The quest for a culture of learning: a South African schools perspective

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Within the media and the literature the need is often expressed for the establishment of a culture of learning within South African schools. The contrasting view tends to be one of dysfunctional schools that have come into being, giving rise to significant learner behaviour problems and poor pass rates being encountered in practice. This paper is directed at gaining conceptual clarity as to what is meant by a "culture of learning" and exploring two fundamentally different views as to how such a culture can be nurtured within South African schools. The study is based on a multi-disciplinary literature review to gain an understanding of the concept and the theories advocated for bringing about a culture change. A key finding emanating from the study is that the traditional culture management approach advocated in the literature may not be all that effective in practice and that an alternative approach that views "culture of learning" as an emergent phenomenon that has its origins in the social interaction taking place within classrooms, schools and learning communities may be more effective.

Introduction

"This new culture of learning can augment learning in nearly every facet of education and every stage of life. It is a core part of what we think of as 'arc of life' learning, which comprises the activities in our daily lives that keep us learning, growing, and exploring" (Thomas & Brown, 2011:18).

Thomas and Brown (2009:1) suggest that educational needs of the twenty-first century pose fundamental challenges for educators and educational practice. According to the researchers "educational practices that focus on the transfer of static knowledge simply cannot keep up with the rapid rate of change" that characterises the prevailing context (Thomas & Brown, 2009:1). It is suggested by Thomas and Brown (2009:1) that practices that focus on adaptation or reaction to change fare better, but are still being outpaced by an environment that requires content to be updated almost as fast as it can be taught. Implied in effect is a quest for lifelong learning. This is reflected in their introductory quotation that attests to the need for a "new culture of learning" that is deemed to be more appropriate for a contemporary context of unprecedented change. Wit and Orvis (2010:6) similarly claim that within a contemporary "knowledge economy" students need new skills for college and careers and a failure to foster these skills and a culture of learning leaves them vulnerable. This vulnerability is manifest in the South African skills paradox, where there are a significant number of unemployed youth, yet business and industry lack people with the appropriate knowledge, skills and experience to effectively function in the knowledge economy.

MacDonald (2005:1) summarised the skills paradox in stating that "South Africa is faced with a unique employment problem: we have high levels of unemployment (estimated at four

million job seekers), thousands of high-skill jobs available and approximately 180,000 graduates out of work". It is rather disconcerting to find that while business and industry are confronted with a significant skills shortage, the country simultaneously faces a huge unemployment problem. Chee (1997:81) accentuates the need for nurturing a culture of learning within schools that "prepares students for a rapidly changing world". It is within this context of needing to prepare a future generation for the challenges they will face that it is concerning to note that Niemann and Kotzé (2006:609) found that there are "numerous dysfunctional schools". The researchers stress that within these dysfunctional schools a "culture of teaching and learning has essentially broken down" (Niemann & Kotzé, 2006:609). Kruger (2003:206) also found that one of the major challenges confronting educators is the need for "creating a sound culture of teaching and learning in which effective education can take place".

The breakdown of a culture of teaching and learning in a significant number of South African schools is reflected in multifaceted socio-educational problems encountered in schools and communities. Masita (2005:205-207), for instance, cites vandalism, gangsterism, drug abuse, a high drop-out rate, poor academic performance, and demotivated learners as observable features of a poor culture of learning. Against this background one needs to assess the claim by Van Deventer and Kruger (2003:3) that an important challenge facing South African schools "is the restoration of a sound culture of learning and teaching". Heystek and Lethoko (2001:222) echo this sentiment in arguing that one of the main goals in education today is to restore a culture of learning and teaching in South African Schools.

