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## Cultural linkages and goal consensus: The principal's role in school improvement

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## Cultural linkages and goal consensus: The principal's role in school improvement

### Abstract

Significant interest in educational reform has been accelerated in the past decade by many factors. A combination of national commission reports and various research findings has created, what has been popularly termed, the effective schools movement. The growing occurrences of school improvement programs, aimed at improving the effectiveness of schools, has helped to reinforce several key factors that have become accepted as necessary ingredients for effective schools.

CULTURAL LINKAGES AND GOAL CONSENSUS:  
THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Educational Administration  
and Counseling  
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts in Education

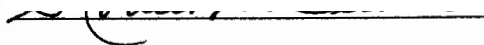
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Significant interest in educational reform has been accelerated in the past decade by many factors. A combination of national commission reports and various research findings has created, what has been popularly termed, the effective schools movement. The growing occurrences of school improvement programs, aimed at improving the effectiveness of schools, has helped to reinforce several key factors that have become accepted as necessary ingredients for effective schools.

The effective schools research indicates that no single factor accounts for school success in generating higher levels of student achievement (Robinson, 1985). Leadership is listed by the Educational Research Services' study, Effective Schools: A Summary of Research (1983), as the first of five elements common to effective schools. This summary along with others (Erickson, 1979; Gray & Deal, 1982; Brookover, 1979), connects effective leadership of principals with higher student achievement. Research has made substantial progress in defining the principal's key instructional leadership functions, (Bossert, 1982;

Hallinger & Murphy, 1982; Stallings, 1982).

Three dimensions of the principal's leadership role are defined by Phillip Hallinger (1982), as: defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting the school learning climate. It is in the first two dimensions, those of defining the school mission, and managing the instructional program that this present study will examine the influence of the principal's implementation strategies and the relation they have to goal consensus and overall teacher attitude towards the improvement effort.

Parallelling the emergence of the effective schools movement has been a recent growth in interest in the cultural side of business organizations (Smirich, 1983). Books such as Deal and Kennedy's Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life (1982), and Peters and Waterman's In Search of Excellence: Lessons From America's Best Run Companies (1982), both published in 1982, have spawned a movement towards reexamination and refocusing on the culture of the workplace.

In business, the connection between culture and performance is commonly accepted. In schools where the product is complex and intangible, a strong cohesive culture is even more important than in business, (Deal, 1987). The study of the relationship between school characteristics and productivity, done by Rutter (1979), identified 'ethos' as a powerful factor in educational performance.

Interestingly, significant overlap has occurred between the research done by the business sector, and that which has been done by the educational researchers on leadership. Berman and McLaughlin (1979) found that especially innovative school districts had cultures that stressed diversity of service delivery, the importance of service over "bureaucratic or political" concerns, open boundaries that allowed learning about new approaches and resources, and norms of mutual trust and encouragement for risk taking. Peters and Waterman (1982) conclude that the culture of excellent businesses stress a bias for action by trying things, norms encouraging the employee to

stay close to the customer, and a respect for individual autonomy combined with a belief that productivity comes through people. Additionally, strong definitions of what the company stands for and a commitment to high standards' (1982)

William Firestone and Bruce Wilson, of the Research for Better Schools Institute, have collaborated on several studies in the 1980s that have investigated various 'linkage' mechanisms a school principal may utilize in order to effect school improvement programs (1985). Firestone's and Wilson's work has delineated both bureaucratic and cultural linkages.

The purpose of the current study will be to examine the elements of culture present within a school that a principal should recognize.

#### Linkage and school culture

Linkage is a concept that several organizational theorists have discussed (Miles, 1982; Corwin, 1981; Rogers, 1962) but, E. K. Weick is primarily responsible for the concepts of school linkages and of schools as 'loosely coupled' institutions. Weick offers a variety of definitions



of coupling or linkage (Firestone & Wilson, 1987). Primarily, those definitions have to do with the coordination of individuals within organizations. Organizational linkage, in its simplest form, refers to the degree to which parts of a system are able to function in relation to one another (Corbett, Dawson, & Firestone, 1984).

Firestone and Herriot (1982) found that elementary schools have tighter linkages on the average than do secondary schools. They suggested that the age of the clientele, the existence of more specialists at the secondary level, the greater diversity of the curriculum, and the existence of formal departments at the secondary level all contribute to the difference in linkage characteristics. External and internal forces may act as linkage mechanisms: staff evaluations, development of curriculum guides, state mandates and temporary planning committees have all been shown to be coupling devices which serve to link people with one another (Sarason, 1971).

Secondary schools, by the nature of their greater departmentalization, have more horizontal and

vertical linkage possibilities. Because of this greater range, there is the accompanying ability for these linkages to not develop, or to be superficial at best.

Through their work with measuring goal consensus and centralization of influence, Herriot & Firestone (1983) uncovered a basic dilemma facing schools at all age levels; schoolwide improvement efforts often are not accomplished in those schools which fail to establish a collective agreement, or cultural "story". They utilized the School Organization Description and Analysis (SODA) questionnaire, developed by Research for Better Schools, Inc., (1983), to cluster schools into groupings according to organizational bureaucracy patterns.

