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ABSTRACT
                The concept and the features of school culture at the local,
school-building level and the culture of schooling as a societal construct
are explored. The text discusses the components of school culture that must
be examined for a school to reach its vision. It focuses on how the
Accelerated Schools Project (ASP) philosophy and process facilitate this
school-culture change. The culture of schooling is conservative and resistant
to change because it exists primarily at an abstract, generalized level. This
culture of schooling creates and perpetuates images that people call forth
when they think of education, schools, and schooling. Conversely, the culture
of individual schools is more amenable to change and must accommodate a
continuous influx of new people. Five critical components shape a school's
culture: expectations for children; children's expectations for their own
school experience; expectations for adults; beliefs and assumptions about
acceptable educational practices; and desirability of change. This paper
asserts that schools employing the ASP philosophy must change the assumptions
in these five components and be dedicated to their desire for change. (RJM)

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Presented at the annual meeting of the
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USING SCHOOL CULTURE TO BRING VISION TO LIFE

I. Introduction

"Imagine a school that ... "

These words are fuel for daydreams, for hopes; they are the reason many
teachers remain in a profession that is both exhilarating and heartbreaking (Fullan,
1997). To be asked to imagine a dream school or to envision the school that
everyone would want for their own children is a new experience for many teachers,
especially teachers who have spent their careers working in schools serving
students considered at-risk of school failure. This process can unleash both the
positive energy of hope and the cynicism of those who are afraid or unwilling to
hope. The process of making a dream explicit can trigger a process of school culture
change -- a process in which not only surface changes occur, but deep changes in
beliefs and assumptions take root.

Vision development is a critical part of the Accelerated Schools process; it is
the vision that drives all future work in an accelerated school. It gives formerly
unheard members of the school community a voice. Accelerated schools are
uplifted at this point in the process -- they have stated a dream to work toward.
Even though all schools that join the Accelerated Schools Project are able to put a
dream on paper, not all are able to make the dream a reality. While most schools are
able to channel the positive energy of hope into bringing the vision to life, other
schools make no more than surface changes in their daily routines and may as well
keep their vision in a drawer. We maintain that the vision comes alive in schools
when it is used to guide school culture change. Vision development is a paper

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exercise for schools unwilling or unable to make a commitment to examining and changing their school culture.

In this paper we begin with a discussion of the concept of school culture, distinguishing between *school culture* at the local, school building level and the *culture of schooling* as a societal construct. We then describe the components of school culture that must be examined and addressed in order to move toward the vision. We conclude with a description of how the Accelerated Schools Project philosophy and process facilitate this school culture change.

II. What is school culture?

School culture describes both the sameness and uniqueness of each school. When one enters almost any school one is struck by how familiar it is. There is something about the place that just says, "school" -- a place to provide a site for teaching and learning -- that is palpable. Most schools share a similar design for classrooms and common areas, organize the day in predictable ways, and develop recognizable patterns for relationships among the students and adults. Despite these similarities, it is also easy to recognize the differences and uniqueness of each school. Even the casual observer will recognize that each school feels, looks, sounds and smells different from any other school. It is the culture of schooling and the culture of each school that account for the common and the unique.

The concept of culture, whether used to describe schools or larger societies, is not easy to define. It is something that surrounds us, gives meaning to our world, and is constantly being constructed both through our interactions with others and through our reflections on life and our world. Culture is so implicit in what we do that it dulls our knowledge that it is there. Margaret Mead is credited with saying of culture that it is like fish and water -- fish will be the last creatures to discover water. It surrounds and nurtures us, even when we can't see it.

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Two features of culture are important to delineate for the purpose of this paper. The first is the seemingly contradictory fact that culture is both conservative and ever changing. On the one hand, culture is essentially conservative, protecting people from the unknown, providing answers to what would otherwise be unanswerable (Evans, 1996, p.44; Schein, 1992). By providing these answers, it also restricts our objectivity; it shapes our judgments of what is good, beautiful, valuable, etc. (McQuillan, 1997; McDermott & Varenne, 1995; Spindler & Spindler, 1982). On the other hand, culture is also ever changing (Wax, 1993, p. 109). It adapts to influences from other cultures and from changes in the physical, social and political environment.

The second feature of culture is that it exists at societal, localized and personal levels. At a societal level, culture provides meaning and a web of understanding to otherwise diverse groups of people. Culture at a societal level can be as large a concept as western or eastern culture, the culture of childhood, or, as in this case, the culture of schooling. Culture at a societal level serves essentially as an umbrella of agreement among otherwise diverse people. Because of a culture of childhood, for example, children from different parts of the world can play together even when they lack a common language.

