

Keeping It Alive: Elements of School Culture That Sustain Innovation

Through sharing and collegiality, teacher empowerment, and effective leadership, the principal and staff at DeKeyser Elementary in Sterling Heights, Michigan, have created a culture for change.

In the past decade, a gaggle of commissions and blue-ribbon panels have told us that our schools are in trouble, noted educational leaders have voiced that pedagogy and curriculums must change, and we are bludgeoned in the media with the statistics of accountability. More fragmented and isolated than ever before, we desperately need connections. And yet there are pockets of excellence throughout this land, where individual teachers and local campuses make magic for their students in spite of every conceivable constraint. I found such a place. You should know about it.¹

Setting and History

DeKeyser Elementary is 1 of 22 campuses in the Utica Community Schools of suburban Detroit. Predominantly Anglo, DeKeyser's population is largely blue collar in the lower range of middle-income brackets, with many parents employed by the automobile industry. At the time of my research (May 1988), DeKeyser—an open-concept building with a capacity for 580—housed 320 students, preschool to grade 6, and a professional staff that included the principal, 11 classroom teachers, a librarian, 2 special educa-

tion teachers, 1 preschool teacher, and 1 director for the extended day-care program. With the comfortable enrollment, the staff has maintained the open space as conducive to their integrated, thematic instruction.

Over the past eight years, Principal Cheryl Snell has guided a small focus group on student writing outcomes as it has developed into total staff com-

mitment to integrated, thematic teaching. The idea for the project originated when Cheryl invited interested others to meet voluntarily during Tuesday lunches to explore the concept of student writing. The time was for sharing, thinking, and planning, not for announcements, administrative matters, or paperwork. Service center consultants from Macomb Intermediate School District and college professors from Oakland University presented ideas and even arranged a visit to The College School in St. Louis, Missouri. This field trip became binding glue for the focus group and was the springboard for the first efforts with students.

With each new venture came greater excitement for the project. Participation in the Tuesday lunches grew. Professors and graduate interns at Oakland University provided expertise, training, and support. Macomb ISD found and maintained funding to support the teachers' growth and collaboration, largely by providing substitute monies to create internal planning time. By 1984 staff commitment to the project was total. By 1986 they had secured state funds, not only to continue their efforts but to spread them to other campuses.

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DeKeyser's Culture

Over the years, the DeKeyser project has developed immutable elements that characterize what is valued about the profession and its products. Here are a few of them.

• *Tuesday meetings.* Nine years after their inception, the Tuesday lunches continue. They have become a protected ritual, supporting teachers' efforts to reflect on their instruction. This is hallowed ground. What transpires there echoes the weekly faculty meetings at the Dewey School in 1900, where teachers planned the next week based on the results of the current week (Sarason 1971). Contemporarily, these gatherings also reflect the processing of "fast failures," deemed vital to successful organizations (Peters 1987).

• *Planning sessions.* Without substantive efforts to include time for planning and professional growth, the hue and cry for collaboration, shared leadership, and participative management are blasts of hot air. Recognizing this, DeKeyser and its collaborators sought mechanisms and funds that would create, support, and sustain the internal time needed for planning, growth, and renewal. Their actions won them a professional development grant from the Michigan Department of Education. The state funds support released time in the spring and fall for school staff to plan the next semester's theme and to bring the project to other schools. Participating schools receive funds for substitute teachers so that staff members may attend planning sessions and inservices or visit other campuses.

It was my pleasure to attend both DeKeyser's daylong planning session for the fall theme and an inservice day for 14 collaborating campuses. Both meetings were characterized by vibrant participation, bright ideas, and enthusiastic support for the project. Participants shared freely about their students' growth and their own professional enhancement. Those looking for history and data on peer assistance programs have fertile ground here!

• *Schoolwide themes.* An outgrowth of planning together was the development of schoolwide themes to focus writing opportunities for students.

