LEADING SCHOOL CULTURE THROUGH TEACHER VOICE AND AGENCY

SALLY J. ZEPEDA, PHILIP D. LANOUE,
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An **Eye On Education** Book

ROUTLEDGE

Leading School Culture through Teacher Voice and Agency

Leading School Culture through Teacher Voice and Agency helps school leaders uncover, understand, and build the skill set to engage teachers in the work of school culture as they navigate the changes needed to improve the achievement for all students. This book presents a Framework for School Culture that explores how school culture, when acted upon through teacher voice and agency, is an untapped resource that can move schools forward. By supporting teacher voice and agency, the school and its teachers and leaders move toward taking collective responsibility for sustaining a culture of improvement that is stronger and more responsive.

This research-grounded book is rich in practical tools to help leaders work with teachers, ensuring all the educators in a school are taking ownership over their own learning and developing the skills to reshape school culture to ensure students, teachers, and community members thrive.

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About the Authors

Sally J. Zepeda, **Ph.D**. is Professor in Educational Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia where she teaches courses and conducts research related to instructional supervision, professional development, and teacher evaluation. Before entering higher education, Dr. Zepeda served as a high school English teacher, assistant principal, and principal. From these experiences, she is considered a bridge-builder bringing light on the intersections between practice and research.

Dr. Zepeda has worked with many school systems in the United States and overseas, especially the Middle East, to support teacher and leader development. Nationally and internationally, she has designed teacher and leader evaluation systems, instructional coaching programs, model system-wide strategic plans as well as degree and academic programs.

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, and he was named Principal of the Year by the Vermont National Association of School Principals.

Dr. Lanoue served on the White House Policy Advisory for the New Generation High School Summit and the ConnectED Future Ready White House Summit. Dr. Lanoue co-authored *The Emerging Work of Today's Superintendent: Leading Schools and Communities to Educate All Children* with Dr. Sally J. Zepeda (Rowman & Littlefield and jointly published by the American Association of

School Administrators); *Developing the Organizational Culture of the Central Office: Collaboration, Connectivity, and Coherence* with Dr. Sally J. Zepeda (Routledge); and *A Leadership Guide to Navigating the Unknown in Education: New Narratives amid COVID-19* with Dr. Sally J. Zepeda (Routledge).

Grant M. Rivera, Ed.D. believes great schools are built on the combined strength of supported families, talented educators, and an engaged community. Prior to his current position as superintendent of Marietta City Schools, Dr. Rivera served as Chief of Staff and principal of two high schools in the Cobb County School District, the second largest district in Georgia. He is nationally recognized for innovative work that ranges from closing opportunity gaps to strengthening staff retention, and he has consulted with school districts around the country on school improvement and family engagement.

Dr. Rivera is a frequent guest speaker and panelist on topics such as equity of access, learning loss during the pandemic, and the important relationship between schools and their communities. He co-authored a report conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that studied COVID-19 infections and transmission among elementary educators and students, and based upon Marietta City Schools' approach to the pandemic, he and the district were featured on a "60 Minutes" segment that aired in March 2021. Dr. Rivera serves as a board member of multiple education-focused organizations, and he is actively engaged in raising funds and awareness of pediatric cancer.

David R. Shafer is a successful entrepreneur and business leader anchored primarily in the K-12 market with successes also in the broadcast, entertainment, and banking industries. Mr. Shafer co-founded Frontline Education that today serves over 12,000 school systems. He also was a partner in the company that introduced the Skycam aerial broadcast camera system known throughout the world for covering live sports from above the action. This technology has been recognized with multiple Academy Awards and Emmys.

Mr. Shafer is a passionate advocate for public education serving several terms as an elected School Board Director in Pennsylvania. His community service also includes serving as an Executive Board Member of the Boy Scouts of America (he is an Eagle Scout), several terms on the executive board of the YMCA, and serving on Millersville University of Pennsylvania's Alumni Executive Board. He lives in Royersford, Pennsylvania, with his wife and three children.

Preface

Approaches Running Throughout This Book

School culture, when understood, lays the foundations for creating powerful improvement opportunities through the interactions between school leaders and teachers who now must occupy the shared space and responsibility for culture. This shared space is important because the work and success of schools is directly related to the behaviors, patterns, rituals, and workplace conditions emanating from how people interact with each other. A positive school culture is built through relationships and interactions. Relationships between teachers and students, leaders and teachers, and teachers with their peers influence culture.

In *Leading School Culture through Teacher Voice and Agency,* culture is examined in new ways so that leaders can unpack its influence and the importance of supporting the work of teachers. The book presents a Framework for School Culture that is examined throughout each of the eight chapters. The Framework for School Culture is presented in the image of an iceberg (see Figure 1.1, Chapter 1). This Framework is important as it brings to light that school culture is an untapped resource that can move schools forward only if it is defined and examined through Unifying Elements, acted upon through teacher voice and agency, and jointly connected to build capacity to bring forward collective responsibility.

