Educational Organisations as ‘Cultures of Consumption’: cultural contexts of consumer learning in schools

DANIEL FISCHER
Institute for Environmental and Sustainability Communication (INFU), Leuphana University Lüneburg, Germany

ABSTRACT High levels of consumption in the industrialised parts of the world such as Europe mark a central threat to global sustainable development. In recent years, growing attention has been paid to the contributions of education and educational organisations to the socialisation of youths and young adults into consumer culture. It is the contention of this article that educational responses to the consumption challenge both within the European Union (EU) consumer policy strategy and in current practices in consumer education in European countries build on an understanding of consumer learning in schools that is too narrowly defined and thus insufficient. The aim of this article is therefore to help overcome this shortcoming by unfolding a socio-cultural view on consumption-related formal and informal learning environments in educational organisations. It is assumed that in response to external framings such as curricula or policies and as a result of inner-organisational negotiations, schools bring about distinct ways of relating to consumption and youth consumers that have socialising effects on their students. This article presents a conceptual elaboration of these contexts and processes. It draws on research into the genesis and characteristic fields of school culture and relates this to the domain of consumption. As a result, a detailed framework of organisational ‘cultures of consumption’ in schools with six thematic domains is presented. The article concludes with a discussion of implications and demands for a new research, practice and policy-making agenda that is needed to advance a more holistic promotion of sustainable consumer education in schools in Europe.

Today’s society is often characterised as a consumer society (Schor & Holt, 2000; Baudrillard, 2006), and its culture as a consumer culture (see Featherstone, 2001). These terms highlight the fact ‘that the world of goods and their principles of structuration are central to the understanding of contemporary society’ (Featherstone, 1987, p. 57). Consumption has become a way of life that is so embedded in affluent western societies that it is often not recognised as a cultural construction but ‘simply seems to be natural’ (Assadourian, 2010, p. 8).

With the emergence of consumer culture and the growing importance of consumption, the world has witnessed a tremendous increase in consumption levels, particularly in the industrialised countries after World War II. Today, consumption levels are identified as a central driver of several syndromes of global change, such as overexploitation of natural ecosystems and environmental degradation through depletion of non-renewable resources (WBGU, 1996), which pose major threats to the very existence of humanity in the twenty-first century. In light of this, the 2010 Worldwatch report on the state of the world emphasises the critical relationship between consumption and sustainable development, and in its subtitle calls for a cultural transformation ‘from consumerism to sustainability’ (Starke & Mastny, 2010). In their review of different major societal institutions, these US-based authors criticise the fact that education has not fully tapped its potential as a facilitator of the cultural transformation aspired to. Elsewhere, it is contended that ‘education plays a powerful role in cultivating consumerism’ and that ‘schools... represent a huge
missed opportunity to combat consumerism and to educate students about its effects on people and the environment’ (Assadourian, 2010, p. 15).

Educational Responses to the Consumption Challenge in Europe

In different European countries a variety of consumer education approaches and policies has been developed in response to the demands of the emerging consumption challenge. A recent OECD survey on trends, policies and good practices in consumer education identified three forms of delivery: formal education (i.e. programmes of instruction); lifelong education (i.e. informal learning across the lifespan of individuals); and targeted education (i.e. for groups considered vulnerable - e.g. the disabled, the poor) (OECD, 2009). The survey results account for an expanding interest in the curricular integration of consumer education, with European countries such as Austria, Finland, Hungary, Norway, Portugal and Spain admitting to formal learning as the core of their consumer education strategies. In the northern German state of Schleswig-Holstein, for example, consumer education has been introduced as a mandatory subject in secondary schools (MBF, 2009). A mandatory syllabus that defines core content areas and competencies that ought to be acquired has been developed by the responsible Ministerium für Bildung und Frauen des Landes Schleswig-Holstein (Ministry for Education and Women). Furthermore, the state authorities provide in-service teacher training to ensure the effective delivery of the syllabus. In the UK, consumer education has also been included in the national curriculum for secondary schools for 14-to 16-year-olds. A distinct feature of the UK’s approach to consumer education is that the centralised curricular inclusion is complemented by a patchwork approach that involves as many as 600 organisations ‘providing consumer education of one sort or another’ (Brennan & Ritters, 2004, p. 100). From the OECD survey it can be concluded that consumer education is commonly ‘not a specific policy area in many countries’ (OECD, 2009, p. 179) and that European responses to the consumption challenge so far remain fragmented and incoherent, and often lack ‘overall strategies and objectives’ (p. 188).

