A Small School with Big Culture:

Exploring Features of a School Culture Conducive to Innovation and Change.

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Abstract
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Chapter 1: Background

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore the school culture at Houston Secondary School. The main focus was to look for structures and features of school culture that creates an environment that embraces innovation and change. I’m hopeful that the results of this study will give educators a stronger understanding of which features and structures can be developed to help grow a school culture that is open to innovation and change.

As a teacher, some personal values and beliefs that have guided my career are the necessity of fostering and maintaining genuine relationships, keeping a student focused mindset, embracing diversity and keeping a broad view of the role that education might play in a learner’s life. I have spent the last fifteen years at Houston Secondary School and believe that a significant amount of time at one location gives me some insight and depth into how our school functions and, the stories, history, rituals and values that are important to our culture. I believe that professional learning is vital to the profession and have been active in provincial learning opportunities that have afforded me the opportunity to build relationships with other professionals from around the province and to converse with them about their schools ability to be innovative and to change. I believe that our education system needs to change and I feel that Houston Secondary School has a culture that embraces change and looks for innovative ways to better serve its learners.

Our learners come to school with a variety of backgrounds and living situations; each with different beliefs about what is important to them, different definitions of success as well as
individual goals as to how they would like to shape their future. I believe that our education system needs to reflect and accept the individuality of the students the system is trying to serve. Unfortunately, in many instances our schools are set up to educate our learners in a model that can be compared to a factory assembly line with a common product dropping out the end. In my opinion the factory assembly line model contributes to large scale disengagement amongst high school learners and that the feeling is often that high school is something to be endured rather than a meaningful experience that will help mold the future of the individuals involved. There needs to be fundamental changes in the day to day operations of our schools. I believe that the majority of the population would agree that there needs to be a change but it is difficult to change and be innovative so we often revert back to the status quo.

Every school has attributes and elements of culture which make their school special or unique. In my opinion, Houston Secondary School has an innovative and caring culture and there is value in digging deeper into which factors contribute to our culture. Examples that illustrate unique aspects of our culture would be the willingness from staff and students to create a whole school music video, a spirit day event that almost needs to be experienced to understand the full sense of the day and a turkey dinner with a talent show that brings everyone together just before the winter holidays. I would describe our school as a safe, fun and caring place that values positive professional and interpersonal relationships. I believe our staff has a student focus and there is a strong sense of trust between administrators, learners and teachers. We see the need to change to a personalized and flexible system of learning that meets the needs of our diverse learners. Members of the staff at Houston Secondary School feel safe enough to take risks and make changes in their practice in a variety of different ways. During my career at Houston Secondary School I have witnessed a variety of changes; recently there has been an
organizational shift to using formative assessment practices, we have changed our timetable to offer more choice and flexibility to our learners and we are often looking for ways to enhance the learners education experience.

My intention for this study was to look for elements of Houston Secondary’s school culture that contribute to the ability to make changes in our school and to look for innovative ways to change our practice. I am curious to find if there are specific structures or features of Houston Secondary’s school culture that contributes to an environment that is conducive to innovation and change.

**Justification of the study**

Our education system was designed in a different circumstance and in a different time and is not always capable of meeting the challenges of our students (Ministry of Education, ?). In many ways our system continues to operate on an industrial model that sorts and ranks students for future, often post secondary, opportunities. In particular secondary schools that have a lack of connection across the curriculum, truncated class periods and an emphasis on covering material rather than a focus on learning (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). The industrial model of education, with an emphasis on covering material and then testing to see if students have the ability to recall at least half of the curriculum, is lacking and does not meet the needs of our learners, let alone, motivate or engage them (Kaser & Halbert, 2009).

Our world is changing at a much greater pace than at any time in the past and our way of educating our students must adapt. There is a global conversation about how we educate, motivate, engage and prepare our learners (Rod Allen, ?). Our focus in education needs to be and promises to be more flexible, adaptable and personalized. This transformation of our
education system requires a shift from a model that works towards sorting students; to a model that has learning for all students at its core. A system that makes learning its core requires a focus on deeper forms of learning, the use of formative assessment strategies, feedback that moves learning forward, teachers working as a team, internal commitment to adult learning and local responsibility to make the necessary changes (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). The ability to make changes will require leadership from a number of different sources; transformational leadership requires the pursuit of common goals, empowerment of people and collaborative problem solving (Hargreaves & Fink, 2009).

However, “change in education is easy to propose, hard to implement and extraordinarily difficult to sustain” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2009, p.1). A vision of change or the idea of innovation is just the beginning of the process; determining new possibilities without action is often the most exciting stage of innovation and change. However, implementing and maintaining a change or innovation requires action from many levels of an organization and tends to prove difficult. Teachers, administrators and learners are necessary components of putting a vision of change into action and there are pitfalls and difficulty with implementing change. Different groups, teachers, administrators, students, within the school system need to be able to innovate, feel comfortable enough to take the risks that are needed to start to make a shift in education. Elements of a school culture can help to create an environment that will contribute making different groups within an organization feel empowered to be innovative and comfortable enough to take risks.

The goal of this study is to look at one case of a small secondary school that has started their journey of change and to look for structures or features of their school culture that contribute to an environment that is conducive to innovation and change. My hope is that the
findings will give a better understanding of our school culture, will guide our decisions and help us continue to foster a culture that is looking to constantly improve and change. A second option is that leaders from other schools can use the findings to look for common elements of a culture that is conducive to change and to explore and adapt these settings within their own setting. It is important to note that the findings will not transfer directly to other settings because each school has unique stories, relationships, values and traditions that contribute to their culture. However, the findings could be used to explore common themes of innovation and to provide a direction for discovery in other settings.

Research Question

The research question of the present study is: By examining a particular school culture, what can be revealed in terms of the structures and features that help to create an environment that is open to innovation and change?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as follows:

Innovation – A initiative that is new to the participants and has an uncertain outcome.

Change - The transformation or conversion of the future course of action that would have remained the same if left alone.

Culture – Unwritten rules, traditions, norms and expectations that shape the way we conduct ourselves and our daily interactions with others within the same organization.

Trust – A confidence that the actions or intentions of a person or organization are reliable, predictable, honest and competent.
Overview of Study

The goal of the study was to gain a better understanding of the culture at Houston Secondary School. A second goal was to look for structures and features of Houston Secondary’s culture that leads to an innovative environment that is open to change.

I was not only an observer of, but a participant in the study who took part in many conversations surrounding school culture. I paid close attention to the informal conversations that took place around the school. There were two focus groups conducted, one that included students and one that included colleagues. I conducted three interviews with colleagues; one of the interviews was with the school principal. The interviews were designed to go into further depth and to listen to other perspectives as to which factors contributed to our school culture. I focused on stories that were told that reflected what people considered important at our school in terms of themes, features and structures that were evident in our school culture.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Every group of people, social, ethnic or organizational, develops a culture that shapes behavior and reflects beliefs that are common characteristics of the group. Culture is made up of norms, beliefs, assumptions, visions and values of a group. These elements of culture are communicated through ritual and ceremony, history and stories, people and relationships, architecture, artifacts and symbols (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Culture relates to the ability to be innovative or change. Innovation requires a sense of purpose or vision, relationship building, building a knowledge base and commitment and leadership of the people within the organization (Fullan, 2001).

What is school culture?

Based on comprehensive research Deal and Peterson (2009) describe school culture as unwritten rules, traditions, norms and expectations that shape the way people think, act and feel. (p. 6-7). Bower suggests that culture “is simply the way we do things around here” (As cited in Deal & Peterson, 2009, p.7). Culture within a school affects how people interact with each other, informal conversations, what is deemed important, who influences school decisions and how decisions are made. As Deal and Peterson assert, “Culture affects all aspects of a school” (2009, p.7) and although school culture has a far reaching effect, many aspects of a school culture are difficult to measure and often overlooked when contemplating and planning school improvements (Deal & Peterson, 2009).
Although difficult to measure, Deal and Peterson have outlined elements of a culture that can be studied and dissected. The categories outlined are: visions and values, norms, beliefs and assumptions, ritual and ceremony, history and stories, people and relationships, architecture, artifacts and symbols (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Within the context of a school these categories are woven together to form a school culture. For the purpose of the study I will be focusing on Houston Secondary Schools vision, values, people and relationships; I will use stories to help illustrate how these factors contribute to our culture. I assert that stories are an essential tool when breaking down a school culture. Deal and Peterson (2009) proclaim that “stories carry values, convey morals, describe solutions to dilemmas and shape the patchwork of culture” (p. 71). I hope to discover the culture at Houston Secondary school and look for structures or features of our culture that lead to an environment that is conducive to innovation and change.

**Innovation and Change**

Innovation and change can take on many forms. Govindarajan and Trimble (2010) declare an “innovation initiative is any project that is new to you and has an uncertain outcome” (p.5). They go on to further explain that innovation does not have to be a total flip from the status quo and many successful changes or innovative projects can be small. Furthermore, starting with small innovation with a larger vision or purpose in mind can be more sustainable than a large innovation that is too difficult to accomplish. In addition, it is a common myth that being innovative means breaking all of the rules. There is a need to break some of the rules, to be different and to operate outside of the norm but in an organizational setting innovators need the day to day operation to still operate in a fashion that does not cause complete chaos (Govindarajan & Thimble, 2010). Innovative ideas can be exciting to discuss but many difficulties to innovation and change surface after the initial idea.
Pitfalls to Change

Implementing innovation and change can prove to be difficult. Govindarajan and Trimble (2010) assert “ideas are only the beginning” of being innovative (p. 3). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) comment on the attractiveness of innovative ideas but explain the difficulty of having people “commit to the hard work of change (p. 1). Govindarajan and Trimble (2010) assert that most organizations are not built to be innovative; they are built to maintain the status quo (p. 10). In companies that are designed to create a profit there is a conflict with an innovation that may be expensive in the short term even if it means that there will be profit in the long run. It is my belief that schools follow a similar pattern. Although, schools are not concerned with profit it is my opinion there is often competition for limited time or resources. Govindarajan and Trimble (2010) further proclaim that conflict between innovation initiatives and ongoing operations are inevitable (p. 11). Innovation and change requires leadership but Govindarajan and Trimble (2010) warn against “looking for the lone great leader. He will fail” (p. 9). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) further explain “the burden is too great” (p. 95) for one leader to be successful. Yet it is my opinion schools often rely to greatly on the leadership of a few to be responsible for innovation and change. Common pitfalls of change can be considered but cannot deter the journey of innovation.

