Nurturing a Positive School Culture: Perspectives of Next-Generation School Leaders

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Abstract

*Purpose: This study portrays the perspectives of next-generation school leaders engaged in nurturing a positive culture in the complex and challenging environment of the schools. T*he study explored *why some school leaders make decisions that seem to threaten the very culture of the school. Methodology: Participants were veteran teachers from a diverse urban school district in the American southwest. A discourse analysis of the participants' reflective journal entries was conducted to identify their broad understandings of the work of school culture-building. Findings: Novel practices and emerging challenges were identified in the participants' journal exchanges. Chief among the findings was the conviction that leaders must align their actions to a clear vision for a healthy learning culture. Conclusions: Questions for further study are suggested to explore how leaders might confront the challenges of scaling up practices that can be used to reinvigorate and build positive cultures in the schools.*

Keywords: education, school culture, leadership, vision, values, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the practice of leading learning cultures has taken its place as a focus of principal preparation programs (Hitt, Tucker, & Young, 2012). Recommendations for effective preparation programs typically include a concentration on building supportive school cultures, with the aim of "altering the culture of the school to one that supports learning for all staff members as well as students (Sparks & Hirsch, 2000, p. 12). In *Preparing to Lead*, Jensen, Downing and Clark (2017) identified culture-building as a strategy used by the world's most successful education systems. For example, in Ontario, aspiring principals are introduced to strategies that "foster a school culture that supports teacher leadership, instructional creativity and pedagogical innovation" (Jensen, et al., p. 32). In Hong Kong, candidates are required to demonstrate how they will "promote a professional exchange culture within schools and link with other schools for sharing experiences in learning" (Jensen et al., p. 35).

Powerful ideas for leading energized schools are coming from the next generation of school leaders. Their voices represent an untapped resource in the effort to revitalize school culture. As scholar activists, these next-generation leaders want to know more about why some schools make decisions that seem to threaten the very culture of the school. In order to discover the best of what is known about nurturing a positive school culture, these next-gen leaders shadow principals, attend seminars, and participate in book studies and action research. Their coursework typically includes readings from authors including Deal and Peterson (2009), Eller & Eller (2017), Fisher, Frey, and Pumpian (2012), Gruenert and Whitaker (2017), Muhammad (2017), Silins, Mulford and Zarins (2002), and Williams and Hierck (2015).

2. Methodology: Participants and Procedures

This study portrays the perspectives of next-generation school leaders who were preparing to nurture a positive culture in the complex and challenging setting of the schools. Participants were purposefully selected as high potential administrator candidates serving 13 diverse schools in an urban district, estimated to be the 31st largest school district in America. Over half of the participants were Hispanic and 85 percent were female. Participants were enrolled in an educational leadership program in a flagship university in the American Southwest.

The next-generation leaders were veteran teachers who were determined to craft a new narrative to energize struggling schools. After taking part in extensive seminars and book studies on the theory and practice of culture-building, participants generated their own notions about nurturing a positive culture and took part in reflective journal exchanges. They did this through their action-learning experiences, linking practice, inquiry and reflection to building a positive school culture. In this way, participants developed their own voices and interacted with others as they reflected on the possibilities and challenges of nurturing positive school cultures.

An analysis of the participants' reflective journal entries was conducted to identify common perspectives from which broader understandings of school culture could be constructed. Drawing on the discourse analysis approach of Foucault (1971) and the methods suggested by Wickham and Kendall (1999), the study examined how the next-gen leaders constructed their notions of culture, what evidence they used, what was made problematic, what alternative meanings/explanations were put forward, and what practices were made possible by their way of thinking and understanding. Figure 1 presents the conceptual map for the study. Analysis was carried out in several phases: 1) a first reading to get a holistic sense of all the journal entries; 2) a second reading to derive commonalities among the entries; and 3) a final reading to formulate emergent themes.
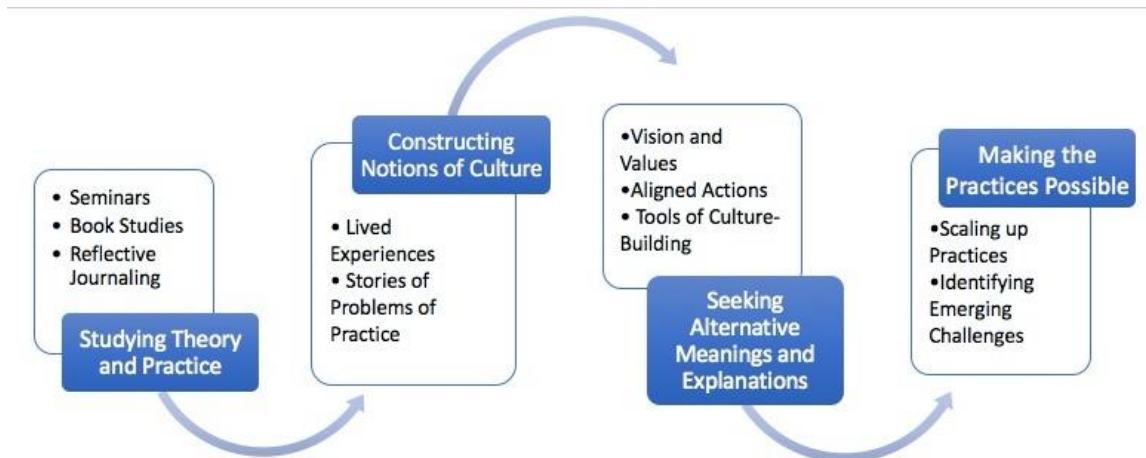

Figure 1: Conceptual Map using Foucault's Method. Source: Wickham and Kendall (1999).

