Capitalizing on the Differences in Organizational Culture in and Among Lutheran High Schools

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This article focuses on the benefits that can be derived from the study of organizational culture in parochial schools. Tension often exists in schools because practices that have a historical basis compete with practices that are meant to be innovative. Drawing from the literature and a research study involving four Lutheran High Schools, Dr. Natzke argues that benefits can be obtained from maintaining this tension and that both practices should exist cooperatively. Dr. Joyce Natzke is Associate Professor of Education and Director of Teacher Education at Wisconsin Lutheran College.

The Research Study Format

This research study focused on the school organizational culture of 4 WELS Lutheran high schools who are members of a highly cohesive religious church body. Comparative and cross-case study methods were used to study each respective school’s culture. A triangulation format was designed to pursue cultural description through 3 means: interviews, physical evidences, and historical records. Through these areas, the researcher uncovered the artifacts, values and assumptions which, according to E. Schein (1992), comprise the culture of an organization. The primary purpose was to examine 2 basic assumptions: 1) Schools within such a closed community vary little in culture; and 2) Orientation is usually limited to beginning teachers and seldom deals with organizational culture because most teachers are educated within this church body’s higher education system. Thus, this study described the school organizational culture of each school and then identified similarities and/or differences. Secondary questions probed specific aspects of each school’s culture, influence of key contributors, communication of school culture to all constituencies, and orientation experiences/practices. (Natzke, 1996)

Spiritual Context

Underlying the efforts of the study was a sincere desire 1) to describe the culture of each selected school and 2) to celebrate the similarities and differences of each school culture. A passage from Scripture, I Corinthians 12:12-27, serves as the spiritual inspiration for this endeavor:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are

many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact god has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (NIV)

In this research context, this passage emphasizes the need for the whole organization to recognize the diversity of its individual members in order to effectively function in a unified manner. As the human body must have diversity to work effectively as a whole, so the members of the body of Christ must have diverse gifts and talents, the use of which can help bring about the accomplishment of a uniting purpose.

In this reference the purpose is Christ’s salvation.
Extending the analogy, the organizational culture of this church body can be described as a large, colorful tapestry woven with many intricate designs. The many threads represent the individual school and/or congregational cultures. As with any tapestry, it must have a main thread—or set of threads. Its purpose is to bring the many individual strands together in a unified pattern. Christ and His purpose of salvation is the Main Thread that binds all cultures together in the tapestry that is the church body. To this end, this study then sought to clarify the design of the tapestry and the important purpose of the Main Thread.

The Research Purpose

The purpose of this research study was to examine two primary assumptions concerning culture that are not necessarily unique to WELS schools, but, because of the interrelated nature of the whole organization, are especially prevalent. The first is that the schools in a closely knit WELS church body vary little in school culture. Because of clear adherence to doctrinal conformity, close family ties, examples of family inter-marriage, and the closed educational system which the church body operates, members may easily form such an assumption.

The second assumption is that teacher orientation which seldom touches the cultural aspect is needed only for newly appointed inexperienced faculty. However, most often faculty is “transferred” from school to school through a formal “Call”, a process in a church body whereby an individual is selected from a list of candidates to consider a different teaching position. The general practice indicates that the experience factor negates the need for comprehensive orientation with those “transferred”. Additionally, there are relatively few teachers brought into these parochial schools who are educated outside of the church body on the secondary and higher educational levels. Since membership in the church body is a requirement and most teachers are educated at a WELS sponsored college, the organizational culture is assumed to be understood, even to the point of indoctrination.

Definitional Context

Organizational culture is often described in the literature as a complex concept which covers many different aspects of organizational life. British anthropologist E. B. Tylor (1871) offered an early definition of culture when he explained that culture was a “complex whole,” which included “knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by people as members in a society.” He added that there are three very important characteristics of culture: (a) culture is acquired by people through a process called enculturalization; (b) the culture acquired through membership in a group involves shared understandings and practices; (c) culture is a complex whole with its related traits called cultural patterns. Tyler believed that people strive to learn the cultural patterns (traits) to fulfill needs and ensure survival.

Later, two American anthropologists, Kroeber and Luckhohn (1951), published 160 different definitions of cultures. They noted that cultural definitions echoed these recurring terms: “behavior patterning” (the subconscious efforts to understand and imitate the behaviors of a group) and “symbol transmission” (the efforts to communicate the cultural traits in some representative form) of cultural traits, artifacts, and written language (p. 357). The essential core of culture consists of common values shared by a group of people.

