

# ÚNICA

Working Papers

## THE REST OF THE SCHOOL

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**THE REST OF THE SCHOOL**  
**Mission, Climate, Culture, and Leadership**  
Working Paper 1

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## **Abstract**

This document is the first working paper corresponding to a series called *The Rest of the School* and is focused on a simplified look at the significance of the School Mission, Climate, Culture and Leadership, and their importance for beginning teachers. However, it might well be of use for school directives and veteran teachers who are actively carrying out their functions in schools today to refresh their focus on these important factors. Teachers in formation are provided with ample preparation in all pedagogical skills and with expertise in their subject area. Nonetheless, once in the classroom these new teachers often find themselves lost when trying to understand the less obvious dynamics of a school. Likewise, veterans in teaching and educational leadership might have lost concentration on these components of school life as they become absorbed with the daily development of their classes and administrative tasks. Mission, Climate, Culture and Leadership are the untouchable but palpable aspects which make a school function and make the members of the institution feel a sense of accomplishment with their work and at ease and pleased with their place in the network. This working paper is a reflective overview, based upon research and experience, and is intended to highlight the impact of Mission, Climate, Culture and Leadership on effective teaching and learning.

## **Key Words**

Mission and Vision, School Climate, School Culture, School Leadership

## **Introduction**

Thirty-five years of experience in teaching and administration, of which twenty-five were in schools here in Bogotá, has led me to believe that teachers should not be left to learn by osmosis, surprise, mishap, or catastrophe how the rest of the school functions. It is important that pre-service teachers have at least a basic knowledge of what occurs in the school beyond their actual teaching of a subject. Sometimes a lack of understanding of how the different services offered by the school operate and especially how and why decisions are taken can lead to misunderstandings, if not mistrust, between administration and teachers.

The purpose of this document is to provide teachers in formation with a general view of some facets of a school's operational practice and how these affect optimum learning opportunities for the students and the well-being of community. Comprehension of the numerous aspects that do not directly involve the execution of classroom activities is necessary for young teachers (and veterans as well) to better understand how these impact and support their teaching and the learning processes of their students. These aspects outside the classroom often leave teachers surprised by administrative decisions or unexpected responsibilities which have not been previously explained. They may also have the sensation that "something just doesn't feel right", and find that work, once they leave the classroom, is not enjoyable. They may be asking themselves how they can perform well if they don't agree with the school's philosophy, or when they simply feel left out.

During their preparation courses at undergraduate level, teachers in formation are thoroughly instructed in the theoretical background of education, the best of pedagogical practices, teaching methods, classroom management, investigation, curriculum, lesson planning, evaluation and assessment, but other operational practices of the school are left un-emphasized. Some of these aspects include extra responsibilities such as being a form tutor (group director), invigilation on the playground, in the cafeteria and during bus loading, other student services such as transport and cafeteria, and attending a series of level, subject and parent meetings. Other aspects are based upon students directly, such as Special Education and Guidance Services, as well as Student Life which includes extracurricular activities and disciplinary processes. These are all of great importance and will be discussed in future considerations, however in this particular document we will concern ourselves with the importance of the school mission and how knowing it helps a

teacher decide if he/she is in the right place. We will examine the school climate as a factor which determines the happiness and productivity of staff and students, and the closely aligned culture, which is the ligament that ties everything together and builds identity. We will also discuss the importance of school leadership, upon which greatly depends if a positive climate is maintained or if it becomes toxic and destroys the working atmosphere for teachers and students alike.

Aspiring teachers are well versed in the academic functions of their profession but are generally not oriented in the other sustaining columns of the school as an institution. As pointed out in the Principal's Training Course (2000) that I was privileged to attend, these columns can be organized into five general areas, each of which is of vital importance to the smooth running of the institution. The first of these is the Climate and here we include Culture, both institutional and in the classroom. These are central to all else and therefore located as the middle column in the diagram on the next page. The others include the Institutional Facilities (buildings, playgrounds, and other resources), the Finances (without which no establishment can survive), and of course Human Resources (which includes every person who works in the school). These are vital in their contribution to successful teaching and learning. Another sustaining pillar is, of course, Academics. This is the main concern of the teachers and that for which they have been prepared, each in their own expertise. The other four are no less important even though in some ways they may not seem to directly involve the teacher's role in the classroom. It is important that educators realize that the major function of these columns is to contribute to successful teaching and learning. In other words, all are dedicated to supporting and facilitating everything necessary for the teachers to do their job effectively. Besides the columns, there is another vital factor that these must uphold. It is the Mission and Vision of the school.

The five categories mentioned above will be used as the headings for the different aspects of the institution's organizational y operational functions. These areas support and sustain the Mission and Vision of the institution, which metaphorically can be considered the roof of the building. The functions of each category are coherent with the Mission and contribute to building the school's unique profile. The exploration of some aspects of these will be subdivided into three separate working papers, of which the Mission, Climate, Culture, and Leadership will be explored in the first of the series.

The Climate is the sensation of positivism or toxicity that can't be touched but can most certainly be felt. Closely related to this, we will consider Culture, which determines how things are carried out, and extends the particular profile of the institution. Leadership in education, while including all of the aspects usually ascribed to leadership, embodies a particular set of qualities that allow for success in a highly humanitarian contest. The importance of these areas can be compared to the nervous system of the human body. The nerves are not usually contemplated when something hurts. We get headaches, stomachaches, toothaches, a cut, a bruise, a burn, a broken bone -- and they all hurt. This



is probably because we can see, touch and feel the affected part. But, we forget that the nerves transmit the pain to the brain and make the sensation palpable.

In this document, we will begin with a focus on the Mission of an educational institution as the identification card of the school.



