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ABSTRACT

The impact of action research on student academic and social performance is examined in this paper. Project LEARN (League of Educational Action Researchers in the Northwest), a cooperative initiative with school districts to train teams of educators in collaborative action research, was evaluated in five participating schools--two elementary, one middle, and two secondary schools--in three Northwest districts. Methodology involved: (1) a survey of all staff members that elicited response rates of 40 to 100 percent; (2) interviews with school staff and students; and (3) analysis of student records. Each school was analyzed in terms of school focus, cultural profile, leadership, and professional involvement. The case studies support the thesis that focus, cultural collinearity, and leadership are school culture components that positively impact school performance. The same components predict commitment to action research as a school improvement strategy. Although collaborative action research can positively affect school culture by improving teacher collegiality, its effectiveness is limited to "culturally sound" schools. Eight tables and 2 figures are included. Appendices contain the school culture survey and interview format. (37 references) (LMI)

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Collaborative Action Research: Can It Improve School Effectiveness?

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Presented at

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Collaborative Action Research: Can It Improve School Effectiveness?

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This study was born of the same motives that inspired much of the "effective schooling" research. As a result of the findings from that body of literature we began our work confident that a relationship existed between the organization of schools, school culture and student performance. The purpose of this particular inquiry was neither to identify additional effective schools nor to create a new listing of effectiveness correlates but rather our purpose was to add empirical support to our knowledge base on a process to create effective schools. In particular, we were interested in investigating the impact that systematic efforts to foster collaborative inquiry, such as action research, could have on student academic and social performance.

The building blocks of our theory are rooted in three bodies of research: the first being the "effective schooling" studies, the second being the "school culture" literature and the third being the research on "collaborative and reflective practice."

School Effectiveness

The seminal "effective schooling" studies (Brookover and Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979; Austin, 1981) established the linkage between organizational behavior, school practices and equity in performance outcomes. The "effective" schools identified in that research produced substantially different outcomes than had other schools serving demographically similar populations. When effective and ineffective schools were compared, it became clear that they differed by the presence or absence of specific organizational characteristics, generally called "effective schooling correlates."

Invariably the correlates discerned by each researcher included items which characterized a common set of beliefs and values held by the faculty at an effective school. Particularly in the work of Wynne (1981) and Rutter (1979) this component was richly explored and described. The Wynne study focused on elementary schools in

Michigan while Rutter and his associates examined secondary schools in inner city London. Despite the different venues, the prominence and impact of a collective "ethos" as a necessary ingredient for a school's academic and social success was consistently demonstrated.

Following the publication of the early effective schooling studies, numerous researchers (as well as practitioners) have worked at developing strategies to implement the effective schooling correlates in less than effective schools. Some of these attempts to improve both the equity and quality of student performance have been in operation for over a decade. Although many of these efforts have been well funded, grounded in good empirical data and carried out by well meaning trainers, they have generally failed to produce the "effectiveness" phenomena. Carl Glickman (1986) illustrated this problem in his description of schools which after implementing an "effective schooling" program, produced educational environments which were neither effective nor good.

So while it appears that the last twenty years of educational research provided many of the insights needed to improve our schools, our attempts at implementation have been less than laudatory. The unfortunate consequence for many practitioners has been that improvement efforts have led only to a roller coaster of expectations.

Practitioners have wanted to believe that if they could only replicate the effective schooling correlates in their schools, they too could show exemplary levels of performance. Yet, for most it simply hasn't happened. This repeated cycle of high expectations dashed by an inability to replicate results has produced increased cynicism among teachers and rising calls for dismantling the entire public schooling enterprise by policy analysts (Chubb and Moe, 1990).

School Culture

The past decade has seen an explosion of interest in the phenomena of organizational culture and its impact on performance. Both the popular and

professional literature in business administration (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Peters and Austin, 1985; Deal and Kennedy; 1982) have argued persuasively that the culture of a corporation has as much to do with performance as does its technical core.

The literature on school organization has followed a similar path. Rutter (1979) outlined the norms and values that were characteristic of successful high schools in London. Judith Warren Little (1982) explored the social features of the workplace as experienced by teachers in "effective schools" in the United States. Little learned that norms of collegiality and experimentation were consistently found in effective schools. Anthony Bryck and Mary Driscoll (1988) determined that communal organizations, distinguished by the presence of shared values, beliefs, core curricula and high levels of extra-classroom involvement, were predictive of improved academic performance as well as improved teacher job satisfaction, morale and attendance. In a recent study of 78 elementary schools in Tennessee, Susan Rosenholtz (1989) found dramatic differences in the attitudes, perspectives and performance of teachers as a direct consequence of the "social organization" of the schools where they worked.

Rosenholtz found that in schools where collegiality was the norm, students performed better, teachers were more creative, worked longer hours and had higher morale. Her work corroborated the finding from the Rand study on school change (Berman and McLaughlin, 1974) and more recently the work of Patricia Ashton and Rodman Webb (1986) regarding the relationship between a teacher's feelings of efficacy and student achievement. Work in progress by Milbrey McLaughlin (1991) is demonstrating that the social organization of departments in high schools, the high schools themselves and the districts they are in, can significantly contribute to teachers' sense of efficacy.

The role of the principal in creating tight cultures is receiving increased attention as well. Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) reported on specific behaviors of principals that had a significant impact on the culture of the school. Principals in this

study were able to reform school cultures by using a variety of bureaucratic mechanisms to stimulate and reinforce cultural change. Principals fostered staff development; engaged the staff in direct and frequent communication about cultural norms, values and beliefs; shared power and responsibility and used symbols to express cultural values.

Firestone and Wilson (1985), building on Edgar Schein's (1985) assertion that, "the only thing of real importance that leaders do is create and manage culture", have articulated the means by which principals can forge linkages between the bureaucratic practices of the school and productive cultural norms. Their work suggests that strong leadership combines bureaucratic strategies such as supervision, planning devices, allocation of funds, etc. with culture building practices such as cultural content (norms of collegiality and experimentation) and cultural denotation (communicating values and beliefs). They found that principals in schools with strong cultures had common characteristics. They were high energy, self-conscious people who worked long hours, established "kitchen cabinets" in the staff and subtly worked the major themes of their personal agendas.

Despite the growing body of knowledge regarding the characteristics of effective schools and effective leadership, Susan Moore Johnson (1990) documented that the norms of collegiality, shared governance and professional growth were largely absent from the workplace of many contemporary public school teachers.

This summary of the literature leaves us with both cause for optimism and despair. On the one hand we are heartened by the knowledge that some schools have demonstrated that they can succeed with all students, yet we are dismayed to find that the organizational cultures that seem to be necessary to produce that level of performance is frequently absent in the workplace of many public school teachers. The process involved in building strong school cultures continues to be largely illusive.

However, one model of school change gaining wider recognition for its potential to improve school cultures is collaborative action research.

Action Research

The concept of practitioner research has been with us for some time. Kurt Lewin (1947) coined the term "action research." This mode of inquiry has come in and out of vogue several times since its inception. Just as Schon (1983) focused attention on the development of the "reflective practitioner", many school reformers have found merit in the concepts of Schaefer's (1967) book, The School As The Center For Collaborative Inquiry. The belief that the school itself must become a social organization that encourages and accommodates the norms of collaborative investigation is finding an increasing number of adherents. Holly and Southworth (1989) argue persuasively for the creation of "developing schools" as places where collaboration and reflective inquiry can be at the very center of school life.

Closer to home, Lieberman (1986), Tikunoff and Ward (1983) and Glickman (1990) propose that because action research establishes a school focus for instructional improvement as deemed necessary by the faculty, dynamic changes in the school culture can be predicted where faculties engage in this process. The powerful outcomes associated with action research have led to interest in and implementation of the model in schools committed to enhanced student achievement through increased teacher empowerment (Livingston and Castle, 1989).

AERA now has "Special Interest Groups" for "Teachers as Researcher" and "Researchers for Action" and there were numerous presentations at both the 1990 and 1991 AERA Annual Meetings dealing with practitioner generated research. Organization such as the NEA (Livingston and Castle, 1989) and the AFT (Levine, 1988) have incorporated the strategies of teacher research into their professional development and school improvement models.

Project LEARN

Bouyed by the promise of action research as a mechanism to foster the transformation of school culture in the directions identified by Little (1982) and Rosenholtz (1985), researchers at Washington State University-Vancouver in the Fall of 1989 began a cooperative venture with public school districts in the Northwestern states of Oregon and Washington to train teams of educators in the process of conducting collaborative action research.

That initiative, Project LEARN (League of Educational Action Researchers in the Northwest), is based upon a model that was designed to be culturally transformational. Teacher teams voluntarily joined the project and were invited to select their own area of focus area, drawn from an analysis of their individual and collective professional concerns. The trainers encouraged the participants to conduct inquiries that focused upon "teaching and learning" (so that teachers would be inquiring into issues within their proximal span of control) and strongly suggested that participants pursue their research in collaboration with colleagues at the same school site. A cadre of "critical friends" (educators from outside the local school site) were made available to the action researchers on an on-call basis as free consultants to be used when and as the researchers saw fit. Whether or not teams followed any or all of these guidelines was ultimately left up to them.

Background

Two research studies were conducted during the initial year of Project LEARN. The first (Sagor 1991) examined the factors which led to the continuation or abandonment of the research effort. Sagor found that action researchers attributed the continuation or abandonment of their projects to certain common factors.

The significance of the project focus, the amount of support received, the performance and encouragement of leadership and the nature of the collegiality on the team were reported as the most significant factors in maintaining a project.

Conversely, projects that were perceived as trivial, were inadequately supported, lacked leadership and were carried out by groups lacking in chemistry tended to flounder.

These were curious findings, since in Sagor's sample the external support for projects was constant across the schools and since in each school the participants were free to choose their own focus and workmates. Given those controls, then how can one account for these pronounced differences in perception?

Curley (1990) conducted a study of nine action research teams in Sagor's sample. She investigated the teams' perceptions of the cultures of their schools as well as the teachers' perceptions of the impact that action research was having on the culture of the school. The teams reported striking differences in their perceptions of the cultures and the role which action research had played during the first year of implementation. Two of the nine teams in the sample reported the perception that action research had markedly improved the culture of their school (although these teams reported that they felt the culture of the school was tight prior to beginning an action research project). The teams which reported the tightest cultures also reported high degrees of focus, leadership and time for group work. Specifically the norms which differentiated the successful teams from the unsuccessful ones were tangible support; caring, celebration and humor; and traditions. In the schools where those norms had been perceived as weak, collaborative action research did not appear to have any influence on the culture of the school.

These two studies led to new theoretical constructs. It was now important to find out if entire school faculties perceived school cultures in the same way as did these staff members who were conducting the collaborative action research. More importantly, this research was causing us to see collaborative action research not as a means to create a strong school culture from scratch but rather as a mechanism to enhance or improve existing cultural norms. Sagor (1991) theorized that mechanism as a "cultural turbo-charger" (Figure #1).

This study was commenced to begin the testing of that theoretical assumption. The five exploratory case studies discussed in this paper sought to shed light on three questions believed to be central to this theoretical model:

1) What are the established cultural norms necessary to predict the success of structured collaborative inquiry?

2) How does collaborative action research impact school culture?

3) Is it reasonable to expect that collaborative action research can have an impact on school effectiveness?

Method

To answer these questions we employed a multi-case study design and drew on qualitative and quantitative techniques. A sample of five subject schools were selected on the basis of their adherence to prescribed criteria.

Sample

The sample consisted of five schools which had been involved in action research for two years and were currently engaged in an action research project. Each school's action research team had attended the introductory session of Project LEARN in 1989 and returned in 1990 for follow-up training. These schools were chosen because our knowledge of the staffs led us to believe that these teachers and principals were involved in and committed to serious school improvement efforts. Although these were reputedly "good" schools prior to their involvement with Project LEARN, we felt it was likely that these teams might perceive some change in the culture of their schools due to their participation in collaborative action research. All five schools volunteered to participate in the study.

The schools were chosen to avoid concentration within a district and to ensure representation of elementary (two), middle (one) and secondary schools (two). The five

schools were selected from three districts which represent urban, suburban and rural communities in two states in the Pacific Northwest.

Milltown High School with a student population of 800 students and LaBelle elementary school (enrollment 525) were drawn from a rural district. The primary employer in the town has been a large pulp and paper mill for more than 100 years. The district includes the town and a large rural area. It serves about 2,200 students.

Lindberg High School is a large high school (population 1500 students) in an affluent suburban community. This high school produces some of the highest SAT scores in the state. The district is generally well supported by local levies and bonds. Wilton Middle School was also drawn from the Lindberg District. It is an old school with a reputation for outstanding teaching.

Riverview Elementary School is a school of 400 students serving a suburban area of a 15,000 student district. This suburban/urban district draws students from diverse economic and social bases.

