Personal Reflections about School Culture

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In the online article “Understanding School Culture” (n. d.), I found a description of school culture that I think is fairly comprehensive: “School culture is the behind-the-scenes context that reflects the values, beliefs, norms, traditions, and rituals that build up over time as people in a school work together”. It is clear from my classroom experiences at Piedmont Elementary School and Maury Middle School, as well as from reading the on-line daily reflections of my classmates, that the school culture differs markedly from one facility to another and that school culture can positively or negatively influence the overall atmosphere and functioning of a school.

A good example of how culture can vary so significantly between schools was evident to me in the tales reflected by two classmates about multidisciplinary meetings in which student behaviors were discussed. The tone of this meeting seems to have reflected professionalism and genuine collaboration as the staff members consulted with the student’s mother in trying to come up with ways to meet the student’s needs. On the other hand, I detected a distinct sense of discord and tension in Julia’s reflections about the meeting she attended at Walnut Hill Elementary School in which a child’s possible placement at an alternative facility was discussed due to this child’s troubling behavior. Similar to the meeting Melissa attended, this one involved several educational professionals and the child’s parents. However, the tone of this meeting was quite different, indicating somewhat of a power struggle and an aura of implying blame and “passing the buck”. A decision was made about the child’s placement, but Julia reveals that the child’s primary teacher left the meeting with feelings of increased animosity toward some of the specialists. Though, as Julia says, her reflections reveal just one side of the story, they present a good illustration of how rifts can form between school coworkers.
Julia also discussed the discomfort she felt with the obviously strained relationships at the school between groups of teachers of different grade levels. It seems so counterproductive to me that groups of teachers within the same institution would allow themselves to be at such odds. Discord during multidisciplinary meetings and tension among staff members could indicate a very negative and toxic school culture, which would certainly trickle down and affect student morale and performance. Unfortunately, these types of factors could negatively influence one’s success as a school counselor, as well as one’s own sense of well-being, since they seem to reveal a “look out for oneself at all costs” mindset. When school workers are preoccupied with feeling the need to protect themselves from insult, they cannot possibly keep the needs of the students as a priority, making a PSC’s job very difficult to achieve.

For the most part, staff interactions as Piedmont were positive and productive. There was an overall “good vibe” at this school. Teachers there seem to generally respect each other and work together successfully, and Mrs. Doan (my cooperating teacher) at all times displayed respect and concern for her Kindergarten students. Piedmont has a very supportive principal, and both teachers and principal hold high expectations for student achievement and behavior. This spirit was reflected in the attitudes of the students toward staff and toward each other. There was a sense of unity among teachers, office personnel, cafeteria personnel, etc. Piedmont felt like a safe and positive place to be. I would love to work at a place like Piedmont in which the school culture reflects professionalism, togetherness, high expectations, respectful interactions, and positive relationships. These qualities are not only desirable, but they lay an essential foundation for effective school counseling.

The general school culture at Maury was one of unity and high expectations of staff and teachers. During the staff meeting I attended, the principal discussed stricter enforcement of
student dress code and other rules, implementing the Olweus Program, and Tennessee’s new teacher evaluation system, among other things. The principal listened patiently to teacher concerns about teacher evaluations and questions about enforcing rules. He was understanding and supportive. Unfortunately, when teachers kept talking beyond appropriate limits, the assistant principal reprimanded them. His reproach made me uncomfortable, but the talk about teacher evaluations had prompted several heated discussions which did not die down in a timely manner. I was surprised that this incident did not seem to dampen the spirits of the teachers who were present. The majority of students and teachers seem to take pride in Maury. “Hornet Pride” was stressed during the staff meeting and the impromptu meeting that the principal had with the students in the gym the next morning to address rule infractions. Upon returning to class after this impromptu meeting, the students asked Mrs. Hillard, my cooperating teacher, for more details about the recent decision to crack down on rules. While listening respectfully to student concerns, Mrs. Hillard supported what the principal said and gave the students evidence that they had been taking advantage of lax enforcement of rules.

At both schools which I visited for the orientation field placement, the main concerns I heard involved the new teacher evaluation system and the recently (at that time) introduced legislation which would limit teacher bargaining rights and toughen tenure laws. It does trouble me that if teachers continue to feel attacked, as they described their emotions, morale will drop so low that the school culture as many institutions will be negatively affected.

In completing this orientation experience, I more fully understand the ways in which school culture affects the general atmosphere and functioning of the school, the ability of each employee to successfully do his/her job, and the attitudes of the employees and students. If the overall culture of the school reflects a stance of respect, support, loyalty, unity, appreciation,
professionalism, and cooperation, school personnel will be more inspired and encouraged to do their utmost to meet student needs, thereby meeting the school’s needs and making it a place of security and growth. When there is marked dissension and disharmony, school personnel cannot effectively communicate. When school personnel do not feel supported, appreciated, and valued, the school culture will reflect the resentment and negativity that the workers are likely to feel. This, in turn, will certainly affect the school’s environment and functional capabilities. I have learned how complicated meeting students’ needs might be, requiring the successful collaboration of numerous persons, including the student’s parents, general education teacher, PSC, principal, vice principal, instructional assistant, speech pathologist, school psychologist, special education teacher, and/or reading specialist. I would feel uncomfortable and probably ineffective working at a school in which there is frequent friction and palpable tension between personnel, resulting in an uncooperative spirit and inability to successfully meet student needs. Clearly, the culture of the school will affect my ability to successfully perform my duties as a PSC as well as my own sense of well-being.
References

*Understanding School Culture.* (n.d.). Retrieved May 3, 2011, from UTeach: University of Texas at Austin, Natural Sciences, WINGS Online: https://uteach.utexas.edu/go/wings/Mentor-Development/School-Culture/