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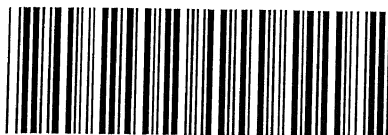
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Seeking an Understanding of School Culture: Using Theory as a Framework for Observation and Analysis

Joyce L. Henstrand

Overview of the Study

Purpose

This case study of planned change at Emerson High School, a large suburban high school, was conducted to contribute to the understanding of the process of reforming secondary schools. At the time I conducted my research, most studies of reform had involved elementary schools, but the findings of these studies did not apply to the more complex high school system (Fullan, 1990; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1990). The persistent resistance of high schools to systemic change and the lack of case studies focused on improving high schools (Miles, 1986) offered the opportunity to participate in the national dialogue related to improving the nation's high schools.

After a search of studies on school reform, I decided to approach my investigation from a cultural perspective. In the previous 20 years, most investigations of change had been from a technological or a political

perspective. One example of a technological approach, the concerns-based adoption model developed by Hall and Hord (1984) to offer facilitators a formula for bringing about change in schools, assumed that if a facilitator helps individuals work through a series of predictable stages, the result will be successful implementation of reform. Politically oriented studies, in contrast, focused on examining how tensions and conflicts between individuals or among groups have slowed or prevented reform. Neither the technological nor the political approaches appealed to me. The technological change models tended to reduce the change process to a formula, assuming most people will respond uniformly to the treatment being administered by the change facilitator, and the political approaches focused on the political aspects of conflict. Neither explained the way people experience change nor the interaction of an organization's internal culture with the change process.

My interest lay in the cultural perspective because my experiences as a teacher had enabled me to witness the complexities of the change process from inside the organization. I had participated in failed reform efforts and in highly successful innovations. From my perspective, teacher values, the culture of the organization, and the leadership skills of the change facilitator were the key issues in successful reform efforts. Supporting this approach in his early work on change, Michael Fullan (1982) argued, "Neglect of . . . how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most social reforms" (p. 4). In his classic work *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*, Sarason (1982) attributed the high failure rate of school reform to a lack of understanding of school culture and advocated for increased descriptive studies of the process of change in the school culture. By providing a case study (as defined by Yin, 1984, p. 23) describing how people actually experience change, this study was intended to create a dialogue between those who experience change and those who want to know about change.

I began the case study without a thesis; instead, for a full school year I observed the culture of a high school as reform was attempted (Fullan, 1990; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1990). The essential question of the study was "What is going on here?"—a question Wolcott (1988) believes is suitable for ethnographic research. The result is a description and interpretation of change in the context of a specific school culture. It does not provide a prescription for carrying out future change efforts in other places, but it does provide cultural insight to those who seek to bring about change in high schools.

Methodology

Because I approached this case study from a cultural perspective, I chose the ethnographic research techniques of cultural anthropology and conducted

my research from my perspective as a full-time practicing teacher in a large high school. As this position was unusual in ethnographic research, I not only studied theory related to the conduct of anthropological fieldwork, but also wrote a rationale detailing the implications of the “native” becoming a researcher. In addition, as part of the findings, I included a detailed discussion of the implications of both being a full member of the culture and conducting ethnographic research. The theory and implications surrounding this research stance will be discussed later in this chapter.

I conducted fieldwork with a repertoire of strategies that generally followed Spradley’s (1980) cycles played over many times. The strategy I used at any point in time depended on “feedback from the field, redefinition of research questions as [my] understanding of the culture [deepened], and meanings that participants [attached] to things” (LeCompte & Goetz, 1984, p. 165). The individual career history required the specialized methodology of Denzin (1970), Kluckhohn (1945), Langness and Frank (1986), and Wolcott (1983). Although the sequence of use varied from situation to situation, the strategies included:

Interviewing. I used James Spradley’s (1979) ethnographic interview to guide the informal interviews, which were useful during the early months of my fieldwork when I was discovering major issues. During the later stages, I added formal interviews to focus on specific topics. As a model for the formal interviews, I used the long interview as described by McCracken (1988).

Observation. My natural involvement in school activities provided access to most school events. Whenever possible, I took notes verbatim. In instances in which I could not take notes, I jotted down key comments and crucial quotes as soon after the event as possible. Every evening, I reviewed my notes and filled in gaps.

Key Informants. I followed the advice of H. Russell Bernard (1988) and Jeffrey Johnson (1990) as I chose informants.

Surveys and Questionnaires. The work of Fink and Kosecoff (1985), Bailey (1987), Worthen and Sanders (1987), and Gay (1987) guided me in the development and administration of a census survey as part of a reciprocal agreement (as defined by Wax, 1952) with the School Improvement Team.

Additional Strategies. I used unobtrusive measures (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966) such as archives and physical traces to corroborate evidence found through other data gathering techniques.