What Innovation Requires.

Organizations and schools can follow various methods to implement innovations or change. Kelley and Littman (2001) assert the method to innovation can loosely be described in five basic steps: understanding, observing, visualizing, evaluating and refining followed by implementation (p.6-7). Kaser and Halbert (2013) describe the spiral of inquiry as one method
to facilitate change in schools. The spiral of inquiry includes a continuous process of scanning, developing a hunch, adult learning, taking action and checking to measure the impact of change. In my opinion there are many similarities to both methods of innovation. Each model has a number of stages before any implementation or action takes place and each model has a time to evaluate and make further changes to an idea. Kelley and Littman (2001) state “no idea is so good that it can’t be improved upon, so we plan on a series of improvements” (p.7). Halbert and Kaser (2013) outlined the ‘checking’ phase of the spiral of inquiry where there needs to be evidence of whether the changes made are making enough of a difference. The spiral of inquiry embraces flexibility and the idea of changing parts of the inquiry throughout the cycle. There is a need in each model of innovation to build capacity or enhance the learning of the people involved in creating the innovation. Fullan (2008) supports this by stressing the need for new learning when building an innovative culture (p. 76). Innovation starts with an observation or an idea that will enhance the way an organization currently performs. Analyzing and brainstorming new ideas can be exhilarating but coming up with the idea is only the beginning of innovation and a large distance from becoming a sustainable change (Govindarajan & Timble, 2010). Beyond the instructions of a model of change there are many factors that give schools and organizations the ability to be innovative and change.

In order for an innovation or a change to be successful there are many elements that need to be in place. Fullan (2001) outlines a framework of change that highlights the need for moral purpose, strong relationships, knowledge creation and the need to share knowledge. (p.4) Kaser and Halbert (2009) echo some of the same sentiments proclaiming that moral purpose, trusting relationships and professional learning are cornerstones to change. Leadership that is distributed to a number of people is a key proponent of innovation and change. Hargreaves and Fink (2006)
assert “distributing leadership across schools and other organizations isn’t just common sense it is the morally responsible thing to do” (p. 97). In my opinion formal and informal conversations weave throughout the process of innovation and change. Innovation is complex and as Govindarajan and Trimble (2010) assert, “requires better conversations, not better spreadsheets” (p.125). They further state, “a good learning conversation is qualitative. It’s about assumptions, not numbers” (p.125). I will further explore common purpose, trusting relationships, distributed leadership and professional learning in more detail.

**Purpose**

A common or moral purpose is an essential component of change and innovation. Effective organizations have common beliefs, goals and purposes. Deal and Peterson (2009) assert “a school with a strong, shared sense of mission is more likely to initiate improvement efforts” (p.11). Fullan (2001) claims “moral purpose and sustained performance of organizations are mutually dependant (p.28). In my opinion having a common purpose brings people together to work towards a common goal. Deal and Peterson assert that “mission and purpose trigger intangible forces that inspire” (p.61). They also declare that “the power of a shared sense of mission to guide decisions, motivate innovation, strengthen commitment to the calling of education and energize collaboration” (p. 61-62). A common purpose is essential during the implementation of innovative initiatives because there is inevitably a time where the excitement of the idea wears off and the hard work and uncertainty of implementation becomes a reality (Govindarajan and Trimble, 2010). There inevitably will be conflict during times of change and having a strong sense of purpose can “sustain people during times of overwhelming difficulty” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p.24). Each member of a school or organization can trust that
decisions are made being mindful of a common purpose and are able to respect the reason behind decisions even when they may not support the decision itself.

**Relationships and trust**

Trusting relationships are an essential element to a culture that values innovation and change. Kaser and Halbert (2009) proclaim “when adult relationships are characterized by trust, the stories about change shift from indifference or negativity to possibility and hope” (p. 43). In a school it is important that stakeholders get to know each other as people; building trust requires time, honest dialogue and positive interactions (Deal & Peterson, 2009). In my opinion trust is essential to innovation because it allows people to be comfortable enough to take risks. Strong relationships lead to a caring environment where people trust each other, have empathy for one another, provide help and encouragement for one another and allow room for mistakes or failure (Kelley & Littman, 2001). Kaser and Halbert (2009) argue that “trust is essential for learning improvement” (p. 45). They note that trust is essential because “making changes to practice at the school level is risky for adults” (p. 45) and trust can be used to help alleviate feelings of stress and vulnerability that are present during times of change. In my opinion, trust allows people to be confident in leadership and creates an environment that is comfortable enough for them to share their feelings, experiences and expertise. Trust is the cornerstone of building the relationships that are required to be present in an organization that is hoping to successfully innovate and change.

Building relationships within a school or organization that is committed to being innovative and open to change need to be a priority. Relationships and the way people interact each other convey a schools culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Kaser and Halbert (2009) assert
that “high relational trust is not necessarily built during special retreats, workshops or meetings but rather is woven into the day-to-day routines of the school” (p. 45). Taking care of relationships in an organization is a vital aspect to bringing about change in an organization (Fullan, 2001). Strong relationships are fostered by conversation and sharing of knowledge and a network of work relationships can be an organizational strength (Govindarajan & Trimble, 2010). Informal networks and the way people communicate throughout an organization need to be taken into consideration when trying to encourage innovation or change (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Professional Learning

Professional learning and knowledge sharing are fundamental aspects of innovation. Innovation can be achieved only through deep and consistent learning; there is a need for teachers to learn how to improve each day (Fullan, 2008). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) also comment on the need for deep learning and assert that “deep learning is often slow learning” (p. 44). They state “learning that is not undertaken too fast or in a hurried way is at the heart of our capacity to incubate creative and innovative ideas” (p. 44). Govindarajan and Trimble (2010) explain “with innovation placing primary focus on learning rather than results actually leads to better results (p. 102). Timperley (2011) proclaims transformative change to teaching practice can be achieved through professional learning. Fullan (2008) warns against relying solely on professional development programs that are “removed from the setting in which teachers work” (p. 86). Wiliam (2011) argues that although workshops or one-time professional development days are common they are not very effective (p. 30). Timperley (2011) echoes his concern when she states “much professional development has little meaning for teachers” (p. 2). In my opinion
genuine adult learning within a school is an essential component of innovation or change. Timperley (2011) calls for a shift from professional development to professional learning.

Professional learning requires teacher involvement and creation of professional knowledge through interaction with colleagues. Timperley (2011) comments, regarding professional learning, “that students are at the centre of the process” and need to be the “central purpose” (p.5). Timperley (2011) asserts “when the professional learning is not driven by identified student and teacher needs there is little urgency or motivation to change or improve” (p. 47). She identifies the need for ‘evidence-informed conversations’ that combine using relevant evidence, building relationships, developing an inquiry habit of mind and accessing expert knowledge (p. 40).

Evidence informed conversations combined with informal conversations are necessary in developing a culture that values professional learning. Wilson declares that 70% of professional knowledge is built informally. Cross (2010) maintains “at least 80% of how workers learn to do their jobs is informal” (p. 45). He comments “conversations are the stem cells of learning, for they both create and transmit knowledge. Frequent and open conversations increase innovation” (p. 50). Cross (2010) argues “most learning is social” (p.45) and “our most powerful learning technology is human conversation” (p. 48). Govindarajan and Trimble (2010) comment that “a good learning conversation is qualitative. It’s about assumptions, not numbers” (p. 125). People learn through conversation with other people and there is value in combining informal conversations with the ‘evidence-informed conversations’ (p. 40) Timperley (2011) discusses. She stresses the importance of having the ability to access expert knowledge and use relevant evidence within learning conversations (p. 40). Cross (2010) asserts “conversations imply networks. A network self organizes and has credibility built in because networks are not
mandated and people have the ability to choose whether or not they want to participate (Cross, 2010). Deal and Peterson (2009) stress the power of an informal network in a school stating “every school has its network of unofficially sanctioned players” (p. 116). They continue their discussion of informal networks by proclaiming the “off–the-record but widely accepted network is most often positive, supportive, and important to success” (p. 116). Educational networks encourage collaboration and shared knowledge. They are flexible, resilient and promote innovation (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). In my opinion to create a culture that is willing to change it is important to blend the formal goals of a school with the power of informal learning, conversations and networks. The ability to successfully blend the formal and informal aspects of a school requires leadership from a variety of sources.

**Distributed leadership**

Creating and maintaining a culture that embraces innovation and change requires a diverse leadership group not a single leader in a formal role. Govindarajan and Trimble (2010) describe having one great leader as a myth of innovation (p. 173). They argue “the inherent conflicts between innovation and ongoing operations are simply too fundamental and too powerful for one person to tackle alone” (p. 173). Fullan (2001) furthers the argument by warning against a ‘superleader’ (p. 1). He outlines that a lone superleader often can create short term unsustainable improvement that often leads to frustration and dependency (p. 1). The leadership of a school is too complex to rely only on those in formal roles and requires the abilities of a diverse group (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Hargreaves and Fink assert “distributing leadership across schools and other organizations isn’t just common sense, it is the morally responsible thing to do” (p. 97).
Distributing leadership amongst the school community has positive effects and can lead to transformational change. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) assert that “leadership starts in the principal’s office” (p. 101) but cite Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller when they state that “teachers who formally or informally acquire leadership positions can make change happen” (p. 105). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) outline evidence relating to teacher leadership stating “schools in which teachers provide more influential leadership are seen by teachers as more effective and innovative” (p. 101). They expand their discussion by mentioning that distributing leadership to teachers “has a positive influence on teacher effectiveness and student engagement” (p. 105). In my opinion opportunities to distribute leadership throughout the school community, notably to students, need to be taken advantage of to encourage innovation and change.

Hargreaves and Fink (2006) state “student outcomes are more likely to improve when leadership sources are distributed throughout the school community” (p. 101). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) assert principals improve student learning indirectly by influencing the adults who “affect the learning more directly” (p. 101). They further the discussion on the role of the principal stating “the principal does the distributing of leadership or creates the culture in which distribution emerges” (p. 101). Deal and Peterson (2009) explain “to sustain strong positive cultures, leadership must come from everyone” (p. 250). They continue their discussion on leadership stating “it must be distributed, shared, and truly democratic, based on trust authenticity and, and core values (p. 250).