Objectives of the Book

Our intention for writing *Leading School Culture through Teacher Voice and Agency* was to bring the value of culture to the forefront for teachers

and leaders as they navigate the changes needed to improve the achievement for all students. Although schools are steeped in school improvement efforts, the ending results have proven to show nominal outcomes in meeting the goal for all students to succeed. Teachers and leaders across the country want to get it right when students walk through the schoolhouse doors or open a Zoom session. However, after years of high expectations and incredible efforts, schools may be losing ground. Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and other national crises, schools are seeing more teachers leave the classroom, fewer teachers entering the profession, and school cultures that are growing more toxic by the day. This book posits that culture is the lynchpin in helping schools maintain stability in the midst of internal and external turbulence, change, and during times of innovation.

While school culture has always been important, its value and impact on the work of teachers remains minimized. Its definition continues to be vague and its relationships to school climate blurry. Furthermore, there has been no consistent and driving definition enabling measurement that leads to school and system improvement nor has there been significant and simultaneous efforts to support teachers and leaders as they engage in the work of culture.

The first objective of the book is to bring clarity about school culture by defining and describing culture so leaders can better understand what constitutes a positive culture as illustrated in the Framework for School Culture and the Unifying Elements. Through examining school culture and the unifying elements found within the Framework for School Culture, leaders and teachers can strategically and collectively impact their culture to support their work.

The second objective is to comprehensively articulate how culture can be reshaped through teacher voice and agency to create greater focus on learning for teachers, leaders, and students. The third objective is to explore how culture is impacted by the very ways in which teachers and leaders interact bringing light to workplace conditions, trust, and collaboration. The fourth objective is to underscore the need to create a network of support and the concerted and needed efforts to affirm the work of teachers and the value of being in a community of learners. The fifth objective of the book is to magnify the roles, actions, and responsibilities of teachers and leaders to shape school culture.

The content of the chapters serves to illustrate how school culture is ever changing due to the relational dynamics between leaders and teachers

and the importance of culture related to teacher induction, growth, and retention. A positive school culture cannot be mandated through legislation because it evolves from the interactions and the experiences of teachers who want to be empowered to do their very best work.

Book Features

There are several hands-on features in *Leading School Culture through Teacher Voice and Agency* to support the application of the concepts presented across the chapters. In the first chapter, the Framework for School Culture and the Unifying Elements are presented. This framework and the unifying elements are unpacked across the chapters.

Each chapter starts with an opening scenario, *Examining School Culture*. This scenario situates the content of the chapter as a dilemma of practice that the reader can track while reading. Like a smart word problem in math, sufficiently identified concepts that are amplified in the chapter are embedded.

At the end of each chapter section, a recap of major take-aways from that section, *Leading Culture*, focuses the reader on applying principles of culture to the dilemma of practice presented in the chapter lead off, *Examining School Culture*.

Each chapter culminates with a section entitled, *Leading Practices*, to engage the reader to pull out strategies that can be adapted to the context in which the reader leads. These strategies pull from the major content of the book and build deeper levels of understanding (knowing) of the chapter content to activities that would broadly engage the reader in planning, implementing, and/or assessing key areas aspects related to school culture.

Suggested readings are offered to support learning more about specific areas of school culture.

What's Inside the Chapters

The content of *Leading School Culture through Teacher Voice and Agency* spans eight chapters. The chapter annotations serve to acquaint the reader with the contents of each.

Chapter 1: Teacher Voice and Agency

Leveraging the power of school culture requires educators in schools to be engaged. Their roles, responsibilities, and abilities jointly need to move to collective responsibility that is foundational to building a healthy and stable culture. The Framework for School Culture and the Unifying Elements are presented in the form of an iceberg that serves to anchor teacher voice and agency as the foundation needed to build collective responsibility within the school.

- Framework for School Culture
- Clarity about Teacher Voice and Agency
    - Teacher Voice Defined
    - Teacher Agency Defined
- Teachers as Culture Leaders
    - Making the Connections to Support Teachers
    - Empowerment Then
    - Empowerment Now
    - Autonomy
    - Self-Efficacy
    - Collective Efficacy

Chapter 2: Understanding and Framing School Culture

School culture, often used interchangeably with school climate, continues to be a point of conversation in schools; yet, its definitions and components remain vague. The power of a healthy and vibrant organizational and school culture does not just "happen."