Culture also exists at a more localized or discrete level. At this level, people with a shared geography, religion, ethnicity, occupation, or workplace (such as a school) share a culture. It is this level of culture that is usually the focus of study by anthropologists or sociologists. Ethnographic studies of schools such as those by Wolcott (1967; 1973), Peshkin (1978), and McQuillan (1997) provide in depth pictures of the culture of an individual school.

Finally, culture resides both within and between people (Brunner, 1996; Evans, 1996). At this personal level, culture provides a frame for making sense of

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the world while it shapes our interactions with people within it (Spindler & Spindler, 1982). It is through individual action and perceptions, at this personal level, that we see culture manifested.

In the following discussion of school culture change, we explain that culture's resistance and responsiveness to change -- a key element in determining if the vision comes to life or remains in the drawer -- rests in part on whether we are talking about culture at the societal or localized level. The culture of schooling, culture at a societal level, is most conservative and resistant to change because it exists primarily at an abstract, generalized level. The culture of schooling creates and perpetuates the image members of our society call forth when they think of education, schools and schooling. Since one cannot see or know all schools, it is comforting to hold a belief that schools in general remain the same, even as changes occur in individual schools.

The culture of schooling accounts for the sameness in architecture, classroom structure (Tyack and Tobin, 1994; Lortie, 1975) and school practices and activities (Cuban, 1984). It also perpetuates a view of schooling that teachers are responsible for the transmission of knowledge and culture and for shaping the minds of children (Spindler and Spindler, 1990; Spindler, 1987). For this reason, the public is most comfortable when the teaching/learning process is dominated by a teacher and textbooks. Many people assume that learning can occur only when the teacher orchestrates it from the front of the class.

The culture of schooling perpetuates a set of basic beliefs and assumptions that include: what schools should teach; how children should learn; who should learn what; who should be teaching; how schools should be run and organized; how students should be sorted; and schools' role in addressing broader social issues. These basic beliefs and assumptions held by society give legitimacy to dichotomies

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in our society. For example, we believe that all children should have access to equal educational opportunities, but we support efforts to provide more challenging work to a select few (Darling-Hammond, 1997). The culture of schooling provides an acceptable rationale for discrepancies in the quality of schooling offered to different segments of our society. The beliefs and assumptions perpetuated by the culture of schooling in the United States can act as barriers to schools intent on becoming something unlike what society expects them to be.

Unlike the culture of schooling, the culture of individual schools is more amenable to change. A school's unique culture accounts for why it feels, looks, sounds and smells different from any other school. At this local level, culture is constantly changing. It accommodates a continuous influx of new people (administrators, faculty, students, parents), new directives from the district and from state and federal agencies, and new directions recommended by professional organizations, institutions of higher education, and unions. To say that school cultures resist change is to discount the mini-changes that happen daily in every school around the world and the larger changes that take place over time.

School culture has been described as resistant to change for several reasons. First, schools rarely change in the ways external change agents want. They adapt and reformulate external directives to fit into their existing culture (Jennings and Spillane, 1996). Second, studies of change have found that most change is at a somewhat superficial level. Sarason describes these as Type B changes (1996). Type B changes occur when teachers choose to post student work in the halls, when they change seating arrangements to allow for more group work, when the school sets up a computer lab, and when parents are named to site councils. Changes at a slightly deeper level occur when teachers change their way of delivering instruction and when schools allow for more shared decision-making. Real, sustained change,

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however, does not occur unless basic beliefs and assumptions also change[1] . For example, if expectations about the role of adults in the school do not change, school site councils and shared decision-making will be no more than what Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) describe as "contrived colleagiality."

III. Components of School Culture Critical to Moving toward a Vision

In the following section, we detail five critical components that shape school culture. For schools to experience real, sustained change and movement toward the vision, these components must be examined and actions taken to make them consistent with the vision. These components represent important assumptions and beliefs that shape the values and the actions of all people within the school. As will be described later, these components are influenced by the culture of schooling (often negatively in schools serving students in at risk situations), but they can be changed at the school level.

