

## Conceptions of School Culture: An Overview

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*It is not clear what the term culture means in current discussion of school culture. Is it to refer globally to everything that happens routinely in schools, or are there more precise definitions that can be useful? This article reviews a range of definitions of culture. Three main conceptions of culture are discussed; a culture as bits of information, culture as conceptual structure and symbols, and culture as meanings generated in political struggle. Through examples and commentary the author considers the relative utility of the different conceptions of culture for helping one think about the diverse and systematically patterned ways of making sense that students, teachers, and administrators bring to their everyday encounters with one another in schools.*

When you walk into a school you may get a global impression of the schools' distinctive tone or character. What cues led to that impression? The walls and their decorations, the floors and the way they are polished, the demeanor of students and staff walking through the halls, the nature of the instruction that takes place in classrooms, the relationships between staff and administration? Behind or beneath the cues, some social scientists assume, lies a shared set of organizing principles called *culture*. Is school *culture* something more than just another word for school *climate*? Are there some aspects of culture that you do not get a sense of at first glance, that are not shared by everyone in the setting? How, in other words, might we think of culture? Where is it in the school? What is its specific content? How would we find it if we went looking for it? And why bother?

*Culture* is a term that presents difficulties as well as interesting possibilities when we try to apply it to a school as a whole. Writing on educational issues, Sarason (1971) and Feiman-Nemser and Floden (1986) have used the term *culture* to refer to an undifferentiated entity; the overall character or ethos of an educational setting, such as a school,

or of an educational role, such as that of teacher. A problem with such usage is that it leaves the term without distinct content and leaves the phenomenon of culture in the school invisible and tacit—it's somehow in the air and all around us but we can't see it or talk about it. This essay attempts to make the notion of culture more explicit and visible in order that it can become a more usable construct within current discourse concerning educational reform.

The use of *culture* as a formal, scientific term originated within the field of anthropology. Even anthropologists have widely disagreed over how to conceive of culture, leaving us with a fuzzy understanding of the concept. Anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) attempted unsuccessfully to resolve these debates through a book-length review of variations in the uses of the term. Their monograph identified hundreds of different shadings of the meaning for the word *culture*. Since then no scholar has attempted to claim sole possession of the correct definition, but many working definitions have been proposed. Each of the major definitions entails a differing theory of the nature of culture. We will review here only a few of these main conceptions of the phenomenon.

Culture in the social scientific sense does not, of course, mean "high culture." Usually anthropologists have thought of culture as a system of ordinary, taken-for-granted meanings and symbols with both explicit and implicit content that is, deliberately and nondeliberately, learned and shared among members of a naturally bounded social group. Typically the groups studied by anthropologists have been hunting and gathering bands or residents of small villages. These are the basic social units of premodern societies.

But schools are not primitive villages. Why should we expect to see culture in schools? Considerable debate continues over how much culture there is to be learned even within a small-scale social unit, and whether everyone in the group learns it or whether it is differentially learned. Large, complex, modern societies fundamentally differ in some ways from smaller societies. In modern societies some crucial social relations take place indirectly and anonymously, while in traditional societies decision making and the exercise of power are less anonymous. In complex modern societies social divisions and differential access to power run along lines of class and race and across major social institutions such as those of commerce, law, and education. Serious questions have been raised about whether or not the anthropological conception of culture is applicable at all to modern societies. Some sociologists and others concerned with social theory have argued that

the notions of social structure or of political economy explain more adequately the observable variations in the actions, beliefs, and sentiments of individuals and groups than does the anthropological notion of culture.

In spite of these difficulties the concept of culture can be helpful as one tries to gain new and deeper understanding about the nature of daily life and instruction in schools. In thinking about the role of culture in schools, three main conceptions of culture seem most relevant. All three presume that culture is essentially ideational—not behavior itself but a set of interpretive frames for making sense of behavior. Each conception presumes a way in which cultural knowledge is shared within a social group. (The following discussion draws upon that of D'Andrade, 1984.)

