

**SCHOOL CULTURE FOR STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANT SUPPORT NEEDS:  
BELONGING IS NOT ENOUGH****Diane Carroll, Ph. D.***Metropolitan State College of Denver***Connie Fulmer, Ph. D.****Donna Sobel, Ph. D.****Dorothy Garrison-Wade, Ph. D.***University of Colorado at Denver***Lorenzo Aragon, Ph. D.***University of Colorado at Boulder***Lisa Coval, Ph. D.***Murray State University*

*This qualitative study examined the influence of school culture on services for students with significant support needs. Students with significant support needs are defined as those who typically have cognitive impairments, often paired with sensory and physical challenges, and who require substantial supports to receive benefit from education. Using Schein's (1988) definition of culture, ethnographic methods, including observations, interviews and artifacts, were used to collect data related to artifacts, values, and assumptions. Results of this study indicate a strong sense of family, community and belonging. However, belonging did not include critical components of instruction as described as best practice in special education literature.*

Despite the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) mandate for least restrictive environment, some programs for students with significant support needs (SSN) fail to be inclusive, utilize segregated classrooms, continue to focus on functional life skills and ignore potential academic needs, including participation in standards-based education (Browder & Spooner, 2006; Director's Survey, 2005; Ryndak & Billingsley in Kennedy & Horn, 2004). However, within the scope of special education, inclusion is not a legal term. Rather, the philosophy of inclusion is based on the *least restrictive environment* requirement of PL 94-142 (1975), and there is little consensus within the field of special education as to its exact definition. Some authors support case-by-case decisions and debate whether all students with significant support needs should be served exclusively in inclusive settings (Lieberman, 1992; Lipsky & Gartner, 1992). Others note considerable benefits for students with and without disabilities who participate in inclusive education (Downing, Eichinger & Williams, 1997; Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Ryndak & Fisher, 2003). With increased legal requirements for proficiency on state standards and state assessments, the focus has now shifted to inclusion in standards based education (Browder & Spooner, 2006). Recommended access to general education includes content related to state standards, activities, settings where students interact, and the use of skills to allow independent functioning across contexts equivalent to experiences of any student at any grade level (Ryndak & Alper, 2003). Furthermore, this expanded interpretation of least restrictive environment bolsters the philosophy of inclusion and, by extension, the creation of an inclusive culture where all students are valued and treated with respect (Carrington & Elkins, 2002; Carrington & Robinson, 2004; Corbett, 1999). Using Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning, the philosophy of inclusion provides opportunities for students with significant support needs to learn within *communities of practice* which may be *legitimately peripheral* initially, but which increase in degree of involvement and complexity over time.

Students with significant support needs, also described as students with low incidence or severe and multiple disabilities, make up less than one percent of the U. S. public school population (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2009). Typically they have significant cognitive disabilities, sometimes paired with sensory and physical disabilities. These students require substantial modifications, adaptations and supports to access standards based education, and providing inclusive education for these students presents substantial challenges to educators (Browder & Spooner, 2006).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how school culture influences the delivery of educational services for students with significant support needs, including participation in academic standards. School culture, for the purposes of this study, is defined as the context in which education occurs, and is exemplified by the patterns of behavior, values and embedded beliefs and assumptions shared by its members (Schein, 1988).

The definition of culture for this study draws on literature from the psychology and sociology of organizational culture, specifically, organizational culture as defined by Schein (1988). Schein (1988) contends that organizational culture consists of three levels. The first level, *artifact*, represents the most visible and tangible level of culture, that is also the most symbolic. Artifacts include visible behavior of the group, notes, values and mission statements, standards, and stories. The second level is *values*, the espoused goals and accepted reality of the group that is shared by its members. The third level, *assumptions*, traditionally begin as values, that stand the test of time and become the unconscious and underlying beliefs of the group that are taken for granted and rarely questioned.

