School Counselor’s Role in Systemic Change to Improve School Culture, Sense of Belonging, and Student Achievement

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Abstract

School climate and culture can be the essence of what a school prides themselves on or it can be the detrimental reality of the lack of leadership among the administration and educators. It begins with administration taking the first steps of assessing the school culture and his or her leadership style and approachability. The next step is empowering and encouraging teachers to lead within the school. Also, it is important to empower students to be involved and lead, therefore investing ownership for themselves and the school. Empowering teachers to be invested and leading will increase job satisfaction and commitment and it will decrease burnout and rigidity. Through professional development trainings and professional learning communities, as well as mentorship programs, schools can exhibit a positive and active school culture. Trust in administration, teachers empowered to lead, students achieving academic success, and everyone feeling a sense of belonging and significance, that is when the school culture will thrive.
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Introduction to the Problem

True leaders on the forefront of education are the teachers. Teacher retention and commitment is a great predictor of the quality of education the teachers are giving the students. Based on personal strengths, creativity, and leadership, teachers are able to commit to the teaching profession and organization (school district). The commitment comes from the relationship the teacher has with their administration, other teaching professionals, and students. Lack of communication and trust leads to a lack of respect and cooperation between educators and administrators. This, in turn, can cause teacher turnover, which cost schools money and decreases the leadership and positivity within their school culture, which affects student success.

According to Gary Barnes, Edward Crowe, and Benjamin Schaefer (2007) “trapped in a chronic cycle of teacher hiring and replacement these schools drain their districts of precious dollars that could be better spent to improve teaching quality and student achievement” (Barnes, Crowe, Schaefer, 2007, p. 4). They found that the average cost of each teacher that left a district, costs the school just under $10,000 (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007). Teacher turnover and lack of student achievement can be prevented; especially with there is a focus and empowerment on teacher and student leadership. Also, even before turnover, teacher burnout rates can financially affect the teachers and the school. According to Juliette Berg and Dewey Cornell (2016), “teachers who experience high burnout are at greater risk for mental health problems, poor performance, and disengagement” (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Pas, Bradshaw, Hershfeldt, & Leaf, 2010; Schonfeld, 2001, as cited in Berg & Cornell, 2016, p. 122).
“Social interactions within schools affect teacher behaviors and attitudes towards their work. The factors forming the basis of social interaction include school culture and trust” (Demir, 2015, p. 625). The goal of educators, administrators, and school staff alike is to educationally help and serve students. Individually, educators and administrators have areas of teaching and leadership strengths, which can be utilized to improve the student’s achievement and school climate to enhance relationships and empower reaching goals. Each individual working within a school is gifted and significant in what he or she can contribute to a school climate and culture. Moreover, successful school climate can only be achieved when school administration and staff are working together to achieve this as one of the schools main missions or goals in their work with each other and students.

**Statement of the Problem**

Within a school, school counselors play a vital role in the responsibility to create and implement systemic change, to enhance the culture and communication between educators, administration, and school staff. By enhancing communication and implementing strengths based models to allow for leadership opportunities among educators, there will be more successful relationships among school staff to help promote a positive school culture and academic achievement for all students.

**Definition of Terms**

**School Climate**

“School climate is a broad term that refers to teachers’ perceptions of their general work environment; it is influenced by the formal organization, informal organization, personalities of participants, and the leadership of the school” (Hoy, 1990, p. 151). According to Mieke Van Houtte and Dimitri Van Maele (2011) “climate can be understood as the total environmental

**School Culture or Organizational Culture**

According to Kamile Demir (2015), organizational culture is “a system of orientations that keep organizational units connected and give a distinct identity to them,” (Hoy & Miskel, 2010, p. 165 as cited in Demir, 2015, p. 623). According to Karadag, Kiliçoğlu, and Yılmaz (2014) “school culture is a concept developed in educational administration to explore the meaning, character, and atmosphere of educational organizations” (Gruenert, 2005 as cited in Karadag et al., 2014, p.105).

**Purpose and Significance of Study**

According to Collie, Shapka, and Perry (2011), by nurturing a better relationship between students and teachers, as well as supporting teachers’ strengths, higher levels of teacher’s commitment will be displayed.

