## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Check for updates

# Understanding school culture: a comparative study of eight schools in Malaysia

Tham Mei Ling[1] | Alberto Luis August[1]

**Abstract**

This research study was conducted to investigate and compare the level of understanding of what school culture is among school principals and teachers from eight selected schools under the national (NS), national-type Chinese (NCS), and Tamil (NTS) schools. A quantitative survey research approach involving the administration of a standardised questionnaire was developed to unravel notable issues for further action/attention, while achieving generalisation of its findings to a larger context. The results of the quantitative survey showed compatibility of cultural stance between the national and national-type Tamil schools and indicated a general level of cultural understanding among their respondents. The survey results for the national-type Chinese schools, on the other hand, were of an anomaly, and are suggestive of a general lack of cultural understanding among their respondents, in particular, of the different cultural constructs in the culture-building process. Recommendations that pertain to future research to better understand the perceived cultural stance of the research participants and the influence of ethnicity and cultural upbringing on the way their cultural understanding was conceived. Practical implementations aimed at reinforcing the understanding among schools of the imperative of values and beliefs towards a shared culture and mapping cultural intervention to ultimate school/student achievements. Policy consideration was suggested to maintain focus and alignment of cultural values and beliefs, amidst the challenges of diverging cultural influence as the school grows and expands

**Key words:** School Culture, Vernacular School, Ethnicity, Chinese School, Tamil School, National School

## 1 | INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The question of what constitutes culture has been a much-debated issue inundated with diverse perspectives/arguments (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Harris, 2018; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Schoen & Teddlie, 2008). Notwithstanding the inherent complexity in its conception, the imperative of organisational culture to success is an empirically supported phenomenon, exemplified by many respected enterprises such as IBM and Starbucks (Gerstner, 2002; Schultz, 2011).

In the education fraternity, the same association was found between school culture and school/student outcome (Fullan, 2011; Grunert, 2000; Leithwood & Louis, 1998; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Rossman et al. 1998; Smylie, 2009). Ironically, literature informs that little attention was given to such fundamental imperative (Hogan & Coote, 2013; Schein, 1992). This is particularly so with the change of time and technological advancement, where increasing pressure and demand on schools to produce graduates who are fit for the $21^{st}$ century, have resulted in the misplaced priority of the "standardised movement" (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Robinson, 2016). Such movement overlooks each school as a unique organism that requires its cultural conditions to thrive (Robinson, 2016).

"School culture", which is a form of context-specific organisational culture (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008), has

myriad of definitions from the brief and to-the-point, one-liner description of "the way we do things here" (Bower, 1966, as cited in Deal & Peterson, 2016), to other elaborated definitions that are more insightful and diverse in perspectives. These definitions have notably encapsulated some common ideas of culture being a historically transmitted/inherited shared set of values, beliefs and conceptions that are embodied and manifested in symbols, acts and other artifacts, by which cultural participants communicate, perpetuate and continue to develop their unique cultural identity and orientation within the organisation towards a common goal/purpose (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Eberlein & Wang, 2014; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011; Schein, 2017).

However, despite the imperative of understanding and unpacking the notion of culture, there remains the irony of too little attention to such cause (Hogan & Coote, 2013; Schein, 1992). Adding to such irony, in the education fraternity, is its purported misplaced priority away from cultural consideration in the face of employers' increasing pressure/demands at the advent of the $21^{st}$ century (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Robinson, 2016). Such phenomenon has been lamented as tantamount to losing the fundamental purpose of education, that may jeopardise any effort of school improvement/reform (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Van der Westhuizen, 2007, as cited in Eberlein & Wang, 2014; Reeves, 2007). The ensuing sections continue with such discourse.

## 2 | PROBLEM STATEMENT

The advent of the $21^{st}$ century that is marked by immense technological advancement, increased global connectivity and information accessibility, has effected a shift in skills-set requirement in the workplace (Dede, 2010; Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). In tandem with such a shift, schools/educators are now expected to produce graduates beyond academic excellence, equipped with the necessary $21^{st}$-century life skills including critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication (Fullan, 2002; The World Bank, 2014).

In response to such a demand, external mandates such as standardised curriculum, assessment and increased testing have been continuously exacted, to make schools more rational and technically advanced (Robinson, 2016) by focusing more on measurable, regimented performance indices and report (Deal & Peterson, 2016). The standardised measures have undermined schools as communities of individuals (as opposed to systematic mechanism that is pliable under any standard manipulation) with different cultural characteristics and shared mission that would only thrive in cultural conditions that befit their unique characteristics and mission (Robinson, 2016). The achievement of their fundamental purpose, therefore, hinges on their own school culture that is encapsulated in their 'values, forms of behaviour and codes of coexistence' (Robinson, 2016: p. 191).

