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Original Article

Culture as a Catalyst: Managing Organisational Change in Educational Institutions

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Organisational culture shapes the heartbeat of educational institutions, influencing how leaders guide, staff adapt, and change initiatives succeed. This study explores the role of organisational culture as a catalyst in managing change within primary, secondary, and vocational schools in Gulu, Uganda. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document reviews from six purposively selected educational and cultural leaders. The findings reveal that leadership, mentoring, and culturally embedded rituals such as morning devotions and traditional dances serve as powerful mechanisms for transmitting values, shaping behaviour, and enhancing staff adaptation to change. Staff internalise culture through both formal and informal channels, while their responses to change are mediated by trust, teamwork, and cultural alignment. Strategically leveraging these cultural practices enhances resilience, engagement, and institutional adaptability. The study contributes to the literature by highlighting the interplay between indigenous culture and organisational change, providing actionable insights for leaders seeking contextually relevant approaches to managing change in resource-constrained and culturally rich educational environments.

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INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions are more than bricks and mortar; they are living ecosystems shaped by values, traditions, and collective behaviours. In Uganda, schools navigate a complex landscape of policy reforms, technological advancements, and community expectations, all of which place immense pressure on existing organisational culture. Yet, culture is not a static backdrop—it is a dynamic force that can either accelerate or impede change. Leaders, staff, and community stakeholders interact within these cultural frameworks, negotiating rituals, norms, and beliefs that influence how new initiatives are received and implemented.

This study explores how organisational culture acts as a catalyst for change in primary, secondary, and vocational schools in Gulu, Uganda. By examining leadership roles, staff internalisation of culture, and adaptive strategies, the research uncovers the mechanisms through which cultural practices, both formal, like policies and mentoring, and informal, such as morning devotions and traditional dances, shape institutional responses to change. In doing so, the study provides novel insights into the intersection of indigenous cultural values and organisational transformation, offering a blueprint for educational leaders seeking contextually relevant approaches to change management in resource-constrained environments.

Background of the Study

The notion of organisational culture emerged from management studies in the late 20th century and has since been applied across sectors, including education. According to Edgar H. Schein, culture consists of artefacts, espoused values and underlying assumptions that bind an organisation together (Schein, 2010). In the Ugandan education sector, historical reforms such

as the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) created shifts in institutional practices, leadership structures and resource allocation. These reforms placed pressure on schools' existing cultural norms, rituals, traditions, and authority structures to adapt to new expectations. As such, the historical trajectory of educational change in Uganda provides a backdrop to understanding how organisational culture has evolved (Turyahikayo et al., 2024).

This study is anchored in Schein's three-level model of organisational culture (artefacts, espoused values, basic assumptions) and draws on change management theory (e.g., John P. Kotter's eight-step model) to frame how culture interacts with change initiatives. Recent research underscores that a supportive culture enhances readiness and adaptability to change (Sharma, 2024). For example, a study of public organisations in Ethiopia found that constructive organisational culture significantly predicted change management success (Javaid et al., 2025). These theories guide the examination of culture as both a catalyst and a barrier in educational institutional change.

The key constructs of this study include: Organisational culture: Defined as the shared values, beliefs, norms and practices shaping behaviour within an institution (Zohriah et al., 2025). Organisational change: The process by which an institution adapts its structures, systems, behaviours or cultural norms in response to internal or external stimuli. Change management in educational institutions: The coordinated effort of leaders, staff, routines and culture to implement new initiatives (Korma Mesfin et al., 2022). Conceptually, the study posits that organisational culture influences how change is perceived, adopted and sustained; at the same time, change efforts may require cultural realignment (Javaid et al., 2025). In the education sector,

cultures characterised by collaboration, open communication, and flexibility are found to support digital-transformation initiatives (Tran & Nguyen, 2024).

In the Ugandan context, particularly within regions such as Gulu, educational institutions (primary, secondary, vocational) are subject to multiple pressures: government policy reforms, technological advances (e.g., new data systems), societal expectations of accountability, and community cultural norms (Turyahikayo et al., 2024). Within these settings, institutional leaders must navigate the interplay between traditional cultural practices (e.g., devotions, traditional dances, communal rituals) and modern change imperatives (e.g., digital record-keeping, performance management). In recent literature, Ugandan universities have been shown to struggle with low organisational effectiveness when their cultural dimensions (artefacts, espoused values, assumptions) are misaligned with strategic goals (Turyahikayo et al., 2024). This provides an important context for exploring how organisations in the K-12 and vocational sectors also experience culture and change dynamics.

Overall, organisational culture plays a pivotal role in shaping employee behaviour, guiding institutional values, and influencing adaptability to change. In educational institutions—where students, staff, and administrators interact, alignment between culture and change initiatives is critical for productivity, efficiency, and overall institutional development. Given the dynamic challenges facing educational institutions in Uganda (policy reforms, technology, community expectations), this study explores how culture serves as a catalyst in managing organisational change; specifically, how leaders leverage cultural values, beliefs, and practices to facilitate staff adaptation.