One of the conceptions of culture defines it by analogy to information bits in a computer or to genetic information in a breeding population. According to this interpretation, culture consists of many small chunks of knowledge that are stored as a large pool of information within the bounded social group. No single member of the group has learned all of the knowledge that is possessed within the group as a whole. The amounts and kinds of information known are seen as varying widely across individuals and subgroups within the total population. (For more discussion of this conception, see Goodenough, 1981.)

Another conception sees culture as a more limited set of large chunks of knowledge—conceptual structures that frame or constitute what is taken as “reality” by members of a group. These central organizing constructs—core symbols—are seen as being shared widely throughout the bounded social group. Within the group routine ways of acting and making sense repeat the major framing patterns again and again, as within a musical composition many variations can be written on a few underlying thematic elements. This concept emphasizes relatively tight organization of patterns, coherence in the meaning system, and identical (or at least closely shared) understanding of symbols across diverse members of the social group. (For more discussion of this view of culture, see Geertz, 1973.)

A third conception treats social structure and culture as intertwined, identifying strong patterns of differential sharing of cultural knowledge in the social unit. Cultural difference is seen as tracing lines of status, power, and political interest within and across institutional boundaries found in the total social unit, by analogy with the ways in which differences in air pressure or temperature are displayed as isobars on a weather map.

One stream of work in this third mode sees culture as arising through social conflict, with the possibility of differing interest groups becoming progressively more culturally different across time even though the groups may be in continual contact. From this perspective the central interest is not the nature of cultural knowledge itself, but the relationship between the content of cultural knowledge and the specific life situation of the persons and groups in which the knowledge is held. A key question is, "Given certain kinds of daily experience, what kinds of sense do people make of it, and how does this sense-making influence their usual actions?" This position assumes that new cultural knowledge—whether in small information bits or in larger conceptual structures—is being created continually in daily social life. This new culture is accepted, learned, and remembered, or rejected, ignored, and forgotten, depending upon where one sits in the social order. This definition of culture emphasizes (1) the systematic nature of variation in cultural knowledge within a population, and (2) social conflict as a fundamental process by which that variation is organized. (For more discussion of this conception, see Giroux, 1981; and McDermott and Goldman, 1983; Willis, 1977.)

In the first two conceptions, and especially in the second, cultural learning is seen as primarily intergenerational; culture is conceived as tradition that is transmitted across generations through socialization. The third conception accounts for cultural learning and change within a single generation and also considers cultural transmission and continuity across generations.

In terms of social theory, the second concept of culture views social processes as fundamentally homeostatic, with tendencies toward equilibrium providing orderliness in social life. Also from the perspective of social theory, the third conception of culture views conflict as the fundamental social process, from which arises the regularity that can be seen in society. It is apparent that the three different notions of culture involve differing basic assumptions about the nature of people, institutions, and social relations. It should come as no surprise, then, that the three conceptions of culture might illuminate different aspects of daily life and everyday sense-making in the school as a formal organization.

Much of our cultural knowledge is implicit, consisting of over-learned ways of thinking and acting that, once mastered, are held outside conscious awareness. Consequently we are too close to our own

cultural patterns to see them without making a deliberate attempt to break our learning set—to introduce a bit of distance between ourselves and our taken-for-granted “reality.” To render our transparent assumptions visible it is necessary to cultivate deliberately the ethnographic stance of moderate alienation. When ethnographers go to an exotic setting they try to get close to the way the “natives” understand things, but they try to maintain distance as well. The opposite problem arises in domestic ethnography. One’s energy need not go mainly into developing insight into strange customs as comprehensible and, so to speak, familiar. Rather, as I have noted elsewhere (Erickson, 1984), when we try to make new sense of the settings in which we live routinely, the initial task is to make the familiar strange.

One way of cultivating an alienated perspective—a way that is heuristically strategic for considering our own lives—is to imagine a different possible way in which a routine activity could be organized. One continually can ask “Why is the X way not done in the Y way?” and “What are all the different possible ways of perceiving/believing/doing/evaluating X?” Knowledge of a wide range of the ways humans have used to organize the routine tasks of everyday life helps one imagine these alternative possibilities; this knowledge leads also to the realization of how arbitrary is the culturally framed choice of one of those possibilities.

