

## Quality culture in schools: How to identify, change and design it

### Abstract

The quality culture prevailing in individual schools has a great influence on whether the objectives connected with a quality management system (such as continuous improvement, evidence-based school development, and advancement of teaching) are actually implemented in everyday school life. This article focuses on the question of the extent to which a schools' quality culture can be identified. In this connection, a specific instrument (the Q-KULT Tool) is presented. In addition, the article examines whether and under which conditions an existing school quality culture can be changed and how this can be reasonably done.

### To quote from this article:

Jonach, Michaela & Gramlinger, Franz (2017): Qualitätskultur in Schulen: Möglichkeiten der Erfassung, Veränderung und Gestaltung. In: Zöller, Arnulf/Frey, Alfons (Hrsg.): Mit Qualitätsmanagement zur Qualitätskultur. Beiträge zu länderspezifischen Qualitätsmanagementinitiativen mit Schwerpunkt auf dem bayerischen QmbS- Projekt. Detmold: Eusl Verlag, S. 265-279.

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## 1 Quality management and quality culture

Quality management systems already enjoy a certain tradition in the fields of schools and teaching and learning processes. In Austria, quality management has been implemented already since 2004/05 in the area of VET schools (the VET Quality Initiative – QIBB) and since 2011 in the area of general education schools (School Quality in General Education – SQA) (cf. [www.qibb.at](http://www.qibb.at), [www.sqa.at](http://www.sqa.at)).

Quality management systems have meanwhile reached a corresponding “degree of maturity” as theoretical constructs and as aids for implementation of innovation and reforms: models, structures, mechanisms and defined processes with the corresponding instruments have been developed and, in some cases, already adapted several times. So far, only little information is available about the way these systems are actually applied and implemented in the schools.

Educational policy strategies imply that an innovation (e.g. quality management) can be applied in a comparable way to all schools. But challenges are found in the implementation of the concepts at the level of the individual school, which means that the possibilities of detailed centralised planning are extremely restricted (cf. Buhren & Rolff 2012, p. 14 f.). Innovations such as quality management (QM) meet with very different school cultures and different compositions of staff, circumstances and conditions. Decisive for the success of a reform project, such as the introduction of a quality management system, is whether this type of innovation is capable of linking up with an existing school culture or not. Wherever this concept is interpreted as being unable to connect, already known, non-intended effects occur: QM becomes an administrative or bureaucratic burden, a control instrument, an ineffective exercise, or a parallel process which needs to be dealt with in addition to the “actual” and “important” tasks.

Intended effects of QM	Non-intended effects of QM
Continuous improvement of the school	QM as bureaucratic and administrative procedure
Evidence-based school development and continuous improvement of teaching and learning	QM as a topic for the executive level; the level of teachers is not reached
Cooperation of the teaching staff as part of school development	QM as a parallel structure, a task which needs to be dealt with in addition to the actually important tasks
Management of schools/leadership	QM as a control instrument (such as of school management or school inspection)
Implementation of efficient processes to support teaching and learning	QM as an ineffective and artificial exercise

Diagram 1: Diagram drawn up on the basis of a presentation by Norbert Landwehr at the closing conference of the Q-KULT project on 2 and 3 March 2016 in Bremen; online at:

Effective changes in schools cannot be initiated by means of structural changes only (such as functions, processes or instruments); here the informal and partly unconscious role of the school culture comes into play (cf. Landwehr 2015, 376 f.). In relation to quality management this means: the fact whether the objectives or intended effects associated with QM systems (such as continuous improvement, evidence-based school development and continuous improvement of teaching and learning) are actually implemented in everyday school life, is influenced to a great extent by the underlying assumptions, values and attitudes which a school or teaching staff has about the topic of quality management. These underlying factors are part of the schools' culture.

The key question in this article is: how to deal with the "soft factor" of culture in the discussion on quality management?