Statement of the Problem

In an ideal scenario, educational institutions would implement change initiatives such as new

curricula, data management systems, staffing reforms, and pedagogical innovations and achieve improved student outcomes, teacher performance, and institutional effectiveness. However, in practice, many such institutions face significant hurdles: resistance among staff, delays in uptake of new systems, low morale, misalignment between institutional culture and reform initiatives, poor communication, and lack of psychological and relational support. For example, in a study of educational institutions in Ethiopia, organisational dimensions of learning orientation, team orientation, and strategic direction significantly influenced organisational performance, but dimensions related to change were not always supported, which signals that culture affects change readiness (Korma Mesfin et al., 2022). In Uganda, research among public universities found that misalignment of cultural dimensions weakens organisational effectiveness (Turyahikayo et al., 2024).

Thus, the problem lies in understanding how organisational culture facilitates or hinders change in educational settings, particularly in contexts like Gulu, Uganda, so as to design interventions that improve alignment and outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

To examine how organisational culture influences the management of change in educational institutions.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore the current roles and responsibilities of school leaders in shaping culture and implementing change.
- To assess how staff internalise and learn organisational culture.
- To examine staff reactions to recent changes and identify challenges in adaptation.
- To explore strategies for leveraging culture to improve adaptation to future changes.

Research Questions

- How do school leaders perceive and enact their roles in shaping Organisational culture and facilitating change within educational institutions?
- How do staff learn about and internalise the institutional culture?
- How does existing culture influence staff reactions to organisational change?
- How do educational institutions and leaders employ strategies to leverage Organisational culture for improving staff adaptation to future changes?

Significance of the Study

The study holds significance for multiple stakeholder groups: Policy-makers: Understanding the role culture plays can help design reform policies that factor in cultural readiness and alignment. Policy implementers / educational administrators: Insights into leadership roles, cultural transmission mechanisms, and adaptation challenges enable better-designed change processes. Future researchers: The study contributes empirical evidence on culture-change interplay in East African educational contexts, helping bridge literature gaps (Zohriah et al., 2025). Educational institutions: Findings can guide institutional efforts to realign culture, strengthen communication, professional development, and staff readiness for change initiatives.

Scope of the Study

The study examines organisational culture, leadership roles, staff internalisation of culture, reactions to change, and adaptation strategies in educational institutions. The research is situated in northern Uganda, encompassing primary schools, secondary schools, and vocational institutions in the region. The empirical data reflect the period up to and including 2025, with participant experiences within that timeframe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Organisational culture provides the foundation for understanding how educational institutions function and respond to change. It encompasses shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices that guide employee behaviour, decision-making, and interactions within the institution (Schein, 2010). In schools, organisational culture manifests through teaching methods, disciplinary procedures, interpersonal relationships, and leadership practices. Understanding the theoretical underpinnings of culture and change is crucial to explaining how educational leaders leverage cultural elements to facilitate adaptation among staff. This study draws on Schein's Organisational Culture Model, Kotter's Change Management Theory, Lewin's Change Model, and Transformational Leadership Theory to provide a comprehensive framework for analysing the interplay between culture and change in educational institutions.

Schein's Organisational Culture Model is widely acknowledged as foundational for understanding organisational culture. Schein (2010) conceptualises culture in three levels: artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions. Artefacts are the visible and tangible aspects of culture, such as rituals, dress codes, and ceremonies. Espoused values refer to the organisation's stated beliefs and values, while underlying assumptions are the deeply ingrained, often unconscious beliefs that guide behaviour. Recent studies in educational contexts (Zohriah et al., 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2024) show that artefacts and espoused values influence teacher behaviour, staff cohesion, and responsiveness to change initiatives. For instance, rituals such as staff devotions or traditional ceremonies can serve as visible reminders of institutional values. However, a gap exists in applying Schein's model to primary, secondary, and vocational schools in Uganda, particularly concerning culturally embedded practices that interact with modern educational reforms.

Kotter's Change Management Theory complements Schein's model by providing a structured approach for implementing change within institutions. Kotter (1996) proposes an eight-step model, including establishing urgency, creating guiding coalitions, and embedding new practices into organisational culture. Empirical research demonstrates that schools with well-aligned cultures are more successful in implementing changes, particularly when leaders model the desired behaviours and engage staff in participatory decision-making (Shibiru & Bekele, 2024; Engida et al., 2022). Nonetheless, much of this research has been conducted in higher education or Western contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how Kotter's principles operate in culturally diverse Ugandan schools where community traditions and local norms play a significant role.

Lewin's Change Model offers additional insights into staff adaptation during change initiatives. Lewin (1947) describes a three-stage process: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Unfreezing involves preparing staff for change by challenging existing behaviours, while changing represents the adoption of new practices, and refreezing entails embedding these practices into the organisational culture to ensure sustainability. Studies in educational settings (Kasbun & Osman, 2024; Journal of Educational Change, 2024) indicate that successful change often depends on embedding new practices into existing cultural frameworks, such as through rituals, peer mentoring, and professional learning communities. However, there is limited research on how refreezing interacts with culturally unique practices in African educational institutions, particularly with respect to local leadership hierarchies and community involvement.