Distributed leadership helps create a group of people that contribute to an innovative environment. Kelley and Littman (2001) suggest innovative groups are driven by purpose, non-hierarchical and diverse (p. 71). I believe by distributing leadership members of the school community have the opportunity to contribute to the success of an innovative group. Hargreaves
and Fink (2006) suggest leadership in a school “stretches across individuals, communities, and networks and up and down organizational layers” (p.136). They further their discussion stating “leadership exists everywhere” and is “not limited to the principal or even its teachers” (p. 136).

Deal and Peterson refer to an informal network within a school which includes “a wide array of people who keep the culture humming and heading in the right direction” (p. 116). Teachers, administrators, office staff, custodians, educational assistants and students all have leadership capabilities within a school; their ability to lead often uses influence rather than control (Deal & Peterson, 2009). I believe distributed leadership can be used to weave trusting relationships, common purpose and professional learning to create a school with an innovative environment.

Summary

Innovation and change within a school or organization is complex and requires many elements of culture to weave together to create a conducive environment. A school with strong, diverse leadership who help to foster trusting relationships amongst a school community driven by purpose that embraces continuous learning can be an innovative place that can work towards sustainable change. Innovation requires the ability to function and thrive in uncertainty while maintaining excellence in day to day operations. The goal of this study is to research Houston Secondary school and to discover how leadership is distributed, pry into what the common beliefs surrounding purpose are, what they think is important, how they foster relationships, how they learn professionally and how they blend informality with creating an environment that is conducive to innovation and change.
Chapter 3 – Procedures and Methods

The current study is a qualitative research study and the methodology that I chose was an ethnographic case study. I wanted to study the culture at Houston Secondary School and wanted to look at how the people at Houston Secondary saw the culture and how it related to being a group of people that were open to innovation and change. I used the principles of appreciative inquiry while conducting my research.

Ethnographic work often focuses on one case or social setting; in this study I chose to focus on Houston Secondary School as my case and social setting (Golbart & Hustler, ask Paige). Ethnographie’s are used in educational settings to explore the world within a school and to give voice to the perspectives of the stakeholders, such as teachers, students, administrators and support staff (Goldbart & Hustler, ???, p.17). Golbart and Hustler () assert “a central purpose behind ethnography is to get involved in this or that social world” (p. 16). They expand their discussion on the purpose of an ethnography stating a goal is “to find out how its participants see that world and to be able as researchers to describe how its culture ticks” (p.16). Researchers in ethnographic work often take on the role of participant-observer or in some cases insider-observer and as a result brings their “own interpretations and cultural orientations into the picture” (p.16). Goldbart and Hustler (??) describe the distinctive features of ethnography that revolve around “people as meaning makers” (p.16). They suggest an emphasis on “how people interpret their worlds, and the need to understand the particular cultural worlds in which people live and which they both construct and utilize” (p.16). Each of these points outlined by Goldbart and Hustler fit with the goals of my research project. I wanted to discover the complexities and nuances of the culture at Houston Secondary School and wanted to discover what made our
environment open to innovation and change. I have been a staff member at Houston Secondary School for more than a decade and am immersed in the culture of the school; I believe I have the ability to be both an ‘insider-observer’ and a participant-observer. I am an insider-observer in the sense I work closely with other staff members, have developed solid relationships and have some influence in staff decisions. I am a participant observer in the sense that I can observe and participate in other areas of our school culture but do not have the same level of influence or participation in day to day interactions; for example administration decisions or student interactions with each other. In my opinion I have access to observe, participate and question in the umbrella of the entire school culture but would never consider myself an insider in knowing about intricacies’ of student life or administrative decision making. I was conscious that I was a part of the culture I was studying while making observations, using subjective judgments and analyzing the data I collected but was also interested in the feelings and thoughts of colleagues and students to see how they viewed our culture and what interpretations they had to contribute when studying our culture. I wanted to hear their voices when analyzing and describing in rich detail areas they thought could be improved and areas they appreciated about the culture of our school.

One of the purposes of my research was to look for structures of a school culture that contributed to an environment open to innovation and change. I used principles of appreciative inquiry to guide my research. Barrett and Fry (2008) define Appreciative Inquiry as:

“a strength based, capacity building approach to transforming human systems toward a shared image of their most positive potential by first discovering the very best in their shared experience. It’s about changing, convening, conversing and relating with each other in order to tap into the natural capacity for cooperation and change that is in every system” (p. 25).
Appreciative Inquiry is inclusive and collaborative; it uses storytelling, interviews and generates conversations to discover the best of the organization, expand future possibilities and further innovation (Barrett & Fry, 2008, p. 26). In educational settings, Appreciative Inquiry requires a holistic view of the school; is possibility driven, is non-hierarchical and can provide creative momentum for a school (Kaser & Halbert, 2009, p.66-67). For these reasons, an appreciative inquiry approach was a good fit for this work. I was interested in a methodology that would help me to uncover my colleagues’ perceptions of the culture we work within, while also providing a catalyst for further innovation and change.

**Population and Procedures.**

I used observation, journaling, focus groups and interviews as my procedures for the study. The population was the staff and students at Houston Secondary School. Houston Secondary School is a small rural high school in Northwestern British Columbia; approximately 205 students are enrolled at the school with 14 teaching staff, 12 support staff and a principal and vice-principal. The main industries in the region are forestry and mining.

I was a participant observer and I took field notes throughout the year on what I observed. I kept track of general observations and impressions throughout the process. I would listen in my classroom and in the common areas during breaks, lunch hours and after school. I observed how people interacted during school events, listened and participated in staff room conversations and reflected on these interactions by journaling my general observations of discoveries and thoughts.

I conducted two focus groups one that was open to staff and another open to senior students over the age of 16. The staff focus group was conducted on a professional development
day, was voluntary and was open to any employee of the school regardless of role. The student focus group was conducted during a block where students had a variety of activities that they could choose from. Student participation was completely voluntary and their anonymity protected. Participants in both groups were asked to respect each other’s privacy and keep conversations had during the focus group confidential.

**Staff focus group**

During the staff focus group I facilitated a discussion to uncover colleague’s thoughts, beliefs, feelings and stories regarding the culture of our school. I started the focus group by giving an overview of some of the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, the elements of culture and a definition of innovation. I encouraged the group to discuss, ask for clarity or interject with comments they felt were relevant. During the focus group I asked the following questions:

1. What do we appreciate about our school? What are we proud of?
2. What is our purpose as an organization? What are our beliefs about education?
3. Do you think our school is open to innovation or change? Which attributes or influences lead to your opinion?
4. Stories “carry values, convey morals, describe solutions to dilemmas and shape the patchwork of culture” (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. 71). Tell a story.

**What do we appreciate about our school? What are we proud of?**

Focus group participants were asked to form three sub groups of three or four members each. I handed out white board markers and participants were asked to brainstorm aspects of our school they appreciated or were proud of. Groups created webs or lists of data pertaining to the
question. Each sub group reported out and the other sub groups were encouraged to speak about or elaborate on each web or list.

**What is our purpose as an organization? What are our beliefs about education?**

One or two members of the sub groups were rotated during each question to ensure a variety of people had the opportunity to discuss together. The new sub groups were given five small strips of poster board paper. The sub groups were asked to have a general discussion about beliefs and purpose. After their discussion they were asked to be concise in summarizing their discussion by printing one or two words that described purpose or beliefs on each poster board strip. Next they came to a consensus on the order of importance of the words printed on the poster board strips and post them on a bulletin board.

**Do you think our school is open to innovation or change? Which attributes or influences lead to your opinion?**

The group felt these questions were mainly covered through the discussions that took place during the first question. We had a small discussion on the topic and I later recorded the new points that were brought up.

**Tell a story.**

Sub groups were given large sheets of paper and asked to write down key words to describe stories they remembered, treasured or felt illustrated the culture at Houston Secondary School. The larger group was then brought together and participants were asked to tell some of the stories they discussed in their sub group. There was not a specific order and participants
were encouraged to interject with their story or add details to another participant’s story during the natural course of the discussion.

At the end of the focus group session I gathered the data by collecting the paper, poster board strips, took pictures of the whiteboard brainstorms and wrote down some of my personal observations.

**Student focus group**

The student focus group was similar in introduction and format to the staff focus group. Students were asked to form small sub groups of three or four people within the room. Each sub group was provided with large sheets of paper and markers to record their responses to the questions. At the end of each of the question there was an opportunity to share with the larger group and an opportunity to add to the thoughts of each group. During the introduction of the student focus group, as I did with the staff focus group, I touched on some of the principles of Appreciative Inquiry and elements of culture. The questions sub groups were asked to give responses to were:

1. What do we appreciate about our school? What are we proud of?
2. What could we do better?
3. Have you noticed any changes in our school over the past few years? If so, what are they and what are some of your reactions to the changes?
4. Do you think our school is caring? If so, what are some examples that make you feel that way?
5. Tell a story – a story that illustrates some of the items we have discussed during our focus group.
During the story telling portion of the focus group students were encouraged to add on to each other’s stories as well as jump in with their own. The majority of participants in the focus group were graduating at the end of the year; they seemed to enjoy reflecting on and telling stories about their experiences at Houston Secondary school. I gathered the data from the focus group by collecting the large sheets of paper the sub groups wrote their responses on as well as wrote down personal observations pertaining to the session.

**Interviews**

In addition to the focus groups I conducted three one on one interviews with three colleagues; two teachers and one administrator. The interviews were conducted in a conversational style that kept certain talking points at the forefront but gave participants the leeway to focus on themes that they thought were important. The talking points revolved around what they appreciated about our school, culture, innovation, change, and any insights they had pertaining to those topics. Participants were encouraged to share examples and stories that would help illustrate their thoughts, opinions and responses. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data gathered from my journals, field notes, focus groups and interviews were coded and analyzed for themes.
Chapter 4 Observations

During this ethnographic case study I was able to find structures and features of Houston Secondary Schools culture that contributes to an environment that embraces innovation and change. The overriding themes that are evident within Houston Secondary School’s culture were shared beliefs with a common purpose, trusting genuine relationships, distributed leadership and professional learning. There were formal and informal structures used to strengthen each element of culture within the school. The combination of the themes led to a school culture which embraces innovation and change.

