BUILDING SCHOOL CULTURE THROUGH REFORM IN A SUCCESSFUL URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOL

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A DISSERTATION in Education and Organization Leadership

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ABSTRACT

BUILDING SCHOOL CULTURE THROUGH REFORM IN A SUCCESSFUL URBAN SCHOOL

Colleen O’Connor
Sigal Ben-Porath

The following research highlights the impact of building a strong school culture in one successful urban Turnaround school. From changes to the environment to increased professional development, from the impact on student and parent engagement to the changes in professional expectations for staff, it seems there was no area of the school that wasn’t positively impacted by focusing on improving the school’s culture. It highlights a school that moved from being arguably the lowest performing elementary school in the state to a school that had measurable and steady improvements in student achievement over a four year span. This research presents a success story told through the lens of the culture-building that the seasoned leader prioritized and insisted was most critical to their Turnaround efforts. Despite massive reform and the pressures of accountability, the leader’s insistence on shaping the culture in every aspect of the school paid off. The staff too experienced this improved culture as critical to their Turnaround and sustained success. Given the fact that this school generated steady success in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the state, this local story has much to teach like and unlike settings. Additionally, this Principal’s ability to strengthen her school culture through the implementation of massive reform provides district and school-based leaders ways to couple culture-building and reform in effective ways. This research identifies and extrapolates the key findings that are replicable and urgently relevant to public schools everywhere that are struggling to find a balance between answering the call of heavy
reform while creating school cultures that meet the needs of students and staff, and create lasting and sustainable school-wide improvement. Finally, this research provides an example of a successful leader who invested in the culture, despite pressures to focus on other urgent matters perceived to be more directly related to student achievement. This research provides an invitation to leaders who wish to build school cultures that will prove foundational to substantial and lasting success.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

From the lowest to the highest achieving schools across the country, leaders everywhere are searching for ways to improve student achievement and narrow the achievement gap (Peterson & Deal, 2009). The context of a school matters greatly, and what works in one district or school, may not be completely adoptable and applicable in another. Individual studies of schools that made dramatic improvements in student achievement provide valuable lessons for like and unlike contexts. Today’s school leaders are charged with managing multiple massive local, state, and federal reform mandates; all of which center around measurable student outcomes. In consequence, the pressure to focus on pedagogy and assessments without addressing and fostering the school culture becomes an understandable temptation for today’s district and school-based leaders. Macneil, Prater and Busch (2009) assert though, that thoughtfully examining and developing the culture of a school is the first and only way to create lasting and meaningful change. In full alignment with that premise, this study sought to examine the culture of Comunidad Elementary School, how the staff defined the school’s culture and how the staff perceived the culture to impact their student achievement, if at all. A successful Turnaround school in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the state, with a leader who credits their success to an improved culture despite the demands of multiple reform initiatives, has much to teach all public schools about the position and value of strengthening the school culture. In doing so, this study sought to explore the following research questions:

1. How do Comunidad’s leaders perceive the role of school culture in leading school-wide efforts to improve student achievement?

2. How do various staff members at Comunidad, a Turnaround school in an under-performing high poverty district, characterize the culture of their school?
3. How do staff members perceive the leadership’s role in shaping the school’s culture and how do they conceptualize the relationship between the school’s culture and gains in student achievement?

The Comunidad Elementary School is considered a Turnaround school in the underperforming high poverty school district of Jonestown; a medium sized city in the Northeast with approximately 30,000 students. In 2010, when Shea was named Principal of the school, it was the lowest performing elementary school in the state. Despite the District’s decline in student achievement, Comunidad Elementary School made measurable and steady progress in the four years that followed, as indicated by data accessed on the State’s Department of Education website (see Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1

Comunidad Student Achievement Data (SAD) 2008-2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comunidad Data</th>
<th>Previous Principal</th>
<th>New Principal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SAD</td>
<td>SAD</td>
<td>SAD</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELA CPI</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math CPI</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science CPI</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>42.8</td>
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<td>ELA SGP</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Math SGP</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>44.5</td>
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*Note: Adapted from State Tests of Spring 2015 Percent of Students at Each Achievement Level for Comunidad Elementary School, Retrieved from State Department of Education, 2015.*
Table 2

*Comunidad Elementary School Student Achievement Data (SAD) 2008-2015*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>ELA CPI</th>
<th>Math CPI</th>
<th>Science CPI</th>
<th>ELA SGP</th>
<th>Math SGP</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
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Principal Shea credited an improved school culture as the primary catalyst for school-wide improvement over the last four years. Since the experience and definition of culture can vary widely, this study explored how this school leader and staff members define and experience the culture at Comunidad in the midst of heavy school reform initiatives.

Through observations in the school and interviews with various stakeholders, this study explored a range of perspectives toward a blended stakeholder definition of the school culture at Comunidad. It also identified how staff members conceptualize the impact of the school’s culture on student achievement. Finally, this study explored how stakeholders valued and built culture while implementing three dense state and federal reform initiatives.
Background and Context

The Jonestown Public Schools is one of the largest school districts in the state with approximately 30,000 students. According to 2013 data found on its website, the District has a higher poverty rate (88%) and a larger percentage of minority students (African American 20%, Latino 61%, Asian 2%, Multiracial 3%), 86% total, than its capital city. In Jonestown 19% of students receive Special Education Services (SES) and 26% are English Language Learners (ELL).

According to information found on their website, the State’s Department of Education classifies its schools from Rating One (highest performing) to Rating Five (lowest performing). Since the State’s districts are classified by their lowest leveled school, Jonestown is a Rating Four district. Statewide schools receive this leveled classification based on the Composite Performance Index (CPI) and Student Growth Percentiles (SGP) from the annual state assessment. The State classifies the lowest performing twenty percent of schools into Rating Three annually, and the least improving Rating Three schools are candidates for classification into Rating Four at the Commissioner’s discretion. Rating Four schools are given three years to make measurable and specific gains in student performance. If after three years they do not meet the criteria for acceptable student growth, they can be placed into Rating Five status, where those schools and the entire district can be overtaken and fully managed by the State.

In the spring of 2013, nine of Jonestown’s schools existed in Rating Four status. In the fall of 2013 the state announced that two Jonestown schools performed their way out of Rating Four status. One of those schools was Comunidad Elementary School, a PreK-5 school known in the community as Comunidad. Like most Jonestown schools, Comunidad is a neighborhood school; meaning it serves the students who live in the
vicinity of the school. Comunidad is located in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city whose many dilapidated homes and housing projects contrast the vibrant Spanish community, markets and cultural centers. As indicated by data found on the State’s Department of Education website, the School’s geographic vicinity supplies Comunidad with a higher percentage of ELL students (37.2% compared to the District’s 26%), Hispanic students (82% compared to the District’s 61%) and more students who live at or below the poverty level (90% compared to the District’s 88%).

**Rating Four status challenges.** For any school, being named Rating Four is a mixed blessing. Upon being identified Rating Four, the state and local district shine spotlights on the functioning and practices of the school. Most often the principal is replaced with a stronger leader and a detailed, three year Reorganizational Plan is strategized, written and implemented. The length of the school day is increased and the staff is expected to work longer school days with increased compensation, or they can transfer to another school, or leave the district entirely. The Rating Four status often creates a great deal of stress on the staff because of the voluminous changes in practice, increased expectations, and extended work days. The school’s walls become transparent as state and district leaders continually visit the building to monitor progress. The leadership must juggle the demands of multiple partners and sometimes conflicting priorities and guidance.

**Rating Four status benefits.** Despite these challenges, there are some benefits to becoming a Rating Four school. Rating Four schools receive two to three times more funding than their district counterparts and school-wide financial incentives for student progress are created for staff members. According to information found on the District’s website, in addition to the increased salary due to extended learning time, “faculty may receive up to a 5% bonus of their base pay for meeting one or more annual..."
benchmarks.” Additionally, school leaders can receive a bonus of up to 10% of their annual salaries. Districts also can “limit, suspend, or change collective bargaining agreements” in order to remove and replace weaker teachers for effective ones. Official documentation from the State Department of Education outlines the state legislation which explicitly says that a teacher with tenure “in a Rating Four school may be dismissed for good cause with expedited arbitration.” In other words, principals in Rating Four schools are unfettered from the tedious and often inefficient evaluation practices that make removing ineffective teachers one of the greatest obstacles of school improvement.

Under the previous superintendent, the district developed the Jonestown Improvement Framework. Available through the District office, this 2013 strategic plan articulated the essential practices expected of each school in order to “significantly improve core instruction and create a culture that is goal focused, adaptive, and cohesive.” The initial steps toward school improvement at Comunidad involved selecting a new leader to design and implement the Reorganizational Plan. The Superintendent appointed Shea, a previous Jonestown Public Schools principal, to lead the work of expectant change and lasting school-wide improvement. This was her charge.

Shea began her tenure at Comunidad in July of 2010 after successfully serving as the principal of the Smith Elementary School (also in Jonestown) from 2006-2010 where she coordinated a partnership with Cornerstone Literacy Initiative to enhance professional practice of staff that led to significant gains in student achievement. At that time the District’s Improvement Framework, publically available on their website, emphasized:

“the importance of implementing a school-wide instructional focus, developing strong professional collaboration teams, engagement of families and the community to support the whole child in the context of academic, social, and emotional needs; and development of an internal accountability system that
creates powerful 21st century learning goals and uses focused and aligned research-based instruction to achieve high levels of learning and elimination of achievement gaps.” (Jonestown website, Retrieved November 20, 2013)

Making that plan actionable required a seasoned leader with an ability to deconstruct the District’s expectations and then rebuild school practice from the ground up. This lofty plan required a strategic leader with an ability to understand the charge while also understanding the players and context she entered. When I asked Shea how and where she began the work toward school improvement, she said: “It’s all about the culture. We couldn’t even begin to look at instruction without first addressing the culture” (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014).

Bolman and Deal (2013) state, “the ability to size up a situation quickly is the heart of leadership” (p. 32). As a new leader in a school that had performed poorly for decades, Shea immediately identified the culture of the school as the first area of needed improvement. She insisted that her work began with an urgent and honest assessment of the school’s culture, followed by focusing the staff on the same goals through an agreed upon way of operating (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014). The process of identifying and understanding the changed culture as well as its impact on the school is the primary aim of this study.

Shea’s focus on culture-building would have been challenging enough in a school with a history of underachievement. However, in the midst of making radical changes in staff, school-wide practice, and school culture, the school was also implementing three large state and nationwide reform mandates (the Common Core State Standards, a new, high-stakes teacher evaluation system, and District Achievement Measures (district and state assessments created to measure teacher impact). All three lofty and demanding initiatives were rolled out during the four years of Comunidad’s steady turnaround.

Given all of these challenges, this study also aimed to observe a leader and staff who
prioritized culture-building in the midst of broad and radical reform. Understanding how Comunidad juggled the demands of multiple reform efforts, while strengthening the culture and improving student achievement warrants much attention and is central in this study. For the benefit of public schools across the country struggling to avoid the test-driven culture that Allington (2010) speaks of as transforming school life in troubling ways, this study provides insight on urgent nation-wide challenges in public education.

The beginning of this research dates back to a pilot study conducted in 2013 at Comunidad. During that study, I worked in Jonestown as the District’s Curriculum Director. In my position, I oversaw curriculum, instruction and assessments for the ten middle schools and six high schools as well the alternative secondary schools. I did not work directly with Comunidad as my oversight was limited to the secondary schools. However, Shea and I attended a number of the District’s leadership trainings and meetings together, and it was at one such training that our conversation about her successful leadership began. The purpose of the meeting was to look at school data that highlighted the latest gains at Comunidad in juxtaposition to the District’s data which was steadily declining. As a district leader and a twenty-year veteran in Jonestown, I was eager to understand how Comunidad (and one other elementary school) was able to make steady and significant gains in student achievement when the District overall continued to decline. When I asked Shea to point to the most significant change she made that impacted gains in student achievement, she immediately pointed to the improved culture of the school. She described the school’s initial culture similar to what Peterson and Deal (1998) call a “toxic culture” where the adults blame low achievement on the students (p. 45). She spoke about the importance of building relationships and
clarifying expectations for students and staff. While that conversation was interrupted, I would return to her when the time was right to conduct my pilot study.

The pilot study gave me an opportunity to continue the conversation I began with Shea in 2012. However, I wanted more than Shea’s perspective. I wanted to observe her school and hear from the Comunidad staff that had been with her from 2010 through its current and continued success. I wanted to hear about the school in 2010 and how they experienced the changes over time. Ultimately, I wanted the staff, drawing from their own experiences, to define the changes to the culture at Comunidad and share their perceptions of how this improved school culture impacted student achievement. I interviewed eleven staff members from a range of roles and grade levels. From that pilot study, I was able to capture initial staff perceptions of the leadership, the school culture and the perceived connection between the leadership, the school culture, and gains in student achievement. This study expanded the number of participants and explored staff perceptions of the impact of the school’s engagement in state and federal reforms, while continuing to reflect on the culture and their understanding of its impact on student achievement.

**Rationale and Significance of the Study**

An unhealthy culture will damage the productivity of any organization. No matter what the industry, developing a working environment that is productive and where its members feel that their work positively adds to the greater cause is instrumental for its success (Schein, 2004). In schools, an unhealthy or unproductive culture has potentially life altering implications. It not only impacts the performance of students, it permeates and poisons an environment that is meant to positively develop children socially and academically. Finding school leaders who understand the importance of a healthy school culture is easy. Finding leaders who know how to systemically change the culture of a
school from one of chaos and conflicting ideals to one of order and congruent aims, is another thing all together. This work, Fullan (2001) says, requires “not the leader who can come into town and save a single school (temporarily) but leaders whose very actions change the systems they work in” (p. 91). School leaders who can make and sustain this type of cultural change in an underperforming school environment, and in the midst of externally mandated school-wide reform efforts, have a great deal to teach school districts and school-based leaders across the country.

In addition to the singular goal of improving low performing schools (often in high poverty settings), successful Turnaround schools have far greater societal implications. In his work on school Turnaround leadership, Fullan (2006) argues that successful Turnaround work not only enhances the productivity of schools, it also raises the quality of the workforce and reduces crime, teenage pregnancy, and welfare dependency. In this way our investment in the success of Turnaround and underperforming schools extends far beyond the children they serve and has wide-reaching implications for society as a whole.

The call for school-wide improvement in high poverty settings and underperforming schools is resounding nation-wide. Pressures to close the achievement gap have placed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top initiatives as the top priority for underperforming districts like Jonestown. The District’s implementation of the three large reform initiatives (CCSS, new high-stakes teacher evaluation system, and District Achievement Measures) in four years has inarguably and perhaps accidently positioned accountability efforts before culture-building. Districtwide each initiative has dominated the teacher and leadership professional development and quieted any previous messaging about the importance of relationships and building healthy and productive cultures in schools. In Jonestown, instead of raising student achievement,
these four years of accountability left the District with nearly a quarter of its schools designated with the state’s lowest performing status. In short, the prioritization of accountability with the singular goal of improving student achievement, and the absence of dialogue about the importance of cultivating school cultures, has so far created more underperforming schools, not fewer.

The pressure on Jonestown’s Turnaround leaders to improve student achievement encourages some leaders to race to the finish line at all costs. Despite this, amidst the pressures to produce, and the lack of messaging about the value of school culture-building, exists one successful school whose principal credited their success, primarily, to creating and sustaining a positive school culture. This study sought to examine that school, and position that culture-building has had in its continued success, while understanding how it improved despite managing massive reform initiatives.
CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The following provides a conceptual framework for the proposed research. It also positions the research within an existing body of research inside the Literature Review, which frames the research within three key areas: the challenges of changing a school’s culture, leadership in shaping culture, and the role of leadership in shaping school culture in the midst of school reform.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 depicts the simplest, and yet most complex role that any school leader has: impacting an entire school of diverse players toward positive change. Figure 1 purposely places the principal at the bottom of the conceptual framework because ultimately the practices, ideals, and day-to-day activity must roll up from the principal to impact the staff and students. As Fullan (2002) states: “Effective school leaders are the key to large scale, sustainable educational reform” (p. 33). Fullan also stipulates that leadership is traditionally seen as leading from the top down, and that school leaders must lead from behind and inspire behaviors and ideals that are pushed up to impact every facet of the school (Fullan, 2002). What is modeled and monitored by the principal, rolls up to the highest aim: student success and achievement.
Supovitz, Sirinides, and May (2010) state that “trust and collaboration point directly to the cultural heart of the school organization.” These scholars add that “many studies identify principals as a central shaper of their schools’ culture” (p. 35). The impact school leaders have on instruction and student achievement while indirect, is significant. The work of Supovitz et al. (2010) suggests:

Principals work through other leaders in schools to influence what goes on inside of classrooms. This indirect pathway points to ways that principals’ attention to such central school improvement concepts as mission and goals, community and trust, and instructional focus have subtle yet real organizational influence. Principals, working with and through the range of other school actors who exert influence on teachers, do affect the instructional practice of teachers that produces improvements in student learning. (p. 53)

In most schools, principals lack the time to lead all aspects of change and facilitate professional learning themselves, but successful principals engage a range of skilled players to lead from within the organization.
Figure 1 also illustrates that focusing on the culture of the school requires changing whole school mindset and practice while in the midst of implementing national reform initiatives. It also illustrates the importance of teacher development and shared leadership which, when combined with culture-building, positively impacts student performance. Leithwood and Poplin’s (1992) work found that successful “school leaders actively communicated the school’s cultural norms, values, and beliefs in their day-to-day interpersonal contacts; and they also shared power and responsibility with others through delegation of power to school improvement ‘teams’ within the school” (p. 10). On the path of successful school leadership there seems to be an intersection between cultivating the culture of the school while also distributing leadership responsibilities across the school, not only to empower staff members but to increase efficiency and positive outcomes.

Additionally, with so much reform and so little time, today’s principals have to find ways to manage the overflow of external mandates that have the potential to overwhelm staff. One way to do so is involving staff during early phases of initiatives. Jordan, McPartland, Legters and Balfanz (2000) assert: “the time and resources must be found to involve staff in the planning process to earn their buy-in of reforms and to provide teachers with continuing high-level technical assistance and monitoring to ensure desired changes in classroom practice” (p. 163-164). In this way, principals must balance implementation and collaboration, adherence to guidelines with ample support for staff members to implement in ways that improve classroom practice.

Finally, Figure 2 positions the previous pilot study within the current research. Combined, both studies build a case study that utilizes multiple data collection strategies to generate detailed information (Creswell, 2014, p. 14) that is useful in defining the school culture and locating its impact on student achievement. What both diagrams fail
to do is define the actual cultural shift that occurred at Comunidad in the midst of multiple school reform mandates. Examining this cultural shift, as well as the leadership moves that influenced school-wide improvement was central to this study.

Figure 2. Position of pilot study as it informs current research.

Literature Review

While this study sought to understand how the staff perceived the impact of their school culture on student achievement, it did so in an already existing national dialogue about the influence and significance of school culture on student achievement. What is missing in this dialogue, and what this study provides, is a timely example of a successful Turnaround school that prioritized and maintained culture-building in the midst of a current climate of heavily mandated reforms. In the pages to follow I position this study and its findings within existing bodies of literature. I begin by defining culture within the
particular context of this study. Then I concentrate on three areas: the challenges of changing a school’s culture, leadership’s role in shaping culture, and the role of leadership and culture in the midst of school reform. These focal areas aid in conceptualizing and positioning this research in the field.

**Defining culture.** In the context of this study, school culture is defined as the “complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths” that have been established at Comunidad over time (Barth, 2002, p. 6). Adding to this definition, Engels, Hotton, Devos, Bouckenooghe, and Aelterman (2008) define school culture as a “system of meaning that influences how people think and how they act at school” (p. 4). Bolman and Deal (2013) distinguish culture as “both a product and a process. As a product, it (culture) embodies wisdom accumulated from experience. As a process, it is renewed and re-created as newcomers learn the old ways and eventually become teachers themselves” (p. 263). In this way, culture is indirectly taught and learned within the school community and passed down to new members.

Peterson and Deal (1998) categorize school cultures as either healthy or toxic. They define a healthy school culture as one in which its members “[have] an unwavering belief in the ability of each student to achieve success” and “pass that belief on to others in overt and covert ways” (p. 47). Conversely, Peterson and Deal classify toxic cultures where members “believe that student success is based solely upon students’ level of concern, attentiveness, prior knowledge, and willingness to comply with the demands of the school” (p. 51). In other words, the responsibility and blame for students’ failures in toxic school cultures is placed solely on the students, thereby allowing adults to remove themselves from responsibility for their potential impact on students’ success.

