

School Culture and Time Usage in the Classroom

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Classroom hours is one of the school's most important resources, and at a time when educational systems find themselves under pressure of budget cuts on the one hand and expectations to improve students' achievements on the other, it is important to explore the factors involved in the effective usage of classroom time. Globally it has been found that longer hours per se do not bestow an advantage, since the amount of instruction hours in the OECD countries bears no obvious association with higher academic performance in international studies such as PISA, whereas teaching practices in regular school lessons were found to be associated with high performance (Education Today, 2013). How teachers effectively use classroom time and how school culture affects these practices, is the subject of the present study.

The rational idea that the more teaching time spent, the higher the achievements, received support from criticism of the educational system. Several studies in the USA, for example, found waste of lesson time and concluded that with the right teaching practices schools can increase teaching time (NCEE, 1983; Goodlad, 1984). It later became clear that not only teaching time counts, but learning time as well. Learning involves processes such as recalling, remembering, problem solving, and information processing, which all take time and create a gap between lesson time and productive time in which students learn (Walberg, 1988; Yair, 2000). In addition, other factors were found to affect learning time such as timing, when morning and afternoon lessons are less productive (Klein, 2004), teachers' ability to handle discipline issues and address students' diversity (Nomi & Allensworth, 2013), and external interruptions such as unscheduled visits (Leonard, 2008).

One of the main factors involved in creating the gap between teaching time and productive learning time is school culture. Based on Geertz (1973), school culture is defined as a pattern of meaning - values, beliefs, and traditions that have been molded over time and commonly held by school members. According to the ecosystem approach (Scott, 2005) that views organizational components as intertwined with reciprocal relations, a school culture that holds the core values of how teachers teach and how students learn is translated into the school's activities and goals such as commitment to the mastering of core learning skills, monitoring of student progress, allocation of lesson time, and maximizing the time available for learning and preventing its erosion or 'leakage' (Tolley et al., 2008). But how do abstract patterns of meaning shape teaching practices in the class? And how do these patterns of meaning become shared by all teachers?

To answer these questions we employed the theory of organizational routines. Routines are defined as "repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions carried out by multiple actors" (Feldman & Pentland, 2003:95). The performative aspect of the routine (who should do what, when, and what are the consequences) is the organizational manual that connects agent to system, and tell each teacher how to actualize school culture into everyday practices.

To better understand the relations between school culture, organizational routines, and teaching practices, we asked three research questions: What are the school culture and patterns of meaning concerning time usage in the classrooms? How do teachers actually use time in the classrooms? What are the organizational routines that connect the culture and the practices?

Methodology

To explore the complex relations between school culture and time usage in the classroom we chose the multiple case study method (Yin, 1989), and for developing a conceptual framework for relations between school culture, organizational routines and lesson time usage we applied a hypothesis-generating study guideline rather than a hypothesis-testing one (Eisenhardt, 1989).

School selection procedure – The four schools chosen for the study constituted a sample of polar cases in which the phenomenon under study is fully developed and are similar in the studied subject but different in level (elementary/high school) and students' background (Merriam, 1990). Based on studies showing efficient teaching practices and time usage in successful schools (Tolley et al., 2008) four high performing schools were chosen according to the Israeli criteria of high achievements, low dropout rate, and good reputation (Tubin, 2011). After collecting the relevant data, recommendations, and ethical approvals, two high schools (of about 1,000 students each) and two elementary schools (about 350 students each) were chosen. Varied data collection tools were employed:

Observations – At least nine observations were conducted in each school: three on department meetings and six on lessons (math, science, literature) to witness teachers' practices such as opening and closing the lesson, dealing with lateness, time allocated to learning subjects, operating teamwork and students' diversity, handling disciplinary problems, and teaching strategies. Short follow-up interviews were conducted with five randomly chosen students from each observed lesson immediately after the lesson, to ask how the lessons was, what they think about time usage, and what makes them more or less engaged in learning.

Interviews – At least 15 interviews were conducted in each school with the principal, midlevel managers and teachers. The semi-structured interview included open questions asking interviewees about effective teaching, productive learning, time usage, and the organizational routines involved. All interviews and observations recorded and transcribed.

School documentation – Relevant documents were collected, such as school schedules, regulation of lesson hour's allocations, school vision, and minutes of meetings.

Data analysis – A within and between cases analysis were conducted to map the schools' culture, time usage, and organizational routines. Reliability and trustworthiness were reached by diverse resources and varied collecting tools. To avoid bias we used a critical review by the research team members, and sought the principal's comments on the written school reports handed to them. Contradictions and different interpretations in the research team were discussed according to the data and literature until agreement was reached.

Findings

First, time usage and efficiency definitions depend to a large extent on school culture. For example, under school culture emphasizing students' wellbeing and autonomy over test results, tolerance was found for classroom lateness and time allocated to students' interests, even at the expense of the lesson plan. In school culture associating learning with high test scores and high self-esteem, lesson time was systematically planned and performed, and disciplinary issues were rare and dealt with immediately.

Second, all the observed teachers encountered numerous options for using classroom time and usually chose according to the school's culture; for example, expecting students to stand when the teacher enters the classroom as opposed to the teacher waiting for the students to arrive; insisting on and enforcing rules (checking homework, demand silence) as opposed to believing students' words and following their interests; and dividing the students into homogeneous groups with different tasks as opposed to lecturing the whole class.

Finally, three main organizational routines were found to connect school culture and teaching practices: leadership, teamwork, and student tracking. It is important to note that routines by these names were found in all studied schools, but the actual performances were found to be different. For example, in a school where the culture places emphasis on test scores, the department meeting deals with analyzing students' results and adjusts the curriculum accordingly, whereas in a school where the culture highlights wellbeing, department meetings focused more on students' personal problems.

Conclusions – We suggest that the best intervention point is the organizational routines. Whereas school culture is too abstract and exists in people's mind, and teaching practices are too unique and depend on each teacher, organizational routines are within the reach of the school leadership to shape and implement, and in turn support the school culture and restructure teachers' practices.

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