Findings

The case is presented in three sections (Goodenough, 1981) that represent the culture as a whole, subgroups within the culture, and the outlook of an individual. My goal was to provide "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) to enable readers to experience and interpret the change process during an academic year at Emerson High School. Emerging from the description is a portrait of a school that appeared to outsiders to achieve its goal: *providing multiple opportunities for success for students*. That broad goal fostered multiple projects: a mentor program, a peer tutoring project, curriculum changes in language arts and social studies, and articulation of services to students at all grade levels. Although these overt accomplishments seemed to signal success, covert changes in the school culture undermined and eventually prevented the overall success of reform at Emerson High School. When the principal, George Barnes, covertly changed policies regarding student discipline, teacher support for the entire reform project eroded. Barnes, in his determination to keep students in school and in class regardless of their behavior, violated a sacred norm of the teaching staff—the belief that strong discipline support from administration both ensured a positive climate in the school and contributed positively to the education of students. The frustrations that teachers felt over what they perceived as a lack of disciplinary support and Barnes's response that he had no intention of removing students from classes for either suspensions or expulsions, ultimately affected teachers' responses to all of the reform projects that Barnes advocated.

Comments made by administrators and teachers throughout the process indicated basic differences in how administrators and teachers perceived their worlds, so neither side understood or empathized with the view of the other. Not surprisingly, communication also suffered and contributed to teacher dissatisfaction. By focusing on information about events and goals, Barnes inadvertently violated another sacred norm of the teachers: their need to have information regarding expectations, follow-up on student issues, and information that affected their careers or their daily work. The opposing perceptions by administrators and teachers of what constituted good communication and appropriate discipline for students led to serious dissatisfaction among staff and erosion of support for all of the change projects.

Descriptions of three faculty groups, the School Improvement Team, the At-Risk Steering Committee, and the department chairs, revealed further erosion in the climate of the school because Barnes's interactions with these groups increased difficulties in reaching the school goals. Barnes created the At-Risk Steering Committee to lead school reform. He appointed new teachers and others who supported, and did not question, the school goals. It quickly became obvious that this group was steering the course of reform at Emerson

High School. Veteran teachers frequently voiced their annoyance that new teachers were influencing the future of the school more than veterans.

The School Improvement Team, a mostly veteran group elected by their teaching peers, felt frustrated that Barnes had assigned the task of leading the reform to the At-Risk Steering Committee. The teachers and classified staff on the School Improvement Team had been elected by their peers to represent them in areas such as determining and planning implementation of the school goals. Although the team members were generally supportive of the school goal "to provide multiple opportunities for success" to all students, they did not agree with Barnes when it came to implementation. A prominent example was their skepticism about the program to mentor at-risk students. Responding to comments from teachers, they strongly urged that Barnes provide professional development and support on how to mentor students, but very little training occurred. Once the mentoring program began, team members tried to inform Barnes about staff frustrations related to discipline issues. They told Barnes that they did not want to abandon the program, but suggested changes that would make the program more palatable for teachers. Disagreements emerged in the meetings. Barnes grew frustrated with their questions and questioned teachers' dedication to student success. The teachers accused him of not listening, and eventually withdrew active support for the innovations. Barnes stopped going to the School Improvement Team meetings. Abandoned by the principal, the School Improvement Team found purpose for its existence by dedicating its efforts to seeking resolution to staff frustrations. The team conducted a staff survey and published results that revealed deep dissatisfaction among the majority of the staff. Barnes's refusal to change the course of action for the school led to deeper dissatisfaction and further eroded support for the reforms.

The department heads, another group of veteran teachers, were appointed by the principal to perform administrative tasks related to running their departments. Seeking to domesticate several strong critics by appointing them as department heads, Barnes reduced their open opposition because actively supporting school goals was a condition of their employment as department coordinators. Although these influential teachers were kept out of the decision-making loop, they were charged with implementing changes in curriculum and instruction within their departments. Their meetings were marked by civility and reporting on progress toward the goals. Informally, as they interacted with colleagues, they sometimes joked about issues but seldom openly opposed Barnes. In their official roles, they worked to implement the goals, but they rarely expressed enthusiastic support among their peers.

Barnes's work with the three groups promoted a phenomenon that Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) refer to as balkanization and Sergiovanni (1986) calls wild centers. Normally, centers in schools provide stability and are "normal

and necessary for establishing social order and providing meaning"; but they can, if left unattended, become "wild centers" that "may not only contradict administrative and organizational aspirations but may conflict as well among themselves" (Sergiovanni, 1986, p. 9). By abandoning two groups of powerful teachers, Barnes encouraged them to become wild centers, undermining his own goals.

