TEACHER LEADERS IMPACTING SCHOOL CULTURE

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This study involved 195 teachers assessing the culture of their schools, and their potential for influencing culture. Teachers involved were pursuing their master's degree in teacher leadership. The assessment survey used was based on key elements influencing school culture (Walters, Marzano, & McNulty (2004), McLaughlin et al (2001), Bryk, Lee, & Holland (1993), Brown (2004). The instrument was administered to teachers during graduate level leadership courses from 2008-2010. Teachers completed the School Culture Review, using a Likert type scale to rate 40 elements of school culture. The analysis includes mean scores, ranges, frequencies, and standard deviations. Results indicated that some specific elements of school culture are lacking in the majority of schools, but no statistically significant outcomes were reported. Specific school culture elements were ranked, based on areas needing improvement. Teacher leader's potential impact on school culture is revealed, and suggestions for enhancing workplace culture complete the study.

Morgan (1986) reminds us that culture is not imposed on a social setting or institution, such as a school. It develops through the course of social interactions. Every coworker in the school setting is affected positively or negatively by the culture in which they work (Adamy & Heinecke, 2005). Teacher leaders not only have the ability to shape the culture of the workplace, but if they are operating from a moral mindset, an obligation to do so is imminent.

Traditions are part of culture, but much of the day-to-day routine, whether written in policy and procedure or acknowledged in unwritten expectations, guides everyone at the school. Teacher leader's potential for leading the continual defining and redefining of the school culture is an opportunity not to be taken for granted, and informal leaders need to be conscious of this. Becoming highly involved in forming a shared set of basic assumptions (Schein, 2004) that will guide the school is paramount for total ownership, and creating a successful learning environment with a strong, sustainable culture (Brinton, 2007).

Research supports this notion; teacher leaders and other members of the school must be involved in creating and supporting a cultural shift if it is to take hold (Alston, 2004; Beachum & Dentith, 2004; Bruffee, 1999; Langon-Fox & Tan, 1997; Hoy, Tarter & Kottkamp, 1991). Understanding that organizational learning sustains the culture of the workplace (Schein, 1996), the role of teacher leaders in determining that culture cannot be underestimated.

Research and experience of educators indicate that shared vision, values, goals, beliefs, and faith in school organizations define school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Fullan, 2005; Stolp, 1994; Renchler, 1992), yet opportunities for teachers to create norms at the workplace are minimal (Donaldson, 2006; Barth, 2002; Brown, 2004).

This study was designed to offer teachers pursuing a teacher leader masters degree an opportunity to assess their workplace culture. Initiating an assessment of their school culture provided them an occasion to analyze strengths and weaknesses (Prince, 1989), and to begin realizing their ability to affect school culture in a positive manner.

Review of Literature

Many descriptions of school culture can be found in scholarly books and articles. Leslie Goldring portrays it appropriately this way in 2002:

> Underneath the operating network of our roles as teachers, classified staff and administration lies a deeper, less visible structure called culture. Culture is a part of every group of people who gather together, whether in work groups, neighborhoods, schools or large corporations. Culture's power lies in the ability to dictate everything about a group, from what it discusses to the beliefs group members hold in common and values the group teaches. Culture is a visible and usable tool in schools, where relationships tend to hold more power than official roles and titles. (p.32)

Schools generally seek a culture that supports good work and high student achievement (Brown, 2004; Goldring, 2002). In a paper generated for the Denver Commission on Secondary School Reform, Brown noted the following ingredients for a productive school culture:

- An inspiring vision and challenging mission
- A curriculum and modes of learning clearly linked to the vision and mission
- Sufficient time for teachers and students to do their work well
- Close, supportive relationships
- Leadership that encourages and protects trust
- Data-driven decision-making

Bryk, Lee, & Holland (1993) found that a sense of community (culture) was a key factor in cultivating a sense of excellence in schools. Teachers were less likely to be absent and more satisfied with their work. Students were less likely to drop out or experience behavior problems. McLaughlin (2001) extends that concept to include the idea of a culture focused on learning that motivates staff and students, noting the power of a workplace that is cohesive, and harbors passion, commitment, and extensive interactions among teachers.