When we wish to escape the limitations of our own cultural lenses it helps to entertain deliberately an awareness that human choice is part of the backstage machinery that stands behind the routine conduct that presents itself before our eyes. Hymes (1980) puts this point more formally in saying that for us to apply educational *ethnography* in our own cultural situation requires that we do educational *ethnology* at the same time. (*Ethnography* can be defined briefly as the description and analysis of customary action and sense-making found in a particular human group. *Ethnology* is the comparative study of ethnographic case studies and historical evidence that takes into account the full range of variation in human lifeways, in contemporary times and in the past.) For our purposes here, the ethnological perspective on education can be thought of as a metaphor for consciously recalling a wide range of variation in ways of enacting an educational activity or of holding a given educational aim or belief. In considering this wide range of options, all of which have been regarded as normal and reasonable by some human groups, we can, in addition, imagine new possible options beyond those we know to have already existed.

## EXAMPLES OF CULTURE IN SCHOOLS

The following discussion of examples of cultural patterns in educational settings considers phenomena at the level of the school classroom, at the level of the whole school, and at the level of the school district.

From district to district and from building to building one sees reading instruction led by a teacher working with a small group of children around a table. The children take turns reading aloud from a basal reader while the remainder of the class does other work. Usually this consists of filling in the blanks on printed workbook pages or dittoed work sheets that accompany the reading or arithmetic text. Usually the teacher assigns the children to one of three or four reading groups; the children are placed homogeneously by "ability," according to a combination of criteria—the child's tested reading level and the teacher's judgment about the appropriateness of the test scores in indicating the child's ability (and, in the case of kindergarten and first grade, the child's "readiness").

This is a typical pedagogical configuration. It can be thought of as an *academic task structure* consisting of a particular kind of social organization and a particular kind of cognitive organization. The social organization reflects a pattern of role and status allocations among members of the interacting group. That social organization frames (and is reflexively framed by) a cognitive organization of certain kinds of attention and information processing that go to make up the intellectual activity of reading, done in a certain way.

Not all ways of interacting in teaching/learning reading are appropriate within this task structure, nor are all ways of thinking. Thus pedagogical choice dictates the academic task structure, which has powerful implications for the kinds of reading that can occur. These are arbitrary selections of some social organizational and cognitive options from among the many that are possible. The particular combination of pedagogical options selected by a given teacher may make sense, given certain pedagogical assumptions, but the combination chosen is neither necessary nor absolute. The structure is not inherent in the fundamental nature of tasks, as we are so apt to believe of our most customary actions and assumptions. Rather, this customary pedagogical arrangement is the result of implicit and explicit human choice, just as monogamy or polygyny are choices that have been made alternatively in human groups for the social organization of marriage.

The ubiquity of this arrangement of pedagogical task structure in teaching reading (basal readers and workbooks used in ability groups) can be explained along lines other than cultural. We might attribute the omnipresence to the workings of market influences in the general society. Textbook publishers sell a reading series, which includes workbooks, sets of ditto masters, and sets of unit-by-unit tests. School systems compete, and are enjoined by state government to improve reading performance as measured by the tests. Thus district personnel are willing to buy a reading series as a curriculum package and then mandate its use in a uniform manner by teachers. Through various formal and informal means of influence those central office mandates are complied with (and/or passively resisted) at the classroom level of the school system.

Another line of explanation is that of teacher convenience and the triage press of a school day that is overburdened for both children and teachers. Using the basal reader and seatwork could be easier than using literature to teach reading or constructing one's own reading materials. Teachers, it could be argued, seek to "satisfice"—they might wish to provide a more thorough and creative kind of reading instruction but that would take more time and energy than are available, and so they settle for the basal, the dittos, and, perhaps, try some "enrichment" that goes beyond the mandated material.