At DeKeyser Elementary School, the documentation of student work is serious, professional, and much more than conventional bulletin boards and hall decorations.

Early themes included: transportation, the Olympics, bridges, and mysteries. Teachers examined their individual, grade level, and total school plans for opportunities to explore, teach, and write within the themes. Even though the themes are schoolwide, teachers' participation in them is individualized and voluntary. My interviews with all the teachers have confirmed that they are very comfortable with this arrangement. Thus, one teacher may weave elements of the theme throughout her traditional use of adopted basal and textbook instruction; another may shelve the texts while he combines multiple objectives into an integrated, thematic unit.

• *Cross-age teaching.* In addition to schoolwide activities planned throughout the year, teachers collaborate, formally and informally, on cross-age projects for the mutual benefits of their students. For example, whereas arranging for older students to read to and assist younger ones may be a yearlong commitment, doubling up classes for certain aspects of theme instruction may be spontaneous. "Trading Terrific Teachers" is offered twice yearly. "Terrific Teachers" offer special art, music, and writing activities to children who select from an advertised menu and enroll in advance. This means that the groups

could contain students from K-6. Activities that provide writing stems are encouraged. Following the half-day event, the different groups report their accomplishments and show their products at an assembly.

• *Schematic displays.* At DeKeyser, the documentation of student work is serious, professional, and much more than conventional bulletin boards and hall decorations. Schematic displays—composed of photographs, slides, student products, and profiles of teacher planning—analyze the architecture of a theme by reconstructing the teaching/learning activities as they were developed over time. The exhibits from one site are then displayed at other schools. Teachers have found that these displays boost students' self-esteem and provide a powerful record of accomplishment—an evaluation of activities in and of themselves.

• *Student assemblies.* First thing each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, students are called to "Homegrown Assemblies" by various musical means. This is a time for greeting and sharing by students, classes, and staff. Poems are read, songs are sung, successes are celebrated. Individual students share their writing efforts, and classes report on theme events. While the scheduling of presenters is responsive to the tides of events and may be spur of the moment, the time for the assemblies is sacrosanct. The gatherings are part of the routine, a ritual. They reinforce the writing focus and reflect the culture of DeKeyser. Cheryl and her staff see them as an outgrowth of their commitment to fewer dittos and more hands-on activities. Coupled with the impressive prolific displays of student work, they are irrefutable evidence of Cheryl's assertion that "we do lots of writing around here."

Culture and Change

Deal (1987) asserts that culture and change are antithetical, that change threatens the stability, predictability, and comfort of the culture. When I asked Cheryl to consider this notion, her response was at once thoughtful and incisive:

"Homegrown Assemblies" reinforce the writing focus and reflect the school's culture.

I know it's puzzling . . . but some of our rituals and ceremonies can be vehicles for change. . . . It's in those settings where we decide that we can't keep things that make us stagnant or say, "This is the way it's always going to be." This keeps us flexible, keeps the culture moving.

That says it, but let's be specific about the elements of the culture at DeKeyser that sustain its innovation:

1. *Sharing and collegiality.* The Tuesday meetings and the planning sessions are structures within the culture that provide stability, as well as the opportunity for continuous improvement in the process. This feedback loop provides "circularity," which controls and refines the innovation (Zaltman et al. 1973). Circularity can prevent the stability of the culture from inhibiting change. In addition, the elements of sharing and collegiality promote meaningful participation in school decision making. Participation in "technical" decision making, argues Rosenholz (1985), increases ownership of school instructional goals. Perhaps the words of a DeKeyser teacher say it best:

As we work together as a team, there's a greater unity among staff members. We have confirmation that what we're doing has purpose. I feel I've grown tremendously here.

2. *Empowerment.* This ubiquitous term has exceeded its dictionary definition and taken on affect; people feel empowered or the lack of empowerment. Almost a life-giving force, it has become validation, affirmation, vindication, and self-actualization rolled into one. According to Porter, relevant, collaborative opportunities "break down teacher isolation and give credence to their ideas; make them more receptive to and analytical with new ideas; increase professional confidence; [and] strengthen commitment to the improvement of practice" (1987, p. 150).