Conclusions

Emerging from this examination of a school in the process of change is the notion that responses at all levels of the organization influence the success of attempts at reform. It is no doubt important to come to an understanding of how an entire staff accepts or rejects an innovation. Equally important to understanding the change process, however, are the roles played by small groups and by individuals. In the case of Emerson High School, all the experiences of the small groups and the individuals came together to create the overall phenomenon of the organization. To fully comprehend the culture of the school, the whole must be understood in terms of the parts just as the parts must be understood in terms of the whole. My observations of the staff, the subgroups, and the individual revealed three significant issues to be considered by those working to change schools.

Issue #1: Teachers and Administrators Have Opposing Ideational Systems. Teachers and administrators tend to interpret the same phenomena in different ways. This viewpoint supports the notions of Wolcott (1977) and Rossman, Corbett, and Firestone (1988) on how to approach issues associated with making changes in an organization. Understanding, rather than berating, the norms and sacred values of others can more productively lead to solutions and thoughtful implementation of change. The key issue at Emerson High School was student discipline. As Barnes and his administrative team worked on discipline issues, they operated from the belief that they were redirecting students to more successful choices. Because the administrative approach did not involve traditional consequences such as suspension, teachers viewed each incident as a personal insult that proved lack of support from the administration. In this and all issues I observed, the subgroup of administrators tended to think in terms of the big picture and acted to move the system toward its goals. On the other hand, teachers tended to focus on the specifics of each situation and how it impacted their own classroom. This was a cultural characteristic shared by the teacher subgroups and also by the individual teacher. Barnes wondered why teachers could not see the big picture and criticized them for focusing on small issues and incidents. A comment by one teacher represented the viewpoint of her colleagues when she stated that

her job demands focus on details: daily class schedules, taking attendance, tracking hundreds of grades, and filling out paperwork. She wondered how Barnes could expect teachers to shift easily to the big picture in the context of their daily reality. The conflicting interpretations were never resolved and undermined the school improvement goals.

Issue #2: Teacher Beliefs About Reforms Have More Impact Than Facts. The beliefs of members of the Culture and subgroups are ultimately more important than the facts about what actually happens. The overly broad goal at Emerson High School led to multiple interpretations of its meaning; without adequate information and direction, teachers acted on their own perceptions. Barnes did provide teachers with factual information, but he did not provide information that corresponded with what teachers desired, such as how the reforms would impact their work, including their relationships with students. After each factual communication, teachers created their own interpretations. Those vested in the planning, such as the At-Risk Steering Committee, tended to react favorably to announcements. Teachers with less or no involvement in the development of the goals created interpretations that questioned Barnes's motives and assumed the worst. Barnes's explanations after the fact rarely changed any minds; teachers clung to their own interpretations that were closely aligned with their personal belief systems. Reactions of teachers in subgroups helped to reify the interpretations of the general population.

Issue #3: School Reforms Impact the Lives of Teachers as Well as Students. In the flurry to improve schools for the benefit of students, it is easy to forget that teachers have needs, too. Seymour Sarason (1990) argues that "schools are no less for the growth of staff than for students" (p. 150) and claims that ignoring that notion has contributed to the failure of many reform efforts. The case of an individual teacher, Linda Nelson, illustrates how *not* to nourish a talented and productive teacher. Although, Nelson was publicly acknowledged for her contributions, her work was rewarded with extra responsibilities and increased committee work. She resented the lack of compensation for extra tasks, grew disillusioned, and finally left the profession to pursue a different career. Another example is the impact on teachers related to changes in disciplinary tactics. When teachers sent students to the office because of severe disciplinary infractions (such as swearing at the teacher), they expected to be supported by administration with appropriate consequences for the student. When students were returned to the classroom with no tangible consequence, the teachers felt that their authority had been undermined. Furthermore, they reinforced their interpretations in the subgroups and at informal gatherings. The reform was making life better for students, but worse for teachers. Not surprisingly, teacher support for the reform eroded.

Although the people and events of Emerson High School will not be exactly replicated in another organization, their story offers an insider's view of the culture of a suburban high school grappling with change. Leaders in reform should take the time to study and understand each school's culture, including the variations in the ideational systems of teacher groups and individuals. Using that knowledge, the needs of both adults and students can be addressed during the process of change.