On the basis of the OECD survey, the OECD’s Committee on Consumer Policy (CCP) developed three main policy recommendations for promoting and improving consumer education: (i) to define objectives and strategies in consumer education and evaluate outcomes; (ii) to select the most appropriate approaches; and (iii) to improve stakeholder cooperation to ensure greater coherence in the delivery of consumer education (OECD, CCP, 2009). So far, these recommendations had little effect on consumer education policy. One exception is the strategy for consumer education in the Nordic and Baltic Sea countries that was released by the Nordic-Estonian Consumer Education Group in 2009. The proposals focus primarily on the OECD CCP’s first recommendation of defining objectives for consumer education, but they also touch on teaching methods and curricular integration. In the strategy, sustainable consumption features prominently as a core content (Nordic-Estonian Consumer Education Group, 2009).

The European Union (EU) has recently sought to put in place a more concerted response to a greater Europeanisation of consumer education. The term Europeanisation refers to a ‘process through which European integration penetrates and, in certain circumstances, brings about adjustments to domestic institutions, decision-making procedures and public policies’ (Jordan et al, 2004, p. 132) following the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and the foundation of the EU in 1993. Since then, the policy fields of education and consumer affairs have both been subject to greater harmonisation efforts by the European Commission (Micklitz & Weatherill, 1993; Rutkowski & Engel, 2010; Lawn, 2011). The recent edition of the EU’s Consumer Policy Strategy (CPS) for the years 2007-2013 (European Commission, 2007) extends the notion of Europeanisation to consumer education. The CPS formulates three main objectives: empowering consumers; enhancing their welfare; and protecting them effectively. One of the five priorities in attaining these goals is to work towards a situation where consumers are better informed and educated. The CPS also identifies actions to ensure close collaboration with national consumer policies. In its resolution on the EU’s CPS, the Council of the European Commission calls upon the commission and the member states ‘to work towards effective consumer protection and education in all Member states... including education on sustainable consumption’ (Council of the European Union, 2007, III, p. 15). A main strategy to advance the Europeanisation of consumer education...
was to set up multi-national networking initiatives that received EU funding mainly to stimulate debate among European consumer educators and develop consumer education materials. Among these initiatives, the most prominent ones were the project Development of On-Line Consumer Education Tools for Adults (DOLCETA) and the foundation of the Consumer Citizenship Network (CCN) and its successive Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living (PERL), as well as the European Network for Consumer Education (E-CONS).

**Proposition: broadening the view on consumer learning in schools**

Despite these efforts in promoting consumer education, little progress has so far been made towards more sustainable patterns of consumption among youths and young adults. One reason for this untapped potential can be seen in a traditional understanding of consumer education itself that is also inherent in current practices both in European countries and in the EU’s CPS. Consumer education is commonly referred to as the delivery of teaching on consumption in structured (and often instructive) formal learning, preferably classroom settings. While such understanding relates to a widespread institutionalised practice in schools, it does not adequately take account of forms of learning that take place outside the curricular surface and the classroom. These forms of learning are conceptualised as tacit, incidental or – most broadly – informal learning (Schugurensky, 2000). A widely used estimation suggests that between 50 and 70% of all human learning is indeed informal learning (see Livingstone, 1999; Conlon, 2004). The potentials implied by these figures sparked the interest of both academics and practitioners, particularly from the field of human resource development. This interest has produced a number of approaches to conceptualising and measuring workplace learning in the last 15 years (van Woerkom & Poell, 2010). Applications of the workplace learning approach to educational organisations are rare, with the few studies that do exist predominantly focusing on schools as ‘educative workplace model[s]’ (Retallick, 1999, p. 35) for the professional development of teachers (cf. Marsick, 2009).

This article focuses on youths and young adults who spend on average about 15,000 hours of their lifetime at school (Rutter et al, 1982). It argues that the notion of informal learning in educational organisations bears promising potential for a broader and more comprehensive approach to consumer education as it suggests that a great deal of consumption-related learning in educational organisations happens by the way. Yet, with respect to consumption and processes of cultural transmission, it has been observed that educators are only just ‘beginning to problematize and challenge the ways in which schools socialize learners to be consumers’ (Sandlin & McLaren, 2009, p. xix). This conceptual article addresses this shortcoming and argues that effective engagement of European educational research, practice and policy making, with the transformation of consumer culture, requires the dominant conception of consumer education as formal learning to be broadened to incorporate what students tacitly learn in the formal and informal learning settings within educational organisations. This requires a more careful consideration of ‘the individual school as the unit of change’ (Dalim, 2005, p. 124) and its inner-organisational processes in response to external expectations and policy constraints. To this end, the analytical framework of educational organisation’s as ‘cultures of consumption’ is proposed.

