Chapter 3

Values, Culture and Context

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Abstract This chapter presents our conception of culture for school development, including broader cultural aims and humanistic values of education for an increasingly multicultural society reflected in the micro-organizational culture of schools and the sub-culture of the leadership team. Specifically, drawing on the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) research, related studies, and education theory, we defined culture as the values, beliefs and norms of behavior embedded within the individual, the leadership team, the organization, and the larger community. The balance of the chapter presents application of theory and practice in the Arizona project (AZiLDR) as well as lessons learned. The chapter illustrates the critical importance of culture to readiness for school development. Often, during the project, teams were at different stages of readiness, resulting in the need to spend time building and solidifying the culture. In schools with less readiness, we found the diffusion process to progress much more slowly. We saw these schools existing in the Zone of Uncertainty much longer. We describe our process to develop school culture through leadership teams, using the AZiLDR delivery system of institutes, regional meetings and on-site coaching. Example case studies and activities are provided.

Keywords School culture · Human perspective · Organizational perspective

“Definitely at the start of this project, I would say we were pretty dysfunctional. We’d had 15 principals in the last 16 years...some teachers were ready to go but were still teaching. We had newbies who would last a year and then go. The kids, we have hard workers and we have kids who have zero GPAs...90% Hispanic, Latino. Part of the population comes from Mexico and into the United States for their education. Viably, it isn’t like a hometown thing.

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It's like a split...I would say probably 60% of our kids are bilingual. Then the others are bi-illiterate. where they speak Spanglish." -Principal

This chapter presents our conception of culture for school development, including broader cultural aims and humanistic values of education for an increasingly multicultural society reflected in the micro organizational culture of schools and the sub-culture of the leadership team. In this chapter, we discuss our understanding of culture that we developed from our work with AZILDR, ongoing study of theoretical traditions and other empirical research. The balance of the chapter presents application of theory and practice in the Arizona project (AZILDR) as well as lessons learned.

Culture Defined in School Development

In order to better serve increasingly diverse students (with differing home and national cultures) in our schools, we see the need to define culture from a human (educational) as well as an organizational standpoint. Specifically, we considered sociology, education theory and leadership research as well as our experiences from facilitating school culture development. Thus, we define culture as the values, beliefs, and norms of behavior embedded within the individual, the leadership team, the organization, and the larger community.

In sociology, culture often refers to *the cumulative deposit* of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes and religion by a group of people that (consciously and unconsciously) affects how people think and act (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990) or the ways in which the *organizational* culture influences how people think, feel and act. Leading leadership scholars agree and add that without a strong, positive culture, schools flounder and die. Based on their own research, Peterson and Deal (2002) and Fullan (2001) argue that culture is characterized by norms, values and beliefs that underlie thinking and is manifested through symbols and artifacts, stories that communicate meaning and herald values, a cultural network, heroes and heroines, and rituals, traditions and ceremonies. Further, Peterson and Deal (2002) note how these elements of culture can become toxic, featuring negative values and beliefs, a spiritually fragmented sense of purpose, negative and destructive relationships, heroes that are anti-heroic or negative, and few positive rituals, traditions or ceremonies to develop a sense of community and hopefulness.

Across the cases from ISSPP and related leadership literature, successful schools exhibited positive school cultures conducive to continuous school development work (Day & Sammons, 2013). There is evidence across 27 countries and almost 200 case studies that schools have a more positive culture when positively influenced by school leadership. Principals worked to build trust, shared values and a shared vision, thereby improving relationships and job satisfaction. Studies have also shown the opposite; inconsistent behavior, lack of trust and a work-and non-supportive approach from the principal produces a negative school culture and climate (Leithwood & Strauss, 2009). In sum, principals who build relationships and trust among teachers and interact with all staff members and students are key to

positive school cultures in successful school. While terminology on school culture varies somewhat according to national context, results from cases studies in the U.K. (Day, 2005; Day, 2009), U.S. (Jacobson et al., 2005; Ylimaki et al., 2012; Klar et al., 2019), Australia (Gurr & Drysdale, 2012), and Sweden (Höög et al., 2005) and related studies (Hoy et al., 2002; Leithwood & Strauss, 2009) agree on areas of impact on school direction and goals: (1) support for learning; (2) stakeholder engagement; ((3) collaboration; and (4) principal leadership. More specifically, the principal's leadership was the umbrella area of impact on school culture through developing people through learning, stakeholder engagement in school activities, and collaboration embedded in the organizational design for decision-making and professional learning. These areas of impact were consistent in schools serving culturally diverse students where principals and others explicitly considered the socio-cultural affect (Ylimaki et al., 2012) and democratic values in education (Dewey, 1916).