Scholars have reiterated that structure, techniques, or organisational arrangements alone will not be sufficient in accomplishing any intended changes/reform, as the key lies in the crucial address of values that undergird such intended changes/reform (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Qian et al. 2017).

The aim of this research was to investigate the understanding of what school culture is among principals and teachers of the selected Malaysia national and national-type Chinese, and Tamil primary schools.

This study addressed the following research question: What is the comparison of the understanding of principal and teachers from the NSs, NCSs and NTSs about school culture? Three sub-questions explored were: i) What is the comparison of understanding of principals and teachers from the NSs, NCSs and NTSs of the different constructs of school culture? ii) What is the comparison of the perception of principals and teachers from the NSs, NCSs and NTSs about the interrelationship between the different cultural constructs towards culture-building? iii) What is the comparison of the perception of principal and teachers from the NSs, NCSs and NTSs about the influence of school culture on student achievement?

The purpose of this study is to offer meaningful insights to the policymakers/educational leaders on the prevalent level of cultural understanding among school principals and teachers who play pivotal roles in the shaping/building of a school's culture. It provides valuable insights on the extent of influence of the different ethnicity's unique upbringing on the way their cultural understanding is conceived.

The significance of the study is to contribute towards formulation of informed and appropriate actions in effecting the necessary cultural intervention towards the ultimate goals of school improvement/student achievement. Such insights, apart from being potentially useful for differentiation of cultural interventional effort/actions in these schools, may also be an impetus to further in-depth studies/actions towards achieving greater cultural understanding and appreciation among the school members.

## 3 | LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of organisational culture (where school culture resides as a context-specific organisational culture (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008)), myriad of definitions has been given to such term, thus suggesting the inherent complexity in its conception. Literature informs that, while there is no one perfect definition that can encapsulate the whole essence of what culture is, its effect is undoubtedly pervasive and tangible (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Peterson & Deal, 1998).

On one hand, the word "culture" has simply been defined as "the way we do things here" (Bower, 1966, as cited by Deal & Peterson, 2016) which, albeit easily relatable, offers very little insight on what it entails (Eberlien & Wang, 2014).

On the other hand, there are other elaborate definitions that are more insightful yet diverse in perspectives, which seemingly attest to Schein's (2004) contention that the conception of culture is very much a reflection of the observer's angle of observation in a given context. In this review, such a phenomenon is notably evident amidst the different conceptions that are rich in their cultural perspectives, including i. culture is a culmination of the retelling and passing-on of school's histories and traditions that carry a powerful message of its values and beliefs, and from which the school members' sense of identity and pride conceive (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Schein, 2004, 2017); ii. culture is a learned phenomenon, conceived and evolved from the group's on-going learning experiences of coping with problems/challenges, and continuously passed on to new members as the tried-and-valid value and behavioural system (Schein, 1985, cited by Deal & Peterson, 2016); iii. culture is a group phenomenon, where the operation

of a common set of rules, values, norms and beliefs, forms and shapes the behaviour and beliefs of its participants (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Eberlein & Wang, 2014), holding them together with a shared cause and course (Deal & Peterson, 2016). The idea of something "held in common" or "shared" (Schein, 2004), that Church et al. (2002) liken as the "knots" around which a "web" of people is interconnected, not only gives strength/support to all participants but also facilitates relationship building between them (Church, 2002). It is within these shared norms that culture exists and resides, thus making it a group phenomenon (Groysberg et al. 2018); iv. culture is a result of the interplay between the intangible (for instance, the group's values, norms and beliefs) and tangible (for instance, the group's rituals, traditions and symbols) elements, with the latter being the tangible manifestation of the former, thus clearly defining each role while drawing a close relationship between the two (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Hogan & Coote, 2013; Schein, 2004, 2017; Van der Westhuizen, 2007, as cited in Eberlein & Wang, 2014).

Schein's (2004; 2017) multi-layered cultural model offers three distinct analytical levels, namely artifacts, espoused values and beliefs, and basic underlying assumptions, that essentially represent the different degree of visibility of cultural phenomena to the different observer/participant.