The framework was developed and applied in the context of the three years’ research and development by BINK (German acronym for Education Institutions and Sustainable Consumption), funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research. In the project, scholars and practitioners worked together to develop, implement and evaluate changes in educational organisations in northern Germany (Fischer, 2011). Due to the project’s background, most of the conceptual resources used in the development of the framework stem from German and Anglo-Saxon organisational culture and school development research.

**The Definition and Genesis of School Culture**

In the 1980s, Anglo-American research on school effectiveness revealed that despite having similar external conditions, significant qualitative differences could be observed between schools (see Madaus et al, 1980; Anderson, 1982). The results were interpreted as a proof of the influence of inner-organisational actors on school performance and fuelled further research interest in the
distinct cultures of schools. In a non-normative and non-elitist perspective, school culture is understood as a fundamental system of shared values and evaluation scales, of orientation patterns and symbolic practices (Dalin, 1993). Recent theorising and empirical research provided some insights into the evolution of school culture, of which three main propositions will be mentioned.

First, schools do not operate in a vacuum or a sterile environment, but are embedded in broader educational and societal systems. These external environments impose demands on schools (e.g. societal expectations, political regulations) that schools need to respond to. Second, in a non-normative approach, school culture does not represent an integrating idea, but rather can be ‘seen to be made up of a mosaic of organisational realities’ (Bell & Kent, 2010, p. 12) that accounts for the diversity and heterogeneity of inner-organisational actors. In this view, schools must be perceived as cultural entities with a differentially elaborated structure of multiple subcultures and groups. And third, school culture is a dynamic phenomenon that constantly evolves and changes in the powerful interplay of external and internal forces. Hence, approaches building on the notion of school culture need to both recognise ‘the dynamic and the importance of both external and internal organisational forces in shaping the culture of schools’ (Bell & Kent, 2010, p. 12) and provide an account for the interplay of such forces.

A profound basis for a comprehensive analysis of the genesis of formal and informal practices in schools in the context of their external and internal structural constraints was provided by Helsper et al (2001), who focused on the interplay of structure and agency between the macro-political level of the educational system and the micro-political level of practices in the organisation. Similar to more complex multi-level models of culture (Erez & Gati, 2004), Helsper et al perceive educational organisations as embedded in and operating within the structures of the educational system. Broadly speaking, three levels can be distinguished (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Structures and system levels](adapted from Helsper et al, 2001).

At the macro level (labelled A in Figure 1), the education system imposes structural constraints on the organisation (B) that are beyond the control and influence of the organisational actors (solid arrow). For example, we know from educational sociology that selection is one of the key functions of the educational system (Meyer, 1977; Fend, 2001). Schools face the structural constraint of needing to assess students’ performance, which makes them operate on the basis of a characteristic better/worse distinction (Luhmann & Schorr, 1979). Complete resistance to these structural constraints is not a choice for educational organisations. Yet, schools (and, within schools, different teachers) can be observed to differ quite significantly in the way in which they assess their students’ performances. Organisations at the meso level (B in Figure 1) thus select particular structural variants (dashed arrow) in response to the structural constraints they face from the macro level (A). Importantly, the selection of structural variants is contested and results from inner-organisational negotiations between different (groups of) organisational actors. Once a school has established assessment and grading practices based on a shared performance ethos, individual actors are supposed to comply with these routines. The structural variant selected at the organisational level (B) becomes in its turn a structural constraint on organisational actors (C). In this way, specific and
binding ways of how to ‘go about things here’ emerge as an embattled response of collective organisational actors (B) to external constraints (A). This can be described as an essential process of school culture formation.

Consequently, the analysis of the foundation and evolution of a cultural order in educational organisations needs both to consider the meso level of the single organisation and to focus on the domains of the collective organisational actors’ examination of and interaction with the structural constraints they face from the macro level.

Levels of Culture

For the further elaboration of a framework, it is necessary to specify where cultural order manifests itself as a result of inner-organisational battles. This has been done by Schein in his influential work on organisational culture, where he provides a framework for the study of organisational culture that distinguishes three levels according to the ‘degree to which the cultural phenomenon is visible to the observer’ (Schein, 2004, p. 23). The first, or surface, level of artefacts represents cultural manifestations that can be understood as ‘visible, tangible, and audible remains of behavior grounded in cultural norms, values, and assumptions’ (Hatch, 1997). Artefacts can be categorised as physical (e.g. cafeteria architecture), behavioural (e.g. lunchtime rituals) or verbal (e.g. specific jargon use). As artefacts have sensually perceivable features, they are ‘easy to observe but difficult to decipher’ (Schein, 2004, p. 36).