Muhammad (2009) expands on Peterson and Deal’s (1998) characterizations of culture, adding: “healthy culture begins with a belief in children, but it does not stop with
just belief alone. Healthy cultures also institutionalize their belief through a series of policies and practices that align with their belief system” (p. 23). Addressing and changing a school culture then requires “policies and practices” that reflect and develop the collective mindset of its staff (p. 35). For instance, if the adults in a school believe that students should not be penalized for their underdeveloped language acquisition that positions them behind their native English speaking peers, then the school must provide pedagogy and interventions that help students accelerate their language development. Likewise, the school’s staff members must be highly invested in knowing how best to support the needs of these students.

**The challenges of changing school culture.** If some school cultures are healthy and others toxic, why then, are some schools unable to shift their culture from toxic to healthy? Barth (2002) points out that the characteristics of culture are so deeply ingrained in the core of the organization that they are not easily changed. Simply put, changing the culture of an organization takes time. While this may be obvious, this is particularly challenging in Turnaround schools where leaders are expected to make school-wide improvements in radically short periods of time. Additionally, Turnaround leaders often inherit negative cultures, often previously unaddressed, and face the burdensome challenge of improving a culture that has been established and deeply rooted over long periods of time. Unfortunately, the longer the school has been ingrained in a particular culture and the more members still employed throughout that time, the harder it is to inspire and generate change.

Ironically, despite the fact that most participants in dysfunctional school environments often agree that a cultural overhaul is needed, members often resist the very change that would create better conditions for students and staff. Schein (2010) blames the all-too-common fear of the unknown for this resistance. Additionally, Schein
(2010) tells us that, “culture is hard to change because group members value stability in that it provides meaning and predictability” (p. 16). Even an unhealthy school culture is often predictable, and in its predictable nature members often resist risking change, despite its potential for improvement. This speaks to both the resistance that school leaders face in attempting to improve the culture of a school, as well as the time needed to impact change. Despite this resistance and the many challenges school leaders face when tackling and improving the culture of a school, Macneil, et al. (2009) argue that “paying attention to culture” is the most important action a leader can make (p. 74). Additionally, Schein (2010) cautions that “the bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them” (p. 22).

In consequence, defining and naming the mindset, practices and policies of a school are the first step toward school-wide cultural change. But once the deficits are identified, how do school leaders then create consensus and uniformity of belief in a large body of staff members? According to Schein (2010), “cultural forces are powerful because they operate outside of our awareness” (p. 7). The school leader’s job requires elevating problematic issues or practices in the building to a level of consciousness and group reflection. Schein (2010) also suggests, “Culture is to a group, what personality or character is to an individual” (p. 14). If this statement is true, then likewise, the culture of each individual school or organization is as unique as the personalities of individuals. If developing one’s character takes time and self-awareness, so too does developing the “character” of a school and its staff. Shaping the “character” or culture of a school takes a thoughtful, skillful and reflective leader; one who can manage the day-to-day challenges of leading a school while continually assuring that culture-building remains in focus.
**Leadership and shaping school culture.** In an age of heavy school reform and massive accountability efforts, some school leaders understandably may be tempted to put off culture-building until student test scores improve. In fact, today’s school leaders are not rewarded for improving the culture of their schools. They are measured and rewarded, hired and fired on the basis of standardized test scores. Ultimately, principals take a leap of faith when investing resources and time on culture-building. For this reason, when considering how much emphasis a leader should place on shaping the culture of her school without diminishing resources focused on student achievement, Barth (2002) says, “show me a school where instructional leaders constantly examine the school’s culture and work to transform it into one hospitable to sustained human learning, and I’ll show you students who do just fine on those standardized tests” (p. 11). In this way, schools that attempt to restructure their environment without “reculturing” it will find their efforts futile (Kytle & Bogotch, 2000). Consequently, principals have to recognize culture-building as an integral part of raising student achievement and work toward improving and sustaining it.

While shaping the school’s culture is “the most important, difficult, and perilous job of school-based reformers” (Barth, 2002, p. 8) it is critically important because “when an organization has a clear understanding of its purpose, why it exists and what it must do and who it should serve, the culture will ensure that things work well” (Macneil, et al. 2009, p. 73). Tempting as it may be for school leaders to sacrifice time and energy spent on shaping the culture in order to focus on technical changes that are directly linked to student achievement, doing so will likely pay a critical price. In fact, creating a positive school environment is so essential that Watson (2001) cautions that student achievement suffers when the culture is left untended. Muhammad (2011) adds that attempting to change the technical practice in the building simply will not work without
first changing the culture. School leaders then must manage their day-to-day challenges while continually shaping the culture of their schools.

Before implementing needed cultural changes, school leaders must first understand the culture of their schools (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010) Taking the time to understand student and staff perceptions is invaluable. In fact, Macneil, et al. (2009) warn that “school principals who choose to lead rather than just manage must first understand the school’s culture if they expect to make measurable gains in student achievement” (p. 42). If school leaders can understand how school culture, “both its content and application, has an effect on students’ learning” (Engels et al., 2008, p. 5), then they will likely see that focus on culture is time well spent.

School culture has wide-reaching impact on an organization. Muhammad (2011) emphasizes the critical importance of culture-building when he explains the futility of focusing on technical changes in the absence of addressing the needed cultural changes as well. Since the work within an organization cannot halt to address and build a positive culture, successful school leaders must juggle the day-to-day challenges while continually identifying and developing a healthy culture. Successful leaders must strike a balance between addressing both the structural and cultural needs of their organizations, while avoiding the perils of a myopic vision that focuses too narrowly on the actions of its organization without tending to how its members experience and value the work.

Another challenge that school leaders face is that negative school cultures impact teacher (and student) expectations for student potential and achievement. Jordan et al. (2000) emphasize that “both teachers and students who work in an unhealthy climate often accept low expectations of students’ abilities to learn at high levels and have little motivation to strive for high standards” (p. 160-161). Essential for successful school culture-building, a school leader must recognize that school-wide expectations for
student potential and achievement are part of the deeply engrained attitudes that Barth (2002) stipulates is a component of a school’s culture. Leaders wishing to change or improve the culture of their schools must work to understand these attitudes and directly address staffs’ beliefs if they are to work toward changing them.

In addition to addressing staff mindset about student potential, school leaders are also faced with the challenge of fostering a professional culture that supports and empowers teachers. According to Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), building a positive professional environment for teachers requires “knowing the concerns of employees, knowing what motivates employees, and knowing the necessary conditions for employees to operate at levels of maximum effectiveness” (p. 16). Additionally, Engels et al. (2008) argue that “effective leaders have to support teachers, encourage participation in decision making, stimulate cooperation and act as a good example” (p. 8). In addition to communicating clear expectations about student learning, Engels et al. (2008) reveal that school leaders must also stimulate and value teacher initiative, and provide support and feedback” (p. 21).

Finally, given that many underperforming schools are situated in the context of high poverty populations of students, the greatest challenge that many underperforming school leaders face in creating change is addressing the attitudes and beliefs that teachers hold regarding their students. Despite the evidence laid out here in support of fostering a positive school culture in schools, Jordan et al. (2000) reminds us that:

[school] climate improvements by themselves cannot be expected to raise test scores if the classroom instructional program is not also changed to address the realities of a high-poverty student population that enters (high) school with very diverse, often weak academic skills and low motivation (p. 161).

Jordan et al. (2000) insists that changing the culture, without changing the instructional practices to reflect the needs of the students on a local level, is as futile as changing the curriculum without addressing the culture. Ultimately, improving and solidifying the
two—culture and reflective teaching practice—not only go hand in hand but are reliant on one another.

In other words, the culture of a school is determined by the collective mindset of its members and the behaviors they exhibit as a result of that mindset. School leaders, in addition to the compounded and sometimes conflicting priorities in their low performing schools, must address the cultural beliefs and behaviors of their buildings if they are to change the conditions needed for student success.

**The role of leadership in school culture in the midst of school reform.**

For a great many years, school leaders could simply monitor and lead the instructional practices in their schools. However, in the midst of radical educational reform and heavy federal mandates, “instructional leadership no longer appears to capture the heart of what school administration will have to become” (Leithwood & Poplin, 1992, p. 8). In order to manage the multitude of reform mandates, Leithwood and Poplin (1992) assert that school leaders have to “protect teachers from the problems of limited time” (p. 11) as they carefully guide and shape a positive learning environment in their schools.

The role of school leader has evolved and required leaders to monitor and improve instruction, yet today far more is asked of them. As Leithwood and Poplin (1992) conclude, “instructional leadership having outlived its usefulness, our profession now calls on administrators to be the servants of collected vision, editors, cheerleaders, problem solvers, resource finders” (p. 10-11). Fullan (2002) also suggests that school principals must become “change agents” to transmute the school culture (p. 17). The role of school leader has changed so that:

in schools with very positive cultures we find principals with high achievement orientation, who focus on creating a flexible, stimulating, participative and supporting environment, who do not only identify with roles of mentor or innovator but manage to devote most of their time to their preferred role (Engels et al., 2008, p. 170).
The new job of the school leader requires balancing the demands of a stringent system of accountability while measuring its impact on teachers and students.

The pressures of school reform have transformed the schoolhouse into a high-stakes work environment that school leaders are forced to uphold while still monitoring the impact of increased stressors on its community members. Confirming this, Macneil et al. (2009) say that “as accountability through tests has become a threat, school principals need to work on long-term cultural goals in order to strengthen the learning environment” (p. 74). In an age where educators must juggle multiple reform initiatives that increase their workload, school leaders are charged not only with leading instruction, they must also provide an environment where teachers and students are supported in the practice of teaching and learning. Supporting this, Fink and Resnick (2001) concur that school principals are responsible for establishing an inescapable culture of teaching and learning in their schools (p. 598). While the responsibility of establishing a positive school culture falls on principals, successfully shaping the culture of the school requires eliciting and involving school members in this process at all levels.

Supovitz et al. (2010) highlight the importance of “fostering shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation to be one of the most significant leadership predictors of student learning outcomes” (p. 35). To this end, today’s principals must not only value school-wide culture-building, they must see staff culture-building as a means to increasing student achievement. This form of shared leadership is a requirement in today’s school environment and necessitates a culture that can support a distribution of leadership, adequate adult learning, and shared responsibility school-wide.

Engels et al. (2008) identify this ability of principals to share leadership within their schools as that of transformational leadership. The complex role of transformational leaders requires the following:
On one hand they have to be able to develop a strong vision, make (sometimes hard) decisions and set high standards for teacher performance. On the other hand effective leaders have to support teachers, encourage participation in decision making, stimulate cooperation and act as a good example (p. 162).

While this is a tall order, it is undoubtedly the challenge of today’s public school leader.

Since school leaders are charged with “actively communicating the school’s cultural norms, values and beliefs in their day-to-day interpersonal contacts, they also share power and responsibility with others through delegation of power to school improvement “teams” within the school” (Leithwood & Poplin, 1992, p. 10). This is the kind of transformational leadership that Leithwood and Poplin (1992) urge school leaders to embrace. School leaders are most effective when they empower teacher leadership through teacher-centered professional learning communities and ongoing and focused teacher professional development, and by exercising a power that is “manifested through other people, not over the other people” (p. 9, emphasis added).

Leithwood, Jantzi, Silins, and Dart (1993) found that “principals who focused on developing an instructional vision, setting group goals, holding high expectations, and providing individual support for teachers positively influenced school culture and climate” (p. 33). Among many roles and responsibilities, school leaders must position themselves as leaders of teams, inspirers, facilitators and sharers of information and decision-making.

Today’s school leaders must also develop a professional environment of learning that mimics and models the kind of learning that teachers need to provide students. Leaders also must be mindful of the needs of teachers as learners. In a time where teacher pedagogy is often seen as both the problem and the solution to student achievement, it makes sense that school leaders would create professional learning experiences that mimic and model the kind of learning they want teachers to provide students in their classrooms. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006) remind us that, “when
teachers learn differently, students learn differently” (p. 67). When teachers are invited to learn within the same instructional models they are encouraged to provide students, they are far more able to adopt and adapt new ways of teaching that support and empower students.

Since teachers enter education because they value learning, school leaders must foster and support a collaborative learning environment (Leithwood & Poplin, 1992). Unfortunately too often, “once [teachers] are inside educational institutions, we leaders, by in large, have ignored their intellectual needs and interests” (Leithwood & Poplin, 1992, p. 99). Therefore, “collaborative school cultures” in which “staff members often talk, observe, critique, and plan together” (Leithwood, Leonard & Sharratt, 1998, p.32) are vitally important. To create a collaborative environment school leaders must coordinate the school schedule to allow time for teachers to work and plan together.

With today’s stringent academic requirements, scheduling student requirements along with time for teacher collaboration is particular challenge. However, if principals want teachers to accommodate the ever increasing expectations for student learning, and meet the requirements of reform mandates, they must prioritize and make time for teacher collaboration.

Collaboration not only supports teachers’ ability to accommodate learners, it also builds a positive school culture. Engels et al. (2008) report that, “testimony from successful school principals suggests that focusing on development of the school’s culture as a learning environment is fundamental to improved teacher morale and student achievement” (p. 99). Teachers who are energized by their own learning transmit that enthusiasm for learning to their students. Additionally, they are more likely to implement specific practices successfully when they are able to experience them first hand as learners. For a principal to enable teacher collaboration amidst so many other
demands on their time is a tall order, but it is an essential element of transforming the culture of their schools.

**Turnaround schools and culture.** Fullan (2006) defines Turnaround schools as “failing schools, schools on probation, schools facing challenging circumstances, schools in special measures, and schools unable to demonstrate ‘adequate yearly progress’” (p. 17). He asserts that culture-building in these schools is even more critical. Turnaround schools are under intense pressure to implement reform mandates that are focused on accountability structures, in short periods of time. These reform mandates have not only neglected to promote positive school cultures, they have also not yielded their intended impact on student achievement. As Muhammad (2011) asserts, “since the implementation of NCLB, we have seen no significant progress in closing achievement gaps in student performance and have made no real steps in realizing the fair and equitable system the legislation aims to accomplish” (p. 9). Despite this fact, Turnaround leaders are no less required to follow the stringent guidelines required from reform mandates that are often tied to much needed funding sources.

Turnaround schools, in addition to meeting expectations of reform mandates, often face more changes in leadership and staffing. Subsequently, they have an even greater need for stabilizing and regenerating cultural norms in order to improve school-wide practices and student achievement. Fullan (2006) emphasizes the need to increase teacher leadership for the success and sustainability of Turnaround schools. He states: “if we do not do something to increase the internal capacity of Turnaround (really, all) schools, we will spend the rest of our days mired in the awful-to-adequate stew of failed reform” (p. 27). Under the intense spotlight of turnaround efforts, school leaders may be tempted to put culture-building on hold and focus solely on teacher practice and student
improvement. However, decades of seeking simple solutions to the complex challenges in Turnaround schools have rarely served these environments well.

The pressures for rapid growth in student achievement in Turnaround schools make leaders susceptible to pursuing fast solutions. Fullan (2006) points out that “quick-fix changes to Turnaround failing schools often exhaust the teachers or the principal, and improvement efforts aren’t sustained over time” (p. 24). Since Turnaround leaders are faced with the additional challenge of leading change while often adding and removing staff members within the school house, building relationships and stabilizing the school culture is even more challenging. However, it is still critically important. Supovitz, et al. (2010) report three factors that are “consistently related to improvements in teaching and learning.” These three factors are:

1. the role principals play in focusing the mission and goals of the organization,
2. how principals encourage an environment of collaboration and trust in the building, and
3. the extent to which principals actively support instructional improvement.

(p. 72)

Supovitz et al. (2010) point to a kind of school leadership that calls for transparent school-wide goals, investment in relational trust with staff members, and a commitment to the coupled learning of both students and teachers for the betterment of school-wide improvement.

Leithwood and Strauss (2008) point to key indicators of Turnaround schools where the school culture is shifting in ways that impact student achievement. In these schools:

Teachers [demonstrate] significantly greater willingness to work collaboratively with their colleagues, and a sense of school-wide responsibility for student success [begins] to pervade the professional cultures. Staff no longer [looks] outside of the school for explanations of student failure, but [focuses] instead on the many things they could do within the school to ensure success. (p. 62)

This is the professional learning that Turnaround leaders are charged with inspiring.
Finally, as Muhammad (2011) says, “recent research has been helpful in exposing the significant power school culture wields in the functioning of a school” (p. 14). And while that may be true, under the current pressure of school reform, culture-building is easier to prioritize in strategic plans than to effectively implement on the ground. Because of this, few school leaders are able to successfully change the culture and manage multiple school reform mandates while improving student achievement. Juggling these important aspects of school leadership is even more challenging in lower performing schools that are too often grappling with the effects of poverty. This is precisely why this study aimed to learn from a high performing school situated not only in a high poverty district, but also in the midst of implementing accountability structures mandated by reform. In an age of accountability through heavy reform initiatives, the voice and power of positive school cultures has been nearly silenced and lost. This study examined one Turnaround school’s success and the impact school culture has had on its success. Through interviews and observations, this study adds to the dialogue about schools and school leaders who are handling the pressure of reform, strengthening teacher practice and improving student achievement against all odds.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This section describes the processes used for studying Comunidad’s school culture as well as the staff’s perception of its impact on student achievement. It begins with a brief description of the school’s increase in student achievement, followed by connections made in the prior pilot study. It also provides an explanation of interview participants, the context and purpose of observations and identifies the specific methods used for collecting data as well as the sequencing of the data collection (Maxwell, 2013). Additionally this chapter clarifies how these data were analyzed as well as what safety nets were put in place to avoid potential gaps in the data. Finally, as both a researcher and an employee in the district in focus, I will address my positionality and how I addressed issues that threatened validity while conducting this research.

Description

“It is in the culture that any organization finds meaning and stability” (Schlechty, 2001. p. 14). This study examined one school in which student performance steadily improved under the leadership of a seasoned principal with a track record of school improvement and generating positive school cultures. In order to define the culture at Comunidad and learn from its successes, this study observed what practices, attitudes and perceptions the members have about their school, how they defined or characterized their school culture, their perceptions of their school culture’s impact on student achievement as well as how they maintained improvement while managing heavy reform initiatives. This study builds off an earlier pilot study, previously mentioned, which developed an initial staff characterization of the culture at Comunidad. While the pilot study characterized staff’s definitions of Comunidad’s culture, it did not place their understanding of the school’s culture in the context of juggling and implementing multiple school reform efforts in ways that this continued study was able to encompass.
Further staff interviews allowed interviewees to discuss their characterizations of the school’s culture in the midst of implementing multiple reform initiatives. As I extended my time at Comunidad, I further developed research relationships, conducted interviews, and observed both classrooms and the overall school environment. I looked not only at what was being told, but also at the data surrounding what was being told (Maxwell, 2013).

**Research Setting**

Seven interviews and observations were conducted at the Comunidad Elementary School at Jonestown. An eighth interview was conducted at my neighboring school (Lafayette Street Middle School in Jonestown) at the request of the interviewee, and a ninth interview was conducted at Kings Middle School (in Jonestown) out of convenience for the interviewee during summer vacation.

**Participant Selection Criteria**

While there are approximately seventy staff members at Comunidad, only thirty-seven remain from the staff that existed there in 2010. Of those thirty-seven, I interviewed eleven members (including the principal) during the pilot study. I returned to some of those interviewees to gather more in-depth data on their perceptions of how the community has focused on culture-building in the midst of such weighty reform efforts over the last four years. I interviewed nine additional staff members who joined Comunidad after 2010. All interviewees answered the same interview questions that served to invite and document their characterization of the school’s culture, their perceptions of the relationship between the school culture and improved student growth, as well as their perceptions of the relationships between the school leadership and its culture (see Appendix B). Finally, interviews with the staff and leadership captured the leader’s view and approach to culture-building in the midst of implementing multiple
reform mandates and in the context of state and district priorities that have not prioritized culture-building.

