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New and Old South Elementary School

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Academic Leadership Journal

Background

New South Elementary School

New South Elementary School is a new suburban school, which serves as a feeder to the middle school in the district. The school is located in a progressive, southern city, which benefited greatly from a rich and thriving business sector. The population was approaching 30,000 and was one of the fastest growing cities in the southeastern United States with one of the highest per capita incomes. The average income was nearly \$60,000 per year with the median age of residents being 31 years. This white-collar community strongly supported their public schools and had an active and vocal parent base. Their influence was considerable, as they desire a rigorous academic program accentuated with fine arts and technology.

The retail sector of the city was continuing to grow, allowing the city to expand and improve public facilities and infrastructure as a result of increased local tax monies. The City Council voted to break away from the county school system and form a city system. The public education system was comprised of one high school, with middle schools and elementary schools serving as feeders. The city was considered an affluent suburban community, with residents working in highly technical jobs. Over 35% of the residents hold a 4-year college degree, while 14% held advanced degrees. The school system had an operating budget of nearly \$30 million dollars, employed over 300 certified staff members, and served over 6,000 students whose ethnic composition was 76% White, 19% Black, and 5% non-White. Test scores on national standardized tests were above the national average at both the elementary and middle schools. New South Elementary School had over 700 students with a principal, assistant principal and over 40 teachers.

The stated mission of the system addressed its desire to develop student potential, develop responsible citizens, and make life-long learners. Their statement vision involved being a leader in the educational community.

The school system benefits from their relationship with the Schools Foundation. The Schools Foundation was a non-profit organization with the stated goal of supporting public schools in the district. Foundation programs provided additional funding to improve teacher training and equipment. The Foundation was especially active in making sure schools had state-of-the-art computer hardware and software systems.

The superintendent of this school system had been the only superintendent since the system's inception. The principal of New South Elementary School was the founding principal.

The average Stanford Achievement Test 9 (SAT9) total battery score for New Elementary South School revealed the average in the mid-70s. This score ranked within the top 10 of all schools in the state.

The Old South Elementary School

The city in which Old South Elementary School is located was in a rural southern county. The first significant growth of the area was realized in the 1800s as a mining town. From a population of 200 people more than a century ago, the city had over 13,000 residents. The median household income

estimate below \$30,000. Fifty-six percent of the families have blue-collar occupations. Twenty-one percent of the children lived below the poverty level.

In the past, the economy was established in coal and iron industries; however, the major employers today were primarily in the health and education fields.

The Old South School System had over 2,500 students attending the system's one high school, one middle school, and four elementary schools. Ethnicity was 50% Black, 1% Asian, 1% Hispanic, and 48% White. The system had a \$17 million operating budget. There were 176 teachers, 6 other certified personnel, and 134 support staff. Over 70% of professional staff held a master's degree or above.

There are five National Board Certified teachers located in this school system. The Old South Elementary School had an enrollment more than 300 students with 25 teachers and 1 principal.

The mission of the city school system was to provide an opportunity for each student to receive a quality education. The mission further stated quality education consists of good citizenship, individual differences, intellectual skills and knowledge, and an appreciation of cultural heritage.

The School Community Advisory Board was a partnership between the city schools and the community. Their purpose is to bring together community colleges and non-profit organizations to form a tutoring and mentoring program for those students who failed to pass the High School Graduation Exam.

Recently, a new superintendent had been named for the city school system. The principal of Old South Elementary School was in his first principalship at the time of this study. The school dates back to the early 1900s.

The most recent Academic Performance Survey indicated the city school system's overall performance was an "A" grade. This southern city was ranked in the top ten of all systems in its state on the 2001 Stanford Achievement Test. The average SAT9 total battery score for Old South School System revealed the average is in the mid-70s. Traditionally the system had ranked in the top ten of the state.

Methodology

Purposeful sampling was selected to obtain information-rich cases in two distinct school settings. The population for this study consisted of six teachers and two principals who were employed in the public schools.