Data were collected from the five schools during the fall and winter of 1990-91 and from multiple site visits by two separate researchers. The entire staff at each school was asked to complete a survey. The response rates varied from 40% to 100%. Also, individual teachers, principals, classified personnel, grade level teams, the action research teams, departmental teams and small groups of students were interviewed following a structured interview format. Data collection also included observations and archival documents as a means of triangulation (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Instrumentation

1. Survey

The primary data source was a survey (Appendix A). To assess individual staff members' perceptions of the culture of the school, a survey based on Saphier and King's (1986) list of cultural norms of effective schools was administered. The survey asked the respondents to rate fourteen cultural norms on a four-point Likert-type scale. The

survey sought their perceptions of the existence and strength of these norms. They were also given an opportunity to cite examples of the manifestation of each norm in their school.

2. Interview

To assess individual and group perceptions of the culture of the school and the role of leadership in that culture, several interviews were conducted at each site (Appendix B). The structured interview was divided into two sections. Section 1 was based on the norms of interactions of staff members as described by Judith Warren Little's (1982) findings. Section 2 drew from Leithwood and Jantzi's (1990) findings that principals can help reform school cultures by demonstrating several distinct behaviors.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary sources of data included observations of classrooms and school practices, shadowing of the principal, student interviews and student achievement data.

Analysis

Interview results from the survey were tallied and converted to percentages to allow for easy comparisons. Standard deviations also proved useful in comparing survey scores across sites.

Qualitative interview and survey data were transcribed into computer files, coded and then analyzed according to Erickson's (1986) suggestions for qualitative analysis. Individual case studies of the five schools were written. Themes and patterns that emerged in each case study led to the identification of distinct similarities and discrepancies of norms and leadership practices in a cross-case analysis.

Case Studies

Riverview Elementary School

Riverview Elementary School is a 500 student school located in a mostly middle class section of medium-sized Northwest city. Riverview is one of 21 elementary schools in the Boxcar School District. Historically, the school has enjoyed a good reputation but hadn't been known as particularly exceptional. The Boxcar School District, with 15,000 students, has a long history of central control and had a general practice of hiring and promoting their building leaders from within.

Two years ago, Laura McAllister was hired from the outside to succeed a career principal who, after a long tenure, was retiring. Laura was well known locally because of her work as a principal in a small neighboring district. She came to Riverview with the reputation as a firebrand who was well liked by both her faculty and administrative peers. Now in her second year on the job, she is well regarded in the district yet is cynical about its bureaucratic ways.

Early in her first year as principal, Laura became aware that "action research" training was being offered locally by Project LEARN and she arranged to bring a contingent of her staff members. Their action research project, implementing the writing process, later became the focal point of Riverview's school improvement effort.

School Focus.

There is unanimity among the Riverview staff on the school's focus. The norm, "clarity of goals", was perceived as characteristic of the school by virtually every staff member surveyed. The district director of evaluation, also a Riverview parent and "critical friend" to the action research team, commented, "If you asked anyone in the central office where writing was emphasized, they would say Riverview!". He remarked that the staff's commitment to that focus struck him as "pervasive" perhaps even "obsessive." During the second year of the action research program, the staff further

expanded its focus on writing to include the utilization of technology, particularly the use of the computer for desktop publishing.

When visiting Riverview, one is struck by another focus--caring. The staff is driven to promote success for all students and demonstrates that commitment through a host of public and private expressions of caring as well as appreciation for academic improvement. Catching kids being good is continuous at Riverview. The multiple foci of the school were captured in this illustrative comment from Riverview's administrative intern,

For the majority of the faculty writing across the curriculum is the clear goal. Everyone is a real teacher. Our goals for students are caring and hard work. We want students to have a good experience. We hold high expectations. We don't want students to leave us as average students. We get kids ready for middle school. Our job is to nurture children.

Cultural Profile.

Faculty opinion on the 14 "cultural norms for school improvement" reflected consensus on values, beliefs and norms. The lowest rating recorded was on "traditions" where only two out of 22 faculty members indicated a feeling that this was not a characteristic norm. The highest ratings went to "collegiality", "clarity of goals", "high expectations" and "reaching out to the knowledge bases." Each of these norms were unanimously perceived by the staff as characteristic. The teachers were also unanimous in recording the "appreciation of leadership" as representative of their school. The norms of "experimentation", "trust and confidence", "availability of tangible support", "involvement in decision making", as well as "appreciation and recognition" were seen as descriptive by all but one faculty member.

When asked to cite actions which reinforced these values, several were repeatedly cited. Among these were the action research effort, the teacher evaluation process and the goal setting process. As one teacher reported,

"We have meetings before school about goals. She, the principal, always reinforces goals, makes it clear what our goals are, brings us back to what we're

supposed to be doing. She keeps us on track. She is very supportive of the methods that we use. She encourages us."

Leadership Analysis.

A central office administrator described Laura McAllister as a mixture of "charisma" and "chutzpah." Although she describes herself differently, she seemed clear in her understanding of her own leadership style. She explained herself this way,

I'm high energy. I took over a leadership role where teachers were isolated. I asked them to leave their doors open. It was tough the first couple of weeks. I spent a lot of time in classrooms, assisting in the classrooms, telling teachers these are the directions we are going, helping them to get on the bandwagon or make a move. It was hard. Teachers wouldn't take responsibility. They hadn't ever worked together. I started real slow and asked, "What do you want to work on?" They brought up writing. Two teachers put together the plan. It came together very easily. Writing was a building need. The test scores showed that. I was having a tough time getting this group going, then I saw information on Project LEARN and thought it was a great way for administration to get people talking in the building. So I talked to two teachers who volunteered to be involved. That was the area they selected. Everything fell together easily. It was luck.

The teachers viewed the change in leadership similarly, yet they didn't ascribe it to luck. For example one teacher recounted that the new principal, "was immediately accepted by the old staff. She is an action person. If you have an idea she picks up the phone and it's done. She is very supportive. She takes care of things, sees projects through." Another teacher added,

The principal is upbeat and very supportive of the special education program. This is a good year for me. . . as a SpEd teacher. This administrator is extremely supportive, a great facilitator. She goes to the line for us, supports us emotionally. She provides funds and resources and doesn't take no for an answer from anyone, including us. She will come up with a solution for any problem, redirects and helps us.

A second teacher put it this way,

This school is improving because of the principal. She had high expectations for students. She has completely changed this school. People are working harder, putting in more hours in the classroom. The principal observes teachers and holds them accountable. High expectations prevail for kids: she expects them to behave and expects teachers to do a good job.

This push for improvement is quite public, as one of the classified staff observed,

Student achievement is improving. The atmosphere in the building has improved because of the new principal. We are busy with new projects and new

ideas. The principal backs people, plus she gives follow through and support. She gives all of us responsibilities. For certain projects, she asks teachers to chair committees, to read the research and bring back conclusions to the faculty.

Governance

One thing that repeatedly came up in conversations was the manner in which Laura involved staff in critical governance functions. She pointed out,

I try to get them to pick out a focal point. At the first of the year we establish goals and how we will reach those goals. We form committees, share and discuss research. I let teachers experiment with their ideas and research. They need to realize that this is a joint effort, a total school. Teachers here are responsible for all students not just their own classes. I expect teachers to give 100%.

One teacher explained,

Committees have a floating chairmanship. The principal is not the chair of every committee. She asks people to work on something and get back to her. Students feel that they have a fair amount of power to decide things. We are not victims of a dictator. She is not a power hungry person. She doesn't hold it over you saying, 'I'm the boss.' I think she just enjoys her job. She has high energy. She wants the school to be good and wants the teachers to do a good job.

The teachers on the action research team describe her approach to governance this way, "She is always saying that the school improvement plan must be our idea. The teachers decide. She says, 'I need your help'. She delegates. This is a democracy!"

Nevertheless, Laura is not one to hold back on her own ideas and values. She was willing to declare, "I am adamantly opposed to tracking and there is a lot of that at this school. This is not acceptable. So I provide them with research articles for examples on tracking and gifted." Linda's administrative intern described her impact on the school this way, "The principal has strong values and beliefs. She evaluates what is happening and makes suggestions and so far she has been right!" One of the teachers noticed that she, "is in the faculty room all the time. The principal brings in new ideas and proposes those. Then people kick them around quite a bit." Another put it this way,

She puts things in the bulletins like, "So and so has a great idea. Go and see it. She praises teachers just like teachers praise students. She is just outstanding. She is up, funny, appreciates the little things. She will notice that I've spent a lot of time on something and will tell you you've done a good job. And when I'm praised, just like a child, I want to do an even better job. She expects things and we do it.

Ultimately, Laura explains her success as a motivator this way,

I survey the staff all the time regarding their needs and wants. The district supplies \$500 per teacher per year. My staff goes to over it all the time! I bypass the district restrictions on out-of-district in-service programs. I'm not afraid to disregard district policy. I bring workshops here to the school, right here where it is comfortable and teachers can participate. I get teachers here to share their talents with one another. That is a pat on the back for those teachers. And I delegate to those teachers who are not participating. I ask them to be in charge, to chair a committee. It gets people involved and all departments are represented. I seek people out, notice who is not participating, not in a threatening way, but encouraging.

Professional Involvement.

There is a dynamic relationship between time, focus and leadership at Riverview. As a consequence of the school's focused agenda the principal can seek out resources in a purposeful rather than opportunistic manner.

Relative to others in her district she is uniquely capable of securing grants. During her short tenure she has twice secured funding for training and materials to support the work on the writing process. A central office administrator told us, "Where there was money she was aggressive enough to get it. This probably did not produce a lot more money, but it showed the staff her commitment."

That demonstration of commitment inspires additional effort from the staff. One of the teachers on the action research team observed that she motivates "through her actions. If we are going to have a long day, she is going to have a long day."

The teachers at Riverview have a willingness to work after hours and to give of themselves for joint projects. This commitment was apparently obtained through participation with committee work and delegation. It may also have to do with expressions of appreciation, as one teacher put it, "It comes from inside, from being told that you are doing a good job--the success of students or parents and the giving of positive strokes. This must be encouraged by the administration and that is happening."

Riverview has a tight culture unlike many schools in the Boxcar District. The district had operated within well understood parameters. Teachers in Boxcar have struck a de facto bargain. They do a reasonable day's work, follow the district's

expectations and in turn are allowed a relatively stress free career. The teachers in Riverview have voluntarily opted for more. The return on investment is mostly intrinsic and most teachers credit this change in their work style to the principal. Her impact was summarized by one staff member this way,

The principal is moving the old staff out--bringing in new staff. The good old staff won't leave. The principal is bringing in high energy people who are willing to spend time, even their own money, on the school. She loves the kids, cares about them, uses humor. People know she likes them. People want to do a good job for her. She is always in the classrooms. She is positive about teachers and the work they put in.

LaBelle Elementary School

LaBelle Elementary School is a grade two through five elementary school in a small school district approximately 17 miles from a major Northwestern city. The community that LaBelle serves is primarily white and working class. The area is rural, although an increasing number of subdivisions are now giving the surrounding area an increasing suburban air. The school has a reputation for quality, having been awarded a national recognition for excellence award in the 1987 school year.

The school is in a transition period. Like the other four schools in the district it is in the third year of a six year experimental project aimed at restructuring education. The current principal, Madeline Smith, is in her first year at LaBelle, having served as a central office administrator in a neighboring district for the previous ten years. The stability of staff in the Plains School District is illustrated by the fact that three of LaBelle's previous principals are currently serving as principals in other Plains district schools.

The school is organized in grade level teams which is a pattern that fits the school's architecture. Each team has its own pod with separate classrooms, however, the teams share common space in the form of offices or multi-purpose areas. During the past two years the action research projects at LaBelle have only involved the 5th grade team. In the first year they investigated the effectiveness of cooperative learning while

this year the team chose to investigate the value and impact of student portfolios.

Morale is high at LaBelle. In the words of one teacher,

It is a good place to work. With caring people and an atmosphere of trying to work things out. I knew about the staff before I transferred. They are a congenial group who support each other as teachers and personally. This building has no hallways so we do make sure we see each other--give pats on the back and really listen.

Another teacher who also just transferred to LaBelle added, "I asked for this transfer and I am delighted to be here. What makes it good is the sophistication of the staff. Madeline offered this view of the teaching staff,

This school is a collection of teachers who have come together as if they were destined to be together--there isn't a weak link. The quality of instruction is above average. There are strong personalities but nobody has taken over. They see students as human beings who they have a responsibility to. Responsibility is an attitude that permeates the building. It makes a difference.

The prevailing sense in the building is that this school is improving. In fact every teacher interviewed agreed with that assessment. A typical comment was, "We have made some positive changes in the past few years such as movement and management of kids which makes it better for teachers and kids."

One of the classified staff members suggested that the "Excellence in Education" award led to changes that we wanted made. The new principal is great. She is not making a lot of changes on her own but is going along with what is already happening."

The action research team, however, was more cautious in their assessment, "The new principal has forced an adjustment period. We still need to come together with styles and expectations."

School Focus.

