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Muhammad, Anthony. (2009) *Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press

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Anthony Muhammad opens his book with a statement that education has been a means to an end, i.e., a route to social mobility. Somewhere along the way, every child did not receive the memo. Muhammad contends that the “system” failed most of these children because of its inaccessibility. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) forced schools to look at themselves under a microscopic lens to identify and rectify the reasons why the school’s achievement gap has not narrowed or closed. In my opinion, 21st century educators have to eliminate the excuses and acknowledge the factors that continue to place American school systems in jeopardy.

Muhammad has written an insightful book that speaks clearly to the dynamics involved in transforming school culture into one that promotes academic success by

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advising teachers and administrators to incrementally influence the assumptions and expectations that create new norms for schools (Dufour, 2001, p. 3).

Chapter one introduces the reader to information from the 2006 census regarding the educational gaps between White and African-American citizens. The issues that contribute to why those gaps still exist and continue to increase are correlated to environmental issues such as teen pregnancy, unemployment and bankruptcy, lack of education, incarceration, and the lack of healthcare. Dr. Muhammad brings these issues to the forefront because it brings to light the highly debated issue of equity. These issues of inequity are now impacting the Latino population which has grown to a point of being the largest minority group in the United States. The United States has another cross to bear because the same issues that have not moved the African-American citizens forward are the same issues that also plague the Latino citizens. When does it end?

The No Child Left Behind Law of 2001 has many stipulations that impact the bottom line for most school districts across America. According to Federal statutes, state departments of education mandate that by 2014, all students are expected to perform at a proficient level on standardized assessments in reading and mathematics. If these students do not perform at the proficient level then those districts will face stiff sanctions which could mean closing school districts from rural to urban, big and small. What could that mean for already struggling districts that cannot keep their doors open for many reasons such as poor funding or shrinking student enrollment? It could mean the abandonment of a dream deferred. I once agreed with Dr. Muhammad's assumption that the NCLB law would fade away like a distant sunset. But clearly it has not and will not. Past attempts have been proposed over the years to close the gaps with program offerings such as Goals 2000, IDEIA, and choice movements which included school vouchers. But the demands that NCLB placed on all schools, in particular, large urban schools, made it even more difficult to compete with the unyielding threats schools districts already face. It is a huge burden of accountability, which lends itself to anxieties that burdens local districts, officials, administrators and teachers with expectations that they must adhere to.

In the conclusion of chapter one, Dr. Muhammad contends that schools must self-diagnose and identify what their beliefs, practices, behaviors and norms are within the walls of the schools. Then schools must determine why those practices are not working. If schools maintain this course of action first, they can begin to close the gaps of those schools that are continuously performing at low levels. Identifying the type of culture (toxic or non-toxic) your building has will enable you to begin building a bridge of stability.

Dr. Muhammad, like numerous others, contends that NCLB has brought to light many issues not really exposed before. Terms like value-added and adequate yearly progress (AYP) attach a measurement factor to a school's inadequacies of how well or not a school is performing. It leaves schools vulnerable and exposed to attack for not holding teachers and administrators accountable. What NCLB accomplished was not allowing districts to place blame, and not to find fault with parents and families that their child was failing. It armed those same parents with the ammunition (information-AYP, value-added) to challenge the traditional belief that educators were the experts, and that students failed to achieve because they squandered their opportunity to learn.

The new era of holding schools accountable calls for evidence of student learning through measured standards of student outcomes. Dr. Muhammad emphasizes why a building's culture is the biggest influence and factor that dictates whether a school can compete and perform at a productive level. The concept of school culture often goes unnoticed because it challenges the teacher to analyze whether their classroom instruction is effective and objective. When you are complimented often and always receive "glowing" evaluations, the assumption is that you are doing a great job. But are all your children really learning or are they just getting by? Dr. Muhammad answers this question by focusing on predetermining factors that often play a major role in how your school operates and how the culture of the building forms. These predetermining factors are:

- Perceptual Predetermination - is an educator's own socialization and the impact of that socialization on

his or her practice in the classroom, including expectations for student performance (p. 21).

- Intrinsic Predetermination – is the student's perception of his or her probability of achieving success in school. These are the messages a student receives from home, community, and school.
- Institutional Predetermination – these are institutional barriers of policies and procedures that are ingrained within the walls of public schools which are the traditional ways of getting things done.