Interviewees were chosen from a staff list provided by the principal which I cross-checked with Human Resources. Since this study aimed to define the school culture during its turn-around over the last four years, most of the interviewees chosen for the pilot study had been employed at Comunidad since 2010. In this study I extended to include teachers who were hired after the new leadership began in order to collect a rounded experience of the culture of Comunidad in addition to the previous historical perspective. I limited interviewees to members who had been at Comunidad for at least two years to adequately capture staff perceptions after participating in at least one major school reform initiative. I interviewed teachers and staff members who represented a range of grade levels and content areas to capture a cross-section and balance of perspectives. I also interviewed the principal and members of her administrative team to contextualize their perceptions of developing a school culture in the midst of mandatory reform initiatives.

The Principal, Shea, gave me full access to visit classrooms, teacher-led small learning communities, student and teacher cafeterias as well as public spaces (e.g., libraries, hallways, Main Office and Guidance offices). Shea welcomed me to shadow her during my visits at different points in her day but most of my observations happened in absence of her company as she was often tied up when I visited. I did observe Shea’s role in the building through her formal and informal interactions with staff and students. In the section that follows, I outline the methods and design of the research.

**Methods and Data Collection**

The following section outlines the methods used to study the culture at Comunidad. It frames the structure and purpose of participant interviews, as well as the
use of observations, fieldnotes, research memos and data journals. Additionally, sources and structures of data and document review are outlined.

The primary data collection instruments for this study were staff interviews and school-wide staff and student observations with fieldnotes. However, this study built off of a previous pilot study of the culture of Comunidad Elementary School. Appendix B provides a framework and context for the relationship between the interviews in the pilot study and those conducted in this study.

**Participant Interviews**

Building off the pilot study during which I interviewed eleven staff members including the Principal of the school, I conducted nine additional sixty minute "semi-structured interviews" (Rubin & Rubin 2005, p. 82) that included a variety of staff members, from teachers to paraprofessionals, a librarian, and three administrators. (See Table 3 below) I

Table 3.

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worked to create and strengthen my rapport with interviewees that invited them to speak freely and not be confined completely by the questions (see Appendix B, p. 143). I opted not to interview students formally, but observed students and wrote fieldnotes that focused on and captured student-to-student and teacher-to-student interactions. Since this study aimed to capture the culture of the school and its impact on student
achievement as well as how the community managed multiple reform efforts, the perceptions of elementary school-aged students were not as relevant as their observable behaviors.

All interviews invited staff members to characterize the school’s culture, to describe their perceived relationship between the school culture and improved student achievement, as well as their perceived relationship between the school leadership and its culture. Additionally, I invited interviewees to characterize their experience with participating in multiple reform initiatives over the years of their employment at Comunidad.

I collected audio recordings of the interviews and extracted data from full written transcriptions for review and analysis. I used the data from interviews to drive what I choose to observe in the school and made necessary changes to my interview questions after reviewing the data that the first interviews yielded (Maxwell, 2013). I chose a method of semi-structured individual interviews after completing the initial pilot study where staff members exhibited a strong desire to talk about the challenges, changes, conditions and leadership at the school during their time of employment at Comunidad. While I readily expected some staff members to decline interviews, all were eager to participate. Additionally, the individual and semi-structured interviews allowed for a confidential and relaxed setting where interviewees had the ability to redirect discussion to areas that yielded rich data. In the nine interviews in this study, I sought a balance between employing scripted interview questions while also allowing flexibility for participants to direct the discussion to areas of the school’s functionality and culture-building that a more structured process may have stifled. Ultimately interviewees generally stayed within the confines of my interview questions, and spoke readily in response to each. I believe this was due to the fact that my questions were closely related
to questions posed in my Pilot interviews which allowed me to grow more comfortable with the content of the questions, while also being flexible with allowing interviews to develop organically.

**Observations and Fieldnotes**

With the Principal’s permission I conducted observations in all areas of the campus at various times within the school day. She and I agreed that this would give me the best view of the natural environment and functionality of the school. Since it is very common in this district for teachers, administrators and district leaders to observe classrooms, my presence did not appear to disrupt the staff or students. I conducted observations in staff meetings, hallways, the main office, the library, classrooms, and teacher and student cafeterias. I also collected fieldnotes while shadowing the Principal where I observed her interactions with students and staff during the previous pilot study. During each visit, I wrote fieldnotes that closely documented my impression of the setting and players observed (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). All gathered evidence helped me to understand the culture of the school through the language and behavior of its members. I observed where and how the staff engages with multiple occurring state and federal mandates through professional development and teacher practice. Observing the environment was important in this interview study, where observations provided contextual information, guidance for adjusting interview questions, a different perspective from the interviews, and a check on my interview data (Maxwell, 2013).

**Research Memos and Data Journal**

Although my primary sources of data collection were participant interviews and observations, I organized my data through research memos that formulated my research journal. I compiled memos after each interview and school-wide observations allowed me to identify and reflect on themes as well as recognizing additional areas of
questioning for remaining interviews.

**Data Review**

The District provided data on both state standardized tests, as well as the teacher and student attendance. I used these data to inform my working understanding of the growth at Comunidad, but I also referenced it where appropriate, in my discussions with interviewees. Having school data and relevant background on the school allowed me to make sense of interview conversations and gave me more credibility with staff members (Maxwell, 2013).

**Document Review**

The Principal invited me to review team meeting and faculty meeting agendas as well as the weekly letters she sent to the entire staff. I reviewed these documents as well as the school’s *Reorganization Plan* which outlined the instructional priority areas and operational strategies that the school prioritized over the years captured in this study.

**Sequencing of Methods**

Before beginning my interviews, I reviewed and analyzed Comunidad’s student achievement data as well as data on student and staff attendance to create familiarity and context for the study. While I began with a concrete plan for both the methods and sequence of data collection, my plan allowed for midcourse corrections on the ground and flexibility throughout the study (Maxwell, 2013). I structured my research to allow enough time to circle back and interview more stakeholders where needed. One example of this occurred while reviewing the initial interviews and noticing a need to be more direct in questioning interviewees about how they perceived the school culture’s impact on student achievement. While the initial interviewees spoke readily about the school culture, could define and characterize the culture and speak to the challenges of
managing multiple reform efforts, there was less data on their overall perceptions of how the school’s culture related to or impacted student achievement. This data was critical because the heart of this study exists in how staff members position the school’s culture in relationship to their gains in student achievement. Recognizing this dearth of data was critical at the start of the interviews and allowed me to dig deeper in the remaining interviews.

In order to allow the data to mold the direction of the study, I interchanged interviews with observations. I began by interviewing the Principal to gather not only her perceptions of the school culture, but also to gauge her comfort level with my movement and interactions throughout the building as I observed and accumulated fieldnotes. After school visits and interviews I compiled electronic notes in a research journal. With each visit to the school, I interspersed observations of the setting with individual interviews. This allowed me to make midcourse changes to interview questions and to illicit unexpected focal areas for observations. An example of one mid-course correction occurred when I observed a Professional Learning Community where teachers worked efficiently in teams and where all members were engaged in the dialogue. The groups reviewed and stated expectations for the meeting time and while some groups were led by administrators or Instructional Leaders (teacher leaders) in most cases the teachers were seemingly empowered to have an equal voice in the work. This observation triggered a need to ask more questions of interviewees about how building-wide professional development impacted their experience of school’s culture, their voice and role in leading professional learning, their ability to manage reform initiatives and ultimately their perceptions of professional development’s impact on improved student achievement.
Throughout the study, I took Maxwell’s (2013) advice that, “any component of the design may need to be reconsidered or modified during the study in response to new developments or to changes in some other component” (p. 93). I was mindful of making adjustments throughout the research process. I did this, as stated previously, by reviewing the transcripts after every two interviews to identify holes in my data. This recursive process allowed the interviews to inform particular environments that I needed to observe and observations to elicit further questions to ask within my interviews. After reviewing transcripts between school visits I compiled memos to allow me to keep my process and school visits efficient.

When all interviews were concluded I had planned to conduct one last interview with the Principal. However, the Principal made a decision just before the start of my staff interviews, to retire. Initially I feared this would negatively impact my data collection. However, because she retired at the end of the year, and all of my interviews were conducted in the summer after she left or the early fall at the start of the new school year, Shea’s absence did not yet seem to impact staff perceptions of the previous years under her leadership because they had yet to experience the school environment in her absence. Given that she is now retired and living out of the region, I chose not to conduct a final interview, as its initial purpose was primarily to close the study formally, share findings with her, and thank her for her participation.

**Positionality**

At the start of this research, I was serving in the role of Curriculum Director for this district where I worked only with the middle and high schools, except for my supervision and support of the district librarians in all K-12 schools. I had visited Comunidad once in my previous role to meet with the librarian but had not worked with the rest of the Comunidad staff. My contact with the Comunidad Principal was limited to
generic email contact to principals regarding supporting the library and my participation in district leadership meetings and trainings where principals and Directors were in attendance. My role positioned me both as an insider and outsider in that I was an employee and leader in the district, yet I had minimal contact with the school at large. However, in the second year of this study, I was hired as a Turnaround Principal at one of the district’s middle schools that happens to abut the Comunidad property. When conducting interviews during the pilot study, staff members knew only that I was a secondary Curriculum Director for the district. However, during my interviews for the second portion of this research, I was serving as a Principal of not only a Turnaround school, but also in their neighboring school. This did not seem to impact staff members’ candidness and interviews from both the pilot and the research that followed yielded similar data. However, it is important to note that through this research my role changed from district personnel to neighboring Turnaround Principal. My second round of interviews (after the pilot study) were conducted in the summer and early fall after my first year as Principal.

While my position as neighboring Principal seemed to have little impact on interviews or the data they produced, my own reactions to the data changed as I was experiencing many of the same challenges as the leader I was studying. I found myself empathetic to both the staff and leader as I listened to interviews and analyzed the data. I believe my role as Turnaround Principal allowed me to dig deeper and ask more pointed and likely more relevant questions. It also gave me a laboratory to learn from the successes and challenges I observed at Comunidad. This research both challenged and validated my leadership moves and made me a more reflective and effective leader in my own setting.
Data Analysis

Before beginning the data collection, I engaged with data at the school, district and state level and disaggregated all in preparation for my time at Comunidad. Specifically, I used information available through the State Department of Education’s online platform to examine how Comunidad performed in comparison to the State (see Table 4).

Table 4
Comunidad Student Achievement Data (SAD) compared to state from 2009-2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Previous Principal</th>
<th>New Principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School data</td>
<td>State avg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA CPI</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math CPI</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science CPI</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math SGP</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>44.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*na = not available
Note: Both graph and table adapted from State Tests of Spring 2015 Percent of Students at Each Achievement Level for Comunidad Elementary School, Retrieved from State Department of Education, 2015.
I used these data to provide a context for my research and to better understand the scope of Comunidad’s student growth and achievement over the four years reflected in this research.

After each interview, I compiled the data to measure how it captured the intended information about the school’s culture, its perceived relationship to student performance and the impact of leadership on Comunidad’s school culture. I used what Saldanà calls *First Cycle* coding after every two interviews to formulate trends in the interviewee responses to questions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldanà, 2013). This gave me “interpretive familiarity” with my data and allowed for midcourse corrections or additions to questions (Miles et al., 2013). I chose not to use my codes from my pilot study as a preliminary or “Start List” of codes. I found, as Miles et al. suggested, that during my pilot study themes emerged inductively throughout the interview and observation process, and I trusted in that process this time as well. Where I found elements were missing from interviews, I adapted questions to reach more pointed outcomes. In other words, my data analysis ran concurrent with my data collection throughout the study (Miles et al., 2013).

I incorporated memoing at the conclusion of each day that I spent observing Comunidad so as not to lose important facts, impressions or observations that were essential toward drawing connections to the data collected in the interviews (Miles et al., 2013). I later coded relevant findings from those memos as well as my field notes during observations.

After I completed all interviews and observations, I conducted *Second Cycle* coding or *Pattern Coding* to allow me to draw broader associations between the responses of different interviewees (Miles et al., 2013). *Pattern Coding* guided my overall findings and data analysis throughout and beyond the data collection (Miles et al. 2013).
Once all interviews and observations were completed I disaggregated and compiled the data to write a report of my findings of how staff members at Comunidad defined the culture, what role they believe the leadership played in creating the school culture in the midst of radical reform efforts, and how they believe the school’s culture impacted student achievement. What follows are my findings.

**Data Analysis and Findings**

This is a qualitative case study of one successful Turnaround school. The purpose of this study was to understand the staff’s perceptions of how the culture of one underperforming Turnaround school impacted their improved student achievement, if at all. It also examined the leadership’s impact on the school culture as well as the ways in which the school culture was impacted by managing three large reform initiatives in a four year timeframe. The findings are based on data collected from interviews with nine staff members as well as data from eleven interviews with staff during the pilot study out of the overall seventy-six staff members at the school. The next three chapters answer the following research questions:

1. How do Comunidad’s leaders perceive the role of school culture in leading school-wide efforts to improve student achievement?
2. How do various staff members at Comunidad, a turn-around school in an under-performing high poverty district, characterize the culture of their school?
3. How do staff members perceive the leadership’s role in shaping the school’s culture and how do they conceptualize the relationship between the school’s culture and gains in student achievement?

Specifically, Chapter Four locates the culture at Comunidad and provides the staff’s definition and experience of their school culture. Chapter Five reveals the staff’s perceptions of how their leadership impacted and shaped the culture at Comunidad.
Chapter 6 examines how the staff and leadership experienced and prioritized culture-building in the midst of three large national reform efforts in a four year time span. It also explores the most critical element of this study, which is, how the staff conceptualized the relationship between the school’s culture and their steady gains in student achievement. Examining how the leadership shaped the school culture in the midst of managing heavy reform provides the much needed and timely example of how public schools leaders can build a positive and impactful school culture, not despite lofty reform efforts, but in the midst of them.
CHAPTER 4: LOCATING THE CULTURE AT COMUNIDAD

This chapter reveals how the staff defined the school culture at Comunidad. It provides concrete examples of what Barth (2002) describes as culture—the “complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths”—that were established at Comunidad over the four years of their school-wide improvement (p. 6). Understanding the specific behaviors, values, and beliefs of staff and leaders is critically important in order to unpack the actual moves that staff believe led to their success. It also positions the staff descriptions and perceptions in congruence or in opposition to current theory on school culture.

In 2010 Comunidad Elementary School was designated as a Rating Four underperforming school after years of poor performance. The previous principal was removed and Shea, a principal with a track record for school improvement in the District, was hired as a Turnaround Principal. Table 1 shows student achievement data under the previous leadership compared to that of Comunidad’s new Principal. Additionally, Table 1 shows dramatic and steady improvements over a six year period. While this study focuses on the first four years of the school’s turnaround (2010-2014), the continued improvements are quite notable and reveal a continued and lasting trend of school-wide improvement.
Table 1

Comunidad Student Achievement Data (SAD) 2008-2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comunidad Data</th>
<th>Previous Principal</th>
<th>New Principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SAD</td>
<td>SAD</td>
<td>SAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA CPI</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math CPI</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science CPI</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA SGP</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math SGP</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>44.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Adapted from State Tests of Spring 2015 Percent of Students at Each Achievement Level for Comunidad Elementary School, Retrieved from State Department of Education, 2015.

Table 2

Comunidad Elementary School Student Achievement Data (SAD) 2008-2015

Note: Adapted from State Tests of Spring 2015 Percent of Students at Each Achievement Level for Comunidad Elementary School, Retrieved from State Department of Education, 2015.
This chapter illustrates the changes in the school’s culture that occurred during Shea’s four year leadership at Comunidad. It is divided into two sections: The School Culture Before 2010 and The School Culture under New Leadership.

The School Culture Before 2010

In alignment with Barth’s (2002) descriptions of culture as the “complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths,” the Comunidad staff described the culture through a series of conditions at the school that existed before and after Shea’s arrival at Comunidad. Staff members employed before 2010 described the culture noting the conditions of the school environment, the behaviors of its community members, their experiences of professional development and leadership support at Comunidad. To capture the themes that surfaced in the data collection specifically related to the culture at Comunidad before and after the new leadership in 2010, the following subcategories are provided within this section, and the section that follows: Physical Environment, Student Behavior & Parent Engagement, Professional Development, Staff Relationships and Leadership Presence and Expectations for Staff. These thick descriptions of the school before 2010 provide a context for studying staff members’ perceptions of the culture after the new Principal came on board in 2010.

Physical Environment

Initially, interviewees were asked to describe the condition of the school. Overwhelmingly interviewees described the conditions of the school negatively. One member described the building before 2010 as “overall run down and very stark” (Hardcastle, personal communication, July 30, 2015). Others described the lack of organization of materials. Specifically one member said that, “There was this closet that was piled with unpacked boxes of perfectly good materials that no one knew about until
we found them years later and they had become outdated” (Martinez, personal communication, July 13, 2015). Ironically, another teacher noted that “there wasn’t really much for resources. I don’t even know if there was even a book closet” (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015). The Principal, Shea, described the resources when she arrived in this way: “It was heartbreaking. There were literally no books. No books. A school with the lowest ELA scores in the state with no books in it!” (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014).

With those interviewees who had been employed at Comunidad before 2010, the word “chaos” or “chaotic” was articulated fifty-two times over the course of their interviews, to describe the conditions of the school before Shea arrived. One member said:

> It was very obvious in the classrooms, in the school. It was just very chaotic. It was kids acting out in every way that kids act out. Very unsafe; teachers didn’t feel safe, kids didn’t feel safe. There just weren’t clear expectations for anyone. (Leary, personal communication, September 15, 2015)

Chaos was used throughout descriptions of the school environment: disorganized learning materials, disrupted classroom environments, poor student behavior, communication that was sporadic or nonexistent, confusion around pedagogical practice, and as an overall definition of the previous school culture.

**Student Behavior and Parent Engagement**

There were many common themes across interviews about student behavior school-wide. Over half the interviewees talked about students being unsupervised in the hallways and the lack of overall expectations for student behavior as well as staff and administration’s response to student behavior. A teacher noted “[they] had kids running around like crazy and there was no good system for reporting student behavior previously” (Leary, personal communication, September 15, 2015). Another said: “We had a lot of kids that would leave the classrooms. Just walk out and run around the
building. There was a lot more physical altercations” (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015). Other staff members discussed how the environment affected the students through the lens of its impact on her confidence as a teacher:

The kids knew that I didn’t have confidence. They would throw chairs. They would talk back. They wouldn't sit down. They had no respect for what was going on. To be fair, I had no idea how to really get the procedures in place. I didn’t know what the schedule was really supposed to look like. I think that they felt the atmosphere. They felt everything was a little crazy. (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015)

Nine staff members who had been at the school before 2010 commented on a holding room where students who behaved poorly were placed:

We had this room that was staffed by a Paraprofessional who was supposed keep the ‘bad kids’ in that room. I remember regularly walking by and seeing students tipping over desks and acting out and I couldn’t blame them since they spent most of their time in there. (Gray, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

Similarly another member recalled:

Kids would be throwing tables and chairs and running out into the hallway. It was, "You can't be in your class. We’re going to stick you in this room and hope to keep you occupied enough that your behavior will calm down a little bit." It was just awful. Awful. That's my biggest memory of what Comunidad was before the turnaround. (Hardcastle, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

A final theme that surfaced had to do with the lack of parent and family engagement at Comunidad before 2010. One member described attendance at Open House nights for parents when she said: “Attendance was low, and I think parents were kind of standoff-ish. They would come and they just would look and not really interact” (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015). In this way, over half the interviewees mentioned the lack of parent involvement in the school prior to 2010. One member said, “Despite the fact that our students live in the neighborhood, literally in walking distance to the school, we had little interaction with parents besides pick up and drop off” (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015).
Professional Development

In response to my questions about professional development that existed in the building before Shea arrived, all staff members concurred that there were no formal professional learning communities in place. One interviewee noted: “We had to attend the district professional development in August each year, but we were never asked to implement what we learned when we returned to the school” (Hanz, personal communication, March 11, 2014). There was a common theme in many interviews of those who worked in the school before 2010, about the Montessori training that they received which was described in opposing accounts. Some teachers said they had extensive training in Montessori, and others said they were expected to follow the Montessori model even though they’d received no training. As one member said:

We were very much the blind leading the blind. We didn’t know what we were doing. We had no training in the district resources, but we also had spotty training in Montessori, but we were supposed to implement it right away, but we had no training. It was a show. (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015).

Several members could not remember specific professional development that occurred under the previous administration, and one said, “I know we had meetings but the fact that I can’t remember the professional development tells you something about the PD we received” (Gray, personal communication, March 11, 2014).

