The Best Practices for Shaping School Culture for Instructional Leaders

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Abstract

School culture is the belief and attitude influencing every aspect of how a school functions. Culture shared by all school stakeholders makes the actualization of both short-and long-term objectives easier. In this context, the best practices for shaping school culture for professional educators are personal mastery, team learning, and building a shared vision (Hall & Hord, 2015). Instructional leaders can use school culture as a tool to influence and lead by establishing coordination among employees, having a direct impact on student achievement.

Keywords: school culture, transformational leadership, personal mastery, team learning, shared vision

Organizational productivity is affected by individual staff members' productivity. Hall and Hord (2015) found most organizations are encouraged to remain open to the creative talents of their members and to the implementation of innovations and improvements best serving their clients. These expectations are assumed to be true for schools as well as the corporate sector. Those studying workplace cultures of both schools and businesses have identified important messages for school improvement (Hall & Hord, 2015). However, school culture has a major impact on instructional leaders as it relates to student achievement.

Hall and Hord (2015) identified factors describing school organizational cultures supporting the current, and likely the future, demands on schools to change. Therefore, Hall and Hord recognized the best practices for shaping school culture for instructional leaders are: personal mastery, team learning, and building a shared vision. Personal mastery is the practice of continually clarifying and making personal vision more precise-identifying what each individual wants in his or her personal participation in the organization. Team learning is the activity of coming together to discuss and to learn with and from each other. Developing team-learning skills involves each individual balancing his or her own goals and advocacy to achieve collaborative decision making serving the well-being of all (Hall & Hord, 2015). Finally, building a shared vision which is the construction of compelling images shared by the organization's members and focused on what the organization wants to create (Hall & Hord, 2015). These shared pictures of the future foster a prodigious culture.

Personal Mastery

School climate generally is defined as the collective sentiments of individuals within a school in regard to a variety of school contextual factors. Lynch, Lerner, and Leventhal (2013) found theorists have conceptualized school climate as the aggregated perceptions of individuals within a school in regard to achievement, treatment of students, student–teacher relationships, school safety, and quality of the school environment. Lynch, Lerner, and Leventhal (2013) link aspects of school climate to a variety of student outcomes, ranging from academic outcomes to engagement in bullying and delinquent behaviors. For example, Lynch et al., (2013) considered the links among collective perceptions of student violence and hostility and school engagement. Lynch et al. (2013) found collective perceptions of negative school climate (defined as perceptions of unfairness, hostility, and victimization) were associated with low school engagement among students. Schools where adolescents perceived high levels of hostility were more likely to have students who were less engaged than schools where adolescents felt students were less hostile. Therefore, school-wide perceptions of hostility also were negatively associated with students' reading achievement scores. In general, research regarding the link between school climate and academic outcomes suggests school climate may have enduring associations with student achievement and engagement.

A key component of improving schooling environments has been improving personalization, that is, tightening connections between students and their learning environments (e.g., teachers, other adults, student peers, curriculum, overall school culture). McClure, Yonezawa, and Jones (2010) found personalization matters because young people who are engaged emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally in their education are less likely to show signs of alienation and more likely to be connected to school. Students who feel connected to their school are more likely to exhibit healthy lifestyle behaviors (McClure et al., 2010). Increased school connectedness is also related to educational motivation, classroom engagement and better

attendance; all of which are linked to higher academic achievement. Therefore, the importance of personalization in today's educational reform landscape is underscored by the time and money focused on reducing school and class size. These efforts have been supported by research and shown increased academic achievement of students, particularly low- income and minority students, when student-to-teacher ratios and school populations are reduced (McClure et al., 2010).

In particular, the idea behind smaller schools has been small schools can produce what McClure, Yonezawa, and Jones (2010) refers to a more "communal school organization" and small schools can become "tighter-knit," providing higher levels of social support to students. More positive, personalized school cultures result in more caring relationships among teachers and students and in fewer students "getting lost." However, as schools shrink in size, teachers are presumed better able to discuss students' progress and to compare information. Advisories, adult-student mentoring programs, and enhanced adult-led extracurricular programs are a few ways small and large schools try to enhance adult-student relationships (McClure et al., 2010). Furthermore, there is growing evidence indicating greater personalization-improved, trusting relationships particularly among teachers and students are able to raise students' expectations for themselves and teachers' expectations for students. But we are still unsure how increasing personalization helps raise academic achievement on various measures (e.g. state examinations, weighted grade-point averages, on-track for college entrance) (McClure et al., 2010). However, significant efforts have also been made to "personalize" schools by improving the relationships and overall feelings of connectedness among students, teachers, and the curriculum.

Team Learning

Dufour and Mattos (2013) found that instructional leaders want to improve student achievement in their school, rather than focus on the individual inspection of teaching, they must focus on the collective analysis of evidence of student learning. Of course, teaching and learning are not divorced from each other. However, the key to improved student learning is to ensure more good teaching in more classrooms most of the time (Dufour & Mattos, 2013). The most powerful strategy for improving both teaching and learning, however, is not by micromanaging instruction but by creating the collaborative culture and collective responsibility of a professional learning community (PLC).

A report from the International Academy of Education (Dufour & Mattos, 2013) concluded the key to improving teaching was ensuring educators "participate in a professional learning community focused on becoming responsive to students." Research shows educators in schools embracing PLCs are more likely to:

- Take collective responsibility for student learning, help students achieve at higher levels, and express higher levels of professional satisfaction.
- Share teaching practices, make results transparent, engage in critical conversations about improving instruction, and institutionalize continual improvement.
- Improve student achievement and their professional practice at the same time that they promote shared leadership.
- Experience the most powerful and beneficial professional development.
- Remain in the profession (Dufour & Mattos, 2013, p. 36).