- Are there any possibilities to identify school culture – and quality culture as a part of school culture – and relate it to the successful or less successful implementation of quality management?
- If so: how can school quality culture be identified and made visible? And is this useful at all?
- Can quality culture be changed or actively designed and influenced, and if so, how to proceed?

The team of ARQA-VET, the Austrian Quality Assurance National Reference Point for VET, has been dealing with these and other questions for some years already. Many of them have been studied in an EU project which has been coordinated by us ([www.q-kult.eu](http://www.q-kult.eu)).

In this article, we want to focus on the key outcomes of this project, offer potential solutions and encourage further discussions.

## 2 Under the surface: quality culture

Organisational cultures are formed whenever individuals live together over a longer period of time, (e.g. in an organisation such as a school), and develop shared values, norms, patterns of interpretation, expectations and convictions for understandable reasons (e.g. reasons of security and orientation of the individual members, and for reasons of efficiency and productivity) (cf. Esslinger-Hinz 2010, p. 13 ff.). Countless theoretical models and approaches for the concept of organisational culture have been developed (cf. Markowitsch 2015). Culture seems to be a “residual factor” which is hard to grasp but highly effective and not to be underestimated. In many cases, the implementation of innovations, reforms, or change projects fails due to this factor (cf. Landwehr 2015, p. 376 f.). The introduction of QM structures (quality managers, processes, quality circles, etc.) in a school, for example, does not signify by any means that QM is actually implemented in a way that the intended effects (such as the continuous improvement of the organisation) are reached. Something seems to exist below the level of the visible, structural regulations for quality management, which can support or prevent implementation.

The probably most frequently quoted source for explaining and describing organisational culture comes from Ed Schein (cf. Schein 2010). Schein distinguishes between three levels of culture in organisations, which he describes using an iceberg model: with visible elements above the water surface (artefacts, espoused values), and with a far larger proportion of invisible elements (basic assumptions), which are hidden underneath the water surface. We attempt to explain these three levels in regard to the topic of quality culture in schools and illustrate them with a few examples.

**The level of artefacts (related to quality management):** The highest level of the culture of an organisation, such as a school, is visible to everyone (also for non-members of the organisation) and consists of artefacts and symbols. Schein views this level as everything which can be heard, seen and perceived, e.g. for instance in a school, on the topic of quality management. This includes for example the quality manual, the displayed feedback rules, the way people speak about QM, the information about quality managers on the website, or the quality award exhibited in a display cabinet, etc. Although artefacts and symbols are accessible and visible to everyone, and at the top of the iceberg, they provide few explanations why QM is implemented and applied in a school in a

certain way and not otherwise. The non-existence of artefacts and symbols related to the topic of quality management is, of course, also an expression of quality culture at this level.

**The level of espoused values (related to quality management):** is about officially accessible and visible strategies and values of a school. Regarding quality management, these values are usually included in the schools' mission statement. Frequently the officially exposed values (such as an innovative range of education programmes, teamwork, individual responses to student needs) are in contrast with the actually observed behaviour of the organisation's members (in our case of the school management and teaching staff). Espoused values are often more a façade than actually established practice (cf. Kühl 2011, p. 102 f.). These inconsistencies can be very fascinating and informative and are frequently discussed as part of a cultural analysis. Espoused values can, but need not necessarily provide information about how exactly quality management is actually practiced in a school.

**The level of basic assumptions (related to quality management):** Underneath the water surface of the iceberg, there are the largely unconscious values, attitudes and assumptions which are shared by all members of the organisation, as well as secret or hidden rules about how the organisation functions, in our case related to quality management. According to Schein, these are deeper assumptions about the functioning of the world, such as assumptions related to time and space, about the way interpersonal relations should be structured, assumptions about how decisions should be taken, etc. Basic assumptions related to quality management, which can become visible in cultural analyses, are e.g.: "We do know that we have problems here, but you should definitely not address them, you have to deal with the matter yourself!" Or: "If it works, almost everything is okay...", or: "All that counts here is the students' performance, everything else comes second". In contrast to the artefacts and symbols, as well as the espoused values, the basic assumptions of a school or teaching staff are invisible; the organisation's members are usually not aware of them. A cultural analysis can make them visible to the members of an organisation, so they become aware of them. They explain precisely why and for what reason the quality management in a school is implemented and practiced in a certain manner and not otherwise. If a quality strategy is not implemented in a school, or evaluation results that have been collected with difficulty but are not processed further, this can be due to the basic assumptions of the teaching staff, contrasting the publicly advocated and communicated quality strategy. Therefore it is the deep level of basic assumptions shared by the teaching staff which controls the behaviour of the individuals related to quality management. It has a considerable impact on the