From the introductory discussion it may be concluded that the nurturing of a "*culture of learning*" within South African schools assumes a significant sense of importance if some of the social, educational and socio-economic difficulties encountered in the country are to be addressed. Yet as noted by past President Mbeki (1997:1), the country's education sector is characterised by too many words and little action in realising a culture of learning. If one is to move from mere words of intent to a reality of practice, it is imperative that clarity be obtained as to what constitutes a culture of learning and how such a culture can be established. In the ensuing discussion the concept is defined and an understanding of the concept is attained. With this serving as a source of information, a review of the literature is conducted to determine if such a culture in fact can be predetermined and intentionally managed within South African schools. In this regard it is important to note that the literature research undertaken was multi-disciplinary in nature, in order to gain an understanding of the concept and the ability to intentionally nurture a constructive culture of learning within South African schools. The value of this research study, it is argued, is vested in the insights and understanding so gained being able to serve as a source of information and reference for educators attempting to instil a culture of learning within their respective schools.

An analysis of the concept "a culture of learning"

> "Culture could be a paradigm for understanding organizations and ourselves. Paradigm is a grand word, signifying a cluster of basic assumptions that form a world view, a way of filtering knowledge and experience. Culture is also a grand word. I wish I could link the two, present a bold claim, and argue it elegantly, for the concept of culture is bringing forth a new way of understanding organizational life" (Smircich, 1985:57).

The introductory quotation surfaces the researcher's underlying sense of difficulty and frustration in conceptualising culture, in terms of a world view of knowledge and experience, in order to elegantly create a means for understanding "*organisational life*". It is probably a sense

of frustration that has overwhelmed many a researcher in analyse the concept and suggesting a means for enabling educators to establish a culture that promotes learning within the classroom and school. There still appears to be uncertainty as to whether an ideal culture can be brought about in practice and how this can be achieved. As noted by Smircich (1985:57) the term "culture" does not come from anthropology with an instruction package ready to serve as a paradigmatic foundation on which to build. When it comes to the nurturing of a culture of learning within classrooms the concept remains rather elusive. This notwithstanding, as a concept, it holds significant potential for the fostering of a context conducive to learning and as a behavioural determinant, for addressing learner behavioural problems. With this in mind it is deemed important that some clarity be attained as to the defining of the concept.

Sedibe (2006:27) concludes that no uniformity exists as to the meaning attributed to the concept "*culture of learning*". Sedibi (2006:28) then accepts a definition attributed to the concept by Chrisholm and Vally, namely "the bringing about of the conditions and disciplines of compulsory schooling to bear on teachers and students, regular attendance, punctuality and acceptance of authority". Implied is a culture of learning built on an infrastructure of discipline and rules. Suggested therefore is that in the absence of the cited conditions within schools, a culture of learning would for all intents and purposes fail to exist. The researcher, however, acknowledges that such factors, as cited, are inadequate for fully describing the concept in its entirety (Sedibe, 2006:28). The outcomes relating to a lack of the conditions that define a culture of learning, such as violence, drug abuse, and poor academic performance (Masita, 2005:205-207), are also used to describe the concept. Implied therefore is that if these cultural underpinning conditions exist there will be no positive behavioural outcomes to observe.

Govender (2009:365) describes a culture of learning from an organisational perspective, which could be a school, as "an organisation skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights". The focus in so defining the concept is on the behavioural outcome and culture is thereby seen as being a behavioural determinant.

In defining the concept Staub (2003:1) adopts a negative behavioural perspective by focusing on the cultural conditions that frustrate learners' basic psychological needs resulting in negative behavioural outcomes, such as violence. In a contrasting perspective conditions that fulfil these needs in constructive ways are deemed to contribute to positive behavioural outcomes and consequently more peaceful conditions (Staube, 2003:1). An important aspect here is that behaviour is again deemed to be determined by the culture that exists within the classroom. It is a view that has engendered the need for "caring schools" (Smit, 2007:53; Weeks, 2009:1). It could be inferred that a social construct of a "caring environment" will result in cultural attributes that fosters learning within the classroom and school.

Louis (1985:74) claims that three aspects of culture can be identified in the definitions attributed to culture, namely:

- Content, the totality of socially constructed and transmitted behaviour patterns, social expression and a common understanding.
- A sense of group or community.
- The relationship that exists between the content and the group, context characteristics of the group; content peculiar to the group, or differing from that of other groups.