From an education theory standpoint, according to Dewey (1916), culture is defined as a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, tradition, folkways, religion, literature and any other capabilities acquired by individuals as members of society. Culture also comprises a vast array of inter-related knowledge, skills and values from rich experiences of humanity and society. From this perspective, the aim of education is to help individuals inherit rich cultural heritage of the past and to enrich it through activities that share culture with the next generation. Such shared culture of the older to younger generations is part of school organizational culture and education itself.

Dewey argues that the aim of education in the democratic countries of the world should be the cultivation of democratic values in the minds of the children and individuals - faith in a democratic way of living, respect for the dignity of other persons, freedom, equality of opportunity, justice, faith in tolerance, faith in change, and peaceful methods and faith in cooperative living and above all fellow-feelingness. Education takes place with the participation of the individual in social activities and relationships with his fellow human beings. Dewey holds that education is a necessity for healthy living in the society. It gives the child social consciousness. The school guides and controls propensities of the child in socially desirable channels. The teachers and principal must recognize the background of the child as well as the social demands. As such, the school is a social environment--simplified, balanced, and graded (Dewey, 1887).

With a view of schools as a microcosm of democracy, the fusion of learners' horizons--their capacities to shape common interests, project common ends, and converge upon common means despite their differences in perspective--is a primary educational goal. Within schools, leaders/learners (principals, teachers, children) develop an organizational culture around democratic educational values, including a shared system of democratic and intercultural norms, folkways, values and traditions, all of which infuse the school culture with passion, purpose, and a sense of spirit. Such cultural activity, in our view, is enhanced by leadership teams who embody and model democratic spirit and values. In the remainder of this chapter, we provide activities and examples that illustrate our definition of culture in school development.

Application

In this section, we describe our process to develop school culture through leadership teams. When we first met with school teams for the first Institute, we understood that they needed to develop as a strong team before they could work productively or be expected to diffuse the learning throughout their school sites. Thus, they were initially asked to creatively introduce their school team. The result ranged from artistic visual displays to raps, songs, and poetry. The activity allowed teams to identify what was special and unifying about their own team. Group norms are vital to a well-functioning team, so teams were then asked to imagine that they were viewing their team functioning well, recording what they were seeing and hearing. This became the basis for their team norms. At this point, we felt that teams were ready to address some of the hard work. We structured an activity, Assumption Card Stack and Shuffle (Lipton & Wellman, 2011), in which teams had deep conversations about the values and aims of education. See the Activity Box 3.1 for additional detail. Teams were able to coalesce around some basic values and aims of education that they would use as their guide going forward.

At this time, we provided information to the teams, both through short lecture and sharing of scholarly articles, including particularly articles from our research on the ISSPP project and related research studies. Articles focused on, the socio-cultural affect and the southern Arizona context, emphasizing the value of building relationships in an ethic of community. They also examined their own consciousness and awareness of the border context and political environment, all of which contribute to the organizational culture.

The next step in the process was to ask each team member to individually complete the School Culture Survey (Gruenert & Valentine, 1998). The dimensions explored in the School Culture Survey included Collaborative Leadership, Teacher Collaboration, Professional Development, Collegial Support, Unity of Purpose, and Learning Partnership. Team members were directed to compare their responses, discuss areas of strength and areas needing additional development, and finally to infer how closely they believed their responses would reflect those of their staff as a whole. We then defined a culture of collaboration, asking each team to describe their existing school culture, explicating the unwritten rules by which everyone operated. They rated their faculty on their readiness as a whole to work collaboratively (on a scale of 1–5) and identified what, if anything, they wanted to change. Participants were provided with additional information about what constitutes positive school culture, then asked to apply their learning. Specifically, they were asked to identify something from a recent staff meeting for which they would have liked to see more staff engagement, and then to find/create a strategy to help and determine why that strategy would be appropriate. Finally, they were asked to plan the next faculty meeting to address their concerns, considering specifically goals to improve culture and team building strategies.