Owens (2004), in applying Schein's theory of organizational culture to education, describes educational culture as behavior patterns and ways of thinking that have worked consistently over time and are therefore taught to new members as the nature of reality. Owens expands Schein's theory describing symbolic elements of school culture as values and beliefs, traditions and rituals, history, stories and myths, heroes and heroines, and behavior norms.

Therefore, inclusive education for students with significant support needs requires a philosophical shift in the beliefs, values, habits and assumed ways of doing things within a school community (Carrington, 1999) that influences educational service delivery for students with significant support needs. Likewise, inclusive practices for students with significant support needs must be located within the culture of the school (Corbett, 1999) where boundaries of acceptable behavior have been defined, differences celebrated, and diversity maximized. The underlying assumptions and beliefs for this complex phenomenon of inclusion and access require school organizations to recognize, value, and provide for diversity in new ways. To include students with significant support needs, educators will need to collaboratively address the challenges brought by these students and reflectively problem-solve to provide standards-based education in inclusive settings. This inclusive school culture exudes a sense of belonging, where all children are accepted and valued (Carrington & Elkins, 2002; Salisbury, 2006; Zollers, Ramanathan, & Yu, 1999).

#### Methodology

This qualitative study examined the culture of a school, recommended by experts in the field as a site that provide exemplary, comprehensive and inclusive educational services for students with significant support needs. Ethnographic research methods were focused on the social regularities of everyday life (Merriam, 1988; Merriam, 1998; Spradley, 1979) going beyond what was seen and heard to infer what people knew, the tacit knowledge that they do not talk about or express in direct ways, their assumptions and beliefs about inclusive education for students with significant support needs.

The site selection process for this study was reputational (LeCompte & Pressel, 1993). Potential sites were drawn from recommendations by experts in the field who were asked to recommend high schools that had exceptional programs for students with significant support needs. The four expert sources included a state advisory board for students with significant support needs, the state department of education, state directors of special education, and colleagues in the field. Three sites were recommended, visited, and evaluated for participation in the study. Final selection was based on meeting the conceptual framework of the study and willingness of the participants to participate in the study. The site selected was a suburban high school in the western region of the United States.

Using Skrtic's definition of adhocracy (1991; 1995), informants for this study included the people who were currently involved and instrumental in providing for the education and assistance of students with significant support needs. Key personnel who supported students with severe disabilities included special education and general education teachers, itinerants such as physical and occupational therapists, the principal, paraprofessionals, and parents of the students. However, only ten of these agreed to participate in this study, including two special education teachers, two general education teachers, two paraprofessionals, two parents, the principal, and the physical therapist. All ten face-to-face interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. School professionals were interviewed at the

site in private locations and during times that were convenient to their schedules. Parents were interviewed in their homes at their request. To maintain anonymity, all participants are identified by position only.

Nineteen artifacts were collected and categorized for analysis. Artifacts included mission and vision statements, agendas and minutes from faculty and team meetings, monthly newsletters, information from school web sites, and samples of student work. Although these documents may not have been created for the purpose of this study, they contained information and details of events, and of long-term duration with a broad coverage in a variety of settings.

Additionally, field notes were recorded during weekly observations of day-to-day activities and interactions that centered around students with significant support needs. Notes described relevant characteristics and actions of members, what brought them together, who was allowed to participate and give opinions, and who was not. Activities and exchanges were also described to determine possible sequence, interactions with each other and with the student. Conversations were noted during observations, identifying who spoke to whom, who listened, noting silences and non-verbal behavior that added meaning to the exchanges. Less obvious, subtle events were also recorded such as informal activities, examples of symbolic or connotative language, and physical cues. What did not happen was equally as important as what did happen, especially if it should have happened.