Firstly, the seemingly straightforward linear causal relationship between the espoused values and the artifacts may nonetheless not be such an absolute predictor all the time. This is particularly so when the leaders' espoused values are incongruent with the group's deeper tacit assumptions owing to, for instance, the lack of "prior learning" of some members, or the implicit assumptions that new members carry with them (Argyris & Schon, 1978, as cited in Schein, 2004). Such phenomenon lends weight to the calls by Fullan (2002) and Sparks (2013) for the continuous effort of culturing and re-culturing towards a supportive cultural environment for the organisational goal.

Secondly, the key to the powerful influence that tacit assumptions have over the members' behaviour, perception, thinking and feeling, lies in the mutually reinforcing nature of these shared consensuses that culminate into the group's behavioural norms (Schein 2004, 2017). Schein's assertion resonates

with other scholars who further contended that these consensuses are highly enduring, self-perpetuating (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Duke et al. 2010; Groysberg et al. 2018) and when aligned with its members' values, drives and needs, are powerful in fostering the organisation's capacity to thrive (Groysberg et al. 2018).

Overall, the cultural relationship as depicted above is in fact implicitly suggested in one aspect or another, in the myriads of cultural conceptions as mentioned earlier. For example, Bower's (1966, as cited in Deal & Peterson, 2016) cultural notion of "it is the way we do things here", while seemingly ambiguous with little to be unpacked, may have likely been conceived through his observational reflection of the unconscious level of "basic underlying assumptions" within Schein's (2004, 2017) model.

Deal and Peterson's (2016) conception of culture as "the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals …..built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges…", on the other hand, seems to mirror a similar conceptual depth found in Schein's (2004, 2017) model that depicts the same transformational process of espoused values and beliefs to the deeply-embedded tacit assumptions, through their repeated application in confronting challenges and problem-solving.

These observations, while attesting to the comprehensiveness of Schein's cultural analytical model (Ford, 2017; Hogan & Coote, 2013; Meier, 2012; Qian et al. 2017), also further demonstrate the contextually driven, multifaceted nature of culture, as posited by Schein (2004; 2017).

Inherent in Schein's (2004, 2017) multi-layered model is the suggestion of the centrality of "values" undergirding both the group's tacit assumptions/norms and its cultural playouts in the various forms of cultural artifacts.

Hogan and Coote (2013) echoed in their attempt to establish an empirical model on how distinct layers of organisational culture can support innovative behaviours crucial to a firm's performance, who have identified "values" as the foundational cultural building blocks that ultimately determine the observed/desired patterns of behaviour.

The significance of the analytical insights of cul-ture ultimately lies in their farther-reaching benefit of navigating the strategizing of any culture-embedding/interventional efforts, as evidenced in the culture-embedding mechanisms that Schein (2017) has closely patterned after his multi-layered cultural framework.

The design of such mechanisms reverberates two strategical principles that address the very core of the cultural elements (namely values/beliefs) that tacitly drive the thinking, beliefs, actions and behaviour of the participants (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Eberlein & Wang, 2014; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011): i. the recognition of values/beliefs as the undergirding building blocks of any emerging culture, hence the imperative of embedding the leader's newly aspired beliefs, values and assumptions in any attempt of culture change/reform, and ii. the utilisation of cultural artifacts as powerful communicator and reinforcer of the leader's value proposition (Schein, 2017).

Schein's (2017) approach seems sensible, particularly given the innate defence mechanism which Schein forewarned as inherent in human against any form of disruption, and the inevitable influence of implicit assumptions that some participants may bring along, that may be incongruent with the leader's (Meier, 2012; Schein, 2017). Such phenomenon not only supports the assertions by Fullan (2002) and Sparks (2013) of the need of continuous culturing/re-culturing, but also further accentuates the very core of the cultural building blocks that calls for such address.

**Methodology**

This research involved a comparative study using a quantitative survey research approach. The population of this study consisted of 475 principals and teachers from eight public primary schools situated in the State of Selangor. These schools are under the purview of the Ministry of Education, where the national curriculum is being taught in national (namely Malay), Chinese, and Tamil language respectively. A convenient-sampling approach was adopted for the engagement of the selected schools.

Random courtesy visits were made by the researcher with a copy of the survey questionnaire and information sheet containing details of the research proposal to fifteen schools within Selangor. Eight out of the

fifteen schools responded positively, three NSs, two NTSs, and three NCSs. Out of the total staff population of 475 individuals from the eight schools, 262 responded thus giving a sample size of 55.16%. Of these, 79 (30%) from NS, 54 (21%) from NTS, and 129 (49%) from NCS.

