

## **Organizational culture of a successful higher-secondary school: An ethnographic case study**

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### **Abstract**

School culture, is one of the important factors that play role in school efficiency and success. The purpose of this study was to examine the culture of a successful school deeply. This study was a case study since it was limited to one school and an ethnographic study since a cultural context was used for the identification of the school. Participant Observations, Intensive Interviews, Case studies, along with the Structured Questionnaires were used for the data collection. The results demonstrated that the school administration and teachers work collaboratively to increase academic success in every spheres of school. It can be concluded that the study based on anthropological ethnography may be fruitful in policy making measurers as well as the development of an organization like school.

**Keywords:** organizational culture, higher secondary school, successful school, ethnographic case study

### **1. Introduction**

Organizational ethnography is the ethnographic study of organizations and their organizing processes. This subject of study takes its place alongside ethnographies of religion, of a city or neighborhood or ethnic community, of gang life, homeless people, professions and occupations (such as doctors and waitresses), fashion design, schools, social movements, and many other aspects of human life. Organizational ethnographers attempt for an appreciation of the complexities of the everyday in organizational settings. These are the seven key characteristics of (interpretive) organizational ethnography: combined fieldwork methods, at the scene, hidden and harsh dimensions, context-sensitive and actor-centered analysis, meaning-making and reflexivity and positionality. (Sierk Ybema, Dvora Yanow, Harry Wels & Frans Kamsteeg, 2009)

In general, Organizational ethnography is closely linked to the use of anthropology as a way to view modern organizations and used as a form of data and method to understand organizations as cultural communities. It is used to enable a rich description of the everyday life, symbols and the Cultural norms and values of a workplace, together with an understanding of the social relations and structures of the community. Application of ethnography has varied to some extent as understanding of organizations has undergone changes. Social scientists and organizational theorists have recently been applying the concept of culture to the more limited aspects of life within organizations. But the concept of culture, when being applied to organizational studies, has been developed very much from the original concern of anthropologists. Anthropologists are concerned with understanding the culture of a group of people while the managers are concerned with manipulating the culture. Therefore; the anthropologists seek to "see" the culture from the perspective of participants. They try to allow their own presence to exert the minimal effects on the group. But managers are concerned with directing or challenging behavior for the purpose of increasing effectiveness of the work being done by the group (Edwards, 1992)

Educational anthropology involves the use of anthropological theory, data, and methods to study educational practices, institutions, and problems in their proper cultural contexts. The range of educational institutions studied varies from highly formal school systems in industrialized societies to very informal systems in which important cultural knowledge is passed down from generation to generation by kin through such means as storytelling, experiential learning, and peer interaction (Ferraro & Andreatta, 2010). Ethnographic study permits the observation of daily life in classroom, the collection of data on classroom life, and interviews to inform further the data that has been collected. The knowledge gained from ethnographic studies can conduct to provide a richer and more complete understanding of the teaching and learning in inner environments. Ethnographic methods can help to the researcher to raise issues that the participants may not have been aware of themselves. In using ethnographic methods to study learning in classrooms, it is important to keep in mind that we are conducting observations not only across cultures, but also across ages and educational experiences.

Due to the fact that culture is not a physical being, it is difficult to perceive organizational culture through analyzing its definitions and explanations (Deal, 1995). A great amount of culture is composed of daily behaviors and beliefs and it has an invisible, deep impact on the flow of life (Miller & Dess, 1996). As Denison (1990) concluded from a variety of studies, culture plays a significant role in the effectiveness of organizations. Additionally, Evans (1996, p. 44) addresses the of power culture within the framework of organizational culture from the perspective of both the process itself and the products it yields. Culture is a means of not only transforming people's behaviors and attitudes but also forms learning models. It is an influential factor in determining the reactions of organizational members to changes in the environment (Flint, 2000). The findings of the organizational research encourage educational researchers to utilize fundamental cultural elements of the successful schools. All the schools have either strong or weak and functional or nonfunctional cultural elements. School culture is defined as a body of

unrecorded (Peterson & Deal, 2002), transmitted norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and mythical meaning patterns employed by organizational members. It can be concluded that organizational culture has a key role in specifying the school’s effectiveness and achievement. Moreover, there are many studies revealing the relationship between school culture and academic aspiration, academic achievement, teacher job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The significant role of culture in achievement led to studies focusing specifically on the characteristics of the school culture in academically successful schools. Several researchers found out common features of such schools. They are;

1. Schools with a communicatively accessible atmosphere and where the members are cooperative and committed to their job schools where teachers are included in the decision-making process;
2. Schools with a strong academic focus; and
3. Schools where administrators have leadership abilities

**2. Aims & Objectives**

The present study is mainly concentrated on the following objectives:

- To study the Characteristics of the school.
- To analyze the variegated networks of relationships and values as the organizational culture of the school under study.
- To observe the positions and role of the primary and secondary participants (e.g. Students, Teachers, Head Teachers, Non-Teaching Staffs, and Parents/guardians etc.)

related to the successful orientation of the school under study and finally.

