PLANNING FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:
CLOSING THE GAP OF CULTURE WITH DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

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ABSTRACT

The gap of school culture is the first gap that principals need to address before and during implementation of school improvement strategies. The authors posit that building a school culture of democracy-centeredness is a means to close the culture gap. The democracy-centered school is equipped to deal with external realities internally in a way that is perceived as engaging and participative. Applying Friedman's analysis of context, narratives, and imagination to schools, this paper presents correlates of democracy-centered schools. The overlooked gap of school culture can be filled by democracy-centered leaders, who build capacity for school improvement using democratic principles. Although barriers are identified, including challenges for university principal preparation programs, the potential for sustained school improvement within schools is dependent on a democracy-centered school culture.

INTRODUCTION

Planning to implement school improvement strategies to close achievement gaps begins with an often overlooked gap, the school's culture (Levine & Lezotte, 1995; Peterson & Deal, 1998). Schein (1992) defined culture as: "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (p. 12). As Deal and Kennedy (1982) stated, culture is "the way we do things around here" (p. 4). How the school perceives and addresses improvement is critical to the school renewal process. One of the challenges is how to elicit sustained focus and effort in constant renewal (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). What, then, is the gap of culture, and how do democratic principles close it?

CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL IN AN ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY

In this era of school accountability, with many state and federal interventions impacting schools, many principals are questioning if it matters how the local school operates. The culture of the school has been invaded by external mandates about "how to do things." For example, the most recent federal influence on public schools, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, has greatly impacted the culture of public schools. In a recent study conducted by the Public Agenda for the Wallace Foundation, Farkas, Johnson, and Duffett (2003) report that 58% of principals surveyed believed that inadequate funding and implementing NCLB were the most pressing problems they had, and 81% of the principals expressed that complexity of regulations regarding special education had become "worse" in recent years. Since the passage of NCLB, schools have been pressured by more centralized control and management to comply with curriculum and testing expectations. Many principals question who is in control of the "way we do things around here."

The School's Culture within the Organizational Structure

The local school, as an open system, is vulnerable to many external influences that impact the culture of the school, leaving principals to question their role of middle managers. The school and school leadership must develop strong internal systems to manage and control the external influences. There is a "gap" in school culture if the school does not have strong internal systems to deal with external demands of the school as an organization.

In the 21st century, it is imperative that all schools have strong systems for the way things are done within the school, as societal and political influences are not going away. Hoy and Miskel (2005) explained that schools, as open systems, should expect to receive and will always receive external environmental pressures. "Technological and informational developments, political structures and patterns of legal norms, social conditions and cultural values, economic and market factors, and population and demographic characteristics influence school structures."(p. 239). How each school addresses these

changes is dependent on the unique culture of the school, but there has been little systematic research that explains institutional cultures of effective schools (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). What we do know is that each school is expected to adapt to the changing environmental demands.

Schools are expected to adapt to change and improve within. If the culture is strong, the chances for school improvement initiatives are high (Wagner & Hasden-Copas, 2002; Sergiovanni, 2005). The culture provides a bridge from previous to future achievement. Cultural leadership devalues the need for external bureaucratic control structures, accepting the power of work groups to assume accountability for decisions made and progress achieved within the school (Kunda, 1992, p.218). Not paying attention to the culture of the school, "as the way we do things around here," may impede the process of adapting to change and improving.

Another way to view the gap of the school's culture is to understand how schools traditionally work. Cuban (1988) believed that many school improvement changes remain at the organizational periphery, rather than embedded in the structure of schools. Spillane described how articulation across the school as an organization is fragmented and given to individuals who often have little interaction with others. (Spillane, 1998). Elmore (2000) described how the school system hierarchy has remained relatively unchanged throughout the 20th century, with teachers working in isolated classrooms, managing the technical core of the school. Schmoker (2004) explained that despite goals and innovation, teaching and learning practices can remain largely static, with no improvement results. Lunenburg (2001) described the culture gap as an incompatibility between the technical core of the organization, teaching and learning, and the organizational "periphery," which is the "infrastructure surrounding the technical core" (p. 7).