While there are many endeavors that involve collaborative work at LaBelle, there are no areas which encapsulate a singular school-wide focus the way writing does at Riverview. When asked about a school focus one teacher mentioned the discipline plan, another cited the integrated curriculum, while a third brought up restructuring. Another offered this response,

Our kids are number one, but where are we headed? A different kind of kid is coming through our school--lower SES. Can we be more ready for this kind of student? Why are these at-risk kids coming through right now? Are we ready for them in terms of accountability and assessments? What can we do for these at-risk kids?

The diffuse nature of the faculty's vision and energy were captured by these comments from the action research team,

We're not focused together on any one thing. Integration? Action research was last year, OBE this year. The district initiatives are exciting, but eventually you are held accountable for that, which makes you leery, but I find it exciting too.

The principal offered her assessment of the focus, "We have implemented a discipline plan and many of the teachers are working with an integrated curriculum. I am helping them work on an instructional model." These disparate responses were confirmed by survey results which demonstrated less than full agreement on goals.

Cultural Profile.

In the opinion of the faculty the two most descriptive norms for their school were "high expectations" and "collegiality". In the words of one teacher, there is "strong evidence of academic rigor at all grade levels--high standards of behavior in the classroom, lunchroom, assemblies and on the playground," and another teacher added, "As a school we tend to have high expectations for our students and for ourselves. We have set guidelines which we follow for student discipline and we have ways to reward good work. Our teachers are encouraged to take classes."

Other teachers mentioned that these high expectations were also placed upon staff, "There are expectations of all staff to follow through with the latest trend. Also, we expect the most from our students" and, "In working together as a staff we assure that we are an effective school. I see a good overview of high expectations. Not just of students but parents and the whole staff, including the administration."

The locus of those expectations were viewed as both internal and external. One teacher said, "We feel responsibility to students wherever they are or whoever's class they are in." Another offered this view of the pervasiveness of the norm of high

expectations. "From superintendent on down through the ranks we understand: 1) we are on the cutting edge and 2) Students will be at grade level or above."

The other norm receiving consensus was "collegiality." To these teachers collegiality meant sharing. It was heard in statements such as, "Our grade level eats lunch together. We talk about what we are doing. We are innovative, creative, sharing." In the words of another teacher,

Our grade level really spends time together. This year we have started a support group to discuss children--share ideas, things you have done with the children. Others give ideas about what you might try. We also take a lot of classes together--debate what the prof is saying. We enjoy that. It started years ago when the values were established. We re-focus every year. . . .

The principal saw collegiality this way, "You hear them talking about the classes they are taking. They are always taking classes. Its incredible to see that hunger for learning."

However glowing these reports may seem, the norm of collegiality had its bounds. When it came to the subject of critiquing each others work (a behavior identified by Little 1982) everyone agreed it didn't occur and there were numerous explanations as to why.

Planning together was something entirely different. This was an activity that came easy to the LaBelle staff, "Our second grade does it all the time. We use our lunch hours to plan," and "At our grade level we do it all the time. There is a great deal of sharing at our grade level--certainly we have the opportunity to share."

In fact, team sharing has become such a part of the LaBelle routine that their approach has now been memorialized into policy. The district now authorizes a regular hour and half release each month for the purpose of team planning.

Leadership Analysis.

As principal, Madeline displays two dominant leadership attributes. She is, at the same time, a transactional leader and a counselor to the staff. This approach comes naturally to her. She has declared a long term professional goal to become a counseling

psychologist. Not surprisingly all of her short term goals for the school grow from an affective base. She feels that repeated administrative turnover had left the staff distrustful and suspicious. Therefore, she felt the first order of business was to get the staff to like themselves, each other and then to become comfortable and secure with her. Her plan to meet those goals was a combination of responsiveness to expressed wants and attention to unexpressed personal and interpersonal needs.

Madeline described her work with the staff this way,

I listen and hear things that are not being said. When I hear people speak about something, I'll bring that up in staff meetings. People were at all levels of receiving that, but there were commonalities. I pointed that out. I'm a good listener. What I've learned about administration is the administrative stuff is really easy. The hard part is dealing with people and their safety--their emotional well being. I can't make everyone happy but it is my obligation to prepare people for any event, so that they are comfortable and perceive that they have been heard.

Her work with staff is not singly in the domain of the interpersonal, as she pointed out,

I make rounds everyday, every classroom, every day--pass through. It is important to me to keep an eye on everything, important for me. Important for the kids. I set this up with the teachers at the beginning of the year. Teachers understand that all I'm doing is making myself known, so I can connect with kids. It ties me to the instructional process. I'm here to maintain harmony. My presence will calm students down. I'm in the cafeteria, out on recess. I have a sense of where every teacher is in the curriculum. The kids know me, I know the process.

All of this is seen as contributing to the development of a quality working relationship.

In the words of one staff member,

She made herself well acquainted with what we had developed in the past through our school improvement plan, the whole staff was involved. This principal has fit into the teachers' program.

Not everything at LaBelle was proceeding that well. The action research team expressed some frustration,

For action research we need time to attend workshops, subs, money. It is the district's responsibility to provide for subs and registration. We were interested in getting further than we did, but it had to be done all on our own time. There isn't time. It seems a shame that they have dropped their support. On the one hand, we hear that they are supporting us, but on the other hand we are not seeing evidence of it.

In light of that sentiment Madeline was supportive of the action research initiative. She told us,

Action research makes changes relevant. One can't discount research. It gives people a viable method of finding things out. Its a pure, generic staff development model. The 5th Grade team has not let go of what they did last year, but I do see them consumed with the notion of having to declare that they will make substantial change every year. We need to head toward one instructional model, a focus, test our notions over the next couple of years. We need to have to have a picture over time which is not interpreted as making a change or adding something new every year. The district has a commitment to staying on the edge so teachers get frustrated with what they feel is piecemeal. I need to get them to feel that they are not in a pressure cooker.

Madeline elaborated,

The teachers said they wanted control of staff development and they want me to respond to that, to see about getting control of it. I am taking that request to the district--to gain control of that instructional model we're working on--permission to use our own people for our staff development next year. The way to organize staff development is to find out what teachers want and then offer that to them.

Governance

In this area the principal also prefers to work from an individual rather than a global perspective. As one teacher explained, "We set goals as a staff. She helps us refine them. Each one of our goals is really individual. She really helps direct you in the area you want to go in." Once again, Madeline is the most articulate spokesperson for her strategy,

I make it safe for them to say they don't agree with me. Then we can talk and get our viewpoints out on the table. The worst thing the teachers can do is accept the model I have made up and it won't be theirs until we sit down and talk about it. It's a combination of leadership and training in psychology. I don't think that I am the most important person around here, I'm just a person. That helps people. You don't have all the responsibility--you share responsibility. People want to be around you because they feel comfortable. Self-centered people take up the whole room. There is so much room in life. Open your heart instead of closing it--I have had lots of different experiences in education and I just keep realizing that we need to look at living as a good thing, to look at things as potentially full rather than potentially empty. We always have an option. I am willing to give teachers that power. They will come up with what is good for kids. I put out some good ideas and that will have some impact on their thinking.

By and large the teachers felt involved in decision making at the school. A twenty year veteran who has been at LaBelle for two years told us that she feels, "empowered--we work together as a group to make decisions. We are heard. Can come to

consensus-- It takes time but its worth it." A colleague with 20 years at LaBelle agreed, "We are valued as adults with expertise in dealing with school needs-- exhibited by openness at faculty meetings." Not only has there been a history of involvement but many teachers feel it's improving, "Even more so this year with the new principal. She listens, that's really important. She is excellent about listening to teachers. She can change her mind and supports us. Teachers have power here."

Professional Involvement.

Even though "tangible support" was a cultural norm receiving high ratings, the staff was not unanimous in feeling supported with their professional work. The comments of teachers reflected perceptions from two extreme positions. One group of teachers seemed to be cognizant and appreciative of the opportunities provided by the restructuring grant as well as the other district professional development opportunities. As one teacher described her colleagues approach to development,

We just take it, just give it. The Milltown district is taking so many different directions. We take lots of classes and we debrief and refocus. We meet once a week. Team days means there is more planning time. Subs are hired to come in for one and a half hours for planning in teams.

However, another teacher told us, "The ten paid days (from the grant) for planning end up being used for global restructuring--no specifics. There are just too many changes." That feeling was repeated by the action research team, which told us about their interest in team teaching,

But there is no time. We wrote a grant. If we get it we'll just put in more time. There is district pressure to change, do more. Add-ons. There's not enough support. We put in our own time. It is hard to get six people together. Student teachers are time consuming. We can't use our lunch hours for action research as we used to. There are ten one half hour sessions for planning this year at grade level but it's just enough to take care of day-to-day needs, but not the extras.

With a new principal the future is unclear. One teacher suggested,

The principal may become more directive, but so far we bring things to her. The lack of initial directiveness is real positive. She didn't just throw everything out, but listens to all and calls on those who do not speak up--reaches out to get your opinion. Years ago we wanted different things from a principal, now we

should be allowed to make decisions we can control. We can't control buses, etc., so we need a principal. This principal lets us be in charge, works with us. We don't feel like we don't have input. If you bring something up, she is not threatened, doesn't perceive it as a challenge. We are people who are team players. District hires people for their ability to work on a team, but it doesn't always happen. We ask, but we don't always get to pick the people we would like to work with.

Another teacher put her desires more bluntly, "Just let me teach and stop changing, innovating every year. Restructuring is hogwash."

How will the "servant leader" respond? Only time will tell, but her philosophy may give a clue,

I am just a dot in life. If the teachers need me to be the bottom line, I'll be the bottom line. Teachers have information and perceptions about things that I don't have so I need to backoff and wait, ask things privately, find the other things that are going on, learn about people. I could use my power, but why? The more you give away the more you get. I know that is true. It is important to give significance to other people. I won't have any trouble. . . .

Wilton Middle School

Wilton Middle School is housed in an old wooden frame building serving approximately 600 students grades six to eight in a middle to upper-middle class section of a desirable suburb of a major Northwestern City. For years Wilton has enjoyed a reputation as the best of the three middle school in the Lindberg School District, a distinction that was memorialized by its designation as a school of excellence in the National Elementary School Recognition Program in 1988.

Frequently, cynical patrons and professionals within the school district have been quoted as crediting the school's history of success to the demographics of its community. In response, the staff has attributed the school's success to their commitment to "not letting any student fall."

Due to unprecedented population growth in the Lindberg School District the school is presently extremely overcrowded. Wilton is currently being led by its third principal in four years (both of the others received internal promotions). This principal is an experienced secondary school administrator, having led two other middle schools and served as high school principal in two large neighboring districts.

School Focus.

When inquiring about Wilton's focus two phrases frequently arise, as they did in our interview with the district's Director of School Improvement: "academic emphasis" and "high expectations."

The faculty put it in different words, "Staff members are driven--to a fault. There is pressure on everybody from everybody. Yet we do what's healthy for kids."

Although the organization of Wilton is traditional the teachers have a commitment to interdisciplinary theming. One teacher told us how they work "toward the same goals, establishing ways that we can work with each other to make a richer academic atmosphere for the students with a connected feeling across subject areas."

Although there are common foci, the Wilton staff proudly refuses to walk blindly down a single road. In the words of the action research team,

We really care about kids. Everything we do is based on whether or not it is going to be good for kids. Cooperative learning is great, but that's not all we should do. Kids need to work individually, too. We older teachers are skeptical. Balance means taking what is good in new fads and balance it with other strategies.

Gene, the new principal, saw Wilton's future this way,

No kids will fail. We have a cohesive staff. Our kids are accountable. We can make them believe they can and then give them a chance. We will be eclectic: innovative yet conservative. We need to keep in mind that no one model is a panacea: adopt/adapt from all the good stuff.

Cultural Profile.

The most powerful of the cultural norms noted by the Wilton staff was the holding of "high expectations." A first year teacher commented, "I've been impressed by the high expectations here." Another beginning teacher noted, that the staff, "was expected to do research. There is very much a tone, 'if you're professional, you'll act like it.'" A 15 year teacher with five years experience in the building explained how this norm is reinforced, "We talk high expectations. We expect high test results and good performance at the high school." The orientation of the staff is that, "All students are expected to perform at the highest level that they can." This norm of expectation

extends from students to the staff themselves, as one 27 year veteran put it, "We're over achievers!" She cited the fact that they teach 8th graders Shakespeare and, like in Lake Wobegon, at Wilton, "All are above grade level."

In fact, only 10% of the student body is achieving below a 2.0 GPA and yet the staff introduced the concept of a paid "academic coach" to work with the low achieving kids in the same way that an athletic coach does after school. Despite the commitment to high academic expectations a third of the staff disagreed that there was clarity of goals at Wilton. This may be explained by two factors.

First, the faculty was about to commence a school wide discussion on this topic so it may have appeared to the six rookies as just another issue under review. One told us, "All the individual teachers have set their personal goals and we are in the process of identifying our group goals. We need more work in this area."