Common Purpose and beliefs

The school mission statement is:

“Houston Secondary provides a safe, stimulating environment in which all may learn and grow towards their individual potential. The school community supports diversity, excellence, a sense of belonging, and individual responsibility, in an atmosphere of mutual respect.”

In many ways our mission statement encapsulates our purpose, beliefs and what we think is important. However, I had to look it up to see what it was. During the gathering of research I posed the question in our staff focus group of, “What is our purpose as an organization? What are our beliefs about education?”

The responses from the different groups varied slightly but the essence of the question was that our purpose and our beliefs revolved around meeting the individual needs of our students. There was a common thread that recognized that meeting the needs of all of our
students meant different things for different students and the purpose of the school is to address the needs of the whole student. Achieving this would require flexibility and a level of personalization so that we can meet the needs of a diverse group of students. One group stated we are required to “innovate to meet our students’ needs” and to “be flexible.” A second group stated our purpose was to “meet the needs of students” and believed “everyone can learn.” The third group believed education needs to be “inclusive” and should “start where the student is.”

During discussion pertaining to what staff members were proud of many comments revolved around purpose and beliefs. One group stated they appreciated “we meet the kids where they are” and we are “proud of student accomplishments big and small.” There wasn’t any discussion in any of the groups that each teacher was responsible solely for teaching their subject area and beyond the subject area was beyond their sphere of responsibility.

There was a belief amongst the group that the needs of our students were constantly changing and dealing with constant change required us to be innovative in our response. There was a professional duty to be willing to change because we live in a changing world and that preparing our students for a changing world would require us to constantly look at doing things differently. One group believed education “requires change”; a second group communicated the necessity to “innovate to meet student needs”. During the discussion on areas of the school that staff members were proud of one group stated “we are accepting of change because we want to do better.” Ultimately, the data showed that the purpose was to meet the needs of each student and the needs of the staff and the system were secondary. The only way to know the needs and goals of each individual student would be to build genuine and authentic relationships with every student.

**Relationships and Trust**
The evidence established relationships were appreciated and valued within the school amongst teachers, administrators and students. Genuine and trusting relationships are built during a variety of formal structures formed recently, through long standing traditions and by valuing the informal aspects of relationship building.

There are genuine relationships between administration and staff. One of our administrators mentioned that he felt it was very important for him to get to know the staff on a genuine level. It was important for him to know about staff member’s personal interests or important things in their lives. For example, whether they have kids or not, approximate ages of those kids, who likes to garden or play sports. In the same token he felt that it was important that he present himself as who he really is. He is very open with staff about his personal life and staff and students have a genuine and authentic view of who he is as a person. During his interview he stated “it would be disingenuous to work with someone in an administrative capacity and not know anything about them as a person.” In the staff focus group the different groups commented they felt support from the administration and they appreciated the relationship that they were able to have with their administrators. During the staff focus group there was a comment staff appreciated the good relationship they had with administration; they also appreciated administration was “visible and interactive with students;” a second group stated they appreciated “administration talking to all kids” and “administration are not just in the building to discipline students.” During one of the interviews with a colleague he commented “relationships have got to be genuine between teachers and administrators.” I echo his sentiments and observed authentic relationships between staff and administrators.

Staff appreciated the relationships that they had with each other. In the staff focus group when asked what they appreciated or were proud about; each group mentioned items that were
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noteworthy when discussing relationships. One group described the staff as “welcoming and supportive” and they took pride in the fact that TOC’s were able to be comfortable in our building. Many of the groups valued the interactions that staff had with each other; one group commented they appreciated “staff gets along.” Staff interactions were described as very inclusive; the staff focus group described our staff as collaborative and they were there to give advice or support. Amongst the staff there are friendships and relationships that carry on outside of the school day and into each other’s personal lives but there was an appreciation amongst staff members that did not have significant relationships outside of the school setting that there was genuine caring and an inclusiveness amongst those relationships. During the interviews these sentiments were echoed by one of the interviewees that there are staff members that don’t fall under the sphere as friends outside of school but at school he has a large amount of respect for their ideas and professionalism. There is an aspect of caring amongst staff member that is supportive and comforting.

The relationships between staff, including administrators, and students is authentic, genuine and appreciated by staff and students. A few of the general comments that came out of the staff focus group was the sense of pride felt when a student that may be at risk finds a sense of belonging or views the school as a safe place. Staff appreciated the informal conversations and the way staff welcomed students into the school or classroom. When asked about what the staff was proud of about the school they listed many events that helped build relationships with students. Spirit day, a turkey dinner before the holidays and table tennis during break and lunch hours are examples of the listed items. Many discussions during the staff focus group centred around building authentic, genuine relationships between staff and students. One group stated “students know staff in our community and it’s brought back to school” and they appreciate
“interactions with students.” In the student focus group when asked what they appreciated about school each of the three groups stated that they appreciated the relationships that they had with their teachers. One group mentioned they “know all the teachers” and they appreciated all of the grad staff events that take place throughout the year. The student focus group stated “teachers are not exclusive; they were relatable”. The second group reported they appreciated the “close student teacher relationships” and enjoyed the “ability to joke with teachers”. Group three echoed the sentiments of the first two groups. The student focus group also commented that teachers are interested in the students well being. One group stated “teachers notice students, are worried about our health, grades and attitude. They want us to succeed”. One student commented he felt teachers wanted to know what they did on their free time because they were “genuinely interested”.

Students had an appreciation for many of the same structures and events that the teachers mentioned in their focus group. The student focus group listed spirit day, the talent show, turkey dinner, in school games, drama skits, grad vs. teacher games, intramurals and lipdub (which was a school wide music video) as events that they appreciated in our school. One of the student groups appreciated the time that was put into their events while another group referred to spirit day as having an “environment that is indescribable”.

The student focus group felt that there was strong relationships and good support amongst the students across the grades. Students felt the students within the school were accepting of each other and that overall they appreciated the way the student body related with each other. There were many comments during the student focus group to support these statements. For example, one group appreciated people were “friends with kids that are different grades, different religions or race – there is acceptance”. The student focus group did contradict
that point later during the focus group stating that there were some student cliques within the school and they viewed that as an area that needed to be improved upon. Overall, the students felt that they supported each other whether it was a drama performance, school sport or fun event, such as spirit day. When asked to tell stories that reflected what our school was about they pointed out an in school game where everyone came with banners and cheered for their team and grade 8/9 drama skits where there was a lot of compliments shared after the performance.

When the student focus group was asked what could be done better at the school the student cliques were the only relationship based responses. The majority of the responses focused on system and infrastructure restrictions. These items included issues such as better course selection, more funding, more supplies available, faster internet, more gym equipment, more support for the arts and better heating.

The relationships and trust that are developed at the school allow for flexibility and allow for administration and teachers to distribute leadership roles throughout the building.

**Distributed leadership**

Leadership responsibilities are distributed to a diverse group of people throughout the school. Beyond the administrators as formal leaders; teachers, educational assistants and students all take on leadership roles that are integral to the day to day operation of the school.

When I asked the administrator, during the interview, about how leadership is distributed in the school he commented on the informality of the way leadership is distributed. He spoke about the conversations that happen daily and the way ideas are bounced off one another. He described an informal network where people worked together but when it came to instruction or
practice there was not one or two formal leaders but rather a number of different people in various roles taking on the responsibility. The administrator commented on having a number of “cultural carriers” in the school. He describes the cultural carriers as a “significant core of influential, more experienced members of the school are the really positive contributors”. He views this core as caring about the school as a whole. He describes the need for “teachers, students, educational assistants, parents and administrators as one learning community”. A colleague I interviewed stated “A staff needs an administrator who can get people interested in doing things but then you need teacher leaders. You need people that want to get involved and go in a direction. That has been consistent at our school”. He felt there was a critical mass on staff that wanted to improve practice. When questioned on how to obtain this he responded “you need leadership.” He told a story of a conversation that took place outside the school library with an administrator and a few staff members revolving around possibility and school improvement; he felt people would listen and that staff had input into those types of conversations. During the second colleague interview he commented on a similar topic stating “not one group or individual feels they can’t contribute to the very informal or the very formal conversations.” Distributed leadership is evident beyond the informal network and into a more formal setting of staff meetings or professional development days.

Staff members, employed in a variety of different roles, are encouraged to contribute to school wide decision making, leading professional learning opportunities and lead a number of other formal school affairs. During my interview with the administrator he provided insight into his thoughts on leading professional learning opportunities. He felt his role was to be a core leader regarding professional learning within the school but did not think he should have the sole responsibility of all of the professional development opportunities in the school. He saw the
need for professional development to come from a variety of sources. He also felt staff meeting agendas should be distributed to a larger group. He comments he wants staff to “have the opportunity to present at staff meeting.” He furthers his thought noting “I don’t want to be responsible for ten staff meetings a year. Telling people how to be a better teacher when I do not consider myself to be the best teacher in the building.” One of the other interviewees echoed some of his comments and felt that professional learning should come from many people. It was observed that some of the most effective professional development days were where people shared their practice with each other and had the ability to be a part of a conversation rather than having a single presenter. He appreciated a learning activity where people brainstormed on the white board and felt it was valuable to see information written out “then everyone talks about it and everyone’s information is included.” My colleague expands his conversation to formal school functions, such as budget and schedule construction. He comments on staff involvement, due to expertise in those areas, stating “there are all kinds of staff involved rather than just admin. Your suggestions are welcome. Everyone’s suggestions are welcome.”

Educational assistants play a significant leadership role at Houston Secondary School by adopting leadership roles in many aspects of the school. There is an appreciation for our educational assistants’ leadership role in significant school events and traditions. One example is the turkey dinner that takes place just before the winter holiday. All of the organization and execution is provided by the educational assistants at our school. One of the interviewees commented on how valued the opinions of the educational assistants were and he described the educational assistants as “incredible educators.” During the staff focus group one of the appreciated items about Houston Secondary School was how much input educational assistants had when making decisions within the school. Leadership is distributed amongst every adult in
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the school. As one colleague describes “we reiterate subconsciously, inadvertently, and
sometimes in a structured manner. We reiterate that whoever you are; your contribution is as
equally valid as anyone else’s.”