*Adapted from the Principal's Training course (2000)*

## **SCHOOL MISSION AND VISION**

As we discuss the Mission (the roof of the building), we will emphasize the importance of everyone in the institution having a clear understanding of the purpose of the establishment and the particular needs of the students enrolled. The Mission/Vision statement is the guiding light for all activity. It explains what the institution stands for, what it wants to achieve, and how it will go about achieving it. Every member of the school community should be familiar with and understand the governing philosophy of the institution and what it proposes to accomplish. The Mission/Vision should be amply dispersed, guaranteeing that all members of the community are familiar with it. It should be publicly displayed to remind everyone of the purpose of the institution. If this does not happen, as time passes people forget its content and can easily diverge on tangents and lose sight of the original identity of the school. Also, with time, the natural turnover of staff, especially directives, can result in the loss of the central focus of the institution, as it is

common for new staff to come in with ideas and projects for renovation. The Mission/Vision should be under systematic review by a committee of representatives of all contingencies of the community.

This is something that an aspiring teacher or directive should examine carefully before accepting a job. The information that is included will outline the identity of the school and its community. It must justify the institution's existence. These reasons for existence will determine the school's beliefs about learning and will be sustained through the use of actualized practices and research. They will lay the foundation for the practices employed to maintain the ideals. Lynch(2016) synthesizes its importance, *"the mission should be part of the school environment."* (p.6) The European Council of International Schools (now Council of International Schools, CIS) Guide to School Evaluation and Accreditation (1997) gives the following description under the title of Philosophy and Objectives:

*"The Philosophy is a statement of the examined beliefs of the school staff, administration and policy-making authority about the education of students and the purposes and goals of the school. The Philosophy expresses the educational character of the school and identifies the enabling theories that the school puts to use. The staff of an effective school knows what the school stands for, knows what it seeks to accomplish, and understands why it teaches in the way it does. "(p. 4)*

The way the statement is constructed and how it is employed will determine its effectiveness. Lynch (2016) observes:

*"Nearly every school has a mission statement and it can be a powerful tool that helps to codify and give direction to the enthusiasm, passion, and expertise that educators bring to the classroom. Or it can be a jumble of letters that are posted on the wall of the office and left unnoticed."* (p.6)

If it is to be effective, the content should define the role the school plays within its community, and how this role is carried out. Learning outcomes should be clearly outlined along with the process to reach them. The desired learning outcomes and experiences must be considered, as well as the nature of the student body and their needs and interests. The characteristics to be developed and nurtured in the students are of an intellectual, social, physical, and affective nature and contribute to the well-rounded individual and positive future citizens the school hopes to graduate. These outcomes must be valid for the entire student population. These will vary according to the characteristics which are particular to the population, for example mixed population, all male or female, religious or non-denominational, college preparatory, technical, or standard. The purpose of the owner(s) and the governing body must also be evident. (p.4) In more concrete terms, the Vision and Mission Center for School Change (2012) provides a guide suggested by the Northwest Regional Laboratory which is composed of questions:

- a. *"Who do you seek to serve?"*

- b. *What do you seek to accomplish?*
- c. *How will you proceed (what methods will you use?)”*

They go on to suggest that the following be included:

1. *“Ages and other characteristics of students you intend to serve.*
2. *Curriculum philosophy and instructional approaches you intend to use.*
3. *An overall goal or two of the school.*
4. *One or two special features of the school.”*

(pp.2,3)

The Vision and Mission Center for School Change (2012) underlines the importance of all contingencies of the school being involved in the formation of the mission statement. *“It is not enough for a small group of people to create a vision and mission. Students, faculty, and families need to understand a school’s vision and mission.”* They go on to say, *“The school’s faculty and board of directors should periodically review both vision and mission statements.”* (p.4)

Gaff and Meachan (2006) cite Peter Drucker (2005) who, although speaking of colleges and universities, draws attention to the fact that *“The spirit of an organization is created from the top.”* They go on to say, *“the president (and the administrators for which he/she is responsible) the board of trustees must act consistently and repeatedly to assure institutional integrity. They must be certain that their organization does what it says and says what it does.”* (p.2) This holds true for schools as well. Part of the importance of the mission statement is that it will provide continuity through changes in administrative leadership and when major changes must occur for the school to evolve successfully while meeting future demands. According to Lynch (2016), *“One thing that administrators must realize is that good goals, good mission statements that are well articulated and actively communicated, offer the possibility of radical change and success.”* (p.6)

Unfortunately, this does not always occur. I recall the case of a successful privately-owned school that had reached a student enrollment of nearly six hundred. It had a long tradition of over 50 years and a good public image. The mission statement and the vision had held true until the owners were faced with having to transfer the school to a new rural site that promised to have everything the school needed to carry on its long tradition. However, given the considerable length of time at the service of the school as teachers and administrators, not to mention the distance they would have to travel daily, the owners decided to lease the school to a company that certified institutional quality. Needless to say, they assured the owners that the school would soon experience an increase in dividends, and rent. After about five years, the school was in financial crisis. The enrollment had decreased to less than a third of its population and the school was nearing bankruptcy. The company had changed the focus of the original mission and even altered the school emblem and tried to change the name. They had made no effort to maintain the original

profile and had lost contact with the school community which brought strong reactions from the parents, students and some teachers. The measures they had taken were aimed entirely toward their commercial interests instead of the original focus established by its founders. The mission had been lost. The once highly acclaimed school had been drained of resources and student population and, worst of all, its identity. When the situation became unmanageable, the company informed the owners that they would end the leasing unless the rent was lowered 25%. The owners did not accept and decided to assume the running of the school to rescue it. Fortunately, the community applauded this decision and little by little confidence is being restored.

The mission statement will serve to maintain a united focus of all who are affiliated with the institution. It will be a determinate marketing factor in helping potential community decide when choosing a school for their children. It will also be helpful to potential staff members who may be seeking a position. It is important for aspiring teachers to be certain that they are comfortable with the mission and vision of an institution. If the philosophy of the school is in direct opposition with their own personal beliefs it would not be wise to become a member of that community. Nonconformity with its mission would be difficult to go unnoticed and would potentially become a problem for the teacher personally and for the institution and the community as well. Therefore, when seeking a teaching or directive position, candidates should read and analyze the Mission before accepting a job offer, and respectfully decline if they are not in accordance with it.

