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The School Leader as Ideal Type: How to Reconcile Max Weber with the Concept of School Culture

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Abstract

Managing and developing a school organization from a cultural perspective requires a different approach to leadership than instrumental or pragmatic standpoints. Most organizations have multiple and even conflicting subcultures. Central issues are how subcultures appear in the individual and in the social structures of the school organization and how they constitute a connected system of meanings. School leaders of today should develop strategic visions for their institutions and perform as role models for students and teachers. Maintaining the balance between long-term development goals and a rapidly changing reality is a challenge for every leader. The school leader as ideal type means that the traditional descriptions of leaders and leadership are no longer enough to face the twenty-first century challenges for schools. School leaders must acquire an ability to understand what social action is and use this knowledge in relation to individual social actors. By reconciling Max Weber with the impact of school culture, I visualize an ideal type for a school leader with a focus on equity and quality in education, in accordance to European demands and standards. School leaders can benefit from the use of autoethnographic strategies to achieve an increased understanding of their practice.

Keywords: school culture, ideal type, social action, autoethnography

1. Introduction

According to Max Weber, there is a distinction between questions of “the internal structure of cultural values” and “questions of the value of culture and its individual contents and the question of how one should act in the cultural community and in political associations” [1, 2]. Managing and developing a school organization from a cultural perspective requires a different approach to leadership than instrumental or pragmatic standpoints. Most organizations have multiple and even conflicting subcultures. In schools, there are more or less complex

dialectical relationships between and within the present school cultures. A given school culture can be tightly organized and either shared or not shared, leading to questions of the integration of elements and their degree of sharedness [3]. The strength of a subculture defines by the intensity of its effects on organizational behavior [4]. Central issues are how subcultures appear in the individual and in the social structures of the school organization and how they constitute a connected system of meanings [5].

Larsson and Löwstedt [6] talk about schools as sites for ongoing organization, rather than institutions with core business of teaching. Researchers trying to establish a holistic approach on school leadership and school culture need to bring together various elements in a coherent analytical model [7, 8]. For Weber, social reality is concerned with the analysis of actual events and real structures [9].

Weber's ideal type refer to collectivities rather than to social actions of individuals, but the social relationships within collectivities facilitate the opportunity that many actors will engage in expected social actions [2]. The Weberian ideal type is not an illustration of the absolute or perfect, but an exciting and valuable analytical tool in how to explain and understand the universal and accepted in a certain context.

By reconciling Max Weber with the impact of school culture, I visualize an ideal type for a school leader with a focus on equity and quality in education, in accordance to OECD demands and standards, defined through dimensions of fairness and inclusion. Fairness is personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background not being obstacles to achieving educational potential. Inclusion is all individuals given at least a basic minimum level of skills.

School leaders of today should develop strategic visions for their institutions and perform as role models for students and teachers [10]. Maintaining the balance between long-term development goals and a rapidly changing reality is a challenge for every leader. The effectiveness of school leadership depends on how school leaders can adapt to their new roles and how competent they will become in co-designing and co-implementing policies for equity and learning, as well as in encouraging the establishment of participative, democratic school cultures. An important part of school leadership is providing shared understandings about the school organization and its activities and goals that can undergird a sense of common purpose and vision with the education [11]. Contemporary research notes that school leadership is second only to teaching in school-related factors in its impact on student learning, according to evidence compiled and analyzed by the authors [12].

All school leaders are however neither well selected, prepared or supported to exercise their roles. To strengthen their capacity, they need both general expertise and specialized knowledge. The discussion of motives and values among the members of an organization is often limited by subjective concepts with varying meaning and proximity to the current context [13, 14]. Forming and establishing an organizational policy raises questions if what really happens is a factual scenario represented to the policy makers with more or less logical and empirical accuracy?

Educational institutions evaluate their performance in order to explore and identify new ways of learning. Policy documents enforce that daily school operations must evolve toward

a greater goal attainment. According to the curriculum, school leadership and the teachers' professional responsibility is supposed to take place in interaction between staff and pupils, parents and the surrounding community [8]. School development aims to facilitate continuous improvement of the current conditions for school activities and to question the limits and rules of a certain school [15].

