Creating a Specialist School Ethos – or should that be Culture?

Dr Carla Solvason
University of Worcester


This presentation has a question as a title, which is quite apt considering the number of questions that I plan to raise. The main premise of this work, inquiring whether, when we talk about the ethos of a school we are really referring to its culture, seemed quite straightforward when it was part of a literature review at the beginning of this decade. My reason for investigating it was that it was an element of a PhD study investigating the effects of Specialist Sports College Status on a high school. I sought to explore how the school would prioritise the conflicting agendas of inclusion in sport (with a focus on health and well-being), and excellence in sport (with a focus on elitism and success). The ‘problem’ that I foresaw was that those with little or no ‘sporting’ skills would feel undermined in an environment that glorified sporting success. When I discovered the fact that the term culture would be far more apt than ethos, I then used the term in a far less problematic way than I do today.

Way back in 2001, ethos was repeatedly mentioned in Government literature as a product of secondary schools adopting a subject specialism; and I began to question whether it was possible to actively create an ethos. I also began to doubt whether the Department for Education and Skills (2001) were actually clear what they meant by ethos. The further I investigated conceptions of ethos, the more convinced I became that what the Government was really eager to change was the culture of the specialist schools. The culture was the tangible element, the ethos was more elusive, more nebulous...no more than a feeling that you have about a place.

School culture, just like national culture, is based on history and tradition and affects action and interaction. Prosser describes it this way:

School culture is an unseen, and unobservable force behind school activities, a unifying theme that provides meaning, direction, and mobilisation for school members. It has both concrete representation in the form of artefacts and behavioural norms, and sustained implicitly by jargon, metaphors and rites. (Prosser, 1999. p.13)

So, is culture visible or not? Prosser uses the terms ‘unseen’ and ‘unobservable’ to describe culture, but then goes on to discuss concrete representation. I would argue that culture is visible; in the school building, in interactions between people, in traditions kept or forgotten and in decisions made. Its pervasiveness into every element of day-to-day life means that it may not be readily seen, but only because individuals are not looking for it.
Nias (1989) argues that we need to look at the term *culture* with far more exactness, if it is to “serve its users with greater accuracy” (p.143). Though Nias fails to attempt such exactitude herself, she makes the suggestion that a database of different types of cultures in schools should be created for reference, because by doing so the ‘cultural perspective’ would be honed and we would be able to use the term with “greater precision and force” (p.143). Or that by looking at different cultures we would have a better idea what culture is. I would argue quite the opposite, that the previous suggestion of a clearer definition of the term would *first* be necessary. Nias appears to have created a ‘chicken and egg’ situation. If we see vandalism at a school, or if we see students in very smart uniforms, are these things a result of the culture at the school...or do they create the culture at the school? And can a culture be created, if everyone is not ‘on board’? Is culture, actually, to a degree, conformity? And if individuals begin to buck against that conformity, do we have a breakdown of shared culture, or do we have a new culture of non-conformity?

Though cultures most closely described as a ‘family feel’ (Acker, 1990, Hargreaves, 1994) have been found in primary schools, this type of shared culture, positive as it may be, will rarely be found in the secondary arena. Here, due to the larger size and increased numbers of staff, schools usually need to take on a more formal (and segregated) role culture. And even if the “herd does keep moving roughly west” (Deal and Kennedy, 1983, p.14) it is likely that you will find sub and even conflicting cultures, which was the case at my study school.

When I initially investigated school culture my aim, as I have already mentioned, was to assess the impact on a High School of it taking on the identity of a Specialist Sports College. I used a Case Study approach, because, of course, everything was relevant to the culture of the school. I was also very clear that I wanted my approach to be ethnomethodological. My views were relatively unimportant, whereas the views of the participants at the school were vital. I used some quantitative data collection in order to assess the big picture, from which I could then focus in on the most pertinent areas from which to gather in-depth, qualitative data. In order to insert some parameters to the research I focused on primary themes, these were: the school building; school documentation (including such things as newsletters, school policies, Ofsted reports and marketing materials); the staff structure; relationships; pupil behaviour and a focus on inclusion or excellence. Data collection methods included: recording fieldnotes; formal and informal observation; scrutiny of documents, interview and questionnaires. This took place over a two-year time span.

