The Complexities of culture

Phyllis Wilson Stivers

*The University of Montana*

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THE COMPLEXITIES OF CULTURE

by

Phyllis Wilson Stivers

B.S., Montana State University, 1979

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Interdisciplinary Studies
in Arts and Education

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Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date

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Using my role as teacher/principal at Charlo School, I have analyzed the "culture" of the school and the role of leadership. My research was enhanced by an in-depth survey of the literature on the topic of school leadership and structure.

I discuss how changing the metaphor for schools from organizations to communities shifts our ideas about school culture, leadership, and the change process.
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ORIGINAL PROPOSAL

The original focus of this study was to design a very detailed and complex “blueprint” which, when followed completely, would fully prepare me with all the “schooled” information and answers that would assist me in the role of “teacher/principal” at Charlo School. I now realize the context of my original proposal could not possibly have been accomplished in my lifetime and many questions and problems have no solutions, no beginnings, and no endings.

STATEMENT OF INTENT

The intent of this study evolved from suggestions by the Creative Pulse faculty. With the caution to stay focused and continue to remain soulfully committed to my profession, I was encouraged to integrally tie this project to my teacher/principal position.

The faculty explained “Working with a school is working with community and culture, and we know that cultures change through evolution, you can affect the evolutionary process, but only through an in-depth understanding of that culture and its various needs including its hubs for change.”

Through numerous discussions with administrators, teachers, and students, I found it a tremendous challenge to really feel knowledgeable in approaching the topic “culture.” I immediately purchased the two books the faculty suggested I read on leadership. However, my journey to understand culture and all its complexities had just begun.
Commitment to life long learning, I found myself ready to wade in and slowly immerse myself into the murky, messy, exhilarating waters of the complexities of culture and change.

**BACKGROUND**

When I first thought about pursuing my masters degree, my parents strongly urged me to pursue administration. At the time I was not interested in that area of education. I wanted to focus on expanding and improving my teaching skills as a Master Teacher. I have been president of our local teachers union for three years and the idea of deeper involvement in the arena of school politics did not interest me at all.

Towards the end of the 1996 school year the superintendent, elementary principal and high school principal called me into a meeting and proposed the possibility of a part time teacher/high school principal position and inquired if I would be interested in the job. My first question was to ask the three administrators if they felt I was ready for administration, which they all strongly supported. I voiced my interest and said I would think about it and discuss it with them in a week.

When this opportunity was proposed, I was completing the final summer of my masters program and I had to come to realize that it is the administration who has the authority to actually initiate and implement planned changes in a school’s instructional program, through the influence and direction of various constituencies in the school. It is clear to me that a school, no matter how dedicated and effective the teachers and support staff are, is only as strong as the leadership. Inevitably, actions or lack of action on the
part of the principal sets the climate and culture for the initiation, implementation, and realization of goals for meaningful and productive change. It is apparent to me that students and teachers become socialized to the environment of expectations created by the principal’s vision and leadership and the outcomes of student goals, work, and productivity should be descriptive of the planned change.

Recommendations from *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution* (NASSP, 1996) make it crystal clear that the role that should be played by the high school principal is the image maker for change: “The principal helps people believe in larger possibilities in order to sustain the hopes of those who want to create a better high school. He or she points to student learning as the compass by which the high school must set its course” (NASSP, p100).

The fact that I could remain in the classroom as a teacher made this job as teacher/principal an attractive possibility. I went ahead and submitted my resume and credentials to the superintendent. I went through a formal interview which consisted of twenty-five questions fired off by the superintendent and some side questions from three board trustees. The interview process was a good challenge, it made me think quickly on my feet and I felt confident in responding to questions. I was offered and accepted the job of teacher/principal and told the superintendent I would keep in touch until we could meet after summer graduate school was over.

At the end of July I met with the superintendent to put together a plan of responsibilities and shared responsibilities. Our junior high and high school runs on a "Block Schedule", four ninety-five minute periods a day. We made up a schedule so I
taught three periods a day with the fourth period being administrative work. Every other day I had a ninety-five minute prep which worked well with classroom planning and administrative planning. We felt that we were flexible enough that we could work around this schedule. I strongly voiced that I did not want to take on any responsibilities as athletic director; the superintendent and head coaches agreed to handle that area. I also did not want to end up being the “heavy” in the area of discipline, which we agreed to see how it worked by addressing discipline matters as they came up—noting that if an administrator was gone that day, naturally one of the other administrators would step in.

The biggest frustration for me was when the superintendent would overrule a discipline decision I had made. The three times he did this was in regards to an athlete and playing in a sports activity. There was no reasonable justification, only that the athlete was to play in the game. I soon learned I was going to be the loser in this game; it was not a hill to die on. But I made it clear to parents, teachers and students how I felt about the incident and where I stood. Interestingly, I soon found that discipline was one of my strongest areas. It seemed that where one, or both of the other administrators tended to “back a student into a corner,” where they “came out fighting,” I could talk through the problem and end up with a “win-win” situation. Students know I care about them--I respect their thoughts and input; students trust me--they see me “walk my talk” every day.

Before I agreed to this job, I visited with many retired as well as practicing administrators and the message was clear: they missed the interaction with the students in the classroom--students no longer had the advantage of seeing the administrator as a person in the classroom. It is very important to me to maintain my ties to the classroom.
I think that when people allow themselves to step out of the molds and common boundaries that schools function by, tremendous classroom learning, job sharing and sense of community can benefit everyone. Moving schools away from traditional visions of schooling and factory models of organization is a huge undertaking. By creating a teacher/principal position (a new concept at Charlo), our school has begun to initiate the process of school restructuring.

In 1996 Charlo school was asked to join Polson and Ronan School systems to form the Mission Valley Consortium (MVC) which was designed to oversee curriculum review, development, implementation, and assessment in order to be in compliance with the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) curriculum development standards. Curriculum development and discipline became my main responsibilities as teacher/principal. Overseeing the process of curriculum review, development, implementation, and assessment has been an enormous learning experience for me. I quickly found out that not all educators welcome change. “Restructuring” means different things to different people, but most people agree it is the belief that schools can change from within. I think that if we really want change to be systemic, it must occur slowly and be done patiently. If we want change, we must sincerely understand culture and the concept of “school culture.”

**ORIGINS OF THE CONCEPTS OF CULTURE**

Since time began, humans have recognized the spiritual side of life in human groups. Historically people have struggled to give this elusive, ethereal force a name: mythos, spirit, saga, magic. No matter what name was assigned, people stood in awe of
this powerful force because it gave life meaning, passion and purpose. Several studies have demonstrated that a positive school climate is associated with academic performance. Other educators called it ethos and again established a link between school ethos and academic achievement. Now, "culture" is being introduced as an alternative way to capture the powerful spiritual force in schools.

Whatever it is called, the spiritual side of human life is powerful. In today's schools, we desperately need an infusion of passion, purpose, and meaning. Decades of criticism and reform have caused the symbolic tapestry to unravel, robbing students and professionals of faith and life.

CRISIS

Today as never before, problems of the outside world encroach on the school environment. Child abuse, gangs, broken families, drugs, violence, and environmental problems all to varying degrees hinder the school's ability to educate students. The challenge for school leaders is to shape and nurture a school culture that can address these growing problems. The school can no longer be seen just as a place for basic instruction. For many students, it serves the function of a home, providing moral direction and a sense of belonging.

The concept of school culture offers school district leaders a more holistic way to look at the school. I believe that the leaders of our schools need to know their own values and have the passion and courage to live them, then by deepening an understanding of culture, school leaders will be better able to influence the values, beliefs, and underlying assumptions held by all members of the school community, with the goal of building an
ethos of excellence and caring. I believe crisis brings us face to face with our soul. In pain and anguish, we kindle our spirits and give strength to others. Leaders of our schools must begin to look inward. They must lead with soul; give gifts from the heart; bring passion into education.

CULTURE: ITS NEEDS FOR CHANGE

Schools, whether public or private, have a remarkable number of similarities. The schoolhouse is usually one large building or a series of buildings connected by breezeways. The buildings are divided into rooms in which younger children are grouped by age, and older children are grouped by age and/or interest. One adult in each room is responsible for developing the learning environment: decorating the room, preparing what will be taught, and overseeing the academic and social progress of his or her students.