Staff Relationships

Juxtaposed to the dearth of accounts for professional development was a varied description of the relationships between staff at Comunidad. Some members described their relationships with other staff members positively, though usually in the context of negative conditions within the school, such as, “I had a good relationship with my colleagues and generally we supported each other because we had to, given all of the chaos. It was hard so we stuck together” (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015). Another teacher expressed a contrasting opinion: “We were all working in our
own silos. There were so many people I didn’t even know their names even though we were in the same school for 180 days” (Hanz, personal communication, March 11, 2014).

Similarly, another person noted:

I went to the bank one day after work half way through the school year. A woman said hello to me and I didn’t know who she was. I figured out a week later that she was actually a teacher in my school. That’s how disconnected we all were. (Martinez, personal communication, July 13, 2015)

Many staff members commented on the communication among staff. This member said:

Communication was horrific. It really was. It was easy to have this kind of inbreed of nastiness and there was pockets of teachers who would gang up on other teachers. There was bullying of teachers. Nasty stuff that would go on. (O’Neil, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

**Leadership Presence and Expectations for Staff**

A common theme in staff’s descriptions of the school prior to 2010 related to their perceptions of the previous leadership. The most common theme was an articulation of the leader’s lack of presence throughout the school. One staff member commented:

When I was hired, I never met her [the Principal]. In fact, I think I worked at the school for several months before we had an interaction. And she never came up into the Pods [Pods were clusters of classrooms]. (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015)

Another interviewee said:

To be quite honest, she was out of the building it seemed like more than she was there. I can’t even remember who the assistant principals were. That in itself tells me obviously I didn’t have much interaction with them. (Hanz, personal communication, March 11, 2014).

Another member noted: “I got along with her [Principal] fine but mostly because I never saw her. I think she spent a lot of time in the community advocating for our school. At least that’s what I was told” (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015).

Chaos was mentioned in this area as well: “Chaotic, I would say. There wasn’t a whole lot of leadership. You were left on your own” (Hardcastle, personal
communication, July 30, 2015). Many others discussed the lack of professional expectations prior to Shea’s arrival:

Attendance was atrocious. We would have about fifteen teachers out (sick) daily, there was really no accountability. Administration had attendance issues too. I think you lead from there, and our old principal just was absent a lot and so that trickled down. (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015)

Another noted:

The admin [sic] was often late to work and the staff had to start the day without them. We literally were receiving hundreds of kids and getting questions from parents alone. It was overwhelming at times but I didn’t know better. (Hanz, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

**The School Culture under New Leadership**

In 2012 (in my previous role) I happened to sit next to Principal Shea at a district leadership meeting where the Superintendent was highlighting and celebrating the schools that had made measurable progress during the previous year. Knowing this was Shea’s second year of gains in student achievement in conceivably the lowest performing elementary school in the state; I leaned over and asked her what actions she felt had the greatest impact on their improvement thus far. I expected to hear about what Muhammad (2011) would call “technical changes” such as new reading interventions or staffing changes but instead she laughed and said, “It’s all about the culture.” In alignment with Shea’s philosophy, Muhammad (2011) validates that attempting to change the technical practice in the building without first changing the culture simply will not work.

In this section, I return to the same categories (Physical Environment, Student Behavior & Parent Engagement, Professional Development, Staff Relationships, Leadership Presence and New Expectations for Staff) as the last section, but this time through the data collected in response to questions (update questions and name appendices) about the school’s conditions after Shea’s arrival in 2010 and after
subsequent school-wide efforts. In many cases staff talked about their experiences in that first year of the transition with the new administration. They were also asked to describe the current conditions (during the 2014-15 school year) in order to gather data that include both the transitional time and the changes and conditions they experienced after four years with the new leader.

Physical Environment

Interviewees were asked to describe the environment of the school in the first year after Shea arrived. They were invited to recall what initial changes they experienced. One staff member said, “I remember they [Administration] did a lot of little things that you wouldn't think would make a difference like repainting the office to brighten things up” (O’Neil, personal communication, March 11, 2014). Another noted:

They repainted the libraries. They got rid of all of those black chalkboard walls and painted them that bright blue so it just looked more welcoming as you walked in. She ordered new computers for the classrooms and just getting rid of the clutter. (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015)

Similarly, another member noted:

There were tons of improvements to the building. It still has its issues, but like I said, even just something as simple as color on the walls to make it more inviting and feel more homey for the kids, a place that they wanted to come into, not stark, barren walls and cold. (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015)

Later the same interviewee said, “She [the Principal] invested tons and tons of money into the actual physical plant, put in a new playscape indoors, things like inviting things for young kids” (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015). Still another staff member returned to the theme of chaos, but this time in regards to the impact and importance of chaos removed:

If I start my day off in chaos, it affects my entire day, so I think those things are really super important, too, for kids, to just have those routines in place now, or the same people, even from year to year, too, the same faces that they now see. So important. (Leary, personal communication, September 15, 2015)
The fact that all interviewees could recall the improvements made to the campus speaks to the “values” aspect of Barth’s (2002) description of culture. Clearly, cleaning up the school campus was one of the values that the new principal prioritized and she discussed this when I first interviewed her at the start of my pilot study. It was actually the first change she made when she arrived. She was appointed to Comunidad in the summer and before teachers and students returned she wanted to clean and brighten up the school environment. She said, “the building was very depressed and in many ways unsafe” (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014). She later explained:

I wanted to clean up the building for obvious reasons. It needed to be more inviting and colorful. It needed to look and feel more like a school. But I also wanted staff to arrive to school in August and see changes already happening. Look around, change is happening. (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

These physical changes to the campus, while practical, also seemed to serve as largely symbolic in Shea’s leadership decisions. As Zott and Huy (2007) write: “a symbol is something that stands for or suggests something else; it conveys socially constructed meanings beyond it intrinsic or obvious functional use” (p. 72, as cited in Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 246). The changes to the building were an obvious symbol and signal to returning staff and students that change was already in motion.

In regard to issues of safety that Shea mentioned, there is a tunnel that runs from the neighborhood behind Comunidad through the basement of the school and anyone in the community can pass through that tunnel to get to Main Street; a main thoroughfare to the North End’s markets, community centers and neighboring housing. When Shea arrived she said that there was no boundary between the tunnel and stranger’s access to the school: “People could and did literally walk up into the school while we were in classes. It had to stop” (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014). Subsequently,
Shea had security walls and doors built and had the area cleaned up and painted that first year.

**Student Behavior & Parent Engagement**

There were some common themes across interviews about the improvements in student behavior school-wide as well as increased and improved parent engagement. Over half the interviewees talked about how the students appeared happier and student behavior overall improved in that first year.

One staff member commented:

> The building felt happy, the kids were happy overall. We still had our pockets of really difficult kids, but there was a lot more help with those kids so that the other kids were able to be in class and learn and focus. (Hardcastle, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

Another member said, “It was settled. You could tell that kids felt comfortable. They felt loved. They felt like there was a community. This school was for them” (O’Neil, personal communication, March 11, 2014).

While I did not enter or observe the school before this study, I did observe many students while conducting my visits. I observed countless transitions of groups of students through the hallways while I waited to interview staff members. What I noticed was a common and orderly way for students to transition that was clearly a school-wide routine. During these transitions I observed staff members praising students as often as they corrected them. I also observed the library frequently as most of my interviews were conducted there. The library, now a bright and colorful space, is home to a massive collection of books, and a large numbers of students were present each time I visited. (The librarian reported that from the time Shea arrived she gave the library an annual budget that her librarian counterparts at other district schools are not allotted.) Visiting the library, often with multiple groups at the same time, proved to be an organized
system where students visited enthusiastically and where expectations for behavior were clearly conveyed and followed.

The staff also spoke readily about the increased and improved relationships between the students’ families and the staff and school community. Muhammad (2011) reminds us: “School culture is a rather recent field of study. For years, we did not consider how the varied and diverse human elements brought by stakeholders—students, parents, and educators—impact our schools” (p. 13). Families then, are a significant part of that human element that shapes or defines the culture of a school. Identifying family engagement as a critical element of culture-building is provided in these data. It is also important to note here that Comunidad is a neighborhood school and that the neighborhood boundaries experienced no significant changes geographically which allows for valid comparison of parent participation in each year during this study.

While staff members expressed a continued desire to have more connection with families, they also reported some subtle improvements in parental contact. One member said: “Open House, families has improved slightly. Usually, like last year, most of the classrooms had only 4 or 5 families, and I think we were up into 9 and 10 now” (Lessard, personal communication, June 17, 2014). Another teacher was more optimistic: “This year there was a lot of parents. The ones that came were really involved. They really wanted to know about their child, what they could do. The atmosphere this year was really nice with the parents” (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015). Another member talked about the improved involvement of families but also a change in the staff’s expectations for parents: “Expectations became different and we are holding students accountable to that and we are having conversations with parents and saying, ‘I don’t want him to stay in 2nd grade again’” (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015). It appeared that while there was an improvement in family engagement school-
wide, members still wished for more. One member said that even though they have a ways to go in improving relationships with families, “the fact that we are at a place now where we’re not putting out fires but can actually be proactive with parents, is big progress” (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015).

**Professional Development**

Interviews yielded common areas of focus and value regarding the changed culture at Comunidad. However, professional development was one of the areas that yielded the most common data. In fact, sixteen out of seventeen (94%) interviewees mentioned professional development as a part of their changes in culture and fourteen of seventeen interviewees (82%) spoke in depth and in praise of the improved, focused and coherent professional learning; especially within their PLCs.

When defining the culture of a school, an outsider might not point immediately to staff professional development as the first measure of a school’s culture. However, Leithwood and Strauss (2008) point to key indicators of turnaround schools where the school culture is shifting in ways that impact student achievement. The Comunidad teachers explained that when teachers demonstrate more interest in working collaboratively with colleagues they gained ownership for student success (Leithwood & Strauss, 2008). Leithwood and Strauss (2008) also highlight that in a culture of collaborative professional learning, “staff members no longer look outside of their classrooms for understanding student failure” but instead focus, “on the many things they could do within the school to ensure success” (p. 62). Given this, it is not surprising to find that every teacher interviewed spoke about the professional development opportunities at Comunidad under the new leadership since 2010. It is also important to note that not all interviewees were at Comunidad before 2010 so responses to, and value of professional development was discussed even by those who had not experienced the
previous school environment that lacked professional development opportunities. This speaks to the reality that many teachers enter education because of their value of learning, and it is essential that school leaders foster and support a continued collaborative learning environment for teachers (Leithwood & Poplin, 1992).

Additionally, in a time where teachers are often seen as both the problem and the solution (Leithwood et al., 2010) to student achievement, it makes sense that Comunidad’s leader would use professional development to model the kind of learning she wanted teachers to implement in their classrooms because as Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2006) remind us, “when teachers learn differently, students learn differently” (p. 67). Subsequently, many teachers talked about their experiences in grade level Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) where they were able to discuss students’ needs as well as ways to shift their own instructional practice to better support students. As one member said:

  Before, I sometimes felt like I was guessing. I wanted to help my students but at times it wasn’t working. And then when we started meeting in PLCs and me being a 4th grade teacher we kind of liked it because I was collaborating a lot with the other reading teachers and learning what she does that works” (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015)

Another teacher noted: “Regarding PLCs, we would meet once a week. I think it was during our prep that year and you would go over standards or testing or strategies or what we were teaching that works well” (O’Neil, personal communication, March 11, 2014).

Providing collaborative learning experiences like those highlighted here, not only empowered teachers to own the changes needed in their practice, it also had the potential to directly impact student achievement. In fact, Supovitz et al. (2010) found, “fostering shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation to be one of the most significant leadership predictors of student learning outcomes” (p. 35). Unfortunately
once teachers enter into the workforce, Leithwood and Poplin (1992) warn that too often school leaders ignore the intellectual needs of teachers. They also insist that it is vitally important “in collaborative school cultures, (that) staff members often talk, observe, critique, and plan together” (p.32). Collaborative adult learning was one of the priorities of the new leadership and an indicator of the shift in culture; a new way of operating.

While most teachers talked about the PLCs in terms of their collaborative learning, one member talked about the principal’s presence in the professional development as a symbol of change:

You knew something was different. Literally the moment I walked into August PD, when Shea was there, I knew something was different. She opened the PD. She stayed for PD. She was in the room. Professional development was very specific. It was incredibly specific” (Martinez, personal communication, July 13, 2015).

While most teachers spoke positively about PLCs, several also talked about how overwhelming the school-wide professional learning was at times and how much they were expected to absorb and implement in short periods of time. As one teacher said:

Sometimes it’s like, enough already! I just got a handle on the last thing and haven’t had a chance to include it in my lessons and already there’s a new topic. It was a lot. It’s always a lot here. (Hanz, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

An Assistant Principal also said, “We ask a lot of teachers. Being a Rating Four school asks more of teachers than other settings. It’s intense and requires more; more of an investment, more time after school. Always more” (Smith, personal communication, June 26, 2015).

Despite the increased work and challenge for teachers, many teachers mentioned that they grew to value the PLCs so much that as the extra funding for Rating Four dried up in the last year, they collectively decided to give their own time and come in early to work several days a week to continue to meet during unpaid time. As one teacher commented: “We voted to continue the PLCs on our own time. We voted because we
decided that either we were all going to continue the PLCs or none of us would” (Gray, personal communication, March 11, 2014). The fact that teachers valued professional learning time enough to continue it outside of their work day speaks volumes to their collective value of teacher learning. It also demonstrates teacher ownership of their own learning which in itself highlights the cohesive nature of the professional culture that improved under the new culture and conditions at the school.

A similar theme that surfaced around professional learning had to do with teachers feeling involved in the process of learning, not just the learning itself. As one teacher said:

It became kind of like, do you have any questions or concerns? At your grade level, what do you want to work on? What do you want to focus on? We had a say in what we needed to focus on or learn. (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015)

Giving teachers a role in selecting the focus of their own professional development is the kind of transformational leadership that Leithwood and Poplin (1992) speak of and urge leaders to embrace. Leithwood and Poplin (1992) assert that, “school leaders are most effective when they empower teacher leadership through teacher-centered professional learning communities and ongoing and focused teacher professional development, and by exercising a power that is “manifested through other people, not over the other people” (p. 9). Many teachers mentioned feeling empowered to give input on the content of professional development in this way.

This theme of teachers being involved in school-wide decisions around PLCs was captured in many interviews. Similarly, I also observed teachers as central decision-makers during an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) meeting at Comunidad. The ILT was comprised of approximately fifteen members, including the Principal and both Assistant Principals. What was unique about this ILT was that after the leader finished framing the meeting, she sat back and the entire meeting was run by the teachers. There
were topics and decisions that members were passionate about and heated debates ensued but the Principal never interjected. She appeared to listen carefully but she stayed out of the debates. Every person in the meeting shared or participated in one way or another and by the end of the meeting the group found consensus on each decision or topic. This was evidence of the kind of school leadership that Supovitz et al. (2010) point to that involves making school-wide goals transparent to staff and creating relational trust with staff members, as well as forming a “commitment to the coupled learning of both students and teachers for the betterment of school-wide improvement” (p. 35).

This Comunidad leader’s approach not only built trust and collaboration among teachers, it likely created a model of operating that was sustainable. Fullan (2006) emphasizes this need to increase teacher leadership for the success and sustainability of Turnaround schools where leaders attempting to lead and operate alone can lose steam and make sustainability impossible. Fullan (2006) explains, “if we do not do something to increase the internal capacity of Turnaround (really, all) schools, we will spend the rest of our days mired in the awful-to-adequate stew of failed reform” (p. 27). (Chapters Five and Six will further address how distribution of leadership at Comunidad assisted in managing the battery of reform mandates placed on Turnaround schools.)

**Staff Relationships**

The interview data yielded themes around relationships between staff members and illuminated a progression that occurred over time. Every interviewee who had been at Comunidad since 2010 talked about the initial divide between staff members. When Shea became Principal at Comunidad she brought with her a small team of teachers, including two Instructional Leadership Specialists (ILS) who had worked with her at her previous school where they had made significant increases in student achievement. While not every interviewee claimed to experience the division of staff first hand, every
one mentioned it. Some members expressed that Shea’s team came with an expertise and a way of operating that was hard for the existing staff that remained at Comunidad. Others explained that at their last school, Shea’s team taught under the Cornerstone literacy model which was largely in contrast to the Montessori model that many Comunidad members had trained and practiced for several years. One staff member explained her initial experience this way:

There was a huge, huge divide between the Montessori people and the Lincoln [Shea’s previous school staff]. We didn’t know each other, we felt like they thought we weren’t doing our job, they thought we weren’t doing our job. It just was bad. We just didn’t mix. (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015)

Another teacher reported:

I think it took a while for everyone to come together. There was a divide between Lincoln people and Comunidad people, so trying to blend us all together was kind of hard, because we came in with a different philosophy. (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015)

Another significant theme that surfaced was discussion around the number of staff members who left the school in the first two years after Shea arrived. The interviews revealed that some teachers received low evaluations from the Principal and were slotted to lose their jobs and subsequently took other jobs. Others left on their own accord because they either feared they would not like the new leadership or after working a year with the new leader decided they wanted to leave. A number of staff members discussed an uneasiness experienced throughout these staffing changes. The impact that these changes had on remaining members speaks to the aspects of culture that Muhammad (2011) addresses where the “unseen human factors” of the school have the potential to affect the day-to-day practices (p 13).

While staff’s reactions to the leadership moves will be addressed more extensively in the next section of this chapter, some members mentioned how these staffing changes impacted their relationships with each other. One member described, “The first year or
two were especially tough because everyone was on edge. It was clear that Shea was
cleaning house and it was just an unnerving time and made relationships kind of
strained” (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015). Another member
remembered a time when her thinking shifted around the staffing changes:

For a while I hated seeing people leave and I wondered if I should leave. But then
I realized my being here, and all the hard work I put in and what a team we were
becoming and I stopped wanting people to stay if they didn’t want to be here.
(Leary, personal communication, September 15, 2015)

Similarly another said: “People started to see that it was working and we started to take
off. There’s a certain confidence, and happiness, that brings staff together when all the
work is leading to this sort of success” (Hardcastle, personal communication, July 30,
2015). Similarly this teacher reported:

[Shea] worked her magic and got a whole staff together of people who really were
there for the same reason, for the kids, to make the school a better place. She
kind of weeded out the people who she knew who didn’t really want to do it. That
in itself was a big thing, getting rid of those weak links I guess you can say.
(Hardcastle, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

Finally, another spoke more boldly to the importance of the team-building that was
happening: “We are a team and if you don't agree with the direction we are headed then
maybe this team isn't for you” (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015).

The impact that these staffing changes had on the teachers illuminates the
complex moves and decisions a Turnaround leader must make. Each move, each
decision, regardless of how it may help students in the long run, has to be tempered
against how it will impact staff morale. Engels et al. (2008) convey that transformational
leaders have to convey a strong vision and set high standards for teacher performance
while often having to make hard decisions about how many and how quickly to remove
ineffective staff. While staff seemed to struggle with the period of time where staff
turnover and removal was extensive, most members expressed ultimately accepting it,
and in many cases, appreciated the changes made.
In fact, during each of the interviews there seemed to be a progression to their experience of the changes in the school. Many staff members expressed initial reactions to the new leader and to the conditions and practices that were swiftly changing. But each interviewee also discussed, in one way or another, how they eventually adapted to the changes, although it is fair to say that some staff members, who left and were not included in this study, may not have made peace with the changes. However, of those interviewed, most ended up expressing an eventual contentment or appreciation for the new way of operating in the school. As one member expressed: “We are one staff now. It’s very much a cohesive staff. You have a lot of new teachers who come in the door and they don’t even know who came from where and if there was any divide” (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015). She continued, saying: “I would say that we focus a lot on collaboration and reflection. I think we work well together, all aspects from leadership teams to teachers” (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015). Another member summarized the changes this way:

I’ve never seen a group of people that really help out each other as teachers. They plan together. Everybody is always willing to help. From holding a door, or taking a kid downstairs that’s kind of having trouble, stepping in. Just the support for one another is crazy. It wasn’t like that when we first came. (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015)

**Leadership Presence and New Expectations for Staff**

In stark contrast to the descriptions of the leadership prior to 2010, interviewees repeatedly noted the visibility of leadership and clarity of roles and expectations that came with the new Principal. As one member said:

The one thing that struck me when [Shea] came is that she walked around upstairs, which never had happened. It kind of made me feel nervous. It was a little unsettling, because it just hadn’t happened before. It’s totally a non-issue with teachers now. (Hardcastle, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

Similarly another teacher noted:
APs [Assistant Principals] and Shea were always upstairs. Walking around, they'd sit down and just do work on a laptop. They weren't observing you, they were just around. Kids know their names. Kids talk to them. They're not intimidated by them. It's just a different culture. I think that was new. The kids felt better about it. (Eisermann, personal communication, June 17, 2014)

Staff also expressed feeling that their roles were made clearer under the new leadership. They were no longer asked to take on tasks that interfered with their primary role of teaching. As one member said: “When [Shea] came, it was like, we're delineated, this is the job that you're going to be doing. Really, it hasn't strayed from that very much since” (Leary, personal communication, September 15, 2015).