A related explanation concerns the pedagogical capacity of the average elementary teacher. Most elementary teachers, it has been argued, are not able to construct their own reading programs. They need and want the basal series, with its prepared materials and its prescriptions for social and cognitive arrangements of reading task structure.

Market influences, time press, and lack of deep pedagogical understanding on the part of teachers may or may not be plausible explanations for the absence of teacher-constructed curricula in reading and writing in the early grades. But these are all general explanations. They do not account for the particular choices that have been made regarding pedagogical task structure—the use of "ability groups" accompanied by seatwork, the emphasis on reading aloud as a source of evidence for the teacher's assessment of the students' skills acquisition, the emphasis on sequential, "bottom-up" presentation of isolated skills in the reading and writing curriculum.

Certain specific characteristics of the typical sociocognitive task structure for reading recur so often within and across American school systems that it seems reasonable to assume that the specific options

taken are grounded—they make sense—in terms of certain core pedagogical beliefs within a professional culture that is broadly shared. These beliefs can be thought of as culture in the sense of conceptual structures—constitutive frames for reality. Among the beliefs seem to be the following:

- (1) Ability, which varies widely in students, is a trait that resides within the individual and is, at least in the school-age child, relatively fixed.
- (2) Hierarchies of skills (e.g., Bloom's taxonomy) make intuitive sense as ladders of stepwise acquisition. Lower order skills (e.g., decoding, spelling) must be mastered before higher order skills (reading for comprehension, writing texts consisting of multiple sentences). Lower ability students have trouble with lower order skills and must practice them before moving on to higher order skills. Among high ability students, practice on higher order skills may enhance their lower order skills (i.e., if they can write meaningful texts they probably have mastered spelling) but this is not true for lower ability students.
- (3) Reading and writing are separate and distinct processes.
- (4) The acquisition of reading and writing requires strong intervention and assistance on the part of the teacher, especially for low ability students. It is unlike learning to speak, which children learn to do without nearly so much formal assistance or adult-designed practice as the need in learning to read and write.

In the field of reading and writing instruction, bitter controversy surrounds all of the statements above. There is no clear empirical warrant for or against these assumptions. Proponents of the "skills" approach (bottom-up ladder of acquisition) and of the "process" approach (nonhierarchical, not isolating separate skills) each claim empirical evidence for their position and accuse members of the opposite camp of ignoring contradictory evidence. Yet despite this bimodal distribution of belief among specialists in the field, common practice by classroom teachers is unimodally distributed toward the skills approach. When framed by the underlying cultural postulates sketched above, the skills approach (and the currently fashionable emphasis on "direct instruction") makes intuitive sense.

This brings us to a crucial point in understanding the nature of cultural knowledge. It is precisely that which makes intuitive sense to someone that is evidence of some aspect of the individual's cultural system. As professional educators we can think: Of course it is difficult to learn to read, so strong instructional interventions are necessary in



classrooms if children are to have a fair chance at learning to read. Of course students vary widely in “ability.” Of course Bloom’s taxonomy can be considered as a ladder of skills to be acquired sequentially. Of course teachers save comprehension discussion for the “high ability” reading group. Of course children from “father-absent” families are expected to do less well in school than children from “father-present” families. All of these propositions, which when viewed critically might seem highly debatable, make obvious sense—they go without saying—within a professional perspective. That professional perspective is a cultural one—specific to some sets of humans and not to others.

In Japan, for example, many teachers and administrators believe that it is not necessary to spend time teaching reading in early elementary school. It is assumed that learning to read is easy, and that it will be learned at home and in the community. To reason judiciously is what is difficult. Strong pedagogical intervention by teachers is required for children to learn to think well and to develop their character and interests. How different this is from the professional cultural assumptions of American educators, given the current emphasis on stepwise and painstaking acquisition of isolated basic reading skills!