The tracking of students based on perceptions of their ability is a factor that is often understated, but serves as a guide for scheduling high school students. Although the institutional barrier of tracking students coincidentally correlates to the bell curve data, we cannot as 21st century educators give merit to the natural intelligence factors that Herrnstein and Murray described in 1994. Educators such as Lezotte, Edmonds, and Marzano discredited these findings with their beliefs and ideologies that school reform is worth a discussion. Their ideologies give credence to why we do what we do.

In the next five chapters, Muhammad identifies four types of educators describing the goals and characteristics of how they behave, form and interact within the school, with their colleagues, and with their students that divide, distract, or develop a toxic or non-toxic school culture. Each chapter is dedicated to describing their classification. The four classifications are:

- The Believer - whose major goal is to provide academic success for each student;
- The Tweener - whose goal is to strive for organizational stability;
- The Survivor - whose goal is emotional and mental survival;
- The Fundamentalist - whose goal is maintaining the status quo.

The Believers are composed of educators who have taught three years or more, and who emphasize a student-centered paradigm that all students can learn if the ideal learning environment is available. Their characteristics are depicted in a six- tiered model which includes high levels of intrinsic motivation, personal connection to the school

and community, high levels of flexibility with students, an application of positive student pressure, willingness to confront opposing viewpoints, and a varied level of pedagogical skills. Each characteristic was embodied by a teacher or principal that would be willing to go above and beyond their scheduled, contractual day to do what is necessary to get the job done. They typically had great work attendance. They were often seen in the neighborhood or community by their students or parents, offering a familiarity and comfort level that created a bond of trust. They were flexible with standards and rules if they interfered with student success. They are often looking for positive strategies to increase student motivation to eliminate the possibility of failure. They also exhibit the willingness to defend or confront negative behavior or comments that could impact the progress of improving student performance, especially if it is coming from a colleague, peer, staff member or student. The Believers are “cheerleaders” for promoting positive school cultures and supporting the schools and districts mission and vision goals. These individuals can help embrace the move forward to transforming a school into one that is noticeable, united and productive.

The Tweeners objective is to find their comfort zone within the organization. Muhammad describes two types of Tweeners. The first are described as Level One Tweeners. They are the educators new to the field of teaching, which is this chapter’s area of focus. The level two Tweeners are teachers who may have been teaching a short while and have moved into a new building or district, or job role. Their familiarity with the school setting is not new or surprising. The basis for describing the role of a Tweener is to find where they fit within the culture of that organization, and understanding what they could contribute by being there. The Tweeners are loosely-coupled with the school mission. They are enthusiastic about the ideas and forward thinking of the school, but rather not involve themselves with district or school politics to promote that cause. They are often viewed as the not “rocking the boat” members of the staff because they do what they are asked without questions. The telling factor that could sway their thinking is what Muhammad calls their “Moment of Truth” incidents. These incidents could either be a positive or negative situation that could change them from being a Tweener to a Believer or

Fundamentalists. Tweeners are important to sustain the growth and innovation of school progress. We must do a better job of retaining those “new” teachers to not forfeit the consistency and long-term continuity of transforming a school culture.

The next group is labeled the Survivors. Their mission is to survive most often to the end of the school year, but sometimes they are just looking forward to the bell that ends the school day. Survivors are overwhelmed by personal or job responsibilities that create an ineffective classroom atmosphere. They have no political or organizational aspirations. They often create “bargaining” contracts to keep students in compliance and less disruptive. Little to no teaching is apparent or evident. They tend to “ditto” the children to death. The only remedy is often removal from the classroom setting and possible treatment. A study conducted by Sanders and Rivers in 1996 concluded that teachers who are ineffective have a devastating impact on student achievement and student’s performance levels, especially when those same students were exposed to more effective teachers that yielded more positive and measurable results from those assigned students.