Based on Miles and Huberman's (1994) data reduction process data were first selected and sorted into a priori variable strands using the analytic framework. Next, data display, the second element described by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used to reduce data to provide an organized, compressed assembly of information allowing for initial development of conclusions and extrapolation of data. From this process, systematic patterns and relationships were developed. Data were then cross-checked for emergent themes based on collection method, interview, observation, field journal, and artifacts, by informant, and also by a priori theme. New themes that emerged from the data were added. Finally, data were synthesized to delineate the structure representing the deeper meaning of culture, identifying trends and relationships. This process resulted in drawing conclusions, revealing emergent themes, and cross checking them to verify that they were plausible, confirmable, and able to withstand alternative explanations (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

#### Results

Using Schein's model of culture, results are reported as artifacts, values and beliefs. Artifacts collected for this study include observations, field notes, reflections, mission statements and other documents. Values represent the second level of culture and, according to Schein (1988), are expressed in the shared espoused goals of the members and the accepted reality of the group. Beliefs represent the third level of culture, and according to Schein (1988). These shared assumptions traditionally start out as values, but stand the test of time, and become the unconscious beliefs that are taken for granted and rarely questioned. These underlying shared convictions guide behavior of the group.

#### Artifacts

The vision and mission statement for Unity High School posted on the school website describes commitment to providing the best possible learning opportunities for students; helping students develop the knowledge, skills, and responsibility needed for a changing world beyond the high school years; and assisting students in their emotional and social growth. The school also has a strong commitment to professional development and creating a quality staff as the key to providing quality education. The mission also places a strong emphasis on encouraging the cooperation and involvement of parents and other community members the educational process.

Visual examples of school spirit were plentiful. School mottos are scattered throughout the school newsletters collected for this study. *UHS ... We Live It!, It's a great day to be a Comet!, Fostering mutual trust, respect, cooperation and communication between community and school, Once a Comet, always a Comet!*, and *UHS – Be responsible; Honor yourself and others; Strive for excellence* are scattered throughout various publications. Students and staff frequently wore blue t-shirts sporting the school name and logo, especially on Fridays. On Valentine's Day, individual hearts with names of each student and staff member were taped on the main hallway.

The local newspaper carried numerous stories about the school special education program, which were taped on the classroom door. There were articles and photos of students hugging horses, describing a

sensory garden created by the teacher and students, the sock hop, and student participation in Special Olympics. Additional article links on the school website told of a more than \$700,000 grant that the city and county gave to the school to expand the track and create additional parking. Since 1995, the city/county had contributed more than \$1.7 million for various improvements at the school, including the gymnasium. School newsletters also contained many references to businesses that supported various school events.

Other artifacts spoke to excellence in education. The veteran special education teacher had a framed *Impact Award for excellence in education* that she received in 2005. This award, she explained, was one of five awards, given to teachers in the district who were nominated by their peers. Receiving this award was quite an honor and included a presentation banquet. An article in the school newsletter discussed Freshman Seminar as a support *...for students to make a smooth transition to high school and to develop a positive relationship with a staff member*. Newsletters also included results of state assessment and ACT testing and onsite accreditation visits, referenced students who had received awards in the district science fair, and various other academic accomplishments.

### *Values*

Values represent the second level of culture, according to Schein (1988). Data from interviews, observations and artifacts revealed four primary values at Unity School: community, belonging, problem-solving, and family.

*Community.* The values of Unity High both stated and lived, are clearly that it is a community school, a caring community where connections are made. The value of community connection was exemplified by city and county financial contributions to the school, business contributions, and by attendance at various events. According to the principal, attendance at school events was so overwhelming that games, choir concerts, and plays were frequently sold out. Prom and homecoming dances had such large numbers of students attending that they had to be held in larger venues off campus.

Many of the staff had been former Unity High students, including the assistant principal and several of the paraprofessionals who worked in the special education program. One of the parents who participated in this study was also a former Unity High graduate and stayed in contact with the paraprofessional with whom she had gone to school. This parent relied on the paraprofessional to be *...my right hand gal up there* intervening on her behalf when necessary.

