emphasizes collective decision making means that culture within an organization is a collective endeavor (Scehin, 1985; 2004; Torres, 2006).

Even in collective decision-making scenarios the manager still holds sway on the direction of the organization and on how, when, and to what extent individuals in the management team participate in decision making (Balkar, 2015). This is important because collective decision-making in organizations is time-consuming, and in some cases counterproductive. As a result, even in organizations that pride themselves as liberal and has decentralized power, such as typical management structures in schools, school managers still have the ultimate prerogative to bring about reforms and to continually bring changes to how work is done in order to contend with the changing environmental needs (Baird & Wang, 2010). Such reforms and the incremental nip and tuck on internal processes in the school develop into a school culture and are repeated and taught to new members as the right way to behave, think, react and feel about everyday challenges.

For these reasons, therefore, the management of a school is responsible for the culture in the school and have the ultimate onus to develop organizational cultures that enable the school to meet its obligations to the stakeholders. But the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about challenges that are beyond the capacity of the school. For instance, schools have to contend with sudden and unplanned lockdown periods that disrupt teaching and learning (Bubb & Jones, 2020). These lockdowns vary in length and severity and have, in most cases, pushed schools to resort to untried and untested ways to stay connected with the students and to continue to provide some semblance of learning. These disruptions hamper normal teaching and learning, impact the quality of learning, and interfere with the learning process of students and ultimately impact their performance and the school's performance by extension (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020).

Schools have to rethink their cultures. There is a need to re-engineer how work is done in schools particularly with the volatility brought by COVID-19 and to device ways and processes that will mitigate the impact, and make up for the time lost while countries, regions, and cities are put under lockdown (Azevedo et.al., 2020). The current cultures in schools

are not designed to deal with the current situation and the way teaching and learning takes place was not designed to cope with the restrictions imposed by COVID-19. While no culture is perfect for all organizations some common considerations can be implemented in the design of how work in organizations is designed and executed and how schools can make the most of the bad situation.

KEY CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

School leadership

One organizational feature that has been greatly impacted by COVID-19 is organizational leadership. Organizations have been forced to flatten their leadership hierarchies and decentralize decision making to departments, and in some cases, to working teams to meet the needs of a dispersed workforce as a result of health restrictions (Lima, 2002). Some commentators anticipate that the COVID-19 pandemic will result in complex organizations that have loose structures and comprising of teams that have a great measure of autonomy (Azevedo at.al, 2020).

Although such teams will work towards attaining organizational objectives their project-based approaches to work will create challenges for leaders as new operating models will evolve within the organization. In the case of multinational organizations, there will be a need to customize performance management systems since the one-size-fits-all models that work in one part of the organization might not work elsewhere (Estep III, 2000). Big organizations that operate in different cities and countries are already grappling with the need to segment operations and functions according to geographical areas. An organizational culture that enforces a vertical hierarchy of leadership and centralizes power at the top will fail to address the new realities of doing business and may hinder the ability of organizations to adapt.

Similarly, in schools, the structure of leadership should transform as schools are transitioning from a focus on efficiency to a focus on resilience (Estep III, 2000). In schools, a culture that gives greater autonomy to subject teachers to make decisions on instructional design, curriculum coverage, and testing and assessment will encourage collaboration and mitigate the impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning (Gal-Or & Amit, 1998). Horizontal leadership hierarchies and a people-first mindset are important as they reassure employees that their contribution is of critical importance to the organization. This should not be a one-off thing, but part and parcel of everyday organizational life, and a practice that will develop into the culture of the organization. Schools will have to abandon contingency leadership styles and adopt more situational oriented styles to contend with increased uncertainty as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Estep III, 2000).

Health and safety in the workplace

Two scenarios have emerged in organizations during the pandemic; some organizations have adopted a people-centric approach and created safe and secure environments for their staff to work in and provided adequate resources to enable staff to adhere to the highest safety standards possible, while some organizations have put their employee at risk by neglecting their well-being, while pushing them to work in high-risk conditions with little or no support. In the latter scenario, organizations perpetuate practices that treat staff as workers first and people second while directly risking the welfare of the employees and their families as well as the very survival of the organization (Mia & Putul, 2020).

