Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

# An Ethnographic Study of Two Schools: Some Aspects of School Culture and the Significance for Change

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Educational Administration at Massey University.

Jennifer Mary Poskitt

August 1989

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
1061568273

Massey University Library
New Zealand & Pacific Collection

Certificate of Authorship

I certify that the thesis entitled

An Ethnographic Study of Two Schools: Some Aspects of School Culture and the Significance for Change

and submitted for the degree of Master of Educational Administration is the result of my own work, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or institution.

Signed: J. M. Boshitt

Date: August 1989.

Massey University Library
New Zealand & Pacific Collection

Retention of Thesis

I hereby state that I, Jennifer Mary Poskitt, being a candidate for the degree of Master of Educational Administration, accept the requirements of the University relating to the retention and use of theses deposited in the Education Department or Massey University Library.

In terms of these conditions, I agree that the original of my thesis deposited in the Department or Library should be accessible for purposes of study and research, in accordance with the normal conditions established for the care, loan or reproduction of theses.

Signature: J. M. Poskitt

Date: August 1989

Acknowledgements

The successful completion of this thesis is due to the assistance of many people.

First, the patience, guidance and skilful questioning of my thesis supervisor, Dr. Wayne Edwards is gratefully acknowledged. His interest and encouragement week after week enabled me to persevere and keep on target throughout the process.

Secondly, grateful thanks are extended to my parents for their interest and support, especially in the trials and tribulations experienced in conquering two word processing programmes! The process and subject which has intrigued them for so long will hopefully be revealed on reading the thesis.

Appreciation is also extended to numerous friends whose inquiries and interest sustained my enthusiasm and allowed opportunities for thought clarification.

Lastly, and not least, grateful thanks are expressed to the principals and their school communities for the cooperation and openness which allowed investigation of their schools. Comments and validation of the draft were appreciated and hopefully they will learn as much from reading the thesis as I have from writing it.

Abstract

Two New Zealand schools, one primary, one intermediate, are studied in depth using ethnographic research techniques, with an emphasis on observations in the field. Observations were supplemented by a survey of pupils, by formal and informal interviews of people in the school community and by document analysis.

The aim of the study was to understand the culture of each school, its way of life, the responses each made to change and the means each used to begin the process of school improvement'.

Descriptions and interpretations of the cultures revealed 'sacred values' which provide a possible key to why changes occurred. At the primary school the 'sacred value' of bilingualism is revealed. This value is supported by rituals, ceremonies, symbols, language, a priestess and patterns of behaviour within the school. Other related values are: concern for people, teamwork, concern for learning and teaching, openness, consultation and involvement of the Kowhai School community; all incorporated within the values of positive reinforcement, flexibility and informality.

Manuka Intermediate is different from Kowahi School in having an overall, inspiring slogan, ***Making Manuka Matter***, to which three main 'sacred values' are connected. The value of putting people first is shown by sub-themes of teamwork, family feeling, shared decision-making and

positive reinforcement. This analysis revealed some sub-cultural groups with competing views, suggesting a site of change. The principal is shown to have a key role in culture shaping and as an agent of change. Two further 'sacred values' of aiming for excellence and image building are explicated. Incorporation of children's views is shown in the children's values of variety, choice and schoolwork.

From the study of the school cultures a theory of change is derived, from which the author proposes that the changes endorse, and are compatible with, the cultural themes and 'sacred values'. These cultural values are postulated to determine the pace, the process and the acceptability of types of changes. Many participants acknowledged that there had been multiple changes but found it difficult to specify them; suggesting that they had been incorporated into the 'way of life.' Changes were deemed to be largely positive, especially by informed people. Participants believed that it was mainly children who were affected by changes, although staff and community also were affected to a lesser degree.

Finally, if one goal of school improvement is an ability to handle change (Hopkins, 1984), then, judging from their ability to handle change and from parent perceptions, it appears that the two schools have commenced the process of school improvement. The thesis, therefore, contributes towards the understanding of the processes of school change.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements iv