My Use of Theory

Prior to commencing fieldwork, I studied theory in two distinct areas: (1) sociological and anthropological theory that would potentially guide both the gathering and analysis of the data, and (2) theoretical discussions by anthropologists regarding the research role of an active participant observer. In the first case, I was seeking a theoretical framework that would "guide and clarify" my observations, data collection, and analysis (Wolcott, 1995, p. 183). In the second case, I sought justification for my research role, which involved being a "native" who becomes a researcher rather than the classic stance of "stranger" seeking to understand the natives. In both areas, the theoretical stances I chose were critical in every phase of the work.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical orientation of cognitive anthropology, and, more specifically, the work of Ward Goodenough (1981), guided my data collection and analysis. Other theoretical frameworks influenced several aspects of the study, and will be explained later in this chapter, but Goodenough's framework was the major influence. My search for a theoretical stance began when I was a doctoral student at the University of Oregon and enrolled in a course in educational anthropology offered by Harry Wolcott. I developed an interest in ethnographic research, with its emphasis on description and interpretation. Eventually, I took a class from Wolcott called "Culture Theory" and wrote a paper that explored the appropriateness of various sociological and anthropological theories in anthropological research. I found multitudes of theories and continued my reading after I completed the class. I settled on cognitive anthropologist Ward Goodenough's cultural framework for the case study of Emerson High School because it allowed me to examine the multiple roles of teachers in the school culture and explained the relation of individuals, small groups, and the whole in the process of change (Henstrand, 1993).

Cognitive anthropology "focuses on discovering how different peoples organize and use their cultures" (Tyler, 1969, p. 3) and perceives that culture resides in the minds of people rather than in the material phenomena of

the system. When they study a culture, cognitive anthropologists seek to understand the organizing principles underlying behavior" (Tyler, p. 3). They ask, "What material phenomena are significant for the people" and "How do they organize these phenomena" (Tyler, p. 3). Cognitive anthropologists are also interested in both differences between cultures and differences within cultures (Tyler, 1969). Their "prime inroad" for understanding groups and their cultures is language (Agar, 1987, p. 432).

Ward Goodenough, one of the early leading scholars of cognitive anthropology, "took language as [his] point of departure for studying culture" (1963, p. iii). Culture "consists of standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it" (Goodenough, 1963, pp. 258–259). Culture is not the material artifacts or observed traditions; rather, it is "what is learned, . . . the things one needs to know in order to meet the standards of others" (Goodenough, 1981, p. 50). Public culture is not taken as "a given simply to be described; [he] takes it as a phenomenon to be explained" (Goodenough, 1981, p. 59). Language is the primary vehicle for learning from members of the culture pool.

Goodenough's (1981) definition of culture includes not only the Culture (with a capital C) of the entire society but also allows for subgroups and for individuals. The Culture includes the values and traditions that are known to all members of the society. Subgroups consist of smaller groups or clusters that, in addition to sharing the values and traditions of the Culture, have values, traditions, and language unique to the members of their group. Individuals have their own personal idiolect or version of the language and their own private version of the shared Culture. Further, Goodenough (1981) argued, "no two individuals have exactly the same understanding of it in all respects" (p. 97). The individual outlook that Goodenough labeled "propriospect" grows "out of his own experience [as] each individual develops his private, subjective view of the world and of its contents—his personal outlook" (p. 98). The "sum of the contents of all of the propriospects of the society's members" (p. 111) becomes the Culture pool. On the other hand, each propriospect can contain pieces from many different cultures. Thus, the concept of propriospect not only allows for differences between individuals but also accounts for an individual person being multicultural and choosing an appropriate operating culture at will.

Goodenough's (1981) model of culture accounts for gradual change (culture drift), rapid change, innovation, and response to change. Culture drift occurs as younger individuals shift their ideas, beliefs, values, recipes, or traditions away from those taught to them by their elders and toward other influences. Faster change can occur when members of the Culture reevaluate and accept change in ideas, beliefs, values, recipes, or traditions. If the changes

cause dissonance between the public culture and peoples' beliefs, a crisis may develop with turmoil among members. Some customs may acquire such deep commitment from the members of the Culture that

People demand of one another that they acquire the knowledge and skills needed to perform these routines. They demand cooperation of one another in their performance, and they prohibit behavior that interferes with them or that jeopardizes the arrangements and stockpiles on which performance of these customary routines depends, investing them with moral rightness and even sanctity. (Goodenough, 1981, p. 90)

Individuals may withdraw from the changes or change may be blocked in the Culture.

Making Goodenough's (1981) model of culture the organizing framework for my study was a relatively simple choice for me. I had spent over a year (Henstrand, 1993) investigating multiple anthropological and sociological theories of culture. Although they offered insights that expanded my knowledge and influenced my work in small ways, I had not "connected" with any of them. Structural and functional theories tended to concentrate on the phenomenal world by looking at social structure and function. They were more concerned with the relationship of structure and function than with the belief systems of the members. Most analyses focused on a unit of measure. For instance, Durkheim was more interested in societal forces than in the individual, and Radcliff-Brown analyzed change in terms of the whole social structure. In contrast, Weber and Malinowski focused on individuals as their unit of analysis. In addition to the limitations of their unit of analysis, structural and functional theories lacked constructs for talking about change. Functionalism, in particular, focused on explaining continuity of culture rather than change. Because I was studying planned change, structuralism and functionalism seemed limited in usefulness for my work.