The last group identified by Muhammad is the Fundamentalists. Their goal is to maintain the status quo. These educators believe not all children can learn, that school reform is a waste of time, that gaps in student learning are due to forces outside of the classroom (parents, environmental, administration, etc.) and that autonomy and academic freedom is their right. They are in different stages of their careers, and they have varied pedagogical skills. They will respond quickly if a threat is made to their status quo comfort zone by either defaming, distracting or disrupting a school’s leader or staff when they try to implement new strategies and policies. They are the largest group to sway and promote change to because they have been teaching for a long period of time, and traditionally, this is the same system that they have been socialized to respect and value. So why change it? Lortie (1975) concluded that traditionally, fundamentalists did well in school when they were young and it is irrational to expect these same people who benefited from that same system, to be a catalyst for changing it. These teachers long for the way schools used to operate and

function, as a student and as teacher. This in fact adds value to the thought that the author's work is very much dedicated to redirecting this group's way of visualizing what change should look like and explaining the validity in the process of obtaining a healthy school culture.

There are four different levels of fundamentalists that a school may have employed within their school. The type of Fundamentalist you have within the building must be first identified before the school leader can devise a plan to appease their need for clarity and justification for change. Each level is ranked for their level of intensity based on their reason and rationale for resisting change. Level one is the weakest and Level four is the strongest. All four levels fit the Fundamentalists' basic premise of resisting change because they were never given a good reason or clear understanding for change. They do not trust the judgment or skills of their leader because they think that they are power hungry and focused on looking good to advance their careers. Fundamentalists often do not provide honest feedback based on reality as they are unsure if the change will achieve a better result than what they are currently doing. Lastly, the level four fundamentalist is the hardest to change because they have defined themselves within the organization or school by their resistance and that they never plan to change regardless what their leader or school is trying to accomplish. This group sometimes find themselves in a change of position out of the building if they are not open or willing to comply with the transformation that is taking place. They are either "on-board" or not. The use of monitoring or forcing them into a corner is sometimes necessary to get them to comply with the new school's policy and paradigm shift. Each level calls for a different course of action with gradual steps of meeting the goals of converting a school to a transformed arena for academic achievement and student success. The idea is to convert the level one to three fundamentalists to believers for change and prosperity.

Muhammad discusses the challenges of the 21st century with foreign nations hiring and employing highly skilled and educated workers that increase their profit margins. Businesses are aware of what they need to change to be competitive in a free and global market. In the book, *Good to Great*, Collins (2001) explains that great

corporations/organizations do better than good/average ones because they, first seek and find the “brutal facts”, and two, they get the right people on the “bus” and sit them in the “right seats.” The biggest question is why schools haven’t figured this out yet.

The shameful realities that plague the United States citizens include environmental issues, the fact that 1.8 million Americans are incarcerated and the collapse of two-parent homes; governmental issues like high unemployment rates and foreclosures; and societal issues such as impoverished citizens with the highest rates of stroke, high blood pressure and heart disease that do not have adequate healthcare to decrease this number. These factors creep into the educational settings through the behavior and circumstances that our children display and contend with everyday. These challenges make it very difficult to welcome change into an environment that does not seem to get better even as times change and calendar days go by. Muhammad coins the phrase “educational pathology.” This concept relates to how leaders can accomplish a synergy and solidarity with the Believers and Tweeners pushing the school’s agenda of changing a toxic school culture. The definition of pathology is the study and diagnosis of disease through examination of the cause. Educational pathology asks the change agent to study the origin of the problem and identify the cause to gain a clear understanding of its development. If a leader will take the time to research and uncover the underlying issues that causes the toxic culture, than the time and effort put into finding a solution is not short-lived. Dr. Muhammad states that if the time is invested then the complete understanding of a problem will lead to focused and effective solutions.

Having an education is a necessity, not only for the potential survival of a global society, but it serves as a means to an end for the survival of the fittest of the underprivileged and disenfranchised. Transforming a toxic school culture to one that is powerful and insightful requires the participants to be steadfast and diligent with their efforts. Anthony Muhammad states that schools and school systems have to develop a systematic and school-wide focus on learning, celebrate the success of all stakeholders, and lastly, maintain and create a supportive environment for Tweeners. This book provided valuable

information for practitioners in understanding who they are as educators and where they fall in relation to their school's vision and leader's mission. I would recommend this book to any administrator who finds him or herself in a toxic setting that is in need of an overhaul. Challenge your staff to identify what type of educator they are, and what type of educator they want to be. Having a collective staff buy-in will help move a school from a toxic unproductive culture to a culture that is healthy and responsive to student needs.

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