Closely associated with the elements of sharing and collegiality, empowerment at DeKeyser is attributed in part to the addition of concerns-based staff meetings, which rank-order and confront issues germane to the organization. Initiated by the principal, these "different" staff meetings have led to working definitions of

shared expectations, teaching at DeKeyser, approaches to teacher evaluation, and elements that form the school's ecology. Together, the Tuesday lunches, planning sessions, and concerns-based staff meetings defy the loathsome stereotypes that faculty meetings have earned and provide a rich milieu for meaningful involvement.

The DeKeyser staff feel strongly that they are empowered. As one teacher attests:

Our program brought stature and respect to teachers. I can remember having a professor and a newspaper wanting to interview me. That doesn't happen to teachers. . . . People are now willing to listen to me; I have enough name identity to take integrated, thematic teaching with me. I'm willing to fight for it!

Another teacher declares that "teachers drive themselves harder here than any administrator could. There's a sense of mission here."

3. *Leadership.* Change is neither a geyser bursting from subterranean depths, nor a wandering ooze that becomes a formidable pool. It is a process that can be facilitated by effective leadership. More and more, says Kanter (1983), leaders are seen as collaborators, not "solo artists." Lightfoot (1983) confirms this, asserting that "leaders express a need for partnership and nurturance. They do not want to go it alone."

The elements of a participative/collaborative style include persuading more than ordering, team building, seeking input from others, showing political sensitivity, and sharing recognition. Little (1982) found that in successful schools, teachers valued and participated in norms of collegiality (shared work) and continuous improvement (experimentation). She and others assert that these norms do not simply happen or spring spontaneously out of workers' mutual respect for one another, but rather are a product of direct principal intervention (Rosenholz 1985,

Smylie 1988, Wilson and Corbett 1983, Dwyer et al. 1983).

Because it takes longer to weld people into a team, it takes patience. And Cheryl Snell has patience; she will do anything to nurture and provide for the vision at DeKeyser. Her leadership is multidimensional. She articulates, promotes, and defends the shared values of her staff, and she believes wholeheartedly in their ability to accomplish the dream.

A Success Story in Collaboration

The so-called second wave of reform, which seems to hinge on more decision-making power for teachers (Lieberman 1988, Boyer 1988, Ambrosie and Haley 1988), crested much earlier at DeKeyser; and its creative staff and entrepreneurial leader ride it well. Later this year, I will return for a follow-up study that continues to document a success story in collaboration. In so doing, I hope to validate Barth's assertion that:

schools have the capacity to improve themselves, if the conditions are right. . . . School improvement then is an effort to determine and provide, from without and within, conditions under which the adults and youngsters who inhabit schools will promote and sustain learning among themselves (1986, p. 293) □

¹After hearing Cheryl Snell's account at a national conference of how she guided the modest gains of a writing project into a schoolwide effort, I gained her support to do a case study. My subsequent documentation of the culture and ethos at DeKeyser Elementary (Utica Community Schools, Sterling Heights, Michigan) became the centerpiece case study of my dissertation on various innovative strategies (Simpson 1989). The tenets of naturalistic inquiry guided this research in the development of a thick description of the context specific to DeKeyser (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

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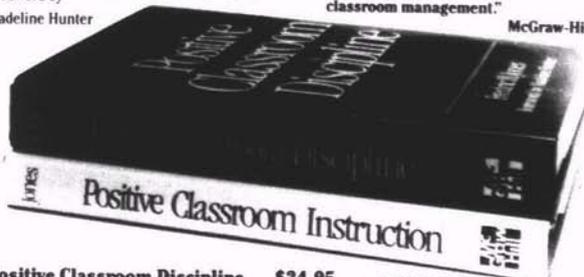
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