There was a vivid commonality in the data regarding expectations from the new principal in that 75% of staffed interviewed spoke to both the clarification of roles and the high expectations the principal held for staff and students. Initially one member experienced Shea’s leadership this way:

She said we need to raise our expectations. Our expectations for the kids are too low. If you have low expectations they are going to meet them but we have got to raise the expectations so that they know what they're doing here. (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015)

While Shea pushed teachers to raise expectations for students, she also did so for staff. As one teacher noted:

There was a common expectation, in general, in the school. There's a common expectation in each classroom by each teacher. Teachers know what they can and can't get away with. Kids know what they can and can't get away with. Teachers have to teach and they have to instruct and they can't do otherwise. (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015)

Another member revealed ho her reaction to Shea’s hardline expectations when she said:

Expectations were made very clear from the very beginning. Some of us who had been here, we were a little bit shocked by the way that she did that, but also, when we stopped to think about it, it worked. It worked. (Leary, personal communication, September 15, 2015)

The need to challenge and raise expectations for staff and students align with what Jordan et al. (2000) says about schools with unhealthy conditions for students.
Jordan et al. (2010) emphasizes that, “both teachers and students who work in an unhealthy climate often accept low expectations of students’ abilities to learn at high levels and have little motivation to strive for high standards” (p. 160-161). Raising school-wide expectations for students’ potential is part of the deeply engrained attitudes which Barth (2002) defines as part of a school’s culture. Leaders wishing to change or improve the culture of their schools must work to understand this and directly address attitudes and beliefs if they are to work toward changing them.

Comunidad’s newly found clarity of leadership expectations, coupled with providing teachers with professional support is an example of what Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006) say positively influences a school culture. Several members spoke to the challenges they faced with what felt like a radical change in what was expected of them, but most preferred the new conditions far more than the earlier years where expectations were not only low, they were somewhat nonexistent. As one teacher said, “It was a hard adjustment. Suddenly there was accountability for everything. But I didn’t mind because previously there was accountability for nothing” (Martinez, personal communication, July 13, 2015).
CHAPTER 5: LEADERSHIP IMPACT ON CULTURE

By far, the greatest volume of data in this study was generated by staff members discussing the Principal’s attitude, behavior, leadership style and presence which they connected to the changes and improvements in the school. While the interview questions elicited interviewees’ perceptions of the leader, these questions yielded thicker responses than other questions. In other words, the staff had a lot to say about how their leader shaped the culture of their school.

The following data analysis address the first part of my research question: How do staff members perceive the leadership’s role in shaping the school’s culture and how do they conceptualize the relationship between the school’s culture and gains in student achievement? The second part of that question is answered in Chapter 6. The data analyzed here are organized in subsequent subcategories to highlight different elements of where and how her leadership was perceived to have shaped the culture of the school:

**Boldness and Fear, Accountability for Professionalism, Clarifying Instructional Practice through Professional Learning Communities, Strategic Staffing, Support and Communication, Distributive Leadership and Leadership Impact on Comunidad Students.**

**Boldness and Fear**

*Boldness* or synonymous words were used to describe Shea’s style in most of the interviews, and there was a wide range of reactions to this leader’s style. Some felt she did what she had to do to improve the school. Some loved her boldness. Others though, felt she initially led with a culture of fear. In fact, *fear* in regards to the leader’s actions was mentioned in nineteen of the twenty interviews (95%), all were about actions the leader took or overall conditions in the first year and a half of her tenure at Comunidad.
Staff members spoke at length about the leader’s actions and behavior in a variety of ways that related to the culture.

In fifteen of the seventeen interviewees (88%) staff recalled one particular story about the leader. This story was referred to as the *Quarter Story* by many members. After five or six interviews, I could have recited the story myself. The story takes place in Shea’s first year, on the teachers’ first day of school. She began the staff meeting by introducing herself and then showing the staff the school’s failing data. Staff reported that what the data revealed was bleak and, “she didn’t sugarcoat or soften the blow” (Lessard, personal communication, June 17, 2014). One teacher reported that she had never seen their school’s overall data before because she reported that the previous leadership never shared it. As this teacher recalled: “It was very sobering” (Leary, personal communication, September 15, 2015). Members then reported that after reviewing the data, Shea briefly explained the hard work they had ahead of them that would require longer hours and an even greater commitment to the school. Then, she told the staff that they either had to be fully committed or else she had a jar of quarters on her desk that she would give each person unable to meet the challenge; they could “go to Central Office, put a quarter in the parking meter and put in for a transfer” (Smith, personal communication, March 11, 2014).

I report the *Quarter Story* with as much of a balanced account as is possible given that the staff had a range of reactions to Shea’s comments that were as varied as the interviewees themselves. One member saw the quarter comment as a sort of humorous truth statement:

She had a thing where she would say, “You don't like it, I have quarters on my desk,” and the quarters were for the parking meters downtown so you could ask for a transfer. It’s things like that but she made light of it at the same time because it got everybody laughing. But she meant it and you knew she meant it. (Hardcastle, personal communication, July 30, 2015)
But another voiced her distain of these statements as threats: “I found the whole thing disturbing. I nearly fell off my chair. This was her welcome message, to threaten our jobs?” (Leary, personal communication, May 08, 2014). Still another member said:

I don’t think it was a culture of fear because I think [Shea] was also really good, even early on, at getting to know staff and knowing something personal about key people in staff. She was in support of people's personal lives and careers. She was also encouraging to younger staff members and stuff like that. It wasn’t all 100% a culture of fear. (Smith, personal communication, June 26, 2015)

Many members mentioned this same experience of the leader’s support of their lives outside of school.

Several other members reported that this Quarter Story message continued over time and eventually became something the staff, at least some of them, joked about:

It scared the hell out of me. In fact she scared the hell out of me in the beginning. But years later, in lighter moments, we would jokingly say, “I know. You have a jar of quarters in your office.” And we would laugh. (Martinez, July 13, 2015)

The Quarter Story appeared for staff members to be symbolic of the kind of boldness that Shea led with, since nearly every member shared the story in interviews. But the range of reactions to the story, seem to reflect the range of reactions staff members held in the beginning of Shea’s tenure. However, most of what staff discussed in regards to her leadership had to do with the later years and the lasting “norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions” that were established as a result of her leadership over the four years of their school-wide improvement (Barth, 2002, p. 6).

The Principal gave her own account of her early messages to staff. She talked about the number of people who left: “Some people left immediately when they knew I was coming. They put in for transfers. I guess my fame preceded me” (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014). She also recalled explaining to staff:

There’s going to be some things that are nonnegotiable and we’ll just have to suck those up, but there are going to be other things that we’re going to work through
together and figure out what the best path is. (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

She reported that she tried to lend them her confidence in their ability to turn the school around: “I would say, ‘I don’t like to fail, I’m not going to fail therefore you’re not going to. We’re in this together’” (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014). And ultimately she said: “We all just have to be on board because it is what it is. What was, was, and now we’re on a new path” (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014).

Shea also said during her first interview:

I know I scared some folks early on and that many people would leave. But I also knew that I have a school full of children who urgently need us to change. I couldn’t wait for the adults to get comfortable. (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

From there, Shea said, she set out on a mission to change the culture, “dramatically” (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014).

Many staff members addressed their initial fear and subsequent appreciation for the leader’s actions. But, in over half the interviews of staff members who held a variety of roles, there was another theme that surfaced. It related to what this staff member described:

It was the feeling that you wanted to work even harder to make her more proud of you, because she was so good at everything else. You didn’t want to let her down. She had high expectations, and if you weren’t pulling your weight, you knew it. (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015)

Another member explained:

Ok, so we’re all adults and we all want to do good work for the kids. But there was also this way in which you wanted to work for [Shea]. She inspired us. You never wanted to let her down. (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

This theme of wanting to live up to the expectations of the leader repeated itself in the data frequently and exemplified the range of reactions that staff had to the Principal’s personality and leadership style.


**Accountability for Professionalism**

Muhammad (2011) says that, “Substantial cultural changes must precede technical change.” (p16) While Comunidad’s Principal would probably agree, the kinds of cultural changes that she instituted were less of the team building or relationship-building that is often associated with improving the culture of an organization and had more to do with holding the staff far more accountable than the previous leadership.

While the data in the previous section revealed a theme of fear about the first year and a half of the leader’s tenure, the data also showed that fear had as much, or more to do with the circumstances of the school being named *Rating Four* as it did the leadership’s style or actions. Muhammad (2011) says that culture changing, “cannot be gained through force or coercion” (p. 16). Early on, while some staff members might have experienced the leader’s approach as a kind of coercion or threat, the following data tell a holistic story of the impact of her leadership moves over time.

In the first interview the Principal noted that holding staff accountable in a variety of ways was critical to changing the culture. This confirms what Macneil et al. (2009) suggest that paying attention to culture is the most important move a leader can make. The Principal revealed how and where she began holding the staff more accountable but she said that it began with her Assistant Principals and ILS leading by example. She said:

> They want to see if you’re going walk the walk, not just talk the talk. We had to show that here. They had been through a lot and they needed to see that as leaders we would lead and follow through. (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

She also said, “I had to focus on teacher attendance and how people came and went around here” (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014).

Thirteen of the seventeen interviewees (76%) also noted Shea’s focus on staff attendance. A staff member confirmed this: “There were statements like, ‘I’m going to
remind everyone that this is our goal for attendance, and so we are not meeting our goal because we’re not here”” (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015). Another said:

Before she came some people would take like every Friday off but, there are people that would take advantage of having so many sick days and she kind of came in and just said, “You know that is not gonna fly here.” (Lessard, personal communication, June 17, 2014)

Another noted the impact of the leader’s insistence: “Our attendance improved a lot when she [Shea] came” (Leary, personal communication, May 08, 2014).

Staff also discussed how the leader set norms for staff behavior school-wide and was quick to reinforce them. The value and impact of norms on a school’s culture are confirmed by Muhammad (2011) who reminds us: “Universal achievement remains a pipe dream until we take an honest look at our beliefs, practices, behaviors, and the norms of our organization. These elements make up a very sensitive system known as a school’s culture” (p. 12). These norms were made tangible by one teacher who noted: “She just did not want people on their cell phones during class time, during meetings. She would say, ‘I don’t want to see them’” (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015). Several interviewees also recalled that Shea explicitly asked staff to “clean up our professional attire” (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015). Another said, “She told us point blank, you know, women not showing cleavage or tattoos and things like that and not looking like slobs and such” (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015).

The Principal noted that she also set norms for meetings: “I didn’t leave much up to chance that first year. I needed to show them that a healthy culture begins with healthy adults and how we behave with each other trickles down to the students. We had rules” (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014). She also talked about how she managed those who were negative in meetings:
There are some of those [negative staff members] always that we would have at every meeting and because I didn’t want them to gain traction, we started doing [assigned] seating at meetings. You’d have to sit where your number was and I would organize it so the detractors were sitting with non-detractors. It sounds childish but it was for the benefit of those who wanted to be there. (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

Another theme in the data revealed how the leader held staff accountable for optimizing instructional time. As one teacher said:

She would meet with us and say, "Okay, I get it. I get it that it's the end of the year, but these are the expectations. I know vacation's around the corner but we're not done teaching." She just had those conversations where she was very frank. (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015)

Many interviewees said that her frankness was hard in the beginning but that as time passed they appreciated her directness. As one teacher said:

I know there were definitely some teachers who felt differently about her because they didn't understand the grittiness she had about her, but it never bothered me, I got it. I was like, “This is what you needed to do. This school was going to be buried if you didn't come in like that.” (Hardcastle, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

Still another noted:

Part of what so damn hard with her [Shea] was that she didn’t hold back. I hated that. We all had been on our own and we weren’t used to so much accountability. But in the end, I appreciated it because you knew where you stood with her. (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

One Assistant Principal discussed how changes in professional expectations required new ways of operating while simultaneously unlearning bad habits. This approach is supported by Elmore (2004) who explains, that “the basic process at work here is unlearning the behaviors and normative codes that accompany loose coupling, and learning new behaviors and values that are associated with collective responsibility for teaching practice and student learning” (p. 82). In this way the new leadership seemed to strike a balance between setting expectations, addressing bad habits while supporting teachers through extensive professional development. As one staff member noted:
There’s follow through, yeah, and there’s accountability, a lot of accountability. Do I really enjoy turning my lesson plans in every week? No, but I know that guess what, if I know I have to send them to [Shea] by Monday morning, they’d better be good. (O’Neil, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

**Clarifying Instructional Practice through Professional Learning Communities**

Fullan (2006) reminds us how in Turnaround schools, “we can see how students and parents suffer from the stress of exposed failures,” but he adds teachers to this “list of casualties” (p. 24). In this way successful Turnaround principals must tend to the conditions for teachers as well as students. The data confirmed this in a variety of ways. Two distinct themes in the data revealed the impact of the leader’s focus on improved instruction as well as consistent opportunities for high quality professional development.

One teacher noted the leader’s overarching attitude about their instructional practice when she said, “our administration and our ILSs were really good about making sure that we weren’t teaching to the test and that they always said something along the lines of good instruction will always help a kid pass the test” (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015). Others spoke with specificity regarding the changes in instructional practice. One teacher said: “The reading block was tightened up immediately. That was a non-negotiable from the beginning. ‘This is how you do a reading block.’ And it helped me significantly” (O’Neil, personal communication, March 11, 2014). Another noted:

We quickly moved on to explicit instruction. It was the next huge push. They taught us the workshop, and then went into each component of the workshop. They spent a year on prepping. It was a whole group specific method. (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015)

Another insisted:

I would definitely say it would be the professional development that was given to teachers so that they can know how to teach with explicit instruction. Teachers received professional development for guided reading, weekly PLC, two grade-level meetings a week. We were constantly meeting together, looking at data, to
drive instruction. It was a non-negotiable. (Eisermann, personal communication, June 17, 2014)

There was a common theme in the data regarding the thoroughness of the leadership’s method for changing instruction. One teacher noted: “She was all about standards-based teaching. You’d talk about the quick-fix. She wasn’t about that. She was about kids learning standards and having clear objectives about what they have to do. That was a big change” (Martinez, personal communication, July 13, 2015). While the leader articulated a sense of urgency to improve instruction, she also understood that making significant changes in the instruction takes time. As Fullan (2006) posits, “quick-fix changes to Turnaround failing schools often exhaust the teachers or the principal, and improvement efforts aren’t sustained over time” (p.24). While quick-fix changes and packaged interventions are appealing to some Turnaround leaders, this leader maximized long-term solutions, as Jordan et al. (2000) suggests:

A comprehensive package of changes in school organization, curriculum and instruction, parent and community partnerships, and professional development supports are needed to establish the new structures and conditions for the positive human relationships and effective learning opportunities that can deal with the underlying challenges of a large, high-poverty school. (p.159)

Additionally, the Principal’s decision to focus on the basics of solid, foundational instruction (consistent implementation of literacy practices, the Workshop Model, and standards-based instruction) is evidence that Shea was acting as Schmoker (2011) posits; that successful Turnaround leaders should: “high dollar innovation schemes shouldn’t be the first place to look when considering school turnaround. Instead, radically focus on reading, writing and discussion” (p.70).

To support these important and foundational instructional priorities, the staff noted that the leader carved out critical time for professional learning through formalized Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Leithwood and Poplin (1992) confirm the importance of make time for teachers to learn and plan together when they
say, “involving staff members in collaborative goal setting” reduces “teachers’ isolation by creating time for joint planning” (p. 10). Reducing teacher isolation and increasing their employment of best practices was critical to the schools’ lasting improvements. Finally, teachers spoke in length about their participation in the PLCs and how collaboration time created cohesion among the teachers:

It took a lot of team-building and doing trainings together and co-planning to figure out and feel each other out and realize that we’re all very capable in our own ways and the leadership and the way the school was run really affected our ability to do our jobs well. (Leary, personal communication, September 15, 2015)

**Strategic Staffing, Support and Communication**

Muhammad (2013) describes the negative cultures of underperforming schools as “toxic” and emphasizes the importance of directly addressing the behaviors and attitudes of staff in order for schools to be successful. At Comunidad, this began with what one teacher referred to as “weeding out” the ineffective staff when she said:

I think the biggest part besides fantastic administration is just the weeding out of the people who don’t really want to be there or don’t belong, as horrible as that probably sounds. There were pockets of toxic culture still within this school and you could feel it. Once that was gone, it felt like, I distinctly remember a PD where we all signed a big chart saying we were all 100% in, and the feeling of the room. You knew that everyone who was in there really was 100% in at that point in time, whereas a year or two before that, there were still some people who were sitting back, not really feeling the love. (O’Neil, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

Comunidad’s leader effectively removed staff members who were contributing to the negative culture but the data also reveal that she was also able to create trust and collaboration that Supovitz et al. (2010) say points, “directly to the cultural heart of the school organization” (p. 35). Supovitz et al. (2010) also confirm what these data reveal; that principals are the “central shaper of their schools’ culture” (p. 35). While much of the analysis provided so far points to a bold principal whose actions early on created fear in some of the staff, interviewees also spoke in breadth and length about the support they received from her. As one teacher said:
She was always a place to go and cry if you need to just break down for a little while. She had a crying chair in the corner where no one could see you, and a box of tissues, and she just listened. (Hanz, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

Another noted:

She has ultimately been very approachable. Very understanding about things that happen that you can't control and she could kind of sense, if you were feeling stressed out or something and she might pull you aside and just give you a little pep talk. (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015)

Similarly another teacher recalled: “She wasn't degrading or belittling. It was just like, ‘You know what? We can do this. We're all smart enough. You guys are intelligent. We're going to work together’” (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015).

Additionally, a staff member described her in this way: “She was more down to Earth, just more human. There were moments where she had, we called her The Bear, but I think everybody has a bear in them” (Martinez, personal communication, July 13, 2015).

In addition to the supports the leader put in place, staff spoke volumes about the leader’s communication. Most of the interviews mentioned Shea’s Friday Focus newsletter that she sent to the staff weekly:

Through emails, [Shea] did a Friday Focus every Friday where she would kind of say something about the week, usually something positive in the email and then there would be an attachment which had things going on for the next week every day and things to remember. (Rio, personal communication, May 06, 2014)

Another said:

We were always in the loop. Good news or bad news, she always kept us up to speed. You know? Friday Focus was good. It made us feel like we had some say, or some involvement. Like it mattered to her that we knew the whole picture of what was happening. (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

Similarly the Instructional Leader Specialists (ILSs) had their own newsletter that kept the staff informed and offered and opportunities for coaching or collaboration.