quality culture of a school.

Organizational culture: common ...

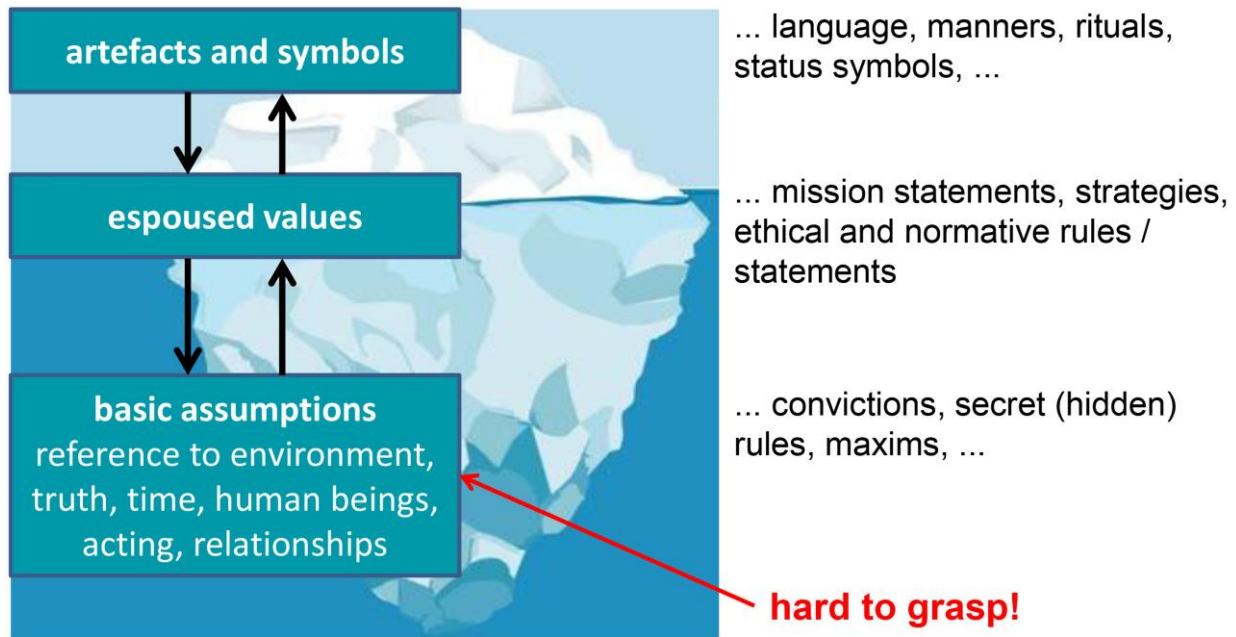


Diagram 1: Organisational culture based on Schein, adapted for Q-KULT by H. Ittner

By way of summary, Schein defines organisational culture as the whole of “common, implicit assumptions a group has learned by tackling external tasks and dealing with internal relations” (Schein 2010, p. 173). This definition should be adapted accordingly in relation to quality management and the school context: quality culture is the result of the common, implicit assumptions of a school (teaching staff) about quality management. Here and in the following, quality culture is used as a value-neutral concept; there can be positive and negative elements of the quality culture of a school. The respective quality culture in a school can either support or rather prevent/hinder the successful implementation of quality management. In our opinion, this value-neutral approach is useful and necessary, in particular when schools plan to implement specific projects regarding cultural change. A normative approach would discredit dysfunctional quality cultures (that is: quality cultures that obstruct the intended effects that are associated with QM) and would, therefore, offer unfavourable conditions for a possibly desirable cultural change (see chapter 4).