*“Young teachers (or experienced teachers for that matter) are justified in being anxious to find jobs and have every right to choose the best offer. Nonetheless, it is necessary to consider all aspects of the position. ---- If your personal beliefs and ideologies do not coincide with those of a particular institution, don’t go there! If you must, then respect and collaborate with the established philosophy and organization in a positive manner”.* (Mc Danel de García, 2014, p. 111)

## **SCHOOL CLIMATE**

Central to the organization and upon which all else depends is the institutional climate. How all the members of the community feel about the institution and their place in it will be reflected in the untouchable but palpable atmosphere of the climate. If it is positive, it is the basis of a healthy community that thrives on teamwork, shared values, and confidence in the value of each person and their individual contributions. It is located at the center of the structure because if something goes wrong with the climate it will eventually harm the other sustaining columns, usually that of human resources will be the first to be affected. The US National School Climate Standards (April 2013) quoted by Buchannan (2013) indicates that a positive climate is only possible where the school has been able to create

*“an environment where all members are welcomed, supported, and feel safe in school, socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically.” (p.1)*

Zakrzewski (2013) gives us a description of what a positive school climate projects: *“Let’s take a moment to paint a picture of a positive school climate. When you walk onto a school campus, you can immediately get a sense of the school climate by watching the interactions between people and noticing the school’s physical environment.” (p. 2)* She goes on to give us some questions to answer as we observe the climate. *“Do teachers, students and school leaders seem happy to be there and are they treating each other with respect?”* People will greet each other with a smile. Leaders are easily accessible, and teachers and children do not hesitate to speak to them. *“Is the school clean and orderly?”* In a healthy climate you will not observe litter or disorder of any type. All members of the community are aware of their environment and take pride in keeping it in excellent condition. *“Are the bulletin board displays sending out positive messages?”* These are used not only to communicate basic information but also to celebrate the accomplishments of the members of the community. A win by the soccer team, the finalists in a spelling bee, a teacher who receives his/her master’s degree, etc. are all made know to the community. *“Are students engaged in learning?”* If you walk past the windows of the classrooms, you will observe active participation and enthusiasm. Students are busy enjoying learning. (p.2)

Climate is the most fragile of all the components and the most difficult to maintain. Sometimes even the smallest occurrence or comment can ruin how a person feels about his/her work place, and they may lose their desire to be a positive contributor. Unfortunately, it will not stop there. In many cases, when a person feels injured for some reason they are likely to share their frustration with others. The feeling or incident will be proliferated, exaggerated, and commented upon until it has affected the entire community. Even if it isn’t commented upon, the mere observation of the incident by bystanders can be enough to ruin a healthy atmosphere. The result is a phenomenon referred to as a “toxic climate”. Sometimes it will expand and explode, and sometimes it will slowly dissipate and return to normal. This will depend largely upon how the situation is handled in the aftermath. It can either be overcome with prompt, prudent, sensitive management, or it can literally destroy an institution.

Sometimes a dose of humility is necessary, and it can cure a bad situation. I recall an incident in which a new Head of Secondary, who had just taken possession of the post, exploded and screamed at a group of teachers for something that had gone wrong with a student whose mother came in to complain. Four teachers, who had been working happily, were present and when he left, they changed the positive impression they had of him. It was a situation where you could cut the atmosphere with a knife. About ten minutes later the Head came back and apologized for the way he had treated them. They talked for a while and when he left the office, they had changed their opinion entirely. They were impressed

with his humility and the courage he demonstrated in admitting his mistake. He stayed at the school for four years and was considered the best boss they had ever had.

Some of the characteristics of a healthy climate were outlined by the Principal's Training Course (2000). Everyone knows them and believes in them, but they are not always certain of how to explain them. These are Respect, Collaboration, Cohesiveness, Trust, and Commitment to Excellence.

## RESPECT

In a positive climate, all members of the community will share a belief in the rights, values, contributions, feelings, and motivations of fellow members. *"My way or the highway"* is not a healthy attitude for a positive climate, and *"I prefer to work alone"* doesn't work either. Disagreement is certainly going to happen, but it will be carried out in such a way that the dignity of each person remains unharmed. Being heard can often allow a person with an opposing opinion to be satisfied enough to accept a different result. Consensus rather than agreement will often be the result, and once that consensus is reached, each member will abide by it without further argument, despite their personal objections.

## COLLABORATION AND MUTUAL SUPPORT

Success or failure will depend upon a joint effort. Simply put, this is the belief in the value and power of teamwork and respect for each other's efforts. This is not a new concept, but it can be very difficult to implement, especially with seasoned teachers. In his book, *"Results, the Key to Continuous School Improvement"*, Mike Schmoker (1999) points out the urgent need for team work among teachers and school administrators and the notorious lack of it. Teachers are isolated by space and by subject matter. They are in command of their own small kingdom in the classroom, and there often occurs a bit of apprehension about letting someone else into their domain. He quotes Lortie (1997), *"Teacher individualism is not cocky and self-assured; it is hesitant and uneasy"* (p. 210). Schmoker (1999) comments, *"Many teachers, comfortable in their isolation, may find the transition to teamwork a little daunting."*, and that *"Isolation tacitly assumes that practitioners have nothing to learn from each other."* (p.10) Teachers are not always aware of the positive outcomes that teamwork can provide. He goes on to cite Little (1990) who lists a series of palpable benefits based upon teamwork.

- *"Remarkable gains in achievement.*
- *Higher-quality solutions to problems.*
- *Increased confidence among all school community members.*

- *Teacher's ability to support one another's strengths and to accommodate weaknesses.*
- *The ability to examine and test new ideas, methods, and materials.*
- *More systematic assistance to beginning teachers.*
- *An expanded pool of ideas, materials, and methods."*

*(Little as cited by Schmoker (1999, p.10)*

Finally, Schmoker, while not underestimating the immense value of research, reminds us that teacher expertise is often underused. He refers to the *"logistical and practical knowledge of teachers"* as the vital element in implementing strategies and programs endorsed by research. (pp.11,12,13) When consulted or given the opportunity to discuss and debate, teachers offer a varied and original bank of tried and proven ideas for nearly all the aspects of teaching and learning.