In turn, this will help teachers, students, and schools: Greater commitment is a predictor for better teaching performance (Day, 2008) and lower burnout (Firestone, 1996). Furthermore, attrition and turnover—a consequence of low teacher commitment—prove financially costly for schools due to the need to replace and train new teachers, and academically costly to students due to interruptions in their learning and the loss of qualified and experienced teachers (Ingersoll, 2003). (Collie et al., 2011, p. 1046)

Within a systemic change of school culture, which effects educators, administrators, and students, there be will an empowerment of individuals which will lead to a greater sense of belonging and contribution. Within the studies previously done, “findings indicate that that there are positive relationships between the school culture and the commitment, motivation, job
satisfaction, and communication leadership skills of teachers (Canizo, 2002; Jones, 1998)” (Şahin, 2011, p. 1921). By improving communication and empowerment of strengths, staff will be invested and valued allowing for a cohesive team and a greater sense of belonging.

School counselors will understand how to evaluate the current school culture they are in and then create and modify systemic change to improve positive leadership skills and empower the climate for school staff to feel a sense of belonging and contributing.

Evaluating School Climate: Literature Review

Purpose of School Counselors

Schools are a system, just like a family is a system. When an event occurs that makes an impact on one member of the family or part of the system, it affects other, if not all other, parts of the system. Comprehensive school counseling programs are an important part of the school’s system, and through careful, data-driven implementation, an ASCA National Model program can have a positive impact on many other parts of the school’s system that lead to student achievement and overall success. (American School Counseling Association, 2012, p. 8)

Within a school, each member of the education and school system plays a unique part to build a positive and effective school culture and climate, as well as helping students achieve academic success. According to Haines, Gross, Blue-Banning, Francis and Turnbull (2015) “partnerships between school staff, families, and community members are vital for ensuring the success and full participation of all students” (Epstein, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sailor & McCart, 2014 as cited in Haines et al., 2015, p. 227).

Important role a counselor plays. According to The American School Counseling Association National Model (2012) “school counselors design and deliver comprehensive school
counseling programs that promote student achievement” (American School Counseling Association, 2012, p. xii). School counselor’s primary focus is students, focusing on both the student’s success and health emotionally and academically. The counselor’s goal is to create ways in which students can succeed. But counselors are not the only adults working within a school; student success is also being impacted by teachers, school administrators, as well as the student’s parents. School counselors have an impact on the other adults that help a school function, the counselor’s act as a bonding agent to them to create relationships and understanding to form a cohesive team. According to ASCA National Model (2012):

> school counselors work with stakeholders, both inside and outside the school, as a part of the comprehensive school counseling program. Through school, family and community collaboration, school counselors can access a vast array of support for student achievement and development that cannot be achieved by an individual, or school, alone. (p. 6)

Especially focusing on what a school counselor can do within a school, collaborating with the adults that interact with each student, they have considerable access to help the student achieve. “Within the school, school counselors build effective teams by encouraging collaboration among students, teachers, administrators and school staff to work toward the common goals of equity, access and academic success for every student” (American School Counseling Association, 2012, p. 6).

**Interactions and counseling with students.** School counselors work with students in both direct and indirect services. According to ASCA National Model (2012) within the direct student services, counselor’s help implement core curriculum lessons, as well as meeting with individual students to coordinate plans and implement goals, and lastly counselors’ are
responsible for responsive services and counseling students and helping meet the student’s needs.

**Interactions and counseling with educators.** Within the direct and indirect student services a school counselor implements, they are also working with school staff and educators to form cohesive teams to help students succeed. Especially within the indirect student services, counselors collaborate with others involved with specific students to find solutions and establish accommodations to meet the needs of the student. Counselors also keep educators up to date on student’s needs and changes taking place. According to Sarah Lam and Eadaoin Hui (2010), “guidance [counseling programs] in school carries and educational function” (McLaughlin, 1993 as cited in Lam & Hui, 2010, p. 220). School counselors are also in the classroom giving lessons on emotional, physical and mental health; it is key that teachers and school counselors create a team for the success of the students. The communication and relationship between the school counselors and educators is incredibly important, so that they can work as a team to help students as well as work cooperatively with parents.

**Interactions and counseling with administration.** The school counselor diligently works between and with both educators and administrators to form a cohesive and understanding team. Administrators are the head leaders of the school as well as dictating the school climate and culture. The counselor also works diligently to collaborate with administration on curriculum, as well as recruiting their support to implement the ASCA National Model (2012) to the school district. The school counselor can also help facilitate staff development that can be led by both the counselor and administration, which can also serve in purposing the collaboration to see students succeed by empowering the leadership within the school. According to the ASCA National Model (2012) “by understanding and appreciating the contributions made by others in
educating all children, school counselors build a sense of community which serves as a platform to create an environment encouraging success for every student” (p. 6).