As one member explained,
The people in mini five, which are like the ILSs, CPDTs [teacher coaches], they had a newsletter that went out every week, 'Coaches Corner.' I think people knew what was going on and there was just this collective understanding about what was going on. (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015)

The staff also talked about how Shea created structures and expectations for communication with families. As one member described:

They gave us specific days during our prep instead of meeting we could call in parents for conferences. We were expected to communicate more regularly with the parents then we had been before. Just them knowing what’s going on with their kids at school – them feeling more welcome into the building. Instead of kind of an “us versus them” mentality, more of a let’s work together on this. (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015)

**Distributive Leadership**

Previous findings and analysis show how the leader empowered teachers to be part of the decision-making for their professional development needs. In a large elementary school like Comunidad with two Assistant Principals, the leader chose to distribute the leadership, especially for teacher learning. This is supported by Supovitz et al. (2010) who found that “principals, working with and through the range of other school actors who exert influence on teachers, do affect the instructional practice of teachers that produces improvements in student learning” (p. 53). Repeatedly teachers interviewed were in praise of the professional development provided that helped improve their practice. But, they also noted the impact the ILSs, or teacher coaches had on their collaboration. As one member said:

Our ILSs, I give them all the credit in the world, fantastic ILSs. Without them, I don’t think it could’ve happened. The assistant principals were really good, but I really go from [Shea] to the ILSs. They were just tremendous leaders themselves and they taught us so much. (Hardcastle, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

Another explained:

They [ILSs] weren’t afraid to say, "Hey, you’re not doing that right. You can’t do it like that. This isn’t what’s best for our kids. It’s not going to work. Let’s do it this way." It never felt like you were being looked down upon, because if they said
something to you, they were there with a solution right after it. (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

Another described:

I think she had strong ILSs and they were the ones to say, "Okay, now we’re going to do this, and this is why, and we’re going to do it together and we’re going to work through it and it’s going to be hard but we’re going to figure it out, we’re going to make it work, and it’s going to be good for the kids." They really had a big influence on us. (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015)

The work of the ILS appeared not only to help teachers improve instruction but they also broke down the barriers that sometimes exist between leadership expectations and change in instruction. As teachers themselves, their input was experienced by their peers as less threatening and perhaps equally or more impactful than messaging from the leader herself. The data reviewed that the ILSs helped to build trust in the leader’s agenda by making it their own. As one member noted:

For all of the things for administration our ILSs and leadership team all took a positive approach on it. So right from the start they say, you know, well we don’t know much about this, we have to do this but they had a very positive attitude towards it so it didn’t allow a lot of our staff members to be so negative about it. We trusted them. (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015)

**Leadership Impact on Comunidad Students**

The data also revealed the leadership’s actions that influenced the culture in ways that directly impacted students. As one staff member said: “They [students] never knew who the principal was before [Shea]. But the kids knew [Shea]. They loved her. They knew she was tough, but they loved her. They like it when you’re tough. They like that security” (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015). Another recalled:

So like when [Shea] walked into a classroom kids would straighten up, you know. They would know that she’s the principal and I need to do my job right now and they weren’t just coming around when you called for them, they were coming around all the time to check in to see how teachers were doing, to see how the kids were doing. (Lessard, personal communication, June 17, 2014)

Others spoke to ways in which Shea prioritized supporting students in need. As one member said:
[Shea] was very strategic in handling those students, holding meetings, collecting data, so that we can get the right placement for students that were in need. There were quite a few kids in crisis. She made a plan so we can get those students the supports they needed. (Hardcastle, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

These themes in the data support what Engels et al. (2008) describe as one of the prototypes of an effective leader: someone who

“prefers to focus on education matters and pupils. The educational leader is concerned about pupils’ well-being at school, and devotes quite a lot of time to innovation in education, teaching methods, a policy on counseling of pupils, etc. Devos (2000) suggests a positive relationship between this last type of leaders and positive school cultures” (p. 8).

Additionally interviewees talked about Shea’s efforts to improve student attendance (as shown in Table 5) and support students and their families. As one member recalled:

[Shea] always did like attendance rewards for the kids. And for Open Houses we would either feed the parents or give away school supplies and things like that. So just...Yeah. More involvement and especially with the phone calls going home, letting them know what’s going on and things like that. (Martinez, personal communication, July 13, 2015)
Table 5

Comunidad Improved Student Attendance 2009-2015


Several staff members discussed how the attendance improved when Shea became principal. Jordan et al. (2000) reinforce that “in all cases, high priority must be given to greatly improving student attendance so that there is the opportunity to increase learning” (p.161).

Interviewees also repeatedly discussed the ways in which Shea’s leadership impacted students indirectly through addressing the staff mindset about students. As one member noted:

And something [Shea] always said everything we do, we do for the kids and that’s just something that is kind of just built into our heads now is every decision we make we need to make it for the kids. And, it’s really, it’s about them. It’s not about us. (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015)
In addressing staff mindset about students, the leaders also made a concerted effort to help the staff better understand the lives of the students they served. Several staff members recalled how Shea had the whole staff read and discuss the book, *Teaching With Poverty In Mind* by Eric Jensen which interviewees described as “instrumental in helping us understand what our kids are dealing with outside of school” (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015). Many also talked about at least one occasion when Shea and the staff visited the neighborhood on foot with no agenda except to be visible and build trust with the families if their community.

Finally, the data overall reveal that the leader helped staff see their potential to help students overcome their personal challenges. As one member noted:

She wanted us to understand the implications of poverty that affect our students but she also wanted us to see that we have the ability to offset or make up for those challenges by being there for them and keeping them on course academically. (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

This supports what Leithwood and Strauss (2008) say that “while a student’s family background has important consequences for their learning, schools are able to more than compensate for the effects of challenging family circumstances” (p.10). This was reinforced by many of the staff who expressed how the leader wanted to strike a balance between holding students to high expectations while also building empathy for students, understanding the impacts of poverty and the complexity of their home lives.
CHAPTER 6: MANAGING REFORM AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURE-BUILDING

The previous two chapters provided a foundational understanding for conceptualizing the analysis that follows. Chapter Four revealed how the staff experienced the radical improvements in the school’s culture through enhancements to the physical environments, improved student behavior and family engagement, as well as improved professional development, staff relationships and higher expectations set for staff. Chapter Five revealed the plethora of ways the staff experienced the leader’s positive impact on their school culture through her unique personality and style, her insistence on professionalism, her ability to clarify instructional expectations through quality professional development, as well as her ability to effectively staff, communicate and distribute leadership throughout the school.

This chapter begins by positioning the school’s culture-building and improved student achievement in the midst of the schools’ implementation of several demanding national and state reform mandates. At a pivotal point in American education, when culture-building is often perceived to be in competition with the other demands of reform, this school managed to do both. This chapter examines how the leader used reform efforts as a vehicle for strengthening the school culture. It also reveals ultimately, how the leader’s insistence on strengthening the school culture was perceived by the staff as positively impacting student achievement.

The chapter examines how the leadership and staff managed multiple reform mandates in short periods of time, as well as how the leader maintained and fostered a positive school culture not despite reform efforts, but directly within them. This is significant because it illustrates how skillful leaders pay attention to the culture at all levels, and perhaps even more so, in areas that cause the greatest stress on teachers. This
chapter gives specificity and voice to the impact of school culture in an age of high stakes accountability where culture is often seen as elusive and secondary to prioritizing skill-building and increased test scores. Through staff and leadership interviews, this research lets the voices of staff members living through school improvement in the midst of school reform, speak for themselves. It also provides vivid data that directly address the staff’s perception of how the school’s culture impacted their student achievement.

The chapter begins with staff accounts of how the leadership continued to support culture-building by lessening staff stress as they managed the demands of school reform. Since these reforms were central to the accountability system that measures the school’s success (through test scores and successful implementation) the school’s ability to manage these reforms was critical for their successful turnaround. The leader’s ability to support staff in managing these changes is one element of culture-building that was perceived by staff to have positively impacted student achievement. In addition to looking at the ways the leadership supported the staff’s implementation of reforms, this chapter also examines the other areas in which the staff identified the impact of their school culture on gains in student achievement.

The analysis that follows is provided under the following subsections: Building Culture while Managing the Demands of School Reform, Staff Conceptualization of Accountability and Student Achievement, Professional Development and its Impact on Students, Staff Mindset and Student Performance.

Building Culture while Managing the Demands of School Reform

Barth (2002) insists that “culture changing is the most important, difficult, and perilous job of school-based reformers” (p.8). While this may be true, Turnaround
leaders are challenged to radically transform the school culture while also managing multiple reform mandate priorities. These mandates have renovated the schoolhouse into a high-stakes work environment that school leaders are forced to uphold while still monitoring and addressing the impact of increased stressors on its community members. At the start of the study, Comunidad was managing three large reform mandates: the Common Core State Standards, a new and more stringent teacher evaluation system, and the implementation of the District Achievement Measures which were comprised of pre- and post-tests administered to all students in all content areas. The outcomes were used as part of the evidence reviewed in teacher evaluations. While these three mandates over a three year period would have already increased the stress of implementing each with fidelity, in the fourth year of the school’s turnaround and in the midst of this study, a fourth major change occurred. This fourth mandate included a change in their high stakes assessment from the previous state assessment to the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) assessment. While both the previous state test and the newer PARCC assessment are both based on the Common Core State Standards, the change was not simply replacing one test for the other. The PARCC assessment is not only more rigorous than the previous state test; it also provides test questions that are largely different from the types of questions on the state test. Additionally, unlike the previous state assessment where students have unlimited time to complete each section of the assessment, the PARCC assessment is a timed test. These changes required needed changes in professional development foci, lesson plan development, needed support of literacy across all content areas, as well increasing the pressures on students by decreasing the time they had to complete these high stakes assessments. It also meant that administrators, teachers, students and support staff had to learn about the test itself and quickly adapt to the new requirements while still
managing the other three previously stated initiatives—not to mention the day-to-day challenges of working in a high poverty school setting.

Despite all of these challenges, I was surprised to find that while a theme of staff feeling overwhelmed by initiatives was apparent in these data, overall the staff was less consumed by responding to these changes than one might anticipate. This speaks to what Fullan (2006) describes in higher performing schools with healthy cultures where teachers and administrators have the “internal capacity to interact productively with the external accountability systems (testing, curriculum guidelines, and so forth) in which their schools operated” (p. 27). While some teachers expressed feeling overwhelmed by multiple reforms as a whole (especially in short periods of time) when they spoke specifically to each new initiative, they focused more on how they learned and adapted collaboratively than on the stress that surrounded each initiative. Interviewees also had a great deal to say about how the leadership supported the implementation in ways that lessoned the stress on them. To highlight these findings, the following data present an analysis of the staff’s ability to respond to the challenges of today’s reform and perhaps highlight the ways in which the established school culture at Comunidad assisted in not letting the reform manage the school. It also highlights ways in which the staff experienced support for implementing these reforms in ways that not only lessened their stress, but positively impacted their overall implementations.

There was a common theme in these data of collaboration and support staff received around implementing the Common Core Standards. In support of this Supovitz et al. (2010) highlights the importance of “fostering shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation to be one of the most significant leadership predictors of student learning outcomes” (p. 35). These data highlight the culture of collaboration that appeared to be a foundational support for the staff’s ability to manage the
implementation of each reform mandate, and do so successfully. Many teachers expressed how they felt supported by the administration, Comunidad's instructional coaches and the district as they studied and implemented the Common Core Standards.

As one teacher noted:

The Common Core, I felt again ILSs were just fantastic. The fact that the district put together groups of people to look at Common Core, flesh it all out for us, figure out exactly what we needed to do, and give us the roadmap for it, was fantastic. Without that, it would've been a lot more work on us teachers to try to figure it all out and figure out where we were going. (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015)

Similarly another noted:

It [leadership support] was very helpful, because a lot of schools just looked at them [Common Core State Standards] and didn't really use them, because they were overwhelmed. We really dove into it, and actually said, "Oh, okay. This is what we can do." Then they gave us time to plan. (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015)

Another spoke of how time was allotted for teacher to prepare for implementation: “So it didn’t seem like we were having to do anything on our own time that was extra to kind of get the kids ready for it” (Gray, personal communication, March 11, 2014). Another spoke directly to the leader’s support:

I think she [Principal] introduced the Common Core as a new way with standards that we were going to have to cover, because it was all different. We were really lucky that [Shea] supported us with our ILS's. We took the UPGs [Unit Planning Guides] and we broke them down. In our PLCs we broke them down, so she gave us time that year. We started to look at them and actually understand them. She gave us time to do that. (O’Neil, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

Finally, another spoke to the ways that she felt this support affected student performance: “I really think that had we not had this kind of specific guidance in terms of the standards that our kids wouldn’t have done as well as they did on the tests. I’m sure of it” (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015).

There was also a theme of appreciation for the district support around implementation of the Common Core Standards. Half of the teachers spoke to the fact
that the district compiled teams of teachers to write Unit Plans and common Unit Assessments and that these guides served as a good “jumping off point for us [teachers] to begin unpacking and understanding the standards” (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015). Another teacher noted that she was glad that the district as a whole adopted the Common Core State Standards early: “I was very grateful that I was working in Jonestown when Common Core came through, because other places are still trying to figure it all out. Jonestown just dove in as soon as they were released” (Lessard, personal communication, June 17, 2014).

While many teachers spoke to the support at the district level for implementing the new standards, a small percentage of teachers also noted their frustration with continual changes and expectations from the district, as one teacher said: “It seems like the district is always reinventing the wheel. Every year is something new, so you just get comfortable with one thing, and we were doing another” (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015). Another noted:

Those initiatives that the state has taken on, as well as the district, have been very stressful for teachers. I think that that is where there was a feeling that administration was on our side and willing to help us because there was not much administration could do. That was, I think, a big frustration point for teachers. (Martinez, personal communication, July 13, 2015)

When asked about their participation in the new teacher evaluation, the staff responses yield two primary themes. One theme showed the staff’s experience of the leadership supporting their participation in the new evaluation system. The second theme revealed a perception that the process was not useful to their practice. As one member said:

[Shea] helped us a lot. I think people didn’t like it but knew we were getting help with it. We would have PD times to look at the new evaluation tool, to learn about it. We could collaborate with our grade level team. She would try to make it easier for us. That went a long way. Step by step, this is what you need to do. This is how you need to do it. I think that made all the difference. (Hardcastle, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

Another member recalled:
Again, they were very positive about it and as much as they could help us with it they did help us with it. Showing us examples of what to do, telling us what our goals are and stuff. I think that the new evaluation tool takes a lot of time. For me doing it took away from time I could use benefit the children. (O’Neil, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

Another noted:

I think there is a lot of things that you have to do for it that aren't necessary. Like at the end of the year we have to do....We had already done one evaluation and we have to do another one where we are basically rewriting the things that we have already done. (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015).

One member spoke with more distain for the process:

Honestly, I think it's a big waste of time. It's another stressor. It's kind of hard to do in October, because now ... Looking at your students, some take a little while to get going. I think it's stressful. More stressful. (Gray, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

Despite staff perception that the process in part, was not useful, some teachers mentioned that they appreciated the directness of the administration’s feedback from observations. One member recalled:

Our administration wasn’t afraid to kind of tell us (in post-observation meetings) when we were doing something wrong or kind of let us know when we needed to go a different way and they weren't afraid to say no to us. They are always willing to explain why, why that didn't fit or why things shouldn't go that way. (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015).

Others spoke to the impact that the evaluations had on their practice that indirectly impacted student success. As one member said:

I get nervous, very nervous when I’m evaluated. Not sure why because I know [Shea] just wants to make me a better teacher. But my nerves aside, I can see how this is impacting my teaching and ultimately I am getting better at delivering material to kids in ways that improve their learning. I guess that’s all that matters. (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

The theme that threaded through responses to questions about all three initiatives had to do with leadership support and collaboration. As one teacher recalled:

But again they were very open and honest with us and very positive about it so again it’s something frustrating that we have to do but they said you know we don't have all the answers and we will kind of get through it all together. (Smith, personal communication, June 26, 2015)
Another noted: “Then there was also the implementation of the Common Core Standards so over this time there has been quite a few things. She would say, ‘We will just take one at a time’” (Rivera, personal communication, June 26, 2015).

Most teachers spoke to the volume of initiatives and the team approach that the leader took with implementation. One teacher said: “There was a lot of extra stuff that we had to do, but then she [Principal] would bring you up, be like, ‘All right, we can do this together. You’re not in it alone’” (Leary, personal communication, September, 15, 2015). Another noted:

She would introduce like, this is what the district wants us to do, but she's like, "We're going to support you all the way. We're going to get through this together. Every step.” It wasn't like, “Here you go. Figure it out on your own.” (Hardcastle, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

While interview questions did not ask participants about their transition into delivering the PARCC assessments, several interviewees included it when responding to questions regarding reform initiatives. Their experiences with implementing the new assessment yielded the same themes of leadership support and teacher collaboration. As one member said:

So when it was time for PARCC we looked at them together. We looked at the type of questions and then we kind of realized what our kids don't necessarily know how to do or what might confuse them so we tried to build some lessons around that because there were somethings that we had to teach like the two part questions or the questions where you have to choose more than one answer and just some of the words that they use that they weren't familiar with, in our PLCs and or grade level meetings. (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015)

These data directly pointed to teacher perceptions that the administrative support radically improved their practice.

The data around reform consistently yielded themes of leadership support and teacher collaboration that reduced teacher stress and allowed time, support and collaboration to lessen the burden that teachers experienced. It also appeared to allow
for more efficiency and fidelity of implementation. The support and collaboration that the leader provided is further evidence of the values aspect of culture that Barth (2002) discusses. The leader appeared to recognize the need for support and collaboration which speaks to what Macneil et al. (2009) say that, “as accountability through tests has become a threat, school principals need to work on long-term cultural goals in order to strengthen the learning environment” (p. 74). This leader seemed to understand that at every level, the culture had the ability to strengthen the school’s effectiveness and overall performance.

**Staff Conceptualization of Accountability and Student Achievement**

Engels et al. (2008) insist that the culture of a school has a direct effect on student learning. Understanding how the staff conceptualized the relationship between their school’s culture and their improved student achievement is at the heart of this study. In answering interview questions about how the staff perceived the culture’s impact on student achievement, there was an overwhelming agreement that indeed the improved culture at Comunidad directly impacted their improved student achievement. The staff felt students were able to achieve at higher levels as a result of the breadth and depth of culture changes that occurred over time.

In addition to managing reform through supportive leadership and culture-building, the data that follow provide concrete examples of the ways in which the stronger accountability systems and high expectations were perceived by staff members to have positively impacted student achievement. The following provides an account of how the staff connected strengthened accountability systems and high expectations with their gains in student achievement.

Fullan’s (2002) insistence that school leaders are the key to large scale change is reflected in these data. In a variety of ways the staff pointed to how the Principal affected
nearly every aspect of the school’s culture, from changing the physical environment, to removing and replacing ineffective staff, to providing time and space for meaningful and impactful professional development. The leader’s efforts align with what Engels et al. (2008) describe as transformational leaders who are able to articulate a strong vision for their staff and set high expectations for their performance. Many named the changes in expectations and accountability as key factors in the schools’ improved student performance.

One staff member highlighted how the clarification of roles and expectations not only made the staff efforts more aligned and goal oriented, it also inspired an intrinsic desire to face and tackle the needed changes school-wide. As one member said:

Yeah, [Shea], expectations, strong leadership coming down the line, and goals, team-oriented goals, knowing what each team, what their role was in the school, how they wove into each other, what our main focus was, and just instilling that passion for change in all of us somehow was key in our overall improved data. (Hardcastle, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

Another highlighted:

We were motivated and excited and passionate for doing what was best for the kids and what we needed to do. You could tell, while there was a lot of focus on test scores, of course, because there has to be, but that wasn’t really anybody’s true motivation. Though it certainly did impact how we did on the state assessment. (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

Another teacher noted the impact of the leader’s expectations:

There was a common expectation, in general, in the school. There’s a common expectation in each classroom by each teacher. All the kids are our kids’ type philosophy, which has been really important. Teachers know what they can and can’t get away with. Kids know what they can and can’t get away with. Teachers have to teach and they have to instruct and they can’t do otherwise. I knew she meant business. I think that that’s important. It was critical to our students’ growth. (Hanz, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

Others noted the ways in which a new level of accountability impacted their practice and subsequently their impact on student learning. As one member said:

The Principal and APs [Assistant Principals] were incredibly active and visible. They were paying attention and they looked for improvement. They also helped
us celebrate improvements we made and how those improvements were directly impacting how our students were performing. (Eisermann, personal communication, June 17, 2014)

Another described:

I think that it definitely was changing our student performance because I think that when you are worried about someone coming around the corner and checking out what you're doing at any moment in time and observing you, you're going to be more prepared and ready. (Smith, personal communication, March 11, 2014)

The other areas of leadership impact that members repeatedly highlighted were the ways in which leadership was distributed throughout the school. As one teacher recalled: “I think another thing that turned our school around was having a strong ILT. An Instructional Leadership Team that included everybody. All the parties were brought to the table. There was a lot more communication between everybody” (Rivera, personal communication, June 26, 2015). Another member concurred:

We couldn’t have improved so quickly if she [Shea] did everything. She’s just one person. But she seemed to have a knack for empowering the right people and doling out the work so we could make traction more quickly. It was also nice to get the message sometimes from other teachers. (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015)

Repeatedly staff members spoke to what Leithwood and Poplin (1992) describe as exercising a power that is “manifested through other people, not over the other people” in Shea’s leadership (emphasis preserved, p. 9). Many interviewees pointed to this shared leadership as an effective and efficient way to align the most effective practices that they felt ultimately impacted student learning. This distribution of leadership highlights the kind of lasting change that Fullan (2006) speaks of where leaders influence staff members in ways that create systemic change beyond each individual’s practice.