The level of artefacts is underpinned by the second level of values and norms that the organisational actors ‘use as a way of depicting the culture to themselves or others’ (Schein, 2004, p. 25). Values refer to ‘social principles, goals and standards held within a culture to have intrinsic worth’ (Hatch, 1997, p. 214). These values may be formally written down in mission statements or other official documents (Schoen, 2005). By contrast, norms are understood as ‘unwritten rules that allow members of a culture to know what is expected from them in a wide variety of situations’ (Hatch, 1997, p. 214).

The third level involves patterns of shared and taken-for-granted assumptions that Schein regards as ‘the essence of a group’s culture’ (Schein, 2004, p. 36). These assumptions, taken for granted and strongly anchored in the organisational members’ cognitive structure as they are, are generally not debated or reflected upon and are regarded as difficult to change. Basic assumptions reflect ‘deeper assumptions about more abstract general issues around which humans need consensus’ (Schein, 2004, p. 137). These general issues ‘tend to be quite abstract’ (Martin, 2002, p. 46) and relate to such broad notions as what Schein labels the nature of human nature, of reality and truth, and of time and place (Schein, 2004, p. 138).

The approach suggested by Schein claims that ‘giving your attention to how a culture resolves each of these [general issues] will help you to define its core assumptions’ (Hatch, 1997, p. 214).

In its conceptualisation of multiple layers of organisational culture, Schein’s approach provides useful references to situate and localise manifestations of cultural order in a more refined manner.

Domains of School Culture

Schein’s work on organisational culture focused on organisations from the corporate sector, claiming that although cultural contents might vary, the parameters identified are also valid for other organisational settings (Schein, 2004, p. 89). Yet, in order to advance towards a more distinct understanding of school culture, Schein’s heuristic of three cultural layers needs to be complemented by empirical findings on distinct thematic domains of organisational culture in schools.

The most advanced approach to identifying such thematic domains of school culture has been developed by Helsper et al (2001), who studied the transformation processes in four German schools in eastern Germany in the early years after the German reunification in a three-year project employing reconstructive research methodology. In their extensive ethnographic work, the authors
have identified four domains in which a school cultural order emerges as a result of inner-organisational battles.

- **Performance orientations** concern in particular the rigour with which schools select their students and the school’s corresponding performance expectations. These expectations are underpinned by different assumptions about the era of youth as either a hedonistic period of life or an ascetic one.
- **Disciplinary-thematic configurations** refer to the distinct selection of themes and contents that are made available at each school from the socio-cultural reservoir of knowledge.
- **Pedagogical orientations** comprise such aspects as teaching-related ideas of appropriate and inappropriate forms and modes of learning in school and professional interpretation patterns of social learning and interaction.
- **Participation conditions**, finally, relate to the limits within which different (groups of) school actors can effectively engage in processes of negotiation and decision-making, whereby the participation conditions for school management and the different factions and groups of school teachers define the boundaries within which student participation is possible.

Educational Organisations’ ‘Culture of Consumption’

The previous sections introduced different aspects of the concept of school culture which laid the foundations for this study. This section presents the results of the research that built on these foundations. The objective of the study conducted was to provide a framework that allows for a broader perspective on consumer learning and socialisation in schools. It does so by drawing together the different threads of research on school culture reviewed above, merging them into a synoptic framework and integrating them from a consumption perspective based on research from the study of consumer behaviour and education. As a result, a conceptual framework for an educational organisation’s ‘culture of consumption’ (COC) is outlined.

Modifications

Helsper et al (2001) identified four thematic domains of school culture (see above). From a consumption perspective, the study complements these domains by suggesting the two additional domains of **educational goals and objectives** and **resource management and allocation**. The focus on consumption marks a specific perspective on school culture and requires a re-contextualisation of, and an explicit reference to, purposes and objectives pursued in the field of formal and informal consumer education. Providing this perspective is the object of the domain of educational goals and objectives. Furthermore, a prominent consumption-related focus on schools has been advanced by environmental educators who argued that schools are places in which consumption is not just taught, but also practised. In such a perspective, schools are viewed as consuming units (organisational households as opposed to private households). In order to pay adequate attention to how schools operate and manage their resources, the set of domains was extended by the addition of the domain of **resource management and allocation**.