Subsequent institutes sought to refine and enhance the development of inclusive, democratic cultures in schools as a microcosm of society. Using the Solution Tree

video set, Collaborative Teams in Professional Learning Communities at Work (DuFour et al., 2010), teams worked through steps to move teachers to a culture of collaboration: define a collaborative team, analyze teams to determine whether they

Box 3.1: Assumption Card Stack and Shuffle (Lipton & Wellman, 2011)

Divide into groups of 3–5. Distribute one full set of cards to each group. The cards are then dealt to each member of the group. One individual will begin the round by reading a card aloud. The entire group then discusses the prompt using the following mediating questions as a guide:

- What is the thinking behind this assumption?
- What are some inferences that can be made from it?
- What might be some alternative interpretations?
- To what degree is this assumption generalizable or context specific?
- If _____ were true, would this assumption still hold?

(Wellman & Lipton, 2004)

Each individual in turn reads a card, and the team discusses the prompt until all cards are completed or time is exhausted. This activity could take up to an hour, depending on the group.

The prompts which we used for the activity are as follows: (Hammond, 2014)

Assumption 1: As a leader, it is important for me to be able to communicate across cultures and to facilitate communication among diverse cultural groups.

Assumption 2: Cultural discomfort and disagreements are normal occurrences in a diverse society such as ours and are parts of everyday interactions.

Assumption 3: I believe we can learn about and implement diverse and improved instructional practices that will effectively serve all our students.

Assumption 4: I believe that all students benefit from educational practices that provide them with hope, direction, and preparation for their future lives.

Assumption 5: It is important to know how well our school serves the various cultural and ethnic communities represented in our school, and it is also important to understand how well served they feel by the educational practices in our school.

Assumption 6: I believe that all students benefit from educational practices that engage them in learning about their cultural heritage and understanding their cultural background.

Assumption 7: I am willing to ask questions about racism, cultural preferences, and insufficient learning conditions and resources that may be uncomfortable for others in my school.

Assumption 8: My personal goals and vision and our collective work at school focus on making our school more effective and equitable.

are operating collaboratively, identify team structures for assuring meaningful collaboration, list strategies for providing teams with time to collaborate, and the role of norms in functioning teams. Each team was provided with the video training set to use at their sites. This video set and facilitator's guide aligned with our process and aims, and we explicitly connected the activities with our approach, asking participants to reflect on what they saw and connect it to their own school values and assumptions.

With each Institute and Regional Meeting, some aspect of organizational culture was revisited and refined. For example, interculturality and communication styles were addressed through a North, South, East West (Lipton & Wellman, 2011) activity whereby participants identified their own styles: North (just get it done); East (look at the big picture); South (consider everyone's feelings) or West (pay attention to details). They were required to choose only one, then those individuals at each compass point generated a chart listing four strengths of the preference, four limitations, and what others needed to know in order to work together more effectively. Then individuals were asked to reflect on how they might individually stretch to work more collaboratively with individuals of varying styles.

Finally, we used the step-back consulting protocol, modified from the Change Leadership model (Wagner et al., 2012). Teams were asked to present an issue and their proposed solution to a partner team, answering clarifying questions. Then they became silent partners and observed the other team as they worked through the issue. The initiating team then rejoined the conversation, describing how it felt to observe and listen and what they learned. Finally, both teams considered the implications of the discussion, identifying any strategies or practices that might be useful moving forward. See the Activity Box 3.2 for our modified protocol.

Lessons Learned

Next we present some illustrative cases focusing on aspects of culture that were enhanced through the AZiLDR school development process. Psuedonyms are used for all schools and individuals presented within this book.

Case A: Smithson High School

Smithson High School is a public high school in southern Arizona, serving grades 9–12. It houses over 1500 students, although when built it was intended for 1100 students. The principal, Mr. Tierney, (at the time of the project) was a white male in his mid-thirties, who began teaching in 2005. After 5 years in the classroom, he was promoted to an assistant principal position, and 1 year later was thrust into the principal position with the abrupt removal of the previous principal.

