

Showing the Talk:

How Artifacts Contribute to Inclusive Schools/Workplaces

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A quick review of district websites reveals mission, vision and value statements laden with words related to student achievement, well-being, equity, inclusion and engagement. That is the “talk”. But “the talk” is meaningless without “the walk”, that being the enactment of such values in behaviour, communication and decision making. I think we can all agree that we would like “the walk” to match “the talk”, but it must be recognized that this does not always happen and certainly will not happen consistently by chance. Rather, it is through complex and highly variable processes that participants in a school system, be those students, staff, or the community, come to understand the organization’s values and then, based on that individual’s understanding and personal alignment with them, subsequently act upon them. These processes are identified as *organizational socialization*. While I have posed that we as educational leaders value “the talk” I would also posit that education systems have considerable reason to more implicitly address organizational socialization given the continuous intake of students of all ages and abilities, and the many anticipated changes in staff groups as a result of expected, as per demographic research, retirements. Those whose values do not align with the organization generally fail to engage, and will physically or mentally leave the organization over time on their own accord or as a result of the actions of others.

An extensive literature review, undertaken by this author when producing the research project entitled “Accidental Educators: New Managers Acquiring and Enacting Organizational Values”, resulted in the creation of the conceptual framework shown following. It attempts to identify the relationships between an organizational newcomer and a variety of the factors related to socialization and subsequent behaviour.

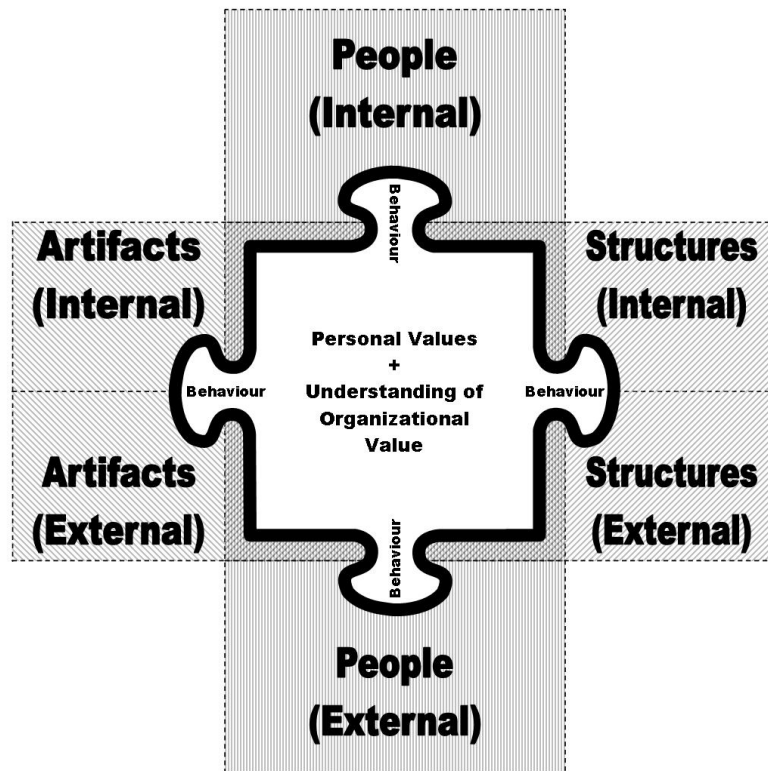


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Accidental Educators Study.

The reader will note six factors of socialization, those being people, structures, and artifacts internal to the organization, and people, structures, and artifacts external to the organization. Rounded socialization practices consider a number of these factors but the focus of this essay will be only one, that being artifacts internal to the organization. I have, however, provided in brief following information related to the others, and to associated theories, in order to provide context. Absolutely people and structures internal to the organization have great potential to influence the socialization of someone experiencing the organization for the first time. For example, if a person encountered speaks negatively about people living in poverty, the newcomer instinctively understands that this individual, now seen as a representative of the organization, does not value people living in poverty. The newcomer may feel they need to adapt this stance as well, or at least be tacit with their contradictory opinions, in order to fit within the organization. If the person encountered openly shows respect for those living in poverty, significant pressure is put onto the newcomer to adopt this view as well or, if they are living in

poverty, to feel welcomed and respected. Similarly, structures such as annual assemblies and events provide the newcomer evidence as to what the organization holds as important. Through my research it was also evident that people and structures external to the organization can also have significant influence over the view of the newcomer. For example, some newcomers involved in my research spoke of the importance of views obtained by hearing about the organization from friends and family members, or from other structures such as other districts. Ministries of education and the media also, for example, can play a role in what the newcomer sees as being valued.

Theories related to socialization which one might want to understand further than this short essay allows include uncertainty reduction theory, sense-making theory and social-cognitive theory. Bradac (2001) indicates that a “major assumption of uncertainty reduction theory is that there is a human drive to reduce uncertainty about self and others in initial interactions...” (p. 458). In comparison to uncertainty reduction theory, which speaks more specifically for the desire to partake in rational information gathering in order to create knowledge, sense-making theory speaks more directly to the interpretation of any information gathered, regardless of how and why it was obtained. According to Savolainen (1993), the premise of sense-making theory is that humans “take steps to construct sense in constantly changing life situations” (p. 16). In other words, we as humans are not above creating our own understanding, as best we can in order to calm our confusion, even when lacking significant information. Social-cognitive theory encompasses not only relationships regarding the conveyance of information through means of “physical demonstration, pictorial representation, or verbal description” (Bandura, 1986, p.70), but the actions and behaviours that then stem from such information being transferred. In simple terms, regardless of the complexities of these theories, the organizational newcomer will use all means possible to sort out how they fit, or do not fit, into the organization they are encountering and their behaviour is predicated on that sense of fit.