2. Twenty-first century challenges

Every nation has its own distinctive character. Sometimes we take the complexity of explaining and understanding the characteristics of other nations and ethnic groups too lightly. Knowledge and competence equalize differences between different groups in society and increase young people's opportunities to choose career and achieve quality of life [16]. Without knowledge, categorizations and preconceptions can lead to prejudice and widening gaps between people. School assessors on different levels in Europe agree that students of today need "twenty-first century skills" to manage and succeed in adulthood. These skills contain critical thinking and problem solving, information literacy, global awareness and an overall need for mastery of different kind of knowledge, ranging from facts to complex analysis.

One way to define equity is people's right to education. As a concept, democracy is about equal worth and rights and the possibility for individuals to influence their lives. Bauman [17] argues that the future of democracy depends on its ability to enthuse and engage young people in dialogs on important social issues. The ability to acquire new understanding and insight into society's roles and guidelines is not obvious. Common accepted opinions are neither generalizable nor automatically transferable to every context. Different issues require different approaches to formulate acceptable answers and contribute to the student's willingness to learn something new [18].

A challenge for every school is to develop the activities of teaching and learning from traditional ways of mediating knowledge, to a strong emphasis on student's inclinations and abilities to learn. In these processes, the students will acquire strategies for their studies and professional life, through basic skills and competences. Student active work forms and social training demands the teacher's flexibility and ability to handle conflicts. The teaching profession extends from a mediator of knowledge into a catalyst of the knowledge society [19]. School leaders must similarly be prepared to face cultural and social pressures and advocate for education that advance all students and engage in new ways to promote a deeper understanding of issues such as democracy and equity [20]. Research evidence strongly confirm the impact of school leadership on student learning outcomes, even if leadership and leadership development will remain complex tasks, without simple recipes for success [21]. School leaders with new perspectives on their leadership are potentially architects and builders of a new social order where all students have the same educational opportunities [22].

Nevertheless, the demanding twenty-first century challenges are not so new. Dewey [23] argued that the primary purpose of education and schooling is to prepare students for life in

their current environment. To Counts [22], a progressive educator in the 1930s, the purpose of school was to equip individuals with necessary skills to participate in the social life of their community and to change their social order as desired. Adler [24] had an idealistic and egitarian vision that all education should centrally prepare students so that they could earn a good living, enjoy full lives and participate and contribute to a democratic society.

Rotherham and Willingham [25] states that the *new* in the twenty-first century is the extent to which economic and social changes require that collective and individual success depend on having adaptable skills. A starting point for exploring potential educational future is to identify the key variables of the development of twenty-first century educational policy and leadership [26]. If we intend to establish equitable and effective public education systems, skills that have previously been limited and reserved for a few, will become universal. Schools must be more deliberate in teaching skills like critical thinking, collaboration and problem solving. Another crucial prerequisite is a deliberative and future-focused school leadership.

3. Active and visible leadership

A hallmark of good educational leaders is how they succeed in developing strategic visions for their institutions [10]. Then they can act as role models for students and teachers and contribute to an effective and attractive environment that is conducive to learning. A challenge for every school leader is to maintain the balance between pursuing long-term development goals and adapting them to a rapidly changing reality. The values to which the school community has committed itself should prove to be viable. Reform policies can only be coherently integrated into the life of schools and classrooms if a capacity building approach for professional school leadership pays attention to topics like; reducing complexity, coordination, learning context, energization, connections for learning and system-wide change. The knowledge, skills and commitment of teachers as well as the quality of school leadership, are important factors in achieving high quality educational outcomes. The ability to inspire students as role models has an undoubtedly positive impact on young people's future [27, 28, 29].

For this reason, it is essential to ensure that those recruited to teaching and school leadership posts are well suited for their professional practice and provide a high standard of initial education and continuing professional development for teaching staff at all levels [30]. This will contribute to enhancing the status and attractiveness of the educational profession [8]. Counts [22] argues that school leaders, by increasing their courage, intelligence and vision might become a social force of magnitude.

Twenty-first century school leaders need to recognize and concretize given goals and negotiate different interests, needs and requirements in the school organization. When school leaders design and construct the content of a development process in a dialog with students and teachers, the opportunity for organizational learning and sustainable school development will increase [8]. School leadership linked to the achievement of learning in organizations will play an important role for development and change of the school organization's culture. Organizational learning in schools is essential for continuous development and renewal from

within, and encourages a proactive stance instead of a reactive position from teachers and students [31]. A precondition for successful school development is, as previously pointed out, an active and visible leadership [18].