Whilst preparing for this talk I came to question whether ethnography was really the best approach to my research, primarily because of reasons given by Barth (2002). He recalled the old adage that “a fish would be the last creature on earth to discover water, so totally and continually immersed in it is he” (p.7). So although I had an ethnographic desire to present “the members’ perspective of the social reality of the observed setting” (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p.490), today I would question whether the participants really were the best people to comment on the
culture of their school, or whether, because of their close proximity to them, the clarity of some of the more prominent features of the setting became obscured. This is something to consider at your leisure.

Barth (2002) also refers to ‘Nondiscussables’ (p.7). I did become privy to a number of these as I gradually earned the trust of those at the school - and these were sometimes the most significant statements. For example, comments made by a member of the PE staff over lunch that they were concerned for the future of their post. They feared that the school would not regain specialist status because ‘there was nothing special enough going on at the school to justify it’. Or the comments received through anonymous questionnaire (I obtained very little response from non-PE staff until they had been assured of the confidentiality of their comments) that with ‘most money and staffing allowances going to the PE faculty other areas of the school feel second best’. These were the comments almost spoken in whispers, but readily agreed with by others when someone had dared to mention them.

So what difficulties did I encounter during my research? Well, firstly it was extremely difficult to assess a change in the culture of the school when there was no discernible, shared culture at the school. Staff’s views on things varied so widely that it was very difficult to comprehend that they actually worked at the same school. There was not the ‘set of core values’ that Leader (2004) views as vital for a unifying culture. What was more in evidence was a subject specific sub-culture, as suggested by Ball (1987). This could be seen specifically within the PE department, which was physically separated from the rest of the school, being situated in an adjacent building, but also socially; because of their subject area, their casual appearance, and their ‘singled out’ status.

What was not evident at Green Acre was the “distinct mission and ethos” (DfEE, 2001, p.5) that became central to the Government’s manifesto for a specialist culture. Neither staff nor pupils recognised a shared identity that had developed through the school’s specialism. Without that shared vision, it became impossible to surmise the affect that group values were having on the students at Green Acre, as their views, I soon discovered, were even more diverse than those of the teaching staff. In something as simple as the staff’s views of the school building, a huge range of opinions was in evidence; whereas some would focus on the ‘pleasant atmosphere’ of the school, others could not overlook the ‘vandalism and the foul language’.

Despite the rather harsh realisation that a shared culture was not always the norm, I continued to look at the impact and influence that the specialism had had on those at the school. Amongst other things I explored whether the students felt an increased desire to take part in physical activity, an increased need to be fit and healthy or a pressure to be successful in ‘sports’. The way that I measured this influence was by concentrating on students arriving at the school in year 9 (n=240),

---

1 I will not go into a long justification of terms such as PE, physical activity and team sports here, there is not the time and I’m sure that you are all sufficiently aware of my meaning
and by comparing their initial views with their views one year later\(^2\). This was done by means of a lengthy questionnaire, which produced quantitative, easily comparable data. An overview of some of the most pertinent points to emerge from this is shown below:

**There was:**
- A drop in pupil’s enjoyment of physical activity
- A significant drop in their perception of how much their form tutor enjoyed physical activity (PA)
- A drop in attendance at extra-curricular PA
- A drop in their perception that school taught them that PA was good for them

*One year after the pupils joined the school.*

Obviously I was aware of the likelihood that these views could simply reflect an increased negativity in the students as the novelty of being in a new school wore off. In order to clarify this I asked the students a general question about their enjoyment of school. Their response to this indicated no significant variation in their attitude toward school in general, and if anything a slightly more positive response in Year 10, unlike their views towards physical activity.

