School Culture Qualitative Study

Fieldnotes of a PLC series

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**Introduction**

During the Fall 2022 semester, KCS's Research, Evaluation, and Assessment (REA) department conducted a qualitative study regarding how staff members experience the school culture. As part of the state's first quarter progress monitoring update, below is a summary of findings from a four-session PLC series called "Keep Kids Learning," which focused on instructing teachers on how to build restorative interventions in the classroom and their teaching practices. The analysis of this PLC was to provide an entry point into the more extensive mapping of the school's culture and its relationship to teacher retention.

The PLC series was held each Thursday from October 20, 2022, to November 10, 2022. Between two and three facilitators ran the PLCs each week. Each session was presented separately to each grade band of teachers and SPED and ENCORE teachers together as another "band." Data collection of these sessions resulted in 21 pages of field notes; 12 hours, 25 minutes of recordings; and 171 pages of transcripts.

These data were then analyzed through the lens of social identity theory. Specifically, group homogeneity refers to the perception of in-group members as a collective of diverse individuals and out-group members as homogenous. Data analysis focused on identifying how interactions during PLCs among participants shaped in-group and out-group memberships and how participants responded to those emerging dynamics.

**BOUNDARIES OF WHAT CAN BE DONE WITH FINDINGS**

The summary below results from making surface-level sense of participants' experiences *across the data* described above. Less than a month was devoted to studying the data. Whatever is written regarding participants' experiences, attitudes, beliefs, or feelings—typically the underlying motivators of inter/in/actions—are primarily the observer's interpretations and some member checking. Understanding whether the dynamics and their impacts emerged from the motivators described in the summary requires qualitative rigor and credibility that can only come when other time-intensive processes (member reflections, crystallization, theoretical constructs, multivocality, etc.) are also performed[[1]](#footnote-2).

This study did employ member checking; however, member checking stems from a positivist interpretation of truth as fixed, objective, and external from personal biases, beliefs, values, and attitudes. In addition, participants provide feedback more as a confirmation check to the already established findings, making it a more straightforward, faster process than member reflections. Because of these qualities, member checking has been a helpful credibility tool for qualitative research in government, where turnaround time is shorter than in academia and in which those findings may be directly applied. However, such a narrow focus on the findings can result in overlooking opportunities for a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying issues.

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This executive summary was to provide information that, if used in pursuing organizational goals and objectives, can either support the insights behind strategies and tasks aligning with those goals and objectives or trigger curiosity over the validity and feasibility of those goals and objectives. To maintain such a focus, this executive summary serves as a living document and will be edited as new information refines our[[2]](#footnote-3) understanding of the ideas written in it. Added information can come from more data (including quantitative), theoretical constructs, more extended time in the field, different data collection and analysis processes, additional contexts, and even inquisitive questions. It can also include readers' feedback, specifically those related to the study. Email REA data analyst Charli Kerns.

**In-grouping/Out-grouping breaks down collaborative potential**

The PLC series aimed to equip teachers with strategies to support the emotional regulation of student behaviors through restorative practices. The PLC arc initially seemed to move from 1) teacher input about experiences, responses to experiences, and problems, 2) conceptual discussion about more important ideas related to student behavior, and 3) identifying a path forward to address student behavior at the school. However, the literature does suggest conducting a PLC as a decision-making team could empower participants to make strategic decisions collectively for their community, which in this study comprises each grade band.

Staff began the PLC series with a conversation between the teachers and PLC leaders about their experiences and reactions to student behavior. Most teachers were actively engaged in the PLC. They were observed asking questions, writing notes, and discussing with other PLC participants. There was little separation among PLC leaders and participants since both shared anecdotes about their everyday experiences. These moments provided opportunities for developing in-group memberships among the staff at the school. For example, facilitators seemed more open to the problems teachers described when implementing restorative ideas. Additionally, during in-group conservations, facilitators and teachers were more willing to share personal moments and activities that deviated from the norm. For example, punitive discipline practices are considered deviant to the rising norm of restorative discipline practices among administrators, PLC leaders, and the district. They also appeared more willing to listen to one another's moments and actions that conflicted with personal values, beliefs, and attitudes.

However, out-grouping interactions often undercut the PLC sessions' abilities to function as collaborative efforts toward problem-solving. The presentation of a directive to teachers during the PLCs produced a particularly pervasive out-grouping dynamic among staff members. An example of this "bait-and-switch." One slide was presented during a presentation that highlights how easily, quickly, and unintentionally the tone of a PLC can shift from collaborative to performative. This occurred during the conceptual discussion about more significant ideas related to student behavior. The slide asked teachers if they identify as "punitive" or "restorative" when addressing student behavior.

* The conversation suggests that restorative practices were positive and punitive were universally negative. Participants could then self-identify as members of the in-group or the out-group relative to the position of the PLC leaders. Additionally, teachers said multiple times, it depends, suggesting that the measurement applied to them by admin may not reflect how they view themselves. As a result, members who felt outgrouped (those who think that disciplinary practices may have some benefits in changing behavior) if their beliefs were out of step with the school's culture.
* The PLC leaders noticed the shift away from collaborative learning but could not prevent the alienation of those out-grouped. The remaining time of this PLC in the series was spent answering specifics behind "calming corners," which was one valued solution to classroom behavior issues. Teachers who agreed with the solution may have felt they were "correct," and those who were skeptical or had lingering questions may be understood as "confused" or "wrong" because of in-group/out-group dynamics.

The initial form of the meeting suggested that a group of teachers would exercise some level of agency in creating a solution to deal with discipline in their classroom. The desired function of the meeting appeared to focus on explaining to teachers why restorative practices are essential and which techniques they should implement. Teachers moved from critical thinking to in-group/out-group identification, wanting to know "what we need to do to comply" with the directive. Some teachers likely needed to understand better why calming corners was the solution that made the most sense.

All participants demonstrated complex pedagogical knowledge through their ability to share and use different knowledges of teaching concepts to collectively address logistical school and classroom challenges in real time. The sense of agency (and belonging) a teacher feels at the school may increase if they actively identify and know they can implement solutions to the problems they are discussing. However, some decisions will be made by school leaders without input from teachers. These decisions could be communicated as such, and the rationale for the decision should be described clearly. Participants often feel frustrated when they were asked for input (either explicitly or implicitly) but then realize their ideas will not influence the decision. When teachers' "buckets" must be filled without their input (e.g., new curricula, third-grade retention law, Case 21) time may be better spent simply stating the directive, which would free up time to figure out how all staff members can manage the directive in their classroom and the building.

In-group/out-group dynamics of culture develop over time and across many interactions and communications beyond PLCs. Such interactions tend to promote ideas and answers that reflect in-group members' values and attitudes and align with prescribed strategies. These interactions may not be problematic as isolated instances but could have damaging impacts if they become patterns or expectations. Teachers who continue to feel outgrouped may be compelled to take even more extreme positions and actions than they would otherwise consider. Moreover, these workplace dynamics may be worth considering at the district level, given the larger conversations regarding teacher retention.

1. For more information, read Tracy, S. J., & Hinrichs, M. M. (2017). Big tent criteria for qualitative quality. *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods*, 1-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Due to the highly contextual nature of this project, “our” refers to any members directly involved in and impacted by it. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)