When a school counselor is working with a principal, it is important that they are collaborating together on what is successfully being implemented and what needs more attention, they will also need to assess the climate and culture of the school. Collaboratively they can be asking constructive questions that could help improve the leadership among the school. According to David DeMatthews (2014), these six questions can really help in data-collection for curriculum renewal, but also systematic change to determine progress steps that need to be taken:

1) What is working well in this school? What are the school’s strengths?
2) What is not working well? What are the school’s weaknesses?
3) Is the curriculum (i.e. what is taught) aligned not only to standards but also to the school’s vision and mission?
4) Have other schools successfully implemented curricular reforms?
5) What can I learn from other principals about the curriculum renewal process?
6) What are important areas of emphasis for parents, students, teachers, and other community stakeholders? (p. 194)

**Role of a School Administrator**

The role of administrator encompasses instructional leadership, organization, flexibility, humility, and relationship skills. As an administrator or principal, the role affects educators and their teaching abilities, as well as student achievement (Şahın, 2011). According to Semih Şahin “according to Johnson and Johnson (1989), the duty of a principal is not to create new instructional methods and techniques, but to take a stand against the status quo and support new opinions and applications. In many schools, evidence is mounting that leaders are currently
engaging in new practices to help their schools systematically improve student learning” (Halverson et al., 2007 as cited in Şahin, 2011, p. 1920). The principal is the leader, but he or she has the responsibilities for the sake of establishing and maintaining school culture to foster and encourage teacher leadership. According to Şahin (2011) in forming the school culture, the principal has to display two important key roles; first, the principal leads by example as the role model, second, the principal is to collaborate with the other school faculty and assist in problem solving. “Instructional leaders who act within the scope of cooperation, collegiality, expertise and teamwork are hallmarks of a successful improvement” (Hoy & Hoy, 2003; Zepeda, 2003 as cited in Şahin, 2011, p. 1921). It is also incredibly important that the principal establishes trust among his or her fellow educators. “Without trust, efforts to build a collaborative culture and to ensure school improvement will be diminished, relationships will flounder and people may even be confined to cliques or special interest groups” (Blasé & Blasé, 1994; Donaldson, 2001; Zepeda 2003 as cited in Şahin, 2011, p. 1921).

The key is school leadership, if the principal is an instructional leader that enables and empowers others to be school leaders; the research reveals that that leadership will lead to a positive school culture. According to Demir (2015) “in summary, as stressed by Glickman (2002), teacher leadership empowers the teacher to be able to affect the school system and affect change” (p. 622). Empowering school leaders will create unity among the school team and allow for a positive impact on students. “ Principals’ role of identifying and delivering purpose, conducing feedback and supervision can be good predictors of the following: Teachers meet the needs of their students’ individual differences, they believe that that every student can learn, and they value moral education and take risks towards achieving this goal” (Şahin, 2011, p. 1924).
Empowering school leaders. “It is important for the principal to empower and give voice to teachers, student, parents and community members” (DeMatthews, 2014, p. 194). To empower school leadership especially within a principals main job of curriculum renewal, DeMatthews (2014) said there were four steps to follow to empower change: Step 1: Know your destination, Step 2: Be strategic and thoughtful, Step 3: Roll it out right, and Step 4: Managing the process. Within these four steps teachers can be empowered to lead and have a voice in the changes.

Teacher Satisfaction

Teachers provide a school with the fundamental elements of education that cannot be expressed through anyone else within the schools. It is the teacher’s role to educate and teach students to high potentials to reach achievement and success. The role of teachers and educators cannot be understated; they play a pivotal role in the functioning, productivity, success, and culture of a school. It is important for teachers to feel a sense of belonging, empowerment, and leadership within their organization (school), so that they can have a sense of job satisfaction, which will lead to an investment in the students, the school, and teaching.

In the simplest form, teacher leadership is a model for providing teachers with leadership opportunities in their profession. Harris and Muijs (2004) proposed that teacher leadership is an opportunity for teachers to develop themselves and affect change in their school without leaving it. In this way the school will be able to more effectively benefit from the extremely valuable and rich source of their teachers’ expertise and experience. (Demir, 2015, p. 622)

For administrators, it is crucial that leadership opportunities are provided for teachers, so that teachers can utilize their strengths and feel a sense of ownership and contribution to the school
and their profession. According to Demir (2015), when a teacher is involved in school leadership, he or she is leading through and beyond his or her classroom “contributing to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and they influence others toward improved educational practice,” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, p. 622 as cited in Demir, 2015, p. 17).