Box 3.2: Step-Back Consulting Modified Protocol.

AZiLDR Institute.

Step Back Consulting: A Protocol for Building Communities of Practice.

Step Back Consulting is based on several learning principles:

- For powerful small group learning to occur, all members must have a role that matters to them and keeps them active.
- Groups are helped by a sense of urgency and momentum, a feeling that there is something important to do and hardly enough time in which to do it.
- The less the consultees talk, the greater the chance for the consultees to learn.

Steps	Explanation	Notes
Step 1	The consultees choose a spokesperson to present next steps and outcomes for competent PLC's and the organizational and belief changes associated with these. Once the spokesperson has concluded his/her presentation, others in the group may add information	Time guideline: 10 min
Step 2	The consultees answer clarifying questions from the consulting group.	Time guideline: 5 min
Step 3	The consultees "step back" and become silent observers. The consultees' job is to remain silent and listen actively, perhaps by keeping notes about ideas and internal reactions. The consulting group takes on the issue as if it were theirs, pondering questions such as:	
	What would we do if these were our next steps?	
	What would we avoid doing?	
	How do we find ourselves re-conceiving or re-defining the next steps and outcomes or the organizational/belief changes?	
	What may have been left out of consideration?	
Step 4	The consultees rejoin the conversation and describe how they experienced the process, what it was like to sit back and watch as others temporarily took on their issue, what they thought and what they learned.	Time guideline: 5 min
Step 5	Finally, the group collectively reflects on the implications of the discussion. Prepare a brief written statement summarizing the consultees learning	Time guideline: 5 min

Typically, consultees are often surprised to discover how challenging just sitting back turns out to be. Often this is a lesson in how difficult it is to reconstruct our experience or change our minds. We may be overinvested in our ideas and constructions and therefore have a hard time keeping an open mind, or simply not give new ideas a fair hearing. This process helps us with those realities.

Adapted from *Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools*, Wagner et al., 2012.

Having moved up the ranks within the same school, Mr. Tierney had well-established, trusting relationships with most staff members. His focus during his first year was to establish a safe and orderly school environment, which was something his entire staff had asked to be addressed. When interviewed, one teacher stated, "And to be honest, I feel like [the principal] really wasn't ready to be a principal; ... He was still kind of in training. And yet, because he was a teacher and everybody knew him, there was a trust level. So we were all going to be supportive of him, knowing that he was going to be learning as he went, and that we were going to support him in that learning process. And he didn't just get this big head like, 'I'm in charge, do what I say.' So definitely from day one the transition was, 'We're in this together, we're a team. If there's a problem, let's see how we can figure it out together.'"

Another teacher at the school summarized the biggest concern from both staff and upper district administration. "We trust him; he is a good ethical principal, but he often hesitates. He does not make decisions that move the school forward." Additionally, other administrators on campus were not all on the same page. A teacher observed, "The leadership team seems a bit fractured. The assistant principal in fact is undermining some of his efforts."

At this point in his second year as principal, Mr. Tierney was unsure about how to move forward; he was operating solidly in the Zone of Uncertainty. He believed that he needed to do it all himself. At the direction of district leadership, he began working in the AZiLDR School Development training with a leadership team comprised of himself, three teacher leaders and an assistant superintendent. Mr. Tierney commented, "I started developing a leadership team....and we talked about what we saw as needs for the school and started making plans. It's been really helpful. These are people who are not formal administrators, mainly teacher leaders so they have the teacher perspective." At the same time, a veteran teacher noticed the efforts, offering, "There have been efforts by the leadership team to bring the school together around a theme, *Smithson Succeeds*. It's really made a difference in the culture."