The instrument used for data collection in this research was a questionnaire developed specifically for this study by the researcher based on factors gleaned from the literature reviewed. The instrument was validated by an academic expert in the School of Education at the university. It had a Cronbach Alpha reliability score of 0.934. It consisted of 33 questions with two parts. The first comprised of 29 questions with a 5-point Likert type scale formulated based on 11 factors that the researcher had gleaned from the review of related literature, namely: i. the recognition of cultural artifacts/climate, ii. the recognition of tacit assumption and shared values/beliefs, iii. the recognition of the centrality of values and beliefs, iv. visible and invisible cultural constructs, v. learned phenomenon/history, vi. group phenomenon, vii. sense of identity, viii. impact of different individual values and perspectives, ix. the need for constant culturing and re-culturing, x. communicator of values and beliefs, and xi. influence of culture on student learning and achievement. The second part comprises four demographic questions seeking information on the participant's gender, age, years of service in the current school, and total years of teaching experience.

The hardcopies of the questionnaire were submitted in person to the principals for their onward distribution to their respective deputies and teachers. The questionnaires were returned after two weeks.

# 4 | RESULTS

The overall mean rating for the entire 29 survey items was 4.10, which exceeds the "agree" scale rating of 4.0 within the 5-point Likert scale. Twenty-five items had a mean rating of 4.0 and above, while 4 items had a mean rating of less than 4.0, but above 3.0 (the rating score of 3.0 means "neither agree nor disagree" within the 5-point Likert scale). The highest mean rating was 4.38 for survey item 3, which stated "the way school leaders and staff think,

behave, make decision and do things, reflect the culture in the school", while the lowest mean rating was 3.94 for survey item 22, which stated "the sharing and re-telling of school histories and stories of special events/people in the school, is powerful in communicating the school's cultural root, and effective in passing on and imparting its values and beliefs to the people in the school".

The NSs and NTSs have an overall mean rating of 4.18 and 4.27 for their responses to the survey items respectively, which are indicative of their general agreement with the listed survey items. The NCSs, on the other hand, registered an overall mean rating of 3.99, which is slightly short of the "agree" scale rating of 4.0, thus indicative of the neutral stance that some of their respondents may have taken in response to the listed survey items. In this regard, it is noted that under the NCSs, 17 out of the 29 survey items have a mean rating of less than 4.0 (but above 3.0), while under the NSs and NTSs, none of the survey items has a mean rating of less than 4.0.

In terms of the highest mean-rated survey item, both the NSs and NTSs have the highest mean rating for the same survey item 1 which states "school culture is the atmosphere that a person feels in the school (for example, cheerful, friendly, helpful, tense atmosphere etc)", with a score of 4.48 and 4.50 respectively. The NCSs, on the other hand, have the highest mean rating of 4.33 for survey item 3 that states "the way school leaders and staff think, behave, make decision and do things, reflect the culture in the school". Survey item 3, in this regard, is also noted to be the overall highest mean-rated survey item with a score of 4.38.

In regards to the lowest mean-rated survey item, NSs had the lowest mean rating of 4.04 for survey item 29 which states "the consideration of the necessity of cultural intervention is crucial, in any school improvement effort", the NTSs had the lowest mean rating of 4.09 for survey item 10 which states "the values and beliefs of a school influence its policies and rules, and affect the way people in the school think, behave and act", while the NCSs registered the lowest mean rating of 3.69 for survey item 22 which states "the sharing and re-telling of school histories and stories of special events/people in the school, can be powerful in communicating the school's cultural root, and effective in passing on and imparting its

values and beliefs to the people in the school". Survey item 22 was also noted to be the overall lowest mean-rated item with a rating of 3.94.

Overall, the differences between the mean ratings for all the survey items within each school category are insignificant, with the maximum being the difference between their respective highest and the lowest mean rating, which is translated to a 10% difference for both the NSs and NTSs, and 15% difference for the NCSs. As regards the differences in mean ratings across the three school categories, the results show that the differences between their overall mean ratings are not significant, with the maximum being the difference between the highest and the lowest overall mean rating of 4.27 and 3.99, which is translated to a 10% difference. It is noted that the difference between the highest and the lowest mean-rated survey items of 4.50 (under the NTSs) and 3.69 (under the NCSs) is higher at 18% difference.

The results indicated an overall mean rating of more than 4.0 for all the 11 factors, thus indicative of the respondents' general agreement with these factors. The highest mean rating was 4.24 for factor item 7, which concerns the "sense of identity that school culture brings". The lowest mean rating was 4.05 for factor item 5, which concerns "school culture being a learned phenomenon, developed and shaped by its histories of experiences".