Elmore (2000) discussed this feature of the school as a loose coupling, drawing on the ideas of Weick (1976). He distinguished between the technical core of the school and the administrative superstructure. The technical core is about teachers' work in the classroom, including the essential features of teaching and learning—making decisions about how to teach the curriculum, how to work with students, how to plan for learning, and how to assess student achievement. The administrative superstructure that surrounds the technical core is the management feature of the school's organization, "the 'glue' that holds loosely coupled systems together" (Weick, 1982, p. 675). School improvement addresses both the superstructure and the technical core, and a school must have a strong culture for school improvement initiatives to make a difference. If the superstructure and the technical core are being invaded by external influences, the school that has a weak culture will not be able to sustain school improvement.

This loose coupling feature of the school as an organization poses another problem, as described by Kleinhenz and Ingvarson (2004):

The theme of the loose coupling argument, as it relates to education, can be stated as follows: the technical core of education systems is weak, disordered and uncertain, largely because of doubts about the status of teachers' professional knowledge. Teachers and administrators alike resist incursions into the technical core, preferring to leave essential decisions about teaching and learning to individual teachers who generally work in isolation. The surrounding administrative arrangements thus carefully contrive to ignore the fragile core of practice, shielding it from external scrutiny and criticism while creating an appearance of orderly management. In loose coupling theory, management of the structures and processes that surround the technical core of education is quite separate from management of the core itself. Although it may seem that educational management is about managing the processes of teaching and learning (the technical core), it is, in reality, nothing of the sort. Educational management, according to this theory, manages things like student grouping, school organization, timetabling and major school events, but leaves the technical core of teaching and learning to the idiosyncratic practice of individual teachers who are 'buffered' from outside interference by the very structures which, ostensibly, were set up to manage their work. This buffering has the effect of falsely reassuring the public that all is well at the technical core. (pp. 35-36)

They argue that assuring teacher quality and facilitating school improvement will best be achieved when teachers and administrators work together in a climate of respect for the complexity and depth of teachers' professional knowledge and practice. In other words, a healthy culture of respect of the people, by the people, and for the people within the organization who are closest to the major work of

the school, teaching and learning, is essential to improvement (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004). Engaging stakeholders external to the technical core to focus on school improvement with teachers and students is essential in ongoing renewal of the school.

Closing the Gap of Culture

If a disconnect, or gap, exists between the organizational structure and the teaching and learning core of the school, school improvement is very difficult, if not impossible. For school improvement to occur, there must be a strong connection across all levels of the organizational structure and technical core (Lunenburg, 2001). It is the culture of the school that provides the means for the congruence of an effective organizational framework, a strong technical core, and energy and motivation to sustain the renewal (Sergiovanni, 2005).

From a careful scrutiny of the literature of effective schools, Sergiovanni (2005) surmised that the school is an organization both "tightly coupled" and "loosely coupled" (p. 140). He explains that successful schools that are tightly coupled are "closely organized in a highly disciplined fashion around a set of core ideas spelling out the way of life in the school and governing the way in which people should behave" (p. 140). Successful schools are also "loosely coupled" in that there is also a sense of autonomy "so that people can pursue these themes in ways that make sense to them" (p. 140). The combination of tight structure around clear themes and a sense of autonomy results in successful schools, which are schools that implement school improvement initiatives and sustain change with energy and commitment within the school.

If the school's culture is strong, the school is better able to achieve its school improvement goals. (Sergiovanni, 2005). The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory identified ten capacities for initiating and sustaining school improvement at the elementary level, one of which is strengthening the culture of the school (2000). Schein (1992) argued that the most important aspect of leadership is creating and managing culture and working with it to meet the needs of the organization. Therefore, a principal who works to build a strong culture may provide the means to generate the kind of energy necessary to initiate and sustain school improvement.

DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES WITHIN SCHOOL CULTURE

So, how does a principal build a strong culture? The authors posit that a school culture based on democracy-centered principles is essential to continuous school improvement. As schools have a long tradition of preparing students for roles within democratic society, it is the school as a host culture of democracy-centeredness that has great potential for creating engagement and commitment to the school improvement process. A democracy-centered school has great potential for filling the gap of school culture and school improvement. According to Darling-Hammond, schools that have restructured to function democratically "produce high achievement with more students of all abilities and graduate more of them with better levels of skills and understanding than traditional schools do." (1997, p. 331). In planning for school improvement, the school with democratic principles has potential to become a learning organization in action. A learning organization, as described by Senge (1990), is a place "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3).

Content, Narrative, and Imagination within the School

Let's examine the potential of democracy-centeredness in schools by first looking at the potential of democracy within a country. Thomas Friedman, in his book, *The World is Flat: A Historical Perspective of the 21st Century*, described how India has the second largest Muslim population in the world, yet there is no evidence of that population's involvement in world-wide extremism. Although India is a vast Hindu-dominated country, he described how Indian Muslims have enjoyed sustained democracy within their country. Although there have been isolated examples of interreligious conflicts, Muslims in India realize opportunities of freedom and participation to fight for their beliefs within their democratic government. In contrast, where Islam is embedded in authoritarian societies, for example in Pakistan

right across the border, "it tends to become the vehicle of angry protest" and extremism. (Friedman, p. 559) Friedman offered an explanation for the difference in Muslims' behaviors in terms of context, narrative, and imagination.

By *context,* Friedman referred to the social, political, religious, and economic environment of the society in which they live. Sustained democracy, economic opportunity, and a culture of tolerance for expression of ideas exists within Indian society--not all without tension, but all within a democracy that has survived without manifesting anger, extremism, and disenfranchisement. This *context* provides positive *narratives* about how one makes progress, gets ahead, and provides for family. In turn, these *narratives* lead to the development of positive *imaginations*—expectations for the future and how one might be successful. Thus Friedman's view, and the view of M.J. Akbar, the Muslim editor of the *Asian Age*, a national Indian daily newspaper, is that the *context* in which Indian Muslims live (which is democracy-centered) and the *narratives* they share (ones of progress, possibilities, and a good life in which they can practice their beliefs) stimulate their *imagination* of a world in which they want to live—not destroy. Muslims in India enjoy the *context* of a democratic government, where the current President is a Muslim, a female Muslim sits on the Supreme Court, and the wealthiest man in India is Muslim, all within an Indian society largely Hindu, but within *context, narrative, and imagination* of democracy.

Applying this analysis to schools, one might ask what context is experienced by students and teachers, those closest to the technical core of the school. Results from a national survey conducted by First Amendment Schools (www.FirstAmendmentSchools), regarding students' and teachers' experience with democracy within their schools, revealed the following percentages regarding participation: (1) civic responsibility, 31%; (2) freedom of expression, 50%; (3) freedom of religion, 59%; (4) freedom of the press, 23%; (5) broad-based participation, 23%; (6) civic mission to the public, 50%; (7) parent participation, 45%; (8) student government, 27%; (9) curriculum engages students, 27%; and, (10) service learning, 56%. Without information on respondents or school level, one can only examine the percentages at face value to find that some schools do not have widespread engagement. This profile of percentages reflects the *context* experienced by some students and teachers in the responding schools. Regarding the *context* of these schools, what might be the narratives from the respondents? The *narratives* generated from this *context*, and from the *context* where external controls dominate the culture, might be stories of disengagement and disenfranchisement. One might hear comments such as, "It's no use to try; they won't listen." "They asked for input, but it really doesn't matter." "They only care about the rich, white people in this school." Just give me the pacing guide, and I'll teach it however you tell me." "Only the good students catch a break in this school." "Just teach to the test and don't make waves." "If I hear test scores one more time. . ." From these narratives, what *imagination* might develop?