A more recent researcher of organizational culture, Schein (1992) defined culture formally:

[Culture is] A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 12)

Schein additionally assigned levels or degrees to which the characteristics of a culture are visible to the observer. Level one consisted of the artifacts: visible structures, processes and tangible evidences. Level two consisted of espoused values: strategies, goals and philosophies. Level three consisted of basic underlying assumptions; those unconscious, often taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, feelings and historical accounts which serve as the ultimate sources for values and organizational action. These
assumptions in level three actually become the mental map for the course of action in the organization. The map, however, is unique and not immediately apparent to any newcomer because its routes are so embedded in the core and history of the organization.

Research Conclusions

This study revealed that these schools differed from one another in organizational culture descriptions while still foundationaly grounded in the religious principles and doctrines of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). The differences were significant enough within and among the schools to conclude that:

- The members of the organization were not always knowledgeable of the various aspects that shape the school’s culture;
- School organizational culture was not given consideration when newcomers were called to teach; and
- No school indicated that it had studied its own school organizational culture.

Specific conclusions were noted in the following areas:

The responses varied within the schools. Respondents tended to give answers according to their respective roles. Principals provided the administrative perspective, while teachers gave the instructional perspective. Respondents with more seniority offered the most detailed responses while least senior teachers admitted not having the knowledge or specifics to give adequate answers. As a result, it was evident that the opportunity had not presented itself for these two perspectives (experience and inexperienced) to be shared in a formal sense to assist assimilation.

Responses varied from school to school. These schools shared the same religious doctrines and principles; yet the practices, physical symbols, and histories varied. The study indicated that a serious review for meaning and historical significance of these areas had not occurred at any school and that members of each school organization assumed schools were more similar than different in culture unless these individuals had experienced teaching at different schools.

Communication of each school’s identity, mission, and vision statements concerning core values and beliefs were not articulated in clear organized formats. Some of the schools already had sufficient resources and avenues, such as print and electronic media, available to provide such clear communication. One school capitalized on the religious theme to coordinate communication efforts. Thus, it was concluded that these schools need guidance, organization, and coherence to weave the message of each school’s identity and mission throughout its communication links, not necessarily that more or better resources were needed.

Schools were not communicating the meaning behind the artifacts and external evidence on a consistent and intentional basis. While the external evidence generally supported the descriptions given by the respondents, most schools lacked documentation of the history and meaning behind some of the physical evidence, events, and traditions. For example, one school had a particular time set aside at the beginning of the year for “Homeroom Olympics.” Much planning had been invested into the event over the years, yet the investment stopped short of deliberately sharing the reason and history behind that event or reviewing the event for its current effectiveness in addressing that reason and history. Thus, schools need to share the reasons for the practices grounded in history or re-evaluate appropriateness in a new era.

The schools had not capitalized on the availability of the early principals and teachers to develop histories and explanations of the physical symbols and activities for the archives. The capturing of this information in writing would enhance the preservation of the past which had contributed to the school’s current organizational culture and would develop materials for each school to showcase its history.

Geographical location of the school impacted the school organizational culture enough to cause differences. For example, climactic differences accounted for a different physical structure, a more “open” structure for one school located outside of the Midwest. This open structure corresponded with what the respondents described as a sense that there was far less emphasis on structure, schedules, and organization at this school as compared to schools in the Midwest. Thus, schools need to recognize that climate and physical environments can impact culture, that practices from other areas do not necessarily transplant successfully.
Schools that were located in metropolitan areas tended to reflect greater awareness of the issues of diversity and urban life in their handbooks, procedures, and programs in general. Respondents indicated that special considerations were given to these issues in their teaching and planning of activities. For example, professional development programs were held to sensitize one faculty to the reality of urban lifestyles, gangs, multiculturalism, and issues of safety for students. Thus recognition and education in the area of diversity is essential in addressing the needs of the learners and acclimating new faculty to the organization.

Size contributed to differences as well. The smaller the school was, the more informal the communication was concerning daily operations and procedures. Less information was developed in writing at a small school and more was expected to be shared interactively through questioning. However, miscommunication often resulted. Respondents suggested that the larger the school, the greater the need for coherent communication and organized information. However, in light of some communication ambiguities, efforts at good, organized communication is just good practice, regardless of the size of the school.

The influence of the founding principal impacted the school organizational culture, not in background training alone, but in areas of interest and particular expertise. The more the founding principal viewed that role as administrative and instructional leader, the more clearly detailed and organized the school program was. Being knowledgeable about the various roles of the principal assisted the principal in being the conveyor and shaper of culture. Thus, the principal needs to examine and understand the culture in order to reflect that which represents the desirable cultural characteristics of that school.