4. The concept of school culture

The explicit concept of culture reflects the norms and values of an individual group. Norms are a mutual sense of what is “right or wrong”. Values identify what is “good and bad” in relation to the ideals shared by a group of people [5]. According to Parsons [32], culture is a system with its own logic, finding its objective reality in the interactively and coordinated subjective representations of actors and their ability to deal with what helps them to construct and use the rules that help them with their operations. Human behavior has multiple systems of influence, ranging from biological and psychological factors to social, environmental and cultural values [33].

Sträng [14] argues that schools are complex establishments whose activities are affected by the shared role of the school as an organization as well as a social institution. Berg [34] has a neo rationalistic view on schools as institutions, established within society by an affinity group in order to fulfill particular interests. The school organization is additionally under the pressure of formal and informal control mechanisms, codified and manifested in the local school culture [8].

Explaining the concept of a school culture is difficult, although there is a general agreement that a satisfactory definition of culture should be attainable within the framework of an elaborated theory of social action [35]. Hodgkinson [13] argues that the individual experience of value can never repeat itself but the larger culture itself changes and transvalues values all the time, which makes organizations always culturally determined. The interaction between overlapping systems will have a significant effect on individuals. Understanding these interactions will provide a better understanding of factors that might lead to development and to failure, for example, in a process of changing school leadership. At the same time, the different systems are not mainly interacting toward or opposed to a certain goal, but overlap and intertwine in complex dynamic and contingent relationships [13]. The school leader may continuously renew and modify the strategies of collective involvement and choice from teachers and students, inextricably interwoven with values.

Simultaneous studies of multiple levels from different perspectives clarify questions of decisions and enforcement in complex organizations. An important part of school leadership is to facilitate shared understandings about the school organization and its activities and goals that can undergird a sense of common purpose and vision with the education [11]. Cultural analysis provides a brief basis of knowledge that is useful for the school leader’s capability of decision making and developing a new kind of leadership. Schools are sites for ongoing organization, in addition to being institutions with the core business of teaching. The improvement of student learning cannot be an exclusive task for students and teachers but a shared responsibility even for the school leaders. In a formal learning environment, the training or

learning department sets the goal and objectives, while informal learning means the learners themselves sets the goal and objectives [36]. Informal student learning is often defined as mainly spontaneous and incidental. It may occur as individual reflections on teaching or interactions with other students in the classroom or in school hallways, cafeteria and other places for learning and training [37].

Contemporary research notes that school leadership is second only to teaching in school-related factors in its impact on student learning, according to evidence compiled and analyzed by the authors [12]. Changing a school's solid cast and loosening up fixed patterns of relations between actors on different levels demand much work on a long-term basis. A natural first step is to identify the concept of the local school culture and its impact in relation to the school's internal governance and the degree of self-renewal capacity [38].

5. Cultural analysis

The cultural analysis on the Arts program at an upper secondary school was predicted on the teachers and the school leader's perceptions of student learning as motivated, contingent and well situated. Central to this perspective was the assumption that students are active learners who reflect upon and may actively participate in investigating their own practice [37]. The aim of the cultural analysis was to conceptualize upper secondary school students' personal and informal approaches to learning, and to determine the extent to which these reflected the effects of teaching and assessment rather than representing stable characteristics of the individual learners [39].

Operating out of a theoretical frame that views cultural practice makes it natural to choose ethnography as methodological tool, because ethnography seeks to explain, describe and provide insight into human behavior in context [40]. Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand the cultural experience (ethno) of individuals and groups [41, 42]. A hallmark of autoethnographic studies are the focusing on narrations and descriptions of personal experience in a context. Autoethnographic strategy thus provide opportunities for close examination and understanding and dissemination of students engaged in self-reflexive inquiries [43]. In the study of upper secondary school students' personal and informal approaches to learning, I decided to use an autoethnographic strategy of inquiry with letter writing as an empirical research methodology [44].