### 3 Identification of quality culture: instruments and methods

The existing instruments to identify organisational culture are just as extensive and varied as the explanatory models and theories describing organisational



culture. Research conducted as part of the Q-KULT project has found a large number of existing survey instruments from the field of organisational and/or business culture. In the area of school culture, considerably fewer relevant instruments could be identified (cf. Markowitsch 2015).

The original intention of the Q-KULT project, namely to develop our own instrument to survey school quality culture, was given up at a relatively early stage due to the associated requirements (such as regarding academic quality criteria) against the background of the planned project duration and existing financial means. It seemed to be significantly more useful and efficient to adapt an existing culture survey instrument for the “school” context and the thematic focus on “quality management”.

Following an inspection of suitable survey instruments and after a selection process based on defined criteria, finally three different instruments (OCAI – the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument based on Cameron and Quinn; SCEQ – the School Cultural Elements Questionnaire, and the T-Procedure based on Friedrich Glasl) were adapted and tested as part of the project (cf. Kurz & Ittner 2015, p. 11 f.). Ultimately the project partners opted for an appropriately changed and extended version of the OCAI (cf. Cameron & Quinn 2006), which was given the title Q-KULT Tool and is available online (<http://q-kult.eu/tool/>).

### 3.1 The Q-KULT Tool

Decisive for the selection and adaptation of the OCAI was, among others, the criterion that, with this tool (in its adapted Q-KULT version), quality culture cannot only be surveyed on the surface or on the level of artefacts and espoused values, but that it allows deeper lying elements to be identified as well. In addition, the OCAI in its original form does not represent a normative instrument, which means there is no, per se, good or bad organisational culture; there are merely different “types” of culture, which can be distinguished. Specific focuses and certain types of culture are connected with advantages and disadvantages, or opportunities and challenges, for the implementation and integration of quality management. The original OCAI instrument bears no explicit relation to the topic of QM or quality culture, it aims to identify organisational culture. The adaptation of the instrument for the context or organisation type “school” allows us to analyse the schools’ organisational culture regarding the question to what extent the forms, instruments or structures of a school-based quality management system match the respective school-specific culture (cf. Kurz; Ittner & Landwehr 2016, p. 5).

Using the two OCAI dimensions “external versus internal orientation” and “structured and defined versus open and creative”, four types of culture can be distinguished. In the OCAI original version, the four types are called: Hierarchy,



Market, Clan and Adhocracy (cf. Cameron 2006, p. 37 f.). For the Q-KULT Tool, the original types were “translated” into the context of the school in the following way:

*Type 1:* focus on organisation (internal orientation, structured/defined). Motto: “Reliability is our strength!”, “Everything is going really well!”

*Type 2:* focus on performance (external orientation, structured/defined). Motto: “Ambition helps us to progress”, “We did it”.

*Type 3:* focus on relationships (internal orientation, open/creative). Motto: “Harmony holds us together”, “That's good for all of us!”

*Type 4:* focus on innovation (external orientation, open/creative). Motto: “Enthusiasm drives us on”, “Great idea, let's do it!”

In the OCAI original form, six categories of analysis are assigned to these four types, the seventh dimension which is listed below (understanding of quality) has been added as a new category.

1. Significant characteristics of the institution (dominant characteristics)
2. The leadership style of the school management (organisational leadership)
3. HR management (management of employees)
4. What holds the institution together (organisational glue)
5. Strategic focuses (strategic emphases)
6. Success factors (criteria of success)
7. Quality Concept

Table 2: Q-KULT categories of analysis (adapted based on the OCAI, taken from: Kurz, Ittner & Landwehr 2016, p. 11 f.)

