

Leadership: external context and culture



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Introduction

Through studying this free course, *Leadership: external context and culture*, you will develop your understanding of the impact of external context and culture on the practice of leadership. The course begins by exploring the nature of 'societal culture' and identifying how culture, at a number of levels, impacts on leadership. We then explore how the external context within which an organisation operates impacts on the factors that leaders need to take account of. Finally the course examines the relationship between policy and leadership.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [EE812 Educational leadership: exploring strategy](#).

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course you should be able to:

- understand how the concept of culture impacts on educational leadership practice
- critically reflect on the relationship between external context and culture at societal and local levels
- evaluate how external context and culture influences educational change in an organisation
- critically reflect on the relationship between policy and practice.

1 Societal culture

Culture, in the sense we are using it here, is an anthropological term that, in essence, defines the individuality or uniqueness of a society, organisation or social group.

The following activities will help you to focus on societal culture more closely.

Activity 1

Allow up to 30 minutes

Watch the film clip below, which is commenting on aspects of education in Singapore. As you watch, make notes on what it says about the societal culture in Singapore. You need to be aware that the narration on all the video clips has a tendency to make very broad generalisations.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1



Discussion

Between the commentary and the interview with Clive Dimmock there are several points made about the societal culture. The overwhelming one is the centralisation of education policy, and the rules and regulations the school leaders are expected to follow. The point is made that the exact way that the rules are followed in a particular school is very much for the leader to decide, but nonetheless, as government employees, they are part of a very hierarchical system.

Now let's have a look at the interaction between these various levels of context and culture in a school environment.

Activity 2

Allow approx. 45 minutes

Watch the following film clip, which is from a primary school in South Africa. As you watch, try to pick out the various levels of impact – international, national, community/ local, and internal – on the leadership of the school.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 2](#)



Discussion

Jamiel Alexander comments on how the culture of the school has changed since the ending of apartheid, which was a huge national change. This has altered the external context of the school. His deputy comments on how Jamiel's relationship with the staff had to change to a more collaborative, democratic and consultative one. This was a change in the internal context of the school in response to a change in societal culture. The community used to look to the school principal for advice and leadership. Jamiel feels that this local context has now changed a little, with the school taking on a more proactive role in the community. He also comments on the need for the culture of the school to raise the aspirations of the young people, who he feels bring the very low expectations of their community into the school.

2 External context

External context is separated here from culture, but in practice it can be difficult to separate the two. Changes in external context may (or may not), over a long period of time, impact on societal or local culture; but equally, in the short term, such changes might in fact be at odds with them. National governmental decisions are often taken in the light of the societal culture, but sometimes they are taken in an attempt to *change* the societal culture. In this latter case, the change might cause conflict, non-compliance or prolonged implementation.

The World Wide Web now means that the rest of the world is readily accessible, communications are fast and direct, and knowledge is easily available. This has challenged many societal cultures that were previously closed to the wider world. There are concerns that much of this communication and knowledge is promoting one particular culture. The global village implies a set of common practices and understandings that span national boundaries and may indicate that there are common international solutions to national problems. Both of these examples illustrate parts of the external context for educational organisations around the world, over which they have no control – much as the international banking crisis signalled a change in the external context for governments globally.

In thinking about external factors that influence the exercise of leadership and the art of leading in our own organisations, it is important to consider the national context in which an organisation is situated. It may seem to be comparatively straightforward to assume that national governments make policy and that organisations implement that policy. And so the transfer of policy into practice is a simple top-down model of organisational change. However, when we begin to think about this in more detail, we can see that everything is far more complex.