Transformational Leadership Theory highlights the critical role of leaders in shaping organisational culture and guiding staff through change. Bass and Avolio (1994) argue that transformational leaders influence behaviour through idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and

individualised consideration. In schools, transformational leadership fosters trust, engagement, and commitment, making staff more receptive to change (Zepeda et al., 2022; Etomes et al., 2025). Leaders who actively model desired behaviours and involve staff in decision-making help embed cultural values into institutional practices. Nevertheless, there is a gap in examining how transformational leadership interacts with culturally specific leadership structures, such as traditional or community-based authorities, in Ugandan educational institutions.

An integrated theoretical framework combining Schein's culture model, Kotter's change steps, Lewin's adaptation process, and transformational leadership provides a holistic lens for this study. Schein's model facilitates an understanding of cultural layers within schools, Kotter and Lewin explain the processes of introducing and institutionalising change, while transformational leadership emphasises the role of leaders in operationalising culture to support adaptation. Recent studies suggest that such integration is crucial for understanding how cultural alignment affects change management outcomes in schools (Zohriah et al., 2025; Shibiru & Bekele, 2024). However, few studies apply this combined framework specifically in Ugandan primary, secondary, or vocational schools.

The justification for adopting these theories lies in their complementary strengths. Schein's model provides a culturally sensitive lens for understanding deeply rooted beliefs and norms, while Kotter's and Lewin's models explain procedural and psychological aspects of change. Transformational leadership highlights the human dimension, emphasising the role of leaders in motivating and guiding staff. By integrating these perspectives, the study can capture both structural and cultural influences on organisational change, offering a nuanced understanding of staff adaptation in educational settings.

Despite their utility, gaps remain in the application of these theories in culturally embedded and resource-constrained educational

institutions. Most existing studies focus on corporate or higher education settings, neglecting the unique dynamics of Ugandan schools, where local traditions, community structures, and limited resources intersect with formal organisational processes. This gap underscores the need for empirical research that examines how organisational culture and leadership practices interact to support or hinder change in such contexts.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework provides a solid foundation for examining the role of organisational culture in managing change in educational institutions. By integrating insights from Schein, Kotter, Lewin, and transformational leadership theory, the study can address the interplay between cultural values, leadership practices, and staff adaptation. Addressing the identified gaps will contribute to both theoretical and practical knowledge, informing strategies for effective change management in Ugandan schools and similar contexts.

Concept of Organisational Culture

Organisational culture has been widely defined as the shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices that shape behaviour within an institution (Zohriah et al., 2025). These cultural dimensions can manifest in artefacts (observable practices and rituals), espoused values (what the institution says it stands for), and basic underlying assumptions (deep-rooted beliefs) (Schein, 2010). In educational settings, this means the way teachers dress, the rituals of devotion, the style of staff meetings, how decisions are taken, and how students and staff interact.

In recent studies, Saparuddin & Sidik (2024) found that organisational culture in educational institutions directly influences learning environments, staff-student interactions, and institutional identity. Their review indicated that institutions with a strong and aligned culture were more inclusive and adaptive to change. This suggests that culture is not only descriptive but

prescriptive: it helps shape what an institution becomes.

Empirical research in Uganda by Turyahikayo et al. (2024) found that organisational culture (specifically espoused beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions) had a significant positive effect on organisational effectiveness in public universities. Their quantitative study revealed that without alignment of culture with institutional goals, performance suffered. Hence, culture matters for outcomes.

Yet, conceptual ambiguity remains. Some studies emphasise artefacts and rituals, others emphasise values and beliefs, and still others focus on assumptions. Zohriah et al. (2025) emphasise the need for an integrated framework that recognises all three layers, but note that many studies only address one layer. This is a gap: in many schooling contexts in Uganda (and similar), the underlying assumptions are seldom examined.

Another gap is in context-specific adaptation: what constitutes “culture” in a Ugandan primary or vocational institution may differ from commercial or Western models. For example, traditional dances, devotions, and community service practices – these cultural artefacts have local meaning which global literature rarely captures. Saparuddin and Sidik (2024) call for more context-embedded studies.

In addition, the dynamic nature of culture, how culture evolves over time, and interacts with change initiatives, is less studied. Many studies treat culture as static. Yet in educational institutions undergoing change (new data systems, new leadership roles), culture may shift. This gap suggests longitudinal or change-sensitive culture studies are required.

Moreover, measurement issues persist: many instruments developed in business settings are applied to education without modification. The result is that what is measured may not reflect the true culture of a school. Turyahikayo et al. (2024)

caution that this may distort findings in Uganda's context.

Finally, the link between culture and individual behaviour (teacher behaviour, student behaviour) is less elaborated. While general correlations exist (e.g., culture, performance), the mechanisms (how culture influences behaviour through, e.g., role modelling, mentoring, rituals) require more investigation. This gap is critical for your study of culture as a catalyst for change.