**3. Significance of the Study**

School culture is a body of unrecorded, transmitted norms, values, beliefs employed by the organizational members. The anthropological study of organizational culture of the school has a key role in specifying the school effectiveness and achievements.

**4. Methodology**

**Data Collection Tools**

The study possesses two major components: qualitative research design, which was used to analyze the school culture and the educational ethnography of the school under study. The data as per requirement of the aims and objectives have been collected from different sources, like, household members, teachers, school, students, and parents. The primary as well as contextual data have been collected through: 1. Participant Observations 2.Intensive Interviews, 3. Case studies, along with the Structured Questionnaires (Bernard, 2006). The secondary data have also been used from books, journal, administrative reports, under the purview of anthropological ethnography.

**Research Design**

The present researchers essentially followed the following strategy of shaping the whole research systematically:



**Fig 1:** Research Process for the Present Study

**5. Venue of Observation**

In this study a higher-secondary school set-up in West-Bengal was taken as the subject of anthropological inquiry. The school set-up selected was an educational institution established by West Bengal Educational Board. The activities of this educational institution were presented in two different categories; Schooling process and administrative process. In order to reach the proposed aims and objectives, the Higher-Secondary School at Ashoknagar-Kalyangarh municipal area

(Ward No.15) in the District of North 24 Parganas, West Bengal has been selected for the present study .The Name of the school is ‘Ashoknagar Vidyasagar Banibhavan Ucchya Vidyalay’ (Established in 1969) which is situated beside the junction of the Habra-Naihati Road and the Jirat Road near Ashoknagar Road Railway Station. Three criteria have been taken into consideration in school selection. They are:

- Success rank in order of last five years for academic, socio-cultural and allied activities.

- School Headmaster’s Experience (5 years minimum)
- School being voluntary to participate in the study.

**6. Findings and Discussions**

In this part, the findings of the study are given. Primarily, a brief overview on the history of school and its general characteristics are provided. Secondly, information gathered from teachers, students, parents and school administrators are analyzed. Finally, all data collected during the course of the study were classified taking the research questions into account.

**a) Information Collected from the Participants**

Information was grouped in few general topics. They are; relations with parents, achievement, relations with teachers, administration, relations with students and special occasions etc. It was observed that most of the taken data from teachers and administrators are positive. But small number information of the negative indication is concerned with the parents and relations with the administration

**b) The School- Past and Present**

The school went through a number of transformations. The first transformation was when there were a small number of student and teacher populations. It can be said that the school administration and teachers work collaboratively to increase academic success in every spheres of school. The academic success and the cultural achievement made both of the teachers and the students in the educational environment which led to the second transformation. Moreover, there was a dramatic increase in the number of students and teachers and there has been a shift in the administrative role of the school headmaster recently, which resulted in a loss in the spirit of collaboration in the school.

**c) Analysis and Interpretation of the Data:**

**Table 1:** Year Wise Increase of Students

| Year | Boys | %     | Girls | %     | Total |
|------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 2016 | 552  | 63.66 | 315   | 36.33 | 867   |
| 2015 | 576  | 66.43 | 291   | 33.56 | 867   |
| 2014 | 505  | 72.03 | 196   | 27.96 | 701   |
| 2013 | 516  | 74.89 | 173   | 25.10 | 689   |
| 2012 | 450  | 74.87 | 151   | 25.12 | 601   |
| 2011 | 406  | 74.90 | 136   | 25.09 | 542   |
| 2010 | 382  | 74.90 | 128   | 25.09 | 510   |

The year wise Increase of students is an important characteristic as it directly affect other socio-cultural aspects of school. From the above table, it can be observed that the percentages of Increase of the students year by year comparatively high in boys students to the girls student.

**Table 2:** Academic Success in Secondary Level

| Division                      | Year |      |      |      |      |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                               | 2016 | 2015 | 2014 | 2013 | 2012 |
| Star/1 <sup>st</sup> division | 12   | 7    | 6    | 12   | 2    |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Division      | 49   | 46   | 32   | 31   | 15   |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> Division      | 10   | 8    | 9    | 8    | 28   |
| Fail                          | 13   | 8    | 5    | 6    | 6    |
| Total                         | 84   | 69   | 53   | 54   | 51   |

From the above table it is observed that the second division

position of the students is comparatively high to the third division position. Here it is also mentionable Future is the first division position among the students is average to the other position.

**Table 3:** Academic Success in Higher-Secondary Level

| Year | No of students | Star/1 <sup>st</sup> division | 2 <sup>nd</sup> division | 3 <sup>rd</sup> division | Fail |
|------|----------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------|
| 2016 | 66             | 15                            | 47                       | 1                        | 4    |

Only one batch has been passed out from the school. It is also important to note here that 22% of the students got star or first division. Most of the students got second division (70%). Few among them did not get the proper position in this examination.