Another explanation is that even though high academic expectations have been an implicit goal, as the principal has pointed out, the vision that this implies has not yet been made explicit. One teacher acknowledged, "Generally we are aware of what our goals are, but this is an area of what our 'vision' might be and that needs to be developed." A long time teacher put it this way, "We know our goals in our hearts but we need to write them in neon letters. We just float along sometimes."

Closely aligned to "high expectations" at Wilton was the norm of "reaching out to the knowledge base." As in the area of expectations this norm was perceived as strong by all of the faculty surveyed. The staff mentioned a number of ways that this cultural attribute is demonstrated, "At staff meetings there is often sharing of research and information gleaned from workshops that teachers have attended," and "We attend lots of staff development. We are recognized as talented instructors and the district supports and makes use of our skills. We are educated in our fields of interest beyond the minimum and even more so as it pertains to our action research projects." Apparently

that was not mere bravado. By December over 75% of the faculty had already taken a class or workshop in their subject area.

Governance

Two other norms that rated high with the Wilton staff were "involvement in decision making" and "trust and confidence." Apparently, these two areas are descriptive of Wilton as a workplace, "The students seem to have confidence in the teachers and the administration does as well." Another teacher commented that you, "Can disagree without personal dislike. You can have differing opinions yet still work towards a common goal." The prevailing sentiment was captured by a veteran teacher, "We're consulted even for tiny things. We don't like being told what to do!"

The principal shares power and responsibility in a variety of ways, "He reinforces the confidence that he has in our professional abilities by delegating responsibilities appropriately among staff members." He explained it this way,

Every staff member is involved in a group or committee as we are working toward discussion and consensus. Once these are established we can make changes, documentation and decide on beliefs. Faculty meetings provide an opportunity to bring together all the small committees. I like to let people try it out and allow for failure. Action research is a way of sharing power.

In fact, all the cultural norms on the survey received high marks from the Wilton staff. Of particular note were the constellation of norms which spoke to interpersonal relationships: collegiality; open and honest communication; and caring, celebration and humor. A beginning teacher observed that, "Teachers here share ideas and concepts and work together formally and informally for the good of the school. Caring is evident if you walk into the teacher's lounge and hear people sharing helpful ideas and encouragement." Another commented, "We are honest and we open our big mouths all the time. There is no fear here of not saying what's on your mind."

The affective orientation of the staff was captured with the comment, "We love kids and keep caring for them long after they've left here." That commitment was also

conveyed in a discussion with the action research team, "We're buried right now. On the edge of burnout but there is celebration. There's no time. It's too much. We're stressed but I guess if we laugh enough our sense of humor keeps us ready to go again the next year."

The normative area of greatest ambivalence was "appreciation of leadership." A long time staff member commented, "With the new administration, we are not as sure where we stand at this time. He has stated his differing feelings on what he sees as our actual policy." Another said, "Yes, we appreciate leadership very much, especially in teachers. Administrators come and go quickly." Fundamentally, this is a confident staff. The action research team commented, "We have a stable staff. This school runs itself. The administrators come and go. The last principal was away from the school two or three days a week and we didn't miss her."

Leadership.

Wilton's new principal is experienced, confident and not one to be easily intimidated. In fact his reputation was as a person who had presided over great schools, was highly regarded by students and staff and was a frequent thorn in the side of his district's administration. His first months at Wilton seemed to lend support to that reputation. So far he is being well received by the district and is a hit with the students as reflected by several individuals' comments:

"He's really awesome."

"He jokes around. He tries to make you feel school is fun."

"If you get into trouble, he'll talk to you."

"He plays baseball, gets involved, plays basketball, has running contests with kids. If the kid wins the race she gets to be principal for the day and the principal takes the kid's classes."

Meanwhile, he has decided not to allow the staff to become complacent without self-reflection. He joined the school during its second year of involvement with action

research. Fortunately, that methodology fits his manner well as he is not one to maintain someone else's agenda.

On the "action" level it is his style to roll up his sleeves and participate in all aspects of school life. For example, he took on an advisory group with the most problematic kids. He organized a basketball team that meets at lunch and involves the very kids who are least likely to ever turn out and be successful in interscholastic athletics. He attends all grade level and department meetings and he has taken steps to abolish the position of vice-principal (seeing it as superfluous) in order to redirect the money to teacher leadership.

On the "research" side, he continuously shares and solicits data on school performance. Rather than drawing and stating conclusions, his style is to drop a set of test scores on the table and ask those assembled, "What does this mean?" Or at a meeting he will ask a question that no one has enough data to answer. Then he will encourage and support them, financially if necessary, in seeking out the answers.

Nowhere has this mode of action stimulated more interaction than in the arena of "tracking." At Wilton, several of the most long term, most influential and reputedly most talented teachers are strong proponents of this practice that the principal vocally opposes. The consequence of this conflict is a plethora of action research projects each seeking to empirically demonstrate the wisdom of one of these two contradictory positions.

That action orientation is public and visible as evidenced by this observation by a classified staff member,

He keeps action research going and he has implemented a School Improvement Committee. The committees are overlapping, there are lots of changes because of new committees. The principal is here all the time and he is accessible.

Staff Development

The Lindberg School District has the most extensive and generous system of entitlement grants for staff development in the region. For that reason it is no surprise

that the staff rated "tangible support" high as a cultural value. Staff development is an area where these teachers are willing to give the administration high grades. In the words of the action research team,

This district is wonderful. Our superintendent is committed to staff development. There are twenty one hours of paid tuition for anyone who wants to apply. There is freedom to choose staff development. You are not denied opportunities if you have a rationale for your request.

The principal is also singled out for credit.

"He encourages us to take time to learn more in our areas of expertise."

"He supports activities."

"He shares research articles."

Gene told us that he sees providing for professional development as one of his main roles. He said that he believes the principal is the, "crux of change." The biggest part of this role is engaging the staff in discussions about educational values and beliefs.

The action research team told us that he "initiates discussion regarding our purposes and goals and is really interested in staff ideas and opinions."

This is a team effort as one teacher observed, "The principal provides money and time. The drive comes from the teachers. Gene shows interest and is supportive. He models and uses humor to pressure and influence."

Professional Involvement.

Wilton is perceived as a good place to work despite its dilapidated physical condition. When describing what it is like to work here, teachers said, "It's overcrowded --physically dilapidated. The plant doesn't meet the needs of the students. However, we have an energetic, knowledgeable staff. It is the greatest place. We have common goals."

Faculty dialogue on instructional issues is a key component of the workplace for many Wilton teachers. Teachers cited the mentor program for new teachers, peer coaching, team teaching, principal drop-ins and the new electronic mail system

(linking all teachers and classrooms) as mechanisms which work to foster professional sharing.

All of this makes the school a professional, fulfilling place to practice. As one teacher stated, "I enjoy it and like the students. There is change and challenge. I like my job. We respect each other as educators and as people." Those sentiments were echoed by another colleague, "It is enjoyable. The people are bright, fun and energetic. They care about what they do and strive to do their best."

Along with professional fulfillment comes a commitment of time. "The district supports us with early release. The staff meets before and after school and at lunch to share what we have learned at meetings and at conferences. The district reimburses us for professional development." The principal observed,

They talk all the time--informally--prep period, lunch, before and after school and formally at committee meetings such as the BUG program (aka bring up grades) and including working with parents. We don't enable kids to fail. I facilitate these committees and things now but then participants will take over.

This buzz was even noted by a classified staff member who observed, "At this school the lunch time talk revolves around educational issues."

One of the teachers captured the culture of the school by saying it was a place of, "Professional caring and sharing. We all go the extra mile, work for the good of the staff. There is mutual admiration and respect--a true interest in teaching and being professional. Kids come first. There is a commitment to education." She concluded that the staff was, "not close socially, but have a professional relationship."

The enthusiasm for professional interaction was nowhere as intense as it was with the action research team. They shared as how they,

Love action research. Action research is good for teachers. . . Teachers have to have confidence in what they do and in themselves. And they need to have administrators tell them that they're good. When we hear that often enough, it gives us the incentives we need.

Milltown High School

Milltown High School is a 800 student high school located about 15 miles from a major northwestern city. Like LaBelle it is a part of the Plains School District. As mentioned earlier this district is in the third year of a six year state funded project to experiment with the restructuring of education. The primary focus of the restructuring project is the development of integrated curricula that will involve students in multi-disciplinary instruction provided by teams of teachers and augmented through cooperative learning techniques and computer technology.

At the time of this study the principal was in his second year at the high school having successfully served as an elementary principal in the same district for over a dozen years. His predecessor held a reputation as an incredibly fine person but was rarely described as an instructional leader.

As a consequence of the restructuring project, each teacher at the school was granted ten paid planning days and the staff had access to greatly expanded staff development opportunities. In their first year, the action research team (a group of teachers from a variety of disciplines) studied the factors contributing to student success or failure. Their work resulted in the development of an advisory program which is being implemented this year. The action research team is currently studying implementation issues associated with this school improvement project which was initiated to make Milltown High School a more inviting place for all of its students.

Several members of the action research team, as well as some other teachers, are involved in work with the "Coalition of Essential Schools." That this work is focusing on incorporating the "student as worker" and "teacher as coach" concept and several other values promoted by Ted Sizer (1984).

The composition of the Milltown High School faculty reflects diversity in gender, age and experience. Their expansive campus includes a large one story building

and a separate multi-story structure. Since each building has separate facilities the staffs assigned to these buildings have evolved their own distinct sub-cultures.

The school was described by the faculty as a place where teachers have "freedom to explore", "freedom to pursue their craft", "freedom to arrange curriculum and think about different ways to teach and structure the classroom." It is an "easy, supportive, open place where you can do your own thing." The principal described it as a place which has, "The potential to be a super place for kids to learn. The staff is caring and there is a supportive community." However, everyone isn't equally enthused. In the words of one teacher who felt that things weren't like the old days, "It used to be the place to work, but now there are internal problems and a frustrated staff at many levels."

School Focus.

One of few issues that the MHS staff agreed on was that their school lacked a clear and coherent focus. Of the 19 teachers who responded to that question on the "Culture Survey" 15 indicated that the goals were less than clear. This was expressed in comments such as this one by a veteran of 12 years in the building, "We don't know where we're going." Another experienced teacher commented that, "we are traveling in too many directions. Too much to do is as much harm as too little." Another teacher, new to the building added, "What are we shooting for? Who knows." The principal recently initiated a process to produce a building vision statement which some faculty believe will help. Nevertheless, one teacher described the vision setting process this way, "We tried, most of us in earnest. It felt good, although the jocks weren't too enthused."

Students seemed equally perplexed about the school's priorities. Several inferred that they were aware of conflicts between the teachers and the administration as evidenced by this comment from a high achieving student, "They (the teachers) all hate the restructuring project because they feel it is something they have to do and they

don't have any control over it." Another student, an average achiever, offered this guess at the teachers' priorities, "Drugs and pregnancy? One teacher is interested in the environment and another in not having people in cliques."

Despite almost three years of work on restructuring the staff and student body still seemed unclear about what the school values and where the school program was headed.

Cultural Profile.

The faculty perceived the school culture at MHS in quite diverse ways. The greatest agreement on norms was in regard to "tangible support". Seventeen out of 21 teachers thought that norm was descriptive of their school while only two believed it didn't apply. This probably reflected the district's support for staff development and the substantial resources which came from the restructuring grant. However, even this area reflected sharp differences of opinion. One veteran teacher declared, "Only a few of the chosen direct many of the programs which has created divisiveness in the staff." However, another long term teacher interpreted it differently. She said, "I think the administration are quick to support those teachers who really go and give the extra mile."

The next most agreed upon cultural attribute was a tendency to "reach out to the knowledge bases". On this item 17 teachers agreed that it was descriptive while four disagreed. Sixteen teachers agreed and five disagreed that "experimentation" and "involvement in decision making" were descriptive of their school.

"High expectations" was another area of conflict. Here the staff opinions showed a range. "I feel the principal, the superintendent and the curriculum director expect our very best. The curriculum director is always looking for ways to help everyone be successful." A more negative assessment was, "We seem to be lowering our standards in order to gain higher ratings."

The norm "appreciation of leadership" was another fortress of ambiguity. One staff member stated, "There is a lack of respect for this administration. There is a top down attitude--you are going to restructure and change! I feel that all creativity and individuality has been stifled." Yet a 17 year veteran viewed it quite differently, "The entire restructuring project was teacher based and gave the opportunity for groups to work together. It showed trust and confidence in teachers and encouraged experimentation."

"Goal clarity" and "protection of what is important" were seen as the two least descriptive cultural norms. Many staff members agreed with this 21 year veteran, "We base too many decisions on what other schools are doing. We need to make decisions based upon what works at Milltown instead of calling elsewhere."

Leadership Analysis.