Integration

According to the degree of their visibility and consciousness, the six domains of educational organisations’ COC can be related to the three levels of artefacts, espoused norms and basic assumptions as suggested by Schein (2004) (see Figure 2). These domains will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Resource Management and Allocation

Schools are not solely places in which consumption-related educational offers are made. In addition to the provision of formal learning settings, schools are consuming organisations and act as models of resource consumption. Among the resources consumed, **material, human and social** resources can be distinguished (Gamoran et al, 2006).
Educational Organisations as ‘Cultures of Consumption’

Apart from the organisation’s household consumption that entails school ground management, procurement policies and schemes auditing resource consumption and material throughput (Department for Education and Skills, 2008), material resources also comprise budgeting and monetary resources (e.g. available funds for consumption-related activities) as well as spatial and temporal resources. The management of spatial resources includes the design and maintenance of schools’ grounds and buildings, in particular their consumption architecture and infrastructure, as well as ensuring they are equipped with consumer-based educational materials. Temporal resources refer to the time allocated to school members to engage in consumption-related activities (e.g. student projects or in-service teacher training). Less directly, they also comprise organisational time schedules that pre-structure organisational members’ consumption (e.g. duration of lunch break, time allocated for transition between different places). Human resources are made up of consumption-related skills and knowledge. As most consumption-related organisational activities depend on their availability in the organisation, human resources constitute a vital factor in educational organisations’ COC. Inter-school variances exist (e.g. in job descriptions, staff training, and knowledge management) with respect to how these resources are built up, maintained and utilised. Lastly, social resources refer to the quality of social relations among inner-organisational members and between school members and stakeholders, as well as to external school relationships with other organisations (e.g. networks, partnerships).

Disciplines and Themes

Results of a recent EU survey show that the curricular integration of consumer education does not guarantee that consumer education is actually practised in the classroom (E-CONS Network, 2007). Hence, it must be asked where and to what extent consumption-related contents feature in the organisation’s range of educational offerings beyond curricular requirements, which entails a question concerning what different disciplinary or thematic perspectives on consumption are provided. The study of consumption is per se a highly interdisciplinary field. All disciplinary-thematic configurations in educational organisations unavoidably offer a limited perspective on consumption phenomena. Thus, decisions have to be made as to which consumption-related phenomena should be taken up (e.g. marketing, consumer rights issues, or problems of unsustainable patterns of consumption) and which disciplinary perspectives on these phenomena should be conveyed (e.g. a natural science, health, or aesthetic one). As such decisions might be
highly controversial and contested by different groups of actors with different disciplinary backgrounds, the permeability of disciplinary boundaries and their perspectives on consumption become a crucial lens through which an educational organisation’s COC can be examined (Santee Siskin, 1991). The question of interest here is how far the domain of consumption falls into the remit of single (groups of) actors and how far it constitutes a field that is broadly shared, occupied and developed by many different (groups of) actors in disciplinary units and subcultures (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995).

The distinct disciplinary-thematic configuration does not only deprive students of certain disciplinary perspectives on, and knowledge about, consumption, but might also affect the degree of certainty that they have about knowledge they have acquired, as recent epistemological research suggests (Trautwein & Lüdtke, 2008). Hence, it can be assumed that those consumption-related contents and issues that feature in the disciplinary-thematic configuration of a school are not just exemplary aspects of consumption phenomena for students, but are more or less exclusive constituents of their consumption knowledge.

**Participation and Communication**

Participation is understood to comprise all forms of exerted influence on the genesis of collectively binding agreements by people who are technically not entrusted with such tasks (Renn, 2005). Educational organisations differ both in the extent to which they enable organisational stakeholders (e.g. students, teachers, administration, management), internal stakeholders (e.g. parents) and external stakeholders (e.g. contractors) to influence decision-making processes beyond their legal entitlement, and in the extent to which they use their sphere of influence in matters that fall into the remit of external stakeholders - for example, in negotiations concerning contract conditions with the school’s caterer.

Stakeholder participation in educational organisations can be examined in its quantitative and qualitative dimensions (Douglas, 1970). In quantitative terms, there are two indicators for participation structures: first, the number of matters collectively decided upon; and, second, the questions of which (groups of) actors are granted which participation rights. Qualitatively speaking, different levels of participation can be distinguished, ranging from merely informing and consulting stakeholders to granting them full ownership over decision-making (Green & Hunton-Clarke, 2003). Furthermore, participation can take both formal modes (e.g. staff meetings) and informal modes (e.g. private gatherings). Obviously, formal and informal communication structures and information flows and the opportunities for various actor groups to access them play a pivotal role in enabling participation.