At Houston Secondary School leadership responsibilities are distributed to students as well. They are responsible for organizing and executing many school events. Dances,
assemblies, lipdub and spirit day are examples of student organized and run events. When the
staff focus group participants were asked for stories that reflected what was important at Houston
Secondary School a number of the stories included events that were student run and where
students took leadership roles within the school. The staff focus group commented they
appreciated “the sense of willingness, excitement and ownership” demonstrated by the students
when they ran an event. Another comment showed an appreciation with the staff’s willingness
to “let go of control of events like spirit day and let them go with it.” One of the interviewees
felt that the trust that he had with students afforded him the opportunity to allow a large amount
of flexibility and choice for the students when they had an idea that they would like to implement
in the school. He told a spirit day story where a student on the microphone stopped an event that
was going poorly. She had the ability to restart without staff interjecting. He stated “that is
pretty important. A grade twelve student in command of an activity can stop it right there and
not one staff member said no, keep going. Everybody in the gym said okay what can we do to
help.” Students have an integral leadership role at Houston Secondary School.

Professional Learning

Houston Secondary school staff members are committed to professional learning and
make use of formal and informal opportunities to learn. There is a belief we must change
practice to best serve our students; to do this effectively requires staff to question and learn about their practice. There is an effort to create an environment conducive to professional learning. A number of staff members have taken opportunities to learn formally outside of the school by taking courses or participating in professional development opportunities. A larger group of staff members work together; learning informally with other professionals within the building.

Houston Secondary school’s culture is an environment supportive of professional learning. Our administrator believes we have “created an environment where it is safe to take risks in the classroom” and as a result professional learning is enhanced. His hope is our school is a place “where teachers feel they can try something new and if it doesn’t work that it is just part of the learning.” During the staff focus group one of the sub groups commented they appreciate the “continuum of growth” at our school in regards to professional learning. One of the colleagues I interviewed stated “we are not telling people they have to work to improve practice; it is just sort of an expectation.” He extends his comments stating “there is a critical mass that want to improve practice.” A second colleague interviewed described an evident comfort in learning from each other and furthered his discussion by describing one of the elements of our culture being an “unwritten, invisible desire to work together.” Our administrator comments touched on the acceptance of slow knowing and his expectation that changing instruction or assessment strategies was a process that took a significant amount of time. He felt conversation was important and referred to conversations he had with colleagues regarding changing their practice as well as his own. He states “staff members are generally willing to reflect upon and change their practice.”

I observed an environment of professional learning with a significant portion of staff members taking advantage of formal learning opportunities. During the interview with my
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administrator he commented on staff members having pursued Masters and exceptional professional development opportunities. He noticed the change in their practice and believed there was a trickledown effect on other adults in the school. I would echo his belief and observed a number of staff members have either completed their Masters degree, are in progress or are looking into a Masters program. There are a number of staff members involved in ongoing professional learning opportunities and we have a learning portion of our staff meeting that is facilitated by a number of different people from month to month. A colleague I interviewed observed the fascination staff members have when they get back from a conference or other formal learning opportunity. He further comments on how their excitement promotes conversation that leads to informal professional learning. He expands by saying the staff members are “not just being invited to say a few words at a staff meeting; but are continuing conversations sitting in the staffroom or outside the library doors.” He gives these examples as meeting places to make informal learning “part of your normal conversations.” The interviewee observed the combination of a formal and informal professional learning environment. His observation matched some of my own thoughts and observations.

Informal professional learning experiences were evident at Houston Secondary school. I observed many of our staff members learn from each other by asking questions about practice and sharing stories of success and sharing new techniques that were tried but not as successful. Our administrator describes the environment as one where people recognize there is “no such thing as a master teacher that has it all figured out and are finished learning”. He describes the learning environment as a larger group bouncing ideas off of each other in conversations in the staff room or in passing in the hallways. One of the colleagues I interviewed commented on an element of our culture as being an “unwritten, invisible desire to work cooperatively.” I
observed colleagues working and discussing together in hopes to learn new ways to improve their practice. I observed during many informal learning conversations where the professional learning was part of the conversation but was dispersed amongst other common topics, such as sports or gardening. One of the colleagues I interviewed described a conversation that took place outside the library doors, which is a common gathering place at the end of each school day. The conversation revolved around possibility and improvement in our school. There were three main participants in the conversation but many other staff members contributed to the conversation and left the conversation. He commented the learning from the conversation was “incredible.” There was not a formal structure the professional learning occurred due to conversation with other professionals. I observed during the interviews with my colleagues that they often referred to other professionals in the school when discussing their thoughts, opinions and practice. There was evidence of various colleagues past and present that have influenced each other’s learning. One colleague referred to teachers he has tried new teaching techniques with as well as the ability to see the classroom in a different light. The other interviewee commented on his experience observing colleagues “inviting students to learn”. He described his observation as his “own personal little epiphany”. He further described “a modeling process that I can see and say I’d better get in on this. Not in a threatening way but by participating at the level so I can contribute the same as everyone else.” Each interviewee commented they felt worthwhile professional learning came from observing in other classrooms. One interviewee furthered his comments on observing a colleagues classroom stating “professional growth, it doesn’t get any better than that. I love that aspect because you learn so much as an educator yourself; just by watching the modeling going on.” Our administrator and the second interviewee both felt our staff could benefit from getting into other classrooms more often. An interviewee commented
“We have got to get into each other’s classrooms.” He continues with a story where two colleagues spent time in each other’s classrooms learning from each other; he described the learning as “brilliant.” Our administrators have offered to cover and prepare for classes to encourage teachers to observe each other’s classrooms. I observed a blend between formal and informal professional learning at Houston Secondary School which provided teachers with new perspective and an opportunity to try new techniques.

Environment that is open to Innovation and change

Initially I wanted to ensure that Houston Secondary school is an environment that is innovative and open to change. I wanted to ensure that these feelings were not just my own but that other colleagues could corroborate my opinion. During my observations, interviews and staff focus group there were a number of innovations and changes that were highlighted. X block, a new timetable, change in assessment practices and a commitment to personalized learning are examples of recent innovations and changes that have taken place at Houston Secondary School.

There is a shift in focus to a more personalized learning system to meet the needs of our students individually while continuing to meet the collective needs of the larger school community require us to constantly change as a group. A colleague that I interviewed voiced that he felt we were “incredibly innovative” and “staff are generally willing to reflect upon and change their practice.” Another interviewee commented that we “change to improve things around the school” and outlined how much they have changed their practice over the course of a career. One interviewee who has been a teacher at the school for a number of years commented on a conversation that he had with a parent of one of his students. The parent was a former
student of the teacher and she mentioned how “blown away” the parent was about the way he taught her son compared to the way she remembered his classroom. During the staff focus group, a group commented we are “accepting of change because we want to do better” while another group stated they believed “innovating to meet student needs” fit into our purpose as an organization. Participants in the staff focus group felt we were innovative in our programming and there is “little negativity” and “you don’t hear ‘no we can’t,’ you hear ‘let’s try’.”

X block is a one hour block every week where staff are encouraged to offer a variety of sessions for students to sign up for. Each week students sign up for a session and attend. Extra help in an academic subject area, guitar, volleyball, skateboarding and origami are a few examples of the options that are available to students. The goal of the X block is to build relationships with students outside a regular classroom setting, provide collaboration time for staff, to build community connections and to allow staff members to bring the excitement of what they are passionate about to the school setting. In both the staff focus group and the student focus group X block was listed as an item we appreciated about our school. Some of the comments associated with X block during the student focus group were they “love it,” “new thing every week,” “extra study block” and “fun, cool stuff.” The students talked about a water balloon event that involved a large number of students as one of the highlights of X block.

There has also been a shift in the timetable where students are scheduled in academic classes in the morning and there are a variety of electives that are offered in the afternoons. Many of the electives are split into six week chunks so that more choice can be offered to students. Many of the electives are new to the staff members teaching them and range from hockey, golf, outdoor education to music and film appreciation. These electives allow for flexibility, choice and a deeper level of personalization in the students timetable. Participants in
the staff focus group and the student focus group appreciated our elective courses. During an interview with a colleague he comments on the change stating “look at what we have done with the timetable to meet the interests of kids.” He continues “Ten years ago I don’t know if I would have been able to make that jump” and further states “I used to be in the management and content business and now I am in the learning business.”

A large percentage of staff members at the school have changed or are working towards changing their assessment practices to follow assessment for learning strategies and there have been a willingness to change from the status quo to further meet our school goals of implementing Assessment for Learning strategies in our classrooms and to foster relationships in the school. One colleague, when asked to describe an innovation in our school, pointed to the shift in assessment practices. He was forthcoming with his struggles in implementing new assessment practices but commented “it’s another step towards student ownership.” He continued with a story of assessment in his practice by treating his art class like a studio. He states “it has been easy in the art program; they own everything.” He mentions how his shift in assessment has been more difficult in his Social Studies class but points to a colleague he is learning from. I observed this shift in assessment with a number of colleagues. Many have ways they have shifted and are willing to share but there are not any staff members that consider themselves an expert. Many colleagues are willing to share their practice and take risks which could lead to further innovations and change.

A future innovation that Houston Secondary School is hoping to implement will be an inquiry class where two teachers are responsible to help students work through an inquiry over the course of a semester. The choice of topic will be the students and the goal is that students will need to seek expertise outside of the school and that the teachers can be a liaison between
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the student and community members. There are many examples of innovation and change at
Houston Secondary school. There is a willingness to delve into the unknown and the comfort to
take a risk without knowing what the outcome will be.
Chapter 5 Summary, Discussion and Conclusions

Summary and Discussion

This study investigated the school culture at Houston Secondary School. The focus of the study was to identify that Houston Secondary had a school culture that was conducive to innovation and change; and identify any structures or features of the school culture that helped create or maintain an environment that was open to innovation and change. The research was prompted by the need for change in our education system. It is essential to equip our students with a new set of skills that will help prepare them for a constantly changing world. They should be offered the opportunity to further explore a school that embraces change and is innovative in their thinking. Houston Secondary School has a culture that is a worthy case study, it is a school that is student focused, relationship based and one that I had the opportunity to participate in while I observed practice.

