Creating a Culture of Community:  
An International School Case Study  
By: Rachelle Savoie  

A Culture of Community  
Schools are consistently going through transformations. New pedagogical research is published to indicate students would benefit from a particular style of learning, a resurgence of traditional learning is embraced or a push to integrate new technology is encouraged. However, there has never been a time where transforming learning has been more discussed, debated and urged than in the 21st century. A student learning in the 21st century no longer needs to attend school in order to have their vessel filled with knowledge by a teacher regurgitating information. The access to technology, the call to equip students with more transferable 21st century learning skills and a growing body of evidence of what effective learning and teaching truly looks like is pressuring schools to redefine their purpose.

One component that is required in this transformation is a need to be intentional with creating a culture of community. Having a strong culture of community is proven to lead to positive learning experiences, establishes mutual respect and creates an environment that is engaging, meaningful and supportive (Fisher, 2012). Schools do naturally form communities- a place where people with a common purpose (learning) come together (in a school) to establish an institution (school). Culture is also something that instinctively develops when people come together and have a common purpose, “Any social unit that has some kind of shared history will have evolved a culture
with the strength of that culture dependent on the length of its existence, the
stability of the group’s membership, and the emotional intensity of the actual
historical experience they have shared (Schein, 2004).” Because culture is
something that surrounds us, is constantly being created, shaped and
transformed by actions, attitudes and behaviors of the interactions between
people, it is imperative that the manipulation of culture is one that benefits all.
Therefore, a culture of community needs to be deliberate and consciously
established. This requires a school to construct, nourish and support strong
relationships between all members of a school while simultaneously
establishing a learning environment that emphasis’s the four c’s of 21st
century learning- communication, creativity, collaboration and critical thinking.

To change the trajectory of a school’s culture and purpose is challenging and
is fraught with obstacles. Each school, city, state, province and country faces
unique and diverse challenges, “Any analysis of reculturing in schools has to
take into account that schools are organizations with a history, operate under
external and internal constraints, and have formal as well as informal
structures of power, alliances, and communication” (Geijsel, Femke, Frans
Meijers, and Wim Wardekker, 2007) However, one area of reculturing schools
that is predominantly unexplored is that of international schools.

International Schools

International schools have been in existence for decades. First catering to
families either working for their governments or missionaries (Hayden &
Thompson, 1995). The amount of international Schools have increased
exponentially, however, in the last decade as more and more people are taking advantage of lucrative business and travel opportunities abroad. International schools are a unique addition to the educational profession. Many of them are quite new, do not have a long history of relationships with educational boards and government initiatives, are not pressured to administer state/country wide testing, are not publically funded and draw upon a pool of educators from all over the world with varying degrees of training and experience. However, they are not immune to the pressures and influences of reculturing schools in the 21st century. Many vision and mission statements of international schools articulate their commitment to developing and nurturing students for the 21st century. This requires connecting with the latest research to understand what evidence supports the best teaching and learning practices and to find ways to meaningfully and authentically implement it. Hence, a reculturing may be necessary.

The Challenges

Many distinct challenges exist in engaging in a reculturing of international schools; from the transient and exotic nature of living abroad that attracts people to international schools (families and teachers) to managing diverse cultures, ideals and values, the potential complications are plentiful. When making the commitment to reculture, leaders must develop strong bonds of trust with all invested individuals. When an entire school is asked to enter into a place of ambiguity and uncertainty, something that is a necessity to truly transform people and places, is trust in leaders, trust in each other and trust in the purpose of the transformation. The gaining and earning of trust is
something that is nourished over time, built on past experiences and requires an understanding of the staff and students on many levels. *Time*, therefore, is one of the most essential elements of a successful reculturing. However, time is something that is fragile and not easily predicted in an international school setting. Without the luxury of time, international school leaders need to bring people to a place of trust and inspire people to embrace the ambiguity of reculturing quickly and swiftly.