With respect to student participation, it can be assumed that the experiences students have when participating in consumption-related affairs at school have the potential to influence both the development of their consumer skills and attitudes (e.g. perceived self-efficacy, critical thinking) and their sense that agency is possible in consumer affairs (McGregor, 2009). An important question to ask in this context is whether participation is called for as a means to achieve certain outcomes (e.g. more satisfied cafeteria customers) or whether it is considered an end in itself ‘inasmuch as empowerment is viewed as a necessary outcome’ (Parfitt, 2004, p. 537) (e.g. self-efficient consumer citizens). Clearly, as Parfitt argues, ‘this ambiguity becomes contradictory when emphasis is laid on participation as a means at the expense of participation as an end’ (2004, p. 537).

**Performance Orientations**

Despite structural constraints on student assessment (e.g. centralised external testing), accentuations of the performance orientations remain a contested arena of inner-organisational disputes, with reference both to students and to organisations as a whole. In the case of students’ achievements, the concept of performance refers to the intended and valued outcomes of consumer educational efforts and is therefore linked to the domain of educational objectives. A controversial issue in this domain is the question of how strictly the attainment of these consumer educational goals should be enforced by means of grading and the awarding of degrees. Performance orientations can also refer to the entire organisation, in which case the issue is to
what extent the provision of consumer learning is understood and labelled an integral part of the organisation’s mission and mandate.

**Educational Goals and Objectives**

One of the central developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1956) for young people in western industrialised countries is to develop individual consumption preferences and lifestyles (Hurrelmann, 2010). Ever earlier, young people are approached as consumers and expected to participate as actors in the marketplace (Kenway & Bullen, 2001). Schools and teachers differ on whether to consider consumption an educational domain, and on the question of what forms they think it appropriate to engage with, and respond to, when the development of individual consumer identity is regarded as a developmental task in youth. Not surprisingly, educational objectives and their underpinning discourses have received renewed attention in consumer education research recently (McGregor, 2008). According to a typology provided by McGregor (2005), the spectrum of objectives pursued ranges from the information and advocacy provided to consumers so that they make better choices, to the empowerment of consumers so that they are likely to consider common and mutual interests and the social and human impacts of consumption, and develop change agency toward a more authentic culture beyond consumerism. The pursuance of conflicting or even contradictory goals and objectives within a school, or their incompatibility with existent structures, can cause severe tensions and fractures in the school’s organisational COC.

In a less obvious way, educational goals and objectives also inform practices outside the classroom. Examples are furnished by rules and codes of conduct (Raby, 2005) (e.g. dress codes) and ritualised practices (Henry, 1992; Rose & Schäfer, 2009) (e.g. lunchtime rituals) that were shown to affect student socialisation (Karpferer, 1981).

**Consumer Pedagogical Assumptions**

The distinction made in this study between pedagogical assumptions and educational goals and objectives can best be explained by analogy to Argyris’s classic distinction between espoused theories and theories-in-use (Argyris, 1976). While espoused theories refer to cognitions and values that people believe their behaviour is based on, theories-in-use refer to the cognitions and values as they are implied in their manifestation in practices and behaviour. Consumer pedagogical assumptions (CPAs) are those mindsets that subconsciously inform organisational members’ actions (e.g. teachers’ teaching practices), whereas educational goals and objectives that organisational members consciously agree upon (e.g. good teaching practice) can be said to be more of a formal and political nature. Of the broad range of CPAs, three key aspects will be explored in more detail.

1. **CPAs about youths’ and young adults’ norms and values.** Societal trends such as differentiation, secularisation and individualisation have resulted in a variety of norms, values and lifestyles (van Raaij, 1993). Firmly rooted in and accustomed to their own lifestyle-based perceptions of the world, teachers are unavoidably at risk of intentionally or unintentionally setting as a norm those consumption expressions and practices that they are most accustomed to. As a study by Page (1987) shows, the act of transmitting curricular contents to students is mainly influenced by the teachers’ shared perceptions of students’ socio-cultural characteristics. Such forms of lifestyle-centrism may not just lead to an unintentional hidden agenda in teaching consumption issues, they may also result in distorted perspectives on, and false representations of, students’ consumer educational needs.

2. **CPAs about adequate consumer pedagogical strategies.** Pedagogical assumptions relate to deeply ingrained and unquestioned understandings of the nature of youth and young adults, evaluations about the influence of different socialisation agents (e.g. their parents and peers, the media) on students’ consumer learning, and the ways that consumer learning takes place. These assumptions underpin pedagogical practices that vary to a significant degree - for example, in the way schools and teachers balance closeness and distance, instruction and self-organisation, or in how they value
relativism and indoctrination (Fien, 1997). Importantly, general attitudes towards appropriate teaching practices do not necessarily result in corresponding practices. In their study of college faculty members, Qablan & Al-Qaderi (2009) were able to show that while teaching staff preferred pedagogical approaches opposed to the notion of indoctrination, it was precisely this notion of indoctrination that their teaching practice hinged on. In the same study, several individual, situational and organisational constraints could be identified that helped to partly explain this gap between teaching values and practices. Hence, analysing practices in light of such constraints is key both to grasping a more refined understanding of the pedagogical strategies employed and to elucidating the underlying assumptions.