Culture and Change Management

Organisational change is inevitable in educational institutions that respond to internal pressures (e.g., staff turnover, curriculum reform) and external pressures (government policy, technology, globalisation). The literature shows that culture plays a pivotal role in how institutions manage change: when culture is aligned with change, adaptation is smoother; when misaligned, resistance emerges (Shibiru & Bekele, 2024).

For example, Engida et al. (2022) found in Ethiopian public organisations that change leadership had a positive effect on employee readiness to change, and organisational culture mediated that effect. This implies that culture acts as a bridge between leadership and change outcomes.

In the education sector, Korma Mesfin et al. (2022) studied educational institutions in Ethiopia and found that dimensions of culture (organisational learning orientation, team orientation, strategic direction) significantly impacted performance, but the "creating change" dimension was weakly supported. This suggests that many institutions maintain a culture oriented towards stability rather than change.

Another study in Kuwait during COVID-19 found that the predominant culture types (hierarchy and market) supported readiness for eLearning changes, but research on other culture types (clan, adhocracy) was lacking (Al-Shamali et al., 2022). This highlights that different cultural types may influence change differently, and contexts matter.

Nevertheless, gaps remain: firstly, the majority of studies focus on higher education or public organisations; K-12 schools and vocational institutions are less represented. Secondly, the mechanisms by which culture influences change adoption (e.g., via trust, psychological safety, communication) are often under-examined.

Thirdly, most studies adopt a quantitative approach; qualitative data on staff perceptions of culture-change interplay (especially in African contexts) remain limited. That is a gap a study is going to fill. Fourthly, few studies explore how cultural rituals (traditional dances, devotions) affect change adaptation, which is relevant in culturally rich contexts like Uganda. Moreover, the temporal dimension (how culture adapts during change, how change impacts culture) is underdeveloped. Many studies treat change as an event, not a process. Longitudinal perspectives are scarce. Finally, there is limited attention on how culture supports change beyond technology (e.g., behavioural, structural, resource changes) in educational institutions. Thus, your study addressing broader change initiatives (data systems, leadership restructuring) is relevant.

Leadership and Culture in Educational Institutions

Leadership is widely acknowledged as a key driver of culture and change in educational institutions. A recent review (Zepeda et al., 2022) emphasised that school leaders shape culture through teacher voice, agency, and professional collaboration. In their study, Plaku and Leka (2025) argue that leaders must intentionally shape culture rather than assume it will evolve spontaneously.

Research in diverse contexts shows that transformational, distributed, and instructional leadership styles foster a culture more open to change. For instance, Etomes et al. (2025) found that transformational leadership significantly enhanced sustainable productivity in higher education in Cameroon, mediated by organisational culture. This underscores

leadership's role in leveraging culture for performance.

In schools, leadership practices such as inclusive decision-making, mentoring, role modelling, and open communication are associated with healthier cultures and greater change readiness (Shibiru & Bekele, 2024). Leaders who “walk the talk” and align policy with culture foster trust and commitment.

Yet leadership-culture studies in education also reveal gaps. Many focus on leadership theory but less on how leaders operationalise culture in daily rituals, interactions, and non-instructional domains (e.g., devotions, traditional dances). This gap is particularly relevant in culturally embedded contexts.

Another gap is the over-emphasis on formal leadership positions; less is known about how informal leaders (peer mentors, senior teachers) influence culture and change. Also, a few studies examine how community or cultural leaders (e.g., local traditional structures) interface with school culture and change. Your inclusion of the Prime Minister of Acoli Ker-Kal Kwaro illustrates this interface.

Additionally, there is limited research on how leadership and culture interplay when multiple stakeholder groups (secondary, primary, vocational sectors) co-exist in change processes. Comparative studies are rare.

Finally, the literature shows scarce attention to how leaders address cultural conflict during change when the existing culture is at odds with new change imperatives. Understanding how leaders manage this conflict is critical for change success.

Employee Adaptation to Change

Staff adaptation to organisational change is a critical factor in successful change management. Studies show that psychological factors such as fear of the unknown, loss of autonomy, stress, and

perceived competence impact how staff respond to change (Kasbun & Osman, 2024). A strong, supportive culture reduces resistance and enhances adaptation. For example, in the study of Kuwaiti universities, Al-Shamali et al. (2022) found that organisational culture types influenced academics' readiness and behavioural intention to implement eLearning changes, which underscores that culture is linked with individual behavioural outcomes.

In educational settings, Teacher participation in culture transformation has been shown to enhance adaptation to change. Teachers' perceptions of their opportunity to contribute to school culture were significantly associated with their willingness to support change (Journal of Educational Change, 2024). This illustrates the role of agency in staff adaptation. Nevertheless, adaptation research reveals multiple gaps: first, empirical studies focusing on vocational and primary school staff adaptation to culture-driven change are scant. Most focus on higher education. Second, the literature often emphasises technological change and less on structural or cultural change, yet your data show changes in rituals, leadership structures, etc. Third, few studies unpack the mediation role of culture between leadership and adaptation in schools.