While exploring the culture at Houston Secondary School I conducted a literature review on relevant research, three one on one interviews with colleagues, two separate focus groups, one with students and one with school staff, and took on the role of participant observer. I was an active participant in the school culture but also ensured to take a step back and observe my surroundings from an outsider perspective. I wrote down observations for further thought and analysis. Throughout the research I listened to stories and examples used by colleagues and students to find out what was important to them. These stories carried values and conveyed what was important to the people that made up the culture of Houston Secondary School (Deal & Peterson, 2009).
When I began my research I believed our school was a special place to work and had an appreciation for the colleagues and students that contributed to our environment. I wanted to dig deeper and find out if other people in the school shared my belief and if they did, which attributes or structures did they believe contributed to our culture. I also wanted to conduct research in a way that would contribute to the school culture and perhaps continue to encourage change and innovation in our school. Using principles of Appreciative Inquiry allowed me to discover factors that give life to our school in an inclusive and collaborative manner (Barrett & Fry, 2005). All stakeholders in a school contribute to its culture and it was important to me to allow as many voices as possible to come through in my research.

**Purpose and beliefs**

At Houston Secondary School we believe our purpose is to meet the needs of our students. We have a mission statement that is eloquently worded and more detailed but is not memorized by staff or even visible in our hallways. However, our common purpose of meeting the needs of our students is discussed in the staffroom, hallways and during meetings. When referring to meeting the needs of our students there is a focus on student learning but we believe our purpose also includes looking at the student as a whole with academic success being one part of student life. One of my colleagues commented “I think we have people that are trying to get kids invested outside of the classroom.” There is a sense that for some students in our school being invested outside the classroom might be the reason they are attending school. He tells a story about a student that when they walk into the school there is a “staff member, within ten minutes, tells her how great it is to see her; no one gives her grief when they don’t come because they don’t need that.” This example illustrates the common purpose of meeting the needs of students. In this case making a student feel welcome at school is meeting student needs. In other
scenarios meeting the need of a student might be extra academic attention or helping a student apply to a post secondary institution. I observed many different ways that we helped meet the needs of students. In staff meetings, school based team meetings or in the staff room conversations often revolve around students with the goal of better meeting their needs.

Our purpose guides our decisions and works towards bringing staff together for a shared purpose rather than what is perhaps good for staff members individually. Our staff believes that everyone can learn; there is not a perfect method or practice. It takes a staff with diverse strengths and interests to best serve the needs of our students. Our administrator describes our outlook for instruction being designed for student learning is “less ‘sage on the stage’ and more ‘guide from the side’.” He also describes our staff as caring and says “with a caring staff if you realize that what you are doing is not working for a number of kids it forces a second look at the way we do things.” Referring back to one of the comments regarding purpose in our staff focus group one group stated we need to “innovate to meet the student needs.” Our purpose is what drives our group and is what motivates us to change and improve (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). Our purpose also allows us to make decisions regarding resources or school direction based on our common purpose. During budget meetings often there is discussion about where resources would best be allocated due to the effect those resources would have on students. It allows for differing opinions to be acknowledged and agreed upon with each person trusting that their colleagues have the common purpose at the forefront of their decision making.

Student needs are constantly evolving and in order to meet those needs our practice, as educators, needs to be constantly changing and evolving as well. I think our purpose to meet the needs of our students is inherent to most educators. In our scenario it is significant because our purpose leads to the belief that our practice needs to be constantly changing; it drives decision
making, makes professional learning necessary and makes developing trusting relationships with each other and with students simply part of our jobs.

**Trusting Relationships**

Developing and maintaining trusting relationships is viewed by our staff as a vital part of educating students. Strong relationships are interrelated to organizational success (Fullan, 2001). Our trusting relationships are a sense of pride amongst our staff and are a source of appreciation amongst students. There are a number of factors that make trusting and genuine relationships an area we feel we excel in. Our staff is genuine and living in a rural setting allows students and teachers to get to know each other away from the school. Our administrator commented, “staff don’t feel they need to put on a different face than what they usually have on; they are genuine and open.” We value relationships, make them a priority and allocate time to work on them. We have built in a number of events and activities that serve different purposes, the main one being to build relationships. It is not viewed as a waste of instructional time but rather as an important part in achieving our purpose of meeting student needs.

We view trusting relationships as part of our success and distribute time and resources to strengthening them. During an interview a colleague refers to a belief, “if a student can invest themselves outside of the classroom at the school. Whatever that is; then they have a place.” He expands his discussion with a list of opportunities students have to latch onto outside of the classroom. He includes rugby, drama, arts fair and ping pong as examples. There is a concerted effort to include people in a variety of ways. A few of the reasons why we are able to include a large number of people is due to our size. We are a small school so if your interests are sports often times there are a variety of grades on a sports team; the same logic holds true for drama or
music. I think there is validity to that argument but I also believe that our purpose drives us to look for ways to include people. We believe we need to meet the needs of our students therefore; we need to build a genuine relationship with the student to find out what those needs are. Fullan (2001) asserts “if moral purpose is job one, relationships are job two” (p.51). The staff at Houston Secondary School would agree with his assessment. Our school goals in our previous school improvement plan were to build relationships and to implement assessment for learning strategies in our classrooms. We ensured we would create opportunities to build relationships with students. We implemented an X block once a week that allowed teachers to offer different activities for students to sign up for. Many of these activities revolved around building relationships for example, one teacher offered a session where people got together to play board games while an administrator participated with a group of students that wanted to go to the skateboard park. There were many opportunities to get to know students outside of the regular classroom. Our administrator felt this helped in having conversations with struggling students stating “the conversation isn’t top down; there is give and take.” On the first day of school many staff members are in the foyer welcoming the students back from summer vacation. There are two required to be there for supervision but many of the teachers find it a good way to build relationships with students. The students notice the relationships with the adults in the building and made many comments during their focus group. They appreciated there was “close student-teacher relationships” and they had the “ability to joke around with teachers.” Referring back to my observations the students felt that “teachers noticed students; they were worried about their health, grades and attitude; they want us to succeed.” I believe the relationships the adults in our school have developed with our students have an impact on the relationships our students have with each other. Many of the items the students appreciated about the
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relationships with the staff they also appreciated about the relationships with each other. They felt school spirit was a strong point and that everyone was willing to be involved. They felt they were supportive of each other and used our talent show as an example. During the talent show a variety of students from various social groups perform, their contribution is appreciated and cheered by the entire student body. The result is an atmosphere that allows people, students and staff, to take risks.

The staff appreciated the relationships they had with each other. They felt administration supported them and enjoyed the fact that staff gets along. One teacher commented “our staff is collaborative, supportive, friendly and inclusive.” She appreciated she could ask for advice from colleagues and they were helpful. Another group commented “staff enjoy their jobs so it makes the school environment fun.” I noticed the relationships within our school are networked relationships. Kaser and Halbert (2009) discuss the power of networks when connecting schools stating “as relationships and learning partnerships are formed across schools, the informal leaders and drawn to network participation” (p. 146). They further discuss the need for a ‘clear purpose’ and that “trust develops across schools as principals meet, talk, share resources and work together” (p.147). At Houston Secondary School we have teachers involved with interschool networks but many of the characteristics of a successful network are present in our school. Our purpose is clear and motivates staff to work towards improving and questioning our practice. There are strong friendships on our staff but there are also professional relationships where there are fewer common individual interests but we are drawn together by a common purpose. A colleague describes some of the relationships he has in the building communicating not everyone would fall under the category of someone you spend your weekends with but the common purpose brings them together and he enjoys listening to them because they are
“professional and contribute excellent suggestions.” Our common purpose leads to strong relationships. There is a camaraderie developed through conversation, listening and the sharing of resources (Kaser & Halbert, 2009).

Many of the relationships in our school can be categorized as informal. Humour is a tool used to nurture and develop these relationships. I referred earlier to students appreciating the ability to joke around with teachers. The adults in the building also have the ability to joke and laugh with each other. Humour and laughter can be used to reduce stress, improve communication, build relationships, spark creativity and blur the lines between the ‘us vs. them’ attitude that can sometimes build between teachers and administrators (Deal & Peterson, 2009). One of the colleagues described relationships in our school as “almost humour based.” He furthered the conversation stating “if you can broach topics in a humourous manner; that is a healthy signal that communication is so comfortable that you can be open to humour, teasing and fun. It’s almost like a reinforcement activity to the collective relationships.” There is a lot of humour used at Houston Secondary School. In our setting it has many benefits, such as communication and building relationship, but I think it really works to bring the group together and to blur the hierarchical lines. It is common for the administration, teachers, students, secretaries and educational assistants to share laughter with each other. It works to make us one large group and helps reinforce the fact that our relationships are genuine and we authentically care for one another.

These findings are significant because it contributes to a safe atmosphere where people have the freedom to take risks and try new things. It allows for leadership to come from various sources and it helps create buy-in towards new ideas because people trust the leaders not to take the school in a direction that is detrimental to them.
Distributed Leadership

There are many leadership opportunities afforded to all members of Houston Secondary School. Educating a large number of individuals with diverse talents, personalities and interests is too complex a task for an individual leader (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). By distributing leadership and encouraging adults to take an active role in shaping their practice and school decisions they will achieve more (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Our administrator believes in distributing leadership. In our interview he outlined his appreciation for having staff members present at staff meetings, usually regarding professional learning. He discussed that he values input from a variety of staff members and demonstrates that by trying “to cover classes for teachers to collaborate” before they need to present at a staff meeting. Having formal leadership that values the input from other staff members encourages staff colleagues take on leadership opportunities and in turn will have “a positive influence on teacher effectiveness and student engagement” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 100).