*Belonging.* The *Take 5* program, started by the principal, exemplified the value of connecting with each student. This need for student connection was reiterated by the science teacher who stated, *What's most important is making a connection*, when discussing the inclusion of students with significant support needs into his class. A paraprofessional spoke about students saying, *Every one of the kids has done something that's endearing to me*. The other paraprofessional shared her concern that students feel comfortable in the classroom and comfortable with her.

*Problem Solving.* Participants in this study also spoke of problem solving as a value supported in this school. Interviews indicated that the principal responded to problems by asking how she could be supportive. She verified this approach. The general education teacher's approach to including students with significant support needs was, *Let's see if we can figure this out*.

*Family.* Data show that there is a strong belief in parent partnership at this school, and problems were approached with a *we can figure it out* philosophy. Additionally, there was a value of family first, reiterated by many of the participants in this study. Parents said that they felt supported and trusted Unity High School. One parent praised teachers and paraprofessionals for treating the students as if they were their own. *The teachers all respect us and really like to work with us and they think of [student's name] benefit all the time*. This was echoed by the second parent who said, *They [parents] trust Unity*.

### Assumptions/Beliefs

The mission and espoused values at this school center on community, belonging, problem solving, and family. These stated values translate into core beliefs of the participants in this study that include community, going the extra mile, ownership and belonging.

*Community.* The principal described the local community as *Mayberry*, a community with that small town feel and invested effort to make the school the hub of the community, where games, plays and events are sold out. Children from an early age play sports in the gymnasium purchased with community

funds, and wear *Future Comet* t-shirts. *We fit together well*, stated the science teacher, referring to the school and community. The music teacher also spoke to the belief in community, where the school mirrored the community and vice versa.

*Going the extra mile.* Beliefs at this school are about going the extra mile. The principal shared a story about how someone found a class ring from Unity High School on a college campus located more than fifty miles away and returned it to the school. The ring was dated 1972 and had initials of the owner. The principal had some students look through the yearbook from that year and not only identify the potential owner based on those initials, but also located that owner and returned the ring.

Going the extra mile was exemplified in many other ways. The principal stated that she sent a teacher to the hospital with a student who needed support. She also shared her conference room with a student from special education who needed a hospital bed. Paraprofessionals took students from special education to school games. After interviewing one parent, I later received a phone call during which she shared that the special education teacher spent time in the hospital with her daughter. This parent wanted to make sure that I knew how committed that special education teacher was to her students. Also, one day during my observations, a new student was in the special education classroom acting as a peer tutor. The special education teacher explained that this was a former student now graduated who needed some support, and volunteering in the special education classroom was a way that the teacher could support her even though she was no longer in school.

*Ownership.* There is also a lived value of ownership in this community, evidenced when former students now work as professionals and paraprofessionals in this school. Members of the community provided funding for a gymnasium, donate to school events, and attend school functions filling the gymnasium and auditorium to capacity on a regular basis. Individuals in this school took ownership of students. Both the general education teacher and the special education teacher talked about their responsibility for student learning. *If everyone fails the test it's my fault*, according to the special education teacher. The science teacher looked at students individually, charging himself to find the one area where they excel, with a goal that they leave his class liking science, and knowing something about science. The choir teacher had tears in his eyes when he spoke about the value that students in special education brought to his class, *If we make it safe for them, we make it safe for everyone*. He proudly shared that a student with significant support needs was pictured on the cover of this year's concert recording.

*Belonging.* *It's about heart; you've never seen love like you see from these women who give so much of their extra time*, said a special education teacher referring to paraprofessionals. This belief was shared by a paraprofessional who stated, *...I'm not just the special ed. lady, but I'm really part of this community, and I'm here to help whoever needs help. I'm available. I want to be significant in any life I can be significant in*. The veteran special education teacher also spoke about creating a caring community, and about her mission to be sure kids are safe. *I sometimes cry because I very much preach that my students are not my friends, but I take them very close to heart*, she said. *Their hearts are in it*, shared another paraprofessional referring to teachers. Parents also shared this feeling. One parent stated, *Teachers love out kids. They treat them like their own*. The principal, summing up how she felt things worked at this school, said -

We're family...We strive for excellence in every area. I want every student and every parent who goes through this program to never forget this school ... because everybody has a place. I'm convinced that if kids are safe and kids feel cared about or kids feel noticed, that achievement will increase.