Cultural frames define for us the range of available and desirable options. The wholesale and successively brief adoption of educational fads that range in their content across diverse educational philosophies can be seen as evidence of the existence of conceptual structures that are culturally learned and shared by school professionals. Look at the range of fads: teacher effectiveness research and training, school effectiveness training, instructional management by behavioral objectives, human relations training, teaching the whole child, learning for living, back to the basics. We can ask, “What is it that is culturally shared—what, specifically, is the content of the implicit assumptions and knowledge that make some deliberate practices and explicit beliefs seem obviously right, while other seem obviously wrong?” We can also ask how such frames for making sense are invented and how they are learned.

Culture, considered as bits of knowledge and as conceptual structures, defines options because it shapes what we think is possible. Most fundamentally it is ontological—it defines what *is* in the world, what exists and what does not. This has been obvious in controversies over textbook content. Clearly the current debates over secular humanism in the schools have to do with ontological propositions contained in teaching materials. Does the book say that family arrangements involve life-style choices that are morally neutral, or, at least, are up to

individual choice? What about single-parent families? What about families in which both the adult caretakers are lesbians? What is there in the world and what is not?

In current middle school and high school social studies texts we see not only little of religion mentioned, but little detail devoted to such topics as the reconstruction period or labor strife. The description of how a bill becomes a law leaves out the role of lobbyists in the process.

Eisner (1985) has called this nonrandom absence of information the *null curriculum*, as distinguished from the explicit curriculum and the hidden (latent) curriculum (p. 107). The null curriculum can be seen as a special case of a more general phenomenon in schools and society, that of *nonrandomly structured absence*. This is a key aspect of the cultural organization of routine experience in social life. It is a means by which ideological content is enacted in society; certain voices and perspectives of participants in daily life are made legitimate and salient or are systematically silenced.

Cultural knowledge, frames of interpretation, and standards of appropriateness also obtain outside the classroom and the textbook. In most school faculty meetings, although never stated in so many words, an informal order of precedence in speaking is taken for granted. The order differs subculturally from school to school. In a faculty, rights to sequencing and to numbers of turns at talk may be allocated along the lines of seniority of service, or across key departments, or by ideological position of the person speaking. The new administrator or teacher needs to learn the unspoken order or change it—deliberately or inadvertently.

Consider a different kind of example. Central office administrators and school boards emphasize the statistical *mean* when preparing and studying quantitative reports. In educational institutions the mean is a ubiquitous measure of what happened. Yet statisticians know that measures of central tendency obscure certain interesting kinds of variation. The school board may ask for a ten-year tabulation of mean scores for the Scholastic Aptitude Test as a measure of the effectiveness of instruction in the high schools. Looking at the year-by-year variance in test scores rather than looking at the mean might yield much more information. Yet it does not occur to the board members, to central administrators, to principals, or to teachers to consider the variance. This can be seen as a matter of cultural expectation, not simply as a matter of the presence or absence of knowledge of statistical technique.

A few final examples can illustrate the notion of oppositional culture that was discussed in connection with the third conception of culture.

From that perspective, when conflicting interests arise between social aggregates, one will find members of the various groupings developing culturally learned badges of social identity. These are status markers in styles of action and in patterns of value and belief. During the course of interaction among groups in conflict, the cultural differences among them will increase over time rather than decrease. Bateson (1975) called this process of progressive differentiation across time *complementary schizogenesis* (pp. 107-127). Sometimes in a schizogenetic sequence of intergroup contact, slight cultural differences will be accentuated because they have assumed powerful symbolic weighting.

For example, Fanon (1970) has reported that in the years shortly before the culmination of the anticolonial revolution in Algeria, the Parisian French accent of the (Algerian) announcers on Radio Algiers was strongly criticized as a symbol of colonial oppression. The day after the revolution, people stopped complaining about the accents of the announcers. Even though the announcers' speech had not changed in its behavioral form, the symbolic meaning of their speech style had changed as the political conflict was resolved (pp. 53-54, 67).

The point is that when reasons for conflict already exist between groups in society, cultural differences between them, whether the differences are large or small, become an excellent resource (and medium) for engaging in and escalating the conflict. From the point of view of the third conception of culture it is not the presence of cultural difference between groups that *causes* trouble, rather, it seems as if trouble goes looking for culture as an excuse to start a fight and to keep it going.

