
The Structure of a Transformative School

By John Shindler

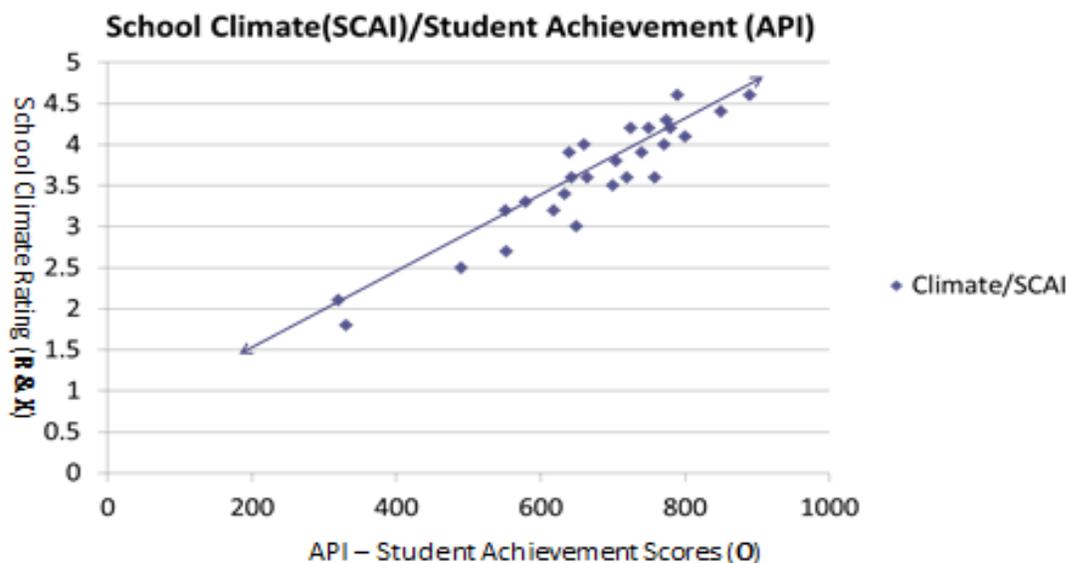
I began my journey into the exploration of school climate about 20 years ago with the goal of helping schools improve. Where it led my colleagues and I was to a deeper insight into what makes a school an effective and even “transformative” place. As we examined the essential nature of school effectiveness, a roadmap emerged that helped explain the relationships among what each school intended, did in practice and the results it produced. Those schools that we could characterize as “transformative” all embodied a transformative vision, committed to transformative practices and reflected upon their outcomes as a means of growth – and as we would represent it – actualized movement up the effectiveness roadmap pathway.

In this chapter, I will share my personal journey of discovery into what makes for a transformative school by way of building the pieces of the school effectiveness roadmap that we use as a conceptual framework in our work. Albert Jones, Clint Taylor and I met 20 years ago and began a collaboration into school research. As a starting point, we asked ourselves what defined the kind of work that we could embrace and get excited about. As generalist, what eventually emerged was the idea of a broad focus that we would call “school climate.” We then embarked on our collaborative journey to explore this area deeply as the Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC). At the time there were relatively few school climate assessment inventories, and there was a lull in the research being done in this area. This would change over the next 20 years. Today there are dozens more inventories and many more groups studying school climate and culture.

One of our first tasks was to create an inventory to assess this thing we were calling climate. Some of the inspiration for our first version came from the work I had done previously in the area of the “psychology of success.” When I examined the last 50 years of research into what most influenced students’ successful in schools three general themes emerged. First students were more successful in life and school when they had more of an internal vs. external locus of control. Today we often use the term agency to explain this orientation, but throughout the literature were studies of how students who felt empowered and responsible for their lives did better. Second, there were countless studies related to student sense of acceptance and belonging as individuals and within collectives. The effects of a sense of belonging were wide ranging and included both achievement and social-emotional wellbeing related outcomes. Third, a dimension related to efficacy emerged that we now call growth-orientation and owes much to the work of Carol Dweck. We chose an analytic design for the survey items to better capture a) what was perceived to be happening at the school/what did they do? And b) how much of the three psychology of success principles were being evidenced, promoted or undermined. We began administering and revising our School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI) with the goal of providing a mirror to school for self-examination of what their test scores could not tell them.