### 3.2 The methodological approach for teaching staff

In its original form, the OCAI is a questionnaire. For the Q-KULT Tool, the methodological approach was changed. It is recommended to apply the instrument in form of a dialogic procedure, which means that the categories of analysis which are later assigned to one of four types of culture, are discussed in small groups comprising two to three members of the teaching staff. The small groups need to agree on a group result by allocating 100 points to four statements for each category of analysis. One example to illustrate the procedure:

1) Key characteristics of the institution

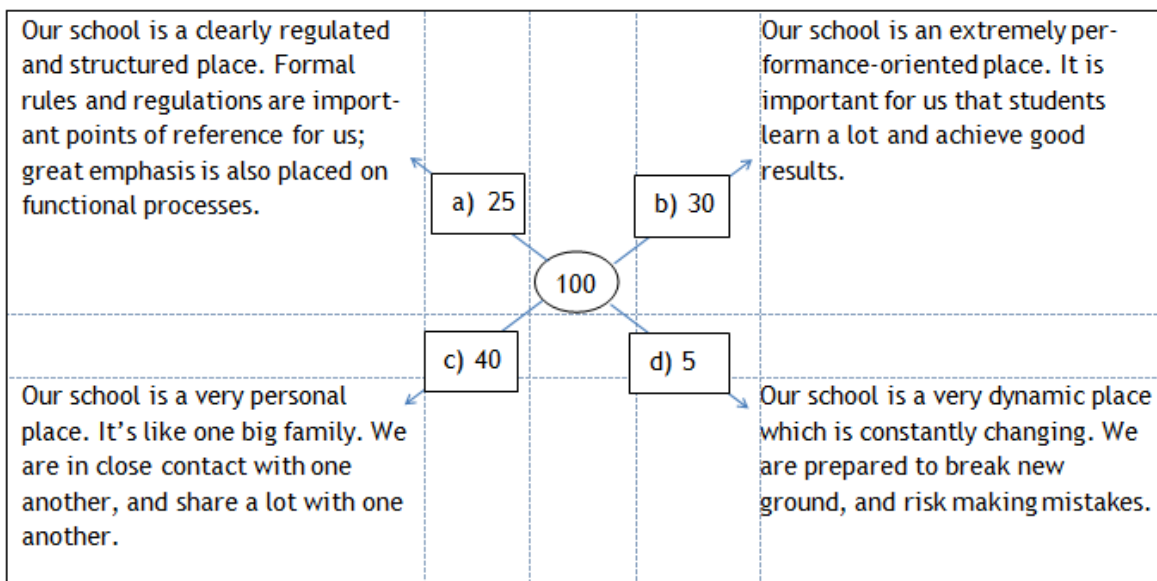


Diagram 2: Category of analysis 1 from the Q-KULT Tool

The results of all small groups are finally calculated and aggregated across all seven categories of analysis with a view to the type of culture prevailing in the school (cf. Kurz, Ittner & Landwehr 2016, p. 7)<sup>1</sup>. Mixed types can occur; it is possible to carry out a branch- or department-related evaluation, which can provide clues about differences. Especially in larger organisations, it is very likely that there are different subcultures (such as different units or training branches in a school). The Q-KULT Tool can be applied both with a view to the current state in the school (the currently dominant type of culture) and conducted with a view to the desired target state (the type of culture desired by the large majority of the teaching staff for the future). The current and targeted results can be contrasted and, if appropriate, differences can be made visible. The results, which should be analysed and discussed with the teaching staff, are presented in the form of a spider diagram.

The results of the applied Q-KULT Tool, the discussion in the small groups and the teaching staff' discussion, (in reference to the analysis and interpretation of the overall result), can provide valuable information. On the basis of this information, the strength and weaknesses of the prevailing quality culture and the implemented quality management can be identified, providing a starting point for further developmental possibilities.