**Relational trust.** According to Demir (2015), the research previously done on teacher leadership, meta-analysis and qualitative research has been used to examine what exactly the dimensions of teacher leadership require. Unfortunately, little empirical research has been done to determine how to develop teacher leadership. In a positive school culture, the environment emulates professional development, as well as acceptance and support of both leadership contributions and strengths. According to Demir (2015) these qualities of a positive school culture can be categorized into three basic dimensions: teacher collaboration, managerial support, and supportive work environment (p. 623). A positive school culture, facilitated by teacher leadership will especially include professional development. Professional development is extremely important in harvesting empowered teacher leaders, but nothing compares to the trust the teachers need to feel when taking the risk to be involved and lead. The trust needs to especially be harvested by the principal and administration, but also other colleagues. According to Demir (2015), studies have been done to understand the impact of trusting relationships within a school and the relationship with the school. They have found that the studies support “the assumption that trust is a precursor of the performance of teachers and the effectiveness of the school” (Van Maele, Van Houtte, & Forsyth, 2014 as cited in Demir, 2015, p. 624).

Fundamentally, relational trust among administration and teachers is the key to empowering teachers to lead and take risks by utilizing their individual strengths. Developing teachers’ strengths increases job satisfaction and feelings of worth and belonging through these
contributions. As administration empower leaders, teachers engage in leadership, students receive the attention and education they need, and a positive school culture is formed.

**Student Involvement**

As addressed before, according to Cohen et al. (2009 as cited by Adam Voight, 2014) school climate is based on four important dimensions: safety, teaching and learning, relationships, and the institutional environment. However, a school climate dimension that is underemphasized is “meaningful student voice and participation” (Voight, 2014, p. 311). According to Voight (2014), student involvement and leadership is a key element to the success of the positive school climate, in his study, *Student Voice for School-Climate Improvement: A Case Study of an Urban Middle School*, he assess how to engage students in promoting a positive school climate. He breaks it down into three pathways that student can improve their school climate: “(i) direct action through which youth work together to leverage and change in school policy and practice; (ii) strengthened relationship amongst students and between students and teachers that result from shared experience in school-based civic activities; and (iv) aggregation of students who become more socially and emotionally competent individuals thought their engagement” (Voight, 2014, p. 311).

According to Voight (2014) by identifying school issues of importance to them, gathering information, and with a collective voice to influence change, youth can direct the first pathway of direct action and youth organizing. This allows the students to take ownership of their school and the school climate they want to create. This involves active listening by administration and educators. In engaging with the school, administration, and educators the second pathway of strengthening relationship among the school can be positively influenced. “Beyond their constitutive value, these relationships may serve as instruments for students to clearly
communicate their needs to adults in school” (Voight, 2014, p. 312). By empowering students to be involved in leadership and advocacy to improve their school climate, they gain a sense of belonging and contributing, which leads to the third pathway: aggregation of individual competencies and social norms. According to Voight (2014):

when youth participate in civic activities, they become more socially and emotionally competent. Evidence suggests that being involved in organizing (Kwon, 2006), service learning (Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009), and volunteering (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2011) and having a concern for social justice (Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013) is associated with higher self-esteem, prosocial behavior, and academic outcomes. (p. 312)

Which means that for school climate to be positively affected, administration and educators need to provide opportunities for student involvement in school leadership, empowering students will bring ownership, engagement, and active participation, which will create a better climate for the whole school.

**Teacher-Student Relationships**

According to Demir (2015), “the supportive leadership of principals, teachers’ perception of principal accessibility and the principal’s openness to the ideas of the teachers, has a major impact on teacher trust in principals” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998 as cited in Demir, 2015, p.625). This same principle applies to the trust students have in their teachers. If students don’t feel supported by their teacher, or the teacher is not open to the student’s ideas, then the teachers will not gain the respect and build trust with the students. Also, according to Laura Hopson et al. (2014) “when students have positive relationships with teachers and school staff, they tend to feel connected to the school, avoid unsafe and disruptive behavior, and perform well
One study done by Rebecca Collie et al. (2011) looked at the connection between teacher-student relationships and the level of teacher commitment of teaching at the school. According to Collie et al. (2011):

previous research had not considered the impact that student relations, such as the perceptions that teachers hold about student behavior and motivation, have on teacher commitment. The results of this study suggest that the impact is large: Better student relations predict greater commitment to the profession in general, in the future, and to the school at which a teacher works. (p. 1044)