Over the next few years we surveyed several schools. What we were noticing was that there seemed to be a relationship between the SCAI score and the student achievement. So, we decided to put all the data into one set and derive the correlation. What we found was an almost perfect relationship (0.7 correlation) between climate and achievement (See scatter plot depiction of this early data set in Figure 1). Revealing this relationship was not our original intent, but it was an eye-opening realization for us all. Soon we were able to make the reliable assumption that if we knew one of three things from a school, a) the SCAI rating, b) the student achievement scores, or c) what teachers were doing in the classroom, we could infer the other two with a high degree of accuracy. The inner workings of schools had now become much less mysterious.

School Climate Score (i.e., R and X) by Student Achievement (i.e., O/Outcome)



Around this time, we had developed a 2x2 matrix to explain classroom teaching “style.” The vertical axis represented function level and the horizontal axis represented either a more teacher or student-centered approach. The matrix worked well to characterize both the intentions of schools as well as classrooms, so provided both our teacher credential and administrative credential students at CSULA a short-hand for describing the kinds of practices that they had observed. The four styles were central to describing both intent and practice within the book *Transformative Classroom Management*. Later we would change the label from style to “paradigm” when applying the matrix to the school level - See Figure Below.

Figure 2: Combining The two Axes into One Matrix – the Four Leadership Styles/School Paradigms

	Empowerment Connection Trust	Control Comparison Fear
High Function Intentional Leadership	1-Paradigm School Empowering <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision-Driven Facilitative Leadership • Student-Centered Classrooms • Community Climate • Mostly 1-style teaching 	2-Paradigm School Managed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efficiency-Driven Top-Down Leadership • Teacher-Centered Classrooms • Institutional Climate • Mostly 2-style teaching
Low Function Accidental Leadership	3-Paradigm School Amorphous <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling Passive Leadership • Unstructured learning • Insecure Climate • Lots of 3-style teaching (but also a random combo of others) 	4-Paradigm School Bossy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dominating and Self-serving Leadership • Lecture and Test Teaching • Domesticating Climate • Mostly 4-style teaching

What we found was that when we overlaid the SCAI/climate-achievement correlation onto the matrix there was an organic fit. The result was the essence of a roadmap that implied all possible school intentions and patterns of practice as well as outcomes. And what we found was that, in application, schools tended to fall along a common “pathway” from lower levels of the roadmap to the highest levels in a predictable pattern (Shown here in Figure 3).

Figure 3: Theoretical Pathway of School Performance Levels Using SCAI and student achievement correlation data.

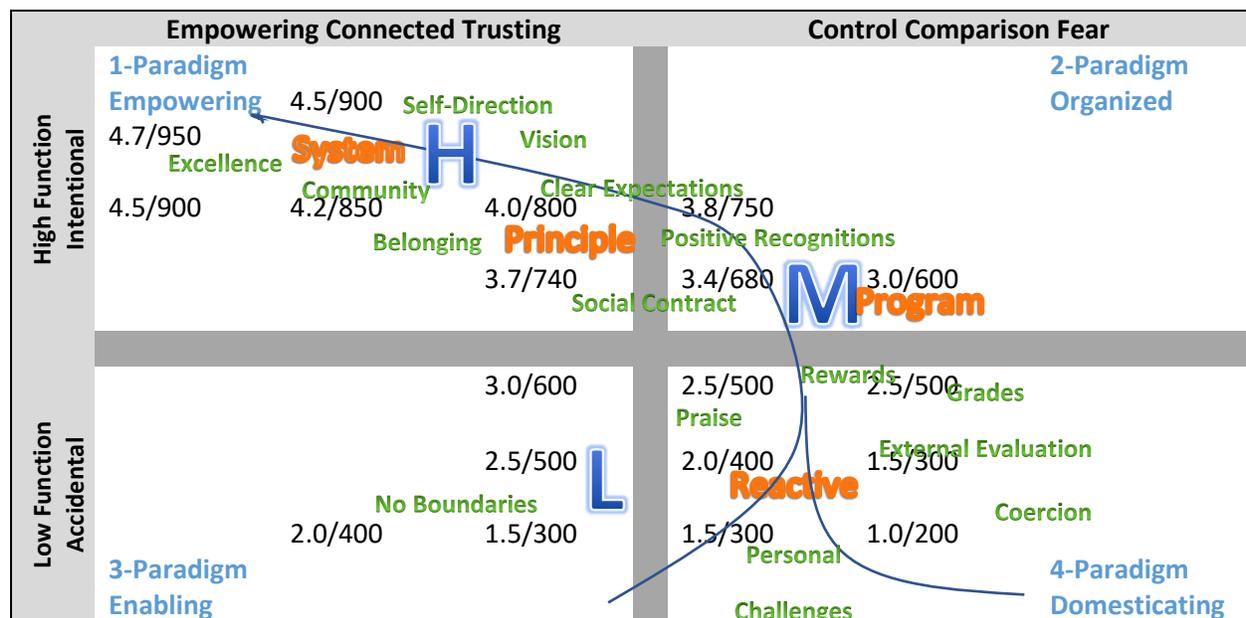
	Empowering Connected Trusting			Control Comparison Fear	
High Function Intentional	1-Paradigm Empowering 4.7/950	4.5/900	4.2/840		2-Paradigm Organized
	4.5/900	4.2/850	4.0/800	3.8/750	3.3/660
		4.0/800	3.7/740	3.4/680	3.0/600
			3.0/600	2.5/500	2.5/500
Low Function Accidental			2.5/500	2.0/400	1.7/340
		2.0/400	1.5/300	1.5/300	1.0/200
	3-Paradigm Enabling				4-Paradigm Domesticating