An administration office that houses the principal and two beleaguered secretaries is located just inside the main entrance of the school. The library, filled with tattered books and maybe one or two computers, is usually found in the center of the school.

The day is segmented into periods; each subject has its moment. The days add up to weeks and then months. After one hundred and eighty days of "session" the whole system shuts down, quite arbitrarily, for nine to twelve weeks. In the autumn school starts up again. The teachers begin their rituals of room preparation, teaching, and assessing all over with a new group of children.

Each year thousands of children graduate and thousands more enter kindergarten. Thousands of teachers leave the profession (retirements, death, attrition) and thousands
enter in their place. Yet schools as organizations vary little in structure. They maintain a remarkable resemblance to each another year...after year...after year.

Despite structural similarities, each school campus is its own world filled with individuals who have developed patterns of communication, rituals, traditions, and norms of behavior unique to their site. The history of the place, the neighborhood in which the school is located, the leadership in the building, the beliefs, assumptions, shared beliefs, and stories of those who work within the school combine to create what educational researchers refer to as, “school culture” (Deal, 1987).

Culture is “the way people do things” in that particular place. Some characteristics of a culture are obvious, others more elusive. Edgar Schein (1985) describes cultures as having three levels: the artifacts level, the values and beliefs level, and the underlying assumption level. The artifacts level includes the characteristics of a culture that are most immediately obvious: daily rituals, ceremonies, the physical appearance of the people and place. In a school culture the artifact level would include the daily bulletins, the murals (or graffiti) on the walls, and whether there are bells or not and when they ring. In schools, the artifact level is best described as the “school climate.”

The “values and beliefs” level includes the articulated, explicit beliefs and values around which the culture is organized. “Respect others.” This is a common expectation among classroom across America. This is an example of a shared value and belief educators have about how citizens should be treating others: with respect. School staffs often adopt their own unique slogan that captures a common value or belief: “Kids count!” “Commitment to excellence.” “Parents are welcome here!”

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The third level Schein’s model describes is the level of “underlying assumptions.” This is what Elliot Eisner would call “the hidden curriculum” (1994). Underlying assumptions are the messages behind actions, events, rituals, ceremonies, language, and nonverbals—the unspoken, implied message. For example, school policy requires students to maintain a grade point average of 2.5 to be eligible to play in extracurricular sports. On the night before the game, a coach pressures a colleague to change a student’s grade so the student will be eligible to play in the next game. What is implied here? There are several implied messages here: pressuring colleagues to break policy is appropriate in this culture; students need not take academic requirements too seriously at this school since coaches are willing to intimidate their colleagues into changing grades.

Elliot Eisner describes what he calls the “null curriculum...”

It is my thesis that what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach. I argue this position because ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problem (Eisner, E., 1985).

For these two researchers what is not included is as interesting as what is.

Culture exerts a powerful influence upon people because it tells them what is important and how to act. In seeking to increase student achievement, I wanted to look at our school’s total environment, its climate and cultures, to assess the expectations and support for all students’ success. Coupled with “trusting yourself” and “gut instincts” I wanted to really research school culture and change. It was not going to be good enough for me to say “follow me, this is what we need.” I wanted to do the work and research in order to gain the background knowledge and understanding that it would take to
successfully entice enough colleagues, students, parents and community members to form a small unified band of people committed to the wellness of education. I wanted to gather the "risk takers," "adventurers," the educators who were truly committed to the belief that all children can learn; to increase student achievement.

Before I would feel confident in my cause, I knew I needed to read, study, and absorb information and research of educators that my graduate committee had suggested. The MVC had begun to establish a small yet current library of research by top educators, along with offering courses in professional development through The University of Montana and Montana State University. I used these resources to challenge myself by doing a well-documented research project within my newly created position. I wanted to "ground" my philosophy and "take a firm stand on educational issues" that effect today's students. It is important to me to have solid evidence; to produce the documents and studies that will support and bring reason to newly introduced ways of teaching and motivating students.

This also gave me a strong, sturdy answer to those who fling back "One can manipulate research to say and support anything one wants it to"—and I now respond with—"I have supported my cause with researched facts and documentation, when you can produce the research that negates this, I would be glad to visit about it." No one has once been able to challenge or refute the research I have offered as evidence for the imperative need of restructuring within our schools today. In my research, I have learned the importance of assessment. It is imperative that the assessment tool is designed to accurately measure the success of our schools academically and, just as importantly,
holistically. I wanted to find a research design that would compliment my philosophy of education: we must educate our children from a humanistic approach—teach from the heart and soul.

The following two excerpts are from ethnographic portraiture describing two schools with markedly different norms of behavior. The schools are located in the same district in similar socioeconomic neighborhoods. Adelaide Elementary is a place of warmth and joy. Sierra Lake is not such a nice place to be.

"At Adelaide"

As though charmed by a spell, Adelaide has always been a caring, safe place to be. Teachers have passed through the school, as have principals, but regardless of the names of staff members, the spirit of Adelaide has been one of cohesive caring. "There's such a strong sense of community and family here. There is a pervasive feeling of caring at Adelaide," remarked a kindergarten teacher. From another teacher who has been at Adelaide for fifteen years, "It's always been like this. Teachers have come and gone, but this has always been a caring place to be." When I questioned a teacher who has been on the Adelaide staff for twenty-four years about the remarkable degree of common, shared behavior among the staff he remarked simply, "Yes, the staff gets along really well." I pressed, "Do you have a mission statement which binds you together towards a common goal?" His response, "We, ah, yes, we do have a mission statement. It's written somewhere. I was on the committee. Oh yeah, it's in the handbook." The endemic love and caring of Adelaide Staff members stems from something far deeper than the words of a mission statement: the beliefs which bind them together are integrated into their very being and comes straight from the heart. "Pervasive caring," is evident; staff members complement one another frequently, both overtly and ritualistically; they hug daily, give gifts unselfishly, gently tease one another, and laugh often. (Sagmiller, 1994)

Sierra Lake

The philosophical differences between teachers have caused a strong undercurrent at Sierra Lake. Despite the faculty's implicit agreement to isolate themselves and ignore their differences, inevitable conflicts regarding plans of action, resource dissemination, and primarily
disagreements about curriculum content, eventually lead to the development of “adversarial” and “competitive” relationships. As the battles continued at Sierra Lake teachers began to celebrate their victories and resent their losses.

Despite staff turnover every year, the significant philosophical differences between staff members have endured. By the third year of operation in this school the core team recognized the damage being done. They requested that a negotiator be hired to help release some of the tension and build trust among the staff. This request was quickly squelched by the principal.

During the fourth year of operation resentments and friction continued to exist between the teachers. Isolationism and “parallel play,” (Barth, 1990) teachers closing their doors and working alone, helped everyone cope with the discord. Issues were not addressed directly—children came and went, and the cold, unfriendly atmosphere continued. As one teacher complained, “We don’t even need to agree with one another. I don’t mind teaching next door to someone I disagree with. I just wish I could come to work without getting a knot in my stomach wondering what’s going to happen today. I’m just exhausted from all this bickering.” (Sagmiller, 1994)

From these two excerpts it is obvious that at Adelaide School, teachers, administrators, parents and students feel like they are part of one, cohesive family—there is a strong, quiet leadership in practice. Because everyone truly “cares,” people take the responsibility of ensuring new people feel welcome and comfortable. This is a school where everyone from cooks, janitors, bus drivers to administration feels that what they do and say counts. I think this is an excellent example of people who “walk their talk.”

Yes—there is a written mission statement (a common goal), but for a school to function in this manner everyone must model a belief in these goals. People have chosen to emulate a caring attitude at Adelaide and live this attitude. This school, to me, emulates “leading with soul”—giving gifts from the heart, there is caring and love—it is a humanistic school.
At Sierra Lake School there seems to be a lack of trust, no one cares what anyone else is doing. No one is willing to bring issues to the table and confront these problems. Staff doesn’t feel validated, so anger and resentment continue to build. The principal must feel threatened and distrustful of the staff in turning down the request that a negotiator be brought in. This is a destructive atmosphere for any organization—children will be the ones who suffer from this situation.