The principal hasn't yet inspired either the staff or the student body with his educational leadership. The students stereotyped him as both a "sports fanatic" and as an "elementary principal" who is having a hard time adjusting to the older students. One high achieving student said, "He tries to care. His heart is in the right place, but he just came from an elementary school and he treats us like elementary kids." A more caustic comment was the view that, "he cares more about the reputation of the school than the students." The student's felt better about the vice-principal. As one student explained, "The vice-principal is more of a speaker. I consider the vice- principal the principal of the school."

The teachers reflected the same ambivalence as the students. One teacher said, he "is one of the best I've worked with in nine years. He provides direction and empowerment but I don't know what he is thinking." Several teachers felt that he was trying to force his will on the school. "The principal has set goals. We will do those goals regardless of any input from staff. The worst thing you can do is ask for teacher's input if you are not going to take it."

Two prevalent views on the principal regarded his work ethic and his role in the larger administrative constellation of the district. "This man does not sleep at night because he wants teachers to take the ball." Another said, "He is a type A personality--driven, motivated. He takes over and he will just do it. He imposes his values on others." Another asks, "Who has more impact on him? Us or the district office? Teachers are distrustful of administration in this district. There's lots of dog and pony stuff just to make us look good."

In trying to explain the way the staff perceives the principal one teacher commented, "The legacy of what the district administration has dreamed up has created some negative feelings about what has happened--and rightly so. Things have been pushed on the teachers. Empowering teachers is difficult with the legacy that is there." The principal's view of himself provides a sharp contrast to that of the faculty,

I need to impress, lead, cajole, whatever, people to go in a certain direction. That's the leadership that I think people are looking for. Some teachers want to lecture, throw information at kids. Some feel pretty strongly about that. They are content driven rather than child driven..I will need to bring all that to bear on that person to convince them of my way, or that person will need to go somewhere else.

Staff Development

The administration's role with staff development was perceived in conflicting ways. On the one hand the administration was given credit for providing a great deal of opportunity. "We are encouraged to pursue as much as we want or have time for. I am piloting math materials and making outside school visitations as well as attending conferences and seminars." But another teacher declares that, "Planning days are used up with their agenda. . . I don't have time to do what I want to develop." One of the concerns is the conflict between quantity and quality. "Some teachers are outside of the classroom more than in the classroom. They have us going in so many different ways we are not doing anything well. Nothing is perfected. Every year means something new." Another teacher commented that the Curriculum Director,

Does a fine job of providing staff development. We have tons of it, but I question the relevance of it. I wonder how it fits into what we're doing. They bring in lots of brand name people--gurus. How much are they paying these people? Couldn't the money be better spent?

The principal seems to be aware of the problem with staff development. He stated,

There is a real strong program in the district, yet, these teachers are not active in the district staff development program. I've got to work with the curriculum director to tailor-make staff development for this school, whether we offer them as voluntary, after school, or during school hours.

Governance

When exploring how the principal engages staff in discussions and decision making we encountered several interesting and repeated observations. He was perceived as both close lipped and supportive of an elite subgroup. One teacher commented on his openness, "There are open forums and there is an open-door policy. We are never turned away. We have meetings up the yin yang! He meetings us to death." Another offered this observation, "I don't know where he's coming from sometimes. I wonder if he is sharing what he is thinking?"

The principal may be aware of how he is coming across as he told us, "It is easier for me to just do things than to talk about them. As leaders we need to take the lead in discussions. Maybe I'm not good at leading discussions."

The thing that has marked the staff's perception of this principal more than anything else has been their reaction to his effort to improve student performance and reduce the amount of student failure. As one staff member put it, "He challenged us some and we're scared. He means it, but if it doesn't get done fast enough he takes over." The teachers on the action research team observed that the faculty "doesn't have a sense of what the principal wants to see. The principal is scrambling to discover the high school culture. He believes that every kid can succeed. He is trying to help the at-risk. A lot of his energies are directed towards the at-risk kids."

But then the group shared their concern that he may have gone too far. "He publishes our grades. Which has caused concern. Is this concern for kids or for locking good? What are we to do for kids who are failing--just adjust their grades?"

The range of teacher emotion on this issue can be seen in these comments from the social studies department,

Students should be allowed to fail without asking what are the teachers not doing. I go over in my mind what the kid has not done. All responsibility for the kids is on the teachers. What about the parents? Give them a frown face! Comparing teachers-- it is demoralizing. The principal needs to help the teachers, promote the teacher make the school run more smoothly. The principal needs to be there to support teachers. I feel threatened. I used to get along fine, but things have changed. Teachers are looking over their shoulders.

Professional Involvement/Use of Time.

These two critical features of the school improvement context are hard to trace at MHS. The action research group meets regularly. The entire staff has been granted ten additional non-student contact days for planning and by all accounts the district is generous in its provision of staff development resources.

Despite the generous (in contrast to neighboring districts) amounts of time provided to MHS teachers one staff member related, "I come in at 7:00 every morning. I give them a half hour a day. I have for years. You have to do it on your own time. I have to give up my family time to do all the extras."

The ambiguity of the situation is captured in these comments from members of the action research team.

We need time to establish a clear focus. So much is going on. There are new things to do--self-study, action research, advisory, Sizer, restructuring. We can't take on anymore without letting something go. There are three groups of teachers here: one negative group, a group of teachers who are interested in change and a core change group. The administration has fostered the core change group. The administration really supports these people. Do they really feel like they are doing something? If it (advisory period) fails, I may not be able to stay in education. Its a personal connection, the one thing we have done to make change.

What is happening here? Is it a school that is, "Starting to address the needs of students and not just of teachers," as one teacher told us? Or, "Is it getting to the point

that there is too much show and not enough substance?" as another teacher said. Will it "blossom into a fantastic place for kids" as the principal believes or will his dream fizzle? Who is seeing the future clearly? The principal or the teacher who says, "Standards are getting worse. Teachers are losing sight of why we are here and the kids are not learning."

Lindberg High School

Lindberg High School is the oldest school in this study. Like Wilton it is part of the Lindberg School District. LHS has been in continuous operation at the same site for over 80 years. At one time it was the regional high school for a far larger geographical area but due to the creation of new suburban school districts, its attendance area has been steadily reduced to where it now serves two growing municipalities and the large unincorporated area in between.

The building recently underwent a four million dollar remodeling and it now serves approximately 1500 students, its largest enrollment for 25 years.

The areas served by the school are becoming increasingly suburban and upper-middle class. Just thirty years ago these communities would have been considered rural and working class. Today, most residents commute to a major city 15 miles away. These changes notwithstanding, the Lindberg community retains a reputation as a fine place for families with a relatively laid-back lifestyle and a place where community life still centers on the local school.

The current principal is in his fourth year having moved to Lindberg from a principalship at a similar high school in another part of the metropolitan area. Due to retirements, relocations and growth, this principal has had the opportunity to hire almost 50% of the current certificated staff and has assigned the entire four member administrative team. In spite of his involvement with staffing, the ghost of the previous principal still inhabits the school. He had served as an administrator at the school for eight years before moving to the central office. During his tenure the community

perceived major changes at the school. It received an award from the National Secondary School Recognition Program and was seen as moving from a rural school with a vocational emphasis to a more suburban college prep school.

LHS has the longest involvement with Project LEARN of any school in this study having sent three teams, a total of 25 teachers, to training sessions over the past three years.

Cultural Profile.

Not one of the 14 cultural norms on the survey were identified as being "characteristic" by the entire faculty. However, three norms were viewed by high percentages of the faculty as descriptive of their school.

"High expectations" was classified as characteristic or somewhat characteristic by 93% of the respondents. The norm of "experimentation" was also perceived as descriptive with 91% finding it characteristic or somewhat so. The third norm on which general positive agreement was obtained was "tangible support." Here a total of 87% saw it as descriptive.

Examples of "high expectations" cited by the staff were the community's push for excellence and the district's financial commitment to staff development. A typical comment was,

I think we try to have high expectations but we don't always know how to effectively communicate that to kids. We are always pushed to become educated and updated in our field. Lots of money is available for teachers to go to school. There are lots of workaholics here!

The interest, emphasis and support for action research was typical of the examples cited by teachers as illustrations of the norm of "experimentation." Although experimenting goes on all the time it is not perceived as universally positive as this comment from a teacher with 14 years in the school attests, "Daily schedules, scheduling of courses, class sizes, classroom decisions, bells, lunches. We do not seem to learn from the past experiences."

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It was not surprising that "tangible support" rated as high as it did since the district is well known for its generous commitment to salaries and staff development. One teacher with 12 years experience in education, yet only in her second year in the building said, "The administration tries to make the teacher's life simpler by providing support and not setting up programs that create a nightmare of paper work."

But as with most things at LHS someone always holds another viewpoint. In this case it came from a veteran teacher with 10 years experience in the building, "Support from the district is not consistent across curriculum areas. Some areas such as language arts get more planning time than do science or math."

The other side of the cultural ledger was apparent in the staff's response to "caring and celebration" (33% negative rating), "appreciation and recognition" (40% negative rating), "appreciation of leadership" (49% negative), "clarity of goals" (54% negative) and "protection of what's important" which was rated negatively by a full two thirds of those surveyed.

School Focus.

The school is clearly divided on the question of focus. The split on this issue serves to illuminate much of the essential cultural character of the school. When asked about the school's focus, the principal said it was "increasing student responsibility for learning." Our interviews showed that this message was getting across and had been internalized by a sizeable portion of the faculty. That language came up in several teacher comments, "Student responsibility for learning--the faculty agrees on this focus but there are different ways to achieve this." Other teachers offered up the same language but with greater skepticism as evidenced by this exchange from an interview with the language arts department,

"Student responsibility? Is that the right answer? It is just a buzz word. That's all it is."

I don't agree. I think there is genuine concern. We may not have found a vehicle to assess it . . . but there are things afoot in our department, such as the action research project concerned with student responsibility.

Individually, yes, but not school wide.

In another departmental interview we were told, "There aren't school goals. We had thought it was 'student responsibility for learning' but at the last faculty meeting the principal told us that there has not been a school goal for the last three years."

The reason for these differing perceptions could be pride in ownership. One of the action researchers commented,

Student responsibility for learning was the principal's decision. People are waiting for the program. What do we do with it? This school was directed so much before that we are still waiting for the direction without realizing that you can take it yourself. There is a lot of freedom and all you have to do is take it.

When asked about the school goals one teacher answered, "Maybe student responsibility?" Another offered, "Maybe action research?"

Both may have been correct and the mixed perceptions could be indicative of the open, non-directive style preferred by the principal. As another teacher put it when describing the school's focus or lack of it, "There is some confusion about focus on the part of some teachers. We need a faculty focus!"

In discussions with the principal and several members of the LHS staff it became clear that the focus that he and they are after is embodied in what has been called, "the ethic of action research" (J. Stickney, personal communication, February, 1991). This is a process focus involving governance, empowerment and individual teacher responsibility. If that is the goal there will need to be more clarification for the faculty. Continued confusion is breeding resentment as indicated by this comment, "The principal handpicked the teachers on the action research teams. He needs to share the resources."

The perceived relationship between focus, or lack thereof, at LHS and its relationship to leadership can best be understood by listening to another exchange from an interview with the language arts department,

There is freedom to do what I want to do. You just take the freedom!

With the previous principal we did action research. At that time I did not sense that it was a choice. This school has changed from a faculty orientation to an individual one. When leadership changes, questions about what is going on come up.

Student responsibility is not necessarily a faculty concern. The principal decided it.

Due to action research, continuous evaluation is a feature of the school and has been for many years.

Leadership is important. We need to change leadership.

To put these discussions on school focus into perspective it may prove helpful to examine the approach to leadership being taken by Clyde Smith, the principal.

Leadership Analysis.

Clyde Smith is an introspective and philosophical leader. His approaches are grounded as much in his values and beliefs as in an assessment of what will be most effective for the school.

When discussing his approach to leadership, Clyde told us this story,

This is the third year we have attended the action research workshops. Twenty five people have attended. In the second year I dragged people along. It almost killed the project because it became my thing. I conducted a survey of homework practices of students. If the principal becomes the important person who provides direction or resources it is not a school which is getting better. The staff must be the doers. I'm empowering staff through shared decision making, a Faculty Senate and department head groups. Among the barriers to democratic processes are the traditions of top-down administration. We need new ideas for teacher leadership, as teachers have no training. The action research process suits me. It empowers teachers. Outsiders and principals provide top-down innovation which dooms the improvement efforts.

However with all this long term commitment, the message is still slow to get out. During an interview with the fine arts and vocational staffs the comments were made,

Action research is not something I have heard about--just heard last week. Which I think is not very good. The areas that we teach means we are left out. Academics are focused on here. People involved in action research are from the other areas. I was part of that group, but they moved away. We need to have some from our group trained. We provide worthy classes that kids benefit from, too. This suggests that we are behind, not being involved in action research. Improvement in school should involve all faculty. We should at least have the opportunity to be involved.

Some of the faculty are putting the blame on the principal. The members of the action research team bemoaned the "loss of time to collaborate as a faculty. We are hungry for ideas and sharing. People feel overwhelmed. There is a need for leadership."