The latter in terms of a culture of learning would be insightful if it can be found that the nurturing of specific cultural attributes would significantly enhance behaviour conducive to learning and contribute to effective behaviour patterns that are acceptable within a broader

community setting. This could be contrasted to cultural attributes that result in negative behavioural patterns. This would be advantageous in determining what cultural attributes need to be nurtured within classrooms. It, however, still does not explain if such a culture can in fact be intentionally established and if so how this can be achieved. Martin (1985:93) analyses two extreme versions of the culture management paradox, there are cultural pragmatists who argue that it can and should be actively managed and cultural purists who find it ridiculous to talk of managing culture. The latter are quite adamant that it cannot be managed. With the preceding discourse in mind, the ensuing discussion in analysing the concept will centre on the realities associated with establishing a culture of learning in classrooms and schools, as well as determining if this in fact is possible and if so how this can best be achieved.

It is disconcerting to find that Nsibande (2005:12) in a literature research study had found that within South Africa very limited research had been undertaken to determine what actually constitutes a culture of learning in schools. The accent in South African generated literature appears to be on understanding the difficulties encountered, as opposed the means that may be employed to foster cultures of learning in schools (2005:13). It is suggested that a distinction needs to be drawn between individual versus collective learning in analysing the contextual imperatives underpinning learning within institutions and schools (Nsibande, 2005:24-25). Nsibande cites Argyris and Schön as contending that learning within an institutional context implies effective learning at an individual level. The so called "learning organisation", which would be deemed to be a school, according to Kerke (in Nisibande, 2005:25), implies a need to "promote a culture of learning, a community of learners, and it ensures that individual learning enriches and enhances the organization as a whole". The accent would therefore be on the contextual conditions that enable such a culture of learning to take root at an individual and collective level. In defining the culture of the school in terms of socially constructed and "shared" cultural attributes that give rise to a culture of learning (Lucas & Ogilvie, 2006:11; Sanford & Taylor, 2006:145; Weeks, 2008:126) it is inherently implied that these shared values and beliefs engender individual learning, thereby consequently giving rise to a learning institution. Tharp (undated:3) supports the view that a culture of learning is underpinned by cultural attributes, which are "shared, learned, transmitted cross generationally, symbolic, adaptive and integrated".

A golden thread that emerges from the literature is that context, social interaction within this context, and the cultural attributes that emerge from this interaction are instrumental in either engendering a culture that facilitates or inhibits learning within the classroom. Grant, Jasson and Lawrence (2010:87) in a research study conducted at 18 KwaZulu-Natal schools found that the social context has a fundamental role to play. They contend that many schools located in disadvantaged communities had inherited a legacy of dysfunction, yet some have succeeded in achieving their core responsibilities of teaching and learning despite the odds (Grant *et al*., 2010:98). The researchers claim that the "dysfunction in many of the schools, post-1994, has continued despite government attempts to restore a culture of teaching and learning" (Grant *et al*., 2010:96). The success of those schools that succeed despite the negative broader community contextual conditions that exist is described by Grant *et al*. (2010:96) as being able to engender a context and sense of pride in neatness, good attendance, punctuality, and efficient use of meagre resources.

The picture that emerges is of establishing an island (or school context) that is conducive to learning, within a broader community, sea of contextual dysfunction. An important additional finding emanating from the research conducted by Grant *et al*. (2010:96) is their refe-

rence to an "ethic of care"; an aspect alluded to in defining the concept "*culture of learning*". In more privileged South African schools the welfare needs of learners are met by the parent body. In contrast in disadvantaged areas, in order to establish a culture of learning within the school context, educators need to spend a lot of time on welfare care, drawing on their social support networks. Materialising from the research conducted by Grant *et al.* (2010:97) is the importance of the role played by the school context in laying the foundation on which a culture of learning can be established. Govender (2009:378) echoes this sentiment in stating that the promotion of a culture of learning requires the establishment of a suitable infrastructure, a plan of action, and effective processes to sustain the learning process. Of pertinence here is that Govender (2009:378) assumes a systemic orientation, implying a notion of intentional culture management, whereas Grant *et al.* (2010:97) emphasise the need for establishing a context conducive for the emergence of a culture of learning through social interaction.

