

MATTERS OF CULTURE

A simple working definition of culture when used to define the characteristics of any group, be it a school, a school district, a business, a consortium, a region, or even a nation, is “the way we do things around here”. In each case, there are certain norms, values, and practices that are either shared by the group or at least assumed to be shared by the group, rightly or wrongly as the case may be.

In that sense, the agenda for our week together can be described as the exploration of many different levels of “culture” as they relate to Music Learning and the Leadership of the changes we believe can be achieved through a focus on Music as an agent of school change.

We have an outline program for the week. But we also have two other documents that accompany this, one of which seems to argue against the feasibility of what the program proposes. Can all three be reconciled?

The program for the week that has been developed to guide our work on Music Learning Leadership (MLL) and ensure that we do not become distracted to the point that we omit some key element that we need to include in our work together. This begins on Sunday by raising the question: What does MLL look like and why does it matter, particularly in the context of Scale-Out Dissemination?

Monday morning begins with a discussion of the Ten Guiding Principles of MIENC which leads into Music Plus Music Integration, with an emphasis on School Culture and Site-based Change. The afternoon begins the examination of some key practices.

Tuesday reviews other practices: M+MI Design, Opera making, Leadership in Schools. Beginning on Wednesday, more Layering/ Deepening of the work is facilitated through the exploration of design connections to other disciplines (Wednesday), Social-Emotional development (Thursday), and Assessment and Research (Friday), culminating in a final review of planning for scale-out and a concluding discussion on Collaborative Leadership As A Change Agent in Schools (Saturday morning through lunch).

At intervals throughout the days of the Institute, time is set aside for Break-Out Workshops by Site to encourage site-specific applications and planning for the coming year.

As participants make their way through this agenda, they will be aware throughout of the other two documents representing parallel streams of thought accompanying them on their journey. One is “theoretical” as demonstrated by the Ten Guiding Principles, the other is “practical” from the real world as told in the account of Baldwin High. The latter

in particular raises issues that are regularly experienced in schools working to introduce and develop arts integration.

The first of these documents describes the “Ten Guiding Principles of the Music-in-Education National Consortium”, a set of beliefs about teaching and learning that guide our current development initiatives and the research efforts. How many of them are actually shared, and how many of them are assumed to be shared is perhaps one of the discoveries we will make. Their focus is on public school education, teacher preparation in institutes of higher education, and lifelong professional development. Taken as a whole, they form an extended mission statement for the Consortium.

The final document is the cautionary tale of Baldwin High and the lessons it contains. The story seems to suggest that the outcome was foreseeable and inevitable. It pits two apparently irreconcilable “cultures” against each other. But is the victory of “top-down” over “bottom-up” quite as inevitable as it is made to appear?

There are examples of schools that have overcome similar clashes of culture, but not without the support of resources outside the school site and beyond the reaches of a single district. The North Carolina A+ Schools are one example.

They made use of resources such as:

- Other schools seeking similar re-forming, preferably in a network that itself had articulated some shared norms/values/practices. For the principal, other principals to meet with for support. For teachers, fellow teachers in other schools to exchange ideas & practices, especially around issues of capacity building and genuine professional development.
- Some organizing entity that could act as intermediary between individual schools and district(s), act as spokesperson for the network, serve as advocate and political guide at local, state, regional and even national levels, act as broker/fundraiser to leverage funds to serve the common needs of the network.
- A place to find and make available the lessons learned in schools, to articulate the research findings, to analyze, develop and propose for discussion hypotheses drawn from this learning and to make lessons learned accessible to others in diverse fields.
- A place to co-ordinate the design and implementation of true professional development, building upon the practices and action research of teachers, principals and administrators across the network(s). Research makes clear that it is the combination of true professional development + networking that creates sustainable school reform.

The fate of Baldwin Park was not inevitable. But the resources to prevent what is made to seem inevitable were either unavailable or more likely unimaginable to the principal, the staff, or even more seriously to the UCLA consultants invited in to guide the practice of the school.

For a single school just to create the changes described at Baldwin Park is in itself remarkable. But to sustain them and continually develop the resources to make them integral to the core culture of the school would have required a range of other resources that were not recognized by the school or just not available to its leadership.

There are several assumptions made in this article that I question. For example, the dichotomy between “Top-Down” and “Bottom-Up” is too simple by far. In the public school systems of this country, because a number of issues governing schools derive from legislation by individual states and their elected governments, there are inevitably a range of constraints, financial and otherwise, that schools are required to honor. In this sense, Top-Down is not an option. But there is a wide range of choices that are negotiable. This may take time and skilled politics but the result does not have to be carved in stone.

The same applies to curriculum. Some states do have a carefully drafted “state” curriculum. But this is also subject to change as part of a political process (see for example what is happening to “evolution”). Even when mandated, most curriculum only prescribes “What” is to be taught, not “How” it is to be taught.

An important section of the article starts on page 11 (“From Assembly Lines to Self-Managing Teams”). This refers to an evolving understanding of how organizations actually work and how this applies to schools as organizations. It contrasts the traditional, top-down only, hierarchical, command-and-control model so familiar to military personnel (and sports coaches) with what the article calls the Self-Managing Teams approach, emphasizing bottom-up, capacity building. This is increasingly influencing school leadership thinking. It is well expressed in the writings of Peter Senge and colleagues at MIT. I believe it would be valuable to make some of this part of the preparation for our own Guided Practice Consultants.

My own introduction to Peter Senge was back in 1993 and I have been impressed by how this group has evolved in the fifteen years since that time. For me it came just as I was beginning to work on the development of the A+ Program at the Kenan Institute. Let me briefly describe how A+ evolved because Senge’s writings were influential in that.

A+ began as an idea that was developed on a small scale in a limited number of individual schools around the country by the late Ralph Burgard beginning in 1988. But it became truly feasible and at a different scale when he joined forces with the Kenan Institute in early 1993.

From 1993 through 2004, the Kenan Institute developed A+ as a statewide program in North Carolina. The A+ Program was designed as “a comprehensive school reform

program that views the arts as fundamental to how teachers teach and how students learn in all subjects”. Twenty-five schools formed the initial A+ Network in fall 1995.

In 2004, the new generation of leaders of the Kenan Trust decided to terminate their investment in the A+ Program, to change completely the direction of the Kenan Institute, and to negotiate the transfer of the program to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. This marked the end of the initial development phase of the North Carolina A+ Program. Since its adoption by UNCG, it has continued to sustain its network of schools and to attract additional new schools within the state. In the coming fall (2008), a total of forty-two schools make up the network. Twenty-three of the original twenty-five schools begin their fourteenth continuous year as A+ schools.

Vincent Marron
July 2008

VMarron@aol.com