3. **CPAs about acculturation orientations and organisational commitment.** Schools can be considered as places of intercultural and subcultural contact. People of different ages and backgrounds, with different values and norms as well as lifestyle orientations, meet and interact in school settings. CPAs refer to the attitudes that school members hold about desirable and undesirable forms of interaction between individuals and the school’s culture. Further theorising can borrow from acculturation psychology, which has a long tradition of researching the ‘dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members’ (Berry, 2007, p. 543). An acculturation approach to the study of cultural consumer learning in schools offers a focus on attitudes of cultural groups towards the question of maintaining their consumption practices and orientations (maintain vs. give up) and the quality of the relationships they seek with other groups (good vs. indifferent). Four orientations can therefore be distinguished, for both the majority and the minority group (Berry, 2007) (see Figure 3). A closer examination of the congruency of minority and majority orientations and respective tensions could help to further elucidate preconditions conducive to informal consumer learning in school settings.

![Figure 3. Consumer acculturation in schools (adapted from Berry, 2007).](image)

**Discussion**

A more comprehensive approach to consumer learning and education in schools as developed in this article offers fruitful starting points for further empirical research, as well as for school practice and policy making. On the basis of the developed framework, three key cross-sectional challenges are suggested as an agenda for advancing consumer education in Europe.

**Surveying and Monitoring Educational Organisations’ COC**

There is urgent demand for empirical research into the different domains and aspects of educational organisations’ COC. Our understanding of consumer learning in school settings could
benefit greatly from research focusing on conflict lines, fractures, inconsistencies and ambiguities that shape the organisational COC and frame the consumer learning of its members. Schein, for example, emphasises the necessity to ‘discriminate carefully between those [norms and values] that are congruent with underlying assumptions and those that are, in effect, either rationalisations or aspirations for the future’ (Schein, 2004, p. 30). Hence, relevant research questions would be how espoused values match with underlying assumptions and visible artefacts, what is perceived as incongruent by whom, and how such (partial) incongruence is explained and rationalised. Methodologically, the different levels of cultural manifestations pose a challenge to empirical research, as they accommodate heterogeneous phenomena (from observable curricular activities to invisible tacit pedagogical assumptions) that differ in their visibility and accessibility. For the elaboration of a research design to reflect these different types of cultural manifestation and their dynamic and interactive relations, a combination of hypothesis testing and reconstructive approaches would seem most appropriate. The advancement of the COC framework for research purposes would be greatly furthered through the more explicit consideration of practices such as rituals (Islam & Zyphur, 2009) and of symbolic aspects (Karpferer, 1981) and their potential role in bridging and mediating between the levels of artefacts and assumptions (Hatch, 1993).

Re-focusing the Agenda of Consumer Education Policy, Praxis and Research in Europe

Educational responses to the consumption challenge in Europe have so far predominantly been analysed in a comparative perspective concerning policies and implementation schemes in place. The focus on the organisational level suggested by the framework developed in this article requires the focus of consumer education research in Europe to shift from input to process and output orientation. Instead of comparatively analysing different national policies and implementation schemes (as done in existing surveys [e.g. E-CONS Network, 2007; OECD, 2009]), it suggests making the object of inquiry the variances in educational organisations’ responses to the external institutional pressures exerted by such policies and implementation schemes (Scott, 2008; Kondra & Hurst, 2009). Several questions emerge from such a new perspective. For example, how do secondary schools respond to the inclusion of consumer education in the national curriculum (e.g. as in the UK), or, respectively, to the introduction of consumer education as a mandatory subject (e.g. as in Schleswig-Holstein)? Which teachers do actually include which consumer issues in which subjects? To what extent do the organisational actors have different interpretations about which educational objectives to pursue, and what inner-organisational disputes and conflicting practices arise from that? The recommendations of the OECD’s Committee on Consumer Policy cited above stress the need for consumer education programmes that are evidence-based and underpinned by empirical research. The framework of educational organisations’ COC provides an approach for an empirical investigation of schools as socialisation contexts that can inform the design of formal and informal consumer learning settings. For this to happen, more empirical research is needed on patterns of interaction between the educational organisations’ COC and students’ consumption-related learning outcomes (see below). In the research perspective proposed, the variety of approaches to consumer education taken in different European countries represents a precious source of varying policy treatments that educational organisations respond to. Research into organisation-based interpretations of these external frameworks promises to provide a better understanding not only of how schools socialise students as consumers, but also of how consumer and educational policy making on a European and national level translates into the formation and design of local learning settings in schools.