Principals were interviewed in their offices, and teachers were interviewed in classrooms. Lincoln and Guba stated, "If you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them information in the form in which they usually experience it." 1 Data were also collected through

observations made before, during, and after the participants' interviews. These observations were conducted in classrooms, hallways, and offices of the schools. Patton observed,

Case studies become particularly useful where one needs to understand some special people, particular problem, or unique situation in great depth, and where one can identify cases rich in information-rich in the sense that a great deal can be learned from a few exemplars of the phenomenon in question. 2

Data was examined in a holistic manner. The analysis of data identified emerging themes from the collected data, a process sometimes referred to as open coding.³ Categories were determined into which the data was placed.

A priori coding was used to list the four-frame model of Bolman and Deal. 4 Participants' sentences were coded to the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames. A miscellaneous category was also added to the four-frame model.

The data collection techniques were interviews and observations. Eisner observed a “paucity of methodological prescriptions” for qualitative research, because such inquiry focuses on strengths of the researcher rather than on standardization.⁵ The open-ended interviews allowed for individual variations that are essential in research dealing with perceptions. The opportunity afforded me to probe and ask follow-up questions is an integral part of the open-ended process. Data gathered through observation were useful in writing a description.

In this study, four themes emerged from the interviews, which collectively offered insights with regard to frames, processes, and influence. These themes are (a) personal framing, (b) school cultures, (c) factors in decision-making, and (d) influence. The role of school culture is demonstrated by the frequency of participants’ sentences listed in the cultural theme as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

The Influence of School Culture in the New and Old South Elementary Schools

Item	Parents	Business/Civic	Colleagues	Other	School
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Holly	61	10	7	3	New South
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Edna	54	14	12	10	New South
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Robin	49	5	14	6	New South
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Wilson	10	45	24	2	Old South
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Abbey	11	36	20	8	Old South
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Jane	15	31	21	6	Old South
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Case Studies

Case studies were listed in clusters of three with the name of the principal appearing first, followed by two teachers who were in the same school. Holly, Edna, and Robin were participants from the New South Elementary School. Wilson, Abbie, and Jane were participants representing the Old South Elementary School.

Holly – Principal of New South Elementary School

What teachers perceived as “parents getting their way” was more accurately the principal’s cultivation of school culture. What the teachers identified as threatening and intimidating overtures by the parents, Holly simply channeled into a constructive and meaningful purpose. Holly reasons, “You have to keep your reputation going, and then you work on change gradually, very slowly...but you always listen to parents. Her actions continued to develop an enabling structure within the school, which seemed to influence the school culture. She showed leadership in choosing to nurture parental enthusiasm rather than contest it. In my opinion, this became a defining moment in Holly’s leadership as she worked toward the attainment of decision acceptance with her faculty, staff, and parents. “One thing about it... our parents will call the superintendent or our director of personnel and freely discuss the principal’s actions. Parents here love to write letters and make telephone calls,” explains Holly.

The new elementary school, which had been entrusted to her, was to become an icon in the community.

Holly told me she was hand picked by a well-respected superintendent to lead this new venture. During the course of our interview, Holly was sharp, even intense, in her responses, which exuded confidence. Many of the decisions she made were perceived as forceful, but in my opinion she was balancing the maturity level of her teachers while determining their readiness. Was this structure awry? Considering her responses during the interview, she felt she was providing the correct amount of structure for the young school.

The elementary school where Holly served as principal was part of a thriving and prosperous community, which took great pride in their schools. This urban, white-collar community held Holly and her faculty accountable for the reputation of their school. The old adage, "To whom much is given, much is required," is a fitting description of this context.

Edna – Teacher at New South Elementary School

Edna was a veteran teacher where Holly served as principal. She volunteered to become part of a new school district and to help with what she referred to as the daunting task of establishing a new school. She called those early years "very, very stressful" and expressed some regret with her decision; however, her "love of children" made the transition worthwhile. When I asked her to tell me some things about her school she commented, "First of all I feel like we have got one of the finest groups of people teaching here."