**i) Problems/Solutions to Problems**

The most frequently encountered problems are: parent’s interference in administrative issues. And lack of class rooms and the size of the rooms are quite disappointing for teachers and students. But it was observed that the administration, teachers and the parents had a common attitude in solving problem in the school.

**ii) School’s Academic Achievements**

Students, Parents and teachers stated that the fundamental reason of academic success is the administrative as well as academic role of Headmaster. Another remarkable reason for the academic achievement is a number of different cultural activities where students have to participate in most of the time. Exam oriented studies and achievement tests of the school are other important factors for achievement.

**7. Discussion**

The main aim of the study was to describe a successful Higher-Secondary school’s organizational culture in a detailed way. To this end, answers to following questions were investigated;

- 1) What are the characteristics as well as pattern of school culture?
- 2) What are the opinions of the participants related to school success?

**The findings are discussed below.**

**1) What are the characteristics of school culture?**

The prominent characteristics of school culture revealed in the study are: 1) teachers from different perspectives having positive relations 2) having a common attitude in the solution of problems and 3) a leadership quality of Head-Master.

i) Teachers from different perspectives having positive relations: It was concluded from the study that relations and communication between teachers have a positive effect on school achievement parallel to previously conducted studies.

ii) Having a common attitude in the solution of problems: It was found that teachers and school administrators had a common attitude in quest of finding solutions to problems. The culture of an academically successful school was examined and it was discovered that teachers and administrators with opposing views display a common attitude to solve problems. Among the distinctive features of a leader, an administrator’s ability to work in a

collaborative manner with the teachers is essential in solving problems.

iii) A leadership quality of Head-Master: It is very likely to talk about two distinct periods in the school. The school’s headmaster had been working in the school for 15 years and teachers stated that the Headmaster had a key role in achievements of the school. Teachers’ talking about the characteristics and activities of the previous Headmaster was a reflection of his effective leadership qualities. Nonetheless, the change in the administrative staff and subsequent transfer of school principals to other institutions did not allow the administrators to shape school culture. The frequent change in the administrative staff was due to rules and regulations of the Ministry of Education, which had both positive and negative effect on schools.

**2) What are the opinions of the participants related to success of the school?**

Teachers think that there is a positive correlation between student achievement and parents’ socio-economic status. Cultural heritage and sources, family structure, school-parent relationship, assistance in home assignments promote student perception of school, increase success and prevent students to drop out. The participants of the study claimed that exam-oriented studies as well as cultural activities carried out in the school are other major factors in achievement. Teachers felt the need for doing extra work consistent with this school

because of the inadequacy of sources in the educational program.

Based on the information provided by the participants, it can be figured that school culture is not influential in academic achievement. However, two parents with almost the same socio-economic background stated that they changed their children’s former school since they believed that the school administration was ineffective and minority of the students was academically successful. This finding can be an indicator that student achievement is not only a result of student and teacher characteristics but also school’s features. Many studies show that school culture has an important role in academic achievement.

**Organizational Structure and Role - A Brief Profile**

Having the appropriate structure is vital for an organization to meet its aims and objectives. Management committees of a school may be structured by:

**Entire Management Committees**

The Entire Management Committees consists of five different categories. They plays different role in different ways. The Managing Committees have eleven members. This structure is made up of hierarchical formation with seven individual in different sub categories. The top position belongs to president of the school who is nominated by the election of the school. After that the second position is set up for the secretary. This role is played by the head teacher of the school.

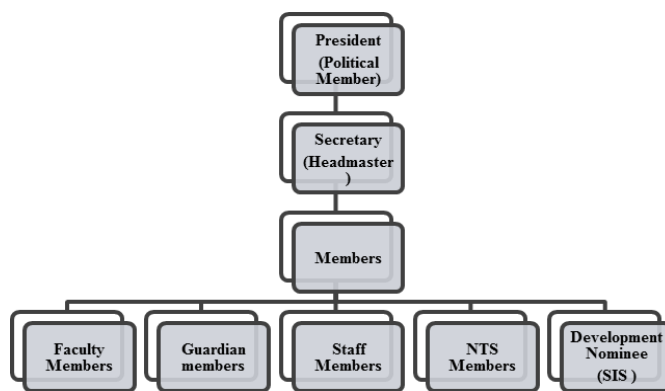
**Table 4:** Entire Management Committees

| Name of the Committees | Managing Committees | Staff Council | Academic Council | Cultural Sub-Committee | Magazine Sub-Committee |
|------------------------|---------------------|---------------|------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Number of Members      | 11                  | 3             | 4                | 6                      | 6                      |

Few members is also included here among them, they are members, guardians, deputy delegates, and departmental nominee. The main responsibility of this committee is to run the proper function of the school. Staff council committee consists of only three members. Here hierarchically the top most position belongs to the head teacher (President) and assistant head teaches (secretary) and others assistant teachers (members). Generally, they are associated for a meeting when they take an initiative steps for the emergency purpose. On the other side, Cultural Sub-Committee and Magazine Sub-Committee play an important and unique role in the entire managing committee for the different purpose, like registration, form fill-up etc. for cultural activities and wall magazine publishing.