The contrast in perception of styles between the current and past principal was illustrated in these other comments from the fine arts and vocational departments,

I never see him. He doesn't come in my room. He doesn't come to our meetings.

In department head meetings a lot of the discussions are not driven in any way. Different principals have different levels of control and direction.

This principal wants direction to be generated from staff, not by him. Our department heads drive values and beliefs now. The previous principal was more controlling and that upset some people. That was one of the criteria when this principal was hired. It was to get someone who would allow the faculty. . .

I'd like to know what this principal is thinking. It is never, 'How are things going?' He doesn't know what I'm doing. The last principal was excellent in helping teachers set goals, take part in workings of school, initiated his own, too. I always felt a part of what was going on in the school, but I don't feel that now.

It seems that when one examines these varied perceptions of Clyde's style one is drawn to the two sides of trust and empowerment. Apparently, some folks love being put in charge of their own destiny while others are frustrated by it. No where is this more apparent than in the arena of professional development.

One teacher told us "Well, he doesn't get in the way of it. The present principal is not as encouraging as the last principal. Teachers have to generate and maintain their own innovations." Another teacher relatively new to LHS said, "There is no professional development theme. The last school I taught at had a theme."

The action research team mentioned that at Lindberg, "People pursue development individually. People go to the conferences that they are interested in."

The previous principal used to present a lot. I learned a lot from him. I miss that direction. We are so busy in classrooms, it is really nice to have someone to provide research ideas. I miss adult interactions. We used to be a faculty. We used to share research.

In the fine arts and vocational education department discussion someone said that ,

The previous principal really worked with us on professional development--he was always urging. I don't feel that now. The district supports you as a professional. Last principal encouraged retreats, gave me money to set up visits downtown, bring in speakers, gave me ideas. He made it happen. "

That good old time nostalgia is not felt by everyone. The current administration is given much credit by other staff members for fostering their personal growth. Several teachers commented about peer coaching. One said, "Peer coaching is encouraged and discussed. There is a problem with time. Many new teachers on staff are not yet comfortable. We have the freedom to do so if desired . . ." Another observed,

I was involved in peer evaluation last year. The district provided the funds. The administration asked me to sit in on other teachers. This was non-threatening and rewarding for all. It is the principal's personality to share power and responsibility---he draws people in."

Clyde told us that action research is the linchpin of his school development agenda yet this discussion with the action research team reveals they aren't completely sure where this is headed,

We need help with guidelines. We need time set up to discuss our project. We need to meet with groups to sustain enthusiasm. Isolation breeds apathy and anxiety.

We don't have to do action research but it is essential.

I have tremendous doubt about what I do. There is no one to reinforce you due to isolation. There's a need for dialogue. People are hungry for sharing ideas. This faculty doesn't get together.

If meetings are not required people don't show. The previous principal used to take attendance so people would show. He pressured us to go. Now they have a choice. The leader needs to let people know that they need to be there, be on time--to not sign in but be there. Its really important. The principal needs to approach people who do not attend and let them know that they were missed.

Another teacher told us that in her opinion there was, "Not enough leadership. The principal does not take a strong enough role. Things are left to flounder. Schools shouldn't be democratic. A vision is lacking. There is a need for a benevolent dictator. The communes of the 60's didn't work."

That negative assessment is not held by all faculty members. In fact, several people commented that the principal, " Allows teachers, through the democratic

process, to do what they think is best despite his own biases so teachers can feel a sense of belonging and value."

Governance

Because of the value Clyde places on individual initiative and growth and his propensity to support grass roots efforts, the arena of governance is one place where his stamp of leadership can be observed. An elected faculty senate deliberates on a wide range of issues and has the authority to plan sessions for the entire faculty which are called "faculty forums." The forums are held occasionally to discuss issues of school wide importance. In November, a week before our first site visit, the first forum of the year was held. It dealt with action research and presentations were made by many team members. Clyde was quite pleased with the impact.

Unfortunately, his assessment was not universally shared. We were told by an English teacher that, "The Faculty Senate is ineffective; a crock." Another added, "The Faculty Forum is held during seventh period when some teachers can't attend. His intentions are good but it is not working well."

Once again governance was an area of disagreement. One teacher felt that Clyde provided "opportunities to discuss and listen to each other. The principal listens and is working toward formalizing a process for sharing. He makes subtle suggestions. Clyde provides lots of input and direction." And we heard this comment, "The principal points out avenues, shows what doors are open. It is the teacher's choice. The principal listens, thinks, is reflective. He can be decisive but is relaxed."

Another window into Clyde's leadership was the way he viewed the process of action research. He mentioned that his attraction to this approach was that it, "promotes the language that helps communication. It is a philosophy that helps teachers be mature." This maturity metaphor was frequently invoked in discussions with Clyde.

The action researchers themselves were beginning to internalize that concept.

They commented,

That teachers have things they are responsible for. For example, how we go about teaching to high expectations. There is a high degree of freedom here and high expectations. However, most people need direction, but direction is resisted.

To empower people there has to be a belief in the talent and skills that teachers have and the sense that the leadership cares and will take the risk on your behalf, such as spending money. Administrators need to remember to participate in the teachers' world. These things are lacking. I don't feel commitment from the leadership. The leader, for me, needs to provide inspiration, share frustrations.

It depends on the principal's personality. He needs to be a warm and caring person who teaches us.

That view was disputed by another action researcher who asserted,

Leadership doesn't make any difference to me unless they restrict what I do. I am the expert in my area. I feel good about being autonomous.

I don't agree with you. Schools need a mission.

That view was the source of another dispute,

I don't know what the mission is at this school. Other schools know exactly what their mission is. We don't. Individually we know what we want to accomplish. We used to have the message that 'kids won't fail.' But in my classroom I do what I want and no one ever challenges me.

If the above discussion makes LHS sound like an educational anarchy that may be a misreading. For it is clearly not the sense of the whole faculty as evidenced by this comment from a teacher who had been quite critical earlier, "Yes, he does it consciously. He really feels that the direction of school must come from teachers." A colleague countered that assertion with this comment, "Then we need a vehicle for this to happen. There is a feeling of drifting, with everyone doing their own thing." Someone else added, "It's a question of direction. Balance. We do have the freedom to try and we appreciate that."

Maybe Clyde's use of a maturity metaphor is wise. Perhaps the impact of his approach can only be seen or appreciated over time. Our discussion with the language arts department ended with these positive comments from one of the teachers,

This year there is a new hope and commitment to action research. The school didn't get off to a good start. There were no goals--no ownership in projects last year. Now more teachers have been trained in action research, so it is as if we have a bank. There is a sense of this is what we need to do. There is commitment of this principal to action research . . . The English department has collaborated all along. We believe in ourselves individually and collectively. Action research is important to us as we have always done it informally, now formally. It is worth the investment in that it will yield benefits. There are lots of small action research projects going on. Collegiality was not the case in the past. There is now excitement by staff about action research projects. Interaction with all staff through action research will result in bringing us together. Action research is leading us toward de-compartmentalizing education--new energy--new hope in teachers and administration.

Professional Involvement.

With some notable exceptions (the action research team) professional work at Lindberg High School occurs in the context of departments. This was one of few attributes of the school where we perceived near unanimous agreement. Clyde explained the collaborative development process at LHS this way.

It occurs in every department--retreats--release time from school--district funding. The English department meetings are held once a week. Social studies teachers meet every lunch hour. I hold regular faculty meetings. Teachers work hard--time is constraining. But the greatest constraint is that teachers are not trained to be public about the profession. But we need to examine our profession publicly.

When asked about collaborative professional work typical comments were, "The staff as a whole does not discuss. They're not used to it and there are no required faculty meetings."

Another teacher shared a departmental perspective, "In Vocational Education we are always sharing what works. It depends on how much you get to see others. If you are too busy you just don't get a chance. It's an individual choice. "

Even departmental work is not universally perceived as producing equity. One teacher told us that her department was, "requesting time but there is no money. We want summer curriculum work. The language arts department has an extra prep period so they may be working together. The math department is trying. We have release time to choose textbooks in the summer."

Frequently teachers talked about the faculty forums and other mechanisms to foster group work but all of these had their fatal flaws in someone else's eyes. For example,

We have faculty forums, but it is hard to get to these after school, as that is the best time for dealing with students, i.e., make-up tests, etc. The intentions are really good, specifically the attempt to have faculty input. But, it is too lax here. Teachers focus on classroom and therefore all of these other things erode that its the little things that consume energy.

In the area of collaborative work, like with so many other things at LHS, many hopes and dreams are being pinned on the action research bandwagon. The action researchers mentioned that they saw action research as an excellent way to "promote understanding of others' work and the action research process." They felt that due to the "need for increased collaboration, action research is essential."

Another faculty member talked of the need to "promote action research so teams do not become an elitist group. Faculty Forums are in place so teachers can discuss issues of concern and teaching strategies."

And finally Clyde summed up the work with action research this way, "We are always looking for new ways of doing things. Action research is a way of evaluation and examining the teaching/learning process. We're beginning to do it well."

Results

The study examined the perceived effects of collaborative action research on the culture of five schools which were thought to possess a tight culture. Although there was variation in the teachers' perceptions of the culture of the school after a two year involvement in action research, all of the faculties agreed that, to a certain degree their schools were getting better. The reasons cited for school improvement were varied and the data revealed that some staffs were more able than others to report concrete examples of school improvement. The differences in patterns of responses for

questions in each school revealed some district differences between the schools as teachers perceived them.

It appeared that the five schools varied on their "tightness" of culture and that the variation on tightness was attributable to several factors. Qualitative and quantitative analysis illuminated some of the patterns of perceived differences in the culture of the schools studied and their effects on school improvement. It appears that even in a sample of reputedly good schools some schools appear better than others.

After conducting an initial analysis of the data and ascertaining an inter-rater reliability of 97%, we constructed a graphic representation of our understanding of the emergent themes (Erickson, 1986) as they applied to our theoretical assumptions.

Figure 2 illustrates our assertions.

General Assertion

The general assertion, that action research in a tight culture will enhance school improvement, prompted us to ask about the process of action research in school improvement: How does action research help to tighten culture? But first we needed to describe the "tight cultures" of these good schools. We decided that a value should not be considered normative as applied to a school unless its presence was confirmed by at least 75% of the respondents on the Culture Survey. In studying the five schools it became clear that teachers perceive that three critical elements contributed to the tightness of their school improvement culture.

Sub-assertion 1: Common focus is a critical element for a tight culture. From the qualitative data we asserted that focus in an improving school could be ascertained by examining the presence of four factors: goal clarity, collegiality, leadership and experimentation. Therefore we derived a composite value for each of these factors from the norms on the Culture Survey (Table 1). A composite quantitative value was obtained by computing the percentage of "characteristic" and "somewhat characteristic" ratings on the Culture Survey. A quantitative value for focus, then, was derived from:

1. The perceptions of leadership as the sum of the percentages of scores reported on #9 "appreciation of leadership" and #4 "trust and confidence" on the Culture Survey.
2. The level of collegiality as the sum of the percentages of scores reported on #1 "collegiality" and #6 "reaching out to the knowledge base."
3. The degree of experimentation as indicated by scores on #2 "experimentation" and #3 "high expectations."
4. The perceptions of goal clarity as reported on #10 "clarity of goals" and #11 "protection of what is important" for each school on the Culture Survey.

The faculty at Riverview found each of the norms that made up the composite on focus as characteristic of their school. While the strength of responses weren't as strong at Wilton, those teachers also perceived their school in a similar light. The only element of the collegiality composite to receive less than a 75% endorsement from the Wilton staff was "appreciation of leadership" which still received a positive rating from 70% of the Wilton faculty.

The collegiality profile at LaBelle was similar to Wilton with "high expectations" receiving a unanimous endorsement and "appreciation of leadership" being the only norm on the survey receiving less than 75% approval. In the category of "focus" the two high schools, MHS and LHS, scored well behind all the other schools in the sample.

Sub-assertion 2: Cultural Collinearity is a critical element for a tight culture.

We sought a measure of "like-mindedness" of the faculties at the subject schools. Since our interest was in the cultural aspects of the workplace we sought an indicator that was analogous to cognitive collinearity (thinking alike) and felt that a measure of central tendency on the Culture Survey would be an indicator of cultural cohesiveness. The score on this factor was derived from a ratio of the norms with standard deviations less than .75 over the 14 norms measured. This data is reported in Table 2.

The standard deviations reveal a clear pattern. At Riverview the teachers perceived the cultural norms in similar ways. On all 14 items the standard deviations were under .75. Wilton was next with 11 of 14 items receiving standard deviations of less than .75.

The agreement on norms dropped some at LaBelle. In this school there was still much agreement with 9 of 14 items having standard deviations of more than .75.