She noted that teachers at her grade level, "are all very different but I think we compliment each other." During the interview, Edna referred to herself as an "old school type" because she believed children should come to school to learn.

While Edna repeatedly referred to the "rough" first year, she also stated she would not want her principal's daily responsibilities. This principal was required to make far-reaching decisions in a timely manner that impacted the school, community, and her own leadership, according to the teachers. The expectations of the community were high as they chose to separate from a larger school system. This white-collar community demanded the best and took a personal interest in their new school, which resulted in their active and vocal participation as evidenced by the teachers' comments. This active participation of parents was realized in both academic and extracurricular settings.

Robin – Teacher at New South Elementary School

Robin had been teaching elementary school since 1987 except for a three-year absence in which she stayed home with her young children. "I believe this is what God has for me to do," was the response Robin gave regarding her career choice.

Robin expressed some concerns she had regarding the decision-making processes at her school. She began by saying, "My perception is that there are certainly things that I am allowed full and complete latitude with as far as things that go on in my classroom." However, "There are also things that I'm really not given very much decision making about." She mentioned that teaching is her passion, and it is important for her to have curriculum and resources that she is comfortable with in the classroom. "Well, I feel that I always like to have control, and I think the perception is that we do not have control; that makes us [teachers] uncomfortable."

Robin offered a philosophical perspective, "I think that the larger the school sometimes the more decisions are made from the top." Her reasoning was that in larger schools the administrators have to bring certain finality to decision making. "It's hard to get larger numbers of people to agree on certain issues, and so I think sometimes because of the size of the school and influence of its culture that

things are going to be handed down from the top, I just think its easier to do it that way,” noted Robin. In the following response she states a preference, “So how I handle one situation with one child is specific to the child in my classroom.” Robin provided a rationale for her actions. “I think because of circumstances in her [student’s] home and things that I know about her home life, how I deal with that and decisions that I make regarding her discipline may be very different from another child in my classroom.” Concluding her thoughts she emphasized, “Teachers here are aware of all they have been given by the district and that is a motivating factor ... but pressure is felt when parents seemingly hold us to unrealistic expectations or think they know better than us.”

Wilson – Principal at Old South Elementary School

Wilson was the new principal of a rural elementary school. I noticed the facilities were older but well maintained. There were not as many parents at the school as was the case at New South. As a newly appointed minority principal, Wilson told me of his strong relationship with the superintendent. When in doubt, Wilson frequently consulted with his superintendent or school attorney to insure his decisions were proper. He would confer with colleagues in other schools about decisions, which was primarily for precedent or legal concerns. He confided that consultation among colleagues was often an attempt to gather support. Wilson’s stated, “If a decision has to be made then I make it because ultimately I am accountable for it.”

Wilson had a different view that no other participant shared. He distinguished between board policy and school rules, which to me indicated he viewed them as separate entities. “There is never a time to break board policy, and if you break board policy you are on your own ... I never, I will not break board policy,” noted Wilson. With respect to school rules Wilson stated, “I guess there’s an exception to every rule you have.”

I was impressed with Wilson’s enthusiasm and drive to be successful. He was a young man taking advantage of the opportunity afforded him to lead this school. Teachers spoke of him as an unknown commodity but demonstrated great respect for both the office and person. Teachers recognized his availability and willingness to assist them in an unselfish manner. He was considered very approachable. There was a desire on the part of teachers to work with him and to please him. This school was in a blue-collar community where hard work was appreciated and respect was demanded. The values were traditional, and change was not always welcomed. I learned through my interviews that respect was earned through hard work, community connections, and personal performance. The strong level of parent involvement that had been evidenced at the other two schools was considerably less here, but that should not be taken as a lack of support.