In contrast to the limitations of the structural and functional theories, Goodenough's (1981) model provided a means to understand the complexities of the social system I found in the high school. His model included a framework for analyzing the total group, smaller clusters within the group, and individuals. I was not forced to place individuals in a single category but could identify overlapping roles and relationships. In addition, Goodenough offered a framework for understanding change in a social system.

Goodenough's (1981) concept of "propriospect" also offered a valuable tool for analysis. According to Harry Wolcott (1987, 1991), propriospect draws our attention "to the individual acquisition of cultural competencies in which each of us is engaged throughout the course of a lifetime" (1987, p. 51).

Propriospect avoids taking an evaluative stance because the interest of the researcher is on the *contents* of the propriospect. Finally, propriospect "draws attention to the idea that multiculturalism is exhibited in normal human experience" (1987, p. 32). Because every propriospect contains a different combination of pieces from the operating culture and from other cultures, diversity is a natural state.

One additional theoretical approach, interpretive anthropology, also affected my study. Interpretive anthropology includes both culture theory and the practice of studying culture. Rooted in phenomenology, structuralism, structural linguistics, semiotics, and hermeneutics, interpretive anthropologists avoid creating categories like the functionalists and refuse to identify universal truths. The only reality that they claim is their own interpretation of their text. In fact, discussion of the texts themselves is an important characteristic of the movement. A major representative of interpretive anthropology, Clifford Geertz, takes a semiotic view of culture. He agreed with Max Weber "that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" and he took "culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz, 1987, p. 5). Ethnography was not to be defined by its methods such as seeking an informant or keeping a diary; rather it is a "kind of intellectual effort . . . an elaborate venture in . . . 'thick description'" (Geertz, 1987, p. 6). The ethnographer develops an interpretation or constructs meaning from the descriptions of even minor aspects of the culture. Though this may appear on the surface to be similar to Goodenough's (1981) framework, Geertz specifically separates himself from Goodenough. Goodenough believed culture is manifested in the mind. In contrast, Geertz believes "culture is public because meaning is" (Geertz, 1973, p. 12). Furthermore, Geertz argues that the cognitive anthropologists' belief that mental phenomena can be analyzed by formal methods such as mathematics and logic "is as destructive of an effective use of the concept as are the behaviorist and idealist fallacies to which it is a misdrawn correction" (Geertz, 1973, p. 12). Geertz does not expect that there will ever develop "a perfection of consensus" but instead a "refinement of debate" (Geertz, 1973, p. 29). The "vocation" of anthropology is "not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said" (Geertz, 1973, p. 30). Despite Geertz's adamant argument separating cognitive and interpretive anthropology, more recently cognitive anthropologists have come closer to interpretive anthropology by seeing culture as public and symbolic (Dougherty, 1985).

Effects of Using a Theoretical Framework

When I originally set out to discover a theory or theories, my goal was to find theories that would guide my data collection and analysis, clarify my ideas, unify my work, and justify my research role as participant observer. As a novice researcher, I knew that tackling a year of ethnographic research in a high school involved observing and analyzing a myriad of events and relationships. I wondered, "How can I make sense of it all, or, for that matter, any of it?" Because my goal was to discover what was going on in a comprehensive high school that was attempting major change, I needed a lens that would help me filter the input and develop a defensible interpretation. Theory provided me with that lens and influenced nearly every aspect of my work. Goodenough's (1981) model of culture and change guided my data analysis, and organization of the written case. Geertz (1973, 1987) and interpretive anthropology influenced me on a holistic level by guiding my thinking about interpretation and description. Both aided me in defending my research role.

Goodenough's *Culture, Language, and Society* (1981) provided the basis of the organization of the case study into three major categories: the social group as a whole, smaller subgroups of teachers, and one teacher operating within the larger group. When I reviewed the research on teacher culture, I discovered that most work discussed teachers as a single culture. For example, Wolcott's *Teachers Versus Technocrats* (1977) represents school culture as a moiety system with teachers represented as one half of the moiety. Lortie's *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (1975) provides an analysis of teachers as a type, and Sarason's *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* (1982) treats teachers as a group. Because of my long-term experience working in schools, I knew that subtle differences exist among teachers, and I wanted my study to expose the variations in teachers at the same time as I described the commonalities of teacher culture. Goodenough's (1981) concept of Culture, culture pool, and propriospect provided the framework for looking at both the big picture and the subtleties.