The empirical material consisted of 89 letters from three grades of the Arts program in the investigated school, located in a medium-sized Swedish city. In the letters, the students gave an account of themselves, their own experiences and the experiences of another. As a research method, a merit of letters is the quality established and the give and take of an imaginary conversation between the researcher and the writer [45].

This conversation progresses simultaneously on several levels as dialogs within the text of letters by writers with similar voices. These dialogs are well suited for collective studies of pedagogical phenomena in a school, in which different perspectives and aspects visualize.

One can say they function as a kind of “black box”, in search of better understanding of educational processes [46]. The interpretation of the letters can lead to different understandings of what actually happens and provide important knowledge of the values and motivations among students in secondary school and their approach to learning.

Research of this kind cannot and should perhaps not even be value free, but it is helpful to have the values brought out explicitly [47]. Paying attention to factors like structural form, word choice and phrasing, the students described implicitly how they positioned themselves as learners. In some letters, the students indicted learning without explicitly stating it as such, for example, by saying, “I like to be doing, I am finding. I love to learn”. Statements such as these showed that the students positioned themselves in a learning process more than taking active steps to learning [37]. Critics have argued that writers create the lives they write about [48]. Common to all perspectives on auto ethnographic strategies for research is the assumption that people enter into conversations with certain goals. Even when they cooperate to provide information for mutual understanding, they attempt to attain certain personal goals. The current educational goals did not seem to make the students planned communicators, merely spontaneous writers with a more or less clear sense of what they wished to obtain [49]. The opportunity for students to write an open letter to their teachers and the school leader about their experiences of learning perceives rather as the trading of resources of attention, concern, support and other personal needs in an effort to achieve their goals [50].

6. Results

Qualitative research methods traditionally contain coding and particular data analysis strategies [43]. To achieve empirical soundness a systematic process of interpretation and representation exposed the statements from the letters in three categories of students’ self-perceived attitudes and opportunities for learning. The categories were security, *teaching, motivation and meaningfulness*. The analysis identified denotative and connotative meanings with connections of larger structures, forged out of the empirical material [8, 49, 51] When describing their experiences, the students expressed both emotional and analytical qualities, from “emotional learners” [37] to a higher degree of reflecting on teachers’ role for students’ learning over time. The relations with teachers responded in turn with the students’ different types of social and professional need. According to Ref. [52] the interpretation of narratives will tend to reflect values connected to the cultural contexts where they appear. Autoethnographic researchers must anticipate how the expressed emotions may be subjective in data coding.

7. Security

First grade students looked at security as mainly a personal matter. In their letters, they express the good feeling of waking up in the morning without anxiety and go to school without being unwelcome or unwanted. They describe the importance of feeling comfortable before meeting other students, teachers, environments and lessons. It is important to be yourself and talk to everyone in the school without fear.

Most of the time I feel safe in school. I adapt myself easily to different situations and I am rarely insecure but mostly the teachers who give me security by respond to me and listen to what I have to say.

You greet teachers everywhere, not only in the classroom but also in the corridors, and then I feel safe.

If you do not feel safe, you cannot concentrate, and then it is harder to learn.

Security for a second grade student is daring to ask teachers when you do not understand, and correspondingly explain to your teachers that you really have learned. This makes students more motivated for learning and reduces the fear of unexpected events during the school day. The role of teachers in student learning is increasing and the students regard their class as a family. By participating in various social and cultural practices, they will acquire resources requisite for both reproducing and transforming relevant social and cultural formations [53, 54].

Our class is like a family, where no one is mean to me. Art students will stand out and it is the very purpose of the program, daring to be you.

Teachers bring a sense of security. For example, when teachers help me to feel safe is when we have oral presentations, and there are several different options to present my work.

Third grade students note that teachers and co-students solve issues of all kinds quickly, but problems arise when they do not explicitly know what is expected from them. Another difficult issue is slow and inexplicit feedback from teachers. The dialog between students and teachers is an important source for learning, as well as the friendship between classmates. In a study of classroom culture Kamberelis [54] speaks of «fourth-grade professionalism” with key components of social responsibility and increased self-regulation among students. In the letters, the “third grade professionalism” in the classroom stands as a clear example of a professional learning community, including students and teachers, and ultimately the school leader. The idea of the professional learning community is that formal education is not simply to ensure that students have been taught but to ensure that they have really learned something. The shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning has profound implications for schools improvement [55].