**Professional Development and its Impact on Students**
Supovitz et al. (2010) insist that, “principals, working with and through the range of other school actors who exert influence on teachers, do affect the instructional practice of teachers that produces improvements in student learning” (p. 53). To this end, the following data reveal how the leadership at Comunidad created the conditions for professional learning that staff members found to directly impact student learning. As one teacher described, “I think the professional development that they have given us played a huge role in what we have been able to do” (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015). Another noted: “I think PLC was really important for the teachers upstairs. Just the common planning time, they plan as a team, and I think that that makes it for them less overwhelming and better for kids” (Rivera, personal communication, June 26, 2015).

Repeatedly teachers spoke to the impact of professional development in their PLCs. As one member said: “In PLCs you're getting into clearing away everything, and really focusing on what standard you need to work on. I think for the kids, they have teachers that are really prepared” (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015). Another recalled:

So many things have changed since [Shea] became principal so it’s hard to say which had the greatest impact on our improved test scores. It has to do with PLCs, and being focused on the same things. It has to do with how we’ve improved as teachers and in what we teach. But all of that improved or happened because [Shea] and the other leaders changed how we work together. Yeah, the how. That’s what’s different. (Martinez, personal communication, July 13, 2015)

Others spoke to the impact of using data to inform their practice. As one member described:

I think as much as I disliked it, the constant analysis of data. I'm not a classroom teacher and yet I was analyzing the data and part of a team and going through and unpacking the questions until we were blue in the face, but I think that we all knew specific things that were going to be on the test. And it helped kids improve. (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

Another explained:
Even the gym teacher could talk about exclamation marks and the way that he speaks and just pointing out little things like that were just more, because we were around it, we just were more in tune with the things that they were teaching upstairs. I think that's what I remember from that year mainly is all of our PDs analyzing data and just being really disinterested in it, but also I think it helped. (Leary, personal communication, September 15, 2015)

Still others recalled how the professional development directly impacted and improved their instruction. One member recalled:

Even before [Shea] came I don't think I was a very good teacher and then after all of the professional development we have gotten and all of the things I have learned I consider myself a pretty good teacher just because of the things that they have taught us. (Hayes, personal communication, July 13, 2015)

Another teacher spoke to how improved instruction impacted students’ engagement when she said: “I think as our instruction improved I think that kids were more engaged and that really led to a lot of it. I think prior to that the kids weren’t always necessarily engaged” (Rivera, personal communication, June 26, 2015). Another recalled:

Kids were incredibly ... impacted greatly, is what I would say. They were learning. We were teaching in specific ways. We were learning how to teach on the fly as far as changing what you’re doing based on how students react. Learning and reacting. We were being taught really good practices. Kids were benefiting from that. (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015)

Others spoke to how the consistency of practice impacted students, as one teacher recalled:

Because we were so honed in on that and practiced it in the classroom daily, faithfully, kids were more organized; that gradual release. I think that helped them get focused because we had to put it out there and practice it; it helped the kids become organized because then they too were speaking the language that we were. (Martinez, personal communication, July 13, 2015)

Similarly, another member insisted that consistency and follow through had the greatest impact on student learning when she highlighted: “We have to keep our eye on what we said we were going to be doing for best practice and really seeing it through. I think that was huge deal. And it has made all the difference for students” (Smith, personal communication, June 26, 2015).
Staff Mindset and Student Performance

Leithwood and Strauss (2008) highlight key indicators of Turnaround schools where the school culture is shifted in ways that impact student achievement. Muhammad (2011) also insists that cultural changes are the first priority for impacting student learning. In addition to teacher’s willingness to work collaboratively with their colleagues, Leithwood and Strauss (2008) point to the ways in which successful Turnaround schools empower “a sense of school-wide responsibility for student success” where “staff no longer [look] outside of the school for explanations of student failure, but [focus] instead on the many things they could do within the school to ensure success” (p. 62). Inherent in this sense of empowerment is a shift in the staff members’ mindset about their work and their ability to create success for students.

This shift in staff mindset about their ability to impact student learning, as well as their overall mindset about students was repeatedly found in staff interviews. Staff members continually spoke directly to how the change in school culture impacted how they felt about their students and their own work. As one member said:

I think the culture of our school is completely different. Teachers want to be there. Teachers enjoy the kids. We enjoy each other. People are willing to come in on Saturdays to get things done. And something [Shea] always said everything we do we do for the kids and that’s just something that is kind of just built into our heads now is every decision we make we need to make it for the kids and it’s really it’s about them it’s not about us. We want to see results and are very supportive of each other. (Cruz, personal communication, June 26, 2015)

Another member noted:

I think they're [students] getting people that believe in them. They're getting solid core work. Reading and Math, they're getting that. They're getting people that truly care about them. I think we have an atmosphere that is comfortable, it's a safe place. There's so many kids that come to us, even though we only know them, you know, snapshots, but they feel comfortable enough to come talk to us, or just say hi. I think it's a feeling that they're safe here. A lot of them do want when it's Saturday, when it's Friday. They're like, "It's Friday already?" I'm like, "Yeah, it's Friday. I'll see you on Monday." I think they like coming to school. (Bello, personal communication, September 03, 2015)
Other staff members spoke directly to the impact these mindset and relational changes had on student effort and performance. One member explained how these changes improved students’ ability to persevere through the challenges they faced in rigorous learning when she said, “I just think that the teacher-student trust relationship will increase and students will be able to be guided through those hard moments when they’re like wanting to push a piece of work away and not do it” (Smith, personal communication, March 11, 2014). Another noted about the positive culture:

To me, that’s everything because if you walk into a classroom that has a positive community going on, kids are going to take themselves further in terms of their academic achievement because they’re going to feel empowered to do so. (Anslem, personal communication, July 15, 2015)

Still another recalled:

I remember the day when I realized that change that had happened with how my students felt because they weren’t resistant to learning or being challenged. I literally looked at my class and thought, this, this is what will make the difference. (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015)

These changes in the mindset and improved experiences for both staff and students point to the conditions that Jordan et al. (2000) highlight as essential for improved student learning, where, “discipline problems fade and school authorities can rule without resentment” (p.161) The impact of these improved conditions was perhaps best described and summarized by one teacher who said:

I know the culture is the greatest change that helped us improve as a school because I lived it. I now know what it’s like to work in a healthy environment and its effect on everyone. And I sure as hell know what it was like before. The culture makes or breaks us, and our kids’ performance. (Sullivan, personal communication, July 30, 2015)
CHAPTER 7: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The previous three chapters provided data analyses from interviews with staff and leadership at Comunidad Community School. They also answered the following research questions:

1. How do Comunidad’s leaders perceive the role of school culture in leading school-wide efforts to improve student achievement?
2. How do various staff members at Comunidad, a Turnaround school in an under-performing high poverty district, characterize the culture of their school?
3. How do staff members perceive the leadership’s role in shaping the school’s culture and how do they conceptualize the relationship between the school’s culture and gains in student achievement?

Specifically, Chapter Four revealed how the staff experienced the radical improvements in the school’s culture through enhancements to the physical environments, improved student behavior and family engagement, as well as improved professional development, staff relationships and higher expectations set for staff. Chapter Five illustrated the vast ways the staff experienced the leader’s positive impact on their school culture through her unique personality and style, her insistence on professionalism, her ability to clarify instructional expectations through quality professional development as well as her ability to effectively staff, communicate and distribute leadership throughout the school.

Chapter 6 examined how the staff and leadership strengthened their school culture, not despite implementing large reform initiatives, but by working through them together. It also explored the most critical element of this study, which is, how the staff conceptualized a relationship between the school’s improved school culture and their steady gains in student achievement. This final chapter will explore the implications generated by the data analyses. While it addresses the school-wide practices and
strategies that were unique to Comunidad’s leader and school setting, it also highlights practices that are quite replicable for districts and school-based leaders struggling to manage and improve underperforming schools. The implications here are organized according to the following subcategories: Building Culture Through Reform (while Remaining Focused on the Basics of Instruction), Preparing Teachers for a new Day: Reform and Change, Swift Removal of Ineffective Staff, What Matters Most in Leadership and Application & Replicability for District and School-based Leaders. These subcategories precede my Conclusion.

Implications

The story of Comunidad’s turnaround is a compelling one. It highlights a school that moved from being arguably the lowest performing elementary school in the state into a school that had measurable and steady improvements in student achievement over four years and continues on that course today. This research presents a success story told through the lens of the culture-building that the seasoned leader prioritized and insisted was most critical to their turnaround efforts. Despite heavy reform and the pressures of accountability, the leader’s insistence on shaping the culture in every aspect of the school paid off. The staff too experienced this improved culture as critical to their turnaround success. It is a local story of a local school and some aspects of the school’s success are not replicable in all settings. However, given the fact that this school generated steady success in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the State and in a high poverty district with many underperforming schools, this local story has many wide reaching implications. This chapter will identify and extrapolate the key findings that are replicable and urgently relevant to public schools everywhere that are struggling to find a balance between answering the call of heavy reform while creating school cultures that
meet the needs of students and staff, and create lasting and sustainable school-wide improvement.

The story of Comunidad’s success begins with the staff’s experience of the changes that occurred as a result of being named Rating Four and subsequently receiving a new and very different kind of leader than the previous administration. The data presented illuminate the breadth of the school’s functioning that was impacted by leader’s focus on culture-building. From changes to the environment to increased professional development, from the increase in student and parent engagement to the changes in professional expectations for staff, it seems there was no area of the school that wasn’t positively impacted by focusing on improving the school’s culture. This speaks to the wide-reaching impact that the culture can have on the health and functioning of a school. It also illustrates what Barth (2002) says, that “culture changing is the most important, difficult, and perilous job of school-based reformers” (p.8). No longer can we see culture-building as a process or function that lives outside of the impact on teacher practice, direct student instruction and student outcomes. These data, as well as the staff at Comunidad, overwhelmingly place the improved school culture at the center of school-wide improvements. With depth and breadth the staff spoke to how the improved culture positively impacted each area of the student and staff’s experience but they also credited their gains in student achievement to the improved learning conditions for students and staff.

Repeatedly the data revealed the staff’s perception of how the school’s improved school culture impacted the conditions of the school, their professional practice, and ultimately student learning and outcomes. Examples of successful Turnaround schools that prioritize culture-building are critically important in a time where public school and (especially high poverty) districts are placed in a position of desperation to improve
student test scores and where energies focused outside of directly improving those scores are often perceived to pose a threat to turnaround efforts. In a word, focusing on the culture as a primary engine for school-wide improvement takes courage. It takes leaders willing to invest in something that initially cannot be measured simply through the yardstick of high-stakes testing. In this way, this research provides an example of a successful leader who invested in the culture, despite pressures to focus on other urgent matters perceived to be more directly related to student achievement. This research provides an invitation to leaders who wish to build a school culture that will prove foundational to their eventual and lasting success. What follows are concrete examples of the ways in which the culture positively impacted the school overall as well as the lessons that can be learned from the school culture and success at Comunidad Elementary School.

**Building Culture through Reform (while Remaining Focused on the Basics of Instruction)**

While much research on the impact of culture in schools exists, this research contextualizes the impact of culture in the midst of the unprecedented multitudes of reform efforts that public schools are asked to manage today. Examining how the leadership at Comunidad shaped the school culture in the midst of managing heavy reform provides a much needed and timely example of how public schools leaders can build a positive and impactful school culture, not despite lofty reform efforts, but in the midst of them. This research adds to the literature illuminating the potential impact of school culture on student achievement but it does so in a time in American public education where the prioritization of building positive school cultures is absent in a national dialogue on what matters most in turning around underperforming schools.

Certainly no part of reform, whether federal, state or localized, explicitly or intentionally devalued school culture-building in recent years. Though Fullan (2006)
reminds us that, “Sick educational systems mirror sick societies, not only because they directly affect one another but also because the internal dynamics of diseased systems are similar” (p. 1). Our local obsession with accountability practices in education purely mirror a national reform movement that began long ago that has recently intensified with a storm of reform mandates in a short timeframe. Over the last five years there have been many large initiatives tied to critical funding that public schools (and especially high poverty and underperforming districts) have been asked to implement in short periods of time. Whether schools aim to implement these initiatives with fidelity or simply hope to meet minimum compliance standards, the sheer volume of changes that public schools have undergone over the last five years has put school and district leaders in the position of prioritizing these initiatives and subsequently downgrading the importance of culture-building. The result, as Muhammad (2011) points out, is that for all our reform efforts, we have neither narrowed the achievement gap, nor improved overall student performance for children in America.

Despite the pressures of multiple reforms and debates over whether they have made conditions better or worse, despite pressures to downgrade culture-building at the cost of implementing reform, the Principal in this case study was insistent and steadfast with regard to the value of strengthening her school culture. However, in order to prioritize culture-building in the midst of heavy reform, Comunidad’s Principal had critical advantages over many of today’s principals. First, she had experience and confidence that focusing most of her energy on the culture pays off, as she had successfully turned around previous schools. Second, she was close to retirement, and there is perhaps a boldness that a seasoned leader possesses in the years before retirement when she no longer needs to prove herself or worry about job security. Third, she had clout in the district and could prioritize culture-building and not worry about
district messaging and heavy oversight that other, younger principals might face. (In fact, [Shea] joked in our early meetings about how her supervisor was half her age, though she did value their relationship.)

As an educator in the same underperforming district for over twenty years, I have witnessed and experienced the change in professional development and supervision of Principals where focus on the school culture is not only missing from the dialogue, it is often explicitly criticized as something for which there simply isn’t time to expend. In large districts like Jonestown, many younger and less seasoned principals don’t have the luxury of autonomy that Shea exerted and are more likely to follow the guidelines from the State and District, if they hope to keep their jobs or rise through the ranks. If they do value culture-building, they will likely struggle to balance a desire to build a healthy positive school culture with making sure their teachers implement the requirements of multiple reforms. This is not to say that the district, and districts like Jonestown, do not value creating safe learning environments or environments where staff feel valued and supported. In fact, the lack of district messaging and support for culture-building likely comes from state and federal pressures experienced by district leaders that create a sense of desperate urgency that places culture-building on the back burner from implementation and compliance with reform as well as pressures to generate rapid improvements in student achievement.

Since we live in an age of massive accountability in education that is not likely to change soon, this study provides an alternative way of looking at culture-building in the midst of heavy reform. Comunidad’s Principal did not say no to reform. In fact, she used her professional learning communities to support teachers’ ability to dig in deeply to the requirements of reform initiatives. The data revealed that teachers felt very much supported by their leader while implementing the Common Core State Standards and the
new teacher evaluation system. Additionally, their Principal offered the teachers more than simply time. She provided her staff with time for new learning and time for integration of reform initiatives. She also found ways to support teachers through these processes. First, she explicitly acknowledged that teachers were being asked to do more. She validated that they had a lot to juggle, and she vowed to help them tackle the work as a team. She literally sat in the same room and generated solutions with her team of teachers. Second, Shea used district resources strategically and found ways to lighten the requirements of reform initiatives by leveraging district resources and distributing the work across her teams. She also used her administrative and teacher leaders to manage the bulk of the time-consuming elements of each initiative. Thirdly, she found ways to abbreviate the teacher evaluation bureaucracy and paperwork by providing teachers with the exemplars and shortcuts to completing tasks that she and her staff experienced to be less about improving practice and more about compliance. In doing so, Shea found ways to comply with reforms by making them manageable for teachers, alleviating time-consuming tasks, validating the bulky and complex work, and tackling the work through a team mentality. In this way, Shea built and strengthened the culture through each initiative. The data show that her efforts to eliminate some of the work that fell on teachers built team work, trust in her leadership and allowed the teachers to continue to spend the majority of their time focused on teaching and learning.

Shea’s ability to manage reform without overwhelming her staff was not only imperative to building a healthy culture, it also allowed her staff to focus their energies on the basics of instruction; something she believed was critically important for their school’s success. This is significant because it illustrates how skillful leaders pay attention to the culture at all levels and perhaps even more so in areas that cause the greatest stress on teachers. Thinking about supporting staff through rigorous and
stressful change is the higher order culture-building that many of today’s school leaders miss. This highlights a whole new level of *Culture-Building 2.0*. At this level, leaders must see managing reform as an opportunity to rally with staff and turn what can feel like a burden, into valuable new learning by: providing opportunities to empower staff through distributive leadership while eliminating stress on staff; building trusting, completing tasks efficiently; and staying focused on teaching and learning. Furthermore, future successful Turnaround principals who empower their teachers to make critical decisions about where and how to spend their time on reform initiatives, what elements to dig into, and what elements to move through quickly, will empower their staff not only to be part of the process, but also to be critical consumers of reform. It is, after all, the teachers who, when given time to unpack reform initiatives, will know best what will benefit their students. The practice of mandating reform *at* teachers without co-constructing best ways to employ new practice must become a way of the past for the sake of both the teachers and the leaders who too often are unpacking and strategizing in isolation.

Additionally, since future principals will no doubt continue to deal with heavy reform and continual change, principals are best served to find ways to help their staff manage these demands efficiently. Instead of buckling down and forcing teachers to comply with every element of reform, Principals will be better served to help their staffs build stamina in the work of reform while also eliminating some of the undue burdens of bureaucracy.

In addition to managing reform well, Comunidad’s Principal was also steadfast about sticking to the basics of good instruction. As Schmoker (2011) reminds us, “if you want your school or system to turn around, don’t innovate first” (p.71) He also warns against, “the false god of innovation” and flashy “high dollar innovation schemes [that]
shouldn’t be the first place to look when considering school turnaround” (p.71). The data reveal that Shea was not invested in, nor did she believe in the kind of quick-fixes that Fullan (2006) warns Turnaround leaders against. The professional development Shea co-authored with her teacher leaders was grounded in lesson planning, standards-based instruction, and mastering the Workshop Model. Comunidad’s discipline in sticking to the basics of sound instruction was revealed in the data to be critical to their focused professional development and improved student achievement. This research provides instructional priorities for other Turnaround principals who struggle to decide what matters most when prioritizing professional development in the interest of improved instruction and student performance.

**Preparing Teachers for a New Day: Reform and Change**

Leaders who allow reform initiatives to overwhelm their staff will likely find themselves metaphorically alone at the finish line. Can and do most teachers in Turnaround schools work to exhaustion? Yes. Will they remain in schools where their leaders don’t make efforts to alleviate the pressures of reform or will they seek to find schools where they feel valued beyond their ability to run as fast as they can until June? Since the amount of reform mandates has significantly increased in breadth and depth over the last five years, no previous or recent teacher training could have prepared teachers for what it is like to teach under the current conditions of the average public school. In this way, until teacher training programs catch up with the current conditions, training teachers for the new game falls on today’s principals.

Like Comunidad’s leader, successful future principals must explicitly name the new field of public education for what it is and what it is not, for and with their teachers. It has never been more important to validate for teachers that indeed the rules of the game have changed and there is an ever evolving skillset that will help teachers thrive
rather than just survive in their classrooms, which likely looks very different from what they learned in their teacher training programs. Atop the pile of skills that today’s teacher needs are adaptability and an increased stamina for change. While much blame can be pointed at high pressure reform, the truth is that for many decades the teaching profession didn’t ask much in the way of change from teachers. Just two decades ago teachers taught the same materials in the same way year after year. Their performance evaluations, too, were limited to one or two planned observations that occurred in most cases, every other year, if at all. Yet suddenly, education has caught up with the age of information, and we know far more about how children learn, as well as what is more or less effective in teaching. And we are learning more every day. It might be fair to say that the teaching profession remained antiquated for decades longer than it likely should have. Successful principals should recognize the divide between the long held idea of teaching and what has become a field of rapid change and explicitly address this gap with their staff.

This research gave a vivid example of a principal who named the changes in practice through reform with her staff and provided adequate professional learning time that alleviated undo stress and allowed teachers to continue to work on improving their practice. Validating the challenges and providing teachers with the support and time for quality professional development that occurs within the school day through peer learning communities is one way that leaders can help teachers bridge the divide between what they likely thought their job would be and what it has become. This is exactly what Comunidad's principal accomplished.