Abbie – Teacher at Old South Elementary School

Abbie was a veteran fourth-grade teacher who invited me to her classroom for our interview. She spoke very softly, which caused me to lean forward in an attempt to hear every word. This teacher gave me the impression that she was very concerned about providing proper responses during the interview. Almost as an afterthought, she seemed to question her responses. Abbie later stated, “I don’t really know what to say because I don’t know we’re in such a routine,” and “I guess we just do things without us thinking about them as being a decision.”

She was comfortable consulting with her principal about decisions but also considers the school counselor and parents as valuable resources. When making a difficult decision, Abbie’s method was to

talk to “someone else ... asking them what they think and sort of working together before making a decision.”

Jane – Teacher at Old South Elementary School

Although she had taught at other schools, she was not yet a tenured teacher. She was recommended by her principal to participate in this research. It appeared to me that Jane was a little hesitant in speaking at first. Later in the interview she commented, “Well, not being tenured...I feel like I am on a different footing than others.”

Completing her bachelor’s degree proved a 25-year pursuit as she took classes while working various jobs and raising two children. I sensed a certain pride in her voice as she spoke of this accomplishment. She attributed maturity and the constant vigil of learning from life’s experience as bringing new perspectives into her own life. Referring to her years in the community she added, “There is a sense of pride in this place that comes from hard work, paying your dues, and doing things the right way. When I questioned her about the “right way” she related it to having a value system by which you live your life.

The varying ability levels of students in her classroom were a concern. She considered the consequences to be significant because, “If I make a poor decision, that’s going to be a reflection of the school.” Jane’s facial expression changed, and to me it is as if she was struck by the words she had just spoken. Explaining the processes of her decision making she stated, “I look at the children in the classroom and I say ‘how would I want another teacher to treat my own two children?’ I was impressed by the sincerity of her words as she uttered a final admonition on this topic, “Once they [teachers] come upon a decision, then they had better make sure they have considered all the pros and cons of that decision.” A recurring theme that became obvious during the interview was Jane’s insistence that her decisions be fair, equitable, and respected. Table 1 identifies cultural characteristics of each school.

Table 2

Cultural Characteristics of the New and Old South Elementary Schools

Item	New South Elementary School	Old South Elementary School
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Community	White-collar, urban	Blue-collar, rural
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Values	Computer-assisted learning, Respect, hard work and parental involvement and results.	supplemental funding.
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Mission	To develop student potential, Quality education consists of develop responsible citizens, good citizenship, individual and make life-long learners. differences, intellectual skills and an appreciation of cultural heritage.	
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Community	The Schools Foundation, School Community Advisory resources a program providing additional Board, a tutoring program for	
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funding to improve teacher students who failed the high training and equipment. school graduation exam.

Key Symbolism Parent culture Business/Community culture

Facilities Modern and appealing Dated, but well-maintained

Technology Computers in every classroom Computer labs and state-of-the-art equipment throughout.

Leadership Shared governance Autocratic

Summary

The participants of a school cluster spoke about parental involvement in their school. Robin commented on what she perceived to be a stifling parental influence in her school, “We [teachers] wouldn’t dare go into some of the engineering offices and restructure their [parents’] day for them ... I think parents sometimes think that what we do [teaching] is open.” Edna stated, “I’ve got lots of parent support, and I get nice notes,” as she shared comments on her perception of school culture. Holly noted her school’s culture in a more relational context, “From the car line, I probably spoke with 10 parents ... but it [decision making] is easier because you learn the parents ... so the decisions become very easy.”

These three participants, all in the same school cluster, had very different perceptions of their school culture with respect to parents. New South’s parental culture provided additional resources to the school but with a price tag – that being accountability. The culture was intimidating if not a threat to Robin. The same culture was a source of encouragement and support for Edna. From Holly’s perspective, this part of school culture was challenging but an anticipated part of administration. Rather than focus on negative elements she chose to strategize and re-direct parental energies in a constructive manner.