Once again the high schools provided a sharp contrast. The teaching staffs were a divided house in both of these schools. At MHS the standard deviations were above .75 on seven items and at LHS only four items posted standard deviations above the cutoff. It is, however, important to note that the response rates at these two schools was significantly less than at the other schools in the study.

In summary, with cultural collinearity we saw the same division as we saw on the dimension of focus. Riverview reported the highest cultural collinearity, followed by Wilton and LaBelle, with LHS and MHS lagging well behind.

Sub-assertion 3: Leadership by the principal is a critical element for a tight culture. This was ascertained by looking for evidence of leadership in the establishment, support and monitoring of a common focus. The responses to our interview questions regarding leadership supported Fullan's (1986) view that effective leadership was marked by the simultaneous presence of pressure to innovate and succeed with innovations and support by the leadership for those improvement efforts.

Pressure was manifest in numerous ways: action research, an emphasis on research and data collection in general, as well as the reading of and sharing of a wider scope of scholarly work and the provision of professional development which was specifically related to the focus areas. We saw action research promoted by principals as a way to create dissonance, discover the needs for school improvement and to monitor the success of those improvements.

Support by leadership was reported in many forms and was then categorized into two areas: tangible and emotional.

Tangible support was revealed in the ways the principal was able to procure financial resources for the school and supply teachers with what they needed to carry out the improvements. Tangible support took the form the professional development, funding, materials, equipment, etc.

Emotional support was perceived by teachers as words of appreciation and praise, as well as being treated as professionals in an open and trusting environment. Teachers perceived emotional support coming from a concerted effort by their principals to promote equity and not play favorites with the staff. The most supportive principals were one of the gang: "If we're going to have a long day, she is going to have a long day." Supportive principals were in classrooms daily and encouraged teachers to go and see the best of each others' work.

Emotional support was also perceived by teachers in this study as practical assistance with everyday teaching methods. Emotional support was reported to be especially high when the principal was able to give practical hints, suggestions and information. This support was reported more often in schools where the principal was in classrooms daily.

Emotional support might mean that the school was clean, paper flowed appropriately i.e., clerical and janitorial staff were effective in their work of supporting teachers. A school wide discipline plan was in place and teachers were buffered (Deal and Peterson, 1990) from parents and in some cases the school district office.

A quantitative indicator of this phenomena was constructed. Pressure was inferred by the percentage of positive scores on the Culture Survey norm of "high expectations" (Table 3). All the respondents from Riverview, LaBelle and Wilton felt that pressure on them to innovate was very high. Lindberg High, although not unanimous, also felt that pressure was high. Teachers from Lindberg High cited the

community as a source of pressure to maintain high expectations and innovations. In contrast to the other schools, only 62 percent of Milltown respondents felt pressure to excel and/or innovate.

Two components of support were recognized: tangible and emotional (Table 4). A value for tangible support was gained by simply ascertaining the percentage of "characteristic" and "somewhat characteristic" ratings on the Culture Survey norm "tangible support". Emotional support was derived from a composite of the Culture Survey norms #4 "trust and confidence"; #8 "caring, celebration and humor"; and #7 "appreciation and recognition" (Table 5).

Riverview and Wilton Schools both consistently reported high degrees of support from the principal and other sources on every dimension of the composite. It was a mixed bag at Labelle where teachers felt a high degree of "trust and confidence" and "caring celebration and humor," but a high number of respondents felt there was inadequate "appreciation and recognition." At both Lindberg and Milltown high schools teachers reported low degrees of perceived emotional support for their work.

The combined tangible and emotional support scores fell out very clearly by school (Table 4). Riverview teachers perceived high degrees of both emotional and tangible support (96%), as did Wilton Middle School (90%). LaBelle Elementary School perceived more tangible support than emotional support but reported an overall high level of perceived support (82%). The two high schools feel least supported. They produced scores showing little emotional support (66%) and only moderately high tangible support (81% and 82%).

In summary, on the factor of leadership we found this division. One school was exceptionally high--Riverview. Here the teachers felt not only tangible support, but emotional support as well.

At Wilton the teachers reported pushing themselves, the principal saw his role as asking the tough questions and this pressure was accompanied by all the tangible

support the faculty needed. While they lacked the nurturing that Riverview teachers received they hardly felt slighted.

In the middle ground we found LaBelle. These teachers felt cared for and supported by their principal. While they felt appreciation for the tangible support provided by their district, they felt put upon by the district's top-down demands and directions.

The picture was not as bright at either of the two high schools in the sample. At MHS many staff members reported a feeling of being manipulated. They felt they were being pushed toward the district's or the principal's agenda. The pressure they felt was external, unsympathetic and unmotivating. The tangible support they felt was substantial but, in their opinion, misdirected.

At LHS no one reported pressure. In fact many teachers seemed to long for it. Repeated comparisons to the previous principal (four years removed) who was perceived as more directive, made this point. To the teachers who missed their previous principal, the laissez-faire attitude of Clyde was not seen as professionally beneficial. Support was another ambiguous area at LHS. Release from pressure was seen by some as support, to others it was benign neglect.

On the dimension of leadership for focus Riverview received a definite plus. Wilton was a moderate plus and LaBelle was neutral. MHS and LHS received low marks on our leadership scale since the simultaneous and productive application of pressure and support were seen by many as seriously lacking.

School Effectiveness

Having reviewed all of this data the one question left to ask was, what difference does it make? While it is nice to have happy and professionally fulfilled staff members, a well liked principal and a culturally tight school, the reason for making changes in school organizational patterns is to help students become more productive.

The action research intervention is too new at these sites to possibly be responsible for changes in achievement patterns. However, elsewhere (Sagor, 1990) we have shown that the nature of the prevailing cultures can predict the likelihood of action research being long lived. How have the prevailing cultures in these schools influenced student performance? To answer this we reviewed trend data on three aspects of student achievement in these five schools. We sought and received information on the levels of academic achievement, social behavior and attendance over the past two to three years at each site. The available data was quite dissimilar, so it was aggregated and reported simply as improving, fluctuating or declining. The summary data is presented in Table 7.

Summary

The pattern of this data appears clear. The divisions between the five schools in the sample are consistent (Table 8). Riverview is the exemplar on each measure. The faculty are clear about their goals, they view the school and its norms in a similar manner and they are responding well to the pressure and support provided by their administration. As one might predict, these positive cultural traits correspond with a trend of improving student performance.

Wilton and LaBelle are different environments in many ways, yet our data places them firmly in the middle of our sample. At this point in time the LaBelle staff has a less ambivalent relationship with their principal (although both of these principals had only been in office for four months at the time of our site visits). The Wilton staff posted higher scores on our indicators of collegiality, yet both schools were marked by stable and secure faculties with high degrees of cultural collinearity.

Given these patterns it is again no surprise that student performance at these two schools is a mixed bag. Although test scores and behavioral indicators have had a

tendency to fluctuate at both schools during the past three years, both schools have basically maintained what are high and stable levels of performance.

If there is merit to the theorized relationship between culture and achievement it should be apparent with the two weaker schools in the sample. At both MHS and LHS collegiality, cultural collinearity and leadership were rated comparatively low by their staffs. That same unhappy trend is apparent in the direction of student achievement at these schools.

From the above it appears that these case studies lend support to our thesis that focus, cultural collinearity and leadership for focus are components of school culture that bear a positive relationship to school performance. That leaves the question, are these also the pre-requisite elements to promote successful implementation of action research?

To get an indication of influence of collaborated action research, we asked faculty members who were not, themselves, involved in action research, if they were familiar with the work of the action research teams at their schools. A similar, but not identical pattern emerged. At Wilton and LaBelle 100% of those we interviewed knew of the research team. That recognition declined to 71% at Riverview. However, it took a precipitous drop to 56% at LHS and to 33% at MHS. Those differences are especially pronounced when one recognizes that at LHS a quarter of the faculty had been trained over a three year period, yet we heard from a veteran teacher, "Action Research is not something I have heard about. I just heard last week, which I think is not very good"

At Milltown, the entire faculty is implementing an "advisory program" that was the outgrowth of the work of their action research team, yet two-thirds of their faculty are unaware of the work of the team.

The principals at all five schools are enthusiastic about the potential of action research, although only Laura (at Riverview) chose to go through the entire training

with her staff. Also, Laura is the only one to attribute a significant portion of her school's success to involvement with action research.

Ironically, the enthusiasm for action research expressed by the two high school principals is great, yet their enthusiasm, like their leadership, apparently has not caught on with the rest of their staffs.

From the above analysis it appears that the same cultural characteristics that point to improved achievement are fundamentally the same ones that predict responsiveness and commitment to action research as a school improvement strategy.

This brings us to our third and final question: How does collaborative action research impact school culture? In our earlier work we termed collaborative action research as a cultural turbo-charger (Figure #1). Nothing that we have found in these case studies refutes that view but the turbo-charger metaphor may be the wrong imagery. When looking at these schools it appears that collaborative action research is a "high technology tool." Like any technological advancement it can be a capacity builder. Apparently, in and of itself it won't provide one with insight. However, because it can enable educators to do their professional work more efficiently it can create more opportunities for one to form their own insights.

Collaborative action research therefore, may make collegiality more meaningful and satisfying. By providing teachers with data on their performance it can enable efficacy and self-esteem to be built. By fostering collegial interaction on the meaningful issues of teaching and learning it can help make the workplace less isolating and more fulfilling. By providing the teachers who come to the process with common goals and perspectives, a mechanism for further focusing their efforts, action research can help build esprit d'corps. And by giving leadership a vehicle to streamline its support for school improvement the efficacy and appreciation of leadership can be enhanced.

We end this stage of our work buoyed by our finding that collaborative action research has potential to foster school effectiveness. While inferring causality is beyond the reach of our data, the correspondence found in our study is heartening. However, it appears, at least from these cases, that collaborative action research only works to assist "culturally sound" schools in getting better. The magic elixir that can turn around the ineffective school with a weak culture is still alluding us. As powerful as collaborative action research might be it cannot overcome the handicaps of staff divisiveness, lack of focus and inadequate leadership.

Limitations and Considerations

Performance Measures

The schools differed greatly in the data collected and none of these schools made a habit of cleansing their data to account for the impact of in and out migration. Furthermore, at MHS and LaBelle we had no longitudinal data on students, therefore, at those schools our academic performance measures were confined to comparisons of different cohorts.

In addition the principal may be an intervening variable with student performance and, with the exception of LHS, the reported achievement trends cover periods preceding the appointment of the principals in this study.

Finally, the trend data that we reported could not have been a result of collaborative action research. For that reason they can only help us understand another dimension of the context in which collaborative action research will or will not take hold. Whether collaborative action research will have an effect on the direction of these achievement trends may not be determined for a number of years.

Leadership

Perceptions of leadership have played a significant role in our analysis. However, it must be understood that four of the principals were in their first or second years in their buildings. Nevertheless, there are some patterns. For example, the

principals at Milltown and Riverview both used Project LEARN as a mechanism to get their improvement agendas off the ground. Clyde has been pushing action research for a number of years. However, drawing conclusions about leadership from the data on Wilton and LaBelle should be done with caution. Madeline is deliberately going slowly, believing that personal relationships must be built before improvement agendas are pushed. By contrast, Gene is trying to arouse the attention of the faculty at Wilton by challenging their long held values. Will this result in new and deeper understandings (as has been the case in Gene's previous schools) or will it cause faculty splintering? Only time will tell.

Instrumentation

Our instrumentation was built upon our understanding and theorizing about the phenomena of productive school cultures. This study served to sharpen those understandings and will result in a tightening of our instrumentation. As with any exploratory study the relative lack of focus brings both costs and benefits.

Elementary Verses Secondary

We have not attempted to account for the differences between elementary and secondary schools. The sharp distinction between the findings in the two high schools and the other three schools gives us pause to reconsider that decision. We do not have an adequate answer to the charge that the differences between the high schools and the other schools was a factor of level rather than cultural deficit or leadership inadequacies. Future studies will need to take the differences between school level into account.

Researcher As An Intervening Variable

The principal investigator in this study was known in various capacities to many of the participants in these five schools. He served as a high ranking administrator for a number of years in the Lindberg School District and he has served

as a consultant to the other two school districts. In addition, his spouse is a district administrator in Plains.

Efforts have been made to screen out investigator bias. Inter-rater reliability in the scoring of surveys, interviews and field notes was extremely high (97%). However, even with our best efforts to control for perceptual bias on the part of the investigator, we could not control for selective sharing or inhibition on the part of the respondents. Although commitments were made regarding confidentiality and these were scrupulously followed, we can't be assured that the participants were completely candid and not sub-consciously influenced by their relationship to the investigator.

Uniqueness Of The Sample

These five schools do not typify the schools in the United States. The communities served by these schools are predominantly white and range from working class to upper-middle class. Three of the five schools received recognition from the United States Department of Education's recognition program for "progress towards excellence" since 1983.

The three districts from which these schools were drawn have unparalleled records of support for their schools. Tax levies are routinely passed in these districts even when they are falling in surrounding communities. As those circumstances set these schools apart from the norm it makes the contrasts between them even more startling.