Research conducted by Van der Merwe (2009:107) brings home the importance of context in terms of the culture, and consequently the behaviour, that emerges with a school. The underpinning contention being that the school culture acts as a behavioural determinant. The researcher cites the prevalence of violence within many South Africa schools, stemming from a culture of violence that has taken root within the institutions concerned (Van der Merwe, 2009:121-122). It is a culture that directly negates effective learning from taking place within the schools. A culture of violence is instrumental in giving rise to and shaping a context that reinforces values, beliefs and cultural determinants, which imply that violence is acceptable behaviour (Van der Merwe, 2009:122). This is manifest and reflected in common games of "*hit me, hit me, rape me, rape me*" played by learners on school grounds, according to Van der Merwe (2009:107). Smit (2207:53) confirms that the extent of school violence and disruptive behaviour has become a matter of extensive concern. It is suggested, in terms of this research study, that the ingrained identification with violence and the associated negative cultural attributes emerging from such a context need to be disrupted, in order for new more favourable cultural patterns associated with a culture of learning to emerge. It is here where the paradox of culture as a managed process versus the adoption of a complex adaptive systems approach in bringing about a change in the culture of the school assumes relevance. The importance of getting it right is highlighted by the contrasting culture of violence that has apparently become endemic in many South African schools.

The dynamics of culture change management in order to establish a culture of learning

"Formal education has the potential to focus much more than heretofore on the systematic development of these generic dispositions or habits of mind — and thus to position itself more effectively as laying firm foundations for lifelong, life-wide and life deep learning" (Claxton & Lucas, 2009:11).

The quotation assumes that schools have the potential to inculcate what the researchers refer to as "habits of mind" that "underpin a generic and open-minded attitude to learning" (Claxton & Lucas, 2009:9-11). Central to the nurturing of a culture of learning therefore are deemed to be the mental skills and attitudes young people are encouraged to exercise and develop (Claxton & Lucas, 2009:11). Claxton and Lucas (2009:16) identify typical habits of a learning mind, namely curiosity, courage, exploration and investigation, experimentation, reason and discipline, imagination, sociability and reflection. All the cited habits of mind could appear to translate into shared cultural attributes that would facilitate learning. It may hence be construed

that the habits of mind that learners acquire could be manifest in either a positive learning or negative behavioural response, the latter being typical of that manifested in a culture of violence. These habits it could be argued are acquired over the space of time through a process of socialisation or interaction. Senge (1990:8) refers to mental models as deeply ingrained assumptions, generalisations or even pictures or images that influence how people understand the world and how they take action. Seen in the context of a culture of learning, the mental models learners acquire would influence not only how they learn, but also behave in general. Senge (1990:8-9) goes on to claim that people are unaware of their mental models and the effect they have on their behaviour, which implies a need for inner reflection to surface the mental models and hold them to scrutiny. Surfacing these mental models or cultural artefacts could prove to be quite difficult in that they are tacit and not generally seen as being very explicit.

Claxton and Lucas (2009:14) contend that children are born curious and therefore drawn to learning. "They wonder about things; how they come to be; how they work. They are open-minded, looking for new interests and perspectives. They like to get below the surface of things, to go deeper in their understanding" (Claxton & Lucas, 2009:14). The description suggests the need for very specific contextual conditions that will stimulate a sense of curiosity, exploration and a search for meaning within a classroom setting. Einstein is purported to have stated that the important thing is never to stop questioning, as curiosity has its own reason for existing. The role of the teacher in establishing a classroom context, such as that described in the foregoing discussion, could be pivotal and critical in bringing about a culture of learning. Nisibande (2005:233) comments that one of the crucial elements in bringing about these conditions is the need for open dialogue and tolerance for openness.