Another vital issue pointed out by Schmoker involves administration. He mentions that despite the many meetings that administrators carry out, they very rarely discuss aspects of student learning, and that their concerns are either political or procedural, as illustrated by Smith and Andrews, (1989) Administrators focus on data regarding external exam results, but their main concern is about how they and the school look compared to other institutions, and what the parents will say about the results. It becomes competitive. They will holler for better Math results for example, but do little to contribute to improvement, especially if it involves added expense. Schmoker suggests that administrators take 30 minutes a month to identify problems and brainstorm to find viable ideas and solutions to improve academic results. (p.19) These ideas and solutions should also be shared with the teachers and, above all, their opinions should be considered. Obviously, we can detect a lack of communication between the teaching staff and the administration which can lead to mistrust or simply the perception that the administration only cares about saving money and getting good results and does not see the teachers' opinions or needs as priority.

## COHESIVENESS

This involves a sense of belonging. It is a basic human need to belong or be accepted by a group to which you are affiliated. To achieve this everyone must truly be in accordance with the established goals. This quality is manifest in how the members of the community feel about the institution to which they belong. Where cohesiveness is evident, students and faculty members will openly express their pleasure at being a part of the school community and will be happy to tell others why they feel that way. This can greatly influence the image of the institution in the outside community, which will eventually result in increased admissions.

## TRUST

Linda Lambert (2002) says, *“All of the learning must be embedded in a trusting environment, in which relationships form a safety net of support and challenge (think of a net under a high wire walker).”* (p.3) It is impossible to operate at top efficiency in any environment where you do not feel that your efforts are valued or if you do not fully trust your line managers or your colleagues. Fear of making a mistake because of not knowing what the reaction of your boss or team members will be is a detriment to a healthy work environment. The same goes for children who do not have the certainty that their teachers are engaged in providing them with equal opportunities for success or they feel that the teachers are not really concerned with them as individuals. Trust is one of the major qualities of a positive climate. In fact, Zakrzewski (2013) says, *“It starts with trust, which researchers say is an essential prerequisite to a more positive climate.”* She gives some good advice and underlines the importance of leaders who inspire trust in their team, *“--build trust by giving teachers, staff and students some say in the process—and leaders who guide the process must never miss an opportunity to prove themselves trustworthy and to facilitate trust building between stakeholders.”* (p.3)

If kids and colleagues alike know that they will not be let down, that they can be certain that others will behave in a predictable manner, and that they can be counted on to provide what is required of them, the element of confidence that they have in others will be reflected in their attitude and willingness to make their best effort. The trust factor will be reflected in the positive attitude of everyone in the community.

## COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

When all the above-mentioned qualities are present, excellence will become a priority for everyone involved. They will require the highest standards of themselves and take on their tasks with personal responsibility, accepting nothing less than top quality from themselves and their group. They will set realistic attainable goals that will contemplate the limits of resources. Achieving excellence and maintaining it will become habitual. Tom Peters (2010) points out some ideas on excellence that apply very well to business, industry and educational institutions:

*“Excellence is the answer in good times.*

*Excellence is the answer in tough times.*

*Excellence is about the big things.*

*Excellence is about the little things.*

*Excellence is a relationship.*

*Excellence is a philosophy.*

*Excellence is an aspiration.*

*Excellence is what keeps you awake.*



*Excellence is what lets you sleep.*

*Excellence. Always.*

*If not excellence, what?*

*If not excellence now, when?"*

*(p.19,20 )*

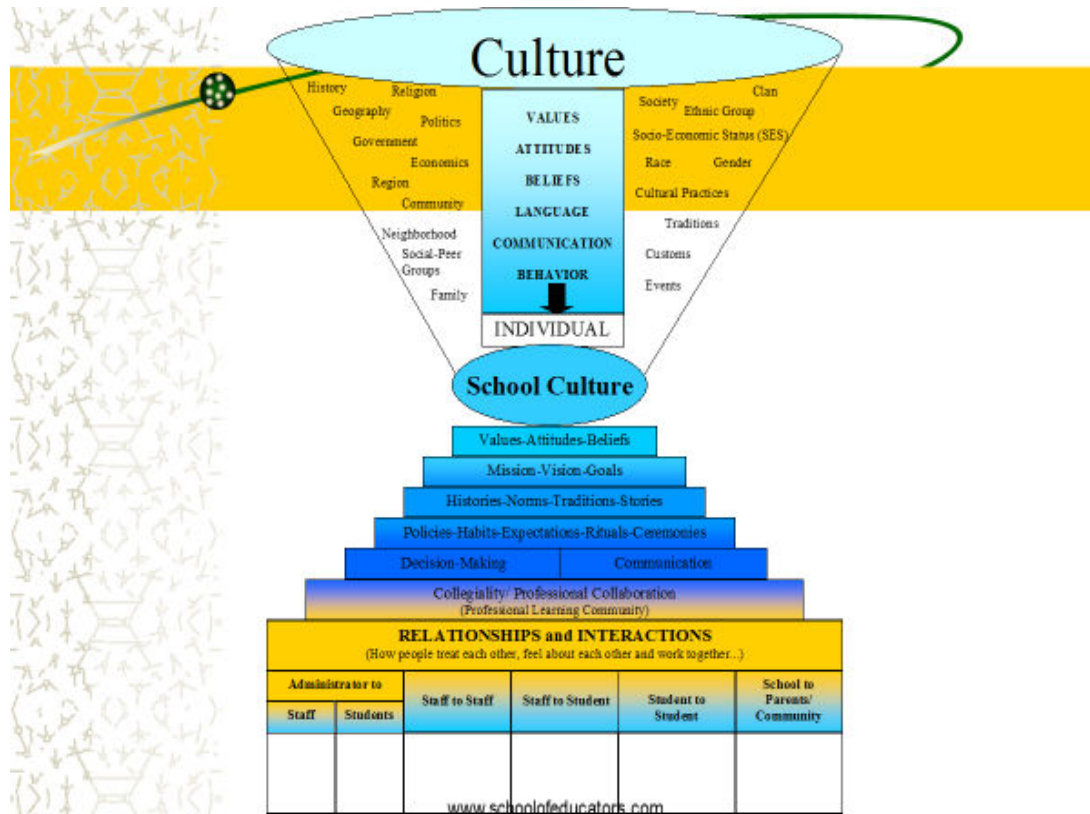
Regarding excellence, the importance of a positive climate cannot be stressed enough. It must be attained and maintained. As mentioned before, it is easily destroyed by simply allowing it to decline a bit at a time or by an adverse circumstance which destroys trust, sense of belonging, teamwork, or respect. Often it will decline if teachers report a circumstance which they find worrisome and nothing is done about it, for example they might report an increase in bullying or suspicion that there may be students consuming drugs. If they observe that no action is taken they will presume that no one cares, and think it is not worth the trouble to advise the higher authorities.