I also interviewed students throughout the age range. During this interview I asked the students whether they felt that the Specialist Sports College Status had had an impact on the school and their responses varied. Some examples are given below:

**Michael, Y11:** I think it does make a difference, I think they take sport more seriously than at other schools.

**Sharon, Y11:** No, not really, it’s just that we get recognised as a Specialist Sports College. It’s just got normal physical education and everything that other schools do, it’s just that we get recognised where they wouldn’t. If I was applying for a job as say a physiotherapist and it said that I’d come from a Specialist Sports College it’d help.

**Amy, Y9:** No, it just feels like (middle school), but just a bit bigger.

**Gavin, Y9:** I don’t think so, I think it’s just a title. Because if you look at it, you haven’t got extra lessons for sport or anything like that...if you looked at it and thought ‘oh maybe they’ll have extra...’ but you don’t, it’s not...it’s just a name...

The teachers were reluctant to be interviewed, and preferred to respond by questionnaire in order to protect their anonymity. Thirty-three of them (over half) completed a questionnaire. The response to the question *‘As an individual teacher have you benefited from the school’s specialist status?’* (shown below in Table 1) was not surprising.

---

\(^2\) As the Year 10 cohort was only a fraction of the original sample, at 70 students, the results were validated by extracting the cohort’s responses from the original Year 9 sample, and comparing their responses with overall responses for ‘typicality’. Any deviations were noted.
Those staff that had been involved in the establishment of the specialist status were far more positive about it than those who had been left on the periphery. In 1987 Ball discussed how innovations tended to “advance or enhance the position of certain groups and disadvantage or damage the position of others” (p.32), but perhaps more importantly he discussed how acceptance of change decisions seemed to be directly related to the amount that individuals within the group had been involved in that decision.

Of the 15 staff who felt that they had not benefited from the school’s changed status, 5 added extra comments:

- Facility-wise there had been some improvement, but no personal benefit at this point in time
- Most money and staffing allowances go to the PE Faculty
- Most staff remain untouched by the sporting specialism, the benefits are not made clear. As a ‘sportsman’ I feel that I could contribute more
- The reverse
- The specialist status is for sport other areas of the school feel second best.

The concept of devaluing staff members by prioritising one subject area is certainly something in need of further investigation.

For fear of opening up a can of worms here, I will just touch upon the concepts of inclusion and excellence. I approached this research with an extremely elevated view of inclusion and a fear of the exclusionary nature of elevating excellence; but by it’s completion I began to question what, exactly, inclusion should ‘look like’. I would question whether inclusion should stretch to overlooking refusals and rudeness; just as I would question whether inclusion should stretch to commitments not being carried through (for example the commitment by pupils to attend an interview, or by staff to ensure that advertised clubs are run at stated times). I began to query whether the ‘inclusive’ attitude of not letting the children have to worry about ‘trivialities’ that existed at my study school, was more a case of the lowering of standards, than a remedy for those who struggled. This research has caused me to question whether schools should begin to look at inclusion differently; for fear that something that was based on an extremely positive premise has slipped into something that is far more negative. How different schools define (if they do at
all), and how they subsequently approach inclusion, and which approaches are most effective, are further areas that warrant in-depth research attention.

So, what conclusions could I reach through my research? In order to judge whether the culture of the school had changed through its new status there needed to be a palpable, shared culture at the school, which there wasn’t. This then raises the question of whether it is possible to create a culture, or whether it is inextricably enmeshed within natural development over time and conformity. In terms of the extent to which the specialist status had affected the school, well you have seen an indication of that. Could a Specialist Sports College become an oppressive environment for those with no ‘sporting’ skills? Such was not the case at this school. But one does assume that the term ‘oppressive’ carries with it some indication of pressure, which, in itself, was not evident. So what can I conclude? That the Government should have used the term culture instead of ethos, definitely... although, of course, I remain unconvinced that the changes that they expect to see to that culture are actually viable.

References


This document was added to the Education-line collection on 20 January 2010