Wilson (2007:35) observes that "the desire to learn, to discover, to figure something out, and to be able to do something well enough to proclaim it as one's own must surely be as strong as any impulse in the human soul". Wilson (2007:35) then questions why so many children dislike school, the very place society created to nourish their minds so that they can experience personal fulfilment. The answer is vested in the culture that exists within the school itself. Wilson (2007:38) asserts that "key contributors to positive, productive schools are building a culture of learning into the vision and mission of the school and making sure that everyone knows and believes it". The researcher stresses that relationships and caring are critical elements of such school cultures (Wilson, 2007:39). Masitsa (2005:212) similarly claims that principals, of "effective" schools interviewed, concur that the school's vision and mission could be used to restore a culture of learning, as it focuses the attention of educators and learners on the principles that the school stands for. Masitsa (2005:213) also stresses the need for all stakeholders to be involved in the formulation of the mission and vision, so that they will be able to accept ownership thereof.

A distinctive habit of mind identified by Claxton and Lucas (2009:14) is that of courage. Confident learners are not afraid of uncertainty and complexity and have the confidence to proclaim that they do not know, which in turn leads to "lets find out" and this in turn then brings one back to the habit of curiosity (Claxton & Lucas, 2009:14). A sense of caring could be seen to resonate with a cultural context that allows learners to make mistakes, be able to bounce back and learn from these mistakes (Wilson, 2007:39). These are aspects Claxton and Lucas (2009:14) associated with the mental toughness or courage underpinning a culture of learning. The Hay Group Education (2004:15) argues that culture change demands courage; "courage to both express and permit dissent, to abandon old certainties for the unknown". The

challenge here in adapting dysfunctional school cultures, is one of enabling students to admit that neither they nor the teacher, in some instances, have answers for all the difficult questions they are confronted with in having to deal with life's challenges. Thomas and Brown (2011: 25) place an accent on what they term to be a "new culture of learning that enables learners to learn from one another". They make the point that the traditional-based approach to learning focuses on teaching learners about the world, while "the new culture of learning focuses on learning through engagement within the world" (Thomas & Brown, 2011:38).

A further habit Claxton and Lucas (2009:15) refer to is that of exploration and investigation. It is interesting to note that Hughes and Kritsonis (2006:6) suggest that "learning by seeking answers to questions, collaboratively researching new ideas, discovering new methods, and testing and evaluating them are what drive individuals in functioning learning communities". Suggested in nurturing a culture of learning in schools is what Tableman (2004:6) refers to as the need for establishing "learning communities", the accent being on interactive collaboration in exploration. Such a view would stand in stark contrast to traditional paradigms of education where the direction of communication flow in the classroom goes from the teacher to the students (Chee, 1977:81). Kruger (2003:207) cites overcrowding of classrooms and poor relationships that exist between teachers and students as contributing factors to a lack of a culture of learning in schools. These are factors that would negate against collaborative investigation and learning in classrooms and turning them into a learning community.

Closely aligned is the fourth habit mentioned, namely, experimentation and knowing how to extract optimal learning from experience (Claxton & Lucas, 2009:15). It entails trying to discover what works in practice, by active engagement or doing, and learning from the experience. Similarly closely aligned is the notion of learning from failed experimentation. The establishment of shared cultural attributes to a large extent are grounded in experiential learning. A theme running through this discourse has been that schools are not innate entities but webs of human social interaction, which give rise to emergent shared cultural attributes that in turn relate to a specific worldview or mental representation of experienced contextual reality. Seen within this context a culture of learning is emergent, in that it emerges from the learning experience that takes place and gives rise to cultural attributes that stimulate and enhance learning. Prawat and Floden (1994:43) are researchers who concur with the view of emergence being a "key aspect of learning" and consequently as playing a significant role in defining the nature of the culture that comes into being. Culture as an emergent property contradicts the notion of determinism encapsulated within the traditional paradigm of "*culture management*", as culture in this sense is determined from experiential learning.