With regards to individual school category, the NSs and NTSs have a mean rating of 4.0 and above for all the factor items. The NCSs, however, registered a mean rating of less than 4.0 (but above 3.0) for 7 out of the 11 factor items, which is suggestive of the neutral stance that some of their respondents may have taken on these items. These 7 factor items related to: i. the recognition of the centrality of values and beliefs, ii. visible and invisible cultural constructs, iii. culture being a learned phenomenon, developed and shaped by histories of experiences, iv. culture being a group phenomenon, v. the imperative of constant culturing and re-culturing, vi. communicator of values and beliefs, and vii. influence of culture on student learning and achievement.

The results showed that all schools bear an overall mean rating of more than 4.0, with the highest registering at 4.13 for factor grouping that suggests the respondents' perception of the influence of school culture on student's performance, followed by the grouping that suggests the respondents' understanding of school cultural constructs (with a mean rating of 4.09), and lastly, the grouping that suggests the respondents' perception of the interrelationship between the cultural constructs (with a mean rating of 4.07). The differences between the mean ratings for these three factor groupings are nevertheless insignificant.

The study indicated a summary of strongly correlated variables with "$r$" results of more than 0.70 ($p<0.001$), under four data samples comprising: i. the entire sample, ii. NSs and NCSs, iii. NSs and NTSs, and iv. NCSs and NTSs.

The data sample comprising of the NSs and NTSs demonstrated a strong positive relationship between two sets of variables, namely: i. between "the uniting factor of school culture towards a common goal" and "the sense of identity school culture brings towards a common goal" with $r(131)=.787$ ($p<.001$) and ii. between "influence of school values and beliefs on teaching activities and student's learning and achievement" and "the necessity of cultural intervention in school improvement effort" with $r(131)=.736$ ($p<.001$).

## 5 | DISCUSSION

The factor groupings result of the NCSs that show a mean rating of below 4.0 (but above 3.0) for the first two groupings suggested a sizeable number of their respondents who may have taken a neutral stance on the cultural assertions under these two groupings. The mean rating result of 4.02 for the third factor grouping, on the other hand, is suggestive of the respondents' general agreement, albeit not strong, on the factor items under such grouping.

Based on these results, it could, therefore, be inferred that there is a sense of oblivion among the NCSs respondents over what the different cultural constructs are, and consequently, their inherent interrelationship, although they do seem to agree on certain forms of cultural artifacts being reflective of school culture and its inherent norms, rules and values (as indicated by the results of factor items 1 and 2 under the first factor grouping). These cultural artifacts include the school atmosphere, leaders' behaviour

and actions, the school traditions, ceremonies, rites and rituals, and the subconscious way that school members think, behave and act. Such phenomenon attests to the literary proposition of cultural artifacts being the most tangible and easily recognisable aspect of culture, and a strong communicator of the organisation's underlying cultural values and beliefs (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Hogan & Cootte, 2013; Schein, 2017).

Further probe to decipher such phenomenon has seemingly attributed it to the respondents' general oblivion of the fundamental culture-building block that hinges on the centrality of values and beliefs (as inferred from results of factor items 2 and 3) that literature posited as undergirding the school's tacit assumptions/norms, and its cultural playouts in the various forms of cultural artifacts (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Hogan & Coote, 2013; Qian et al. 2017; Schein, 2017).

The above inference is made based on the paradoxical results that were observed under survey items within factor items 2 and 3. Specifically, while the results show, on the one hand, a general agreement among the respondents with the affirmative assertion that "school culture can be reflected in the subconscious way people think, behave and act according to some commonly accepted norms, rules and values", yet on the other, there is a seeming uncertainty among them over literary affirmatives that it is these rules/values/beliefs that form and shape the cultural characteristics of the school, through their influence on the way people think, behave and act towards common goal (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Eberlein & Wang, 2014; Groysberg et al. 2018; Hogan & Cotte, 2013; Schein, 2017).

The results also brought to light the possibility of an implicit influence of the respondents' cultural upbringing and background, on their cultural stance (Argyris & Schon, 1978, as cited in Schein, 2004; Meier, 2012). Specifically, analysis of the two higher mean-rated survey items 3 (with highest mean rating of 4.33) and survey item 20 (with mean rating of 4.16), indicated the NCSs respondents' positive regards towards the actions and behaviours of their school leaders, which they generally agreed as reflection of the school culture, and powerful communicator of their values and beliefs which greatly influence their subordinates. Such obser-

vation attests to scholarly assertions on the powerful influence that leaders have, particularly through their role-modelling and behaviour, in communicating, reinforcing and embedding the desired values among their members (Hogan & Hoote, 2013; Qian et al. 2017).

