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2021 Short-Term E-Exchange Program – Research Report

Awareness and Importance of School Culture

School Culture for Principals

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As part of the International [E-Exchange Program](https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/careers-at-education/scholarships-and-programs/international-teacher-exchange/short-term-e-exchange-program), a virtual exchange was completed between New South Wales and overseas counterparts. This exchange provided an opportunity for short-term one-on-one partnerships between educators with similar interests or fields.

This action research report on the shared focus area was completed following the 6-week program.

# Introduction

As part of the International Teacher Exchange program in 2021, we were required to complete our exchange with a colleague from Alberta, Canada online due to the impact on international travel thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic.

# Focus of the Study: Description of Current Practice

Our shared focus area was school culture. My partner was new to the position of school principal, working in a small school in this role for just over a year. I have been a principal for eight years but had experiences in the role that led me to have and share an interest with my partner in knowing how the culture of a school can impact on relationships with key stakeholders and learning outcomes for students.

In my current school, I would confidently say that our school culture is strong. One way of knowing this is via our annual involvement in the *Tell Them From Me* surveys. This is a self-evaluation tool for schools based on two complementary research paradigms (‘effective schools’ research and ‘Dimensions of Classroom and School Practices’). Amongst other markers of success as a school, these surveys measure the school’s abilities in the eight drivers of student learning. For all eight, we have graded as above state average for the last three years. This is not to say that we are without challenges where our school culture is concerned. This is why I keep this at the top of my priorities because it is this that strongly drives student learning outcomes.

As a new school principal, my partner was having challenges with bringing staff and parents together in a shared vision for the students.

# Signficant Learning: Findings

Unsurprising to me, relationships and communication are at the core of developing a strong school culture. If these are robust and mutually respectful and beneficial, problems within schools can be resolved more readily and successed can be celebrated more authentically.

The basic assumptions, beliefs and practices that are shared by the members of a school community need to be identified and defined as they shape the school’s operations and how it functions. The culture within a school becomes increasingly apparent the longer you are part of it so patience, listening, asking key questions, observing etc are all behaviours required of a school leader or principal in the initial days of integrating into a new setting. Once relationships are established, more challenging questions can be asked, for example, as trust has been built.

There tends to be three main categories when developing or sustaining and growing a school culture: verbal, behavioural and visual.

Verbal includes written and spoken, evident in things like the school motto, the school plan, a shared vision, the school’s goals and the language used by teachers when talking about school.

Behavioural is evident in the school’s procedures, ceremonies, rules and regulations, rewards and consequences, structures and curricula.

Visual is evident in the school’s symbols, uniforms and facilities.

Culture is the environment that surrounds you at work all of the time. It is a powerful element that shapes your work enjoyment, your work relationships and your work processes. Culture is not something that you can see, except through its physical manifestations in your workplace. Culture is insidious, either in a positive or negative way.

Culture is learned through interaction so is shaped by the people present. It is difficult to change but is possible through negotiation with the people involved.

# Conclusion: Recommendations

Work with key stakeholders to identify the school’s culture and to negotiate the way forward for improvement.

In a strong culture, there are many overlapping and cohesive interactions among all key stakeholders. In a weak culture, sparse interactions make it difficult for people to learn about it. Culture is only as strong as the connections that people within the school have with each other. So build opportunities for connections to build. Find ways to collaborate, to have parents involved, to communicate with our students about their home lives and their learning at school and to be inclusive of students at all levels of need, for example. Know your students and their families, as well as the staff who work in the school. Build trust and a shared vision for the students and the school that is reflective of the community and their needs and wants.

# Acknowledgements

Shafer, L. 2018, “What makes a good school culture?”

Starratt, R. 1993. “Transforming life in schools”. Staff development and appraisal. ACEA. Adapted from School focused training and development, NSW DET 1999.