A change of leadership may cause a toxic climate to prevail if the new boss comes in like a dictator and proposes to change everything. Here is a situation taken from real life. A new Head of the English Department was hired from another country. The English teachers had worked during the summer vacation to revise the curriculum for English to help their second language students correct their grammatical errors. They felt they had made significant improvement in the program and were anxious to show their new boss their achievement. He laughed at them and sarcastically said the he could "*piss on grammar*", and that it should not be given emphasis in the program. Then he asked them to start over with the curriculum plans. His manner never improved and the atmosphere in the department never got better. He continued to make impertinent remarks to the teachers for the two years he was there. Fortunately, the outstanding professionalism of the teachers did not allow him to affect their high standards in the classroom, but they were always uneasy. Change always brings uneasiness until everyone is comfortable and reassured that they can continue to work in a positive respectful way.

A toxic climate will produce an untidy uncared-for environment where resources and facilities are destroyed, bullying is common, poor academic results are the norm, a high dropout rate is evident, and high teacher turnover is routine. On the other hand, a positive climate will produce the contrary. This can be especially noticeable in the more vulnerable communities as Buchanan (2013) mentions: "*It's clear that improving school climate benefits everyone – particularly low-producing, low-income schools, with social problems in the community, by providing a safe and supportive environment away from the potential hardships of home life, a more connected, motivated school emerges- a school that is built upon a foundation of trust and mutual care.*" (p.3)

## **SCHOOL CULTURE**

Prior comments on school climate have pretty much established that this refers to how people in the community perceive things and the emotions that are evoked at any given time. It is the “here and now” and is highly susceptible to change. This is, of course, closely related to the school culture but, on the contrary, the culture builds rather slowly and endures over a long period of time. The culture defines the way things are carried out and it establishes what is important and what is not. The following graph taken from the power point called Transforming School Culture (2009) clearly defines the things that compose the school culture:



*Transforming School Culture (2009), slide 10*

As easily noticed on the graph, the school culture, much like any culture in general or individual’s culture, has a lot to consider. Like the climate, the culture depends greatly on collegiality, respect, decision making, team work, mutual belief in high achievement and basic common values. It has an enormous dependence on how the different members of the contingencies relate to each other. Relationships are of utmost importance. A good way to evaluate the culture would be to fill out the chart at the bottom of the diagram with a few words about how these relationships operate and ask if they are positive and if they inspire confidence or not.

The culture will depend greatly on tradition, stories, rituals, ceremonies, and policies. Unlike the climate, many aspects are more tangible and easily recognized and much longer lasting. Jerald (2006) points out that, *“Organizing an extensive body of research on organizational culture, leadership, and change experts Terrance Deal and Kent Peterson contend that “the culture of an enterprise plays the dominant role in exemplary performance.”* They define school culture as *“an underground flow of feelings and folkways (wending) its way within schools” in the form of vision and values, beliefs and assumptions, rituals and ceremonies, history and stories, and physical symbols.”* (p.2) Traditions, heroes and heroines, and special events and symbols such as the school song or flag form an important part of the school’s culture.

A focus on the type of education that characterizes the school often forms part of the culture. For example, a school may follow the demanding International Baccalaureate Programs (I.B. World School) or have a strong scientific or technological program. For example, the Gimnasio Moderno in Bogotá, is noted for its marching band, along with being the most traditional school for boys in the country. There might be an emphasis on music or the arts in general, or a strong sports program. Special people whose personal philosophy is reflected in the mission and vision, often the founders of the school or national or historical heroes, are remembered and revered. Many schools are named for their founders or heroes, such as Gimnasio Monsignor Manuel Maria Camargo, Colegio Distrital Robert F. Kennedy, Colegio San Mateo Apostle, Liceo Simon Bolivar, or Colegio Cardinal John Henry Newman. These “heroes” are ligaments that tie the institution together. They are ever present and unmoving.

The importance of culture cannot be underestimated, Gary Phillips, as cited in - *Transforming School Culture* (2009), said, *“Positive learning can only take place in a positive culture. A healthy school culture will affect more student and teacher success than any other reform or school improvement effort currently being employed.”* (slide 19) Kruse and Louis (2010) explain this. *“A school’s culture is characterized by deeply rooted traditions, values, beliefs, some of which are unique and embedded in a particular school’s history and location. Culture informs the ways in which “things are done around here” and, just as importantly, frames how change efforts are perceived.”* (p.4) It is not difficult to conclude that a school’s culture is central to the structure presented at the beginning of this paper. It gives the institution its unique identity and distinguishes it from all others. It will build a sense of pertinence in its community members and stimulate loyalty to the principles it fosters. It portrays the definition of “Alma Mater”, or “mother soul” for students and alumni, and is often the reason that people who have graduated from the school seek to enroll their own children in the same institute where they spent their school days. *“Based in accumulated experiences, a school’s rules and regulations, policies and procedures, whether written or informal, are the lasting artifacts of old organizational lessons.”* (p.4)

Closely tied to a positive sustainable climate and culture, and often the greatest influence on these, is the factor of leadership. School leaders have enormous power and persuasion to either maintain and cultivate or deteriorate and destroy the atmosphere of a school which is fragile and can be easily disrupted, sometimes by a small or accidental incident.