While the above could be inferred as the respondents' general recognition of the intertwining and mutually-reinforcing relationship that Schein (2017) has unravelled between intangible cultural constructs (which include values, beliefs and assumptions) and the tangible cultural artifacts (which include leadership's actions and behaviour), in the light of the respondents' general oblivion in their cultural understanding, such response could be more of an influence of their Chinese cultural upbringing and context, that has a strong advocacy on respect of, and submission to, elders and leaders. Such phenomenon is not unexpected, given that each person is essentially a product of his / her cultural upbringing (Meier, 2012; Schein, 2017) and hence the inevitability of the implicit assumptions that they bring along with them (Argyris & Schon, 1978, as cited in Schein, 2004). Furthermore, according to Schein (2017), the way culture is conceived is also very much a contextual matter, influenced by each person's angle of perception within his / her context.

It should be noted that the above inference is by no means conclusive, as responses to these survey items could be influenced by the respondents' personal experiences and encounters in their respective schools, which Schein (2017) posited as the contextual nature of culture. For instance, while teachers may hold a strong conviction of the importance of cultural consideration in their school improvement endeavour, they may nonetheless lack the autonomy to do so, thus affecting their response.

A comparison between the mean rating results of the NSs and NTSs showed close compatibility with very insignificant difference (not more than 10%). A notable observation was that both of the schools had the highest mean rating for the same survey item that holds the affirmative statement that "school culture is the atmosphere that a person feels in the school". Such result is suggestive of their similar high regards of school atmosphere as what school culture is, which attests to what literature informs as the most evident and easily recognisable aspect of

culture (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Schein, 2017).

The general appeal which the respondents had towards the tangible manifestation of culture as embodied in the cultural artifacts, was further reflected in the lowest mean-rate survey items of both the NSs and NTSs, which relate to "the influence of values and beliefs" and "consideration of the necessity of cultural intervention for school improvement purposes" which is essentially founded from the recognition of the former. These cultural assertions relate to what literature informed as the intangible aspect of culture, which is often harder to decipher (Hogan & Coote, 2013; Schein, 2017). Having said that, the mean ratings of these cultural assertions remained above 4.0 with an insignificant difference from their highest mean-rated items. As such, they could be inferred as a mere difference in "perceptibility" to the differing tangibility of such cultural constructs.

Two sets of strongly associated variables were uniquely found in the data sample comprising NSs and NTSs. These were notably cultural assertions that resonated among the scholars, who held that culture is a group phenomenon (Groysberg et al. 2018) that operates through a common set of "rules, values, norms, beliefs", that forms and shapes the behaviour and beliefs of its participants towards a shared cause and course (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Eberlein & Wang, 2014). It is in these shared norms that the participants were united with a common sense of identity (Church, 2002; Deal & Peterson, 2016). The role of culture, consequently, has been contended by scholars as fundamental imperative that must not be neglected in any attempt of school improvement or reform effort (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Reeves, 2007; Robinson, 2016).

The foregoing discussions have distinctly revealed the disparity between the cultural stance of respondents from the NSs and NTSs, and that of the NCSs. The general lack of cultural understanding among the NCSs participants could be attributable to the frequent treatment of culture as a single construct, as contended by scholars, with little attention given to its building blocks and the process by which they lead to culture formation (Berkemeyer et al. 2015; Hogan & Coote, 2013; Schein, 1992). The neglect of cultural consideration should not be undermined, as scholars have sternly forewarned of its pitfall of

jeopardising any attempt of school improvement or reform effort (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Reeves, 2007; Van der Westhuizen, 2007, as cited in Eberlein & Wang, 2014).

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

There was compatibility of cultural stance between the NSs and NTSs, with a general awareness of the different cultural constructs, the inherent interrelationship between the different cultural constructs, and the influence of school culture on students' achievements.

The NCSs, on the other hand, showed stark disparity from that of the NSs and NTSs. NCSs are suggestive of a general sense of oblivion of the different constructs of school culture and the inherent interrelationship between these cultural constructs.