- Culture and Climate Differ
    - Culture Defined
    - Climate Defined
- Internal Factors that Influence School Culture
    - Teachers
    - Workplace Conditions

    - Teacher Morale
    - Levels of Engagement
    - Teacher Retention and Attrition
    - Leader Mobility
- External Factors that Influence School Culture
    - Poverty
    - Shifting Demographics
    - Student Mobility and Attrition
    - Divisive Political Environments

Chapter 3: Understanding Functional and Dysfunctional Cultures

Understanding the dynamics and levels of functionality of culture remains essential as schools rely on its power to improve the work of teachers and leaders. Important for leaders is understanding their role in leading culture and the characteristics of functional and dysfunctional school cultures.

- Leading with a Culture Vision
    - Understanding the Culture
    - Culture Leaders
    - Leading with a Culture Lens
- Functional Culture and Climate
    - Positive Culture and Climate
    - Positive Culture and Climate Intersect
    - Key Norms Support Positive School Culture and Climate
- Dysfunctional Culture and Climate
    - Dynamics
    - Collegiality and Collaboration
- Changing the Culture Vision
    - Reculturing
    - Leading "Good" Disturbance
    - Stabilizing School Culture

Chapter 4: Transforming School Culture Is a Human Endeavor

Focusing on developing school culture requires leaders and teachers to have clarity in its definition as well as an understanding of its presence within the school. While school culture is often described in various ways across schools, there are conditions that must serve to support the working relationships between teachers and leaders.

- Relationships Matter
    - Care and Support
    - Normative Behaviors Send Explicit Messages
    - The Lonely Road of Isolation
    - Affiliation and Sense of Belonging
- Collaborative Structures
    - Making Practice Public
    - Teacher Leadership
    - Professional Learning Communities
    - Online Learning Communities
    - Collaborative Planning
    - Mentoring and Induction

Chapter 5: Professional Learning Cultures Grow People and Systems

While effective professional learning has been central to improving teacher and leader effectiveness, its importance, as well as delivery, has not always impacted practices. Creating a culture of professional engagement requires new mindsets in professional delivery, support of new practices, and an understanding of its impact on the system.

- Collaboration
    - Bringing Clarity to Collaboration
    - Leading a Collaborative Learning Culture
    - Creating a Collaborative Learning Culture

- Professional Learning
  - Unpacking Professional Learning
  - Focusing on Professional Job-embedded Learning
  - Promoting Supportive Collaborative Practices

Chapter 6: The Social Dynamics That Build School Culture

With the increased intensity of school disruptions and its impact on teachers, leaders must pivot their focus to the human capital within the system and the culture in which they work. Creating processes to build a culture on the foundations of teacher ownership and collective responsibility will be critical for leaders moving forward to support them and build the capacity to improve schools.

- School Capacity
  - Collective Ownership
  - Collective Responsibility
  - Coherence
- Human Capital
  - Induction
  - Mentoring
  - Teacher Leadership
- Social Capital
  - Relationship to Human Capital
  - Social Networks

Chapter 7: Leveraging Culture to Stabilize the School House

School leaders and teachers will need to navigate a changing school culture in readying for the ongoing turbulence and disruptions from outside and within the system. The new normal for school culture will evolve by

acknowledging change processes and ensuring levels of resiliency—both central as education is reshaped.

- Culture, Turbulence, and Disruption
  - Turbulence
  - External Turbulence
  - Internal Turbulence
  - Personal and Professional Turbulence
- Readying for Tomorrow Through Culture
  - Leading Through Cultural Turbulence
  - Stabilizing Through Unifying Elements
  - Impact of Subcultures
- Culture in the New School House
  - School Culture Expanded
  - Culture Tensions
  - New Focus

Chapter 8: It's All About Culture

This chapter highlights the major take-aways from the first seven chapters and offers final perspectives about school personnel to work continuously at building a culture that embraces learning for all.

- Revisiting the Framework for School Culture
- Unifying Elements of School Culture
  - Empowerment
  - Autonomy
  - Collaboration
  - Support, Care, and Safety
  - Sense of Belonging
  - Self and Collective Efficacy
  - Professional Engagement
- Asking, Why Culture Now

- Culture Supports Teachers
    - Teacher Effectiveness
    - Teacher Retention
    - Professional Learning
    - Work-place Conditions
    - Collective Responsibility and Ownership
    - Human and Social Capital
- Key Takeaways About School Culture

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We are appreciative of Mr. Dan Roth, Owner and Art Director of Athens Creative Design, LLC. Dan brought to life Figure 1.1 that represents the Framework for School Culture and its Unifying Elements. This figure serves to anchor our examination of school culture and the primacy of teacher voice and agency as its foundation. Dan, your artistic and trained eye for detail and perfection supported our efforts to get the words right.

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