The imagination of teachers and students with these kinds of narratives might lead to life looking better outside the school—rather than inside the school. Aggression, vandalism, and /or even apathy may have more appeal than rules and external control. Doing the minimum, just getting by, "five more years to retirement," may be the imagination of teachers who share such narratives. Students also may see school as a place to escape, rather than a place to learn.

In schools where there is a disconnect in the technical core and organizational infrastructure, the imagination of teachers and students within the school may be left to isolated situations, leading to a deeper level of disenfranchisement. The student, teacher, or administrator may experience random acts of excellence in isolated cases, creating narratives, such as, "If you want to learn, you better get into Mr. ABC's class," or "I demand that my child be placed with Mr. ABC, because he's the best teacher in sixth grade." These narratives lead to imagining that success is possible for those students who have influential parents or whose "luck" determines one's fate. Worse yet, it leaves those who are not very familiar with the "way we do things around here," even more disenfranchised from the opportunities of teaching and learning.

In schools where democracy is practiced and embedded in the culture of the school, where the infrastructure and the technical core are both tightly structured and loosely structured, there can be a *context* of autonomy and freedom that co-exists with state accountability and external demands. In 2001, ASCD joined forces with Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center to launch an initiative designed to transform ways in which schools model and teach rights and responsibilities of a democracy. Many

examples of such schools may be found at their website (http://www.firstamendmentschools.org/).

A Democracy-centered School

One elementary school that endorsed the First Amendment Schools ideals of democracy-centeredness turned their culture around in order to improve student achievement and to improve engagement of teachers, students, and parents in the school improvement process. The host culture of democracy-centeredness is embedded at Fairview Elementary, one of the 97 First Amendment Schools. The school is described as a high minority school in a neighborhood troubled by drugs. English is a foreign language for many of the parents. Working to implement First Amendment and democratic practices, the school's culture became more inclusive, and, soon, the *narratives* began to change. Parents felt included in the school, students became more engaged, and *imagination* of those within the school demonstrated hope and success. In the last two years, suspension rates have dropped, their "graduates" in sixth grade have averaged a "B" or better, test scores have doubled, and the students were able to reverse a dress code through democracy in action.

Although this is the narrative of one school, there are many such examples at the First Amendment web site. What is clear to principals is that planning to implement school improvement initiatives involves engaging teachers, students, and parents within the context of the school. The narratives and imagination derived from the culture of the school are very insightful during planning and implementation of school improvement initiatives.

On the other hand, there are examples of schools that have achieved higher test scores through bureaucratic, tight controls on the teaching and learning core. Bureaucracy and management can produce higher test scores. In the NCLB environment, many schools are responding to external controls and demands that have placed principals in a middle manager position. Teachers are told how and what to do. Morale is low, but test scores are improving. Federal and state controls have demoralized the efficacy of the school. Although there are success stories in the literature of schools improving test scores with tight controls and no democracy in action, the capacity for schools to sustain improvement and go beyond improving test scores remain within the capacity of the school's culture. Even though bureaucracy and external controls provide a means to raise test scores, to sustain school renewal without a culture of engagement within the school is difficult.

In assessing the culture of the school, a principal might determine the state of the school's culture by observing the context and listening to the narratives of all of those within the school—not just the "best" students and the "best" teachers and the "best" parents. A principal may ask "What if?" to determine aspirations and dreams of those within the school. Friedman advocates thinking about how we stimulate positive imaginations. He related advice given to him by an IBM computer scientist about encouraging people to focus on productive outcomes, to minimize alienation, and to celebrate interdependence. Friedman, in viewing the global society in which we now live, advocated focusing on "'inclusion, rather than exclusion,' openness, opportunity, and hope, rather than limits, suspicion, and grievance" (p. 545).