When I entered the field to live as a full participant observer for a year, I worked to ensure that I was able to collect data that represented all three major categories. I had not yet chosen the individual teacher who would be the representative for one propriospect, but she revealed herself to me rather quickly. A leader on the School Improvement Team, she enjoyed the respect of the principal, teaching colleagues, and students. Early in the year, she supported the concept of the reform, and she was always candid about her opinions even as they shifted. She readily accepted my proposal to be the subject of a major section of the study, and, unlike other teachers, she was not afraid of possible consequences when she voiced her opinions. Moreover, she

provided an opportunity to test Goodenough's (1981) hypothesis that each *propriospect* shares characteristics with the Culture and with subgroups to which it belongs, and also possesses characteristics from outside the group that are unique to itself.

The subgroups emerged quickly as well, perhaps because, as a full participant, I was familiar with the working teachers committees and their roles. As I gathered data, I was careful to ensure that I observed each group in situations in which the group was intact. As I observed each group, I asked, "What characteristics do the members of this group share with the Culture?" and "What characteristics are common to members of this group, but not present in all others in the Culture?" I also asked, "What unique functions did the members of this group serve in the reform efforts?"

Finally, I gathered data that would reveal characteristics common to all teachers. This was done primarily by observing the teachers in large groups and by partnering with the School Improvement Team to conduct a census survey that enjoyed a 100 percent response rate. My guiding questions were also derived directly from Goodenough's (1981) theory. I sought to discover, primarily through examination of both written and oral language, the common understandings that constituted membership in the Culture. This included, "standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it" (Goodenough, p. 62). These were standards that cut across all subgroups and were present in individual *propriospects*. One section of the study, "A Year at Emerson High School," describes the culture pool, and the conclusions for the study focus on the standards that are understood by members of the culture pool.

The concept of *propriospect* was, in particular, valuable to observation, analysis, and description in the case study. Because I operated in the role of full participant observer, I was keenly aware of issues of objectivity. Using the concept of *propriospect*, I was able to analyze the operating culture of individuals without being evaluative of the world view. *Propriospect* was a tool for understanding the partial overlap of viewpoints of teachers and administrators without contradicting the discussions of their different cultural orientations. Because *propriospect* is a collection of all experiences, teachers and administrators did share a number of experiences; their *propriospects*, however, were not identical because they each had experiences unique to their roles in the school. In addition, *propriospect* was an aid in understanding teachers' individual and collective response to change. As explained earlier, most teachers responded strongly to the changes in discipline implemented by the principal. The change in disciplinary practices no longer aligned with the belief systems of teachers, resulting in turmoil. According to Goodenough,

some customs are so deeply held that "they prohibit behavior that interferes with them . . . and . . . [invests] them with moral rightness and even sanctity" (1981, p. 90). Teachers talked about the changes as being morally incorrect, and, as frustration increased, the teachers' sense of being morally correct increased. Informal conversations revealed an expectation that all teachers would share the same view. Goodenough's theory helped develop my insight into how conflicts between public culture and personal beliefs can result in the upheaval and resistance that I observed at Emerson High School.

Geertz's (1973, 1987) writing appealed to me at a more intuitive level, which is not surprising when considering my academic background. Like Geertz, I studied literature as an undergraduate, and I was drawn to his emphasis on description of the public aspects of the culture. As both a student and teacher of literature, I had been schooled in the idea that no reality is the same for all people; the only reality I can claim is that of my own personal interpretation. Despite Geertz's statements drawing a line between cognitive and interpretive anthropology, my personal interpretation found the approaches to be complementary rather than contradictory. Reading that cognitive anthropologists were moving closer to Geertz's view of culture as public helped justify my blending of the two. Although Goodenough influenced my organization, Geertz's concept of thick description influenced the way I collected data and what I included in the written case. When I was taking field notes, I was always conscious of recording sufficient detail to ensure that my writing would be rich with description. As I observed social situations or conducted interviews, I recorded words verbatim. When that was not possible, I recorded key phrases and returned to the text later on the same day to complete the dialogue and add description. When I was present at key meetings, I was particularly conscious of taking detailed notes of the conversation and of the reactions of participants. Because I carried a small notebook with me at all times, I was able to describe informal situations and record conversations. In the final report of the case, I presented most of the information as a narrative, a story of the year at Emerson High School, with an emphasis on dialogue. Consciously working to provide "thick description" so that my interpretation would be clearly supported, I also wanted to provide enough description for my readers to be able to form independent interpretations. Also, like Geertz, I fully acknowledged that the account is a personal interpretation. In fact, in the last paragraph of the study I stated that "I cannot promise this represents anyone's truth except my own" (Henstrand, 1991). To tie the description back into my use of cognitive anthropology in my organization and analysis, I concluded with a reference to Goodenough's (1981) concept of *propriospect* to support my research role and description as one "*propriospect* in the culture pool of Emerson High School" (Henstrand,

1991, p. 270). In my own mind, at least, I synthesized the two approaches in my interpretation and conclusion.