Security for me is that the education has a clear sense and that different subjects and topics fit together so I can see and understand “the big picture”.

I feel very confident with teachers who I have known since first grade. One good thing is that you meet them often, even outside the classroom.

In third grade, I have grown as a human being with much bigger self-confidence than before. This is all entirely dependent on the Arts program and its teachers and students.

8. Teaching

The importance of teacher performance is fundamental in most educational research. Today hardly anyone should question the impact of good teaching for students’ learning. Nevertheless, good teaching in theory might not automatically match the students’ personal

and informal approaches to good learning. In their letters, the students argue collectively and emphatically for efficiency in teaching and learning. An important criterion is fast and constructive personal feedback from the teachers, directed at the individual student rather than to a group of students. For successful communication, students and teachers should respond logically to each other with at least a minimum amount of feedback, coherence and interaction [49].

I sometimes feel that feedback does not give me the chance to explain how I experience the teaching and what I think the teacher should do to make it better for me.

The teachers should have feedback that is more individual with students so we could get a better view on our results and performance.

I get a lot of support and good feedback that tells me what I should do to be a better musician.

Another criterion is how to use and exploit the potential of the technical equipment. According to the letters, the teachers cannot always effectively adapt their teaching to the new technology, which prevent the students to use their own technical knowledge and skills for better learning. The school's choice of equipment is also questionable by critical students.

I like to have an iPad, but a PC had been better because PC is better suited for schoolwork.

Our iPads are terrible...they are worthless as IT tools and it feels ridiculous to walk around with it... besides I will also say that the school should find new ways for us to present our work...It's Learning is the worst I have ever seen!.

The third criterion for teaching and learning is "value creation" as educational practice. When the students are processing information and examining questions from different perspectives, the value creation is increasing the students' approach to learning. The concept of value creation originates from the Japanese educator and philosopher Makiguchi, considering the lifelong happiness of learners as the authentic goal of education [56]. In a recently published doctoral thesis, Lackéus [57] express that letting students learn through creating value for others, giving teachers prescriptive advice on what, how and why issues in education is inherently entrepreneurial in its reliance. Value creation as education allows for more engaged students and deeper learning of entrepreneurial as well as subject specific knowledge, skills and attitudes. Laszlo [58] states that students can more easily access information at a deep level where their egos interfere less. Despite the challenges in assessment, there is thus a need for evaluate the educational philosophy's effectiveness in terms of learning outcomes.

The Arts program develops your self-consciousness when you are standing on the stage and play your own music for other students and teachers.

I highly recommend the Arts program to all who love music and want to improve your skills and knowledge. Here you will have the best school years ever...you will love your class-mates because you are all here for the same reason...the love of music.

It is very good that the school have started with value creation for learning, instead of all the time focusing on students' results and performance

9. Motivation and meaningfulness

The students' motivation should be set against what the school is aspiring to achieve. A clear vision will set the context for the school to make sustained improvements and move forward [59]. The impact on student outcomes is in basic the measure of the school's effectiveness in producing skills and knowledge. To involve the students' own knowledge, skills and social competence in the school improvement process will increase their motivation of the need to learn how to make well-informed decisions for their upcoming adult life [18]. In their letters, the students express their motivation explicit as a source of values, close connected to security and teaching as the two other conditions for learning. Values are synonymous with meaning or defined as concepts of the desirable with motivating force [13]. There are certainly values that sustain minor motivation, but values seem nevertheless to be an overall important factor of the students' attitudinal orientation and understanding of their education.

The school motivates me because it is a big part of my daily life and I want to do the best of my three years here.

Sometimes the school do not motivate me so well. I would learn how to buy a house, pay bills or just to live as a civil person.

What is motivating me in the school is that I learn how to learn...how to make memories...find friends... a meaningful journey, that is it!

The letters recognize two different kinds of student motivation. The first kind is achievement motivation [60] with individual needs to do something better than it has been done before. The abilities for success are realistic goals and constructive feedback from teachers to facilitate the students' own efforts. The second kind of motivation connects to networking, goal sharing and a micro-political awareness in-group coalition, regarding to results and orientation to individual and collective educational goals. Klemp [60] claims that achievement and power motivation together form a cognitive initiative, which refers to how the students define themselves as actors in a certain situation. In the culture analysis, the cognitive initiative is students' definitions of themselves as collective members of the Arts program and as individual musicians and artists, on the verge of adult life.