Every type of culture is related to specific strengths and weaknesses in regard to quality management; none of the four Q-KULT types is better or worse than any other type. The predominance of a certain type (such as the type "focus on

performance”) usually means that elements, which are characteristic for other types (such as social interactions, negotiation processes, cooperation between staff members – elements which are characteristic of the type “focus on relationships”) are neglected and should, therefore, be taken into consideration more strongly (cf. Sagmeister 2016). The strengths and weaknesses of the individual types, regarding the quality management system of an organisation, are listed in the handout for the Q-KULT Tool (cf. Kurz, Ittner & Landwehr 2016, p. 9 f.).

The application of the Q-KULT Tool will, in all cases, initiate a process in which the school/teaching staff reflects on *why* they think and act in the way they do in relation to quality management, with all the opportunities and risks connected with it. Cultures “live”, so to speak, because they are not officially dealt with as a topic in itself. As soon as they are “uncovered” and revealed, they are also subject to negotiation, which means that very different wishes can come to the foreground. The school management needs to be aware of these opportunities and risks and weigh up whether and at which point in time a cultural analysis is useful and productive. It can be worthwhile and necessary to use advisory support in the course of a cultural analysis and in a possibly following cultural change project.

## 4 Cultural change

Cultures, such as those in an organisation, are something very stable, and can hardly be changed. There is a consensus about this fact in the relevant literature. Stability means that, in the example of schools, similar to other types of organisations, structures prevail that are highly resistant to change. Here it needs to be remembered that this cultural stability exists for good reasons. It creates security and orientation, and allows efficient and economic action: everyone is well informed and the staff knows what to do because they are clearly guided by shared values, attitudes, convictions, and expectations. There is no school without a culture, and a “culturally weak” school would, as a consequence, be an organisation in which a great degree of uncertainty and lack of orientation prevails; it would hardly show coordinated, joint action (cf. Esslinger-Hinz 2010, p. 318 ff.).

It is useful to know the schools’ culture and take it into account whenever the focus is on change projects or innovation, because there is great danger of failure (which is well-known from change management processes), with the result of non-intended, rather than intended effects (see Table 1 above). Frequently, after a cultural analysis, it becomes obvious that the behaviour of individuals is by no means as irrational as it seems to be from the outside, but

that there are easily understandable reasons for it (cf. Berner 2012, p. 9).

Systems and organisations depend on stability in order to be able to function. Jointly shared basic assumptions, values, attitudes and convictions safeguard this stability (Schein 2010). It would therefore be short-sighted to associate resistance in our case by schools, regarding educational reform projects solely with a lack of flexibility, narrow-mindedness or the acting stakeholders' refusal to change. Difficulties during implementation are part of normal responses to a changing environment; they are not diseases that need to be conquered (cf. Esslinger-Hinz 2010, p. 320).

Cultural change usually brings about great insecurity for the members of an organisation. This is because familiar and well-known modes of behaviour and associated values and convictions are suddenly called into question. If a reform project, such as the introduction of quality management, meets a school culture which does not offer any relevant reference points, these need to be created. Above all, the existing school culture must not be discredited without reflection (e.g. by new school managers) because this would mean that the work done so far and its connected values and attitudes of a body of teachers all of a sudden become worthless. If the existing strengths of a culture are used, then the opportunities for a functioning implementation of change projects increase. Even seemingly negative cultural patterns can partly comprise positive elements: behind the avoidance of conflict by managers might lie empathy and tolerance; endurance and patience might be hidden behind bureaucracy (cf. Sagmeister 2016, p. 164).

Not all the elements or parts of a school culture are incorporated equally strong, which means there are elements which are "more easily negotiable" and easier to change than other elements. If an innovation or an educational policy reform project in a school comes into contact with an associated concept, which is strongly anchored, the implementation process of the innovation will be connected with problems and resistance. An example: if a culture of "lone wolves" prevails in a school and if there is a silent agreement, that no-one should interfere with the issues of colleagues, especially regarding their teaching, a new project with the topic "feedback among colleagues" - planned to be introduced as part of school quality management - will very likely be met with resistance. Such a project would probably be faced with completely different responses in a school where teamwork, team teaching, and joint reflection on teaching have been established and accepted parts of the school culture for many years.