In schools focused on aspirations, principals who espouse practices of democratic principles and values within their schools have great potential to sustain school improvement. For example, Fairview Elementary developed a First Amendment School Leadership Team, with parents, students, community members, teachers, and administrators sharing access to the school's policies and procedures. The function of the team was to ensure that the policies and procedures reflect the democratic ideals they promoted. Democracy-centered leadership is at work in all of the decisions made within the school, with the students reversing a school dress code. Even as NCLB pressures have become part of their environment, they have a culture of democracy in action, as "the way we do things around here" are embedded in engagement, evidenced by their context, narratives, and imagination.

Correlates of Democracy-centered Schools

So, what exactly are democracy-centered schools? First of all, the literature abounds with the rationale for public education, which usually includes the purpose of educating youth for citizen participation in democracy. In his book, *In Praise of Education*, Goodlad (1997) argued that the purpose of education is to develop individual and collective democratic character**.** Apple & Beane (1999) identified central

ideals of democratic schools to include: open flow of ideas; faith in individual and collective capacity of people for resolving problems; use of collective capacity of people for resolving problems; use of critical reflection to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies; concern for welfare of others and the common good; concern for dignity and rights of individuals and minorities. Maxcy (1995) discussed democratic values as those that are based on: a dedicated belief in worth of individual and importance of individual in participation and discussion regarding school life; a belief in freedom, intelligence and inquiry; a persuasion that plans and that solutions should be results of individuals pooling their intelligent efforts with communities.

So, what does a democracy-centered school look like in comparison to some schools in regards to democratic practices? The following components (see Table 1) of a democracy-centered school, while not exhaustive, provide a framework by which principals may question the extent of democracy-centered practices within their schools. The features of a democracy-centered school are contrasted with what might be current conditions in some schools:

Table 1
Correlates of Democracy-centered Schools

Current Practice	CORRELATE	Democracy-centered Practice
Compliant students are valued. Conformity is desired. Good students are recognized and privileged within the school. Grades are used to sort and select.	**1-The individual is valued and respected.**	All students are valued. Individual identity is valued, and individual student progress is monitored and recognized. Continuous student progress is valued. Assessment for learning is the focus.
Students witness unequal application of policies and procedures. Classes are "dumbed down" for some students. Some students are more equal than others. Homogeneity of representation is practiced.	**2-Equality and equity are core values.**	Students witness democratic values and practices in policy development and application. Equity of instructional practices is demonstrated within classrooms and across classrooms. Students develop a healthy respect for all. Heterogeneous representation is practiced.
Dissent is discouraged. Those in power develop rules, procedures, and consequences. There is an imbalance in the common good and individual rights. The common good is enforced by authoritarian practices.	**3-Civility, decency, and justice are practiced.**	Dissent is expected and respected. Conflicting viewpoints are considered and provided a means to influence rules, procedures, and consequences. Rules, procedures, and consequences are developed by all who will be affected by them. The common good is balanced by individual rights.
Freedom is restricted, even feared. Questioning and thinking are discouraged, especially in some classrooms.	**4-Freedom is valued.**	Freedom is expanded/ encouraged. Questioning and thinking are valued/ stimulated in all classrooms.
Some students, teachers, and parents participate in school.	**5-Civic obligation/ participation is expected.**	Opportunities for involvement across the curriculum extend to every student, teacher, and parent.
Student/teacher government is perfunctory. Parent involvement limited. Faculty/ staff engagement limited to 'small' matters. Competition is encouraged to defeat.	**6-The circle of meaningful engagement is expanded.**	Student government, parent organizations, and faculty/staff involvement is meaningful to decision-making and accomplishing shared goals. Competition is encouraged to improve.