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Table 1

The Composite Quantitative Value for Focus

	Collegiality	Experimen- tation	Clarity	Leadership	Composite
Riverview Elementary	100	98	98	100	= 99
Wilton Middle School	95	95	60	80	= 82
LaBelle Elementary School	85	93	75	82	= 84
Milltown High School	76	69	24	67	= 59
Lindberg High School	80	91	36	59	= 67

Table 2

Composite Quantitative Values for Cultural Collinearity

	Ratio SD<.75/14	Percentages
Riverview Elementary	14/14	100%
Wilton Middle School	11/14	79%
Labelle Elementary	9/14	64%
Milktown High School	7/14	50%
Lindberg High School	4/14	29%

Table 3

Quantitative Value for Pressure

	<u>High Expectations</u>
Riverview Elementary	100
Wilton Middle School	100
LaBelle Elementary	100
Milltown High School	62
Lindberg High School	92

Table 4

Composite Quantitative Values for Tangible and Emotional Support

	<u>Total Emotional</u>	<u>Tangible</u>		<u>Composite</u>
Riverview Elementary School	97	95	-	96
Wilton Middle School	90	90	-	90
LaBelle Elementary School	78	85	-	82
Milltown High School	66	81	-	74
Lindberg High School	66	82	-	74

Table 5

Quantitative Value for Emotional Support

	Trust & Confidence	Appreciation & Recognition	Caring Celebration Humor		Composite
Riverview Elementary	100	95	95	=	97
Wilton Middle School	90	90	90	=	90
LaBelle Elementary	93	57	85	=	78
Milltown High School	62	71	66	=	66
Lindberg High School	72	60	67	=	66

Table 6

Student Performance

	Academic Achievement	Discipline	Attendance
Riverview Elementary School	Improving	Improving	Stable-High
Wilton Middle School	Declining	Improving	Stable-High
LaBelle Elementary School	Fluctuating	Improving	----
Milltown High School	Declining	----	Improving
Lindberg High School	Declining	Improving	Fluctuating

Table 7

Culture Survey Percentage of Positive Scores (1 or 2)

	Norms													
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Riverview Elementary	100	95	100	100	95	100	95	95	100	100	95	95	90	100
Wilton Middle School	90	90	100	90	90	100	90	90	70	70	50	90	90	90
LaBelle Elementary	85	85	100	93	85	85	57	85	71	78	71	64	64	85
Milltown High Sch.	71	76	62	62	81	81	71	66	71	19	28	76	90	76
Lindberg High Sch.	65	90	92	72	82	95	60	67	45	45	27	75	62	67

- 1) Collegiality
- 2) Experimentation
- 3) High Expectations
- 4) Trust & Confidence
- 5) Tangible Support
- 6) Reaching Out to the Knowledge Base
- 7) Appreciation & Recognition
- 8) Caring, Celebration and Humor
- 9) Appreciation of Leadership
- 10) Clarity of School Goals
- 11) Protection of What's Important
- 12) Involvement in Decision Making
- 13) Traditions
- 14) Honest, Open Communication

Table 8

Cross-site Culture Survey Analysis

	Focus	Cultural Collinearity	Leadership Pressure	Leadership Support
Riverview Elementary School	99%	100%	100%	96%
Wilton Middle School	82%	79%	100%	90%
Labelle Elementary School	84%	64%	100%	82%
Milltown High School	59%	50%	62%	90%
Lindberg High School	67%	29%	92%	74%

Figure 1.

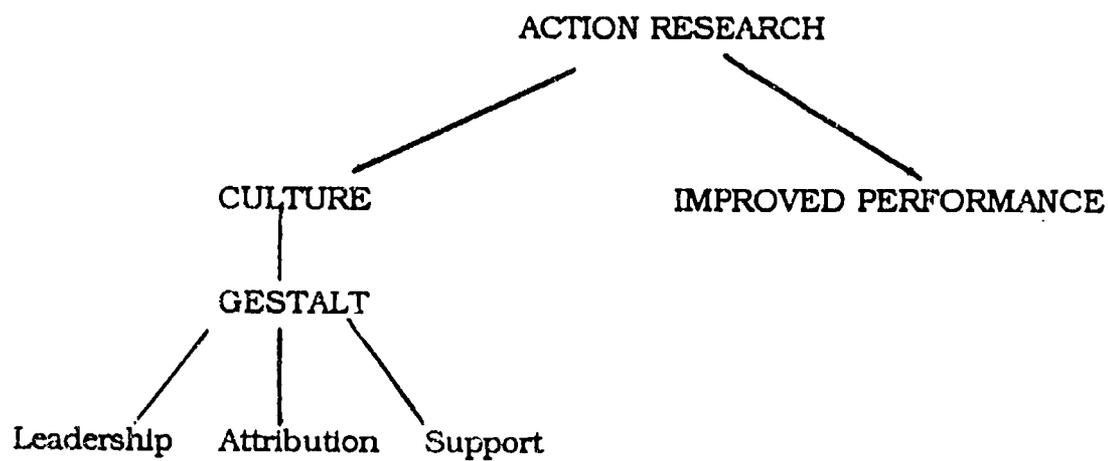
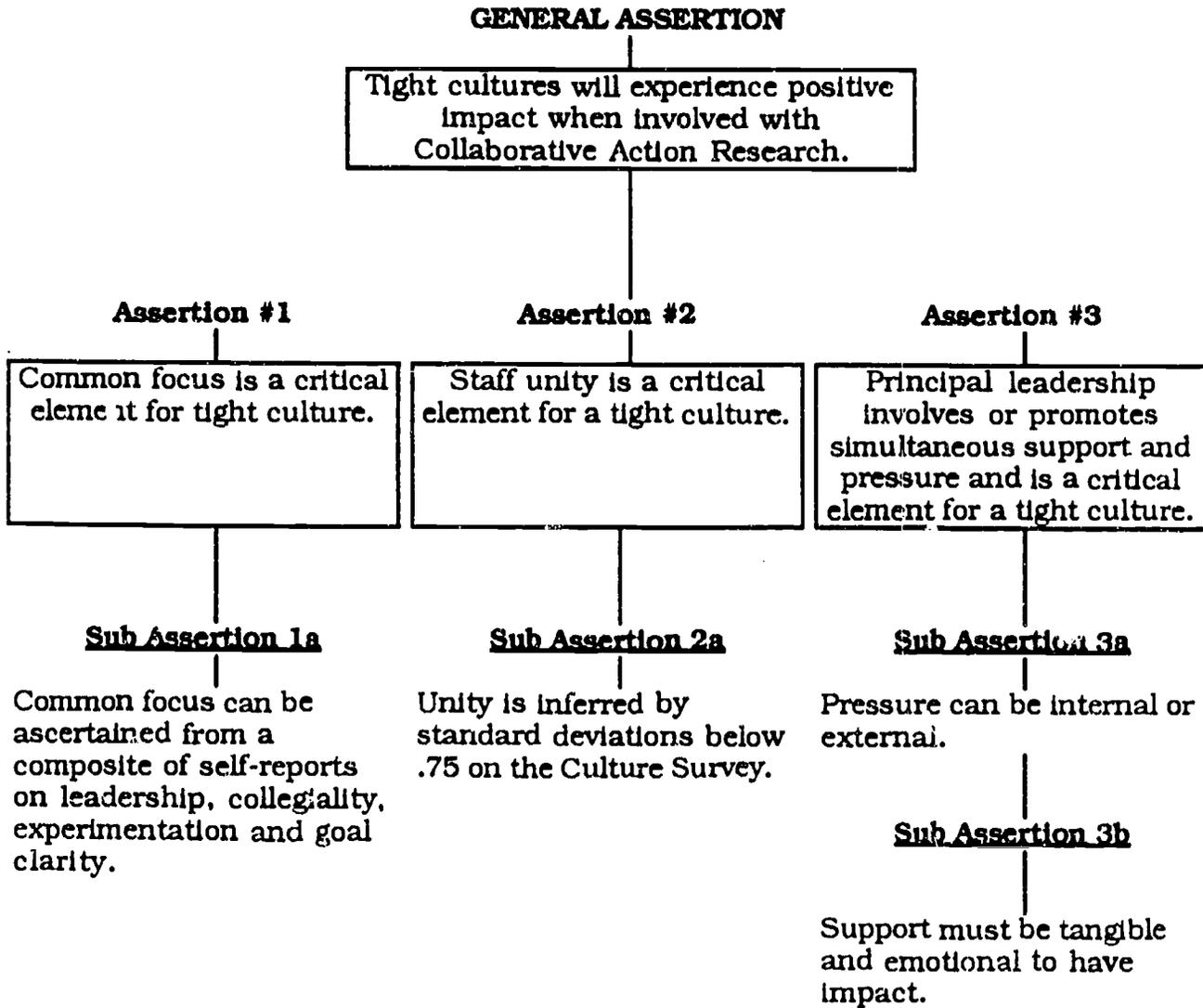
Action Research As "Effectiveness" Turbo Charger

Figure 2.

Graphic Representation of Emergent Themes



School code: _____

SSN: _____

Appendix A.

SCHOOL CULTURE SURVEY

Schools differ in many ways. One difference between schools is the character of their organizational "culture". The culture of an organization can be understood by the shared norms, values and beliefs of members of the community. This survey asks you to think about your school as a workplace and to assess the degree to which each of the following norms/values are consistent features in the worklife of your school.

Rate each of these norms/values on the following scale:

- 1=Characteristic of our school,
- 2=Occasionally characteristic of our school
- 3=Seldom characteristic of our school
- 4=Not characteristic of our school.

Remember! The focus of the survey is your school as a whole.

For each norm/value that you scored 1 or 2 please provide an illustrative example of how that norm is demonstrated through individual or organizational behavior.

- | | |
|---|----------|
| 1= Characteristic of our school (give example)
characteristic of our school | 3=Seldom |
| 2= Occasionally characteristic of our school (give example)
characteristic of our school | 4=Not |

Norm/Value: Rating: Illustrative example(s):

1) Collegiality

2) Experimentation

3) High Expectations

4) Trust
and Confidence

5) Tangible
Support

6) Reaching out to
the knowledge base
(use of research, reading
journals, attending
workshops, etc.)

7) Appreciation
and recognition

8) Caring, celebration,
and humor

9) Appreciation of
leadership

10) Clarity of school goals

11) Protection of what's
important (school goals)

12) Involvement in
decision making

13) Traditions

14) Honest, open
communication

Thank you for completing this survey.

The norms/values used in this survey were derived from the work of Matthew King and Jonathan Saphier (1985)

Appendix B

SCHOOL: _____
 Date: _____
 Interview Category: _____

INTERVIEW FORMAT

(TEACHERS/STAFF)

Remind interviewees that their participation is voluntary and no responses will be attached to individuals.

1) I work for Project LEARN, a program which helps teachers conduct Action Research. I'm aware that the Action Research Team at _____ is involved with school improvement. For that reason, I'm interested in what it's like to work at this school. Tell me what it's like to work at _____.

2) I'm particularly interested in changes which are occurring here. Do you feel that _____ is getting better or worse? Tell me why you feel that way.

3) In some schools teachers engage in frequent discussions about teaching and learning. Is that the case at _____?

Tell me about two or three recent discussions you've had with colleagues about teaching and/or learning.

4) Do teachers at _____ critique each others' work?

If yes, tell me about a recent time when your work was critiqued.

Tell me about a time recently when you critiqued a colleagues' work.

5) Do teachers at _____ prepare teaching materials and lessons together?

If yes, tell me about some recent collaborative curriculum work you engaged in that you enjoyed?

6) Do teachers at _____ learn from each other?

If yes, tell me about some techniques or strategies you've recently learned or adopted from colleagues.

7) The things we've been talking about don't just happen by accident. What factors, strategies, or structures do you believe support this type of ongoing collegial work at _____?

8) I would like to ask you some questions about the role of the Principal in school improvement at _____. In your opinion, does the Principal help the staff recognize their shared values and beliefs?

If yes, how does s/he do this?

9) In your opinion does the Principal use school procedures and practices to reinforce shared values and beliefs?

If yes, how does s/he do that? (give examples)

10) In your opinion is the Principal effective in fostering the professional development of staff ?

If yes, how does s/he accomplish this?

11) In your opinion does the Principal engage staff in discussions about educational values and beliefs?

If yes, how does s/he accomplish this?

12) In your opinion does the Principal share power and responsibility with staff?

If yes, how does s/he accomplish this?

13) How does the Principal communicate the schools' values?

14) Are there common areas of faculty concern/focus? What are they?

15) Does the faculty find time to work on the focus area?

How do they get this time?

16) Are you familiar with the work of the Action Research Team?

yes no

17) Is there anything else you would like to add to help me better understand _____?

I need some identifying information for cross-referencing our data.

SSN: _____ Sex: _____

Assignment: _____ Academic Background:

Years in teaching: _____ BA

Years in building: _____ BA + 24

MA

MA +