There are two possibilities regarding cultural patterns which have been

identified as weaknesses: either it is attempted to change the pattern; or the organisation accepts it. Careful thought needs to be given to whether a change is desired, and it is useful to focus on patterns, which have a decisive impact on the culture. Otherwise there is a threat of wasted energy with low chances of success in areas of secondary importance. For a School, it might be beneficial not to oblige the entire teaching staff to give feedback among colleagues, as long as there is a functioning practice of students feedback to single teachers. Or, at one point or another, a “blind eye” could be turned to the specific aspects of a methodological approach regarding evaluation in a particular department.

But how to proceed if basic assumptions or cultural patterns really need to be changed? First of all, a clear picture regarding the desired target culture is needed in order to move the culture in a certain direction. In the case of a culture change it is not necessary to change the values, attitudes, or convictions of people by persuading, or even threatening them. First and foremost it is the behaviour of individuals, which needs to be changed. It is therefore important to look at the behaviour in the existing culture, i.e. analyse why the members of an organisation act in a certain way and not differently (cf. Berner 2012, p. 66 f.). Frequently certain structures or framework conditions (such as target systems, organisational structures, salary structures, process requirements, meeting structures, etc.) turn out to be decisive elements.

Those who want to change the behaviour of individuals in organisations do not necessarily have to put the focus on persuasion and motivation; it is important to redesign existing structures and framework conditions in a way that this increases the likelihood that the desired behaviour occurs (cf. Sagmeister 2016, p. 167). Framework conditions often have more impact on our behaviour than our attitudes and values do. This also explains why many people are living more unhealthily, e.g. being less physically active than they actually want. On the other hand, convictions frequently follow action after a while. This means that our convictions adapt to our habits after some time. The theory of cognitive dissonance says that individuals can hardly accept that there is little compatibility between their behaviour and their ideal self (cf. Berner 2012, p. 66).

If the objective of a cultural change is, for instance, to enhance the willingness to cooperate among teaching staff, the mere plea of calling on colleagues to cooperate more will presumably only have very limited success. More important is the question of, for example, what the communication and meeting structures or the available time for cooperation in a school actually look like. Do existing structures encourage the willingness to cooperate? And if not, which structural change possibilities exist? Are there, in some circumstances, new “reward systems”? What promotes non-cooperative behaviour? How can the school management enhance the desired behaviour in a positive manner? “Rather

than attempting to change the values and convictions of the staff, it is more promising to change the framework conditions of their action in a way that a different behaviour becomes useful and attractive for them” (Berner 2012, p. 69).

## 5 Final comments

Cultural analyses are complex, and not only do they offer great opportunities, but they are also connected with certain risks, which school principals in particular need to be made aware of in advance. Cultural change projects are demanding, take years and frequently require extensive advisory support (Berner 2012, p. 115). For these reasons, cultural analyses cannot be ordered, but schools need to be able to decide in favour or against them on a voluntary basis.

The focus on cultural aspects must be described as a new development in the context of school quality management. Considering the specifics of school cultures allow explanations of phenomena (such as difficulties of implementation, occurrence of non-intended effects) which were previously unknown. From the perspective of the authors, it is worth analysing cultural aspects when focusing on the implementation of QM, both for the level of the individual school and as a blueprint for reflection and interpretation for those responsible at the system level. Most of the existing school QM systems mainly focus on instruments, structures and processes. Aspects of the school culture and its influence on the implementation of QM are hardly ever taken into account. We propose greater consideration of the culture perspective in the relevant systems, for instance as reference for principals and school quality managers if difficulties emerge during the implementation.

At the system level, the question arises of how school Quality management systems can be structured in a way that they leave as much leeway as possible for opportunities to adjust and adapt school cultures in order to provide schools with more capabilities to make QM systems “their own”.



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<sup>i</sup> Here is an example of the result of the cultural diagnosis with the Q-KULT Tool for one school:

