MyVoice: Activating the Power of School Culture Through Teacher Voice and Agency

Philip D. Lanoue, Ph.D.

Robert R. Neu, Ed.S.

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Introduction

School culture conversations are occurring worldwide as schools and systems seek new solutions to support teachers in their efforts to improve the quality of instruction, so all students achieve success. Understanding the tenets of school culture and its relationship to school effectiveness may be the key to unlocking new solutions for improving schools. However, developing a positive school culture does not occur unless leaders are aware of its definition, changing dynamics within their schools, and the relationships between teachers and leaders. According to Jones (2009), "Culture is definitely a variable that requires monitoring, assessment, and the implementation of changes on the basis of the assessment and reassessment" (p.7).

About the Authors

PHILIP D. LANOUE, Ph.D., has a demonstrated record in leading school transformation at the building and district levels. Dr. Lanoue is the 2015 American Association of School Administrators (AASA) National Superintendent of the Year, as well as the 2015 Georgia Superintendent of the Year. Before serving at the superintendent level across two systems, Dr. Lanoue was a high school principal in Vermont and Massachusetts, leading four schools toward excellence. While principal of Burlington High School in Vermont, he was named the Vermont National Association of School Principals, Principal of the Year. Prior to entering administration, Dr. Lanoue was a high school biology teacher. Dr. Lanoue was named as one of the nation's top 50 educational innovators in digital learning by Converge magazine.

Dr. Lanoue has been recognized by numerous organizations at the state and national levels including the University Council of Educational Administration honored Dr. Lanoue for his contributions for the preparation of educational leaders when he received the Excellence in Educational Leadership Award. The University of Georgia recognized his work in supervision and evaluation when Dr. Lanoue was awarded the Johnnye V. Cox Award.

Dr. Lanoue continues to serve as a voice advocating for public education and the children. He has served on the White House Policy Advisory for the New Generation High School Summit and the ConnectED Future Ready White House Summit. In addition, Dr. Lanoue was named one of the top educational voices (authors, writers, speakers, and experts) who are keeping K–12 issues in the national dialogue.

Dr. Lanoue (2018) co-authored The Emerging Work of Today's Superintendent: Leading Schools and Communities to Educate All Children in collaboration with Dr. Sally J. Zepeda (Rowman & Littlefield and jointly published by AASA). Dr. Lanoue and Dr. Zepeda have co-authored two subsequent texts: Developing the organizational culture of the central office: Collaboration, connectivity, and coherence; and A Leadership Guide to Navigating the Unknown in Education: New Narratives Amid COVID-19 (both with Routledge).

ROBERT R. NEU. Ed.S. is a recognized leader in bold education reform initiatives in equity and closing opportunity and achievement gaps for students that are traditionally underrepresented and underserved by the American education system. He has over thirty-six years of experience in public education as a teacher, coach, principal, and district leader; including ten years as superintendent of schools in Michigan, Washington State, and Oklahoma.

Under his leadership, his schools have earned recognition by the Center for American Progress as the highest rating on taxpayer investment; made the Washington Post's "Top in the Nation List"; and earned distinction as a College Board Advanced Placement Honor Roll School District.

Rob has presented at national and international conferences, including the Beijing Institute of Education, the Korean Ministry of Education, and the University of Oulu Teacher Training School in Oulu, Finland. His topics include school transformation, equity, social justice reform, social emotional learning, and promoting healthy school culture.

Rob has been recognized for his work in education leadership and contributions to education diversity. His work on inclusion in advanced coursework resulted in Washington State law. He was the recipient of the 2015 University of Central Oklahoma Friend of Diversity Award, and the 2009 Oakland University School of Education and Human Services. Award He was named the 2000 Michigan

Boys Basketball Coach the year, and elected president of the Michigan Basketball Coaches Association.

Rob has served as an advisory member of the United States Department of Education Technology Advisory Committee, College Board National Superintendent Advisory Council, Oklahoma Governor's Education Advisory Council, Oklahoma State Superintendent of Instruction Advisory Council, and the University of Central Oklahoma President's Advisory Council.

In 2018, he co-founded Kadem Education LLC, and co-developed MyVoice, a research-based solution framework and web-based platform that utilizes culture to improve teaching and learning. In 2021, he joined Cognia as a subject matter expert specializing in school improvement through building healthy school culture. He is also an adjunct professor at Western New Mexico University teaching in the College of Education, Educational Leadership program.

Defining Culture, Empowering Teachers

A New View of School Culture

The growing focus on school culture to support instructional practice and the work of teachers to improve schools is a departure from the hard-nosed, data-driven era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), in which student test data were at the center for improving student achievement. The power of a positive school culture is now being recognized as an emerging focus due to its significant effect on student achievement (Bektaş, Karadağ, AY & Çoğaltay, 2015). Moreover, schools and school districts are now shifting their focus to culture as the bedrock for school reform and improvement efforts.

A strong school culture requires continuous interactions among its members to create a widespread understanding of the school's character, which is needed for them to grow and thrive, whereas a weak school culture has few interactions by its members with little understanding of the commitment to the organization (Shafer, 2018). Developing a positive school culture requires conversations on teaching, which positively impacts teacher effectiveness in the classroom and the overall success of the school to fulfill its mission.

One of the primary responsibilities for school leaders is ensuring that the school's culture supports the work needed to improve the academic performance of every student. Leading a positive school culture requires leaders to understand the internal factors that influence and shape culture, especially during times of change. According to Louis and Wahlstrom (2011), organizations with strong cultures:

- Are more adaptable
- Have higher member motivation and commitment
- Are more cooperative and better able to resolve conflicts
- Have greater capacity for innovation
- Are more effective in achieving their goals (p.52)

The research on how leaders value culture and understand its impact on the success of schools is creating a new and exciting post-NCLB approach to lead improvement initiatives.

Teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement (Opper, 2019) and the greatest impact on establishing a positive school culture. According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017), 55% of teachers leave the profession when school environments are developed based on testing and accountability pressures, have lack of administrative support, provide limited advancement opportunities, and create dissatisfaction with working conditions. Furthermore, Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, and Darling-Hammond (2016) determined that "teaching conditions—which also define learning conditions for students—are a strong predictor of teachers' decisions about where to teach and whether to stay" (para.12). Supportive teaching conditions listed by teachers include school leadership support, professional collaboration, shared decision making, accountability systems, and resources for teaching and learning. For these reasons alone, understanding the working conditions and culture in which teachers work must become a priority for school leaders.

The culture-leadership role is not an easy one nor often a familiar one for most school leaders. However, referring to Bridwell-Mitchell's work, Leah Shafer writes in her piece "What Makes a Good School Culture," that "once principals understand what constitutes culture—once they learn to see it not as a hazy mass of intangibles, but as something that can be pinpointed and designed—they can start to execute a cultural vision" (2018). For leaders, school culture does not need to be nebulous or vague, but rather defined in ways to change and improve.

A focus on school culture to improve student achievement is a lever that opens new opportunities for schools. From teacher perspectives, a healthy school culture promotes their growth and development and keeps them from leaving the profession. Teachers cite school culture factors as more important to their work than compensation (Data, 2020). As well, teachers have the greatest impact on the success

of every student's learning journey, and creating a healthy school culture is fundamental to their support. (Heck and Hallinger, 2009).

Defining School Culture

Using research and experiences from nationally recognized educational leaders, the team from Kadem Education focused on the impact of school culture in supporting the work of teachers. With the traditional definition of school culture characterized as vague, invisible, and non-actionable, the Kadem Education team identified and defined school culture so leaders and teachers can improve their culture using 10 School Culture Drivers, further defined through 48 School Culture Indicators (Appendix A). The research-based School Culture Drivers and School Culture Indicators provide new insights to understand how to leverage the power of culture as the foundation for improving schools.

School Culture Driver 1—Clear & Unified Direction is essential for developing universally understood norms, practices, and policies. The school's vision and mission are critical in guiding decisions and providing clarity and direction (Center for School Change, n.d.). Furthermore, mission and vision statements remain relevant as strategic management tools that can impact employee behavior and attitudes (Darby, 2012). Understanding and communicating the school's direction provides a clear picture of what is desired for all stakeholders, and guides program and policy decisions.

School Culture Driver 2—Professional Engagement is founded on providing multiple opportunities for teachers to be lifelong learners by engaging in professional activities both individually and collectively. Professional growth must be an organization's expectation, with access to professional activities that improve instructional practice. For schools to improve, focusing on professional learning is a critical step for improving academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). Furthermore, professional learning using reflective conversations and inquiry in practice, combined with leader support, improves outcomes for students (Annan, Lai & Robinson, 2003). However, leaders must be engaged in professional development along with teachers. The environment in which teachers and leaders work is impacted when they work together in professional development activities (Hilton, Hilton, Doyle & Goos, 2015).

School Culture Driver 3—Instructional Autonomy supports teachers in making decisions about the success of each student using multiple metrics with flexibility, innovation, and personalization in instructional design. Effective teachers are motivated when given the autonomy to make independent decisions rather than restricted to prescribed top-down steps (Knight, 2019). What's more, teachers need greater flexibility and autonomy rather than prescriptions stemming from high-stakes testing, which according to Rubin (2011), have a negative impact on teachers as well as on their commitment to the teaching profession.

School Culture Driver 4—Collaboration is required to develop and share instructional resources, and to embed professional learning needed for expanding and improving teacher practices. According to Schleifer, Rinehart and Yanischa (2017), a "growing body of research shows that when teachers work more collaboratively, student outcomes can improve, teachers can be more satisfied in their jobs, and teacher turnover can decrease" (p.3). Through collaboration, teachers are better able to plan instructional lessons and assess their effectiveness. Supovitz and Christman (2003) found that communities of practice are built on teacher interaction that lead to a culture of continuous learning, and Darling-Hammond, Wei, and Andree (2010) assert that opportunities for ongoing professional learning must be embedded in school planning time.

School Culture Driver 5—Empowerment gives teachers the responsibility to make individual and collective decisions that impact the school and classroom. Their voice and expertise are integral parts of solving problems, developing school improvement processes, and planning their own professional growth. "Schools in which teachers have more control over key schoolwide and classroom decisions have fewer problems with student misbehavior, show more collegiality and cooperation among teachers and administrators, have a more committed and engaged teaching staff, and do a better job of retaining their teachers" (Ingersoll, 2007, para.17). However, increasing teacher voice in school decision making is a culture shift by teachers and principals that requires respect for each other's expertise (Natalie, Gaddis, Bassett and McKnight, 2016).

School Culture Driver 6—Feedback and Reflection requires pervasive instructional observations that provide immediate feedback leading to conversations about effectiveness. Feedback through the outdated form of

checklists is no longer adequate. Improving teaching and learning requires new tools that allow teachers and observers to identify areas of effectiveness and areas for growth (Jerald, 2012). Furthermore, according to Schwanke (2016), providing feedback is a catalyst for a strong school culture, builds relationships, reinforces the value of effective teaching, and provides opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice with renewed energy and focus.

School Culture Driver 7—Resource Priorities focuses on how instructional resources are selected and teacher strengths are leveraged to activate innovation to meet the varied needs of students. Leveraging the most valuable resources in a school—the teachers—requires rethinking current practices and requires new criteria for teacher assignments. According to Hibbeln (2020), new approaches ensure that the most experienced teachers are matched with the highest-need students and critical resources are shifted to struggling learners. In support of innovation, providing resources and "safe landings" for teachers to try new strategies is conducive to a culture that supports an innovative mindset (Gilpin & Gustafson, 2015).

School Culture Driver 8—Support and Care is valuable in meeting a teacher's personal and professional needs and includes mentoring by experienced teachers and focused professional learning with follow-up. "Without strong support and continued growth, many new educators do not stay on the job—and fewer who do can be effective in helping students reach higher academic standards" (Goldrick, 2016, p.i). Peer observation, professional dialogue, and advice from colleagues are instrumental to a school's culture and the wellbeing of its teachers. According to Hendry and Oliver (2012), "watching someone teach well inspires us to try the strategy, and when we too are successful, our belief in the usefulness of what we saw and what we are capable of is enhanced" (p.8). A community of care is created when teachers take a deep interest in helping each other be successful.

School Culture Driver 9—Sense of Belonging is the feeling of being valued and part of the school in ways that support a teacher's well-being, bringing meaning and importance to their work. According to Acton and Glasgow (2015), defining well-being and understanding the unique challenges teachers face is important to supporting and retaining them. Furthermore, when teachers feel valued, they have greater professional resilience and tend to stay in the profession (MacDonald & Cruickshank, 2017). A sense of belonging has an impact on commitment and motivation in the workplace, which translates into greater retention, pride, and motivation.

School Culture Driver 10—Teacher Advancement requires creating opportunities for teachers to be leaders and experts in their fields. Career advancement is fostered through professional learning and innovations that lead to new professional opportunities. Lack of opportunities for teachers to grow and lead is a significant contributor to teacher turnover (Coalition for Teacher Quality, 2021). Moreover, student achievement is impacted by a teacher's understanding of pedagogy (Guerriero, 2014).

MyVoice

Teacher Voice and Agency

The Kadem Education team found that defining culture sheds tremendous light on its value and importance as schools move forward in seeking new improvement opportunities; however the true shifts in culture are created by the interactions that occur once culture is defined and understood. Creating conversations and seeking new solutions require teacher voices and agency—the ability to act on their voices—that will lead to new ways of thinking, interacting, and leveraging the power of culture.

Teacher voice is one of the founding principles of the MyVoice™ digital platform developed by Kadem Education. MyVoice creates unique opportunities to hear the voices of teachers in ways much different from regular organization surveys. In most organizations, including schools, survey instruments are the main platform for getting feedback on a range of organizational attributes. However, survey information remains static and has drawbacks. The functionality of survey instruments has common challenges from construction to administration.

According to Ramshaw (n.d.), traditional surveys are ineffective due to several key problems: often-limited sample size, survey fatigue, subjective responses, and bias. The Kadem team designed MyVoice and its processes knowing the challenges of a survey environment, and understanding that teachers are weary of the constant surveying because of feelings that it does not matter, and nothing happens with the data. Kadem's approach is founded on using continuous, real-time data to create conversations for meaning and impact with reduced fatigue.

Teacher agency creates opportunities for teachers to be actively involved, make choices, and act in ways to make a difference (Toom, Pyhältö & Rust, 2015). Calvert (2016) describes teachers' agency in a professional learning context as "the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues" (p.4). The vision of the Kadem team was to design a platform to engage teachers in processes that were typically absent in the survey environment. That is, teachers have choices, and the ability to take action to support their aspirations as well as those of their colleagues and their school.

The MyVoice platform activates the power of voice and agency as an agent to improve school culture in ways that impact instructional practice and student achievement. Through inquiry processes using the data generated through the platform, MyVoice helps teachers and leaders frame conversations using continuous teacher voice and agency while guiding them to better understand and improve their school culture together, using real-time formative data.

Collective Action and Collective Responsibility

With MyVoice, the real-time data allow teachers and leaders to identify areas to improve and work together in seeking solutions. The process begins with conversations that dig deeper into an area for improvement followed by solution generation and implementation. Teachers and leaders engage in a joint inquiry process that builds a culture of collective action in seeking a common good and creating solutions to improve with collective responsibility.

Collective action in education, with MyVoice, refers to a process where teachers and leaders work together to seek and implement solutions to improve school performance. Historically, the challenge of collective action becomes difficult as not everyone in the school may share common interests, creating conflict. However, the concept of collective action can have benefits for everyone in the group whether they are engaged in the process or not. According to Olson (1989), "If the individuals in some group really do share a common interest, the furtherance of that common interest will automatically benefit each individual in the group, whether or not he has borne any of the costs of collective action to further the common interest" (p.61).

Collective responsibility is a complex concept that refers to the acceptance of responsibility by a group. Creating collective responsibility is not easy; human nature often makes it difficult for some people to take responsibility for others' actions or the action of a group that they did not support. However, Kardos, Leidner, Castano and Lickel (2018) conclude that collective responsibility can help guide individual behaviors in the context of groups. In education, collective responsibility refers to those in the

school taking responsibility for policies and practice to improve performance. MyVoice helps teachers and leaders develop collective responsibility for identifying and creating solutions that support teachers in implementing effective instructional practices to improve student achievement.

Summary

MyVoice is a real-time culture-monitoring platform that enables teachers and leaders to foster collaboration and develop a schoolwide commitment for improvement. Through the research and recommendations on effective instructional practices from practitioners the Kadem team identified the 10 MyVoice School Culture Drivers and 48 MyVoice School Culture Indicators that define a school's culture. MyVoice provides teachers with a continuous voice to improve school practices goes beyond teacher feedback associated with surveys by using real-time data, creating teacher agency.

Through teacher voice and agency, the school culture is shaped so that collective action and collective responsibility create a unique togetherness—a togetherness that teachers need to be engaged, stay in their schools, and remain in the field of education.

Appendix A

School Culture Drivers and Indicators

Driver 1—Clear & Unified Direction

The school's vision, mission, and beliefs (school's direction) is important in developing universally understood norms, practices, and policies. Programs are monitored for effectiveness in supporting the school's direction.

(1.1)   The Vision, Mission, and Beliefs (school's direction) of your school are important.

(1.2)   Program decisions support the school's direction.

(1.3)   Policies support the school's direction.

(1.4)   Stakeholders share responsibilities for developing the school's vision, mission, and beliefs.

(1.5)   The school's direction is effectively communicated.

Driver 2—Professional Engagement

Teachers are lifelong learners necessitating multiple opportunities for them to engage in professional activities both collectively and individually. Conversations are created throughout the system to improve practice while modeling the attributes of a learner.