The positive relationship teachers have with the school and administration helps them to be more involved and committed to their teaching and therefore the students. When students are more engaged in their school there seems to be a reciprocal trust. According to Voight (2014), there is a strengthened social network between students involved in leadership and teachers that are involved in the leadership teams as well. According to Voight’s (2014) research, when involved in leadership, the students regularly consulted teachers outside of class, which the collaboration “seemed to help these teachers appreciate students’ ideas and built openness and understanding between the two sides” (p. 317). This trend results in a healthier emotional well-being of the teacher and students as well as aids in their commitment to teaching at the school.

**Productive Systemic Change**

For a specific school climate to change, it begins with the leadership of the principal and administration. They can humbly promote leadership among the educators by delegating tasks, allowing educators to take risks in leading by their individual strength. When the educators know
their leadership efforts are supported, they will then be empowered to serve the school more empowered, therefore helping students in a more intentional and creative way. The student will then feel appreciated, encouraged to lead them, and promote academic achievement. This will create a positive shift in the school climate, which will make the school stand out from other schools and limit educator turnover. According to Ereka Williams (2015):

> school leaders have such a moral obligation to assist in the growth and development of children and adults that an increased awareness of self is extremely important… [They] must foster a genuine feeling of identification with others… [and] recognize that healthy school environments promote collaboration, cooperation, and interdependence. (Combs et al., 1999, p. 115 as cited in Williams, 2015, p. 12)

Williams (2015) focuses on the practice of focusing on the whole child as a school leader attempts to change the school culture. According to Williams (2015) as a leader is assessing their leadership they should be asking the following questions:

- What do my body language and facial expressions communicate to colleagues, families, and learners?
- Does my tone indicate concern? Sincerity?
- As a leader, am I modeling respect for all who engage in this environment?
- Do my communication practices (email, letters home to families, updates on operations) operate from a place of “we” and “us,” or do they convey a dictatorial approach?
- Are the stakeholders invited to build the environment or am I informing stakeholders invited to build the environment or am I informing stakeholders of what had been predetermined?
• How do I demonstrate my commitment to each child’s growth and his or her right to an education? (pp. 12-13)

**Social-emotional learning.** Social Emotional Learning (SEL) “is an approach to teaching and learning that aims to incorporate social-emotional skills and concepts into general education. SEL encourages students to develop abilities that help them with their emotional awareness, constructive decision making, appropriate goal setting, and interactions with others” (Payton et al., 2008 as cited in Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011, p. 1036). According to Collie et al. (2011) research has shown that SEL programs have a positive effect on students, especially helping student switch to positive and prosocial behavioral choices, gaining cognitive and emotional skills, increase in happiness, and better academic achievement. By having students learn through social emotional teachings, it is allowing for students to feel a sense of belonging and encouragement, this in turn helps the educators and teachers to have a better sense of control of the classroom and a deep impact on the students emotional being and academic achievement.

Even though there have been significant research on SEL programs and the effects it has on students, there has been little study on the effects SEL has on teachers. However, according to Collie et al. (2011) there was research done by Ransford and collleagues’ (2009), “which found that greater burnout predicted lower implantation of an SEL program’s supplementary activities. Furthermore, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) proposed that SEL: is related to teacher social-emotional competence and well-being” (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011, p. 1036). Therefore the SEL focuses on a well-rounded approach, focusing on school members as much as student’s, to help “improve working conditions and enhance teacher commitment” (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011, p. 1036).
Collie et al. (2011) conducted a study, which hypothesized “that positive school climates and SEL would predict higher commitment to teaching” (p. 1036). The study participants consisted of 664 public school teachers ranging from kindergarten through grade 12 and they completed an online questionnaire. According to Collie et al. (2011) to access school climate they used the Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire (R-SLEQ), created by Johnson, Stevens, and Zvoch, in 2007, which included 21 items that were split into five subscales; collaboration, student relations, school resources, decision making, and instructional innovation. According to Collie et al. (2011) the SEL was measured using two measurements, first, the Beliefs in SEL Teacher Scale (created by Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, and Elbertson in 2009), which had 12 items split into three subscales; SEL comfort, SEL commitment, and SEL culture. The second SEL instrument was the SEL Integration Scale, which was developed as part of the related study by Collie et al. (2011), and included 12 items that measured the degree of SEL within a school. According to Collie et al.’s (2011) research, a binary logistic regression was used for analysis of data.