Although not an exhaustive list, these correlates can be used to assess the democracy-centeredness of the school's culture. As the school transitions into a democracy-centered place, the host culture of democracy as "the way we do things around here" has potential for students to become more energized, parental involvement more meaningful, and faculty and staff more committed, loyal, and engaged. The context of democracy-centered schools has the potential to create narratives, such as "we worked together to design senior projects," "we decided to use early dismissal time for professional learning

communities." "In developing our new inclusion teams, we identified ways to create time for ongoing planning." "The student government decided to work on strategies to discourage cheating." "Lots of students and teachers attended our forum and participated in interviews when we were gathering information." From such narratives, the imagination concerning school is that school life is meaningful. Rather than escape, students participate. Rather than waiting for retirement, teachers develop a sense of efficacy that motivates their work. Parents understand their access to the school. Cooperation, teamwork, and the feeling that "I make a difference" may become operational.

Challenges and Barriers to Democracy-centered Schools

It may seem illogical to school leaders to relinquish power in an era of accountability that holds the principal ultimately responsible for student performance as indicated by "test scores." Distributed leadership and widening the circle of engagement in a school setting, however, create a context that is necessary to do the work of school in this era of accountability and 21st century challenges. In the current climate of change, it is becoming necessary for knowledge workers to be in a continuous learning mode. The real reform, then, lies within the school's capacity to be democracy-centered, with the leader recognizing the school as a learning community with democratic values and access to and participation in decision-making within the school.

Furman and Starratt (2002) caution that just establishing an environment of democratic participation is not sufficient. Democracy requires "the ability to listen, understand, empathize, negotiate, speak, debate, and resolve conflict in a spirit of interdependence and working for the common good" (p. 116). The celebration of diversity--rather than the desire for homogeneity and conformity--evolves from a school that employs democracy-centered leadership. Engagement of all involves more than getting a few to address minor problems. Democracy-centeredness can only be achieved when the structural and inherent features of the system are changed to reflect the capacity of access, capacity for contributions, and capacity for benefits from all who are within the democracy. The school created from the need for democracy-centered participation is real reform only if the "accessed" develop the practices and procedures that they choose to be governed by *within the school*. It is difficult work.

The challenge for university preparation programs is developing the means for deep development of principal interns. In contrast to the assortment of courses found in the typical preparation program, deep development provides opportunities to face typical challenges through a virtual school to practice decision-making and interventions associated with democracy-centered leadership.

Initially, educators borrowed their models of leadership from management studies. In doing so, they promoted and adopted organizational arrangements that invested particular individuals with power so that the latter would be able to force, motivate, or inspire others in ways that would help schools achieve the comparatively narrow ends of efficiency and productivity (Ryan, 2006).

If the principal intern enrolled in a preparation program sees the leadership role as hierarchical, based on the image of the school leader as a manager, then real reform may be problematic. As Sergiovanni (2005) suggested, the principal's role in developing a community of learners is a challenge, not only of efficiency and productivity but also of moral choices. Building the capacity of future school leaders to develop confidence in and comfort with democracy-centeredness requires deep development.

Another challenge to the practice of democracy-centered school leadership is federal, state, and local intervention in schools, forcing compliance with procedures designed to address adequate yearly progress (AYP). The resulting confusion over power and authority may lead to the absence of a support culture for democracy-centeredness. Absence of trust makes the development of democracy-centered schools harder work, but even more necessary work.

Recently, the authors conducted a pilot study in which the Jung-Myers-Briggs typology test was administered to 25 elementary and secondary principals from three school districts. This test measures preferences, not abilities or skills. Individuals tend to be guided by their preferences and be more comfortable with actions that are compatible with them, however, even though they may be able to exhibit other types of behavior. The following results were obtained from this pilot study: (a) 100% of the high school principals and 79% of the elementary principals scored a preference for Sensing. Sensing types take information in through the senses and prefer tangible reality. Their focus is on