Over time we began to understand the nature of the roadmap and its common pathway more distinctly. One of the many things that struck us was that there were great differences among schools based on a) what they were both doing, and also b) what they were trying to do given the region of the roadmap in which they were located. As a result, we began to better recognize the relationship between intentions and results, and its sequence of causation. We developed the short hand for this causation: references → action → outcomes or R→X→O. That is, the references/R's (i.e., values, conditioning, vision, beliefs, narratives, knowledge, biases, etc.) drove the choices toward the actions/X's (i.e., practices, strategies, policies, communication, interactions, verbal and non-verbal, etc.) and those ultimately manifested as outcomes (i.e., scores, learning, felt climate, social and emotional reality, indicators, etc.). What we noticed was that the most effective schools were trying to do different things as well as doing different things than the schools in the other regions. This was both enlightening as well as a source of consternation. Why don't all school try to be like those at the top of the roadmap? One answer to that question seems to be related to how schools conceive improvement and are oriented related to the R-X-O sequence. Highly effective schools tended to focus on R's as the driver and use O's as information, i.e., we will be as good as the values we bring to work each day. Most schools (located in the middle function location) tend to look at outcomes as the driver and respond to them in a reactive (and ultimately less coherent manner), i.e., we have a low score, we need a program to fix it.

Putting It All Together into a Roadmap

As we better came to recognize what was going on at each location of the roadmap, we were able to include descriptive words onto the diagram. See Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Complete School Improvement Theoretical Roadmap with Pathway Pattern



What I find especially interesting is that the roadmap structure with its pathway toward higher levels of consciousness and efficacy works at all levels – school, classroom, and individual. As an institution, the more our school or business can take on the nature of the 1-Paradigm the

more successful and effective we will be. In the classroom or team setting, when a group develops a sense of community and grows in the capacity for self-direction, their potential is increased. For all individuals in the school – leaders, teachers, staff and students, raising our levels of consciousness will imply growing our personal qualities related to trust in life, connection to others, and learning to access our inner resources, gifts and talents. This personal journey up the pathway will define to a great extent the ability of the school to move up as a collective/institution. Therefore, unsurprisingly, what we found in most every case was that when we came across a transformative school we typically also found a leader who had to a great extent embraced a personal journey of growth (up the pathway) that mirrored that of the school.

Using the Roadmap to Understand How Schools Grow into Transformative Places

All schools want to be better. So therefore, all school improvement is a journey of growth. But growing into a transformative school implies an intention to do so. Based on the roadmap framework, we find that most schools are aiming for somewhere in the middle of the pathway defined by the qualities of the 2-Paradigm. In this location, the primary intention is to produce an acceptable level of outcomes. The means are therefore anything that will support achieving that goal. Few would question the rationale behind this approach, or its results. It is the modus operandi at most schools but is incapable of producing transformative results.