Firstly, national policy is mediated through the locality as well as through the organisation. At each stage of the process, the policy is subject to interpretation and understanding. The policy will then have planned and unplanned outcomes: it may be differentially applied in different parts of the country, and so on. We also have to remember that organisations are not single institutions; they are linked as part of a professional system delivering a national service. In addition, organisations are increasingly linked in a variety of multi-agency, cross-sectoral partnerships. This has particular implications for leading, and the exercise of leadership, in the implementation of policy. For example, where leaders are skilled and knowledgeable in their own field, they may be leading partnerships of institutions where they have little skill and limited knowledge. The institutional goals, cultures and social norms may be significantly different in the partnership.

Activity 3

Allow about 30 mins

This activity will involve you in thinking about the external context for your own organisation. Think about a change that happened in your organisation's external context over a year ago, another that has happened in the past year, and another that you have reason to believe will happen in the next year or so. Your examples could be at national or local level. Write them down in a list, and then consider the following questions for each of your examples.

- What was the impact, or is the likely impact, of the change in the external context on your organisation?
- Were you, or will you be, able to mediate the change?
- Did the culture, or might the culture, of the country or the locality mediate the change?
- Has the outcome, or likely outcome, of the change been positive or negative when measured against the purpose of your organisation or the outcomes for the learners?

Discussion

We have no idea what changes in external context you have decided to select or your responses to the questions. What is important to note is the rapidly changing nature of the external context and, increasingly, how these changes might be as a result of global trends or developments. Some of these changes might be predictable, and the organisation may be able to prepare to meet the challenge that results; but some might be unexpected. The last question is an important point to bear in mind. While change is usually unwelcome, its outcomes can be unexpectedly positive if the change is approached in an appropriate way.

As we have already established, context is an important lens for leadership and on one level relates to the key question of *where* leadership takes place as in the organisational culture and ethos of a workplace. But context also relates to the '*why*' question and invites comparisons. The readings and AV materials in this section will prompt you to compare why leaders in different contexts may carry out key policies in different ways.

If you had to find a metaphor to sum up your leadership context at this point in time, what you would choose? Would it be a skydiving team holding hands under blue skies, or a captain steering a ship in stormy waters? What about a juggler trying to keep pace with fast and furious competing priorities? Any one of these images may reflect your role in your context at a given point in time.

Understanding context is important in strategic leadership as part of reading the external environment and adapting internal plans to policy changes, resources and values. As the material in this section emphasises, context is no longer just about your immediate working environment but about other influences too – global, national, local, economic and political. Although we need to guard against simplistic causalities, it is relevant to think about how global trends may have local ripples. For example, as leaders we may be finding new ways of data collection for quality assurance and improvement, and thinking about what this means for planning. As you work through the material in this course, you should begin to see a link between this and ongoing debates on accountability, autonomy and markets, which in turn are linked to policy.

3 The potential impact of context

The film clip you are about to watch demonstrates how this awareness of the international context impacts on one particular school's curriculum.

Activity 4

Allow up to 30 minutes

Watch the film clip below, which was filmed at a private school in China.

Write a short analysis of your own organisation in terms of the international contextual factors that need to be taken account of. Identify what these are and why they are important to the organisation.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 3](#)



Provide your answer...

Discussion

The school has decided to provide students with greater chances of access to international higher education. The international connections are very clear in terms of local market competitiveness and a vision of global citizenship. It can be seen that this perspective is shared with the parents.

Another context, this time a hypothetical one, might be an early years centre in a rural area in a developed country. National data indicates a trend towards rising pupil rolls impacting on local schools, and there are plans for new house building in the area. A group of Children's Services partners have a vision for a brand new local lifelong education campus, including an early years centre, and are successful in their bid for

government funds. However, in the event of a change of global economic circumstances, the proposed new local employer, such as a military base or factory, may decide to relocate. The local funding for housing is withdrawn, and the national government withdraws funding for new lifelong education buildings.

The shifting context here is socio-economic, where local issues of housing, jobs and transport will affect families and related services. The group of educational leaders might decide to collaborate and join up services despite the lack of a new building because of their vision for the children of the area, or there may be increased polarisation and competition between schools.