Colleagues have input into school decisions and have autonomy in areas they are responsible for. Our turkey dinner is prepared by staff to serve to students on the last day before winter break. Our educational assistants take on a leadership role and are responsible for much of the organization and preparation. The event is valued in our school community and the people organizing are not assigned from the top to have to help out. The opportunity to lead is available and there are people willing to step forward. People are motivated by having the ability to make decisions that are of value to them (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Another example of distributed leadership at Houston Secondary School are our professional development days. Our professional development committee plans the agenda and if it fits will invite our administration to present. Our administrator likes the way it is run and does not want the entire responsibility of
planning our professional learning. In his interview he discussed that if he was in charge of planning all of the professional learning two points might be communicated. The first point might be that he was bringing “a vision or an agenda” and the second point he sarcastically stated “I am that good that I have more to teach than anyone.” In this sense he uses influence rather than direct leadership. The vision or agenda is shared amongst the staff and there is a belief that learning can come from a variety of people. A statement that came from the staff focus group was an appreciation there is “a sense of willingness, excitement and ownership” amongst our staff. I believe this is fostered by the fact that leadership is distributed amongst a variety of people in a variety of roles.

Distributing leadership allows us to take advantage of the strengths of the adults in the building, accomplish more and self organize. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) refers to some of the elements found in Houston Secondary School as “emergent distribution” (p. 122). Emergent distribution remains clear about purpose and values, maintain relationships and encourages staff to innovate (p.138). Many staff members take the initiative to lead, take care of responsibilities outside the classroom and influence their colleagues to try new things (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). One of the interesting points that came out of my research was the amount of influence staff members, including administrators, had on one another. There was a sense that leadership was distributed and that new ideas were welcomed. Teachers often discuss practice or decisions that need to be made. When I was questioning my interviewees they all brought up other colleagues, in a positive light, in their answers. They would reinforce their answers with examples of colleagues thoughts or practice that they agreed with. For example, one colleague referred to another colleagues belief that if a student was connected to the school outside the classroom they would be more likely to be engaged. Distributing leadership, while keeping a
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clear sense of purpose, has allowed the organization and direction of the school to become everyone’s job. One colleague felt leadership was distributed evenly in our school; pointing to examples of teachers that help with timetable, budget and events such as the arts fair. He appreciated the fact that staff members were involved and these tasks were not only viewed as administrative jobs; he stated that “everyone’s suggestions were welcome.” We view the school as an entire community and do not necessarily compartmentalize all the tasks that are required to run the school. There is respect for different roles and the understanding that administration has the ultimate decision making capability but there is a sense that everyone has input before a decision is made. Other groups of people will self organize and focus on an initiative or task based on strength or interest. For example, a courtyard garden area is organized by staff members that are interested in that area. Their ideas are encouraged and they have the leeway to make their own decisions. All members of the school community have opportunities to lead, their contributions are valued and it gives us a sense of community and shared vision. Adults in our school are empowered to contribute to a collaborative culture and are engaged in problem-solving and school wide decisions (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Distributed leadership is not just for the adults; students contribute and have opportunities to lead. Their ideas and encouraged and some events they are expected to run. For example, senior students run our spirit day events or plan X block activities. They truly lead the events; they organize, prepare, emcee and clean up. Our spirit day event the third week of September is, in my opinion, the best school day of the year. During the time I have worked at Houston Secondary School our spirit day has been an amazing amount of fun and it has been interesting to watch the event evolve. When I first arrived at Houston Secondary School the staff ran the event and there was a lot of school spirit. Over the last five years students have taken over the
planning and running of spirit day. They have brought their new ideas and involvement and have improved on a day that I would have been skeptical could have been improved. Distributing leadership is about empowerment but also has an element of giving up control; this requires trusting relationships. During the staff focus group there was a comment that a colleague brought up stating they felt we were good at “letting go of control of events like spirit day and letting the students run with it.” A colleague I interviewed commented on students leading stating “students are so used to it that they are willing to take more and more steps in terms of contribution.” He feels they contribute and lead partially because they feel listened to. He further states “mature students are treated as a partnership.” Distributing leadership to our entire school community, being mindful of our purpose, allows us to accomplish more, increases engagement brings out the interests and strengths of everyone involved and is integral in creating an innovative environment.

**Professional Learning**

Distributing learning makes professional learning everybody’s business. Houston Secondary School blends formal professional learning opportunities with informal networking to improve practice. We keep student learning as our purpose for professional learning and focus on integrating research based strategies into our practice (Timperley, 2011). We have made a shift from subject based professional development to professional learning that benefits all students.

The shift in professional learning is due to external changes, such as a drop in enrolment but also from, as our administrator commented on, “influential staff members starting to become interested in redesigning their way of teaching and their jobs.” He felt “when you get certain
staff members making a change it inevitably has a ‘trickle down’ effect.” Many of our staff took advantage of formal learning opportunities such as, district initiatives with educational experts brought in over an extended period of time for teachers to work with and exploring Master degree options. A staff member I interviewed commented on “his excitement about changing practice.” He further commented “trying to improve our structures is good but we’re actually trying to improve what we are doing in your classroom.” This shift came from having a staff driven by purpose and looking for ways to enhance student learning. The trickle-down effect came from a strong informal network; “a wide array of people who keep the culture humming and heading in the right direction” (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p.116). Our informal network allows us to take formal evidence based professional learning and look for other people to help them make sense of how to apply new knowledge (Timperley, 2011).

The staff at Houston Secondary blends formal professional learning with informal ways of applying their knowledge. Referring back to statements made by Daniel Wilson “informal learning is the basis for 70% of professional knowledge.” Informal learning is social; uses influence over authority, relies on the power of conversation and conversations imply networks (Cross, 2010). Educational networks encourage shared knowledge, stimulate collaboration, are flexible, self organized, give more teacher voice in decisions; they are supported by distributed leadership and stimulate innovation (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Our staff is networked and we take opportunities to collaborate, converse and reflect with each other (Timperley, 2011).

Our previous school improvement plan listed implementing Assessment for Learning strategies as one of our school goals. There were a few teachers that had learned about the assessment strategies formally and we decided as a staff that was an area we needed to focus on. It fit with our purpose and we wanted to increase the engagement of our learners. The majority
of the professional learning was achieved informally and using conversation. One of our activities on a Professional Development day was simply to bring something you have tried in your classroom and we will each discuss what we tried, what worked and what didn’t work. This activity relied on our trust and relationships and there was a level of vulnerability that was evident in people opening up and sharing their practice. A lot of examples were of criteria that were co-created with students. That was where a lot of the staff had started; there were a few other examples surrounding some of the other strategies but everyone talked about what they had tried and reflected on their learning. The conversations continued in the hallways, classrooms and staffrooms with different people participating at different times. This is significant because it allows the conversation to be continuous and does not rely on one leader to be present to lead discussion. Instead of professional learning happening only at conferences or Professional Development days; professional learning happens daily. Professional learning is not mandated but there is an expectation that people are working on improving practice. Colleagues have influence over each other’s learning and there is the belief that the professionals in the room have the knowledge that is necessary to change practice. Collaborating with colleagues informally is part of daily conversations; teaching practice is interchangeable with sports, gardening or any other informal topic of conversation. Our administrator commented “we want the kids to be reflective learners, hopefully we will do the same; I think we do.”

Illustration Through Story

One of the purposes behind X block, which I referred to earlier, is to strengthen relationships in our school. It allows time for staff to genuinely get to know students in a setting that is not necessarily tied to academics. There are often large events that bring people together such as our water fight one of our teachers offered. There were approximately a hundred
students signed up to participate and was organized by a group of students and a supervising teacher. There were two other teachers that participated in the event to ensure there were enough adults to properly supervise the event but their role in organizing was minimal. The event took a large amount of set up having a few students arrive early in the morning and to miss their first class to help set up. When it was time for the event to start there were a thousand water balloons and large garbage cans full of water set up all over the field and students were split into their four house colours to make teams. There were quadrants in the field and participants were to remain in their quadrant throughout the water fight. Once the water fight started students ran out fairly close to the quadrant boundary and hurled the water balloons at other teams that were fairly far back. The result was a water fight where very few people got wet and it was quickly evident that something would have to change for the water fight to be any fun. The boundaries were then erased and the fun ensued. Before the time of our X block was even half over we were out of water balloons and we had a few containers and pylons, which were once boundary markers, that could be flipped over and would hold water. Luckily, there was a large puddle that could be used as a constant water supply and the water fight was able to continue and everyone had to go to the same spot to replenish their water supply so there were plenty of opportunities to douse each other with water. At the end of the block everyone was soaked and smiling; it was truly a great event. Everyone posed for a picture, in the middle of the large puddle, and then quickly cleaned up the pieces of broken water balloons that were spread all over the field and headed back into the school for their next class. I believe this story illustrates many of the features of our school culture that leads to an innovative environment (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

The story regarding the X block water fight reflects our common purpose, trusting relationships, distributed leadership, professional learning and leads to our ability to innovate.
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The story reflects our common purpose and beliefs by having the event take place in the first place. Allowing for a water fight in the middle of a school day that includes a little less than half our student body is a change in the way we have conducted our day to day operations in the past. However, the idea reflects some of the things that we deem are important and have the support of the administration and staff. Our purpose is meet the needs of students and we believe to do that we must change our practice. One of the items we appreciate as a staff are the relationships in the school and if keep our purpose and beliefs in mind when making decisions on the types of events that are designed, partially to give leadership opportunities to students, to build relationships. We view this type of events as part of our jobs and that they serve an important purpose in our school. Another beneficial aspect of designing these types of events is that collaboration time between staff members not involved in supervising the event is available.

The extent to which we value relationships in our school were reflected in our water fight X block event. Building relational trust needs to be woven through our day to day activities and interactions (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). Our water fight event helped create interactions between students and teachers as well as students with other students in a way that demonstrated respect and personal regard (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). There needs to be high levels of trust to attempt a large scale water fight and there are potentially many opportunities for people to demonstrate disrespectful behavior and to treat people poorly. However, the relationships at our school are such that we can attempt these types of events and trust that teachers will work with students to work towards success. Referring back to the student focus group the students listed the fact that “time was put into our events” as an item they appreciated about our school. They also appreciated they were “friends with kids that are different grades, religions and race”. During the large scale water fight there are opportunities for many positive interactions between
individuals from different grades and focus group that helps to create the inclusiveness that we value at our school. In the example of the water fight there was a point in the event where there could have been a lack of participation. There was a point where we thought we might run out of water early. Decisions were made to change up the format and the group went along with the decisions without complaint. I believe through many events such as the water balloon fight we have built a respect between teachers, students and student leaders that encourages people to work together. The relationships that are built allows us to transfer our trust to a greater sense of belonging, safety and learning (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). The event is also evidence of the way our adult relationships are networked in the building. The water fight idea came from students and a teacher; the teacher looked for two other adults to participate in the event. It is important to note that teachers are not mandated to help run a water fight event nor are students required to participate. The group that got together to run the water balloon fight might not work together on another event for a long period of time. They might team up with another group of people for something else, like the turkey dinner. The adults will work together based on interest, abilities and available time but the idea is valued and supported by staff members that are not participating in this particular event.