Another gap is the longitudinal tracking of adaptation, how staff move from initial resistance to acceptance over time, and how culture supports or hinders this journey. Qualitative narratives of staff experience are also limited. Further, cultural change and adaptation in resource-constrained contexts (such as many Ugandan schools) are under-explored. Understanding how limited resources affect adaptation is needed.

Moreover, research often generalises staff as a unit; differences among roles (headteachers, counsellors, vocational principals) are rarely distinguished. This gap is important given the varied roles in your data. Lastly, the influence of local/traditional cultural practices (e.g., traditional

dances, devotions) on adaptation has barely been studied. This is a rich vein for research in Uganda.

Synthesis of Literature and Identification of Gaps

The literature on organisational culture, change management, leadership, and staff adaptation provides strong evidence that culture is a central factor in change success. Studies have found that a culture aligned with institutional goals, combined with effective leadership, enhances readiness to change and performance (Turyahikayo et al., 2024; Engida et al., 2022). Moreover, staff adaptation is better when culture is participatory, open, supportive, and inclusive (Kasbun & Osman, 2024; Journal of Educational Change, 2024). However, several gaps remain that your study can address. First, most research centres on higher education; K-12 and vocational institutions (especially in Uganda) remain under-researched. Second, many studies treat culture as static rather than dynamic; your context of institutions undergoing change (leadership shifts, data systems, ritual changes) offers an opportunity to explore culture in flux.

Third, the cultural dimension of rituals, devotions, indigenous traditions, and community interface is seldom featured in mainstream literature but is highly relevant in Ugandan schools. Fourth, there is limited qualitative work on how staff perceive and negotiate culture during change, especially in resource-constrained settings. Your data with direct participant quotes and coded roles enriches this.

Fifth, the intersection of multiple roles (secondary, vocational, and community leadership) and how they experience culture and change is rarely examined. Sixth, the temporal sequence of adaptation (from resistance to acceptance) and how culture supports this journey is not well documented. Seventh, measurement and operationalisation of culture in schooling contexts often rely on business models not always fully suitable. Finally, the studies seldom examine culture's role in non-technological change (e.g.,

leadership structure, rituals, practices), which your study highlights.

By addressing these gaps, your research on the role of culture as a catalyst in managing organisational change in Ugandan educational institutions can make a substantive conceptual and empirical contribution.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This section presents the methodology adopted to explore the role of organisational culture in facilitating change within educational institutions in northern Uganda. The section details the research philosophy, approach, design, population, sampling procedures, data collection techniques, data analysis methods, quality control measures, ethical considerations, and limitations and delimitations. The methodology was carefully selected to capture rich, context-specific insights into how institutional culture influences staff behaviour and adaptability during change initiatives.

Research Philosophy

The study adopted a constructivist-interpretivist research philosophy, which emphasises understanding social phenomena from the perspectives of those experiencing them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This philosophy is appropriate for examining organisational culture because culture is socially constructed and shaped by interactions, beliefs, and shared values within institutions (Etomes et al., 2025). By using this philosophy, the study recognises that multiple realities exist and seeks to understand how educational leaders interpret, enact, and respond to cultural norms and change processes in their institutions. This philosophical stance justifies the use of qualitative methods, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and perceptions.

Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was employed, as it prioritises depth of understanding over numerical generalisation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research is suitable for exploring complex social phenomena such as organisational culture and change because it captures meanings, experiences, and attitudes that are context-dependent (Shibiru & Bekele, 2024). This approach allowed the researcher to explore how leaders perceive, communicate, and model culture, and how staff internalise these cultural practices to adapt to change. The qualitative approach also facilitates understanding of the psychological, social, and cultural factors that influence staff reactions, which would be difficult to quantify meaningfully.

Research Design

A case study design was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of organisational culture and its role in managing change within multiple educational institutions (Yin, 2018). Case studies are particularly suitable for studying phenomena in their real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon (organisational culture) and context (educational institutions) are not clearly defined. By focusing on primary schools, secondary schools, vocational schools, and community cultural structures in Gulu, the study could identify both common patterns and context-specific variations in cultural practices and change management strategies (Turyahikayo et al., 2024). The case study design also allows for the use of multiple data sources, enhancing the richness and credibility of the findings.

Study Population

The study population comprised educational leaders and community cultural leaders responsible for shaping culture and implementing change. Participants included the Director of Studies of a secondary school (R01), Deputy Headteacher of a secondary school (R02),

Headteacher of a primary school (R03), Counsellor in a vocational school (VCR), Principal of a vocational school (VCP), and Prime Minister of the Acoli Ker-Kal Kwaro Palwo (VCK). Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants had direct experience with culture management and change initiatives, representing diverse roles, responsibilities, and levels of experience (Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach was justified because these leaders provide first-hand insights into how culture influences institutional change, making their perspectives critical for the study.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

The study used a small, purposeful sample of six participants. While this sample may appear limited, qualitative research prioritises depth of information over breadth, and small sample sizes are justified when participants have rich, relevant experiences (Guest et al., 2020). Data saturation guided the final sample size, ensuring that no new themes emerged during interviews. Criterion-based selection ensured inclusion of participants who were directly involved in leadership, culture management, and change implementation. This sampling procedure was appropriate because it focused on participants most likely to provide detailed and meaningful insights relevant to the study's objectives.