Abstract v

Table of Contents vii

List of Tables, Figures and Graphs xi

Glossary xii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

Background of the Study 1

Nature of the Study 2

Statement of Research Problem 3

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study 4

Organisation of the Thesis 6

Conclusion 7

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction 8

Change 8

The Nature of Change 8

Conditions of Change 10

Change and the Role of Leadership 12

Management of Change 13

Culture 15

Towards a Definition of Culture 15

School Improvement 19

Factors of Effectiveness 22

New Zealand Studies Related to School Improvement 26

Limitations of the Literature on School Improvement 30

Conclusion 31

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction 32

Ethnography 32

Why Choose Ethnography? 33

Ethnographic Research Techniques 35

Fieldwork 35

Multimethods 38

Research Issues 40

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY IN ACTION

Introduction 44

Why Choose Manuka Intermediate School and Kowhai School? 44

Practical Considerations and Limitations 45

Timetable and Phase Development 47

Utilized Research Techniques 48

Access 48

Rapport 49

Fieldnotes 52

Interviews 52

Survey 53

Triangulation 54

Document Analysis 54

Analysis Process 59

Conclusion 60

CHAPTER FIVE: CULTURAL SLICES FROM 1988

Introduction 61

Kowhai School 61

Physical Description 61

School Organisation 62

Cultural Slices from 1988 63
The Staffroom 64
The Burglary 65
Maths Lesson 67
Teddybears' Picnic 68
A Glimpse of the Community 68
General Impressions 70
Manuka Intermediate 71
Physical Description 71
School Organisation 72
Cultural Slices from 1988 74
General Impressions 74
Image Building 75
Arts Festival 75
Decision-making 76
School Assembly 78

CHAPTER SIX: THE CULTURE OF THE SCHOOLS
Introduction 82
The Cultures of Kowhai School 82
Bilingualism 84
Concern for People 88
Concern with Learning and Teaching 88
Teamwork 91
Open School 96
Informality and Positive Reinforcment 97
Conclusion 99
The Cultures of Manuka Intermediate 101
Putting People First 104
Excellence 122

Image Building 125
Conclusion 127
Significance of the Two Cultures 128
Bilingualism 128
Concern with Learning and Teaching 129
Teamwork and Shared Decision-making 130
School-Community Relationships/Open School 131
Positive Reinforcement 132
Divergent Values 132
Cultural Analysis 133
Conclusion 133

CHAPTER SEVEN: TOWARDS A THEORY OF CHANGE IN SCHOOL CULTURE
Introduction 135
What Aspects of the School Culture are Changing? 135
What Aspects of the Culture Appear to Promote Change? 140
What Cultural Factors Inhibit Change? 147
Why Have the Changes Occurred? 150
How are these Changes Perceived by the School Community? 152
Conclusion 155

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION
Introduction 158
Linking the Strands 158
Methodology Reconsidered 162
Concluding Remarks 162

APPENDICES

BIBLIOGRAPHY 178

List of Tables


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I | Manuka School Triangulation Checkpoint | 55 |
| II | Kowhai School Triangulation Checkpoint | 56 |
| III | Values derived from Student Survey (Kowhai) | 89 |
| IV | Kowhai Teacher Values derived from Interviews | 90 |
| V | Kowhai School Interview Schedule | 95 |
| VIa | Manuka Intermediate School Interview Schedule | 110 |
| VIb | Manuka Intermediate School Interview Schedule | 111 |
| VII | Changes instituted in 1989 | 136 |
| VIII | Linking Culture and Change | 155 |
| IX | Comparison of Cultural Factors with Effectiveness Factors | 157 |


List of Figures


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 3-1 | Timetable and Phase Development | 47 |
| 3-2 | Allocation of Time Spent in the Field | 58 |
| 3-3 | Analysis Process | 59 |
| 6-1 | Kowhai School Culture (Fieldwork Analysis) | 83 |
| 6-5 | Manuka School Culture (Fieldwork Analysis) | 102 |
| 6-6 | Manuka Student Values | 118 |
| 6-7 | Manuka Teacher Values | 119 |


Graphs


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 6-1 | Student Values: Boys and Girls | 115 |
| 6-2 | Student Values: Classes A and B | 116 |
| 6-3 | Student Values: Form One and Form Two | 117 |

## Glossary

### Cultural Terms

*Sacred values* - immutable norms, sacred because they keep order in the culture, symbolized in events, relationships and procedures. procedures.

*Profane values* - values susceptible to change, 'the way we do things around here.'

*Rituals* - dramatization of the school's cultural values; a particular set way of doing things, symbolizing a central belief.

*Symbols* - a sign, focal point of a cultural value

*Legends* - stories about particular people or ways of doing things that embody the school's cultural values.

*Slogans* - brief sayings that embody a sacred value

*Heroes* - provide role model, set standard of performance; preserve what makes school special; motivate others; embody the beliefs and values held by the culture.

*Priest(ess)* - tend to be older mature, human 'encyclopaedias' on matters of their school's history and community.

*Storytellers* - tell stories to gain power and influence and because they enjoy doing it; typically found in positions that give them access to a great deal of information

*Cultural players* - people in the culture like heroes, storytellers, priestesses, gossips ...

### Abbreviations

P. = Principal
D.P. = Deputy Principal
S.T. = Senior Teacher