Returning to the topic at hand, what are *artifacts*? Artifacts internal to the organization, as referenced in the literature review and my subsequent study, primarily encompass physical aspects of the organization which might be encountered by the newcomer and, through their

symbolic and representative nature, serve to factor into the socialization of such an individual. The work of Kesebir, Uttal and Gardner (2010) identifies that although artifacts as such are not responsive to the newcomer, as a person would be, they do have social meaning capable of shifting cognition and behaviour, and as well may serve as a talking point for the newcomer to engage other individuals and vice versa. Artifacts internal to the organization, our focus here, might include, for example, bulletin board displays, wall hangings, murals, trophy cases, and framed photographs. By comparison, a prime example of an artifact external to the organization which is capable of influencing socialization are local newspapers.

An important aspect of district artifacts are the schools and administrative centres, and in particular the public spaces such as foyers, hallways, and school signs. To begin, I'll impart a quick anecdote from one of my research participants. He mentioned the personal importance to him of locations where the district has displayed character attributes they value, namely on their public website and at their main office building (personal communication, June 4, 2010). Feeling inspired to work at an organization with these articulated values proudly displayed, he pointed out his disappointment that the organization had not taken the care to ensure such sentiments are identified in all work places and, in particular at the administrative office site where he worked.

Yes, your walls and halls are part of the "walk". Do they match "the talk"? In examining schools and administrative centres I've discovered those that do, and those that do not, and of course most fall along the spectrum between. To evaluate a site in the public school system against the target of being inclusive and engaging I personally consider three components; the first being artifacts (or lack thereof) which positively reference the tenets of learning, student achievement and well-being, the second being artifacts (or lack thereof) which positively influence anti-discrimination efforts related to the grounds identified in the Ontario Human Rights Code (OHRC), and the third being artifacts (or lack thereof) which positively address other grounds of discrimination that, while not part of the OHRC, can prove problematic in education settings. An example of the latter would be lack of inclusion as a result of differing income levels.

For clarification, let me provide a few examples of artifacts that one might find in an education setting that might positively assist with socialization and make one feel included in the environment. With regard to the tenets of learning and student achievement, I have seen plaques for outstanding academic achievement, displays containing honour rolls, posters identifying aspects of specific courses and post-secondary options, and framed photographs identifying past graduating classes. With regard to well being, one might encounter trophies and other awards that have recognized excellence in sports or the arts as well as those which have been awarded for sportsmanship, volunteer contributions, and participation. One might also encounter displays indicating the value the school or workplace places on environmental initiatives, see signs identifying valued character traits, and come across bulletin board information addressing healthy food options and anti-bullying campaigns.

With regard to artifacts that clearly identify school and workplace values related to grounds of discrimination, one can frequently turn to the types of signs and posters that are found on doors and in halls. People, be those students, staff, or community members, who do not see their personal situation reflected must search further for clues of inclusion and safety. Powerful artifacts are those which address stereotypes, such as pictures showing girls in Science Clubs and participating in competitions related to male-dominated trades. Also important are artifacts which identify the breadth of the student body, including those with special needs, of different races, and of varying income levels. Forms of diversity frequently missed in school-based artifacts include those related to sexual orientation and family status. The York Region District School Board has, in part, addressed the former through use of Positive Space Symbols. These symbols incorporate a 6-stripe rainbow and an inverted triangle, both positively associated with issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, and the words “This environment is inclusive of all sexual orientations and gender identities”. Such a symbol can act as a powerful source of socialization for those who see it given that it might serve to increase the comfort level of those who are personally examining issues related to sexual orientation and/or gender identity, as well as send the message to those who may not share similar values that this is the expected norm within the organization. Family status, frequently represented in artifacts related to registration

and parent participation, presumably benefits from portrayal of a variety of family make-ups on signage of the institution, including single parents of both genders, as well as same and opposite sex couples, grandparents, and parents of children not of the same race as themselves. A place to start when examining public, but less openly visible, artifacts as they relate to family status is to consider the school or district's registration form. Is it inclusive of a variety of family structures? If not, you can understand that it has at some point led to someone not feeling included and possibly quite embarrassed. Indications, through charts or maps, of the number of languages spoken by students and staff at the school or places of origin, favour the newcomer who might feel they are the only one who could possibly be a speaker of a certain language or from abroad. This is, of course, less challenging for schools with truly diverse populations. However, it is not impossible for other schools to address this in their own way and some might say it is these schools which must truly do the most to ensure newcomers feel included. When considering artifacts, in many cases it is absolutely true that a picture (or symbol or some other representation) is worth a thousand words as pictures may bridge the divide between those able to read the language used and those who cannot. But, the importance of the words cannot be forgotten. A special caution is provided here to pay attention to acronyms and other short forms that may be not be known in common vernacular as they serve to defeat the purpose of building inclusion and organizational understanding. A final caution relates to inclusivity of socializing artifacts as they relate to individuals who are blind or visually impaired. In such cases a picture may be worthless, and alternative socializing artifacts should be considered.

In closing, I hope I have not bored my reader as that of which I write is absolutely common sense and for the most part simple to achieve. However, I have written about this as I unfortunately know that less than inviting, inclusive schools receive students, staff, and community members on a daily basis. By those who create or authorize artifacts paying slightly more attention to the ones within the school or workplace, it might be hoped that this can be remedied. It would seem there is generally no shortage of artifacts in place, but the question is whether or not they are the most effective ones.

References

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