NCSs had a general awareness, albeit not strong, of the influence that school culture had on students' achievements. This group indicated a general lack of understanding of the different cultural constructs in the culture-building process, and particularly of the centrality of values and beliefs as the fundamental elements that navigate and shape the thinking, behaviour, actions, values, and beliefs of school members towards culture-shaping. This raises a deeper question that confronts the very core of their understanding of what culture is, whether it is in the mere manifested forms, or does it encompass the intangible values and beliefs that such forms carry. It is such ignorance of the cultural building blocks/process that may have accounted for these respondents' unawareness in practically leveraging on their cultural insights, for their school improvement initiatives.

## 7 | RECOMMENDATIONS

This research proposes the following five recommendations, two of which pertain to future research, two pertain to practical implementation while the remaining one pertains to policy consideration.

Future research: To better understand the cultural stance of members from the NCSs that this

quantitative survey research could not have captured, future studies could consider a more indepth, investigative-oriented qualitative research study within the context of the NCS, that is effective in discovering affirmative insights on the cultural understanding of the research participants within the real-life context of their schools (Yin, 2014).

To better understand the compatibility of cultural stance between participants from the NSs and NTSs, despite their different ethnicity and inherent cultural upbringing, future studies could consider a more focused study that centres on the extent of influence of their ethnicity and cultural upbringing, on the way their cultural understanding is conceived.

Practical implementation: School leaders (particularly of the NCSs) could consider the deliberate sharing and role-modelling of the aspired values and beliefs, while ensuring consistency in the message conveyed across the different mechanisms (for example, in the way they allocate reward, promote, recruit and allocate resources, in the design of the school's systems and procedures, and the conduct of rites, ceremonies and celebrations), to communicate and reinforce the imperative of these values and beliefs towards a shared culture that supports the common goal of school achievement.

Given the general cognisance among the participants of the NSs and NTSs of the importance of cultural consideration in their school/student improvement endeavour, school leaders could consider a cultural interventional measure that is specifically monitored and mapped to the ultimate school/students' achievements, to reinforce a better understanding and appreciation of the extent of its significance.

Policy consideration: School leader could consider the establishment of a "culture committee" that is tasked with the continuous effort of education, development, and reinforcement of positive cultural understanding that is focused on student learning and achievement. Committee of this nature could be a key in maintaining focus and alignment of cultural values and beliefs, amidst the challenges of diverging cultural influence that inevitably comes with each individual, as the school grows and expands.

## 8 | REFERENCES

Ainscow M. & Sandill A. (2010). Developing inclusive education systems: the role of organisational cultures and leadership. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(4), 401-416, DOI: 10.1080/13603110802504903

Berkemeyer N., Junker R., Bos W. & Müthing K. (2015). Organizational cultures in education: Theory-based use of an instrument for identifying school culture. *Journal for Educational Research Online*, 7(3), 86-102. Retrieved from https://www .researchgate.net/publication/316683988_Organizat ional_Cultures_in_Education_Theory-based_use_o f_an_instrument_for_identifying_school_culture/lin k/59258498aca27295a8e27bbf/download

Church, M., Bitel, M., Armstrong, K., Fernando, P., Gould, H., Joss, S., ... & Vouhé, C. (2002). *Participation, relationships and dynamic change: new thinking on evaluating the work of international networks*. London: University College London. Retrieved from https://www.alnap.org/he lp-library/ participation-relationships-and-dynamic-change-new-thinking-on-evaluating-the-work-of

Deal, T. E. & Peterson, K. D. (1990). *The principal's role in shaping school culture*. Washington, D.C.: US Department of Education. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED325914.

Deal, T. E. & Peterson, K. D. (3$^{rd}$ ed.) (2016). *Shaping school culture*. San Francisco: CA: Jossey-Bass

Dede C. (2010). Comparing frameworks for "21$^{st}$ century skills". In J. Bellanca and R. Brandt (Eds.). *21st Century Skills: Rethinking How Students Learn*. (pp. 51-75). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press. Retrieved from http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu /viewdoc/download;jsessionid=77CC9EE3082018FF0664F75C3D3FDA6A

Duke, D.L., Tucker, P.D., Salmonowicz, M., Levy, M. & Saunders, S. (2010). *Teachers' guide to school turnarounds*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD.

Eberlein, E. & Wang, Z. (2014). Principals' Understanding of their Role in Establishing a Positive and Enabling School Culture in Chinese and South African Public Primary Schools – Report on the Pilot Study. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*. 5(27), 1178-1186. Doi: 10.5901/mjss.2014.

v5n27p1178.