There is a strong correlation between certain aspects of a school's culture and how well students perform academically (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty (2004). Deeply imbedded in the culture of those schools were discussions of purpose and improvement, stories, ceremonies (traditions), and celebrations. Lortie (1975)

noted that teachers have more opportunities for succeeding in cultures focusing on productivity, performance, and improvement. Those teachers found that a productive school culture helped them overcome the uncertainty of their work.

Fullan (2001) sees the importance of school culture when leaders realize change is needed at the workplace. He refers to this as "reculturing" (p.44). This focus on change reflects moral purpose through collaborative work cultures in which differences of opinion are respected. Fullan conveys that knowing there are things that need improved upon should be viewed as a learning opportunity, and that the school culture can provide openness for change efforts.

Methodology

Participants

The subjects (*N*=195) of this study were Pre K-12 teachers in rural, suburban, and urban schools in Ohio. They were pursuing graduate degrees in teacher leadership while working full time as teachers. Approximately 80 percent of the study group was composed of female teachers.

The majority of the teachers (60 percent) had one to five years of teaching experience. Twenty-five percent had 6-10 years of experience, 14 percent with 11-20 years of experience, and the remainder (N=5) had over 20 years of teaching in the building in which the study was completed. Approximately 59 percent of the teachers in the study taught in elementary buildings, 14 percent taught in a middle school/junior high setting, and 27 percent

were high school teachers.

Approximately 20 percent of the study group were in the 25 and younger age group, over 51 percent were 26-35 years of age, 15 percent were 36-46 years old, and 14 percent were over 46 years of age. Over 94 percent of the teachers were Caucasian, 2.8 percent were African-American, and 1.8 percent Hispanic.

Instrument

The School Culture Review was administrated to 195 study participants. A Likert-type scale was used for the survey that was developed, incorporating 40 statements considered characteristics of cultural norms (Donaldson, 2006; Fullan, 2005, 1992; Goldring, 2002; McLaughlin, 2001; Renchler, 1992; Deal & Peterson, 1990; Fyans & Maehr, 1990; Cheong, 1993; Senge, 1990).

Key elements identified for this culture survey focused on trust and respect, relationships, workplace contribution, collegiality, motivation, leadership, sense of purpose, accountability, workplace goals, meaningful work, cooperation, student achievement, and support. Points were awarded (None=0, Low=1, Average=2, Above average=3, High=4) to each statement, based on observations and perceptions of the study participants rating their school culture.

Table 1

Study Groups: Experience in Building	N	M	SD
1-5 years	107	102.49	26.37
6-10 years	53	97.07	22.70
11-20 years	30	104.35	23.70
21+ years	5	108.40	21.17
All	195	101.72	25.02

Results

Teachers included in this school culture study were grouped for comparison according to years of experience in the school building they currently work within. The 1-5 five years experience study group was composed of 107 teachers. The comparison groups of teachers had 6-10 years of experience (N=53), 11-20 years experience (N=30), and 21+ years of experience (N=5). Table 1 displays the statistical results graphically.

The statistical results of the study indicate no significant difference in the means of the groups based on experience in the school. All comparison group means fell within the 80-119 point range of the survey assessment values, which indicate there are many worthwhile, respectable relations and activities at the workplace. There is evidence of many established community norms. Means below 80 would reveal a low functioning culture, and a mean below 41 would indicate the school culture is dysfunctional. High, positive functioning cultures would be noted by a mean of 120 or above.

The second focus of the study reflects an interest in reviewing and analyzing the specific areas that teachers perceived were at inadequate levels in their schools (Table 2). It is noteworthy that well over one-quarter of the teachers perceived teacher isolation to be "low", and that this partic-