(2.1)   Professional growth is an expectation to meet student, teacher, and system needs.

(2.2)   Professional learning is offered through a variety of modalities (individual, group, online, etc.).

(2.3)   Professional learning initiatives improve instructional practices.

(2.4)   Leaders learn with teachers.

(2.5)   Conversations on instructional practices occur regularly.

(2.6)   Follow-up support is offered after professional learning has occurred.

Driver 3—Instructional Autonomy

Teachers have the flexibility to make decisions about the success of each student using multiple metrics. Standards determine the core framework for teachers; however, flexibility, innovation, and personalization in instructional design is encouraged, supported, and shared.

(3.1)   The curriculum allows for flexibility at the school level.

(3.2)   Teachers have the autonomy to make classroom instructional decisions.

(3.3)   Teachers are encouraged, supported, and feel safe in trying new instructional designs.

(3.4)   High-stakes testing is viewed as only one part of a comprehensive assessment system.

(3.5)   Effective instructional models are shared.

Driver 4—Collaboration

Collaborative planning is required to develop and share instructional resources, and to embed the professional learning needed for expanding and improving teacher practices. New instructional designs emanate from shared expertise and support in using new instructional designs, and then evaluating their effectiveness.

(4.1)   Time is regularly allocated for collaborative planning across grades and/or disciplines.

(4.2)   Teachers collaboratively plan instructional lessons and select resources.

(4.3)   Teachers collectively assess the effectiveness of instructional practices.

(4.4)   Professional learning is part of the collaborative planning process.

Driver 5—Empowerment

Teachers have the responsibility to make individual and collective decisions that impact the school and classroom. Teacher voice and expertise are valued as an integral part of solving problems, developing school improvement processes, and planning their own professional growth.

(5.1)   Teachers have the freedom to make classroom-level decisions to meet the needs of students.

(5.2)   Teachers are involved in developing school rules and policies.

(5.3)   Teachers are involved in school improvement processes.

(5.4)   Teacher engagement in school-wide decisions is valued.

(5.5) Teacher voice is important in the development of professional learning opportunities.

Driver 6—Feedback and Reflection

Pervasive instructional observations provide immediate feedback and create conversations about effectiveness. The use of examples from practice and reflection activities provide clarity for professional growth.

(6.1) Classroom observations and walkthroughs frame specific feedback.

(6.2) Feedback on instructional practice is immediate.

(6.3) Artifacts and evidence from practice are used to engage teachers in conversations about their practices.

(6.4) Reflection is modeled and encouraged to help teachers learn from their own practice and the practices of others.

Driver 7—Resource Priorities

Teacher strengths and students needs are aligned in developing schedules that maximize teachers' skills. Shared selection of resources is leveraged to activate innovation and support teachers in meeting the varied needs of students.

(7.1) Teacher schedules are based on their strengths.

(7.2) Teacher schedules are based on students' needs.

(7.3) Teachers are involved in the selection of instructional resources.

(7.4) Resources are allocated for teachers to innovate.

Driver 8—Support & Care

Experienced teachers are valuable in providing support and mentoring to their colleagues. Meeting teacher's personal and professional needs through focused professional learning with follow-up are essential for professional growth.

(8.1) Teacher mentoring is embedded through interactions with experienced colleagues.

(8.2) Processes are in place to provide new teachers with timely support.

(8.3) Teachers observe and give feedback to each other through peer observations.

(8.4) Teachers have created support structures to seek advice and discuss concerns around classroom practices.

(8.5) Teachers care about each other.

Driver 9—Sense of Belonging

The feeling of being valued and part of the school brings meaning and importance to teachers' work. Teachers avoid working in isolation when they feel a sense of belonging. Diversity is valued, and programs are in place to make teachers feel like they belong.

(9.1) Teachers feel their safety and well-being are valued.

(9.2) Teachers feel valued for the diversity they bring to the school.

(9.3) Teachers feel like they are part of the school.

(9.4) Teachers feel like they belong in the school.

(9.5) School programs create a sense of belonging.
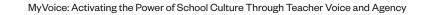
Driver 10—Teacher Advancement

Opportunities are created for teachers to be leaders and experts in their fields. Career advancement is fostered through professional learning and innovations that lead to new professional opportunities.

(10.1) Teacher interests are used to expand opportunities for career growth.

(10.2) Opportunities are created for teachers to be leaders.

(10.3) Professional learning supports career advancement opportunities.

(10.4) Teachers are supported to become experts in their field(s).

(10.5) Teachers feel valued because of their expertise.

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