To foster school cultures in which PLCs flourish instructional leaders need to focus on five key steps. They can start by forming teams in which members share responsibility to help all

students learn essential content and skills, providing teams with time to collaborate, helping to clarify the work that teams need to do, and ensuring teams have access to the resources and support they need to accomplish their objectives (Dufour & Mattos, 2013). Furthermore, the PLC process also promotes shared leadership by empowering teams to make important decisions. At the same time, instructional leaders ask their teams to be accountable for results, and they publicly recognize and celebrate incremental progress (Dufour & Mattos, 2013). An instructional leader providing acknowledgement and appreciation are vital to sustaining a continual improvement effort.

Finally, effective instructional leaders are willing to confront those who fail to honor the commitments to their team and obligations to their students (Dufour & Mattos, 2013). Instructional leaders make it clear an individual teacher cannot disregard the team-developed curriculum, dismiss the sequencing of content, and refuse to administer the team's common assessments, or opt out of the collaborative team process in any way (Dufour & Mattos, 2013). Therefore, they are willing to use their authority to break down the walls of educator isolation and create new norms of collaboration and collective responsibility for student learning.

Building a Shared Vision

Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) found good character is generally described as involving the facility to consistently apply principles such as respect for others, truthfulness, fairness, and responsibility when facing behavioral and ethical choices. Payne (2008) stated: "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship." It means that instructional leaders both insist on high-quality work and offer support. Gaziel (1997) found in the past decades, organizational climate and organizational culture have been the terms used in the educational administration literature to describe members' perception of the school work environment as an organization; organizational climate and culture were therefore investigated in relation to school effectiveness.

Organizational culture is a better defined, clearer, and more powerful concept than is organizational climate (Gaziel, 1997). Assumptions and beliefs are deeply held and are largely subconscious convictions about the world and how it works. Culture, then, inform climate in the way that it helps individuals to define what is important for them and to make sense of their experiences (Gaziel, 1997). Gaziel (1997) stated the tactic assumptions, values, and beliefs commonly shared in an organization can shape members' perceptions, feelings, and behavior. However, a common hypothesis about this role suggests if an organization possesses a well-defined culture (that is, a well-integrated set of common values, beliefs, and behavior patterns about what a good school should be) it will perform at a higher level of productivity (Gaziel, 1997).

Culture is the concept helping instructional leaders perceive and understand the complex forces working beneath the surface and is in the very air of human groups and organizations (Gaziel, 1997). Organizations usually have distinguishable identities manifested in their organizational members' patterns of behavior. The concept of culture helps instructional leaders understand these patterns-what they are, how they came to be, and how they affect organizational performance (Gaziel, 1997). Gaziel (1997) found many organizations including schools have shown institutions work best when people are committed to certain commonly held values and are bonded to one another and to the organizations by means of symbols. Therefore, by articulating such values and using appropriate and effective symbols; by celebrating milestones, events, and accomplishments; and by engaging in various expressive activities, instructional

leaders can encourage strong culture that focus on improving education (Gaziel, 1997).

Leadership Matters

The school leader is considered one of the most influential factors in the development of the quality and character of a school. Transformational leadership is one style successful in the school improvement process. In addition, Sergiovanni (2007) claimed a transformational leader practices, provides a clear and concise goal, focuses on uniting the organization and encourages commitment. Hallinger and Heck (1998) stated transformational leadership has also been found to have an impact on teachers' perceptions of school conditions, their individual commitment to change, organizational learning, and student outcomes.

Leadership is a key component in the development and sustainment of school climate. Moolenaar, Daly, and Sleegers (2010) found transformational leadership was positively related to teachers' perceptions of their school's climate of innovation. Teacher perceptions of an instructional leader's leadership style can also influence school climate. Rhodes, Camic, Milburn, and Lowe (2009) found instructional leaders could improve teachers' perceptions of school climate by exhibiting collaborative decision-making and attempting to remove obstacles that prohibit teachers from focusing on instruction. As a teacher's perception of leadership improves, he or she becomes more effective in the classroom. Therefore, instructional leaders who want to positively impact school climate should focus on providing teachers with the necessary support and resources.

According to Vos, Westhuizen, Mentz, and Ellis (2012), an unhealthy school climate can lead to ineffectiveness. Discovering the climate of a school is an important component for developing strategies for management and improvement for student performance. School climate has a significant effect on the job satisfaction levels of staff members. It is especially important to evaluate organizational health to maintain positive work performance (Vos et al., 2012). Therefore, a sustainable, positive school climate encourages the development and learning necessary for students to become productive contributors to society.

Conclusions

Student achievement increases substantially in schools with collaborative work cultures fostering a professional learning community among teachers and others, focus continuously on improving instructional practice in light of student performance data, and link to standards and staff development support (Valentine, 2006). Therefore, instructional leaders, both formal and informal, help shape the nature of school culture and thus the nature of school improvement. Leadership and school culture go hand in hand, in both the development and the sustainability of school reform (Valentine, 2006). The school leader is instrumental in shaping the school's culture and leading reform and the presence and sustainability of reform is highly associated with the school's culture (Valentine, 2006).

The rituals and procedures common to most public schools also play a part in defining a school's culture (Hinde, 2015). Instructional leaders must be able to use their ideas to help others come together in a shared consensus and be able to make the lives of others more sensible and meaningful (Bell, 2012). However, an instructional leader, in particular, is the key to enacting change or frustrating it. Instructional leaders work closely with staff to clarify and support the innovation, and they work collaboratively with other change agents (i.e. vice-principal and lead

teachers) throughout the school year. They develop supportive organizational arrangements, consult, monitor, and reinforce the change process (Hinde, 2015). Therefore, schools with instructional leaders who have these qualities are amenable to change.

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