The first component includes the school's **expectations for children**. The basic beliefs and assumptions of a school's culture undergird a tacit acceptance that the students, as a whole, are capable of performing at a certain level academically, physically, and emotionally. No school explicitly states that they have low expectations for children, but studies comparing schools serving students in at-risk situations and those serving middle class and upper middle class students point to markedly different expectations of students of similar ability levels at the different schools (Oakes, 1985; Wilcox, 1982; Page, 1987; Hanson, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1997; McQuillan, 1998). The signs of different expectations are subtle but evident, even at the elementary school level. Schools serving lower income students often stress following directions while the middle class students learn to think more critically (Wilcox, 1982). Teachers of low income students often place more

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[1] Changes in basic beliefs do not guarantee that changes in more visible, tangible aspects of the school culture will also occur, but they usually stimulate such changes. When changes at a more superficial level occur because of a change in beliefs, they are more apt to remain a part of the school culture.

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emphasis on discipline, and children's experiences are circumscribed because of concerns that they will not behave appropriately if given challenging or enriching experiences or provided with too much independence (McQuillan, 1998).

A second feature of a school culture's basic beliefs and assumptions includes **children's expectations for their own school experience**. Student expectations for their own school experience are shaped by both the explicit and subtle messages that they receive from adult members of the school community and by the trust placed in education by their community. Examinations of the chronic school failure of indigenous ethnic and racial minority students point to the development of an oppositional culture among such students (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Solomon, 1992). This theory holds that minority students, usually high school students, believe that the notion of achieving economic success through school success is a cruel hoax. They see in their community the results of years of inequity, and they develop an opposition to all avenues to mainstream success. Other minorities - those coming to the United States as immigrants - often succeed in school, largely because they live in communities that brought with them a belief in education as a route to success, and they do not have a history of subordination in the United States (Ogbu, 1987; Suarez-Orozco, 1989). Other studies show that students actively negotiate lower expectations from teachers and each other (McQuillan, 1998), accomplishing what McDermott (1987) describes as "achieving school failure".

A third component of school culture includes **expectations for adults**. The expectations for adult members of the school community depend largely on the characteristics of the students. Expectations for teachers are shaped by the students they teach (Metz, 1993), and expectations for parents draw largely from the characteristics of their children. Teachers and administrators working in schools serving at-risk children often feel inferior to their colleagues in more affluent

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schools. Typically the staff and administrative turnover at schools serving at-risk students is great, and financial incentives and positive work climate draw good teachers to more affluent schools and districts (Darling-Hammond, 1997). There is a feeling that only the poorest teachers and administrators remain in inner city and rural schools (even though some very good teachers and administrators choose to teach in these schools). The lower expectations for children feed the lower expectations the staff have for themselves. The staff members are often reluctant to try new ideas because they are afraid that the ideas will not work with "our children." As staff members withdraw from challenging themselves with new ideas, they lose confidence in themselves.

Differences in expectations for parents are also evident. Schools with high expectations for all students treat parents as partners in the education of the children. Parental opinion is valued, and involvement in their children's education is taken for granted. Where expectations for children are low, however, expectations for parents are also low. Instead of valuing parental opinion, parents of children in these schools are seen as a problem and a hindrance to their child's development (Fine, 1991; Lightfoot, 1978).

Beliefs and assumptions about acceptable educational practices form another important component of school culture. A school's culture also provides support for the educational practices used in the school. The nature of these practices is related to expectations for students and adults and to the mission of the school. Where expectations for students and teachers are low, beliefs about appropriate educational practices lead to an emphasis on rote memorization and basic skills. School cultures fostering high expectations for students and teachers emphasize active learning and challenging curriculum. Schools that base their mission on an identifiable philosophy of education (e.g. Montessori schools, bilingual schools, back

to basics or open classroom schools) can assume opinions on acceptable educational practice are shared by all members of the school community, and this philosophy shapes all school practices. In many schools, the culture allows for considerable variation among teachers on how and what to teach. This does not usually arise from a respect for diverse teaching strategies but from limited discourse among teachers and a lack of communication with parents on effective teaching.

Basic beliefs and assumptions about the **desirability of change** also shape school culture. Most public school decisions are made at the district or state level creating a sense of powerlessness among personnel at the school site. Teachers and administrators often actively and passively resist externally imposed change (Shor, 1992) because the proposed changes do not fit their school culture, are not well designed or are not presented in an understandable way. Rarely do policy makers and district administrators see that the implementation process is one of teaching and learning and that if schools are not guided in their learning of the innovation or policy, they will create their own meaning for it, resulting in outcomes very different from those envisioned by the policy makers (Knapp, 1997; Jennings and Spillane, 1996).