A lone voice in the educational literature is that of Thomas Sergiovanni. His recent works, which include *The Principalship* (1991), *Moral Leadership: Getting to the Heart of School Improvement* (1992), *Building Community in Schools* (1994), and, most recently, *Leadership for the Schoolhouse* (1996), have a distinctly different conception of leadership and schooling. Sergiovanni, who spent the early years of his career as an organizational theorist, argues now that he and his colleagues have been using the wrong metaphor to interpret and improve schools. He argues that schools are not organizations, they are, or need to become, communities. Sierra Lake School, to me, is simply a “structure” which is called a school. There is no “community” by any sense. As human beings, we seek balance; a school system, too, needs balance. When there is a challenge in the system, all the people in the school need to respond by working together to regain that balance. Knocked out of equilibrium, this system, such as Sierra Lake, must respond and make some evolutionary adaptations that will result in a functioning school system. This is the “day of reckoning”—the pivotal point at which a school system knows it must, it has to, begin restructuring. These portraits provide evidence for what many have suspected: some schools are more effective learning cultures than others. As shown in the Adelaide
and Sierra Lake portraits, schools where people feel valued and appreciated; people are more likely to take cognitive risks necessary in the process of learning (Lampert, 1990; Noddings, 1992; Effective School Research, 1995). I think that schools that provide an effective learning culture view teaching children as an exciting, challenging process of exploration—this can be fun, too.

We are slowly beginning to realize that the goal of education is not solely measured by tests. For me, something from within keeps coming back to hearts, soul, the nurturing of our children. If we expect children to internalize "life long learning," then the process of education must be motivating. I try to model "intrinsic motivation" everyday for myself as well as students, teachers, and community. There is a sign above my door, "the journey is the reward." This sign has provided numerous opportunities to discuss life, happiness, goals—the skills that students need to develop in order to become productive, positive, contributing members of our global society.

EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH DESIGNS

In their study, "Leadership and Culture-Building in Schools: Quantitative and Qualitative Understandings" (1990), Sashkin and Sashkin, study the idea of leadership in contrast to "administration." Before this study, investigations of "leadership" had been primarily qualitative; the Sashkins wanted to show how quantitative data can be used to complement the qualitative findings. The research design for this study includes the use of case studies and three quantitative instruments: the Leader Behavior Questionnaire, the School Culture Assessment Questionnaire, and the Frames of Reference Questionnaire.
The Frames of Reference Questionnaire (FOR) was designed by Sashkin and Morris in 1987 (Sashkin & Sashkin, 1990) and is based on Bolman and Deal's work in which four frames of reference can be used to understand people's behavior in organizations: the structural frame, the human resource frame, the political frame, and the symbolic frame (Bolman & Deal, 1984). The Frames of Reference questionnaire assesses the extent to which people in an organization think in terms of one or another of these "frames of reference."

The School Culture Assessment Questionnaire (SCAQ) was designed by Sashkin and Sashkin and is based on the work of "Parsonian functions" (Bolman and Deal, 1984). "These functions are labeled as 'cultural strength' (latent pattern maintenance), 'managing change' (adaptation), 'teamwork' (integration), and 'achieving and community orientation' (goal attainment)." (Sashkin and Sashkin, 1990).

The Leader Behavior Questionnaire measures specific leadership behaviors: clarity of communication, communication skills, consistency, creating opportunities, effectance (the belief that one can have an effect on one's environment), one's need for power, cognitive complexity, adaptation, and "the degree to which the leader has been able to incorporate into the organization's culture certain values thought to facilitate effective functioning.

The authors of each of the assessment models I have discussed consider schools to be organizations. The terminology and language used to describe each model illustrates this: "management teams," "outcomes," "strategic planning," "facilitate effective functioning—"The Sashkin and Sashkin model is the only plan that includes a qualitative

...
component. From an organizational perspective, the case studies are a nice touch; from a community perspective this is a shame. So now we must continue the search for a better assessment model. To me, this model must include community—we must take more of a "humanistic" assessment approach. I keep asking myself the question, "Can schools learn?" Is it possible for our schools to become more than reproduction institutions, and move toward becoming a learning organization? It doesn’t make sense to constantly jump from one “innovation” to another. This, to me, does not reflect a learning organization.

Most school improvement seems to have been piecemeal attempts with little effect on our schools and students. The debate has been traditional concerns over "standards" and "accountability," which paralyzes our schools and does not allow them to move forward. Perhaps we need a new debate: about the challenges that our students will be facing in their early adult lives and how present societies—and in particular, schools—can help to prepare them for that future. Sergiovanni asks, when will educators quit borrowing theory from other disciplines and begin to create their own way of being? (Sergiovanni, T., Leadership for the Schoolhouse, 1996). Three noted educational researchers, Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, Robert Coles, and Phillip Jackson, may have done just that (Lawrence Lightfoot, 1983).

**INSTRUMENTS FOR MEASURING CULTURE**

In the early 1980s Stephen Graubard, editor of *Daedalus: the Journal of the Academy of Arts and Sciences*, gathered together a group of academics and practitioners to study secondary schools. After a two-year period of deliberation the group decided it
needed a more comprehensive understanding of secondary schools: something beyond their and their children’s experiences. Lightfoot, Coles, and Jackson were selected to work as a team to investigate three schools acknowledged for excellence. Their assignment was to bring back a “picture” of what was happening in those schools. Each researcher brought to the project his or her own perspective. They decided to collect data at each site independently for three or four days. After the data had been collected, the team gathered to collaboratively write a description of the school. The researchers used both formal and informal interviews, documents, observations, and ethnographic description to collect their data.

In a sense, what the team created was an abbreviated version of an ethnography. Portraits do not require the extensive longitudinal data collection that a true ethnography requires; instead they rely upon the cross referential findings of three (or more) independent researchers. Questions in Lightfoot and her colleagues’ original research were ethnographic in nature: Tell me about your school. What are the most meaningful things you do during your day here? Lightfoot described the new methodology as follows:

Not only were the techniques of observation, interviewing, and ethnographic description similar to my earlier research experiences, but the values and assumptions that have shaped my work also held firm with the creation of portraits. For example, I visited the schools with a commitment to holistic, complex, contextual descriptions of reality; with a belief that environments and processes should be examined from the outsider’s more distant perspective and the insider’s immediate, subjective view; that the truth lies in the integration of various perspectives rather than in the choice of one as dominant and “objective”; that I must always listen for the deviant voice as an important version of the truth (and as an indicator of what the culture or social group defines as normal), not disregard it as
outside of the central pattern . . . I also believe research should be critical . . . Given these empirical tendencies and value positions, it is not surprising that the portraits I have written move from the inside out, search for the unspoken (often unrecognized) institutional and interpersonal conflicts, listen for the minority voices and deviant views, and seek to capture the essences, rather than the visible symbols, of school life (Lightfoot, pp. 13-14).

Case studies, portraiture and ethnographies will never be free of observer bias. The very nature of the research method requires that observer bias be present. In qualitative research the researcher is the measurement instrument. It is through her observations and interviews that data is collected. For this reason qualitative researchers must be explicit about their own biases as Lightfoot has done. By noting their cultural and professional bias the researchers are acknowledging how the data collection process has been influenced by “the measurement instrument.” Qualitative researchers can attempt to control for their observer bias through the use of a data triangulation: recording observable behaviors, cross referencing them with formal and informal interviews and seeking congruence between what is observed and what “natives” do and believe. The validity of a qualitative study relies on the integrity of the researcher and her thoroughness in a triangulation. Case studies, portraits, and ethnographies are not designed to be generalizable to many different populations. An in-depth interpretation of one culture may help the reader see relationships or similarities to another culture. Educators and researchers who attempt to control naturalistic variables in order to measure a particular change often do not recognize the value of ethnographic research.

Being interested in developing school communities, portraitures and ethnographies are the methodology of my choice. As we engage in conversation with the people of the

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community we are able to investigate the deep underlying ideas, beliefs and assumptions of those from whom the culture emerges. As we observe the behaviors, rituals and events within the community we can develop an understanding and appreciation for why things are as they are. The language people use to describe themselves, their colleagues, their work, their school, their leader, provides us with a unique insight into the values of those within the culture.