In schools, in particular, the blatant disregard for employee well-being could be catastrophic due to the nature of the interaction of students and teachers in confined classrooms. Schools will need to develop and nurture people-centric cultures that make safety a cornerstone of organizational practice (Barroso, 2006). In particular, a culture of safety will manage student-teacher and student-students interactions as well as limit and management movement in and out of schools by other stakeholders such as parents. Well-articulated safety guidelines and strict and consistent monitoring is mandatory and should permeate all activities in schools from the moment people enter the school to the moment they leave, with particular emphasis on traceability of guests and staff and students alike. Such a culture will not only minimize the risk of COVID-19 but it should also prioritize the mental health of employees during stressful times. Help should likewise be extended to self-isolated and employees working away from schools (Bubb & Jones, 2020).

Develop versatile cultures

Research indicates that organizational cultures are hard to change (Torres, 2006). Even at the best of times when incremental changes are introduced to the way work is done in organizations such changes are met with varying degrees of resistance and protest. But COVID-19 pandemic does not call for incremental changes to organizational culture; rather it necessitates an overhaul of the way work is organized and done in organizations. Schools have to contend with local, provincial, federal, and international restrictions that are aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19. While schools have to stay up to date on current practices and potential heightened restrictions they also have to develop versatile and adaptive cultures that evolve with current developments. The detailed and established a priori processes of pre-COVID-19 pandemic can no longer provide schools with the necessary agility to respond to short notice, and in some cases, sudden indefinite lockdowns and interruptions to the way teaching and learning take place (Cameron & Quinn, 2006).

Rules and processes that afford teachers increased flexibility should replace policy and procedure driven cultures, while the culture should also encourage discretionary effort by individual staff (Baird & Wang, 2010). One way that school cultures can adapt to the new normal as a result of COVID-19 is to anticipate and prepare for increased remote working.

While most universities have established a parallel online component to their everyday activities, including teaching and learning, lower level schools have not been able to do so at the necessary degree. While moving most of the teaching and learning online could be challenging to students, particularly in developing countries where resource scarcity and inadequate infrastructure may hinder such a move, a culture that encourages the active participation of teachers in remote working will ensure continuity during lockdown and in times of quarantine or self-isolation (Hargreaves, 1998). The traditional approaches to work where both the teacher and the students have to be present in the classroom can no longer address the current challenges (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020).

Revise stakeholder involvement
As the corona virus pandemic continues to spread and disrupt teaching and learning schools are compelled to reconsider their relationship with stakeholders (Ancess, 2003). More than ever schools are compelled to collaborate with health departments, parents, and other stakeholders to develop robust contingency and coping processes (Bass, 2009). Earnest communication and transparency are needed to engage with stakeholders on how best students, and teachers, can be kept safe and secure and how best a semblance of normality can be maintained in schools to facilitate teaching and learning (Ancess, 2000).

While teaching is by nature a collaborative exercise, the peripheral role that stakeholders played in the running of schools before the pandemic can no longer provide the necessary support that schools need. The new reality is that parents, health ministry, and the ministry of education will now play an active role in the running of schools, with particular emphasis on the health and safety of teachers and learners (Barth, 1990). In the process of developing a cohesive network of support systems for schools, these stakeholders may, in some cases interfere with the everyday running of schools. It is important, therefore, for school management to use this opportunity to develop new channels of communication with stakeholders (Beck, 1992). A culture of inclusion will reduce uncertainty by spelling out the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders so that all parties know what is expected of them and how to behave during a crisis. A culture of inclusion would also reduce the dissemination of false information by designating contact people in schools who will liaise with external stakeholders, thus freeing teachers to perform their duties with limited interruption.