#### *Concerns*

However, it appears that the strong sense of community and belonging at this school overshadows instruction for students with significant support needs. Deal and Kennedy (1983) contend that, *Strong cultures provide the internal cohesion that makes it easier for teachers to teach, students to learn...* (p. 15). Despite this strong sense of community, this site did not provide adequate academic instruction for students with significant support needs.

#### *Discussion*

According to DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, and Walther-Thomas (2004), effective education is an integrated system of academic and social supports. Data from this study show that several critical components of education for these students were extremely lacking. The most glaring example of this is that explicit instruction for students for the most severe disabilities was almost non-existent. While these

students participated in daily community activities, there was no explicit instruction of skills, no data collection, and no assessment to inform instruction. This is not indicative of exemplary instructional practices described by Kluth, Straut, and Biklen (2003) who contend that teachers must develop a comprehensive approach to teaching, use differentiated instruction, and use appropriate strategies to meet unique needs presented by some students. Nor is it exemplary of the systematic approach of a prompt fading method with feedback described by Browder, Spooner, Ahgrim-Delzell, Harris and Wakeman (2007). Throughout the entire observation period, this group of students was well taken care of by the veteran teacher and paraprofessionals, but I saw no indication that they were given appropriate instruction in either academics or functional life skills.

#### Limitations

Findings of this study are limited by the selection of the site which was determined by recommendations of experts in the field. Second, findings from this study are particular to this specific site and should not be generalized to similar schools without systematic replication. Nor should this study be generalized to students with other disabilities such as learning disabilities or emotional disabilities. Additionally, this study does not address culturally responsive teaching for students who are second language learners or from different cultures. Despite limitations, this study yields much needed knowledge for the field, particularly about the influence of school culture in supporting and maintaining exemplary service delivery for students with significant support needs.

#### Recommendations for Practice

School culture defines what is important and establishes boundaries of acceptable behavior. Education that happens within the culture exemplifies these patterns of behavior. This study indicates that belief in community and a sense of belonging are an absolute priority at this school. However, this belief does not necessarily translate into exemplary, or even adequate, education for students with significant support needs.

This study points to the need for policy changes focusing on administrator and on teacher licensure programs to prepare all educators to foster excellence for all students. While the authors want to acknowledge and recommend that schools build-upon the many strengths in the school culture that were evidenced across the analysis of the artifacts, values and assumptions dimensions of this study, these are only foundational to creating exemplary education programs. Ensure quality education for students with significant support needs begins with leadership and extends to teacher accountability. The principal is a critical factor in supporting, implementing and maintaining inclusive practices and developing a school culture of inclusiveness (Attfield & Williams, 2003; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Zollers, Ramanathan, & Yu, 1999). Principals are also responsible for school and the staff preparation to include students with significant support needs, and to provide the backing, in both resources and commitment, to make it succeed (Bateman & Bateman, 2002). In addition to ensuring a sense of belonging for students with significant support needs, principals must have expectations for learning outcomes. DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, and Walther-Thomas (2004) discuss the need for principals to develop working knowledge about disabilities and the unique learning needs and behavior challenges various conditions present. With 80% of teachers reporting that they feel ill-equipped to teach diverse populations (Futrell, Gomez, & Bedden, 2003), merged teacher preparation programs that jointly prepare general and special education teachers send a serious message to school leaders and teachers about the need to have all educators prepared to work with all students including those with diverse educational needs (Sobel, Sands, & Basile, 2007). To meet that charge, teacher preparation programs must look critically at their basic values as well as their existing organizational structures, be responsive to their students, and hold the highest expectations to ensure they are doing all they can to prepare teachers for the challenges present in today's inclusive schools.

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