Ethnographies are in-depth studies of specific cultures. Portraits are a version of ethnographies and should be understood as such. The purpose of both methodologies, however, is to illuminate rather than advise. Wolcott writes, “ethnographic accounts do not point the way to policy decisions; they do not give clues to what should be done differently, nor do they suggest how best to proceed. Ethnographic attention tends to focus on how things are and how they got that way, while educators are preoccupied with what education can become. Educators tend to be action oriented, but ethnography does not point out the lessons to be gained or the action that should be taken” (Wolcott, H.F., 1988).

From a community and ethnographic perspective, change is viewed as a natural force always at work within the school community; it is not an event to be planned and managed. To me, the “illumination” of an educational community provides a window to reality which only makes sense when evaluating our schools and their souls. This is more of a humanistic approach to assessing our schools.
A PORTRAIT OF CHARLO SCHOOL

The Charlo school district 7J is a small rural school district, consisting of 180 students in the elementary school and 180 in the Jr. High school. We live in an agricultural community that is sparsely populated and neighbors are separated by miles of space. Travel is restricted to a north/south flow because we live in a valley surrounded by mountains. Some students commute over an hour to get to and from school each day. There is a high student mobility rate of about forty percent as students move throughout our valley to attend schools within the area. Unemployment is ten percent in Lake County and we are classified as a labor surplus area. Fifty percent of our students receive free or reduced lunch. We live on the Flathead Indian Reservation and twenty percent of our students are Native American.

Charlo’s student population is ordered into social strata, which with the exception of having perhaps fewer classifications, differs little from any other school. However, Charlo’s current system seems best suited to meeting the needs of the students typically perceived as scholar-athletes. The need of scholar non-athletes are met reasonably well, while the needs of students with high vocational interest and motivation and low conventional academic skill levels are unable to be thoroughly addressed.

Many of Charlo’s teaching staff coaches, which may explain the strong focus on athletics and athletic performance. Athletics is allowed to interfere with conventional academic progress (note I do not say that athletics interferes with a student’s education; education is not so narrow as academics). The amount of school time missed in order to travel to various sports events is significant and illustrates the athletic focus. There is a
system of prearranged absence forms in place which allegedly makes students responsible for their work on the day(s) they miss prior to leaving for their activity, but teachers usually just accommodate the absences and have the student make up their work after they return. Interesting enough, the vast majority of honor roll students and students involved in highly academic clubs and activities are also athletes. This seems to refute a connection between in class time and academic achievement, or support the notion of significant classroom time versus insignificant classroom time (raises many questions, does it not?) I postulate a more evident correlation between academic and athletic success in Charlo and I suspect it lies in parental and community support and attitudes.

The fact that parental involvement and support increase a student’s chances of success in any endeavor is no great secret, but the expectations of achievement create a mentality within the Charlo community that pervades the school and exerts its presence on student performance. Students who perform well both in school and on the field or court are granted positions of greater prestige and popularity. Once again, this is no surprise, nor is it greatly different from thousands of other public schools across the nation. The major difference is how well Charlo has adapted its ability to socialize and instruct its student to this paradigm. This may or may not be a conscious phenomenon, but being unaware of a force does not discount its effects. The coaching/sports oriented school majority of faculty and students seem to work very well together, while the non-coaching staff and non-athlete scholars also seem to work very well together. This is not to say that any teachers and/or students can not or do not work very well together under our current context regardless of these limited and fallible designations, but merely to propose
that based upon student performance, the athletes find Charlo school better suited to their learning styles.

The group that was left out of the above assessment deserves its own segment; the high vocational aptitude and interest groups has been given the semi-affectionate moniker ‘The Wrangler Gang” by the rest of the school. Marked by learning disabilities within our conventional context and a general feeling of scholastic apathy, the Wrangler Gang’s needs are not met. This is not necessarily because the teachers don’t care--this group is a constant topic of concern--but because the school is not sufficiently staffed or funded to accommodate them. This group of students does not relate well to the majority of the staff or student populace and communicates their frustration at this situation by acts of disrespect, insubordination and vandalism--this by no means indicates that all aforementioned acts are attributed to this group, but a significant amount are. However, I do not feel this is done out of malice but perhaps out of a combination of boredom and resentment. These students simply do not have enough classes to meet their needs, nor do they have alternative fields to excel in--which they are capable of doing--and in turn earning positions of respect among their peers. They are often shuffled around to various humanities and special ed classes in an effort to find a place for them to sit for the space of one or more periods.

I stress that this is not because the staff does not care about these students’ education, but because many staff members are often unable to meet their needs. In turn, these students make little effort to make the best of their situation and try to glean what they can from what the circumstances offer; I submit this is a learned behavior that they
refuse to unlearn. The positive parental involvement factor does not figure in to this equation, further supporting the correlation between the relative success of the students in Charlo school and the support of family and community.

I think that teachers and principals need a new mission. That teachers and principals “burn out” and are losing professional prestige and authority is old news. This problem cannot be resolved by “pep talks” or by better salaries (although this is needed). Developing learning organizations can be dealt with only by defining a whole new mission for teachers and principals as (I like to refer to) the “guardian angels” of students who prepare for the global age. I have experienced that when principals and teachers reach out to others, there is more of a “team attitude.” People will go the extra mile so everyone wins. At Charlo, I think our people do reach out to help each other and our students do feel cared about, but everyone must commit themselves. Everyday is a new day with new challenges.

The following are “snapshots” of challenging situations that have occurred at Charlo School. Any situation can be dealt with in many ways. I think the manner in which these challenges were handled prove that our school community is a caring, nurturing place to be.

October 15, 1996 1:10-1:15

- a student informs me there is a girl in the locker room who can not go to class because another girl has stolen her dress and is wearing it to her favorite teacher’s class.
• as I walked into an eight grade team-room, I see two students laying on the floor appearing to be asleep.

• The elementary principal comes to inform me that a man is in the front office who has introduced himself as the father of two of my students and states that he intends to leave and take his children with him.

The first issue I addressed was the third situation. I had to have the secretary go get the two students and take them up to the district office. The father was given a seat in the office while we talked to him and looked for a schedule of classes. I called the mother to find out what was going on. There was a restraining order against the father and he was not to have contact with the children. I then called the police who arrested the father and removed him from the school.

I then went to the girl in the locker room, where an aide had been sent to stay with the girl until I came. Apparently the girl in the questionable dress just decided to take the dress and wear it. The girl in question was pulled from class and clothing returned. Girl in question then phoned her mother in my presence to explain the situation.

When I expressed an interest in what the classroom activities were the teacher enthusiastically explained that the students were engaged in monitoring heart rate. Various “lab students” rested, jumped rope, walked and sat. Students then recorded heart rates. This answered my question of “students appearing to be sleeping on the floor”—they were the “resting” lab participants (ten minutes) waiting to have their heart rates monitored.
October 29, 11:25-12:10

- The counselor informs me that a parent has come to a conference at school with his child who has several bruises on his face. The parent has proudly explained that he gave the child these bruises as a form of punishment.

- A teacher sends a student to the office to tell me that while demonstrating fire-building techniques, he has set off the sprinkler system for the entire wing of the school.

- A teacher comes to me and reports that the entire class of eight grade students refuse to clean up their team area after a construction project.

The first task was to address the sprinkler system because it concerned the computer room and the high school library. I sent the head janitor out and informed the superintendent. I suggested later to the teacher to take his fire-building lessons outside during an appropriate time of the year. We also made him a Smokey the Bear Award.

The student was sent to one of our teachers who is an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) to check out his bruises. In visiting with the father, he had no problem taking his kid to task when the kid did not mind. No one was going to tell him how to raise his kid and the father stormed out taking the boy with him. The sheriff was called to take a statement and Lake County Family Services was also called.

Students were told that the time they were wasting would be made up during their lunch period. Students got busy and cleaned up the area. This was a situation involving a student teacher and the class. It was clearly a power issue. The student teacher shared the incidence with the faculty in the teachers lounge. This ended up being a great
discussion about motivation and positive attitudes, teachers being part of the classroom, not viewed as the person with the power. We gave the student teacher a “Big Stick” award.

November 14, 1996 9:15 am

- A teacher brought a senior, special education girl to me. After being pinched on the rear end, the girl in question turned around and punched another student in the jaw and rendered him unconscious.