Data Collection Techniques

To ensure triangulation and enhance credibility, multiple data collection techniques were employed, including semi-structured interviews, observations, and document review. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their experiences in depth while providing flexibility to probe emerging issues (Flick, 2018). Observations of rituals, devotions, staff interactions, and meetings provided direct evidence of cultural practices, complementing self-reported data. Document review, including institutional policies, notices, and records of rituals, enabled corroboration of observed behaviours and participant accounts. The

combination of these techniques strengthened the study's validity by providing multiple perspectives on the phenomena under investigation.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) approach. This method involved coding data into categories aligned with the study objectives—leadership roles, staff internalisation of culture, reactions to change, and strategies for leveraging culture. Themes were generated inductively from participants' responses and observations, allowing the data to speak for itself while being guided by research objectives. Thematic analysis is suitable for qualitative research as it allows patterns and meanings to emerge systematically, providing insights into both manifest and latent aspects of culture and change (Guest et al., 2020).

Quality Control

Quality control measures were employed to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of findings. Triangulation of interviews, observations, and document review enhanced validity (Flick, 2018). Member checking allowed participants to verify the accuracy of transcripts and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Zohriah et al., 2025). An audit trail documented all steps of data collection and analysis, supporting transparency and replication. Peer debriefing further reduced researcher bias, ensuring that themes reflected participants' perspectives rather than preconceptions. These measures were essential for maintaining methodological rigour in a qualitative study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly observed (Israel & Hay, 2020). Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks before

providing written consent. Anonymity was maintained through participant coding (e.g., R01, VCP), and data were securely stored on password-protected devices. Participants were free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Additionally, ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Gulu University. These measures ensured that the study respected participants' rights while maintaining the integrity of the research process.

Limitations and Delimitations

The study acknowledged certain limitations, including potential subjectivity in participants' self-reported experiences and limited generalizability due to the small, context-specific sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Time constraints limited the ability to capture long-term changes in culture. Delimitations included focusing exclusively on educational institutions and local cultural structures in Gulu, and on leaders directly involved in culture and change management. While these delimitations narrowed the study's scope, they ensured depth and relevance by concentrating on participants most knowledgeable about the phenomenon.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Introduction

This chapter presents, analyses, and interprets the data collected from semi-structured interviews, observations, and document review. The aim was to explore the role of organisational culture in facilitating or constraining change within educational institutions in Gulu, Uganda. The findings are organised according to the study objectives: (1) leadership roles in shaping culture and implementing change, (2) mechanisms for staff learning and internalisation of culture, (3) staff reactions and adaptation to change, and (4) strategies for leveraging culture to improve future adaptation. Themes emerging from the three instruments are triangulated to ensure validity and depth of interpretation.

Leadership Roles in Culture and Change

Leadership emerged as a central driver of organisational culture and change. Leaders not only set institutional expectations but also model behaviours that embed cultural norms into everyday practice.

Interviews with key participants highlighted that leadership is central to shaping culture and facilitating change. R01 (Director of Studies, Secondary School) emphasised, *“Leadership is about mentoring staff, enforcing policies, and ensuring the school operates within the expected ethical standards”* (16th October 2025). Similarly, VCK (Prime Minister, Acoli Ker-Kal Kwaro Palwo) noted the cultural dimension of leadership: *“Our leaders not only supervise but model cultural values through participation in rituals and community activities”*.

Observations supported these statements. Leaders were consistently punctual, engaged actively in teaching and administrative duties, and supervised mentorship sessions. Morning and evening devotions, collective problem-solving sessions, and routine inspections reflected structured leadership engagement in reinforcing institutional culture. Document reviews showed policies emphasising ethical conduct, teamwork, and adherence to cultural norms.

Leadership emerges as both a formal and symbolic agent of culture. Leaders communicate expectations through supervision, mentoring, and role modelling, consistent with findings by Mensah et al. (2022) and Opoku and Boateng (2023), who highlight the influence of leadership behaviours on staff adaptation. In the Ugandan context, this study uniquely demonstrates how indigenous cultural practices, such as traditional rituals and devotions, are embedded in leadership roles, extending previous literature that largely emphasises formal policy implementation.

Mechanisms for Staff Learning and Internalisation of Culture

Staff acquire and internalise organisational culture through formal and informal mechanisms, shaping their attitudes and behaviours toward change.

Participants highlighted multiple mechanisms through which staff internalise organisational culture. R02 (Deputy Headteacher, Secondary School) explained, *“New staff are oriented through mentoring, daily devotion, and observing senior colleagues; this helps them understand the values and expectations of the institution”*. VCR (Counsellor, Vocational School) added, *“Counselling sessions, team-building activities, and participation in rituals encourage staff to adopt the cultural norms”*.