The event distributed leadership in a variety of ways. Leadership was distributed to the students and the supervising teacher. The students that took on the task of organizing had ownership of the event. There was input from the supervising teacher but the student ideas made up the bulk of the plan to execute; the students came up with the rules of the event and were in charge of the time consuming set up. The supervising teacher and the other teachers participating took a secondary role. Leadership was also distributed to the supervising teacher. She had the leeway to take a risk and be the teacher leader of an event that involved very close to
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half of the school. There was not any micro managing from administration or skeptics that said it should be the whole school or nobody or the event was a waste of time. She was free to use her professional judgment and to lead the event as she saw fit. Distributing leadership opportunities to staff and students contribute to greater learning for all students (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

The value of professional learning is reflected both directly and indirectly in our water fight event. It is directly evident regarding the teachers involved in the event. As a staff we have accessed expert knowledge and are trying to apply what we have learned (Timperley, 2011). Many experts inform us that trusting relationships are a key to enhancing student engagement and students are more likely to be successful if they can identify at least one adult in the building that cares about them (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). We have accessed our expert knowledge and made a change to our practice. At the end of the event the teachers involved as well as the student leaders got together informally and had a quick conversation. The discussion revolved around what was successful and what some of the pitfalls were. We immediately agree the event was very successful based on the camaraderie, inclusiveness and fun. We also are thankful for the giant puddle that was important in the success of the event and decide that if we have the event in future years we will need to flood that area to ensure a constant water supply. There is some trial by error and learning by asking each other’s opinions on different aspect of the event. The conversation is short but takes advantage of the informal learning that is incredibly powerful (Cross, 2010). Indirectly there are professional learning opportunities afforded to other staff members. Approximately half of the student body is being supervised by three staff members so it is accepted practice for a group of teachers not to offer an activity but to meet in that time to collaborate about their practice.
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The water balloon X block event is an example of an innovative practice at Houston Secondary School. It fits with our purpose of meeting student needs and our belief that building genuine relationships is part of the work. Innovation requires leadership from a variety of sources (Fullan, 2001). In this example leadership comes from the administration, a small group of teachers and a group of students. The administrator is not directly involved but supports innovation and helps encourage an environment that is conducive to taking risks. In his interview he commented “I hope we have created a place where teachers feel they can try something new and if it does not work then it is just part of the learning.” In this environment teachers can act on hunches or ideas they think might work; they can experiment and take a chance (Govindarajan & Trimble, 2010). A common belief on our staff is that taking the risk is worth it; the worst thing that could happen is the event could be a flop and we could learn from our mistake and move on. The support built into that belief allows for a number of small innovations to take place. We do not believe that every innovation needs to change the whole educational system but believe, as do Govindarajan and Trimble, an innovation initiative can be anything with an uncertain outcome to the people involved. Our innovation requires a purpose to motivate the participants, relationships to help bring people together, professional learning to support our decisions and leadership from many. The combination allows us to be innovative and be willing to take chances.

Strengths and Limitations

During my research I felt ethnography was a rewarding style of research. I was able to stay immersed in our school culture while stepping back and observing the intricacies that made our environment the way that it is. I developed a strong appreciation for the elements, structures and stories that contribute to our school culture. Using principles of Appreciative Inquiry
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opened up discussion amongst staff members, students and administration and allowed people to contribute to the research. I enjoyed interviewing colleagues and discussing elements of our school culture and innovation. I believe the research has had a positive effect on our school community and has contributed to a stronger understanding of innovation and has highlighted our relationships and elements we appreciate as a learning community. I feel I have a stronger understanding of what innovation is and elements of our school that can be fostered to continue moving student learning forward. I have a stronger sense of my role in contributing to the school culture and have a great appreciation for my colleagues and students.

A limitation to my research is the topic of culture; I feel this is a valid limitation. All schools or organizations have a unique culture comprising their stories, traditions, values, rituals and people. Although I agree my findings would not be able to be transferred directly to another setting I would argue that the themes and process could be a guide to discovering innovative practices in other organizations.

Suggestions for Future Research.

Future ethnographic research pertaining to innovation and change could be done in other settings. Examining, analyzing and reflecting on common structures and elements that may be evident in other organizations. It would be interesting to delve further into informal learning conversations and how conversation relates to weaving together purpose, relationships, leadership, professional learning and ultimately innovation.

Conclusions: Why is our Environment Innovative and Open to Change?

By examining Houston Secondary School’s culture there were features and structures uncovered that contributed to creating an environment that is open to innovation and change.
Innovation requires us to take risks, struggle with uncertainty and access the diverse skills of many leaders (Govindarajan & Trimble, 2010). Innovation requires experimentation, discussion and often “short term sacrifice in order to achieve long term gain” (Kelley & Littman, 2001). Innovation is non-routine and can be a source of conflict between the status quo and innovative initiatives (Govindarajan & Trimble, 2010). The goal of innovation is not to be the best or to change the most but to be willing to take risks and be willing to delve into areas that have uncertain outcomes (Govindarajan & Trimble, 2010). Innovation and change requires purpose, relationships, leadership, learning and reflection (Fullan, 2001).

At Houston Secondary School purpose, relationships, distributed leadership and professional learning are woven together to create an environment that is open to innovation and change. Our purpose drives us to innovate and change. There is a belief that meeting our students’ needs requires us to be innovative. As students’ needs change we must change as well. In order to meet student needs we need to know what they are and that can only be achieved by building genuine relationships with our students and each other. We see building trusting relationships as part of our job not only because it morally responsible but because we have learned as a staff that trusting relationships are essential to student learning (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). Our purpose combined with the knowledge we have acquired requires us to question the status quo. A colleague I interviewed stated “with a caring staff if you realize that what you are doing isn’t working for a number of kids it forces a second look at the way we do things.” He expanded on his comments stating “staff are generally willing to reflect upon and change their practice.”

Once the staff at Houston Secondary School decides that a change is necessary then the more difficult work of implementing a change needs to begin. Implementing change is complex
and needs to be backed in purpose. This is significant because if our staff feels there is not a reason to change or there is a mandate to change there is little motivation to change; the change needs to match our purpose and beliefs, be evidence based and a large enough group on staff have to agree that change is necessary. Leadership is distributed throughout our staff for different reasons. The administration values leadership from various sources, staff is driven by purpose and view leadership as part of their job in the school and our relationships create a safe environment for various people or groups to lead at different times. We approach new ideas and projects “with humility and the knowledge that answers can come from everywhere” (Kelley and Littman, 2001). Our peer network can collaborate fluidly and continuously through informal conversations. Having leadership distributed through our staff we become a collective force that makes innovation possible (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). Combining our peer network with our inclusive staff relationships and distributed leadership amongst the staff and allows for leaders to attend to personal items, such as sick kids or medical issues, without feeling pressure to lead the way. Our staff values leadership from various people and feel their contributions are necessary but their personal regard for each other makes it possible for leaders to slow down when necessary without slowing down the innovation or direction of the school.

We are light hearted, fun and use humour in our daily interactions. This is important because it brings people together and allows for us to try things new things and not to derail if our new ideas are not as successful as we were hoping they would be. Humour helps blur the roles between administrators, teachers, support staff and students and allows us to act as a partnership. Humour also allows us to laugh during the ‘implementation dip’ which refers to the inefficiencies that are a part of implementing new ideas (Govindarajan & Trimble, 2010).
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We innovate not by erasing the status quo but with small experiments where we take a chance and enter into a realm of uncertainty (Kelley and Littman, 2001). We are afforded this opportunity with the acceptance that failure is okay; the worst thing that could happen is the new initiative is unsuccessful and that we will learn from our experience (Govindarajan and Trimble, 2010). An example of our staff taking a risk is the implementation of X block. There were a few different staff members that had learned of the idea formally and thought it would fit with our school goal of building relationships, would allow teachers to bring what they were passionate about into the classroom, and would create collaboration time for teachers. We organized different X block activities and posted which rooms each activity was in and asked students to choose an activity they were interested in. There was a ‘moment of truth’ where we would find out if the idea would work (Govindarajan, 2010). Would students run for the exits; would they be engaged we were uncertain but were willing to take the risk. We believed it was worth taking a chance because it might increase engagement and provide opportunities for teachers to build relationships with students. The innovation was successful and over time we refined our experiment and reflected on what was working and not working. That experiment helped pave the way to change our timetable to have academic classes in the morning and a wide array of electives in the afternoon. Student choices of electives were becoming fewer so we wanted to offer more choice and had to come up with a solution. The X block experiment, which was only an hour a week, led to a change that increased elective choices for students and helped work towards personalizing their experience.

We learn from our innovations and use informal conversations to enhance professional learning. There is constant reflection and conversations about school initiatives; we question assumptions, ask why and we accept that new adult learning is required (Govindarajan and
Trimble, 2010). Professional learning is evidence based but the implementation requires informal learning and continuous conversations amongst our peer network. It helps refine our practice and turn innovation into change. A blend of formal and informal professional learning at Houston Secondary School improves practice. For example, a colleague created a new interim report that did not include a letter grade but was focused on learning outcomes. Her new interim report was an innovation not because it would revolutionize education but because it was new to her and the outcome was uncertain. She was taking a risk and trusted that colleagues would give her feedback that would enhance her learning. The concept of no letter grades came from formal opportunities but she relied on informal learning from other professionals in the building to help her implement her idea. The blend of formal and informal structures is a key to Houston Secondary’s ability to innovate.

Houston Secondary School is an innovative environment that is open to change. There is a student centred purpose that requires them to build trusting relationships with students and each other. There is a sense that every member of Houston Secondary is valued and a belief that leadership can come from various people. Their relationships are trusting, caring, genuine and often light hearted and humourous. They use formal professional learning opportunities to guide change but rely on informal learning to implement change.