I left the girl in the office under the secretary’s supervision. On my way to the Special Ed room I picked up the science teacher who is also an EMT. When we arrived at the room, the student was conscious and alert. The ambulance had been called and the student went to the hospital. His parents were called and met him there. All in all, this was probably the most beneficial incident in the boy’s young life. He was totally humiliated in front of his peers. He had been a continuous discipline problem and constantly picked on vulnerable classmates. He became a “changed man.” The girl in question had never been a problem. She responded in an understandable manner. The counselor and I visited with her and her mother about appropriate behavior and trying not to act impulsively. In visiting, the girl asked me, “but Stivers, wouldn’t you have done the same thing?” I told her that I understood how she felt and if I didn’t keep an “awareness of myself” I probably would have done the same thing. However, I know that type of behavior wasn’t acceptable, so of course I would never slug someone. She was very serious and very sorry that she was not setting a good example for her classmates.
January 21, 1997

- A teacher brought two students to see me. The students report they have been living at home alone for six weeks while their parents were on vacation in Tahiti. They claim to have run out of food and money two days ago.

The two students (ages sixteen and seventeen) and I immediately checked out and walked to the local cafe for breakfast. They explained they were doing okay and several neighbors checked in on them but they had not done a very good job of managing their money. After returning to school (me, short twenty-six dollars) I visited with the school counselor and the superintendent. It was decided that the students were fine, they did have relatives two blocks away who checked in on them. We didn’t think they were going to starve to death. However, upon the parents return, the counselor called them and we did get together and discuss the situation and the wellness of their children. It’s a small community and the superintendent did not want any hard feelings to come from this incident.

March 19, 1996 3:15 p.m.

- A student attempts to punch a teacher, misses, hits a concrete wall and breaks his hand.

In visiting with the student while the math teacher (trained EMT) iced and bandaged his hand, he admitted he was mad at the teacher because he flunked his math final. He acted without thinking. His parents were immediately called, they were there while the student explained his case. He was expelled from school.
May 29, 1997 2:30 p.m.

- Three male students were helping the janitor move extra desks and equipment to the store in the basement of the school.

May 30, 1997 8:30 am

The janitor came to report to me that the three boys who helped move equipment the day before, had thrown old cans of paint, that was stored in this room, all over the walls. I went down to the store room and found that about one to two pints of paint had been thrown on the back room wall where students had been allowed in prior years to “leave their mark.” I kind of laughed and asked the janitor “this is what you are so steamed about?” Not really. The janitor was mad because these boys had been involved in incidents throughout their school years and they always “lied their way out of everything.” The janitor went to the superintendent to “have these little liars expelled from school,” and I went to quickly find the boys. I pulled them out of class individually and said, “You have fifteen seconds to tell me what happened in the store room and I know you’re going to tell me the truth.” Two of the boys came clean immediately. The third and oldest boy said, “Stivers, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I said, “You now have ten seconds to tell me the truth.” I brought all three of the boys to the office, placed one at one end, one at the other, and one in my room and asked them to write down their actions and sign their name. The oldest student, in my room, immediately burst into tears and said that his probation officer would now be contacted and his accumulation of points would send him to the Miles City boys institution. So he was going to go tell the superintendent off and tell him exactly what he thought of him before
he expelled him from school. I agreed with him and said I thought he did need to talk to
the superintendent and if he was respectful and told the truth that the superintendent did
have the authority to see that his probation officer wasn’t contacted. And that he needed
to start taking responsibility for his actions and think before he acted, especially on an
impulsive act. Parents were contacted and when it was all said and done, the three boys
were suspended from school for the last three days of school and the probation officer was
not contacted.

This was a great day for me. For all the trouble these students had been in and all
the lying they had done, this was the first time they had told the truth. Before they left
school they stopped and thanked me for trusting them. I could have cried. They have
been up to visit me this summer and help do chores around the place. I guess this is what
it is all about. The rewards maybe few and far between but when they happen, they are
monumental.

I see the major challenge for students in today’s society as well as in the future is
to live in harmony with people of other cultures and with nature, engage in creative
partnerships, master a high technological society, take responsibility for other persons,
work for a more peaceful world, and be prepared to live in an international society. In
order to prepare our students for these challenges, our schools must become humanistic.
Our schools will grow and flourish only if the individuals within them grow. I even
propose a creative title for a school’s principal—the “cultural leader and facilitator.”
LEADERSHIP: A NEW PARADIGM

Organizations are designed around one of three theories: the “Pyramid theory,” the “Railroad” theory, and the currently popular “High Performance theory” (Sergiovanni, 1996, p. 10). The Pyramid theory is the typical hierarchical system of control and management. The work of others is controlled by one person who is delegated to supervise, direct, and inspect. The Pyramid theory “is particularly suited to organizations that need to produce standardized products in uniform ways, and to situations where deviations hinder rather than promote effectiveness—but when the Pyramid theory is applied to schools—the work of the principals and teachers becomes increasingly simplified and standardized, and the outcomes of schools also come to share these features of simplicity and standardization” (p.10). The Pyramid theory binds employees to rules and regulations of the system.

The Railroad theory is designed to “control the work of people who do different jobs, meet different responsibilities, and work in different locations by standardizing the work processes [sic] they engage in” (Sergiovanni, 1996). Following clear directions about the “one best way to get the job done,” employees simply follow tracks to get from one goal to another, from one place to another. Jobs that lend themselves to predictability and determination are particularly served by the Railroad theory. But when the Railroad theory is applied to schools, “an instructional delivery system is created. Specific objectives are identified and tightly aligned to an explicit curriculum. Teachers are supervised and evaluated and students are tested to ensure that the approved curriculum
and teaching scripts are being followed” (p.11). In the Railroad system, people are connected to scripted work.

The High Performance Theory de-emphasizes the top-down hierarchical model of the Pyramid and Railroad theories. Instead, it calls for decentralization of power: workers are to have more power to make their own decisions. This theory is highly appealing to educational reformists; it loosens up the process of schooling and puts the focus on the “ends.” The “ends” in the schooling process are the learning outcomes, and teachers, in High Performance theory, are free to use any means they wish to help their students reach the standardized learning outcomes. Sergiovanni writes, “Once principals and teachers are empowered to make decisions about how they will do the assigned work, it is assumed that they will be more motivated, committed and satisfied. The formula for success is as follows: High Performance goals combined with high performing workers will result in high performing learning for students” (p. 12). People who work within the High Performance Pyramid system are connected to outcomes.

Our new understandings about learning will have important pedagogical implications only if educators believe that teaching influences students’ intellectual growth. Teachers who deny the fact that their practice influences the learning of their students free themselves from any responsibility to improve. A critical characteristic of an effective school is a staff that has a focus upon learning, and a shared belief that all children can learn. The implied message here is: “What I do makes a difference.” Teachers who believe they make a difference, make a difference, I believe that principals who believe that they make a difference, make a difference.

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TEACHER LEADER

The actual power of a leader to influence the culture of a school lies somewhere between efficacy and total responsibility. A leader is indeed subject to the norms and other socializing forces of the school. Developing an organizational culture and shaping the creative process of its evolution is the unique and essential function of leadership. Nevertheless, the leader alone cannot bring about change in the norms of a school because, by definition, cultural transformation is a collaborative activity. The leader must engage others both inside and outside the school if he or she is to effect any meaningful changes in the school’s culture. To me, an important prerequisite is a willingness to relinquish some authority and control over the administrative and creative process.

Making change possible may be the best way to describe the leader’s role. Adopting a design framework means gathering an understanding of the administrative avenues best suited for change. The leader knows how to put a vision or a plan into action, but that doesn't mean that a leader must always have a rational plan or strategy. To the contrary, a leader should be continually learning and trying new strategies that make creative, new ways of teaching and learning possible.

FRUSTRATIONS: The Way Schools Are

Today’s schools are expected to reform themselves in a world where contradictions and irrationalities of political confusion, conflicting demands, and swirling social problems have invaded the serenity of playgrounds, hallways, and classrooms. In attempting to grapple simultaneously with day-to-day stress and systemic reform, many
schools have sold their souls to those who advocate hardheaded, bottom-line, rational approaches to organizational change.