**Managing Committee of the School**

This figure shows a hierarchical structure of this institute for the development. The top most position belongs to political member of the local municipality. The second most position belongs to the secretary, or the head teacher of this institute. After that nominated members like faculties, guardians, other staffs, NTS members and development Nominee (SIS) are also included of this committee. School development, teachers’ responsibilities, guardians’ responsibilities, complains and education related problems these all are the discussing topic of the committee when they are associated with any meeting. Finally all the members of this committee moderately take the right decision for the development of the school.

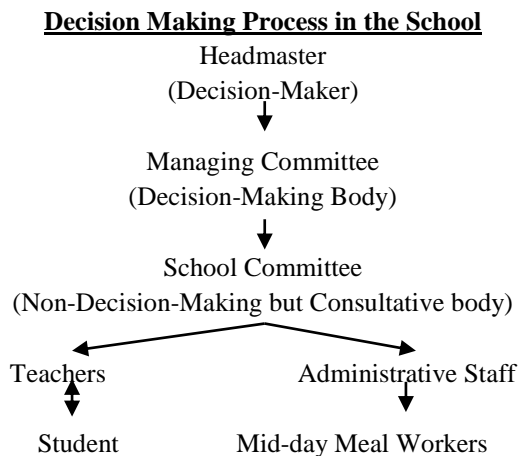


**Fig 2:** Managing Committee of the School

**Decision Making and Authority**

Decision making and authority is a major concern to get a successful achievement for a school. Here the diagram shows that the decision making process have been distributed through step by step. Most of the times the head teacher takes the decision and which is followed by the other associates. That’s why the decision making process flow into faculties, administrative staff like non-teaching staff, mid-day meal workers. On the other side academic decision making process has taken part among the students. They also follow the teachers’ instruction sometimes the mid-day meal workers also instruct to them as a guardian at school and they systematically follow the rule regularly. When an instruction

is processed by the head teacher, the instruction is distributed in academic as well as administrative field with two different ways. The head teacher instructs to students as an order on the other side this instruction being made up as a proposal for the administrative staff.



**Fig 3:** Decision Making and Authority

**Typology of Inter-Relational Phenomena**

The interrelationship phenomena are categorized in three important fields and these are academic, cultural and Administrative. The academic field is associated with students, teaches, head master and parents or guardians. Most of the time when they are dependable with each other in a particular time at school, during this segment the discussing topic is related to the study materials, homework, class periods, examination, school uniform, school dairy etc. The second field represents here different kind of cultural activities which is quite popular activities of this school from the beginning. Here students participate in different cultural programs like annual cultural programme, annual sports, wall magazine, school rituals, etc of the school or out of the school. The last one is showing the administrative activities in different ways. The administrative field is associated with school managing committee, parents, students etc and here the conversation topic is related to school fees, teacher-parents meetings, school cabinet, and opinion about school development.

**Table 5:** Typology of Inter-Relational Phenomena

| Interaction About | Interaction Among                            | Discussing Topics   |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Academic          | Students, Teachers, Headmaster, Parents      | Study Materials, Homework, class Periods, Examination, School Uniform, School Dairy,    |
| Cultural          | Headmaster, Asst. Teachers Students          | Annual Cultural Programme, Annual Sports, Wall Magazine, School Rituals,                |
| Administrative    | School Managing Committee, Parents, Students | School Fees, Teacher-Parents Meetings, School Cabinet, Opinion About School Development |

**8. Concluding Remarks**

In this study, it was aimed to describe organizational culture of a higher-secondary school in a comprehensive manner. The participants of the study stated that students related variables were more effective than school related variables in academic achievements. The study revealed that students’ participation in different allied fields like cultural activities, sports events, social work etc. played a major role in the achievements of the school. Based on the information provided by the participants, it can be figured that school culture is definitely influential in academic achievement. Additionally, it was found that the school had a positive culture in line which shows that positive school culture supports academic achievements. The main factors in the achievements are:

- 1) Teachers from different views have positive relationships.
- 2) Having a common attitude in finding the solutions to problems.
- 3) School Headmaster having a leadership characteristics also contributed to school success.

Last of all, it can be concluded that the study based on anthropological ethnography may be fruitful in policy making measurers as well as the development of an organization like school.

**9. Acknowledgements**

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