Ford, J. (2017). *A case study: What is school culture and how is it built from the perspective of stakeholders within an organisation?* (Master's dissertation, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom). Retrieved from http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/50226/1/Ford_Jason_Dissertation_Taylor.pdf

Fullan, M. (2002). The change. *Educational leadership*, *59*(8), 16-20. Retrieved from http://www.ghaea.org/files/IowaCoreCurriculum/Module1/Mod1- FullanChangeLeaderArticle.pdf

Fullan, M. (2011). *Change leader: Learning to do what matters most*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Gerstner, L.V. (2002). *Who says elephants can't dance? Leading a great enterprise through dramatic change*. New York: HarperCollins.

Groysberg, B., Lee, J., Price, J. & Cheng, Y.J. (Jan-Feb, 2018). The leader's guide to corporate culture. *Harward Business Review*. Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2018/01/the-culture-factor

Grunert S. (2000). Shaping a new school culture. *Contemporary Education*, 71(2), 14-17. Retrieved from https://search.proquest.com/openview/ e405373c00fad2ecff8971702494ee7d/ 1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=41688

Harris, J. (2018) Speaking the culture: understanding the micro-level production of school culture through leaders'talk, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 39(3), 323-334, DOI: 10.1080/01596306.2016.1256271

Hogan, S.J. & Coote L. V. (2013). Organisational culture, innovation and performance: A test of Schein's model. *Journal of Business Research*, 67(2014), 1609-1621. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/ j.jbusres. 2013.09.007

Leithwood, K. & Louis, K.S. (eds). (1998). *Organizational learning in schools*. Lisse, Netherlands: Swets and Zeitlinger.

Levine, D.U. & Lezotte, L.W. (1990). Unusually effective schools: A review and research of practice. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 1(3), 221-224. DOI: 10.1080/0924345900010305

Meier, L.T. (2012). The effect of school culture on science education at an ideologically innovative elementary manget school: An ethnographic case study. *Journal of Science Teacher Education*, 23(7), 805-822. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/s10972-011-9252-1

Peterson, K. D. & Deal, T. E. (1998). How leaders influence the culture of schools. *Educational Leadership*, 56(1), 28-30. Retrieved from https:// citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.476.976&r

Qian, H. Y., Walker, A. and Yang, X. W. (2017). Building and leading a learning culture among teachers: A case study of a Shanghai primary school. *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 45(1), 101-122. Doi: 10.1177/1741143215623785.

Reeves, D. (2007). How Do You Change Your School Culture? *Educational Leadership*, (1), 94-96 Retrieved from https://static1.squarespace.comstatic/56a6ae1c22482e2f99869834t/597fdfbbf5e231e59a6b9558/1501552572097/Leading%252Bto%252BChange% 252B-252BHow%252BDo%252BYou %252BChange %252BSchool%252BCulture_.pdf

Robinson, K. (2016). *Creative schools: The grassroots revolution that's transforming education*. New York: Penguin Books.

Rossman, G.B., Corbett, H.D. & Firestone, W.A. (1998). *Change and effectiveness in schools*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Saavedra A. R. & Opfer V. D. (2012). Learning 21st-century skills requires 21st-century teaching. *Phi Delta Kappa*, 94(2), 8-13. Retrieved from https://doi/org /10.1177/003172171209400203

Schein, E. (1992). *Organisational culture and leadership ($2^{nd}$)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Schein, E.H. ($3^{rd}$ ed.) (2004). *Organisational culture and leadership*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Schein, E.H. ($5^{th}$ ed.) (2017). *Organisa-tional culture and leadership*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Retrieved from http s://books.google.com.my/ books/about/Organiza-tional_Culture_and_Leadership.html?id=l2jpCgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

Schoen, L.T. & Teddlie, C. (2008). A new model of school culture: a response to a call for conceptual clarity. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 19(2), 129-153. DOI: 10.1080/09243450802095278

Schultz, H. (2011). *Onward: How Starbucks fought for its life without losing its soul*. NY: Rodale.

Sparks, S.D. (2013). School Climate: Missing Link in Principal Training? *Education Week*. 32 (23), 8-12. Retrieved from https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/ 2013/03/06/23principal.h32.html

Smylie, M.A. (2009). *Continuous school improvement*. CA: Corwin Press.

The World Bank (2014). *Malaysia Economic Monitor: Boosting Trade Competitiveness.* Retrieved from http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en /8 01661468281719019/pdf/891020WP0P14640B00PUBLIC00MEM100web.pdf

Yin R. K. (2014). *Case study research, design and methods*. California: SAGE Publications Inc.

**How to cite this article:** Understanding school culture: a comparative study of eight schools in Malaysia