Two of the most prominent business approaches are restructuring and re-engineering. Restructuring spotlight roles, relationships, and power, but fails to mobilize or harness the commitment and potential of teachers and students. Re-engineering, a newer approach, is directed at rethinking and redesigning how to create products and services but fails to consider that children's learning can't be reduced to a linear sequence of events.

Schools have also tried strategic planning, total quality management, site-based management, and a spate of other management approaches. But none has had a significant impact because they all presume that if you run schools like businesses, everything will improve. The trouble is that children are not products, miniature workers, or raw materials. Our children and their learning are too important and complex for such solutions.

Schools are not businesses; they are sanctuaries for children that should be comforting, fulfilling, and exciting work environments where children's spirits can soar. They should be places of goodness that are imaginative, caring, idealistic and creative. To create such sanctuaries, communities need to develop covenants with their schools that define values the school stands for. These covenants should define virtue and what it means for schools; they should clarify what is ethical practice in education and what is not, what has integrity and what does not, and the differences between the obligations and responsibilities of educators. Schools should have soul!
To me, it is ironic that the answer to school improvement may rest more in the heart than the head. Schools with strong hearts and souls that are dedicated to noble ideas are far more preferable to any scientific, multi-step corporate management plan.

**INSIGHTS: The Way Schools Could Be**

The impact between individual learning that a teacher might do and the notion of a team or an entire organization of learning is amazing. I think there is a major difference between individual capability and individual learning and collective learning. But it is rarely reflected in how schools are organized, because education is so highly individualistic. Many people are advocating cooperative learning for kids, but the idea that teachers and administrators ought to learn together really hasn't gone too far.

The fragmentation that exists in the education process is extraordinary. Part of it is embedded in our theory of knowledge. Our theory of knowledge puts knowledge in cubbyholes; in our society we consider an expert to be someone who knows a great deal about very little. So part of the problem here has to do with very deep issues regarding the fragmentation of knowledge and our incapacity to really integrate. Another dimension of the problem is that education institutions are designed and structured in a way that reinforces the idea that my job as a teacher is as an individual teaching my kids.

Significant changes in the content and process of education require coordinated efforts throughout a school: you cannot implement "learner-directed learning," in one classroom and not others. So we need to try to create change on multiple levels. In order to make change possible we need principals who see their job as creating an environment...
where teachers can continually learn. In turn, the job of the superintendent is to find principals and support principals who have this attitude.

As a principal/teacher leader, to make a school more of a learning organization I would find the teachers who really had some commitment to doing something different. I do not think a principal can "establish an environment" in a vacuum. But a principal can pull together a group of people who really could start to slowly begin to change their school culture.

A learning organization is an organization in which people at all levels are, collectively, continually enhancing their capacity to create things they really want to create. Most educators don't feel like they are doing this. Most teachers feel oppressed trying to conform to all kinds of rules, goals and objectives, many of which they don't believe in. Teachers don't work together; there is very little sense of collective learning going on in most schools.

We say school is about learning, but by and large schooling has traditionally been about people memorizing a lot of stuff that they don't really care too much about, and the whole approach is quite fragmented. Really deep learning is a process that inevitably is driven by the learner, not by someone else, and it always involves moving back and forth between a domain of thinking and a domain of action. So having a student sit passively taking information is hardly a very good model for learning; it is just what we have become used to.

Consider adult learning. We do have staff development programs to help educators improve their skills, to become more knowledgeable, but they are far from supporting a
"learning organization." The traditional approach to helping educators learn has been to develop the skills of individuals to do their work better. Realistically what mentors where they can continually reflect on what they are doing and learn more and more what it takes to work as teams.
GETTING PEOPLE ON BOARD

*Establish an environment!* We need to have some idea of what we are trying to do, and some real commitment and passion to do it. You won't expect to find a lot of people at the start. In any system, you find most people basically trying to cover their backs and preserve the status quo. This is true in any organization.

Find ways to start to get those who are committed to doing things differently talking to one another—early morning coffee; bring some doughnuts and the group will begin to establish some norms. Begin to design a process that would be inclusive. We must start with the people who are ready to start, but your goal is always to create the most inclusive process possible, to involve people at all levels, including the students, envisioning where they really want the school to go. This is the cornerstone. But it is also very different from some group of people going off and writing a "vision statement."

The field of education has one tremendous asset. A large percentage of people enter this profession with a high sense of personal purpose. As we bring these people together, they can begin to share their visions of education; they begin to create a field of shared meaning where there really is a deep level of trust and mutual understanding.

We must remember that this is a process which we continue to work on; getting people to reflect on and articulate what it is they are really trying to create and why. It is never ending. It takes time and patience. It occurs over time whereby people's beliefs, ways of seeing the world, and ultimately their skills and capabilities change. Schools need to focus on thinking skills and learning skills, because those are what will prepare our children for a world of increasing interdependency and increasing change.
At Risk Profile

A study completed for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement found that by the year 2020, the majority of students will be living in circumstances that place them at risk for educational failure. These students will be poorly housed, undernourished, subject to alcohol and drug abuse, and have few positive adult role models. Under these conditions many students will lose interest and see no real life value in completing a traditional high school education. Currently many of these students are floating around from course to course with no real goal in mind for future preparation.

At present time the population of Junior and Senior High School students at Charlo School which could be considered at-risk is profiled in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Title I</th>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Concerned</th>
<th>Total Num.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(113)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior High</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(66)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (181)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Professional Development

Charlo School District 7J, a member of the Mission Valley Consortium, recognizes the importance of schools as communities of learning. Teachers, administrators, and other
school professions must play an integral role in the designing of plans which are meaningful and supported by significant research trends.

Created in the Spring of 1994, by Charlo, Polson, and Ronan School Districts, the Mission Valley Consortium oversees the process of curriculum review, development and assessment. Schools in the Mission Valley Consortium are on the Flathead Indian Reservation. There are a total of ten schools: five elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools; serving over three thousand students.

The advisory council, which includes three trustees, and three superintendents, oversees the development of the consortium and evaluates the curriculum coordinator. The MVC membership is contractual. Each school board has the choice of renewing this contract every three years.

As a member of the MVC, our Charlo professional development program has two strands: the central office strand and the building based strand. The central office strand, emphasizing technology and assessment, will be planned by the administration in response to recommendations by the central office committee, teachers, parents, students. Building based plans will be designed by each staff; plans should complement and support the mission of our school. Completed building plans are to be submitted to the superintendent for review. Upon endorsement by the superintendent, the plans will be passed to the principals who will collate the plans into a Professional Development Catalog. This catalog is then put together in collaboration with the other two MVC schools.

The preceding framework is meant to be a guide for staff as they design their own professional development programs for the upcoming year. General trends in research
will be identified; additional recommendations will be made as to general directions in which we must move in order to best prepare our children for the future. Continuity and ongoing support are critical to the success of an effective professional development program; it is for this reason we encourage staffs to be mindful of the change process.

Select a general area of development which you want to pursue for several years. It takes two to five years of persistent work to implement an educational change. Choose a general area of focus, plan most of your courses and study groups around that topic. You may add additional, even unrelated courses to your plan, but a clear direction must be evident in each building plan.

Commitments

As a community we have an ongoing commitment to keep children at the center of our school. We want ALL children to progress academically, socially, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, so that they can become happy, healthy, well educated individuals. We are all dedicated to thoughtful conversation, reflection, and continuous improvement.

Time Line

This is a continuous process to be reviewed, discussed, planned and implemented through weekly staff meetings held every Friday afternoon (2:30-4:00), "early outs". Every staff member is committed to a lifelong learner.

Plans for the Future

A one year evaluation of graduates from CHS has shown that only approximately twenty percent of our high school students go onto college. And only a fraction of those
actually graduate from college with a four year degree. If these figures are true, why are we concentrating so heavily on preparing all of our students for college? Most of our high school students will be going on a nine month to two year vocational program or directly to the work force. We should be developing more programs which will help our high school students make the transition from school to the workplace.

We need to structure an integrated (applied) vocational program within our high schools which will develop the academic skills as well as the vocational skills and work ethics of our young people. We must offer our students a program which will give them practical skills and knowledge such as technical reading and writing, vocational math, vocational computer literacy, and customer relations. These are some of the skills which will help create productive workers for those students who are not going on to work towards a four year degree. The number of high pay low-skilled jobs in the United States has diminished over the past twenty years. When our young people do not succeed in school, society as a whole suffers. For this reason it is our duty as educators to do everything we can to ensure that our young people stay in school and receive an education that will provide them with the tools to become productive, responsible citizens.