Finally, in addition to their implications in terms of future research, the domains of the framework address crucial fields of action for practical initiatives and thus provide a starting point for school development and reform initiatives. The review on consumer education praxis and policy in Europe reveals a strong preference for formal learning arrangements. The framework of educational organisations’ COC calls upon consumer educational policy to abandon such narrow focus on formal consumer education in favour of a broader perspective on the socialisation of consumers in schools. It calls for refocusing on the individual school as the ‘unit of change’ and for building the respective capacity in schools that allows organisational members to initiate and evaluate changes in their COC in whole-school approaches.
Besides the comparative analysis of the different levels, domains and aspects of educational organisations’ COC, another promising research perspective is emerging that concerns the interaction between the organisational context, its perception among (groups of) individuals and their consumer dispositions. From the perspective of organisational socialisation, such interaction processes between distinct configurations of a school’s COC and its members’ consumer knowledge, attitudes, preferences and identities present an important field for further research. A tantalising starting point can be seen in recent integrative work on organisational membership negotiation, which criticises the tendency of organisational socialisation research to overemphasise either organisational structure or individual action/agency and suggests a closer investigation into the reciprocity of communicative and interactive processes of socialising agents (e.g. senior teachers and students) and newcomers to the organisation (e.g. junior teachers and students) in producing, reproducing and transforming the school’s COC (Scott & Myers, 2010). Another issue is the socialisation of teachers into the dominant school culture, a culture which has been described as precarious and threatening. An example is provided by the conflicted situation of new teachers who feel urged to abandon their educational convictions, principles and beliefs in order to comply with ‘accepted modes of professional practice’ (Cherubini, 2009, p. 96) in the organisation.

Conclusion and Outlook

With the increasing importance of consumption and consumer socialisation as an educational issue and objective, consumer education research, practice and policy making are challenged to pursue new paths and form new alliances. The framework of educational organisations’ COC developed in this article and the implications for research and practice discussed propose new directions for scholars, policy-makers and practitioners in Europe that go beyond the often narrowly confined and conventional perspective on consumer education that prevails in current practices in consumer education in Europe and the EU’s CSP. School settings in which students learn are shaped by external demands and by the organisational actors’ responses to these demands. Consumer education research in a European perspective should carefully examine these interactions between consumer policy and educational policy making at the European, national and regional levels, and critically explore how the local responses of schools to these external demands shape the distinct configuration of formal and informal settings for consumer learning in the educational organisations’ COC.

Finally, for the success of the overarching goal of the EU’s CPS – one of empowering ‘citizens, as consumers, to make environmentally sustainable choices’ (European Commission, 2007, p. 3) - the so far fragmented consumer education practices and policies in Europe need to seek closer alliances with the emerging ‘new system of education’ (Lawn, 2011, p. 270) in Europe that is characterised by processes of standardisation. In order to make consumer education an essential part of this system and of each school’s performance orientations, standardisation of mutually agreed outcomes of consumer learning could be an important next step towards a policy space for a sustainable consumer education in Europe that research on and development of educational organisations’ COC can seek to contribute to. The imminent review of the EU’s CPS marks a welcome opportunity to give an impetus in that direction.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the colleagues and partners in the BINK project, as well as Dr Michael Pätzold and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article. Any remaining errors or misconceptions are, of course, the author’s responsibility.

References

Educational Organisations as ‘Cultures of Consumption’


607


Educational Organisations as ‘Cultures of Consumption’


DANIEL FISCHER works as a research fellow at the Institute of Environmental and Sustainability Communication (INFU) in the Faculty of Sustainability Sciences of the Leuphana University of
Daniel Fischer

Lüneburg. He is involved in the transdisciplinary research and development project BINK (Educational Institutions and Sustainable Consumption; see http://www.consumerculture.eu). He teaches and does research in the fields of education for sustainable development, sustainable consumption, sustainable school development and school/university culture. Correspondence: Daniel Fischer, Institute for Environmental and Sustainability Communication (INFU), Faculty of Sustainability, Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Scharnhorststr. 1, D-21335 Lüneburg, Germany (daniel.fischer@uni.leuphana.de).