Observations revealed that informal mechanisms, such as traditional dances, morning devotions, and collective problem-solving sessions, were integral to learning culture. Documents reviewed, including policy manuals and training schedules, reflected formal mechanisms like structured orientation programs and CPD sessions. Staff learning occurs through both formal (training, policies) and informal (rituals, mentoring, participation) mechanisms, consistent with Adebayo & Ogunleye (2021). This study contributes to the literature by showing how indigenous cultural practices serve as informal yet highly effective mechanisms for internalising values and aligning behaviours in educational institutions. The gap addressed here is the empirical link between these cultural rituals and actual adaptation to change, which has been underexplored in African educational contexts.

Staff Reactions and Adaptation to Change

Staff responses to change vary based on trust, prior exposure to flexible practices, and cultural alignment, influencing the success of change initiatives.

Interviews revealed diverse reactions to change. R03 (Headteacher, Primary School) observed, *“Some staff embrace change willingly because they trust leadership, but others are hesitant, fearing increased workload or unfamiliar methods”*. VCP (Principal, Vocational School) noted, *“Resistance often shows in subtle ways, like absenteeism or passive participation in meetings”*.

Observations confirmed these reactions. Staff engagement varied during new initiatives, such as data management transitions or policy shifts. Some fully participated in problem-solving sessions, while others showed minimal interaction. Documents indicated structured mechanisms, reward systems for compliance and counselling interventions for resistant staff aimed at addressing these reactions.

Staff reactions are influenced by trust, teamwork, prior exposure to flexible routines, and cultural alignment. Positive, flexible cultures encourage engagement and adaptation, whereas rigid or poorly communicated norms contribute to resistance. These findings align with Kotter’s (2016) framework, emphasising communication, participation, and reinforcement in change management. This study uniquely highlights the interaction of cultural norms and psychological factors in the Ugandan educational context, adding depth to existing literature on staff adaptation.

Strategies for Leveraging Culture for Future Adaptation

Embedding organisational culture into change strategies strengthens adaptability, resilience, and staff motivation.

Participants proposed multiple strategies to leverage culture for change. R01 emphasised, *“Continuous training, open communication, and mentoring are key to embedding cultural values and supporting staff during transitions”*. VCK added, *“Including traditional rituals and*

devotions in the change process makes staff feel part of the institution and improves acceptance”.

Observations revealed that daily briefings, team-building sessions, and mentoring programs actively reinforced cultural values. Document reviews highlighted structured CPD programs, policy updates, and recognition systems that encourage adaptability and alignment with cultural expectations.

Embedding culture into change strategies enhances staff resilience, motivation, and performance, consistent with Mensah et al. (2022) and Shibiru and Bekele (2024). The study contributes by explicitly linking cultural rituals and local practices to organisational adaptability, filling a gap in the literature concerning culturally embedded strategies for change in African educational institutions.

Summary

Triangulation of interviews, observations, and document reviews indicates that organisational culture is a critical factor in managing change. Leadership, communication, and role modelling transmit and reinforce culture, while structured programs and informal rituals support staff learning. Reactions to change are mediated by cultural alignment, trust, and teamwork, and embedding cultural practices into change strategies enhances staff adaptability. These findings both confirm and extend prior literature, highlighting the unique role of indigenous cultural practices in the Ugandan educational context (Adebayo & Ogunleye, 2021; Kotter, 2016; Mensah et al., 2022).

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter discusses the study findings in relation to the reviewed literature, highlighting similarities and divergences with previous studies. It also outlines contributions to theory and practice, draws conclusions based on the findings,

and provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, implementers, and future researchers. Participant voices are integrated to provide authenticity and contextual depth.

Leadership and Organisational Culture

The study revealed that leadership is central in shaping organisational culture and guiding change. Participants emphasised the importance of modelling values, mentoring staff, and enforcing institutional norms. R01 (Director of Studies) stated, *“Leadership is not only about supervising but demonstrating values in every action; staff learn culture by watching leaders”* (16th October 2025).

These findings align with Schein (2017) and Kotter (2016), who underscore that leaders transmit culture through role modelling and strategic guidance. Unlike some prior studies in Western contexts, this study shows that in Ugandan educational institutions, leaders embed cultural rituals such as morning devotions and traditional dances into daily practice, thereby directly influencing staff adaptation. This adds to the literature by highlighting the interplay between leadership and indigenous cultural practices as a unique driver of change.

Staff Internalisation of Culture

Staff internalisation occurred through mentoring, role modelling, active participation in rituals, and counselling. VCR (Counsellor, Vocational School) noted, *“When new staff participate in devotions and traditional activities, they begin to understand the institution’s values without formal instruction”*.

These findings resonate with Adebayo and Ogunleye (2021), who highlighted the effectiveness of formal and informal mechanisms in embedding culture. However, the current study extends this understanding by demonstrating how indigenous practices function as informal yet powerful mechanisms for culture acquisition in

African educational contexts, filling a critical gap in empirical literature.