10. Concluding thoughts

The conditions for the students' approach to learning combine both their thinking and actions as learners. The combination of mental and behavioral elements forms a dynamic profile of students as learners, in accordance with the pre-perceptions of student learning as motivated, contingent and situated. The assumption that students are active learners who reflect upon and may actively participate in investigating their own practice [37] is visible through the empiric material. The boundaries between formal and informal learning differs with particular contexts from the three grades of the program. The students have in general good awareness of their informal learning, grounded in their motivation and the sense of meaningful education. In their letters, they express that the structure of the program have enabled them to learn and reflect on their performance process and outcomes [61, 37].

In order to improve the quality of education, there are very strong confidence ahead analyzes and reports illustrating different school systems and their elements, providing recommendation for current trends in school development. The main twenty-first century challenge for schools is to improve the activities of teaching and learning from traditional ways of mediating knowledge, to a stronger emphasis on students' inclinations and abilities to learn. In these processes, the students acquire strategies both for their studies and for professional life through the learning of basic skills and competences. Common accepted opinions are however neither generalizable nor transferable to every context. Different issues require different approaches to acceptable answers and contribute to the student's willingness to learn something new [18]. This requires activities, which guarantee all school actors (students, teachers, school leaders) sufficient conditions for appropriate participation. An evidence-based investigation of students' perceptions of learning are not merely about whether or not to apply standards of mastery knowledge and better learning in the twenty-first century. The results and findings of this study are just inscriptions or cultural theses [62] of who the individual students are and who they want to be as adult members of the society.

11. The school leader as ideal type

In the European perspective, the ideal school leader should be an inspiring delivery and sterling character with a vision, charisma, integrity and emotional intelligence. However, if there are leaders who do not fit this image; we cannot use this ideal picture to define school leadership in general. It is time to give up the myth of the ideal leader. Searching for good leadership is no longer a matter of finding the right role or the right person [63]. Hodgkinson [13] describes the rough correspondence between the Weberian leadership categories of rational-legalistic with realism and charismatic with idealism. To understand the idealistic foundations we also need to interpret the axiological theory of value. Describing the complexity of regulatory mechanisms and conventions that affect school leadership leads to the need for new concepts to achieve a deeper understanding of this area.

To manage an organization from a cultural perspective requires a different approach than the traditional instrumental or pragmatic view. Alvesson [64] notes that the research in this area is limited to manageable meanings and ideas directly related to efficiency and performance. Hodgkinson [13] argues that issues of values of individual members should be the key points in organizational analysis.

To handle safety issues of different kinds is an important task for a school leader. Within the school conflicts generate when educational interests of groups and individuals do not really match. Uncertainties regarding what is really happening cause different or divergent values to the same piece of fact. Disagreement between individual and collective interests leads to the divergence of individual, organizational and institutional needs. An important issue for each organization is the ability to unite the formal nomothetic approach and the informal idiographic behavior of its members. Hodgkinson [13] argues that the nomothetic rational ideology in organizations is often countervailed by the idiographic humanistic countervailing tendencies and their associated ideologies. Based on the organization's quest for order, there is a natural endeavor to limit the strength of the individuals' idiographic impact. In the

school this divergence is visualized by the dialectical relationship of educational contexts of nomothetic rules and the idiographic aspirations of students and teachers.

The school leader as ideal type means that the traditional descriptions of leaders and leadership are no longer enough to face the twenty-first century challenges for schools. School leaders must acquire an ability to understand what social action is and use this knowledge in relation to individual social actors. Professional researchers [65] can strategically use auto-ethnography as methodology. School leaders can use it repeatedly, for better understanding of the meanings and values they encounter in their practice. This insight will, according with Weber create an "individual" ideal type, defined as "a mental construct for the scrutiny and systematic characterization of *individual* concrete patterns which are significant in their *uniqueness*" [66–68].

This does not mean taking the actor's point of view. The understanding of teachers and students perceptions of teaching and learning becomes valuable tools for the school leader in creating ideal types based on the interpretation of what is going on in the school on different levels [1].

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