Theory and My Research Role

Theory not only contributed to the design, data gathering, and analysis of my study, but also, quite unexpectedly, was critical in supporting my decision to take on the role of complete participant observer and in managing several problems that arose as a consequence of that role. Before I chose the subject of my study, I had assumed that I would follow the advice and practice of traditional anthropologists and sociologists who advocated that researchers engaging in participant observation should be outsiders to the culture being studied. Becoming too involved with the “natives” was considered a major breach of the research role because it generally involved losing the analytical perspective of the researcher (Agar, 1980; Becker, 1958; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Wax, 1971). My assumptions changed when I had the opportunity to return to my work as a teacher and, simultaneously, conduct ethnographic research for a case study of planned change. In other words, I planned to be a “native” who would take on the role of participant observer. I returned to the literature to seek justification and support for becoming a complete participant observer.

I found that researchers had begun to support the position that full membership in the social system can be advantageous (Adler & Adler, 1987; Jorgensen, 1989; Peshkin, 1988; Wolcott, 1988). Bronislaw Malinowski (1984, 1987) was one of the first anthropologists to conduct his fieldwork as a participant observer. He claimed that living with the natives enabled him to develop a better understanding of their thinking and lifestyle. In the 1920s, a group of sociologists known as the Chicago School also adopted participant observation to study subgroups of American culture, such as medical students or drug addicts; however, they also advocated the traditional stance by warning against over-involvement with the subjects (Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Wax, 1971). More recently, existential sociologists have broken from the traditional stance of researcher as stranger. Researchers within the theoretical school of existential sociology believe that people often act on the basis of emotions. The job of the researcher, therefore, is to penetrate the surface to discover insights into the emotions of the humans they study. This necessarily leads to the involvement of the researcher with the subjects. Not troubled by the possible subjectivity of the researcher, existential sociologists believe that the ability to engage in self-reflection is more important than seeking objective detachment: “They reject the claim that over familiarity leads

researchers to assume the self deception of the members. Self deception is not caused by involvement per se, but by deep-rooted emotional conflicts within the individual" (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 23).

Proponents of ethnomethodology also advocate for the involvement of the researcher with the group being studied. In order to understand contextual meanings and avoid distorting the vision of the world, ethnomethodologists believe they must participate "to the fullest degree" (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 32). For them, "going native is the solution rather than the problem" (p. 32). They do not worry about the possibility of researchers altering the setting because "good faith members will only alter settings in ways similar to other members, so their actions are condoned" (p. 32). Armed with the support of at least two theoretical approaches and of contemporary researchers such as Adler and Adler and Peshkin, I decided to go into the field as a complete participant observer.

During my fieldwork, I followed Alan Peshkin's advice: I did not try "to exorcise my subjectivity" but rather to "enable myself to manage it—to preclude it from being unwittingly burdensome—as I progressed through collecting, analyzing, and writing up my data" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). At first, I used research strategies and personal reflection to manage the subjectivity. I chose an overt stance so that everyone would know what I was doing. Using Peshkin's subjective I's, I continuously monitored my own interactions to maintain the same membership role I had before I began fieldwork; and I took verbatim notes whenever possible. As I progressed into the year, however, I found that my conflicts of conscience required more than simple solutions. Taking on a theoretical perspective helped me manage those conflicts.

The personal conflicts started when I realized that the reform was not going well, and I observed conflicts between teachers and administrators. Divisive behavior nearly became a norm in the organization. Despite the fact that colleagues knew I was conducting field research, I worried about publishing negative behaviors in my study. I worried when I memorized key phrases from informal conversations and ran back to my office to record what I had heard. I also worried about being disloyal to colleagues and wondered if they felt they were being exploited. Referring to theory was my chief means of coping with these issues.

The theoretical frameworks of Goodenough (1981) and Geertz (1973, 1987) helped me to manage the subjectivity of my research role, including numerous conflicts with my conscience as I recorded unflattering behavior by members of the school. For example, as a teacher in the building, I found that I shared many of the frustrations of my colleagues related to the changes in the discipline system. Many of my colleagues made inflammatory comments that actually reflected my own feelings when I was in my teacher role. I struggled with recording their negative comments even though they were said in public.

On the other hand, I had a good working relationship with the principal. I worried about recording behaviors and words that might bring criticism his way.

To manage my subjectivity, I consciously retreated from my role as teacher and stepped into my role as researcher by applying the theoretical model to the situation. If, for example, I observed colleagues at the lunch table commenting energetically about the lack of discipline in the school, if I stayed in my role as teacher I would tend to fully engage emotionally. During the fieldwork, however, I consciously moved into the role of researcher. For example, I would apply Goodenough's model for culture to the situation by looking for the operating standards that were being revealed by the participants. In committee meetings, instead of becoming emotional over the conflict I saw, I consciously worked to understand which standards the groups shared with the Culture and what impact the groups had on the Culture. I was, therefore, able to step back from seeing the people as friends and colleagues and consciously assume the research role.