III. Origins and Consequences of School Culture

The preceding discussion focuses on components of the school culture and their importance in moving a school toward its vision. These components exist in a larger context, both historical and societal. Schools have a history that molds both the structure and culture of the school (Schlechty, 1991). The origins of the school, the population it has served, its unique claims and accomplishments all constitute this background. From this history come heroes and villains, ceremonies, rituals, legends and stories. These are very important links to the community and can give children the feeling that they are attending school in an important place, and that by

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being a part of this school, they too will "make history". Alternatively, as in many inner-cities, it can also create the impression that the school is for losers, affecting teaching and learning roles and expectations negatively. It is impossible to understand the organization of a school without examining what preceded the current organization.

We have referred primarily to the collective nature of school culture, encompassing beliefs, practices, operations, and expectations of the school community. But individuals who join the school as staff, parents, and students also have personal histories which reinforce school culture through self-selection. The involvement of participants in a school is hardly a random event. Students from fairly homogeneous neighborhoods attend schools that reflect community values, aspirations, and expectations. Even when choosing private schools or public schools outside of their neighborhoods, families select school environments that reinforce their beliefs about what schools should do. School staff tend to choose the environment and practices that they feel most attracted to and comfortable with. At the same time, new participants are socialized into the culture of the school and its practices and role expectations. Over time those who feel themselves to be sufficiently in conflict with the dominant culture of the school and are unable to adapt will ultimately leave. For these reasons the culture of a school can show great stability over time, even as new participants join it and others depart.

School culture is important to acknowledge explicitly because it has consequences for both stability and change. We have emphasized the stability and conserving nature of school culture in that it is like a vast web of intricate and interlocking ideas, values, beliefs, and practices that protect the school from change. Both societally and locally it protects participants from external pressures for change because of its comprehensive and ubiquitous nature. Pressures for change tend to

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be piecemeal and can only pierce a small part of this protective web, while the vast remainder remains intact. In this respect school culture serves as a barrier to change and effectively fends off attempts to transform the school (Cuban, 1984).

But, school culture can be used as a vehicle for sustaining change, at least locally, by using school culture as the vehicle to effect change rather than trying to undermine it directly or get around it surreptitiously. It is unfortunate that school culture is only viewed as a conserving force rather than one that might be used for transformation. We have found that when schools are provided with both pressures for change and the tools to transform their culture, remarkable changes in school culture can take place (Finnan, 1992; 1996). Our own experience shows that this can take place locally when members of the school community recognize a pressing need to change and are provided with a shared process in which they can address the most fundamental aspects of their functioning. Such a process must establish a shared language, a process for ongoing communication, research, and professional interactions, a highly participatory governance structure that incorporates all members, and involvement of significant other parts of the educational system to support the process of change (Finnan and Hopfenberg, 1997).

IV. The Accelerated Schools Project and School Culture Change

The Accelerated Schools Project (Hopfenberg, Levin, and others, 1993; Finnan, St. John, McCarthy, & Slovacek, 1996; Levin, 1996) is a notable example of an educational reform movement that recognizes the importance of working within the context of each school's existing culture. The project began in 1986 with just two pilot schools and a collaborative philosophy to accelerate the learning of all students, especially those at-risk of failure, to bring all students into the academic mainstream. Instead of imposing particular changes in curriculum or instructional strategies on schools, the project introduces a process by which the school takes over

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its own destiny and that of its students. This process includes fundamental explorations of all dimensions of the school, the construction of a living vision and goals, a setting of priorities, a governance system in which all participate, a systematic approach to action research and problem solving, and an overall pedagogy called powerful learning that enlists the entire school to develop constructivist solutions to learning challenges.

Since 1986, the Accelerated Schools Project has spread to about 1,000 elementary and middle schools in 40 states with 12 regional centers to provide support and about 300 trained coaches who follow-up schools. The project's philosophy and process address each of the five components of school culture listed above, which helps school communities reflect on their existing culture and make changes resulting in a culture that supports increased learning for all children.

In relation to **expectations for children**, the Accelerated Schools Project is based on the belief that all children respond favorably to the enriched learning environment usually reserved for students identified as gifted and talented. The project recognizes that many low income, minority students come to school with experiences, beliefs, and expectations that differ from those of middle class White and Asian students. When these differences are seen as strengths rather than weaknesses, and are not used as excuses to lower expectations of children, student achievement and behavior improves. Accelerated schools assume that "our students can," unlike other schools that decry, "our students can't."