4 Policy and context

Throughout this course you may have recalled your own reactions to national policy or the reactions of those around you – perhaps those of colleagues, unions or parents.

Activity 5

Allow up to 30 minutes

Read the following abstract for 'Stories of compliance and subversion in a prescriptive policy environment', by John MacBeath.

In their commitment to raising standards successive Conservative and Labour governments have moved progressively to tighter prescription of school policy and more far reaching proscription of practices deemed unacceptable. This article examines how 12 headteachers construct the policy environment and how they respond to it in the schools they lead. The evidence base is 12 in-depth interviews with headteachers, in six primary schools and six secondary at the outset of the TLRP/ESRC research project Learning How to Learn. This subset of headteacher interviews from the total number were selected for this article because these 12 interviews were accompanied by the fullest data set of complementary interviews, questionnaire and observation data which will be the subject of other papers to follow. The interviews provide a baseline picture of how these school leaders were talking about leading learning in their schools and the authority, or 'warrant' they referred to in validating their views. Patterns of compliance and subversion are examined with reference to theories of organizational, and 'double loop' learning.

(MacBeath, 2008, p. 123)

Note where you think your own organisation sits within the policy discourse prevalent at this time, and whether the leadership is more or less directive.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

A reason for supporting any policy initiative is that it may improve and tighten teaching and learning, especially for weaker teachers. A reason for not supporting the policy may be that it stifles creativity, owing to loss of autonomy. Whether (or not) to do as *one is told* becomes a dilemma determined by context and values.

MacBeath (2008) describes this possible range in response as a continuum line with polar opposites at the extremes. At one end, he signals compliance, and at the other, subversion – although most of the people interviewed in this study were mid-range. He finds ambiguity and tensions in what teachers and headteachers believed about learning and what they had to do. The suggestion is that their compliance is inevitable under stronger accountability measures.

MacBeath also picks up tensions and gaps in the making of a prescriptive policy to work where there is a conflict between the policy and how learner-centred everyday

practices can be. He points to the tension between an ideal view of learning and the pressures on the need to meet targets – such as inspection criteria – so leading to a different style of leadership to get the job done.

MacBeath argues that leaders should come off the fence and be more than technical administrators. He points out that conflict is only seen in pupil–teacher terms rather than conflict or dialogue with policy. MacBeath is arguing that leaders should ‘know what stance is appropriate at a given time and in relation to specific policy movements’ (MacBeath, 2008, p. 127). He is agreeing with Giroux’s (1992) radical view against an uncritical approach of technical implementer (i.e. an approach that does not ask questions or analyse appropriateness) and argues to guard against seeing new ideas as unproblematic, or if:

internalisation of the grand narrative has for our sample of headteachers at least not only coloured their view of policy making but provided a rationale for a more directive form of leadership in accord with the new orthodoxy.

MacBeath, 2008, p. 129

In his paper, MacBeath touches briefly on the issue of values. In the article in the following activity, Rayner reports on research that looked at the impact of headteachers’ personal values and life histories on their reaction to policy.

Activity 6

Allow about 1 hour

Read the article below by Rayner. As you do so, think about policies that have created personal tension for you because of their opposition to your personal values. [‘Playing by the rules? The professional values of head teachers tested by the changing policy context’](#)

Provide your answer...

Conclusion

This free course, *Leadership: external context and culture*, provided you with an introduction to studying leadership and management as part of the Masters in Education qualification. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

References

Giroux, H. (1992) *Border Crossings*, London, Routledge.

MacBeath, J. (2008) 'Stories of compliance and subversion in a prescriptive policy environment', *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 123–48.

Rayner, S. (2014) 'Playing by the rules? The professional values of head teachers tested by the changing policy context', *Management in Education*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 38–43.

Acknowledgements

This free course was written by Alan Floyd.

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Extract (abstract) from MacBeath, J. (2008) 'Stories of compliance and subversion in a prescriptive policy environment', *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 123–48

Video

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