## **SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

### **At the top, in the middle, and in the classroom**

School leaders include the Head of the School (or Rector), the Heads of Sections, subject and level coordinators, and all of coordinators of the different services, as well as the teachers. Lambert (2002) reminds us that, *“Just as we now realize that learning is about more than filling an empty vessel, so we are beginning to realize that leadership is about more than control, or the domination of people.”* (p.2) No one in the school is unimportant or expendable, and it is important that teachers realize that all contribute to student learning. According to Linda Lambert (2002), *“School leadership needs to be a broad concept that is distinguished from person, role, and a discrete set of individual behaviours. It needs to be embedded in the school community as a whole which suggests a shared responsibility for a shared purpose of community.”*(p.1) We should keep in mind that the best type of leadership allows each member of the staff to carry out his/her functions with autonomy, responsibility, and confidence, along with accountability for the quality of their work. This requires that everyone is a leader in his/her own right. *“The Principal does not always have to make all the decisions. In fact, I would argue that the more he/she does so, the less skillful he/she is in the art of leadership.”* (p.3) Nonetheless the line managers are the most influential in how things are organized and maintained.

Many volumes on leadership have been written, and we will refer to some, but most do not consider the educational context. The Longman Exams Dictionary (2006) defines leadership as *“in control”, “the person who directs or controls a group.”* (p.863) In a school context, albeit the directing and controlling, I would have to add enables, inspires, encourages, appreciates, teaches, sustains, and oversees. They gather data, study it, and establish goals in a reciprocal relationship with their teams. Schmoker (1999) points out, *“The new culture of schools should encourage and expect that a leader will orchestrate a program that includes measurable goals, as well as regular praise and celebration of progress toward those goals.”*(p, 113) But there is more to it than that. Effective leaders in education need skills that are common to all leaders, but they also have a distinct profile which all professions that deal directly with humanity require. They have the power to enable. As Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) so pungently points out,

*“Their (educational leaders) work enables teachers to be effective—as it is not just the traits that teachers bring but their ability to use what they know in a high-functioning organization that produces student success. As we have seen, the number-one reason for teachers’ decisions about whether to go or to stay in a school is the quality of administrative support.” (p.323)*

Teacher retention in schools is one of the characteristics of a good school. It may be a surprise to know that in Colombia teacher turnover must be reported to the Secretary of Education in the school’s locality every year. It is used as an indicator of the schools’ quality and effectiveness, and if it is notoriously high, the Ministry of Education may investigate.

I stumbled on a short article that hits the nail on the head. Elena Aguillar (2014) outlines what makes a great school leader. She only names three things, which is a relief for anyone trying to define good leadership. However, these three are at the core of being successful in the role, because the main interests and attitudes of the principal are communicated in such a way that the community pulls together with support and common goals. These traits are *“visionary leadership”, “community builder”, and “emotional intelligence.”*

As a *“visionary leader”*, the principal keeps the academic, social and emotional well-being of the children (and staff) at heart and this well-being is developed and is priority for all stockholders. It is embodied in the mission and vision statement. This leader not only *“talks the talk but walks the walk”* of the mission and vision of the school. He/she is *“the number 1 champion of the vision.” (p. 1)*

The second of these characteristics is *“community builder.”* By this, Aguillar suggests that the principal knows he/she cannot work alone, but *“creates connections and bonds”* in children and staff which fulfill the human need for belonging. All stockholders are consulted and included in decision making. This type of organization will make people proud to belong, be happy, and want to stay. *“Find yourself a healthy community and you’ll see your happiness increase, your health improve, and your professional practice reach new levels of excellence.” (p.1)*

I would add here that clear opportune communication is indispensable to help fortify community building. This is a major fault in many schools. The teaching staff is often left in the dark about changes and decisions that affect them and their work, or if they are informed they are not given reasons for the decisions. Leaders at all levels should have strong skills in both oral and written communication. Communication in a school covers many aspects that entail the entire gamma of emotions. It may be directed to inform, convince, negotiate, reprimand, and decide. Sometimes it will involve public speaking to large groups (assemblies, graduation ceremonies). It can be directed toward smaller groups (the school board, staff meetings, senior management, and groups of parents or students). At other times it can be with individuals or groups of 3 or 4 people (disciplinary procedures with students, or with parents or members of staff) which require patience and diplomacy.

The principal may even be forced to communicate with the media, about something positive and important (accreditation, new facilities, high scores on external exams etc.) or something dreadful, as we have observed with the school shootings which have shaken communities in the U.S.A. All the above require different skills. It is the mark of a good communicator to be able to adjust his/her discourse to the event, and neither say too much or too little. Written reports are also required, whether they be weekly bulletins to the families or progress reports to owners or the local educational authorities.