From staff, students and leaders, many international schools lack the commitment and consistency required to engage in reculturing. Students and teachers are often unclear as to how long they will be attending/working at the school; intentions as to why teachers are teaching at a particular school may not be for pedagogical or professional reasons and school leaders may alienate local staff, impacting their expectations and willingness to embrace change. Therefore, another fundamental element of reculturing a school is to be able to “persuade people to act in support of a shared common cause in the future.” (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). A ‘shared common cause in the future’ is at the core of the obstacles facing the reculturing of an international school. When staff and students cannot foresee a future together, do not feel personally and professionally invested in the school community, reculturing becomes not only a challenge, but impossible. Further to this, as teachers play the most prominent role in student learning, teachers need to be consulted, supported and aware of why and how decisions are being made. Because groups of teachers may be leaving and entering at the start of any given school year, decisions to initiate a change are often not transparent,
something that Geijsel et al state is necessary, “Decisions are transparent if it is clear to all teachers why a certain decision was taken” (Geijsel, Femke, Frans Meijers, and Wim Wardekker, 2007).

The obstacles that face a reculturing of an international school are not at every school, are experienced in varying degrees and can be overcome by effective leaders, successful recruitment policies and sustained and intentional work to develop a strong culture of community. International schools can also extract lessons from many other schools that have already made the commitment to provide authentic learning experiences for 21st century learners and who have already purposefully created an environment where there is a sense of belonging, purpose and a collective vision.

At the current international school I work at, staff and students have identified a lack of community, cohesion and collaboration. Many of the challenges that have already been addressed are recognized as contributing to this lack of community, however with the support of administrators, the passion of teachers and involvement of voices from a variety of invested groups, a new initiative is being planned to deliberately and purposefully begin the next year by actively creating a culture of community.

**The Initiative**

The initiative has started with key members of administrators, teachers, support staff and students. It was essential that voices from all areas of the school were heard from and involved in the planning process. A benefit of an
international school is the ample resources that are available. The majority of international schools function in countries that have a workforce that is affordable and plentiful. This can often be an advantage that is overlooked as these local contributors play a vital role in the sustainability and authenticity of any change. Further to gathering people from other departments, it was also imperative we had student voices involved. Essentially change and reculturing is made for the benefit of learners, therefore their input was invaluable.

Once a team of invested individuals was assembled, we identified the key goals that we wanted to accomplish from the initiative. They include the following:

- be intentional with creating a positive and engaged community
- create space and time to set goals as individuals and as a school
- develop a common focus for the school to collectively work towards
- solidify relationships between students, teachers and staff
- identify and develop key skills needed in order to have a successful experience at school and in the world

As time is a core element of any successful reculturing, our principal has committed to allocating some of the time teachers spend together the week prior to school starting to the initiative. This is the time where returning teachers and new teachers set the tone for the year. Often this time is spent on prepping curriculum, going through formalities and many other administrative duties. Although these things are important, we believe it is even more important to etch in significant time to share our goals, invite new
people to play active roles within the initiative and also facilitate key activities to intentionally work on the relationships between teachers prior to students arriving on campus. This will be an important time to establish the trust and respect that is required to create a culture of community.

Another element of time that has been allotted for this initiative is 4 full school days throughout the year established on the calendar so teachers are informed, aware and briefed on what to expect. Although not all decisions can be completely transparent due to the nature of the comings and goings of staff members, giving ample time prior to any change or new addition to the calendar is necessary and appreciated by all staff and students.

A final portion of time that has been indicated as necessary for this initiative is time in the schedule for grade levels to work together. Although we have an advisory period scheduled into each day, there has been very little organized and expected within this time. In conjunction with this initiative, we are also redefining our advisory program to complement and supplement the work we intend to do.

The proposed program that will be rolled out will include grades working together to create a mural in a new building that is being constructed for the secondary students, workshops where students can focus on skills necessary to be successful at school and in life (time management, certain computer programs, mindfulness, study skills, public speaking skills, essay writing, etc), service learning and community building activities to establish a relationship
with the local community, competitions between houses that include students from all grades and having a summer reading expectation in order to create common learning experiences and inspire purposeful conversations between teachers and students.

Although international schools present some clear obstacles to creating a culture of community, they also present infinite possibilities. Learning is no longer confined within the walls of a traditional school. Yes, our students and teachers may not know when or where they will be next, but the learning a person can do in a place that is connected, creative and cohesive can transcend and live beyond the actual place the learning is done at. International schools have the advantage of working with people from diverse cultures, allowing the school culture to be one that is a true reflection of the 21st century- a mosaic of color, traditions, experiences, perspectives and compassion. If this is the lens in which all change is viewed through, international schools may soon be a place where other people can unearth powerful lessons of transformation.
Works Cited