The data in this research revealed how the principal effectively shielded her staff from the stress of reform through teamwork, distributive leadership and lessening the time consuming, bureaucratic paperwork associated with reform. This not only made
implementation efficient, it also built trust and improved the staff morale and strengthened the school culture. As stated previously, today’s teachers, regardless of when they attended teacher training programs, could not have been prepared for the amount of reform they now face or understand the necessity to adapt, persevere, and develop stamina for change. In this way, current and future teacher training programs need to prepare teachers for this new educational environment. New teachers will be more successful and serve students best if they understand and choose to be part of a system that asks them to do more than master content knowledge and develop pedagogical toolkits. Today’s teachers, in addition to being great teachers of content and managers of classrooms, also need to be consumers of reform, adaptive to change, reflective, flexible, and able to manage multiple requests and expectations. A deep understanding of this new environment needs to be explicitly incorporated into teacher training so new teachers arrive ready for the challenges ahead. In the meantime, school leaders need to fill those gaps in understanding by sharing the big picture of reform, its purpose and its implications. They also need to prepare teachers for the challenges ahead, which will no doubt include more, not less reform and change.

**Swift Removal of Ineffective Staff**

One of the dominant themes in the data had to do with the fear that staff experienced in their first year with the new leader’s approach to staffing. Some staff members spoke to their discomfort with the leader’s statements; which some members experienced as threats. All of the interviewees who spoke about their fears regarding staff that were fired or encouraged to take jobs elsewhere in the first year also addressed some variation of acceptance or appreciation of the leader’s actions in the years that followed. The leader made bold moves in her first year to remove or drive out ineffective staff members through the teacher evaluation process and through directly inviting staff to
leave. She chose to rapidly remove teachers not on board with the new way of operating rather than trying to work and shape the entire existing staff. While this created a sense of fear initially in staff members, the fact that the staff eventually came to understand or appreciate the leader’s actions is significant and speaks to the power of insisting that staff be on board with the priorities and challenges of turnaround work. While other leaders may have taken a different approach to working with staff in the first year, this leader’s overall actions yielded school-wide improvement, and the leader’s approach ultimately proved to be effective. Additionally the staff came to experience the leader to be invested in building trust, collaboration, and sharing the leadership decisions and challenges. Teachers’ earlier perceptions were washed away by the leader’s later actions and lasting impressions.

While removing a large number of staff members in the first year may have initially created fear among the staff, much can be learned from the process of removing ineffective staff swiftly. While the leader initially created fear, she contained this period of staff removal to a relatively short period of time, and her actions moved the staff to collaborative practice fairly quickly. Had she retained and worked to shape the existing staff, she may not have gained the traction she needed to create rapid and lasting change. Muhammad (2011) reminds us that changing the culture of the school is a “difficult journey” that begins with the adults, the professionals, taking an honest look at how this gap in student performance began and how it is perpetuated despite the honest efforts of very intelligent and concerned people” (p. 12). In this way, Shea had to look at the attitudes and effectiveness of her staff and decide who could do the hard work ahead and who needed to move on. The data revealed that this leader placed the needs of the students and the readiness of the staff at the center of her decisions. She blatantly said that she could not wait for the adults to get comfortable with the changes that needed to
happen (Shea, personal communication, March 11, 2014). Despite staff fear, her actions certainly clarified expectations and weeded out staff members that were not up for the challenges ahead.

As Turnaround leaders or leaders in underperforming schools are called to make urgent decisions about how to shape their culture in regard to staffing, this research suggests that leaders must be intentional and, where necessary, be bold in removing staff that will create drag or resistance that will impede rapid improvements. It also provides a model for leadership that positions the needs of the students ahead of the initial comfort of the adults in the school. Additionally the data here revealed that the staff perceived the leader’s swift removal of ineffective staff as a critical element of their ability to function more like a team. Ultimately, their early experience of fear may have been fundamental to the staff’s eventual job satisfaction and sense of collaboration and effectiveness.

**What Matters Most in Leadership**

The Comunidad leader’s insistence on prioritizing and improving the school culture is slightly radical in a Turnaround school whose improvement is measured solely on concrete student achievement data; none of which includes measuring an improved school culture. As previously stated, this veteran leader likely had an advantage over some leaders. She also had a certain boldness that while in the first year may have created fear in some staff members and perhaps drove out others initially, overall she had a way of inspiring staff to get behind her efforts. As a result, the majority of staff expressed a desire to please and impress her. This personality that inspired change in her staff may not be specifically replicable. Some may argue that instilling fear of any kind should not be replicated. But the *who* of this story matters far less than *what* the leader put in place for the school’s success. Comunidad’s leader possessed a certain charismatic
boldness and staff seemed to want to rally around her. Shea’s personality, while interesting, is not what ultimately led to the lasting changes in the school.

The data revealed that initially staff adhered to or complied with the changes made by the new administration. However, in changing the culture of the school, the leader initiated a more lasting and wide-reaching type of change when she put structures in place such as removing and improving staff, empowering teacher leadership and voice, and creating effective professional learning communities that became so valuable to staff that they chose to continue the practice long after the funds dried up and time had been removed from the daily schedule. These effective practices and new structures are and should be far more relevant to district leaders and future principals than the personality that the leader possessed.

Most important to note is the culture that Shea created which was one that systemically changed the way teachers saw and approached their work. Fullan (2001) reminds us that, “lasting and sustainable change in schools requires not the leader who can come into town and save a single school (temporarily) but leaders whose very actions change the systems they work in” (p. 91). The data reveal that Comunidad’s leader was able to make lasting and sustainable change and largely influenced staff and student behavior and performance. Ironically, the Comunidad Principal announced her retirement at the end of the data collection of this study last year. Like many strong Turnaround leaders, the question remains as to whether the strong school culture, the value and emphasis on culture, and the improved student performance will continue after she is gone. The answer to that question is largely outside the realm of this study, however, it is compelling to note that the leader groomed her Assistant Principal to replace her from the beginning of her tenure at Comunidad and that Assistant Principal immediately became the Principal when Shea retired at the end of 2015. This plan
supports what Fullan (2006) says that, “it is not only that the existing leader needs more
time to work on the new direction; more importantly, a culture of distributive leadership
that grooms new leaders for the next phase must be established” (p. 31). Additionally
Shea was hired by the district to remain a mentor to the new Principal after her
retirement and the new Principal reports that “although [Shea's] mentorship is officially
supported by the district, she goes above and beyond with multiple weekly check-ins”
(Rivera, personal communication, February 17, 2016). Additionally, Shea and the new
Principal communicate often by phone and email, as well as meeting regularly. The new
Principal also reports, “I do think the relationship we have contributes to the awesome
mentorship I continue to receive” (Rivera, personal communication, February 17, 2016).
Still, it remains to be seen if the school will continue on with the same priorities of
professional learning and high expectations for students and staff in the years to come.

**Application and Replicability for District and School-based Leaders**

The impact of school culture in this study speaks not only to the wide-reaching
impact that the culture has on the functioning of a school, it also calls for more concrete
and actionable definitions of culture that will better serve school and district leaders.
When we wish to improve the culture of the school in today’s educational climate, what
exactly do we mean? District leaders who understand the value of building a strong
foundational culture in their schools will be best served to lay out exactly what they mean
for school-based leaders. While Barth’s (2002) description of culture as the “complex
pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and
myths” (p.7) adequately describes broad categories of culture, at a local level district
leaders should consider making their definition of culture-building concrete and
actionable. To date, most district mission statements and strategic plans mention culture
more in terms of safe learning environments; however, school leaders need more
direction and specificity so they know where and how to strengthen their school cultures.

This study provides concrete and replicable actions for district and school-based
leaders wishing to create school cultures that dramatically impact their schools. Before
the staff and students arrived, Comunidad’s leader began improving the physical
environment of the school, making it safer and more inviting, but also providing
symbolic representations that change was already in motion. Then, from the first day the
staff arrived, the leader communicated her vision and expectations clearly and held staff
accountable in ways that improved the professional environment and created a positive
staff identity. Additionally, she instilled confidence and a positive mindset in her staff
that they could and would be successful. Then, she went about providing structures for
their success. She directly addressed specific behaviors and attitudes that would impede
their success individually and as a collective team. She eliminated ineffective staff swiftly
so the remaining staff could rally around the work ahead. The leader’s visibility in the
school also created a presence for students and staff that created a sense of security and
showed her willingness to be deeply involved in the work.

Within professional learning communities this leader focused on the basics of
quality instruction and sought input from the staff. Topics in professional learning
communities were not only co-constructed and grounded in building quality instruction;
they also supported teachers in implementing complex reform initiatives. This leader
also explicitly acknowledged the complexity of the work and found ways to eliminate
undue burden on her staff. Her recognition of the burden placed on teachers and her
willingness to acknowledge this with her staff not only built trust, but also empowered
them to be part of the solutions. She leveraged district supports to make implementation
of reforms more efficient and she did not attempt to solve school-wide challenges by
herself. Instead she engaged her teachers in team-oriented problem solving and collaboration and she trusted them enough to lead the work together.

Many of the changes the Principal put in place to support staff indirectly improved conditions for students. In addition to providing professional development to support instruction, she also provided texts for staff that challenged their mindsets and increased their belief in the abilities and potential of all students. The staff also felt that the leader’s actions in relationship to families, increased parent involvement, improved student attendance and created more of a sense of community within the school.

These cultural changes were critical, but it is also important to note that the Comunidad principal did not change the culture in a vacuum. While she improved the culture, she simultaneously addressed the curricular offerings that were in contrast to one another, purchased and implemented reading materials, and reconfigured teams of teachers. In short, she simply could not wait for the culture to improve before making those structural changes. While Muhammad’s (2011) work is supported by the findings of this study, this research pushes against the idea that schools must change the culture first before addressing needed technical changes. The pressures of reform and the often broken systems of underperforming schools require that leaders address both the elements of a healthy school culture as well as the functional and operational needs simultaneously, if they hope to create swift school-wide improvements. While Muhammad (2011) says that, “substantial cultural changes must precede technical change” (p.16), with the mass of demands from current reforms, by necessity we have already outlived that theory.

Surely, Turnaround leaders have to prioritize the needs of the school and not try to change or improve everything at once. However, in addition to unhealthy cultures, in underperforming schools, we often find antiquated structures (such as inadequate
instructional time, schedules that do not optimize learning time, outdated materials, unclear instructional expectations, as well as a lack of structured time for professional learning) that need to be rectified quickly or the improved culture can do little to improve student achievement. Therefore, culture-building must be paired with critical structural changes which should include abandoning quick-fix or packaged curricular materials and replacing them with consistent instructional practices that have proven to be effective over time.

How does a leader accomplish all of these changes in a short period of time? In short, she does this by distributing the leadership across the school. Today’s leaders cannot accomplish all that needs to occur on their own. While distributive leadership empowers teachers to support the school vision, it also multiplies the number of successful changes that the school can successfully manage in a short period of time. Under the intense pressure and scrutiny that today’s school leaders face, especially those in underperforming schools, leaders must embrace a shared leadership practice if they hope to dramatically and swiftly improve their schools.

Conclusion

A successful Turnaround school that prioritized culture-building has much to teach like and unlike education and organizational settings. If this school, which sits in the one of the poorest neighborhoods in the state, was able to accomplish and maintain steady gains in student achievement over a short period of time, and its leader and staff credit the improved school culture as their primary engine of change, then district and school leaders should take a closer look. Additionally, if a Turnaround school experiencing stringent reform mandates and high stakes accountability measures finds success through prioritizing culture-building in all areas of its organizational processes, then not only can and should school and district leaders seek to do the same, but reform
efforts also should seek to support culture-building as a key ingredient to all schools’ success. The fact that culture-building is not an urgent and integral element of reform efforts in an industry so central to human development should be reason to take pause and reconsider what matters most in education. Certainly, accountability and healthy cultures are not, and should not be, in competition. In fact, this research vehemently proves that to be untrue.

Today’s public school leaders face the unprecedented challenges of managing massive reforms that compete for limited time and energies. Leaders have to make difficult decisions about what to prioritize amidst stringent accountability measures that have led to the devaluing of creating and developing positive schools cultures. Additionally teachers, regardless of their age or credentials, are living through conditions in education that no teacher training prepared them for and subsequently, school leaders need to support teachers by acknowledging that we are living through a new day in education: one that requires the ability to be adaptive and persevere through external pressures and ongoing change. Today’s teachers are asked to be caretakers of our children, experts in their content areas, shapers of positive classroom environments, and masters of continually changing pedagogies while juggling multiple reforms amidst constant changes in expectations. If we as leaders acknowledge this reality with our teachers and provide them with time for learning and reflective practice, our students will have the best chance at success.

Today Turnaround leaders, and in fact, all public school leaders sit at a critical crossroads. They can choose to steam on and attempt to focus exclusively on complying with reform mandates, denying their teachers the reality of this challenging new day and allow attention on building positive school cultures to take a backburner to reform, or they can use this age of accountability through massive reform as an opportunity to
strengthen their school cultures within and through reform. However, building a healthy and effective school culture in the midst of reform calls for brave and sophisticated leaders willing to swim against currents that value only what can be measured on annual standardized tests. It requires leaders who simultaneously shield their staff from the time consuming elements of reform while rallying with them to unpack mandates, problem solve and learn together.

In recent years we have seen the effects of attempting to manage heavy reform by placing all of the responsibility of reform on school leaders and their teachers and insisting that they improve student achievement at the cost of devaluing or eradicating positive school cultures. And yet, the increase of reform and accountability has yet to yield the return on closing the achievement gap or radically improving student achievement in America. Schools like Comunidad remind us that improved student achievement is not only possible through building a strong school culture, it is in fact essential. District and school leaders who allow their school culture to be swallowed up by reform are participants in the problem of our schools. This research reminds public school leaders that they have a choice. They can manage reform in ways that strengthen their school cultures and ultimately improve student achievement, or they can continue down the same path of allowing reform to manage them.
Appendix A: Letter of Informed Consent

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Research Protocol
Letter of Informed Consent

Date: ___________________

My name is Colleen O’Connor and I am a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania. I am also the current Principal at Jonestown Middle School. I am working on my dissertation, which is focused on understanding the impact the school culture at Comunidad Elementary School has had on the student achievement. I respectfully request your permission to participate in my research dissertation, The Impact of School Culture on Student Achievement in a Successful Turnaround School.

I will be audio recording our interview today. I will be the only person who hears this recording and the recording will be destroyed after it is transcribed. Any data taken from this interview will not personally identify you.

The purpose of this research is to document the work of Comunidad Elementary School over the last four years. As Comunidad’s student achievement has steadily improved over the last four years, I aim to collect data on the culture of the school and its impact, if any, on student achievement. The research will be conducted during the spring and summer of 2015, and the data collected will be used to add to the research and dialogue on school culture and student achievement, especially in Turnaround schools.

Participation in this study is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time. Your participation in this study would involve:

- Complete confidentiality and anonymity regarding the information shared and provided. Any information obtained will be considered confidential and will be used solely for research purposes in fulfillment of my dissertation.
- Face to face and/or phone interview lasting approximately 1 hour.
- Completion of one more interaction (email, phone call, or in person) if I need to follow-up on any data you shared in the interview.
- Permission to audiotape interview(s) (You will be entitled to review the transcripts and negotiate changes)
I sincerely appreciate your time, energy, and participation in my research, and hope that you will allow me to document your experience. There is no anticipated risk on your behalf for participation in this study.

You may withdraw from the study at any time by speaking with me, and all data collected will be returned immediately.

*Completion of the consent form will indicate permission to use the data obtained in the study.*

**Research Protocol**  
**Letter of Consent**

Participant’s Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________  
Researcher’s Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________

For further information regarding this study, please contact:

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Appendix B: Staff Interview Questions

1. How do Comunidad’s leaders perceive the role of school culture in leading school-wide efforts to improve student achievement?
2. How do various staff members at Comunidad, a Turnaround school in an under-performing high poverty district, characterize the culture of their school?
3. How do staff members perceive the leadership’s role in shaping the school’s culture and how do they conceptualize the relationship between the school’s culture and gains in student achievement?

Introductions:

My name is Colleen O’Connor. In addition to my role as Principal of Jonestown Middle, I am also a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania. I am working on my dissertation, which is focused on understanding the perceived impact the school culture at Comunidad Elementary School has had on the student achievement. I will be audio recording our interview today. I will be the only person who hears this recording and the recording will be destroyed after it is transcribed. Any data taken from this interview will not personally identify you.

The purpose of this research is to document the work of Comunidad Elementary School over the last four years. As Comunidad’s student achievement has steadily improved over the last four years, I aim to collect data on the culture of the school and its impact, if any, on student achievement. The research will be conducted during the spring and summer of 2015, and the data collected will be used to add to the research and dialogue on school culture and student achievement, especially in Turnaround schools. Participation in this study is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time. Feel free not to answer any questions should you prefer not to.

General Questions

1) When did you start working at Comunidad and in what role?

2) (For interviewees who were at Comunidad before the start of the leader's tenure)
   - What was Comunidad like before 2010 before the new leadership took over? (ask broadly then use prompts below)
   - What was the building like?
   - Relational environment: What were the relationships like between students and teachers? Teachers and teachers? Admin and teacher? Etc.?
   - What were the professional expectations?
   - What professional learning communities were in place if any? How did they function?

3) (For interviewees who were at Comunidad at the start of the leader’s tenure)
   - What was Comunidad like initially 2010 before the new leadership took over?
   - (What do you remember about what it was like when you transitioned in? What was striking at first?)
• What were the early changes you made?
• What was the building like in that first year? (What were the relationships like between students and teachers? Teachers and teachers? Admin and teachers in that first year?)
• What were the practices and professional expectations?
• What professional learning communities were in place and how did they function?

4) (For interviewees who were at Comunidad after the start of the leader’s tenure)
• When did you start working at Comunidad? ____________________
• What were your initial impressions of the school and leadership?
• (What were the leadership’s expectations?)
• What were relationships like in that first year? (Between students and teachers? Teachers and teachers? Admin and teachers in that first year?)
• What professional learning communities were in place and how did they function?

5) Do you feel that the school changed since the new leader came on board? Explain. (What is the building like now? What are the relationships like between students and teachers? Teachers and teachers? Admin and teacher? Etc.? How did the new and old staff mesh?)

6) Is there anything else you would like to add about the initial changes at Comunidad?

Questions regarding district and state initiatives

7) How has the school worked to implement the Common Core Standards? (What were and are the challenges and rewards for implementing the new standards? Specifically, what have teachers been asked to do differently as a result of implementing the Common Core Standards?)
• From your perspective, has implementing the Common Core Standards impacted student achievement? If so, how? (probe 2 examples)

8) How has the school worked to implement the SEEDS teacher evaluation system?
• What were and are the challenges and rewards for implementing the new system for teacher evaluation? (What have teachers been asked to do differently?)
• From your perspective, has implementing the SEEDS teacher evaluation system impacted student achievement? If so, in what ways (probe 2 examples)

9) How has/is Comunidad working to prepare for the PARCC assessments?
• What are the challenges and rewards in preparing for and administering the PARCC assessments? (What have teachers been asked to do differently?)
• From your perspective, has implementing the SEEDS teacher evaluation system impacted student achievement? If so, in what ways (probe 2 examples)

10) How does the school manage these different initiatives? What supports did you have, or wish you had to adopt these changes?

11) Would you say that these initiatives have impacted the school-wide culture? If so, how? If not, can you say more about that?
Probe: (morale, routines, beliefs, behaviors, etc.)
Questions regarding school culture for all.

12) How would you describe the school culture when you arrived?
13) Has it changed during the time you have been at Comunidad? If so, how? Probe 1-2 examples
14) Since student performance has steadily improved since 2010, what would you say the factors were that had the greatest impact?
15) Would you say that the leadership has had a role in shaping the culture of the school? If so, how?
16) Would you say that the leadership has had a role in the improvement in student performance? If so, how? Probe examples.
17) How would you define or characterize the culture at Comunidad today?
   - (Can you give me some specific examples of staff or student behavior, practices rituals or routines that can help exemplify the culture today?)
18) For the purpose of this study, I define School Culture as the norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, traditions, and myths that are ingrained in the staff and school community. Now hearing this definition, are there any other definitions of characterizations of Comunidad’s culture that you can provide? (Any further specific examples of how this culture is exhibited here at Comunidad? What else, if anything, would you like to tell me about the school that I may have neglected to ask?)
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