In addition to leading with vision and building community, we must consider “*emotional intelligence*”, without which everything else can be undermined. Aguillar defines this as “*ability to understand and manage your own emotions and recognize, understand, and manage the emotions of others.*” Being a good listener who will try to understand where others are coming from is indispensable, as is the ability to deal with conflict. This person will appreciate the members of staff. He/she will remain calm and empathetic and will not allow him/herself to be drawn out of control. (p.1) In his excellent book, *The Leadership Mystique*, Kets de Vries (2006) specifies 4 Hs of effective leadership, all of which are at the core of educational leadership:

- *“HOPE - Leadership starts with the H of hope. Leaders have to create a sense of hope, or both they and their aspirations are lost. Without hope, there’s nowhere for leaders to lead or followers to follow.*
- *HUMANITY - Leaders should never forget that they are human. The humanity of leaders is often best revealed in how they treat people whom they can’t benefit from.*
- *HUMILITY - Humility is closely related to humanity, in that it’s rooted in accurate self-perception. Good leaders realize that no conquest is theirs alone.*
- *HUMOR - Effective leaders have a good sense of humor, even in the face of disaster, and they’re willing to laugh at their own foibles. Humor is a good indicator of mental health and an asset to any workplace.”*  
(p.263)

Peñate and Peinado (1998), in *Administración de Instituciones Educativas*, enumerate some characteristics that a good school leader should have, as cited by Yandovic Nola, who in turn cites W.J. Redin. The principal (Rector) should demonstrate both personal and professional orientation toward carrying out his/her own responsibilities and seeing that those of the other functionaries do the same. He/she should have a primordial interest in people and an excellent management of human relations. He/she should also be able to achieve high productivity through his/her own efficiency. (p,98) They go on to advocate the creator/executive type of leader who develops the talents of the personnel, gives orientation so that they can assume responsibilities, and always remembers that “*the*

*intelligence, the imagination, the creative spirit are distributed among the people , and are not the privilege of the director.”*(P.99) This type of leader achieves excellent results, is admired and respected, gets the families of the students involved, hears the voices of the students and gets them committed to their school. He/she will want everyone’s participation and will listen to opinions that differ from his/her own. Constructive criticism is welcome and will be acted upon. He/she is a notorious presence who cultivates high moral standards in the working team. Triumphs and failures are shared with all. He/she is a hard worker and example for the rest, who, with the objectives of the institution in mind, is dedicated to the job as well as to relationships with staff, students and parents. (pp. 99-100)

We understand these characteristics to be necessary for the Head of the School, but they are equally necessary for the rest of senior and middle management. A head of section, head of department, level coordinator, form tutor, classroom teacher, and head of human resources or of transport or cafeteria, no matter the responsibility, all should strive to develop these fundamentals of leadership.

I was privileged to attend the Principals’ Training Course on Creating and Administrating an Effective School in 2001, and that one-week experience got me through 7 years of school management, first as Head of Section and later as Head of School here in Bogotá. When working as Head of Section, I was fortunate to work with two excellent Heads of School. They were the kind of principals that were approachable and respectful of the teachers’ and the students’ opinions. They believed in and trusted their staff. The Standards for the International School Principal, as they appear on the web site of the Principal’s Training Center today uphold what Aguillar (2014) has mentioned. They say that leadership should result *“in student progress consistent with the school’s mission and curricular goals.”* A positive climate and culture are of utmost importance and the leader should carefully protect them. Learning is primordial, and relationships make a difference in the smooth running of the school. The principal should lead and interact with all members of the school community in ways which demonstrate a knowledge of and sensitivity to the culture as well as *“model the skills and attitudes of a global citizen”* (PTC, Standards for the International School Principal (n.d.)

Schmoker (1999) mentions a great truth which is of some concern. The Head of the School usually dedicates his/her time to organizational and operational matters that are not directly connected to learning. He urges administrators to dedicate a small amount of time, even if it is only once each month, engaging in action research to identify strategies to promote effective collaboration and improve learning through the use of data. They should share ideas and seek solutions to improve academic results. This is not a common practice. He refers to Smith and Andrews (1989), *“But there is a precious shortage of achievement-focused administrative collaboration. It is well documented that as often as administrators*

*meet, they seldom discuss student learning issues; instead they focus almost exclusively on procedural or political matters.”(p,19)*

One thing that is advisable for members of middle and senior management, including the Head of the School, is to teach at least one subject. Michael Fullan (2017) says, *“The principal’s role and the teaching profession are intertwined and need to develop in concert.”(p.3)* This type of harmony can be more easily achieved if the principal actually has firsthand contact with the students in the classroom. In a prominent school where I worked for many years, even the Head Master was expected to teach a subject. This kept him in contact with the reality of school life and the fundamental purpose of the institution – learning. It is all too easy to get entangled in the bureaucracy, finances, strategic planning, and putting out fires. By the way, there is always a fire. There is no normal day in a school.

John Gastil in chapter 8 of *Leadership*, edited by Keith Grint (1997), points out that leadership and authority are not the same. Members of the community can be involved in leadership without having authority. Likewise, someone can have authority without leadership. Hopefully there will be a happy balance of both. *“Leadership is behavior, not position.”* Gastil quotes Bass (1990: pp.15-16) *“Any member of the group can exhibit some amount of leadership.”* The likelihood of success will depend upon the distribution of responsibilities and opportunities to lead by carefully evaluating each person’s particular strengths and potential and then suiting the person to the job. This is of great value because it offers the members of the staff the possibility to progress in their careers through ascending to higher positions of responsibility.

Darling-Hammond (2010) says that in order to keep in touch with the functioning and needs of the school, *“Leaders are identified, cultivated, and recruited from among teachers who demonstrate promise.”* (p.191) She explains that one of the characteristics of top ranking nations that have achieved high results in equity and student learning is *“leadership development that engages expert teachers in developing curriculum and assessment, mentoring and coaching others, and leading professional development. As well as pathways that recruit strong teachers into programs that prepare them as school principals who are instructional leaders.”* (p.198) If they have worked their way to the top through years of teaching experience, they bring with them the essence of why a school exists, and a vocation that has endured the trials and frustrations of classroom teaching.