Design result-oriented cultures that have clear milestones
COVID-19 has hampered syllabus coverage in schools across the world (Bubb & Jones, 2020). While some schools that already had an online component to their studies have fared relatively better than exclusively brick and mortar schools, on the whole schools were caught off guard by the pandemic. A new reality in schools during the pandemic is that there is

great uncertainty about the future. In countries that have eased lockdown restrictions there has been a resurgence of infection that has sparked renewed panic about the possibility, and in some cases, the reality of another lockdown, therefore, debilitating further all the endeavors to go back to normal teaching and learning.

This uncertainty is making it difficult for schools to plan and execute comprehensive curriculum coverage. Some commentators urge schools to break the curriculum into manageable chunks that can be covered speedily in a matter of a week or fortnight (Azevedo et.al, 2020). To increase the chances of adequate syllabus coverage schools will need to adopt result-oriented cultures that focus on what can be accomplished and assessed in the shortest time possible while they do away with planning curriculum for a term or a year. Pre-pandemic cultures that emphasized mastery of skills will also need to adapt and focus on performance instead in order to contend with the new reality (Islam, 2019). In countries that have been greatly hit by the pandemic and have extended lockdown in some parts of the country while the other part continued with schooling, it will be impossible to administer a national examination. A criterion-based examination therefore will need to be administered instead, so that emphasis is focused on what the students have covered so far.

REDESIGN WORK

As already stated above, schools are redesigning how work is carried out in schools. Due to reductions in class size for purposes of social distancing schools will need to re-evaluate their working teams, and if crucial, design teams that are loosely coupled instead of interdependent (Iqbal, 2021). A dispersed workforce that works with minimal contact with one another is a new reality and organizations in general, and schools specifically, are awaking to the fact that current systems and processes are inadequate in affording teachers the necessary freedom, and support to work from home, if necessary.

In classrooms old pedagogic ways such as team-based learning and other forms of collaborative learning are becoming less useable in their current form. There is a need to take into consideration health-related aspects when designing work in schools, as well as a need to consider whether the current methods of assessment and testing are still appropriate in their current form. As teachers change how they teach there is often a need to also change assessment tools as well as how they are administered (Hargreaves, 1998).

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a lot of strain on schools and created uncertainty about how teaching and learning should take place. The pandemic also disrupted classroom practice by imposing health-related restrictions on movement, collaborative learning exercises, and on teamwork. Based on the recurrences of infection in countries that have eased lockdown restriction it is becoming evident that schools should

brace themselves for a long and uncertain future. One way to do this is by overhauling how teachers teach, how students learn and how schools are managed. Incremental changes will be inadequate in addressing the risk of the spread of COVID-19 in schools.

Particular attention should also be paid to the mental health of both teachers and students. Research from past pandemics, such as the HIV pandemic, shows that the mental health of teachers is often the least considered during hard times. But teachers experience high levels of stress during volatile times since they are not immune from the challenges affecting the community in which they work. They also develop an emotional attachment to the students they teach and therefore experience the hardships that the students go through vicariously. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted resource allocation in schools and will likely negatively impact teachers' progression, promotions, and pay increases and these will affect teachers emotionally. In the same vein, schools will need to address the teacher's morale and motivation. The COVID-19 disruptions and the change in how work is done in schools will have a debilitating effect on the teachers' attitude to their work.

On the students' side, disruptions to teaching and learning will lead to an increase in the attainment gap between high performing and low performing students (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). Such disparities in performance will also be exacerbated by economic inequalities as children from poor families are likely to have no internet connection to access study materials at home or electronic devices needed to study (Bubb & Jones, 2020).

To address these problems there is a need to build strategies that will ensure that there is a seamless continuation of studies at home. Robust education systems that ensure equitable access to high-quality learning materials for students, safe and secure work environment for teachers, and a management system that takes a people-first mindset are becoming a post-COVID-19 reality, and in time, may become the winning formula that sets organisations apart in their performance.

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