Turning to examples from a high school, think of the disagreements among students who differ in ethnicity, race, and social class about which band should play at a major school dance. Consider as well the interactional display of badges of disaffiliation from school by the educationally alienated high school students described in Britain by Willis (1977) and in the United States by Cusick (1973), among others. Willis's and Cusick's students do not seem to be following only culturally learned rules to govern their behavior. Rather the actions appear to be deliberately or nondeliberately strategic; they work hard on an improvisatory way of *not doing school*. This puts them in a schizogenetic relationship with school authorities and with nonalienated students. They become more culturally different as time goes on.

The actions of the alienated students can be seen as manifesting a cultural politics of resistance that is invented (at least in part) in their

own generation as well as partaking of the cultural resources of previous generations. (See Giroux, 1981, for a review of resistance theory as applied to educational settings.) In a later study of school faculties, Cusick (1983) found that working hard at not doing school characterized the activity of teachers who were alienated from their professional work. We might speculate that, as with high school students, the teachers' badges of disaffiliation were in part invented in the current moment (i.e., the teachers were not simply following learned traditions). The teachers might also have been influenced by the actions and beliefs of previous cohorts of alienated teachers, some of whom became role models for the next professional generation of alienated teachers.

## CONCLUSION

Table 1 displays the relationships between the three conceptions of culture and the examples of school cultural actions. The three concepts of culture can be seen to apply somewhat differently to the examples that were presented (although it should be noted that the assignment of these examples to the conceptions is a bit arbitrary and should not be taken too literally).

Of the three conceptions of culture that were reviewed, the third one is the most comprehensive, in that it can encompass both the notion of culture as bits of information differentially distributed among subgroups of society and the notion of culture as a set of root symbols shared widely in a particular society. The third conception is also more dynamic than the other two, in that it accounts for sociocultural change and conflict as well as for certain kinds of stability and homeostasis. A major difference between the third view of culture and the previous two concerns the role of tradition in the processes by which cultural knowledge becomes shared among individuals. In the first two conceptions tradition is seen as central to culture sharing. Shared culture is the result of explicit and implicit teaching and learning across generations. In the third conception, intergenerational cultural transmission is taken into account, but in addition there is strong emphasis on the invention and diffusion of new cultural patterns within a single generation, for reasons of oppositional display and resistance.

In all of these conceptions, culture is seen as knowledge and as framing for meaning, rather than as social behavior or its artifacts. In that regard these definitions differ from some of those used by other authors on the issue of school culture. One's sense of the role of culture

TABLE 1  
 Varying Conceptions of Culture  
 as Applied to the Examples Discussed

<i>Examples</i>	<i>Conception I Culture as Knowledge Bits</i>	<i>Conception II Culture as Conceptual Structure</i>	<i>Conception III Culture as Political Struggle</i>
Reading pedagogy in the classroom using ability groups and basal textbooks	✓	✓	
Debate over secular humanism in the curriculum		✓	✓
Turn-taking order in faculty meeting by seniority, department and pedagogical philosophies of education		✓	✓
Use of the mean to summarize frequency distributions	✓	✓	
Conflict over what band should play at the school dance		✓	✓
Alienated high school students and teachers working at not doing school		✓	✓

in the schools will differ depending upon what conception of culture one adopts, or what eclectic mix among them one develops.

Why bother with the notion of culture when thinking about schools? One main reason is that the notion of culture as shared ways of making sense reveals the action patterns and underlying assumptions in the conduct of educational practice that otherwise might go unnoticed, or they might be dismissed as trivial because they are so commonplace. Another reason is that when one sees professional sense-making by educators as learned and as involving arbitrary choices from a range of alternative possibilities one gains a sense of a broadened range of policy options. A final reason is that by seeing patterns of social organization as grounded in culture and in human agency we identify a reasoned basis

for hope in the possibility of educational reform. When we make visible the ways in which humans form the distinctive shapes of their lived history through implicit and explicit choices, we see that what people have made they can change.

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