The shaping and establishing of school culture that supports a culture of learning, as confirmed by MacNeil and Maclin (2005:1) is a negotiated product of sharing sentiments. In summary a culture of learning emerges through a collaborative learning experience, as well as the sharing of ideas, expectations, values and beliefs between teachers, students, parents and other pertinent role players. The important point to note here from a culture management perspective is that if a culture of learning is an emergent property, the traditional approach of envisioning a desired culture and establishing such a culture through management practices could be the very reason for the failure in so many schools to transform the culture of the school. Mere statements of desired cultural determinants and intent to establish such a culture, without giving expression to them through active learning experiences within the classroom could be attributed to the failure experienced in many schools. Until a mindset and context conducive to a culture of learning is established and all the stakeholders involved start to live

out the cultural artefacts through their day-to-day interaction, it is difficult to see how a culture of learning will emerge in practice. The result will be, as noted by President Mbeki (1997:1), too many words and very little real meaningful action.

Underpinning the view expressed of culture as an emergent system is the contention by Lessem and Schieffer (2009:118) that only "when we understand culture as the meaning giving system of a society then it becomes a current ever evolving force which can best be experienced in active engagement with today's human beings as well as with local nature, not with yesterday's historical beings". This statement at first appears to stand in stark contrast to the traditional perspective of culture defined as "the way things are done around here" (Trompenaars & Prud'Homme, 2004:14-15; Weeks & Lessing, 1993:119). Transforming an organisation's culture constitutes one of the most fundamental, challenges confronting an institution, according to Munck (2002:23), as the natural inclination of people is to hold on to whatever feels familiar, even if confronted with better alternatives. Unless the habits of mind have become ingrained in educators' mindsets it will be a case of business as usual. Letting go of past cultural artefacts that provide educators and learners with a sense of meaning, in order to embrace a new set of values and insights, as to the way things need to be done, therefore becomes a fundamental challenge.

Dayaram (2005:72) suggests that most South African institutions, which would include schools, are "managed within a Western linear 'cause-effect' paradigm"; an approach that Seel (2000:3) concludes, tends "to encourage a rather mechanical view of culture change". Thomas and Brown (2011:34) similarly stress that many traditional means of teaching, such as books and instructional videos, have been predicated on what could be termed to be a mechanistic approach. Weeks (2010:44) in researching the concept "culture" similarly concludes that "the more traditional view is one of being able to actively and intentionally manage the concept to realise a desired or envisioned culture, although it is also acknowledged that in practice it is extremely difficult to achieve". Weeks (2010:44), confirms that the view that culture can be intentionally managed has resulted in institutions spending significant financial and other resources on "rolling-out" new desired cultures. This would seem to contradict the more contemporary approach where it is suggested that a culture of learning is a naturally evolving "living system" and the outcome of the culture formation process can therefore not be predicted with any degree of certainty (Weeks, 2010:44). Snowden (2002:4) contends that if cultural interventions are seen in terms of being pattern revealing and influencing activities, then institutions such as schools will have a far greater degree of success in nurturing a culture of learning.

Two different approaches in dealing with the dynamics for bringing about a culture of learning in classrooms and schools become apparent. Based on the more traditional model the accent would be on identifying the ideal desired culture and then to manage the change process through traditional management practices. The incorporation of desired cultural elements in school mission and value statements, as well as school rules relating to what is deemed to constitute acceptable student behaviour, serve as a typical cases in point. The contrasting approach is to assume that a learning culture can at best emerge from the social interaction that takes place between the various participants involved. The picture of openness and exploration that characterise the latter approach tends to contrast with the typical description presented by Sedibe (2006:28), as reflecting the situation in many South African schools, namely, a culture of teaching and learning built on discipline and rules laid down by bureaucratic educational authorities. Students themselves have often not bought into the espoused desired cultural

attributes, if one has to judge from media reports cited by Sedibe (2008:28-29), namely, students visiting shebeens in school uniform; high incidences of absenteeism and tardiness in schools; a lack of interest and commitment to learning; low student morale; incidents of sexual harassment; a high failure rate; and early school dropout. In understanding culture as a meaning giving system, as suggested by Lessem and Schieffer (2009:118), the accent needs to be on changing the mental paradigms that people have as to what constitutes appropriate behaviour for nurturing a culture of learning. This needs to then be turned into reality by living out the cultural artefacts and attributes that underpin these paradigms in the day-to-day social interaction that takes place within the classroom and school.

