
Book Review

Prosser, J (Ed.) (1999) *School Culture* London: Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd. Pp182
ISBN 1 85396 433 6, ISBN 1 85396 377 1 (hard/paperback)

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This is a refreshing excursion into both the influences that shape school cultures and the actors who create, manage and maintain these cultures. Whilst each of the authors draws heavily on research conducted in the United Kingdom, the themes they explore are universal. What's new in Prosser's collection? Two things really. A genuine breadth of perspective on the subject of school culture, and some interesting excursions into the dynamics of how power is used within cultures.

By assembling the work of fourteen contributors, each with quite diverse views on the subject of school culture, Prosser whets our appetites with an interesting, eclectic menu. We can choose to engage with the work of Stoll, Hargreaves, Power and Whitty, all of who represent school culture as an holistic concept: 'the way we do things around here'. Alternatively, we can consider the arguments mounted by Corbett, Munn and Mac an Ghail who represent school culture as being the aggregate of significant, but fragmented, sub-cultures. Essentially Prosser invites us to work through the tension between the dominant view of school culture expressed in the literature, and an emerging view.

One way of thinking about school culture is to see it as a holistic entity that pervades and influences everyone within a school...

An alternative view is that school culture is the result of multiple interaction: multiple in that individuals and groups who form sub-cultures are influential, and in the sense that there is two-way interaction school culture and sub-cultures. Here there is an attempt to understand the relationship between co-existing sub-cultures to identify values and beliefs by which they are created and maintained and are in conflict and harmony with each other. (p. 14)

This attempt to take us deeper in our examination of the micro-politics of school culture is welcome and, at times, compelling.

In his introduction Prosser defines school culture as ‘not only the particular patterns of perception and behaviour, but also the system of relationships between those relationships’ (pxii). The micro-political dimension of school culture is explored by some of the authors who examine the conflicting nature of these relationships. For example, in Chapter 11 Weber and Mitchell argue that in the struggle over the culture of the workplace many good teachers have been marginalised.

The voices of teachers have been muted, even stifled, in the debates about schooling. One way to remedy that is to speak out, write, produce, and create...

Contradictory stories and images can help create a deeper and more complete understanding or *reading* of teaching.’ (p. 160)

If Blase is right in his assessment that ‘schools are complex, unpredictable social organisations that are extremely vulnerable to a host of powerful external and internal forces’ (1991, p. 1) then teachers, as the lead *actors* in schools, are in peril of becoming *extras* if they can not find or create ways of exerting a stronger, more positive influence.

In Chapter 1 Prosser himself traces the ‘Evolution of School Culture Research’ and makes the observation that our recent fascination with understanding school culture is driven by a deep-seated desire to improve the effectiveness of schools. But those looking for a strong connection between school culture and school improvement in this book will be disappointed. Whilst Stoll and Hargreaves expand on some well developed insights into school improvement, the emphasis of the book is clearly on the cultures of schools; albeit, examined through ten very different lenses.

Power and Whitty take the global view and examine the effects of market forces on school cultures. In interpreting the power effects of external forces on schools’ cultures, the authors claim that an important tension has emerged between two new *hybrids* - the ‘decentred market’ pedagogy and the ‘prospective’ pedagogy. The ‘decentred market pedagogy can be seen to foster *new* subjects, the prospective pedagogy seeks to reconstruct *old* subjects, albeit in response to the pressures of a new economic and social climate’ (p. 29). But what of the internal forces which shape a school’s culture? How are they responding to the challenges associated with educational shifts shaped by economic and social policy?

Whilst Chapter 2 will be of most interest to policy makers and theoreticians, Chapters 3 and 4 will appeal to practitioners, particularly school leaders. In Chapter 3 Stoll is concerned with ‘why the cultures in some schools are black holes...and others provide sustenance for school growth and development’ (p. 31). Whilst her re-appraisal of the various insights she has shared with educators over the last decade provides no new or startling revelations, Stoll’s conclusion reaffirms what we should all place at the centre of our thinking:

Real improvement cannot come from anywhere other than within schools themselves, and *within* is a complex web of values and beliefs, norms, social and power relationships and emotions. (p.47)

As always, Stoll is engaging and goes a long way towards helping practitioners understand the characteristics of their contexts.

David Hargreaves addresses Chapter 4 directly to school leaders, and more than any other contributor, offers a variety of models that can be used by practitioners to better understand their culture. His conclusion comes as a projection into what the future holds and will be welcomed by many in schools, particularly those who have become cynical from the 'top-down' approach to change. Hargreaves advocates that schools act out what Quinn (1980) described as 'logical incrementalism':

where teachers are encouraged to experiment in their classrooms and to do so in loose association with colleagues in a climate that enables and encourages innovative playfulness in the search for more effective teaching and learning (p.64).

Hargreaves reminds us that, at its simplest level, the relationship between school culture and school improvement lies in the notion that 'successful schools get the right mix at the right time'.

Primary educators, in particular, will find Nias' Chapter 5 examination of primary teaching as a 'culture of care' of interest. Nias identifies six values and beliefs about the nature of 'care' and, in her discussion, shows how they are often in tension with each other. This cultural complexity provides insight into the many stresses associated with the profession.

Chapters 7 - 9 examine three specific sub-cultures each of which has been the centre of debate in western education for more than a decade:

- masculinity
- bullying
- special education.

Taken separately, these chapters offer some deep insights into the sub-cultures of the school yard and the classroom, and tackle some of the important differences between the needs of individuals and of schools, and the expectations of governments and education systems. For example, Corbett examines the various politics of special needs students being placed in mainstream schools. Read as an aggregation of sub-cultural perspectives, these three chapters remind us of the magnitude of the challenges facing practitioners, policy makers and theorists committed to further developing and improving the culture of schools.

More than any other chapter, the examination of boys and literacy provided by Moss and Attar (Chapter 10) highlights the micro-politics of the classroom. If a school seeks to develop a culture of achievement, then the building blocks are the classrooms and what happens inside of them. The authors' insights into understanding the process of gender construction and its effects on how boys and girls learn to read are a salient reminder of the powerful differences teachers make in developing effective classroom and school cultures.

The major disappointment in this work is that Prosser does not draw any conclusions from the diversity of views he has collected on school culture. There is no final chapter synthesising the many threads. Nor is there a strong indication of where Prosser himself stands on the issue. A 'fence sitter'? Maybe. But we should be thankful for the quality of the views that Prosser has selected to share with us from either side of the school culture 'fence'.

References

Blase, J. (1991) *The Politics of Life in Schools*, Sage Publications, London.