Every year we lose students who do not see how an education can help them advance. A strong integrated vocational education program can help to create incentives for these students to stay in school and receive the education they need to become productive contributors to the society. This program would also teach the students critical thinking skills, decision making, and problem solving skills.
An integrated vocational program can help the community as well as the students. By helping these students become productive members of the community, the economic health of the community is improved, creates closer ties between the community and the school, and encourages students to remain in the home community. Employers of the community also gain from the better trained pool of future employees which helps to relieve the employer of bearing all of the training related to hiring new employees. The school also gains by helping to bring industry and school together.

Many of our non-college bound students need the motivation that comes from relating what is learned to the real world rather than trying to memorize facts from a book that have no real meaning for them now or in the near future. At the same time through a developed integrated vocational program, students would still be acquiring their math, science, and English skills. And later if these students decide to go on to higher education, they will still have the necessary credentials.

We currently offer a college prep program for those students who plan to attend a four year college. We also offer a Tech Prep program for those students who plan to attend a two year college and possibly go on to a four year program. And we offer a program for the special needs students. But we need to offer an applied vocational program for students who need school to work skills and knowledge. This program would be offered as a school within a school program in which all of the teaching staff could become a part of.
Currently Charlo's Graduation Expectations Are These:

- Effective communication skills: interpersonal and group skills
- Writing skills: technical and aesthetic
- Problem solving skills as individuals, group skills and skills for solving global problems
- Critical thinking (students will be able to access and evaluate the worth of data)
- A willingness to take cognitive risks
- A sense of ethics: an understanding of how our individual actions effect others and the environment
- Computer and technology literacy
- Applied basic skills
- Self knowledge: a sense of self contextualization by our personal heritage and culture
- Aesthetic appreciation: an appreciation of the process as well as the products
- Conflict resolution skills and the ability to lead a healthy life
- A respect and appreciation (rather than a tolerance) for:
  differing points of view;
  groups, families, and cultures; and
  the environment
- Instill a sense of the importance of Community: caring for those we live with in our families, town, state and country
• Develop a love for learning: an appreciation for the process as well as the product
• Develop a “work ethic:” an understanding of the self-esteem which comes from a job well done and the importance of responsibility on the job

Some of the goals of this new program would include the following:
• Prepare students to become productive citizens and wise consumers.
• To teach through hands on, imagination, innovation, and integration.
• To relate learning to practical applications and relevancy.
• Reinforce academic skills with hands on applications.
• Encourage collaboration between teachers.
• Better modify course work to the student’s needs.
• Involve community in the education process.

This list is a work in progress. It will undoubtedly be refined and revised as members work with it. Next, we must ask ourselves how curriculum can be designed to develop these attributes in our students. How will we evaluate progress?

Lessons Learned

The toughest lesson is learning to be patient in bringing about effective changes in school culture. We need to think “simple” and “practical.”

1. Work on team-building.
2. Get acquainted with staff - know where your support is.
3. Focus on doing less rather than more.
4. Facilitate new ideas from individuals and groups.
5. Identify the most important and salient problems.

6. Put your agenda second.

7. Get people excited about the work at hand

8. Remember that some things just come with time and experience.

9. Learn from students and staff.

10. Accept the fact that is not all going to get done.

11. Put people before paper.

12. Know that you don’t have all the answers; everyone has limitations.

13. Consider the values of staff and students in relation to your own.


15. Get some distance when evaluating changes.

These suggestions emphasize the importance of people and relationships. The role of leader should be to facilitate reforms while at the same time reflecting on how changes affect staff and students. The leader can make a difference only by putting people first.

SUMMARY

The term *culture* has a long history. The meaning of the word has been discussed for many years in a number of different fields, including anthropology, sociology, history, English, and rhetoric. From humanities to the hard sciences, the meaning of the term has inspired conversations and stirred controversy.
We define *school culture* as historically transmitted patterns of meaning that include the norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and myths understood, maybe in varying degrees, by members of the school community.

"Why does culture exert such a powerful influence on a school’s effectiveness?"

Because the culture tells people in the school what is truly important and how they are to act.

The most important lesson to be learned by leaders is that they too, are part of the school culture. A school leader does not make decisions from outside the institution. Change comes from incorporation into the daily routines that affect all participants, including the leader.

Leaders who can identify the strengths and weaknesses of their school’s culture and see their place in the organizations will be more effective school leaders. Remembering one’s place in the school organization, can be learned if leaders are willing to approach the process of cultural change with patience, reflection, and humility. The culture of schools greatly influence what types of changes and the degree to which change may occur within a given school. Leaders need to be aware of pervasive cultural aspects of schools, such as lack of consensus, teacher isolation, and contrived collegiality, that are barriers to school improvement.

Leaders need to understand that they are sculptors of school culture. By understanding the existing culture, linking with the culture network, meeting teacher’s needs, and continually modeling and articulating the emerging vision of the school, leaders can shape the school culture toward continuous improvement.
AN INSPIRATIONAL MODEL: Personal Growth

A turtle has a hard shell but is soft inside. Leaders need to develop a hard outer "shell" against criticism and second-guessing, while remaining soft inside.

A turtle sticks its neck out. Leaders frequently must stick their necks out; taking risk and making themselves vulnerable.

A turtle knows when to pull its head in. At certain suspicious times, veteran leaders recognize the wisdom of simply ignoring activities going on around them.

A turtle pulls its body along. The way a turtle uses its powerful legs to move its body reminiscent of the way a leader must sometimes pull a reluctant faculty along to make needed changes.

A turtle’s body has many parts. Just as the individual growth rings of a turtle’s shell merge to form a distinctive pattern, the wise leader is aware that each person in the school is unique, but also a part of a cohesive whole.

A turtle adapts to its environment. Turtles can adjust to life both on land and in the water. Leaders will succeed if they are adaptable and refrain from doing things the same old way in new and different environments.

A turtle moves at a steady pace. Like the fabled tortoise that won the race against the swift hare by moving ahead slowly and steadily, effective leaders keep their schools moving forward toward realization of their goals.

A turtle lives a long time. Some turtles live more than 150 years. Leaders must take a long range view of the issues facing them because there will be many tomorrows to resolve them.
A turtle leaves its mark. Just as a turtle leaves a characteristic trail in the sand as it moves along the seashore, leaders leave their mark in the many ways they affect change in their schools.

Most turtles are green. Green is the color we associate with spring, the time of renewal, hope, rebirth. Leaders must keep hope alive in their hearts, regardless of circumstances, and periodically energize those around them, giving them new life and new hope.

Admittedly, the turtle also has a few negative traits, the most obvious is the slow unhurried pace at which it moves. Unfortunately, leaders usually don't enjoy the luxury of being able to take their time making decisions and solving problems.

But if you possess most of the turtle’s good traits, chances are you are the kind of leader who welcomes the opportunity to work with a staff to make your school a better place for children to learn.

May the turtle be your inspiration!

PERSONAL GROWTH

In agreeing to the position of teacher/principal in our school I have come to the conclusion that leadership, for me, is pro-active and reflective. Some days are like pools of water basking in the warm sunshine. Other days are stormy seas of crashing waves and spraying water all around. Some days are just a constant drizzle. To be effective, I alternate between participating and observing. Although this principle is easy to grasp, the
practice is not. I found that rather than maintaining a perspective on the events and issues that surround me, it is easy to get swept up by them.

I soon realized that in order to bear the responsibilities that came with being a principal, I needed to develop some strategic plans or else I was either going to lose my effectiveness or collapse under the strain. It was too easy to let myself drift into the waves of controversy and disagreement, losing focus on the issues at hand. I have found that when you are involved in an unfamiliar situation, the right questions can give you some perspective and insight.

I have become grounded in the philosophy that people represent issues, that interpersonal conflicts among people (students, parents, teachers, administration) represent issue conflicts among their groups. By asking questions you can gain some perspective as to what the real issue is:

- what is the cause of the distress?
- what are the contradictions?
- what problem is this distress linked to?
- has this happened before—is this a pattern?
- how is this affecting you-your work?
- can you tell me more?
- what do you need from me?
- what needs to happen?