According to Collie et al. (2011) major findings of the research showed that affect for school climate revealed “better student relations predict greater commitment to the profession in general, in the future, and to the school at which a teacher works” (p. 1044). Overall with school climate it was found that “research supports this: For example, teachers who have better relations with students—that is, teachers who perceive better student behavior and motivation for learning—experience lower stress, greater job satisfaction, and a greater sense of efficacy” (Collie et al., 2011 as cited in Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011, p. 1044). It was also found that teacher collaboration and positive relationship with colleagues also predicted teacher’s commitment. As far as the SEL data:
teachers may be more willing to commit to teaching in general and to a particular school that values the social-emotional well-being of all its members. Another possible explanation is that SEL may help improve some of the antecedents of teacher commitment, such as ‘being heard and respected with regard to school decisions.’ (Park, 2005, p. 465 as cited in Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011, p. 1044)

In regards to positive relationship with colleagues, teachers want to be heard by administration, and administration needs to encourage and foster teacher leadership, in order for teachers to be committed.

The school counselor can aid with administration in the facilitation and implementation of social-emotional learning curriculum. By executing social-emotional learning, the school can be encouraging student emotional, behavioral, and academic development, as well as fostering relationships between staff and students, and increasing teacher leadership and commitment.

**Strengths finders.** According to Tom Rath and Barry Conchie (2008), the key to being an effective leader has been reviewed and investigated by Gallup data and the research has come down to three key findings: (1) *The most effective leaders are always investing in strengths*, (2) *The most effective leaders surround themselves with the right people and then maximize their team*, and (3) *The most effective leaders understand their followers’ needs* (p. 2-3).

According to Rath and Conchie (2008), within a workplace, such as a school, “when organization’s leadership fails to focus on individuals’ strengths, the odds of an employee being engaged are a dismal 1 in 11 (9%). But when an organization’s leadership focuses on the strengths of its employees’, the odds of each person being engaged goes up *eighthfold*” (p. 2). The organization’s leadership within a school is the principal or administration. This means the principal’s focus needs to be leading the school through encouraging strengths amongst teacher
leadership and what each individual teacher can contribute to the improvement of the school climate.

The school counselor can assist the principal in setting up professional development, which utilizes the *Strength Finders 2.0* assessment and then creating a curriculum for engaging teachers on how to understand and utilize their personal strengths. This means that every teacher should take the assessment and then there should be ongoing training in large groups and small groups on how to be intentional with maximizing the strengths of the teachers and the school, to create a cohesive and encouraging team.

**Adlerian Perspective**

**Sense of Belonging and Significance**

A person’s self-worth and sense of belonging is what is going to influence their productivity and involvement within an organization. As the school as the organization, when a student or staff feels their thoughts, opinions, and self are validated and considered, they are empowered to continue to take risks, which develops trust. By building trust among co-educators, administrators, and between student-teacher relationships, everyone feels a sense of belonging and significance. According to Ursula Oberst and Alan Stewart (2003), humans have the main goal of contributing and belonging. “Individuals try to find a place among people. They try to answer the question: ‘How can I fit in and also be all that I can be?’” (p. 22). Within a school, administrators, educators, and students alike are asking themselves that question. The administrator really has the influence on setting the culture, by understanding how he or she fits and leads the school and how he or she is going to involve and empower the rest of the school to fit in and utilize their strengths. Once the teachers believe there is a sense of trust, that they too,
can take risks and be empowered to lead using their abilities, they can in turn empower the students, making them feel significant to lead.
Social Interest

Adler also pointed out that the concept of Social Interest, though difficult to grasp and subject to changes through the development of human community and from culture to culture, is universal and nobody can ignore it. It is the ‘iron logic of communal life.


Different schools are going to have different cultures and they can still be different and positive, but also different and be a negative culture as well. But despite differences, a positive school culture harbors social interest. It is in human’s innate desire to want to contribute, belong, and be in community with others, especially within a school, where most of the work and school day take place.

Encouragement

Encouragement is more important than any other aspect of child-raising. It is so important that the lack of it can be considered the basic cause for misbehavior. A misbehaving child is a discouraged child. Each child needs continuous encouragement just as a plant needs water. He cannot grow and develop and gain a sense of belonging without encouragement. (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964, p. 36)

Even though this quote emphasizes the importance of encouragement in children, especially child-raising, this simple concept is completely applicable to adults and students in their work and school environments to create a positive culture.