The journey of the transformative school is quite different from that of the more common 2-Paradigm school. The journey of the transformative school is defined by a vision of growth and possibility. It has its sight set on a location far upward on the pathway into the 1-Paradigm. As far as is possible at the present point in time, with an intention of moving ever further. However, as these schools implicitly discover, the nature of the destination and the means for getting there are really one. The process is the goal. Being and becoming are primary and the secondary indicators of success are only byproducts. As we examine the expected outcomes implied in the 1-Paradigm, we find that the rewards for heading in this direction are innumerable, i.e., greater levels of meaningful learning, a sense of connection and community, personal and social maturity and well-being, an embodiment of self-actualization and promotion of the individual and collective “psychology of success.” But the nature of the destination is inherently fluid and never attainable in any absolute sense. It is a vision of a school that is most consistent with the essential nature of the human person/learner and best serves to actualize the individual and collective potential of those within the school community. And that vision pulls the school along on its journey.

The process of supporting the practical elements of moving our school to the highest levels of the roadmap where we can realize that transformative power will begin with an intention to move our school upward on the vertical axis toward higher levels of function. This aspect of the journey may not feel as inspired as the process of moving over, but without doing a good job with the vertical axis aspect of the job, we can find ourselves dipping into the 3-Paradigm. While this location can have desirable qualities on the surface – we all do what we feel like doing, and things organically work out, in practice, the lack of clarity and social structures leads to frustration and strife. And with the students it is common for a 3-Paradigm environment to breed a great deal of “social Darwinism.” So, if we are to embrace the vision of the highest points on the pathway, we need to embrace what it takes to encourage function.

As we have better come to understand the nature of the vertical axis, we have found that it is defined largely by four qualities – intention, capacity, coherence and efficiency. Intention, as we have discussed is the most essential element in our journey. We need to have a working picture of our desire. This needs to include both what we want and what we don't want and why we want what we do. Capacity is the aspect of the school related to how well the structures and functions within the school support its desires and operate to enable the potential of the people – adults and students. Do the structures allow for the level and quality of collaboration, clarity of purpose, empowerment, and other qualities that you might intend? Coherence relates to the integrity of what happens at the school. Does what is done at the school reflect an alignment with the core values and vision. Is there integrity and alignment among practices and policies? And can you say that it is in integrity with how people best learn, work and grow? Finally, efficiency is important for us to move forward with momentum and support a reality where energy is spent in ways that are most beneficial and not in constant repair and reaction to problematic elements. The potential for burn-out or overwhelm in a high performing school is high and should therefore be given attention. Taken together, these four elements represent much of our challenge when it comes to making our school feel like it is sane, well-run, functional and considerate of the practical needs of its inhabitants. So much of what constitutes such elements as trust and motivation come from folks just feeling like their school has it together. We might say that we need to be sound before we are ready to be excellent.

While moving up the vertical axis will be valuable to any school, to embark on a journey toward a transformative destination we will also need to move very intentionally to the left-hand side of the horizontal axis. We often call this making the “left-hand turn.” To move up implies a great deal of work, yet, to move over implies, for most schools, a paradigm shift in intention. Moving over means moving away from a mindset of control to one of trust, from thinking in terms of comparisons to connection, and moving away from the goal of compliance to one of empowerment. What we can say from our research into hundreds of schools, at this point, is that no amount of 2-Paradigm references and practices, no matter how well executed, will support the movement into the 1-Paradigm or obtain 1-Paradigm results. So, our frequent message to schools that will have to give up their 2-Paradigm baggage to move to higher levels on the roadmap is most often met with consternation and sadness. Moreover, we find that moving toward a transformative location on the roadmap will most often imply more of this giving up of what one has been doing rather than adding on. Teacher-centered practices such as extrinsic rewards, manipulative control strategies, heavy emphasis on tests and scores as the learning goal, comparison-based structures, and other 2-Paradigm mainstays have to be disavowed to effectively make the left hand turn successfully.

One of the defining qualities of the transformative school and what distinguishes it from the more conventional 2-Paradigm school is how it approaches outcomes. The transformative school embraces the R-X-O mindset. Whereas the 2-Paradigm school uses more of an X<-O approach. The common school acquires data and outcome evidence to determine how they are doing, and upon examining it, they judge whether they are a) doing fine, or b) need to seek an intervention to improve a weak area. In the transformative R-X-O orientation, outcomes are viewed as evidence, but are not the point. The essence of change in the transformative school is always the R. Are we being who we set out to be and becoming our best selves? And as time goes on, we continuously ask those same questions as we more deeply discover who we want to be and can become. X's/practices and policies are an effort to best represent that vision for who we think we can be. Therefore, the transformative mindset implies the use of outcome

evidence as a source of understanding of how well our practices/X's are doing representing our values/R's. The transformative mindset is based in growth, honest self-examination, and innovation based on the collective and individual emerging visions. The 2-Paradigm mindset is based on adequacy relative to external standards, and interventions based on what is commonly accepted as effective. Whereas in the transformative mindset there is a faith in the internal human capacity to seek and recognize the "good" and an effort to cultivate it using wisdom, honesty and insight.