Staff Reactions and Adaptation to Change

Reactions to change varied among staff. Some demonstrated enthusiasm and engagement, while others exhibited subtle resistance due to fear of uncertainty or loss of autonomy. R03 (Headteacher, Primary School) reflected, *“Some staff adapt quickly because they trust leadership and feel included, but others hesitate when routines change”*.

Observations confirmed these patterns, showing differential participation in new initiatives like digital record-keeping. These results corroborate Mensah et al. (2022), who argue that trust and communication reduce resistance. Additionally, Kotter’s (2016) framework on change management is reinforced, emphasising the need for clear communication and participatory processes. The study contributes uniquely by showing how cultural alignment and psychological factors intersect in Ugandan schools to influence adaptation differently than in previously studied contexts.

Strategies for Leveraging Culture for Future Adaptation

Participants proposed strategies such as open communication, continuous learning, teamwork, and the integration of cultural rituals. VCK (Prime Minister, Acoli Ker-Kal Kwaro Palwo) stated, *“When rituals and devotions are part of change initiatives, staff feel more engaged and less resistant”*.

Observations and document reviews confirmed that structured CPD programs, mentoring, and reward systems reinforce cultural values and facilitate adaptation. This finding aligns with Shibiru & Bekele (2024), who emphasise embedding culture into change strategies to enhance resilience. The study adds to the literature by explicitly linking cultural rituals to

organisational adaptability, an area previously underexplored in African education research.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The study confirms global literature on leadership, communication, and staff engagement as critical for effective change (Kotter, 2016; Mensah et al., 2022). However, it differs by emphasising indigenous cultural rituals as central to organisational culture in Ugandan educational institutions, highlighting a unique contextual dimension not widely addressed in prior research.

Contributions of the Study

Theoretical Contribution

The study extends Schein's (2017) organisational culture theory by integrating culturally specific rituals and spiritual practices. It demonstrates that culture is not only expressed through formal policies but also through daily practices and local traditions, highlighting the significance of contextualised approaches in facilitating change.

Contribution to Existing Body of Knowledge

This study enriches knowledge on change management by empirically demonstrating that culture acts as both a facilitator and a barrier. By providing evidence from Uganda, it underscores how leadership, mentoring, communication, and cultural rituals influence adaptability. It bridges gaps in African educational research, where the interaction between indigenous culture and organisational change has been underexplored.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that organisational culture is a critical determinant of successful change in educational institutions. Leadership emerged as a central factor, with leaders shaping culture through modelling values, mentoring staff, and enforcing institutional norms. Effective leadership goes beyond policy implementation and encompasses embodying the institution's cultural and ethical standards.

Staff internalisation of culture occurs through a combination of formal and informal mechanisms, including mentoring, role modelling, participation in rituals, and counselling sessions. These processes facilitate alignment between individual behaviours and institutional expectations, fostering adaptability. Cultural practices embedded in daily routines, such as devotions and traditional activities, serve as informal learning opportunities that enhance staff understanding of institutional values.

Staff reactions to change were influenced by trust, prior exposure to flexible routines, and team collaboration. While some staff demonstrated enthusiasm and active engagement, others exhibited hesitation or passive resistance due to fear or uncertainty. This illustrates the interplay between cultural and psychological factors in shaping responses to organisational change, highlighting that adaptive capacity is strengthened when cultural values are actively reinforced and communicated.

Finally, strategies leveraging culture, including continuous learning, open communication, mentoring, teamwork, and integration of rituals, enhance resilience and facilitate successful adaptation. Culturally embedded practices act as motivational and integrative tools that support staff engagement and reduce resistance. Overall, effective change management in Ugandan educational institutions requires alignment between formal policies and informal cultural practices, ensuring that organisational transformation is sustainable and contextually relevant.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, several recommendations are proposed for policymakers, educational leaders, and future researchers.

Policymakers should recognise the significance of cultural practices in shaping organisational change and integrate such practices into national educational frameworks. Policies should

encourage leaders to incorporate indigenous values and rituals into school management practices, enhancing staff engagement and adaptability. Furthermore, continuous professional development programs should emphasise leadership, communication, and cultural sensitivity to equip school leaders with the necessary skills for effective change management.

For educational leaders and policy implementers, both formal and informal mechanisms should be utilised to embed organisational culture. Structured mentoring programs, daily devotions, team-building rituals, and counselling sessions should be strategically employed to reinforce cultural values and facilitate adaptation to change. Open communication channels must be strengthened to build trust, reduce uncertainty, and foster inclusive decision-making, as staff are more likely to embrace change when they feel supported. Additionally, implementing reward and recognition systems can motivate staff, reinforce positive behaviours, and align actions with desired cultural practices, creating an enabling environment for continuous improvement.

Future researchers are encouraged to explore the long-term effects of culturally embedded practices on organisational change through longitudinal studies. Further studies could investigate the impact of specific indigenous rituals on staff performance, engagement, and resilience across different educational settings. Comparative studies between regions or countries would also be valuable in understanding how cultural contexts influence the effectiveness of change management strategies. Such research would expand the theoretical and practical understanding of the role of culture in organisational adaptation and contribute to a more nuanced, globally informed discourse on educational leadership.

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