Bruce Wilson joined with Herriot and Firestone (1984) to further refine the SODA questionnaire to take advantage of new developments in organizational theory and school effectiveness research. The School Assessment Survey (SAS) (1984), emerged as the product of four separate phases of research, the first of which utilized the SODA questionnaire.

Originally developed for research purposes, the SAS was found to have usefulness as a diagnostic instrument for practitioners (Johnston, 1986). In its fourth phase of refinement the SAS collected data from 4087 teachers in 159 schools throughout the country. The programs that use SAS as a data-based improvement effort operate on the premise that schools are individually unique, and can improve by making better use of their human resources, by opening up the decision making process, and by focusing on a few critical areas (Johnston, 1986).

As many researchers have noted; culture is an elusive, powerful, and often ill-defined 'something' that shapes our perceptions of the world around us (Deal, 1983). In their book Corporate Cultures, Deal and Kennedy, (1982) discuss culture as the integration of thought, speech, action, artifacts and their patterns of usage among human behaviors for transmitting knowledge. Terence Deal, of Vanderbilt University, has done extensive investigation into school culture for many years and admits that formal definitions often fall short of

capturing the "robustness" of such an elusive concept. Deal (1985), states:

Culture is an all-encompassing tapestry of meaning. Culture is "the way we do things around here." The ways are transmitted from generation to generation.

There is overlap in the use of school climate and that of school culture. As Brookover (1982) points out, when Lezotte (1980) defines school climate as, "the norms, beliefs and attitudes reflected in the patterns and behavior practices..." they are viewing school climate as a pattern of complex, interacting factors. It is when school climate is used to describe the physical environment that it strays from a cultural perspective. In this analysis, the principal will be viewed as a key cultural actor in the school setting. Moreover, the effect he/she has on the successful implementation of a school improvement program, and the relation the strategies he/she employs has on goal consensus will be closely examined.

#### Principals and the culture of effective schools

Emerging from the literature are three main areas of culture that are vital to understanding the

role of the principal in school improvement. The three areas are: cultural content, cultural symbols, and the communication patterns of the individuals within a school (Firestone & Wilson, 1984).

Before a principal can manipulate a school's culture he/she must be able to understand what their own world view preference is (Taylor, 1986). Sergiovanni (1987) uses the metaphor of mindscape to describe the phenomenon by which a leader structures their vision. To help sort out the important from the unimportant, a principal develops a mindscape which is composed of, "a mental image, view, theory, and set of beliefs " (Sergiovanni, p.117) that helps to orient the individual towards decision-making and an accompanying behavior set for problem-solving. Recognizing the key elements and significant actors in a school's culture represents the largest barrier in successfully harnessing and guiding a school towards improvement (Sarason, 1982).

What are the elements of culture which a principal must comprehend? Deal and Kennedy (1981)

considered these essential elements to be: shared values and beliefs, heroes and heroines, rituals and ceremonies, and an informal network of priests and priestesses, storytellers, spies and gossips.

If effective schools are those that over time have built a system of belief, supported by their cultural forms, which give meaning to the process of education; what initial strategies may be utilized by a principal which will result in a more successful implementation of a school improvement program?

### Conclusion

Schools have stories. Stories which reveal how they have come to be what they are. As Gray & Deal (1982) point out, in their research on urban schools, these stories describe what is valued by the school community. These functional stories capture and reveal the symbolic, dynamic essence of the school community (Sarason, 1982).

Gray & Deal (1982) conclude from their study of urban schools that the presence of a "functional we", a "collective story", is the basic essential

ingredient for the initiation or extension of all school development efforts.

If, as many researchers have contended, that the symbols of a culture are the means used to carry its content, (Firestone & Wilson, 1984; Gray & Deal; Smirich, 1983.), than the creation of a functional story by the collective school community will serve as a major kind of symbol. The creation of this functional story is dependant upon the principal's awareness that the eventual success of a school improvement effort will be inextricably linked to the symbolic importance he or she places upon the importance of being able to 'forge' this collective school community functional story.

Summarizing from the work of many who have examined the culture of schools and organizations, several major points are worth stating for principals to keep in mind.

First, a principal should know what their own preference as to values, philosophy, and commitments are. This is not easy to do, because of the trade-offs inherent in being strongly committed to one area, often means sacrificing emphasis on

something else. Strong cultures are built from strong commitments.

Second, be constantly aware of the power the principal has to symbolically shape the existing culture of the school. Treat everyone with respect and develop the true power of listening. Cultivate special relationships with those you identify as key cultural characters; the storytellers, the priests and priestesses, the key communicators and value reinforcers in your school's culture.

Third, a principal must be consistent in their dealings with the staff. Researchers have noted that the principal's daily routine involves hundreds of brief, impromptu interactions with numerous others. Therefore, it is important to be consistent and to communicate consistent values that you firmly believe in.

In conclusion, a capsulizing key thought from all this is: begin by recognizing the uniqueness of a school's culture, and look to the areas of cohesiveness, that set of shared values and beliefs that motivates, inspires and ultimately shapes behavior inside the school. Use the 'science' of



the effective schools research, and integrate it with the practice of artfully, symbolically interacting with the culture of the school.

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