All of the schools had some type of orientation session; however, the study revealed that the purpose and scope of orientation varied from school to school. Orientation as a process of assimilation into the organizational culture was not addressed directly. Candidly, respondents indicated that the substance of those sessions were, for the most part, spent on lists of who, what, and where of the daily operations. Respondents, especially the least senior ones, indicated a need for orientation to be more detailed and organized with more attention given to the fit of the person to the position, the school, the community, and the expectations. The orientation also needed to extend beyond the days just before school started, to address methods to assist with assimilation into the organization, and to be applied to new principals as well. One school in the study dovetailed the orientation into a mentoring program and professional growth plan, but even with such a plan, the least senior teacher failed to make the connection of assimilation, mentoring, and professional growth. Thus, investment into planned orientation sessions that begin early with the call and continue at least through the first year yields a faster, more successful assimilation.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Schools would benefit from a self-study including the analysis of school culture. The entire faculty and staff along with a representative sampling of the student body, parents, and federation should be involved in this study. Plans should be made to analyze, assess, evaluate, and modify as needed.

Once the school has developed its description of school culture, it should make plans to coherently communicate this, using the resources all of the schools already have at their disposal.

There is a need to develop complete induction programs which begin when a newcomer is extended a Call or contract to teach at the school. Such programs should include the cultural description prepared in the self-study.

Schools should identify a person or committee to be responsible for recording the history of the school. Procedures for gathering materials for the archives should be established. Teachers and administrators who were part of the school’s early years should be approached to write their memoirs of their experience at the school. Every school should have an active plan to celebrate the current and past heroes and heroines of the school. In so doing, the stories and traditions surrounding these people and significant events should be reviewed, evaluated, and shared with all members of the organization. Consideration should be given to celebrate the school’s culture just as schools showcase trophies and awards.

Some states do not mandate requirements for administrators at parochial and private schools; therefore, administrators at such schools, especially with the demands being placed on education today, need to have focused course work in the area of educational leadership. That would provide the background knowledge and skills needed to forge forward with a self-study involving organizational culture. In the case of the WELS schools, such
graduate work should be a part of the higher education program already in place within the church body.

Administrators need training on the process of culture examination. Such examination is a natural part of self-studies. The appropriate questions need to be asked in order to focus on the aspects of culture. Some questionnaires have been developed for that purpose. More specific guidelines of culture self-study techniques are needed to assist in this process, especially as applied to religious-based schools.

Teachers need strong induction programs into new teaching assignments regardless of the amount of experience. Some researchers advocate that these programs should begin at the minute of consideration for the position and continue beyond the first days, weeks, or months on the job. Effective induction programs also are planned, not to be completed in one large healthy dose of information, but rather in a logical progression of prioritized information interspersed with ample opportunities for absorption through practice, interaction with peers, and self-reflection. More examples of effective induction programs for schools are needed.

Administrators also need strong induction programs for the same reasons that teachers need them. In addition, they are often in a new type of administrative position or are first-time administrators. Induction programs also should address issues of isolation and separation. Studies need to concentrate on the simultaneous induction of both principal and teachers.

**Recommendations for Research**

Comparative studies of the school organizational culture of other religious and private nonsectarian schools are needed to provide a more complete picture of the cultural fabrics of the various schools in operation in this country. It is especially worthwhile to compare WELS schools with other religious-based schools in the same community.

More studies are needed regarding the relationship of culture and change or reform. Many areas are changing so rapidly in education that there appears to be less time to analyze whether the change is appropriate for the school or if the school culture is appropriate for the change. Failure to analyze and provide for readiness can doom a great program before it ever gets off the ground.

Research should be conducted on new schools as they undergo the process of development from the dream to the fruition of an established facility and program. As researchers learn about culture from established models, so studies should explore what is needed when designing a new school organizational culture.

Study of school organizational culture needs to include interviews of parents, alumni, and current students to provide additional perspectives and/or support of what the teachers and administrators contribute.

Communication of a school’s basic tenets of cultural beliefs, its mission, and identity, is of primary importance. A study that focuses on the effectiveness of that communication to all constituencies of that school merits consideration.

Most specifically for WELS schools, more study of best practices regarding cultural diversity issues as they impact organizational culture must be conducted. Utilization of such models of operation must be carefully implemented within the cultural framework of that respective organization. One size does not fit all—respect must be paid to that unique organizational culture.

Most importantly, action research must be conducted in WELS schools. Administrators and teachers must study and evaluate practices in their own organizations; they must become reflective practitioners who are recorders and analysts of what does and does not work in their schools and classrooms; finally, they must contribute to the educational profession through published research. This research can assist the larger organization in understanding the diverse cultural attributes of the individual schools.

**Summary**

The research dialogue must begin—soon. For then we can rejoice in the various gifts that the WELS organization represents. Regardless of the type of school or the slant of school culture studied, each and every study provides another thread of information woven into the rich, colorful tapestry of education. These studies provide knowledge about aspects of human values, beliefs, and behaviors in new or different contexts. Thus, may this study about the context of school organizational culture at four WELS Lutheran high schools provide awareness of the organizational cultural diversity that exists along
with the strong Biblical and historical roots and may it serve as an encouragement for further study.

References