Lambert (2002) gives four reasons why building teacher leadership is greatly beneficial. First of all, she reminds us that principals or Heads of School are not often permanent. When a change at the top occurs, reforms that have been initiated get left aside and everything goes back to the way it was before. If there are teacher leaders involved innovations that have been initiated can be carried on. Another very important aspect that she mentions is: *“When teachers become involved in leadership you can see the growth that takes them to higher levels of human development. As they develop over time, they begin to focus on three prominent values: equity, justice, and caring.”* These are perhaps the most valuable aspects



for supporting children and families who are encountering adverse circumstances. *“When more people in a school are involved in thinking about these broad issues deeply, you can really start to struggle with the issues for families and students, and how to organize schools beyond the academic focus.”* (p.7)

Lambert goes on to mention that teacher leadership helps reduce the resistance that hierarchy builds. *“The hierarchy invests resistance in every system in the world. It is the very nature of being “kept in place”.”* Finally, she speaks of “collective responsibility”. It has an effect on teachers that allows them to see themselves differently. She cites a primary teacher who tells how she went from being focused almost exclusively on the classroom to having a much broader concept of what she was doing. *“I now see myself as part of education—and I see myself as responsible for the next generation of educators who are coming into the school.”*(p.7)

Schmoker (1999) offers the following indicators for building future leaders:

- *“Designate--and cultivate—talented teacher leaders at every school.*  
(Competency and the respect of other members of staff should be considered.)
- *Pay them a reasonable stipend. Leadership is not free.*
- *Provide them with release time.* (There should be time in their schedules to dedicate to their administrative tasks.)
- *Include them in administrative training.* (Professional development would be of upmost value.)
- *Involve the faculty in their selection.* (Consult faculty members based upon criteria and expectations.)”  
(p.117)

From this study, we find that contemporary world experts in educational leadership agree upon the characteristics that educational leadership should strive to achieve. I would like to include here some of the related findings of Dr. Michael Fullan, advisor to the Minister of Education in Ontario, Canada, who, after a rigorous study of education in Colombia, presented a conference called *Estrategias para la Excelencia Educativa, El Camino para el Desarrollo y la Equidad* in February 2014, in Bogotá. In Colombia Dr. Fullan identified the need for strong leadership from the top down, which begins with the Ministry of Education and continues down the line of command to the Form Tutors or Group Directors in the schools. There should be professional development provided to form present and future leaders who will model what they have learned, and will consult and carry out dialogue, seeking to better the level of education, always focused on the goals of increased learning and equity. It is important that these leaders be from the realm of education.

It is apparent that leadership greatly influences the climate and culture of an institution, and is closely tied to the way staff, students and other community members view their position in the organization. Fullan (2017) suggests that the principal and other school leaders in today’s world should *“focus on instruction as a learner, not as a boss. The more*

*you learn the more influential you become. Your job is to influence the instructional practice of teachers. It involves trust, non-judgmentalism, transparency, specificity, and measurable learning outcomes.* (p.2) A modern contemporary approach to leadership is clearly needed and Fullan tells us why. *“Two reasons: the push reason—traditional schooling is boring for the majority of students (as they go up the grade levels) and teachers. The pull reasons are a) that the digital world is dynamic and alluring, and b) the future of work and global competency requirements are unclear and volatile.* (p.3) He also tells us what. He identifies six twenty-first century outcomes that will require concentration if we are to meet forthcoming challenges that technology is demanding. *“This involves new learning outcomes—what we call the 6 Cs: character, citizenship, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. And new pedagogies, revamping teaching and learning, and altering learning environments.”* (p,3)

In summary, we can justifiably return to the three characteristics that Aguillar (2014) gave us at the beginning of our discussion on leadership. All of the concepts discussed in this paper fit into the categories that she identified; visionary leadership, community builder and emotional intelligence. Visionary leadership maintains the Mission and Vision of the institution and demonstrates it in action reflected in the well-being of all contingencies. If the leaders are community builders, teamwork is a priority which values and takes into consideration opinions and responses from all members. This results in a strong sense of belonging that makes people feel that they count. Finally, emotional intelligence will permit the leaders to conduct themselves and interact with others according to the four *Hs* offered by Kets de Vries (2006) that were discussed earlier. Hope, Humility, Humanity and Humor will always be at the heart of good management in education and in all other endeavors as well. It is up to the individual how he/she cultivates them.

## **CONCLUSION**

This small reflection on Mission and Vision, Climate and Culture and Educational Leadership is meant to provide an awareness of the importance of these factors that are vital in holding together and fortifying an institution, but if unrecognized can sometimes mark its decline or even demise. It is imperative that teachers in formation become aware of these, because they do not perceive the importance until they are immersed in an uncomfortable situation that affects their performance in the teaching/learning quotient and makes their work either pleasant and enthusiastic or disagreeable and off-putting.

The Mission and Vision express who the institution is and where it wants to go. The characteristics in these documents give identity and purpose and justify existence. They must coincide with what really happens in the institution, and if the activity carried out will sustain the purposes outlined therein. The importance of the Climate and Culture in educational institutions, as in business and industry, is vital. How people feel about their working place, their colleagues and their own contributions to the whole greatly affect their capacity to produce quality work, and indeed their very happiness. It allows all members to

feel a sense of belonging and identity that will translate into quality effort and excellence in teaching and learning along with formation in values and citizenship. The importance of leadership in education cannot be underestimated. A strong leader, who inspires trust, gives hope, treats everyone equally, appreciates the contributions of others, understands the humanity of others and his own, and is not afraid to admit a mistake and try to fix it will promote a positive climate, uphold the mission, and produce the highest standards of learning. We can conclude that, where possible, school leadership should be identified and cultivated from among the teachers who are already practicing the profession, and that leaders as well as teachers should maintain their professional development. This will require practicing school leaders to adapt to the unavoidable changes of the twenty-first century and take steps to cope if they are to be successful. It will also require them to begin to build in a younger generation the type of leadership that will eventually have to assume their roles.

Hopefully this reflection will be useful in preparing future teachers to enter the profession with an understanding of the importance of these factors and be able to cultivate them throughout their careers. Also, it might serve school directives and veteran teachers to recall the importance of the school Mission, Climate and Culture, and Leadership, and to strive to maintain them, thus guaranteeing positive and edifying experiences for them and their students.

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