3. Findings: Making Culture the First Order of Business

What follows are the themes arising from next-gen school leaders on their perspectives for nurturing a positive school culture. Pseudonyms were used to de-identify the participants. To being their inquiry, the next-gen leaders described their experiences working in schools that lacked energy. Sofia said, "We have taught in schools that are overflowing with stressed students, worn-out teachers, unhappy parents, and disgruntled community members. And we want to make a change". Lucas remarked, "Our first order of business as school leaders must be nurturing a positive culture".

It doesn't take long to notice how passionate these next-gen leaders were to move their schools from places of exhaustion to places of high energy. Like Sir Ken Robinson, they believed that passion could change everything (2009). Their reflections revealed an earnestness to uncover the underlying central issues that keep struggling schools from moving. They strove to dig into the root causes. This hunger for remedies led Diego to inquire, "why does the culture feel so toxic, rigid, and oppressive in some schools?" Diego's question prompted the leaders to offer up their own speculations about the triggers that seemed to be draining schools of energy:

- Are urgent issues taking precedence over what is important?
- Are people retreating into surface conversations to avoid conflict?

- Do academics take second place to performance on the football field?
- Have our schools lost faith in the dream of a democratic culture of schooling?
- Are some schools simply overwhelmed by fragmented practices, overly-prescriptive programs, and flawed policies?

3.1. Seeking Alternative Meanings and Explanations

3.1.1. Leading from Vision and Values

Listening to the voices of next-gen leaders, we get a clear sense of their resolve to lead from vision and values. Far from hidden, these leaders make their vision and values the centerpiece of their work. Following the lead of culture scholars, they said they would focus everyone's attention on "what is most important and motivate them to work hard toward a common purpose" (Jerald, 2005, p. 2) and to do that in a way that ensures a more inclusive culture (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015).

Pablo reflected on the significance of a culture of purpose. He observed, "starting every conversation with 'why' changes the narrative from compliance to purpose". Renata was especially keen to let the vision drive her work in nurturing the school culture. She said, "repeating the…vision as [my] mantra will remind the staff of the reason why we do what we do". Elena's experience provided a close-up look on how vision and values can connect schools to their deeper purpose:

> Understanding the history and traditions of the school is beneficial to me when trying to create a vision that is most relevant to the dynamics of my school. At my high school, generations of family members have attended the school and many staff members attended the school themselves as a teenager. The school's motto is 'the pride of the valley' and when you walk onto campus the pride can be felt. This [motto] has been a connective symbol. … The culture extends beyond the walls of the school and bleeds into the identity of the neighborhood.

3.1.2. Aligning Leadership Actions

Cultivating school and community cultures like those described by Elena require high levels of aligned, connected, and purposeful actions (DuFour & Keating, 2009; Reeves, 2007). This is not without its challenges. When next-gen leaders reflect on their readiness to build positive cultures, doubts about their capacity to lead tend to come up every now and again. Javier's reflection on his experience as a department chair was telling:

> I did not succeed in creating a shared vision for our team. … I was excited about planning purposeful meetings directly related to our work. I should have started the year by asking what each colleague intended to get out of our PLCs [professional learning communities]. This would have created a sense of value for each team member instead of another meeting to attend. I assumed each person would be as excited as I was to collaborate with colleagues. I focused too much on the meeting agenda and I did not help develop a vision to unite us all on one plan.

Javier's words demonstrated how intensely conscious next-gen leaders are of their responsibility to align leadership to the interdependencies of the team. Javier's personal experience revealed the pitfalls of misaligned actions and the challenge of aligning the culture toward a shared and just purpose.

Tabita offered a way to circumvent these pitfalls. She said, "I hope to avoid the energy traps that stall efforts to improve the culture". Tabita noted she aligns her leadership to the energy sources described by Garmston and Wellman (2009) "as a way to pull up the energy of the school". She said she plans to use "the drivers of flexibility and craftsmanship to create a culture in which everyone looks forward to each new school day filled with optimism". Likewise, Dakotah commented that his culture work was driven by the energy source of efficacy. He harkened back to Fullan and St. Germain (2006) as the source of inspiration for his reflection:

> When it comes to changing the school culture, I think we have to take our most basic, fundamental, and uniform belief that all children can learn and make it better… all children can learn at high levels. By making it [our culture of achievement] better we will force ourselves to fight for what is worth fighting for and change our schools from 'putative by default to positive by design'. Efficacy has a high positive effect on outcomes; so, if we change the way we think students can learn and the way we [lead], the culture shift will follow.