Culture transformation to nurture a culture of learning within South African schools would, within a more contemporary emergent approach, imply that teachers as well as other key role players start to live out the required cultural determinants. In so doing they not only serve as role models for students but also in bringing about meaningful social interaction to establish a learning community with the classroom. It entails moving away from telling people what to do and how to behave to a situation where the underlying cultural attributes are manifest in action. As advocated by Kruger (2003:207) it reflects a context where: all role players value the processes of teaching and learning; where practices reflect a commitment to teaching and learning; where the resources required are made available; and where the school is structured to facilitate these processes. These practices are acts of doing, in contrast to being mere statements of intent often encountered in practice.

As teachers implement appropriate interventions within the classroom to give meaning to cultural attributes that underpin a culture of learning, so new behavioural patterns can be expected to emerge from the social interaction that takes place and it is essential that these patterns be identified. Favourable patterns can then be stimulated through appropriate interventions and where negative patterns emerge they need to be disrupted. This would seem to resonate with Snowden's (2002:4) previous recommendation that cultural interventions need to be seen as pattern revealing and influencing activities. Already stated, but needing to be reiterated, is the fact that managing the school culture, as a living system, tends to contradict traditional mechanistic processes so often advocated by researchers (Lessem & Schieffer 2009:118; Weeks, 2010:44). Many educators who have become accustomed to the conventional culture management rhetoric encountered will find the views of culture emergence through social interaction that takes place within classrooms and schools a bit of a challenge, as it entails a very fundamental mindset change as to the nurturing of a culture of learning in practice.

Insights gained from the literature study analysed in relation to findings of the 2007 "schools that work" ministerial report

Christie, Butler & Potterton (2007:6) conducted a research study to discover the lessons that could be learnt from South African "*schools that work*" and determine if they could be applied to other schools on a wider and more general basis. The research study and its findings are encapsulated in a report of the Minister of Education, Ministerial Committee (Christie *et al.*, 2007:6). In this section an analysis is conducted of the findings emanating from their research in relation to that surfacing from the preceding literature review to determine if a correlation exists and if so what may be learnt therefrom. This is deemed to be of practical significance as the working school research report is based on insights gained from interviews conducted with principals and teachers confronted with the reality of having to deal with the establish-

ment of a culture of learning within schools termed to be "schools that work". While the report on schools that work does not specifically make mention of a culture of learning as an attribute of such schools, nor on how such a culture could be brought into being, there are aspects in the report that resonate with a culture of learning as an emergent complex system.

In reflecting on the ways in which schools that work conducted their daily practices of teaching and learning, four dynamics are cited by Christie *et al*. (2007:5):

• all of the schools were *focused on their central tasks* of teaching, learning, and management with a sense of responsibility, purpose and commitment;
• all of the schools carried out their tasks with *competence and confidence*;
• all had organisational *cultures* or *mindsets* that supported a work ethic, expected achievement, and acknowledged success;
• all had strong *internal accountability systems* in place, which enabled them to meet the demands of external accountability, particularly in terms of Senior Certificate achievement.

