STRUCTURE, CULTURE AND POWER IN EDUCATIONAL CHANGE: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

Ms Loan Dao, Doctoral Student, University of Tasmania

Introduction

This article argues that implementing successful educational reforms may require both the structure and culture of schools to be changed first, to be more conducive to implementing such reforms. In doing so, it is important to analyse the operation of power in schools, as power is a fundamental dimension in both the structure and culture of organisations. Morgan (as cited in Kezar, 2011) noted that power dynamics are deeply rooted in the routine institutional structure and aspects of culture. Power can be defined as the ability to influence the actions of others (Carlopio, Andrewartha & Armstrong, 2005) and according to Kabanoff (as cited in Carlopio et al., 2005) it can be used to "create stability but also be used for disruption" (p. 351). Thus, an opportunity exists through altering the structure and culture of schools to affect the operation of power to be more constructive to achieving successful educational reforms. The intent of this article is to provide an analysis of these points and explore some strategies for changing the structure and culture of schools to be more conducive to implementing educational reforms.

Structure & Power

Put simply, structure is how something is organised. The structure of an organisation is usually indicated formally by an organisational chart which shows the "position holders and the line of authority that link them to one another" (Wood et al., 2010, p. 294). There are two main types of organisational structure, namely tall and flat hierarchies which indicate the span of control in an organisation. A tall hierarchy exists where there are many levels of authority and the span of control is narrower than a flat hierarchy that has few levels of authority (Wood et al., 2010). Working relationships in tall structures are likely to be hierarchical, and where bureaucratic approaches are stressed, whilst a flat structure is one where leaders work alongside their teams, using implicit authority with the likelihood of supportive functional relationships (Law & Glover, 2000). It appears that authority is a common descriptor in defining organisational structures and it has the capacity to facilitate different types of working relationships.

Organisational structures can provide insight into the operation of power in a school to reveal where the existing structure lies along the spectrum of tall to flat hierarchies. If the operation of power between people within the existing organisational structure is deemed as unfavourable to implementing educational reforms, it is proposed that appropriate changes are made to this structure. This is likely to facilitate different working relationships between people. However, the caveat which has been established from early studies of educational change is that proposed changes will face strong resistance if the stakeholders are not assured of the worth and value of such changes (see: Bishop & Mulford, 1999; Cuban, 1988; McLaughlin, 1987). Moreover, Fullan (as cited in Grieshaber, 2010) contends that a meaningful consultation process to assess teachers' support for the proposed changes is important, as is ensuring that teachers understand the proposed changes and what is required of them as part of the process. Thus, in maximising the chance of success for proposed changes to the organisational structure, decision makers should meaningfully consult with the stakeholders, as well as sell to them the worth and value of such changes.

This article does not purport that there is one right organisational structure that is conducive to implementing educational reforms. Rather, it argues that certain measures can be undertaken to ensure that appropriate changes to the organisational structure are pursued. First, the range of working relationships within schools needs to be identified and understood. Law and Glover (2000) have identified three different types of people relationships within educational settings. The first is "line relationships", for example between head and deputy head; "staff relationships", for example between teacher and special needs coordinator; and thirdly, "functional relationships", for example an assessment working group (Law & Glover, 2000, p. 110).

In examining the different types of working relationships, different types of power at play in a school could be unveiled. For example, line relationships would suggest the presence of legitimate power, where the head would have the power in their position to ask for something to be done by his deputy, and where the deputy would normally comply (Robbins, Bergman, Stagg, & Coulter, 2003). In a study by Lines (2007) that investigated the use of power to implement strategy, it was highlighted that "the existence of position power opens for approaches to implementation based on simple requests to which the target persons have the duty to obey" (p. 146). The findings of Lines' (2007) study also suggested that "power plays a role in predicting the success of strategy implementation" (p. 166). It is probable then, that working relationships without the presence of legitimate power could prove getting things done to be very difficult, let alone work towards achieving the goals of educational reforms.

After identifying the existing working relationships, which would give insight into the operation of power in the existing organisational

structure, the decision makers would be more informed on whether the organisational structure needs changing and if so, what changes should be made. In the event that there is a lack of legitimate power, the existing organisational structure should incorporate more line relationships. Unfortunately, it is not within the scope of this article to explore all possible types of working relationships where the operation of power could be utilised to support a change process. The key point is, an organisational structure characterised by working relationships where power can be used to support the intended course of educational reforms should be pursued by schools.

Culture and Power

From the discussion so far, it can be argued that the organisational structure is helpful in unveiling the operation of power in schools. This is not necessarily the case with organisational culture. Culture can be defined as the shared basic assumptions that exist in an organisation that shape people's behaviour (Schein, 2004). These are more difficult to identify and interpret as they are not formally documented and are typically passed on from long-standing employees to newer staff (Schein, 2004). These observations are consistent with those made by McShane and Travaglione (2005) who argue that part of an organisational culture is the unstructured and informal way of communicating with others, founded on social interactions rather than organisational charts and job descriptions, where such communication allows employees to access information when it is unavailable through formal channels. This suggests the existence of informal power at play within these interactions. According to Graetz, Rimmer, Lawrence and Smith (2006) organisational cultures can create resistance for change, because they can exert a powerful influence on people's behaviour and organisational outcomes. Like organisational structure, power appears to be an intrinsic aspect of organisational culture and it has the potential to hamper change efforts.

In the event that an organisational culture is potentially obstructive to change efforts, it should be changed. Brown and Harvey (2006) have also argued that "changing the culture to successfully implement a change strategy is critical" (p. 73). To do this effectively, it is important to understand the cultural factors that drive certain behaviours to obstruct change efforts. The organisational culture framework developed by Schein (2004) with three levels of analysis could be useful here. The three levels are: artifacts; espoused beliefs and values; and underlying assumptions (Schein, 2004). Lucas and Kline (2008) contend that "when initiating change efforts, an organisation needs to assess and understand what aspects of the culture can be facilitators or hindrances..." (p. 286).

These observations are important, as changing the school's structure alone does not guarantee the success of change efforts. For example, people with legitimate power are not necessarily always able to bring about the changes they would like to see, because the beliefs and habits of staff that permeate the school culture can pose a barrier to implementing successful change. Grieshaber (2010) found the use of administrative power by the Principal and structural changes to resource management and a teacher's position to upskill other teachers in the use of technology was met with acts of subversion by teachers. These structural changes failed to reculture, that is change the behaviours and beliefs of these teachers to embrace the change (Grieshaber, 2010). Therefore, a thorough analysis of organisational culture could assist in identifying and understanding what drives the behaviours that are detrimental to change efforts. This understanding could assist

in altering the culture to be more supportive of educational change.

Ultimately, reculturing must affect the values and beliefs of people. Similarly to changing organisational structures, it is argued that measures to effectively change a culture would need to contribute to selling the worth and value of educational reforms to the stakeholders. A possible measure is the use of a shared vision to provide direction, focus and commitment (Brown & Harvey, 2006). Moreover, employees must be provided with the necessary resources to implement proposed changes (Brown & Harvey, 2006). These strategies are likely to build, guide and change shared values and the sense of purpose in an organisation, and in turn affect people's behaviour to be more supportive of change efforts.

Conclusion

Overall, the success of educational reforms may require that both the structure and culture of schools to be altered first to be more conducive to supporting and implementing such reforms. In order for this to occur effectively, a consideration of power is necessary, as power is a fundamental dimension of both organisational structure and culture. Additionally, it is vital that the worth and value of proposed changes be sold to the stakeholders, otherwise their resistance can derail the change efforts.

Copies of the references for this article are available from the author. Email: Loan.Dao@utas.edu.au