Holly understood she had active and aggressive parent cultures, which held her and other teachers highly accountable for their performances. These white-collar parents had high expectations for their children and their children’s teachers. These parent cultures were organized, involved, and vocal. Parents, whose constructs of school identity and function are strongly enhanced by their mere numbers, influenced the principal’s decision-making processes. Teachers in the New South Elementary School worked with parents who actively wanted to be involved in shaping their children’s schools. While there were plentiful demonstrations of participants correctly as well as incorrectly assessing school culture, Holly’s leadership gave rise to a working relationship rather than an adversarial one between parents and teachers. Principals in this study viewed themselves as part of the community at large, and were well aware of its history and future expectations.

The resources used by teachers and principals influenced their interpretation of school culture.

Resources included but were not limited to intuition, mentors, superintendents, colleagues, personal experiences, students, research, and their principal. New South’s dominant cultural influence was its parents. Leadership meshed with parental involvement in an enculturation process that gave purpose to parental energy, understanding to a concerned faculty, and quality instruction to students.

In some situations, the effort was to appease parents was considered excessive as principals sought to involve parents in limited decision-making opportunities where their input could be

creatively and effectively channeled. While perhaps manipulative on the principals' part, it was well received by parents eager to be involved in school processes. Participants eventually developed strategies for dealing with their school cultures. Those who developed effective strategies for dealing with parents enjoyed healthy relationships. Those who failed to strategize were seemingly in "pressure" situations more often.

School cultures impacted both the Old and New South Elementary School Systems and it was the ongoing interaction of culture and structure that forged each school's unique identity. It seems to me one size doesn't fit all with regard to leadership structure. Quality instruction and learning were derivatives of what all stakeholders in these two schools valued. Common to both New and Old South Elementary Schools was the fact that excellence is a product of an enculturation process, which defines leadership, clarifies values, and provides empowerment.

The Old South Elementary School, steeped in traditions and beliefs, was a source of community pride. As a school principal in the Old South School System, Wilson felt it was necessary for him to adhere to a predefined role that school culture established. He and others from the Old South School relied on a worn but still welcomed system of respect, hard work, and results. Old South School was dependent upon a structured leadership that embodied the values of its community. Political alliances were crucial, requiring the principal to be skilled in networking.

Wilson, the principal was very "hands on" as he lead this school. His leadership style was somewhat more autocratic than Holly's. He wanted to touch every decision, not for selfish motives but rather to insure its appropriateness and quality. He sensed great accountability to the superintendent and seemed to have a vital relationship with this office. His leadership was relatively unknown or perhaps I should say untested in both the school and community. Wilson proceeded in a cautious manner, realizing he must slowly build trust and reflect the values of this community. The school system had a storied history with many valuable lessons to be gleaned by the young principal. In my opinion, the culture, that existed here, was just as demanding as that of the other school in this study, but perhaps in a different sense. Simplicity, hard work, values, politics, pride, and trust were motivating factors in this culture.

Seemingly, the crown jewel of this school system was not its facilities, funding, or volunteerism but rather a deep- rooted work ethic that encompassed the entire system. In a realistic sense, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. They have carved an identity not by the same process of financially prosperous school systems such as New South, but through a common community vision, which through the years has become their tradition of excellence. The cultural icons in Old South were historical and the school leadership framed decisions in consultation with community stakeholders. Second in influence to community were colleagues. Through the years, the system had developed a reputation for excellence as they consistently ranked in the state's top 10 systems. Their SAT9 performance has become a source of community pride and each year seemed to renew their efforts toward greater academic achievement.

New and Old South Elementary Schools understood, accepted, and adapted to the culture of their schools. Although uniquely different schools they shared a vision for instructional quality by gaining a deeper perspective of their school cultures. In doing so, they found excellence is a product of an enculturation process, which defines leadership, clarifies values, and provides empowerment.

Notes

1. Yvonne Lincoln and Egon Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage Publications, (1985): 120.

2. Michael Quin Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, (1990): 54.
3. Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Sage Publications (1990): 76.
4. Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*. Jossey-Bass, (1991).
5. Elliot Eisner, *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice*. Macmillan Publishing Company, (1991): 169.

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