Table 2

Rank	N	%	Cultural Norm
1	54	27.6	Level of progress toward working together as a team of educators to reduce isolation
2	39	20.0	Level of trust between teachers and administrators
3 (tie)	36	18.4	Level of progress toward working together as a team of educators to manage change
			Level of progress toward working together as a team of educators to strengthen relationships
4	35	17.9	Level of support: Central office supporting teachers
5 (tie)	34	17.4	Level of opportunity to lead
			Level of contentment with physical plan (building aesthetics, climate control, etc.)
6	32	16.4	Level of progress toward working together as a team of educators to resolve conflict
7 (tie)	29	14.8	Level leadership distribution (tasks are delegated/distributed by formal leader)
			Level of support: Teachers supporting administrators
8	27	13.8	Level of substantive focus (focus on something because it is a good thing to do, regardless of end results
9	26	13.3	Level of informal leadership (willingness to initiate and/or take on responsibilities for school)
10	25	12.8	Level of progress toward working together as a team of educators to grow professionally
11 (tie)	24	12.3	Level of respect between teachers and administrators
			Level of progress toward working together as a team of educators to solve problems
12 (tie)	23	11.7	Level of trust between teachers and parents
			Level of collegiality
			Level of interest in coworkers being successful
13 (tie)	22	11.2	Level of stewardship
			Level of support: principal supporting teachers
14 (tie)	20	10.2	Level of focus on agreed upon goals, objectives, and outcomes
			Level of school wide student achievement
15	19	9.7	Level of contribution to the workplace: teachers
16	17	8.7	Level of accountability
17 (tie)	16	8.2	Level of respect between teachers and support staff
			Level of respect between teachers and parents

Rank	N	%	Cultural Norm
18 (tie)	15	7.6	Level of trust between teachers and other teachers
			Level of sense of belonging
19 (tie)	14	7.1	Level of trust between teachers and support staff
			Level of contribution to the workplace: administrators
			Level of respect between teachers and students
20	13	6.6	Level of motivation among all educators and support personnel
21	12	6.1	Level of cooperation
22	10	5.1	Level of respect between teachers and other teachers
23 (tie)	9	4.6	Level of trust between teachers and students
			Level of sense of obligation and duty
			Level of respect for school as a learning community
24 (tie)	8	4.1	Level of contribution to the workplace: teachers
			Level of work being meaningful and significant

ular aspect of the school culture needed to be addressed. Trust between teachers and administrators ranked as the second highest concern.

Teacher isolation and trust between teachers and administrators were followed by cultural elements that address teamwork for managing change, resolving conflict, and strengthening relationships. Support from central office, and opportunities to lead (17 percent) were concerns. Teachers indicated that the condition of the physical plant was an issue for many schools. Thirty-two (16.4 percent) teachers noted that their level of progress toward working together as a team to resolve conflict was below average. Other areas of concern are also listed in Table 2 (ranked).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study revealed that length of teaching experience in the school was not a factor in rating school climate. No statistically significant differences were noted. However, teacher isolation was a major concern, along with opportunities for informal leadership, climate of physical plant, trust, relationships, and support.

Teacher leaders involved in this study have an opportunity to initiate discussions and strategizing to improve areas of cultural weakness in their schools. One recommendation would involve having teacher leaders initiate an audit of the specific areas that the majority of teachers in each school feel need addressed for improvement (Brown, 2004). This may include a school communication and rela-

tionship audit, discovering communication patterns (e.g., who talks to whom, focus of conversations, what ways, and how often), knowledge flow, and connections and disconnections.

Initiating open dialogue to tackle key issues that were confirmed by the survey results would give teacher leaders a chance to potentially change negative aspects of school culture. Trust building, managing change, and strengthening relationships of educators at the workplace are key items the survey revealed that need to be addressed by teacher leaders and school administrators.

Fulani and St. Germain (2006) discuss the impact of developing a culture of learning; educators becoming "collectively committed to improvement." (p.23) Learning from peers (which addresses communication and relationship issues found in the survey results), is a powerful action teacher leaders can initiate to impact school culture.

Maehr and Braskamp (1986) state, " that there is a relationship between organizational culture and personal investment – that knowing something about the cultural facets of an organization allows us to predict employee's job satisfaction and organizational commitment "(p. 153). This leads to the recommendation of conducting a leadership study. This would include an audit to determine the leaders (formal and informal) in the building, and what opportunities exist for all educators in the school to discover and use their leadership gifts and talents.

Teacher leaders can take the lead in bringing about change to enhance school cultures, from:

- Total self-interest to sincere interest in helping coworkers
- Just congeniality to collegiality
- Blaming and complaining to accepting and solving
- Just extrinsic and intrinsic motivators to moral motivators
- Primarily contractual relationships to covenantal relationships
- A school of coworkers to a community of learners
- One-way mentorship to two-way mentorship
- Being reactive to becoming proactive
- Little or no involvement in important decision-making to high involvement
- An operational focus to a professional focus

Informal leaders have the potential to influence of the culture of the school, and this can be dramatic. The potential positive affect of teacher leader efforts could lead to a school culture that includes continuous learning for all.

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