the present. They are interested in what *is* rather that what might be. Key phrases that define their preferences are: facts, present, experience, practicality, realism. What these findings suggested is that the typical principal may have great difficulty in leading a democracy-centered school, which rests on more intangible factors (for example, permitting students to reverse a dress code as occurred in Fairview Elementary might appear to such principals as a short term risk, their being disinclined to visualize the collateral benefits to instruction of a more democratic emphasis). (b) 71% of secondary principals and 21% of elementary principals scored as Introverts. They prefer to work independently and may experience working with others as painful. Key words are quiet, private, few, deep, inward. This finding suggested that they would have difficulty in working with and negotiating with groups, which is the essence of democratic practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRINCIPAL TRAINING

While the results were from a pilot study of 25 principals in three school districts, they are supported by other studies of principal preferences and, given the high percentages, suggested that these findings may be characteristic of principals, generally. In light of the preference for Sensing and the high percentage of secondary principals who scored as Introverts, a much more robust training program will be needed to support principals as they learn to manage their preferences in order to engage in democracy-centered school practice. Currently, principals experience training that features information supplemented with discussion, analysis of cases, and projects at their home schools. These training approaches have enjoyed wide support in the literature. They are not likely, however, to be sufficiently robust to alter deeply held preferences.

We propose a process of "deep development," the focus of which would be to aid principals in moderating the influence of their preferences as described above to prepare them to lead democracy-centered schools. Such training has been piloted with students in a course in school leadership. A scaffolding approach has been followed, starting with the presentation and discussion of a democracy-centered school and how it fits with current theory of effective organizations. Following this, and supplemented with discussion in which they can raise questions and express doubts, they are presented with cases, which they discuss in terms of moving the school toward democracy-centered practices through their handling of that case.

From here, and this is where the deep development occurs, the students are placed in a "hot seat" where they must deal with, in real time, a situation in a "virtual principal's office." Other class members have cards, red signaling that they feel the student in the "hot seat" has not moved the school toward democracy-centered practices or green to signal that they agree that the student has done so. Then "red" and "green" students are paired to discuss how they arrived at their decision and report back to the class. The student in the "hot seat" also has an opportunity to discuss his rationale for the way he handled the situation and why he thinks it moved the school toward democracy-centered practice. The professor then provides his analysis of the response of the student. Over time, students have been able to implement democracy-centered practices in a variety of hypothetical situations. Research is on-going on the transfer of these practices and preferences into school settings.

SUMMARY

School improvement is a process which begins within the culture of the school. The "gap" of school culture is often overlooked, making school renewal difficult. Closing the gap begins with an understanding of "the way we do things around here." Schools as open systems are vulnerable to external environments, which make change inevitable and ongoing. Schools are expected to adapt, but school improvement changes may remain at the organizational periphery, the impact not to be felt at the teaching and learning core of the school. For school improvement to occur, there must be a strong connection across all levels of the school as an organization. The culture can be the "glue" that binds the school improvement initiatives and practices across the school. Building a school culture based on democratic principles has great potential for transforming the school. The context, narratives, and imagination of those within the school can be used to generate the energy, commitment, and accountability necessary in school improvement.

The challenges of 21st century life and the need for all students to achieve provide the motivation for democracy-centered school leadership. The correlates of democracy-centered schools provide a vision of what schools might begin to look like in the process of becoming more democratic. Barriers to the process, however, may initially come from within the school. Teachers may resist involvement because of the confusion over power and authority. Democracy-centered schooling also requires hard work both inside and outside the classroom. Students may resist because of the risk of engaging in what they may perceive as the "adult" world. Other barriers include the general malaise typical in a bureaucratic organization that leaves faculty, staff, and students feeling powerless, especially in educational decisions that have been so influenced from district, state, and national control. University training programs for principals will need to redesign to insure the deep development required of leaders of democracy-centered schools. Whatever the internal barriers and external challenges, however, they can be addressed within the school, beginning the transformation of the school as a host culture of democracy-centered practices.

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