Transformative schools are asking and answering different questions at a different level of consciousness than those in lower locations on the pathway. If we were able to read the minds of teachers in each of different quadrants of the roadmap, we would notice that what they are trying to do was often quite different – and much of that variation could be explained by the implicit guiding questions that they were asking themselves internally, and then answering with their thoughts and actions. Different paradigms, different guiding questions. For example, a 2-Paradigm teacher may be asking, "how can I reinforce the behavior of certain students right now so others might become more motivated to be on task?" This question makes sense in the 2-Paradigm but is not congruent with the 1-Paradigm. In the transformative school teachers are more often asking actualizing internal guiding questions that will lead to transformative results. These might include, "how can I build more trust in the group/" or "will this practice promote more of my goal of connection?" or "what would the next level of empowerment look like for this student or the whole class?" or "what will it take to get to the next level of confidence and efficacy with this essential process?" When we ask these actualizing questions, it leads to finding practical answers, and those answers then lead to actions, which eventually leads to transformative results – all born from questions that came from a disciplined intention and commitment to ask higher levels questions rooted in a raised level consciousness.

Where do We Find Transformative Schools?

Simply put, we find transformative schools everywhere. Recently, I make an effort to visit several. As one would expect some schools that fit the transformative mold are private schools with a progressive vision, and where parents' expectations were aligned with the values and practices at the school. Yet, many more private schools could best be characterized as fairly conventional in their intentions. While students in these schools may bring a great deal of cultural capital with them, and the school may have a reputation for excellence, these schools can lack the necessary transformative DNA. In the most basic terms, being a transformative school begins with the desire and intention to be a transformative school. So, all schools possess the potential to be a transformative. It is exciting to me is to see public schools in working-class neighborhoods that meet the definition of transformative schools. They do exist and are impactful sources of community empowerment. I have even seen alternative schools where the students were essentially cast off from other schools that embody a transformative nature. The effect of being at a school like this on these students' lives is dramatic, and in some cases these schools academically outperform those schools that sent the students away. The shining examples that I have seen have demonstrated to me that any school with sufficient autonomy and the commitment to a transformative ideal/process can become a transformative school.

Transformative schools will vary in their what's. They may be about progressive education, the arts, STEAM, science, leadership, dual language, or even credit recovery, but their how's will

reflect a consistent set of values/R's and practices/X's. These R's and X's could be defined by those consistent with the 1-Paradigm of the roadmap. So, leaders in transformative schools tend to be visionary facilitators. To move confidently on the journey up the pathway into the 1-Paradigm of the roadmap requires a great deal of trust and faith. Teachers need to know that they are empowered to empower their students. They need to know that placing a preeminent value of connection is supported. They need to feel like a growth orientation is not just an ideal, but is operationalized as a practical reality, so built into the DNA, policies and structures of the school. What may have struck me most about the transformative schools that I visited was that there were few if any mixed messages. What the school was about was clear – and it was about being and becoming and growing in the quality of the processes and practices that defined the school, without fear of an ulterior value or implicit bottom line like test scores confounding their efforts. Their job was to work as a team to find ways to maximize their students' potential and human growth.

When I walk through one of these schools and see the level of intrinsic motivation, care for one another, self-efficacy, fun, emotional ease and joyfulness my first reaction is that these students are so lucky to be at this school. The thought that quickly follows is that the learning environment for most students is not like this, which makes me frustrated for the vast majority of students that are not in schools like this. And as I observe the adults and students engaged in their work within a transformative school, the various reasons why this type of learning environment is portrayed by many as too idealistic, impractical, unrealistic or undesirable lose their validity and/or legitimacy. In fact, anything else seems difficult to embrace, or deem superior when compared side-by-side. Therefore, my hope is that the transformative school increasingly becomes the paragon rather than the alternative.

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