Using theory also presented challenges. A commitment to the use of theory required that I develop knowledge of various anthropological and sociological theories and read examples of the theory being used well. This required time and I had to cope with the comments, made by several of my fellow PhD candidates, urging me to do something simple so I could finish the degree. Because the PhD program was more about learning than jumping a hurdle to my next job, I spent a full year reading research theory before I gained enough knowledge to choose a theory and start fieldwork. Once I announced that I would use theory, I was accountable to apply the theory appropriately. Not only did I frame my data collection and analysis around Goodenough's theory of culture, but I also had to ensure that my analysis of the high school's Culture, culture pool, and individual propriospects remained consistent with the theory's framework. At one point, Harry Wolcott suggested that my use of propriospect was rather superficial. Because Wolcott's (1987) article on propriospect had initiated my inquiry into Goodenough's theory, I returned to *Culture, Language, and Society* (Goodenough, 1981) to increase my understanding, and then I added clarification to my writing. I continued to return periodically to Goodenough's texts to renew my understanding and reflect on the application to my research.

Conclusion: A Professional and Personal Reflection

Despite the challenges of time and accountability, using theory benefited both the process of doing the research and the product that emerged. The initial research for culture theory and the review I wrote clarified my thinking and

provided the groundwork for the design and completion of the study. Before I discovered a theory that helped me to frame my understanding of the culture at Emerson High School, I was unable to start the study. The school appeared to be a chaotic collection of actions and voices; I did not know how to look at the situation or how to interpret what I saw. The application of Goodenough's (1981) theory of culture provided a lens through which I could observe and record. In addition, using theory enabled me to manage the subjectivity involved in the full participant observer role I assumed as the researcher.

The importance of using theory in qualitative research goes beyond the benefits I experienced in doing the study. Conscious and consistent use of theory by researchers should improve the stature of qualitative research in education. Researchers have long debated the relative worth of qualitative and quantitative research; qualitative research is often criticized for its subjectivity and lack of precise measurements. A leading cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1973) argues in favor of developing and using strong theory because theory helps elevate anthropology to the level of a science: "There is no reason why the conceptual structure of a cultural interpretation should be any less formulable, and thus less susceptible to explicit canons of appraisal, than that of, say, a biological observation or a physical experiment" (p. 24). Similarly, Goetz and LeCompte (1984) support the establishment of a theoretical framework for qualitative research, especially ethnographic studies. The use of theory, they believe, increases rigor and makes qualitative research more understandable when read in other disciplines. By using theory to frame and justify my work, I hope I have contributed to elevating qualitative research to the level of a science.

The discovery and use of Goodenough's (1981) theory of culture also benefited me on a personal level. In my career as a public school administrator, I have been principal of two large high schools and director of instruction for a medium-sized school district. All of my positions have involved leading the organization through large-scale change. Those who have led organizational change know only too well the struggles that occur in organizations. Despite paying attention to change models and attempting to work systematically through the change, leaders of change report resistance, blockage, and unintended consequences for many actions. Goodenough's theory of culture has given me the tools to understand the variations in behavior of the large group from smaller groups or individuals. When I think of applying a large-scale plan for change, I frame it in terms of Culture, and I devise activities and professional development based on the large group, but I have come to realize that this large-scale planning is not enough. After seeing reforms fail, I have been conscious of the roles of subgroups, not only for their official purpose, but also for the beliefs of their members. I work to understand their

jointly held and individual views and to maintain communication that addresses issues of importance to them. Perhaps most important, I seek a partnership with members of the organization in the planning process so that implementation of reform respects the sacred values and needs of teachers and other staff. These efforts, in my experience, contribute to successful change over time because they attend to the individual propriospects present in the organization.

Attending to theory in research design and implementation in the field of education still tends to be relatively rare, perhaps because of the time involved in developing an understanding and the accountability that comes with applying theory during the process of research and analysis. In particular, doctoral students who intend to pursue careers as practitioners might view the use of theory as an exercise that will not yield personal benefit. On the surface, I would not have expected my exploration and application of theory to go beyond its usefulness in the completion of my dissertation. I hope this essay has illustrated that the benefits of using theory can go far beyond research applications and that knowledge of theory has relevance in the real world of teaching and administering schools. Wolcott (1995) has listed a number of benefits of using theory for the researcher, and I found several to be particularly applicable to myself. The use of theory enabled me to "join [my] work to some larger issues or accumulation of data" (Wolcott, 1995, p. 189). My study was moved from simply an account of what happened in one school to a more comprehensive generalization and understanding of culture and culture change. Moreover, as a researcher who returned to the role of educational practitioner, the use of theory has deepened my understanding of the culture in which I operate.

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