Not specifically stated but implied in the cited dynamics is a strong sense of positivism, namely, a sense of purpose, commitment, achievement, acknowledged success, and an enabling work ethic. These would in a sense resonate with the previously alluded to habits of mind deemed to be important in nurturing a culture of learning, mental skills and attitudes acquired in eliciting a positive learning experience. Notably, an important insight gained from the literature review was the identified contributors to positive, productive schools, namely, the building of a culture of learning into the vision and mission of the school to ensure that everyone knows and believes in it. Citing a number of researchers, Christie *et al*. (2007:18) similarly identify a shared vision and goals as a characteristic of an effective school and also cited is the statement from a rural school: "*The community understands the vision and the culture of the school*". Incorporating the concept of a positive culture of learning into the vision and mission can constitute a stepping stone in the right direction, particularly if seen in terms of a principal's statement that "*most of the teachers ... have a strong commitment to the vision of the school*" (Christie *et al*., 2007:47). An important element within this from a culture formation perspective is that of the "sharing" that takes place. Culture formation is therefore not seen as passive but as actively emanating from the shared visioning experience and living it out in practice. This is in line with the approach that views a culture of learning as having its roots in social interaction and sharing.

The literature review revealed an accent placed on "*caring environments*" as giving rise to cultural attributes that foster learning and engender a culture of learning in the classroom. An important feature identified in schools that work is the good relationships that exist between principals, management and teachers and it is stated that "on the whole, schools had been successful in creating a culture of caring for teachers and learners" (Christie *et al*., 2007:60). An apparent striking feature of schools that work is the student achievement that emanates "from the quality of learning in interactions" between teachers and learners (Christie *et al*., 2007:84). Echoed in these statements is the notion of a culture of learning having its origins in the interaction that takes place between teachers and learners in the classroom. In terms of the report this interaction is deemed to take place in a context of caring. An important aspect that surfaced in the research conducted by Van der Merwe (2009:107) was the importance of context in terms of culture formation as an emergent system. A caring context in the school or classroom can be expected to give rise to shared cultural attributes that facilitate learning within the school or classroom setting. Observed in schools that work is the recognition that

they exhibit strong inner capacities of caring and learning, thereby tending to provide support for the notion of a caring context engendering cultural attributes conducive to the emergence of a culture of learning.

Underpinning culture as an emergent system is the meaning derived from the social interaction that takes place within a specific community context, which gives rise to a culture of learning. The cited Coleman report (Christie *et al*., 2007:14) suggests that the broader social context or milieu within which the learner functions plays a very fundamental role in influencing learner performance. The attributes, conceptualised as emerging from the interactions taking place in a broader social setting, are deemed to impact positively or negatively on the establishment of a culture of learning. The context and the social interactions taking place within that context would therefore be seen as constituting a key determinant of the emergent culture. Whether the school context and the cultural attributes emerging therefrom could override that emerging from a broader socio-cultural milieu, as seen from the report, remains an open question. The dilemma encountered in the report and its linkage to culture as an emergent system, does seem to provide a degree of support for exploring culture from a complex adaptive systems perspective.

An important conclusion that emerges from the discussion is that South African schools exhibiting a poor or even dysfunctional culture of learning could be turned around if principals, teachers, parents and key role players in the broader social community, actively participate in establishing a caring context conducive to the nurturing of a culture of learning. As observed by Christie *et al*. (2007:21,26), schools are complex systems and engendering a culture of learning is hardly achieved over a very short space of time. It is suggested that it emerges in response to changing mental models that come into being through collaborative, purposeful interaction between the key role players involved.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a brief analysis of two different theoretical perspectives for dealing with the fostering of a culture of learning in South African schools. The traditional model based on a more mechanistic approach of identifying a desired culture and actively managing the processes involved appears to not have been all that successful in many schools. The result, it is suggested, can be seen from what has become termed to be the existence of dysfunctional schools that inhibit, instead of facilitating, learning within the schools concerned. Suggested in this paper is an alternative approach that assumes that culture formation is an emergent system, based on social interaction taking place in schools, classrooms and what could be termed to be learning communities. It would seem that some of the insights gained from the schools-that-work report provide a degree of support for the approach. It is, however, acknowledged that the report only provides circumstantial evidential support for a culture of learning as an emergent system. It is therefore suggested that further research be undertaken to see if the recommended approach resonates with the findings that emerge from studies specifically undertaken at schools where a positive and constructive culture of learning has been established in practice. It would in particular be important to determine to what extent "caring schools" give expression to a culture of learning as an emergent system.

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