By asking these kinds of questions, I think people can take responsibility for their actions. I learned this from a series of workshops that administrators in our Mission
Valley Consortium have been involved in. This kind of "self problem solving" comes from Cognitive Coaching. It's a great way to improve listening skills. So many times when I'm listening to someone's concerns or dilemma, I want to interrupt and say "you should do this..." or "this is really what your problem is...." I always thought I was pretty "in tune" with people but this has really helped me to practice to be an active listener. It also enables people to sort out their own problems and issues without being given the answer.

The cognitive coaching approach also works well in all areas of teaching. Teachers make decisions in the classroom all the time concerning when to which level of questions under what level of questions under what circumstances. This approach takes into consideration what previous experiences, intuition, or artistry on which the teacher relied to select that particular instructional behavior and the desired student learnings for which it was intended. Cognitive coaching is a way of thinking that encourages self and others to shape and reshape their thinking and problem solving capacities.

I think that a person who leads must interpret people's responses to their actions as responses to the role they play and the perspective they represent. A personal example: February 28, 1997, a student is not allowed to cheer at the district basketball tournament that night because she missed the team bus. After missing the bus, this senior cheerleading captain rides with some of her teen-age friends to the tournament and shows up in her uniform ready to cheer. I, being the administrator who is responsible for the cheerleading squad, informed this cheerleader that she is to sit in the audience and help cheer; reminding the girl that it is school policy that team participants must ride the team bus to and from activities. The cheerleader emphatically states that I am picking on her, and I
cannot tell her what to do. The girl then stomps out of the practice room very vocally flinging over shoulder “I hate you, Stivers!” Though upset with the cheerleader’s behavior, I knew better than to take this personally. If this anger was taken personally, my response would be off the mark. I learned a long time ago that words or actions taken from an emotional reaction to a situation are usually words or actions one regrets. When you lose control of your emotions you lose all ability to think and act rationally—you lose all control of the situation. By distinguishing between myself and my role as an administrator, I am less likely to be misled by my emotions into taking statements and events personally that may have little to do with myself.

To conclude the cheerleading incident: Monday morning, March 3, 1997, I found an envelope on my desk with my name on it. It was a two page handwritten letter of apology from the cheerleader. She came in at noon and apologized again, saying she hoped I knew of course, that she didn’t hate me. Her parents were thankful that I cared enough to allow her to learn a lesson of life. Her parents also called me at school to thank me. The incident was never discussed again and to this day we have a great relationship.

It especially helped me to realize the distinction between role of self when there were “darned if you do” and “darned if you don’t” situations. By externalizing the conflict, I could focus my attention on issues and not own the conflict.

In this job getting a strategic perspective is critical to staying alive longer. But it is sometimes difficult to distinguish yourself from your role and try to externalize the conflict when you are in the middle of the storm, when thrown overboard, threatened by sharks—and about to go under!
In my role as union president I always had at least one person I could rely on to “call it as she saw it.” Every now and then I could go to this person for a reality check. Throughout the year I reached out to people I trusted more and more, knowing that I certainly couldn’t do this job all by myself. Especially at the end of the day we would meet, a time to make the traditional bowl of popcorn and break out the mustard! We would sit down and just hash the day over. By November there were seven staff members, a secretary and one other administrator meeting over the popcorn. This job became more and more of a team effort and I seldom found myself “hung out to dry.” It has been great to know I could call any administrator to get their opinion or advice on an issue. I especially enjoyed the administrative classes I took this summer. A lot of work, yes, but the comradery was authentic and sincere. I learned many new strategies and tactics from listening to colleagues and exchanging views. It is very refreshing and renewing. I continue to experience “soul and spirit” energizing—a passion for wisdom.

I have really learned from reflecting on daily actions, successes and failures. On September 23, 1996 I reflected on what I considered a failure. An eighth grade boy had been in possession of smokeless tobacco. The policy is to call the sheriff and the student would be ticketed a twenty-five dollar fine. This student had been sent to me on September 18, 1996 for the same infraction. I had a long talk with him the first time (Sept. 18). I let the student off with a warning. The teacher was furious at me for giving the warning. I felt justified. The superintendent told me I could give initial warnings. So five days later (Sept. 23) I see the same student, sent by the same teacher, for the same infraction. I did call the sheriff and the student was ticketed. However, at the same time I
was in conference with the student, this teacher went to the superintendent complaining I wasn’t enforcing policy. After school I was in the office where there were five or six teachers and three students. The superintendent comes in and starts talking loudly saying I need to get tough and not be a pushover. He said there were numerous complaints from teachers on how I handle discipline. I was really caught off guard. I felt: (1) the superintendent didn’t have the correct information, (2) there had been no discipline problems, (3) how dare he address me like this in public. As the superintendent kept talking, I quietly said, “Excuse me” and walked out of the office to my room. About twenty minutes later the teacher came in and apologized for going to the superintendent. He said he was frustrated because he was overcrowded in his classes and was having problems with discipline. I asked questions; did some probing and we came up with some solutions he might use. Later the superintendent came in, and in a round about way said he may have over reacted a little. But I did take it personally and felt run over. That’s when I decided I needed some survival tactics and started growing a thicker skin. I also talked to a couple of confidants and received some excellent advice.

In this job I have found it essential to have time to myself, a place where I can hear myself think. It not only helps me to put things into perspective but it gives me some time to regain courage and heart. Pottery has become a passion. I can sink my feet into the ground and go into myself. Being by myself is a sanctuary, it gives me time to restore my spirit.

Sometimes when I come home from a crazy day at school, I feel like a piece of clay. I, too, have felt fingernails dig deep into my soft earth. I begin gently patting the
clay into a ball. In my mind, I begin reaching out, pulling in little frayed strands of myself, and patting them into the clay.

The wheel whirls round as I smack the clay ball onto the wheel head, sinking my feet into the base of the kick wheel. I stare at the distorted lump as it sits on the spinning wheel. I begin to set myself free as my fingers caress the deformed clay mass; freedom is presence. The clay is pressed down and squeezed up again and again—supported, nurtured—and pushed down again. The clay begins to center; there is tension in my fingers, arms, back—I am holding my breath—my whole body is “tension.” As the clay begins to mold I find that I, too, have transformed. The clay takes form as I begin to return and remain centered. I now have the freedom to turn inward and outward, effortlessly. When I am grounded, I function from an inner unity.

For me pottery is a retreat, which becomes reflection, which becomes transformation. As I look inward, I lead and teach from the heart, daily breathing spirit and passion into student’s and teacher’s lives and into the fields (hearts) of our community.

We have a new superintendent this year, I’m sure there will be some changes. I’m happy with the position and feel I function well in this role. This fall and next summer, I will attend classes at the University to complete my administration certification. I plan on picking up the next four classes needed for a superintendent’s certification. Our new superintendent has already stated that he has two years until retirement, so our school is headed for more change—new boss, new rules. As I continue to reflect on this past year I feel a sense of real accomplishment. The practice of my leadership requires a sense of
purpose. I have the inspiration and drive to take risks and look for opportunity. My values are well grounded. Setbacks and failures are a part of life. Failure and setbacks can be wise teachers if you have the courage to accept them. Leadership takes place everyday. Every time there is conflict, questioning of values, questioning of choices, I see the opportunity to learn new ways.

In assessing myself, I believe I lead with clarity of personal core values. These values apply to the implicit and explicit curriculum. I am an advocate for children, deeply committed to the core values of equity and compassion for teachers and students. I have made a commitment to “understand before being understood.” Sometimes a leader has to put personal agendas and ideas “on the back burner” to understand others.” That is difficult to do.

I think that leading from the heart requires personal authenticity: a person can’t be afraid to show vulnerability, at the same time has to push hard for personal values and ethics, have the ability to select these values and hold true despite adversity. This is easy to espouse, but difficult to live. Leaders bringing spirit and soul to a professional position must be great risk-takers! As a leader, I continue to be a lifelong learner, using my head: leading with my heart as well as my soul. Developing an ethic of caring and creating a community that cares is, for me, an educational priority if we are truly committed to educating all children.
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