Assessing School Climate and Culture

When a school counselor enters into a counseling position, he or she needs to assess the school climate and culture, as well as what the previous relationship had been between school counselor and students, educators, and administration. According to Hoy (1990) citing Firestone
and Wilson (1985) suggested that there are ways to assess the current school culture; they focus on three basic components of a school organization culture: stories, icons, and rituals. According to Hoy (1990), “stories are narratives that are based on true events, but they frequently combine fact and fiction” (Firestone & Wilson, 1985 as cited in Hoy, 1990, p. 160). This can be seen by stories passed down on how administration stood by and heroically supported an educator or student. “Icons are physical artifacts that are used to communicate culture (logos, mottoes, and trophies) and rituals are the basic ceremonies that provide tangible examples of what is important in the organization” (Hoy, 1990, p. 160). Examples of these would be pep-rallies, or ceremonies or faculty meetings in which administration lead and educators, staff, and students participated. Also, according to Hoy (1990) you can assess a lot about a school by the examination of their informal communication systems.

There is also many different tools and inventories to use to assess the school climate. The inventories mostly consist of survey tools that are completed by administration, educators, and students. If one is evaluating school climate, according to Andrew Roach and Thomas Kratochwill (2004), the Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE), School Climate Survey, and Organization Health Inventory (OHI) and Organizational Climate Descriptive Questionnaire (OCDQ) can be used. If evaluating school culture, according to Roach and Kratochwill (2004) the Critical Incident Analysis and Quality Improvement Tool can be used.

**How to Implement Change as a School Counselor**

The openness of administrators to the participation of teachers in the management decision-making process creates the conditions needed to achieve mutual trust between teachers and principals in teacher leadership practices (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). This
way issues can be resolved. “While overcoming adverse conditions, through openness and honesty mistakes will be considered as part of the learning process, as a developmental opportunity instead of a risk for blame. (Demir, 2015, p. 625)

By establishing a relationship of trust the mindset of a positive school climate and culture is developed and shaped and becomes a way understanding one another and ultimately effects the students’ ability to learn, achieve, and lead. As a school counselor, it is important to recognize the power of trust within the relationships at the school. The area of trust, delegation of leadership, and intentionally knowing and utilizing others strengths, are conversation and promptings of implementing systemic change that need to happen with the principal and administration. Because the position of school counselor is neutral and exists to advocate for staff and especially students, the counselor needs to be willing to take the first step of leadership, take some inventory, and initiate constructive change with the principal.

**Implementation of Systemic Change**

Systemic change to a school is incredibly important, especially if the school culture can be positively impacted. The systemic change of school culture is incredibly important and can affect the overall school in so many ways. According to Engin Karadağ et al. (2014) “culture is a significant concept for organizations as it influences them in terms of balance, loyalty, unity, and ability” (p. 105). They go onto say that “specifically, a positive school culture influences the motivation of students and teachers, academic achievement of the students, job satisfaction, commitment and cooperation of the teachers, employee dedication and motivation, and structuralization of the school community” (Canizo, 2002; Deal & Peterson, 1990, 2000; Giles, 1998; Harris, 2002; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Masland, 1985; Lima, 2006 as cited in Karadağ et al., 2014, p. 105).
The school counselor can be the first to initiate systemic change within a school after assessing the school climate. Especially if a school counselor is in their first year, it is wise to reflect and assess the general climate of the school. Then slowly he or she can begin to initiate change. The principal is the first person the school counselor can communicate and dialogue with on how to improve the school climate, teacher leadership, and student achievement. The principal, along with the school counselor can then hold informative meeting during a professional development day during the beginning of the school year. In the meeting, communication and *Strength Finders 2.0* will be discussed and each teacher will receive the *Strengths Based Leadership* book and the code number to take the strengths assessment. The assessment will then be completed by the staff before the next professional development day. Communication will also be discussed in the meeting, as it is a very important topic in making sure a cohesive team is formed. According to Linda Plevyak and Amy Heaston (2001) the importance of communication needs to be established early, especially within a professional community, “so a specific plan of action could be developed in order to achieve the purpose” (p. 769). Which the case the professional development day, the purpose would be to establish what strengths are and how they can be utilized within teams and leadership.