Mika reiterated the importance of an efficacious belief that all students can learn. Her mantra, "each and every student, each and every day," was exemplified in her experience as an instructional leader:

> This school year I am asking grade levels to do backward planning during collaboration time, beginning with selecting common core standards and then creating a rigorous final assessment. This has been quite a laborious task and I have supported the process by working side-by-side with staff providing sample templates, assessments, and materials for each grade level. I want teachers and staff to know that I won't ask them to do anything that I am not willing to do. I have found that a positive school culture is best cultivated through building trust and showing compassion for every student.

3.1.3. Using the Tools of Culture-Building

Mika's reflection underscored the leader's responsibility to ensure a culture of compassion for every student. But just knowing that culture building is the right thing to do was not enough for these next-gen leaders. Mika's approach challenged leaders to be present with the resources and tools that are consistent with the school's context and stated goals. She reflected that, as coaches and mentors, leaders must spend time in collaborative work in order to "develop and use [people's] assets to build a culture of collaboration in the schools" (Williams & Williams, 2014, p. 12). Esteban echoed this sentiment further saying, "it takes investment and skill to do the [culture] work". He remarked, "Our best efforts will fail if we forget that we must be a resource and provide the tools needed to protect commitments and sustain the work". Following the lead of Barth (2002) and Reeves (2007), Esteban's story illustrated the importance of using the tools of culture-building.

> For one of the breakout sessions at our summer seminar, I implemented a school culture activity. Staff were asked to generate thoughts related to the identity of the school and themselves as members of the school community. I asked staff to share their thoughts about their core beliefs and behaviors … related to the purpose of the school and why it is so essential to the success of the students and their families. The intent was to begin the work of coming to consensus on who our school is and to build the foundation to answer what we must become in order to accomplish a culture of achievement in the school.

4. Discussion: Possibilities and Emerging Themes

4.1. Making the Practice of Culture-Building Possible

To make culture the focus of leadership, the next-gen leaders said they intend to use a variety of strategies to nurture a positive culture. Common in the journal entries of all participants were the following fresh practices to culture-building:

- Take an open-heart approach using storytelling and celebrations that can propel the culture forward.
- Get to know the school's history, traditions, and values. Start by conducting a school culture survey or a critical issues inventory.
- Take the time to interview each staff member and don't forget to inventory the influential members of the staff first.
- Create a consensus around fairness and a belief that every child can learn in a healthy, safe, and supportive culture.
- Create a coalition to help model and monitor everyone's commitment. Coach and provide assistance to maintain the momentum.
- Bring families along who share positive values of the culture; they can be strong assets in building a healthy school culture.

4.2. Scaling Up Practices

From their reflections, it is apparent the next-gen leaders are ready to create and implement culture-building systems that will uplift all who work, serve, and learn in their schools. Carla summed it up saying she will continue to challenge herself to "connect everyone doing this [culture] work to scale best practices". Carla and her colleagues were leading the way to connecting culture to student learning. They were hungry to get moving in establishing what Hall and Simeral (2017) called a culture of learning and reflective practice.

4.3. Identifying Emerging Areas of Challenge

The participants' journal entries were further analyzed to formulate emergent themes. Three distinctive patterns emerged as broad areas of challenge in the next-gen leaders' ways of thinking about nurturing a positive school culture: (1) reinvigorate teachers to support the learning and wellbeing of students and community, (2) transform energy-sapped schools into places of high energy, and (3) build a positive culture to restore energy, hope and joy in the schools. These are tough challenges and aspiring leaders should be cautious about trying to meet them too quickly. To address these challenges, next-gen leaders will need to approach their future leadership roles with plenty of patience, creativity, and intentionality. Implementing the approaches and meeting the challenges will require a shift in the thinking and practice of culture-building.

5. Conclusions: Taking the Learnings to the Next Level

Next-gen leaders are relentless in their pursuit to lead energized schools. They bring a refreshing perspective and passion to the work. Their reflections provide convincing evidence that they are prepared to draw upon evidence-based tools for culture building, to lead through vision and values, and to align their work in a way that accelerates everyone's energy.

Further study is needed to investigate how the participants will use the practices and address the areas of challenge to successfully transform, reinvigorate, and build a positive culture in the schools. Scholar activists interested in culture study will need to carefully address the tensions that exists in reproducing entrenched cultures within existing power relations and to consider alternatives to building more humanizing, positive, and purposeful school cultures. Some possible lines of inquiry that emanate from this study include: How is culture-building work formed and transformed in interaction with the school and community? What challenges are encountered by school leaders who venture to interrupt negative patterns that sap schools of their energy? When and under what conditions does significant culture change occur?

The reflections of next-gen leaders provide a starting point in using theories of reflective practice and critique to interrogate these and other questions. Their reflections fill us with hope that teachers, parents, students, and community will see their passion and work together to create a clear vision for a healthy learning culture that is filled with purpose, inclusion, compassion, collaboration, and achievement.

Acknowledgements

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