When adults begin to hold higher expectations for children, the children begin to raise their **expectations for their own school experience**. In accelerated schools, the curriculum, instruction and course sequences become increasingly challenging. Rather than alienating or overwhelming the students, most students rise to the challenge and exhibit increased pride in themselves and in their school

(National Center for the Accelerated Schools Project at Stanford, 1997).

The democratic decision-making process and governance structure of the Accelerated Schools Project encourages higher **expectations for adults associated with the school.** Teachers and parents are given the tools to work collaboratively to bring about research-based change. Parents and teachers form cadres devoted to the systematic investigation of challenges and solutions to problems. Even when parents are unable to meet regularly with the cadres (due to work and family obligations), they become more engaged in the school through outreach by the cadres and through their child's enthusiasm for learning. Through taking responsibility for change, teachers and parents develop more confidence in their ability to work productively with children and in their role in making a difference in their school.

The Accelerated Schools Project is explicit about **acceptable educational practice.** The project is built upon a concept of "powerful learning" -- learning that is authentic, interactive, learner-centered, inclusive, and continuous (Keller & Heubner, 1997). Many schools join the Accelerated Schools Project because their school community members want to move away from the emphasis on drill and practice that characterizes many schools serving students in at risk situations. Through the development of a shared vision, accelerated school communities work toward a common goal of providing powerful learning experiences to all children. Teachers share their excitement over new ways to promote student learning with colleagues, and they increasingly work together to build on each other's strengths.

By joining the Accelerated Schools Project, schools demonstrate a **desire for change.** Schools engage in an extended investigation of the project (Chenoweth & Kushman, 1996) prior to joining, and at least 90% of the full time teaching staff must vote to join the Accelerated Schools Project. Everyone knows that the project

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will bring about change, but the change will be of their design, not the design of the district office, the state, or a local university. The Accelerated Schools Project creates an environment where change is seen as natural and desirable. This is not to say that change is always easy or that all members of the school community embrace personal change, but the structure exists within the school to effect both deep and superficial change.

VI. Conclusions

As described above, the cultures of schools fully implementing the Accelerated Schools Project philosophy and process are quite different from the cultures found in most schools serving students considered at risk of failure. To change the beliefs and assumptions described in the five components requires a fundamental departure in our expectations for students and adults, and for learning. This is not an easy task; it requires deep reflection, thoughtful dialogue, receptiveness to new ideas, and careful research. It goes beyond putting dreams on paper. For a number of reasons, some school communities are unable or unwilling to examine and change these components of their school culture. We believe that lasting change and movement toward a vision will not occur unless they do. What are some factors that make the transformation of school culture difficult? We have identified three key factors.

The first factor involves the culture of schooling that exists in the United States. While school cultures can change through reflection, discussion and inquiry, the culture of schooling is sustained in a vacuum void of interaction. It is carried around in the form of a more abstract set of beliefs, values, habits, and expectations that cannot be scrutinized through direct evaluation and practice. For this reason, it would seem that it is only when there is a large enough mass of transformed institutions that the societal culture of schooling is challenged and transformed. Far

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from discouraging attempts at changing school culture at individual sites, this should encourage it along a more ambitious scale to get to the point where the societal culture of schooling is challenged -- where society will not condone unequal educational opportunity and will expect from all students (and from all adults associated with students) high levels of academic performance.

The second factor lies at the school level. Visions cannot be expected to come alive without a structure to ensure that members of the school community engage in on-going discussion and research. Too often schools are asked to set goals and develop action plans without engaging in research and without establishing a governance structure that will allow everyone a voice in the decisions being made. The success of schools associated with the Accelerated Schools Project is largely attributable to the project's governance structure and inquiry process.

The third factor lies at the individual level. If there is too great a difference between the beliefs and assumptions underlying the vision and those held by members of the school community, especially the principal and the teachers, the vision is unlikely to move off of the paper. The vision must be in the hearts and minds of the people who touch the lives of children. If key members of the school community merely sign off on a vision statement, without believing that it is achievable, it will not be achieved. A fundamental belief in the potential of all children (and all adults) becomes contagious in schools with strong committed leadership, a core of dedicated teachers who are willing to take risks and stand up for their students, and the inclusion of parents and the community as partners in the effort to improve the educational opportunities for all students.

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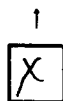
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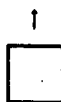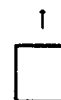| The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents	The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents	The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents
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