At the next professional development day, staff, including the principal, will disperse into groups of two to three to discuss their findings of the assessment. Then, staff will share within the large group what they found interesting and how it could help create a systemic change to the overall culture of the school. The ideas will then be documented, voted on, and implemented. Throughout the year during meetings with professional development communities, teachers and staff will discuss what has been working with identifying and utilizing their strengths and what areas they could continue to improve in. The next step would be create a mentorship program for
teachers who have been teaching at the school for over 10 years and they would mentor teachers
that are new or under 10 years of service to the school. This is to help one another in discussing
strengths, but also for accountability, and support and encouragement for taking on leadership

> teacher leaders who step into the role of mentor face significant responsibilities. Within
these multifaceted roles, mentors encounter triumphs and challenges. Effective teacher
leaders draw upon their extensive knowledge of curriculum, best practices, and current
research and courageously share their experiences and expertise with their mentees and
peers. (p. 13)

When the mentorship program is created and strengths are discussed and present to all the school
staff, teacher leaders can be formed. An assessment that can be discussed amongst professional
learning communities, as well as mentor and mentees, will help foster leadership. According to
Douglas Roby (2011):

> Teacher leaders can take the lead in bringing about change to enhance school cultures,

from:

- Total self-interest to sincere interest in helping coworkers
- Just congeniality to collegiality
- Blaming and complaining to accepting and solving
- Just extrinsic and intrinsic motivators to moral motivators
- Primarily contractual relationships to covenantal relationships
- A school of coworkers to a community of learners
- One-way mentorship to two-way mentorship
- Being reactive to becoming proactive
• Little or no involvement in important decision-making to high involvement

• An operational focus to a professional focus (p. 788)

The overall goal for professional development and strength finder’s assessments is to have an appreciation of each individual’s strengths, so that he or she can be valued, find significance, and contribute to the school in leadership. Shillingstad et al. (2015) put it best when they said, “when mentors and mentees are supported through professional development, professional learning communities, opportunities for dialogue, and other ways in school districts, the ultimate winners are the children. The children gain in achievement when their teachers gain in skill and efficacy” (p. 20).

Conclusion

The need is great for intentional principals, school counselors, and teachers within a school. The idea of creating a positive school climate can be achieved, but it starts with the encouragement and humility of the principal. Without the principals’ awareness in utilizing teachers’ strengths, encouraging teacher leadership, and creating positive relationships between teachers and colleagues and teachers and students, there will be high rigidity among teachers, which will lead to lack of student achievement.

The research shows that a workplace or organization, a school, needs teacher leadership and teacher trust to create a positive school climate.

The trust level of teachers towards the organization are shown to explain 76% of the variability in the level of teacher leadership culture in their school. It was found that trust in principals has the highest correlation with managerial trust. Trust in colleagues also is found to have the highest correlations with teacher collaboration and supportive work environment. (Demir, 2015, p. 621)
Even though there is little research on the effects of social-emotional learning and strengths enhancing curriculums and the effects they have on teachers commitment to the school and overall student achievement, the best objective for teachers is to feel valued, appreciated, understood, and feeling a sense of belonging to a school.

**Implications for School Counselors**

School counselors’ role is divided among students, teachers, and administration, meeting and collaborating with all to essentially work as a team to help students have success. The role of the counselor is to assess the school climate and analyze what could be done to improve the climate, so that the team can become more interconnected to help students. This also means that the counselor can encourage the principal to helping him or her understand what could be done to improve the climate and enhance teacher commitment.

**Recommendations for Future Research Directions**

There is a need for more research on how strength based assessments and social-emotional learning can effect teachers’ commitment and sense of belonging outcomes. There also needs to be more research on the applications and opportunities for teacher leadership within a school. It would be important to understand, just how much leadership opportunities are healthy for a teacher to possess and what can become burdensome and have opposite effects on teacher commitment. According to Demir (2015), in looking at Poekert’s (2012) research, studies that have recently been done “mostly focused on the characteristics of teacher leaders and showed that research related to the development of teacher leadership is still limited” (p. 622).

Overall, their needs to be trust within the school. Trust between principals and teachers, teachers and students, and also with the school counselor. It is important to have teachers and student leadership, and understanding of strengths and how to utilize them, a sense of belonging,
and encouragement, but without trust in one another the school will plummet. Both teachers and students have a great need for belonging and encouragement to stay engaged and successful and when they are given opportunities to utilize and empower their individual strengths the school and climate will flourish.
References