Finally, when asked to reflect, Mr. Tierney offered, "I have been really thinking about what it means to be a leader. I knew when I was hired, I was moving into the principalship; it meant I had to be a transformational leader. I knew the four I's...but what did I know about taking that on? I didn't know anything. I had to engage myself as well as other people, and I have a long way to go, but I see us changing together. The trainings from AZiLDR have been incredibly powerful. It's a time to reflect and talk to teachers about where we are, what is the evidence, what do we know from research and then plan to move forward." He concluded, "Since we started, I have seen changes in the school vision and mission, the directions that we are going in, the capacity-building groups that we have, our curriculum action team, as well as the revamped and rejuvenated leadership council with better direction...We have better communication across the board, better professional development for our staff focused on student learning." The emphasis on democratic humanistic values and the needs of culturally diverse children resonated strongly with Mr. Tierney.

Observing Mr. Tierney and the leadership team as they worked through the school development processes during training, it was clear that the entire team felt empowered to make changes and build the culture of the school to move together in a positive direction. The trust by the team in each other was evident, and Mr. Tierney no longer felt the need to make decisions alone, thus impacting his ability to move forward with decisions. Through the school development process, the team was able to navigate the Zone of Uncertainty with deliberation. Interestingly, within 2 years after the training concluded, Smithson High School was recognized by the state of Arizona as an A+ School of Excellence.

Case B: Ruth Bennett Middle School

Ruth Bennett Middle School is in a rural community along the US-Arizona border, serving about 450–475 students in grades 6–8. They are housed in the oldest building in the district, 109 years old. The school is considered low socioeconomic, a Title I school. Many of the students are under guardianship with a grandparent or relative in the US, while parents reside in Mexico; there are a large number of students that transition back and forth across the border. The student population is primarily Hispanic/Latino/a/x (about 85–90%). There are approximately 22 teachers on staff, many who have grown up in the community and reflect those demographics. Only six of the 22 teachers are experienced.

The principal, Kim Wilson, is a white female in her 30's, who is also from the community, with family support in the area. She was in her first year as principal, having served 1 year as assistant principal prior to taking over. She is the 15th principal to serve this school in the last 16 years. In describing her own style, she states, "I'm trying to be more collaborative - more distributive in my style, trying to be a little bit more hands on, and trying to have more of an accountability which I think was lacking. My staff has had many principals in many years; the last few principals have been all 1-2 years...I'm sure they thought we can wait her out. I keep communicating to them unless the district moves me, I'm here for 5 years." Ms. Wilson was able to rather quickly mediate and teach the team about policy pressures and requirements in relation to student needs.

By the end of the AZiLDR school development training, one teacher discussed the changes that had occurred as a result of the project, commenting "definitely shared collaboration time, shared vision. I don't feel like Kim's telling us what to do. I feel like Kim's involving us in the process, and that has never happened before, ever. I trust Kim. I trust Kim to do what's best for the students." Another teacher offered, "I think we see Kim's vision. I don't think everybody realizes how many phases we're going to have to do to get there, but I think I see that we're more open to change."

Two teachers collaboratively described the new culture. "The way I'm seeing it, Kim's the train...conductor. We're on the train. We were the first ones to get on and we're like,"Okay." Then we started seeing it, so the train starts speeding up. Now

we're pulling ...More passengers are getting on. They're starting to see it. It's like,"Okay." It's slowly ... it's going to take time. That's my biggest fear is if you truly look at it, it's going to be anywhere between five to seven years. Period."

Finally, when asked to describe the vision, a teacher stated unequivocally, "She wants to change the perception of Ruth Bennett. She doesn't want us to be the ghetto school. She wants our kids to succeed and she wants her teachers to succeed also. I really do see that we want to be the beacon of light."

Observing this team at work was enlightening. Initially, team members were quiet and hesitant to contribute. By the end of the project, they were fully engaged and eager to take the information back to the school site. The principal valued the ideas of her team, and allowed them to take the lead with staff, spreading the common vision and setting the direction together.

Final Thoughts

It was critically important that teams were ready to embrace the process of school development. Often, during the project, teams were at different stages of readiness, resulting in the need to spend time building and solidifying the culture. In schools with less readiness, we found the diffusion process to progress much more slowly. We saw these schools existing in the Zone of Uncertainty much longer. This was exacerbated by policy challenges at the district, state and national levels, as well as the churn of teachers and administrators. When schools were caught in the Zone of Uncertainty without a leader who could mediate the often conflicting demands on schools, the schools stagnated, or at best, moved very slowly.

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