

**Teachers Teaching on Call (TTOCs):**

**Their Views on School Culture**

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Research Question:

What are TTOC's views on school culture;  
how do they know a positive or negative one when they see it?

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## **INTRODUCTION**

There are broad intersections between the life of a TTOC and the school cultures in which they find themselves immersed. From my own experience and casual discussions with TTOCs over many years, if the school culture is a positive one, the experience of the TTOC may be quite enjoyable. If the opposite is true, the experience might drive the TTOC to never wish to work in that school again. TTOCs have unique insight into how a school culture is actually working, ground level. They are strangers to the environment. They do not share the biases of the permanent residents and they have an outside perspective that is often difficult for people immersed in an established culture to reach. In a sense, they are school culture anthropologists, striving to fit into an environment but, hoping not to upset its balance, change or harm it or, have it harm them. TTOCs, as a resource for feedback on the effectiveness of school culture initiatives, are under-utilized. They possess a wealth of knowledge, perceptions and views on the culture of the school and yet, they are not meaningfully and safely asked for this insight. This research attempts to ask TTOCs for that insight in meaningful ways.

### **Research Problem**

In many school districts, there is woefully little training (beyond basic practicalities of such things as the callout system) for TTOCs in how to be effective in that role and to interact with school cultures in positive ways. Commonly, TTOCs are left to their own devices to find their way through this complex maze of social interactions, physical plants, bodies of curricular

knowledge and other circumstances they face daily. There is a great deal of research on school culture; for example, *Rediscovering Hope*” by Sheehan and Rall (2011), or “*A School Culture Audit*” by Williamson and Blackburn (2009). There is also good research on TTOCs; for example “*The Substitute Teacher: An Irony in the School Improvement Process*” by Phillip A. Griswold (2001) or “*Not Just a Warm Body*” by Ismat Abdal-Haqq (1997). There is, however, a dearth of research on the specific intersections of school culture and TTOCs.

This study is not an attempt to provide a “survival guide” to life as a TTOC; there are already many such documents. For example, “*Teachers’ Toolbox: A Substitute Teachers’ Survival Guide*” in *Techniques: Connecting Education & Careers* (2003) or, going back decades, to 1989, “*A Handbook for Substitute Teachers*” by Ann Westcot Dodd (reviewed by Sandra Tracy in 1990). My actual intent was to mine the knowledge base of the TTOCs to look for similarities and differences in their perceptions of positive and negative school cultures in order to contribute to the integration of TTOCs insight into our understanding of school change processes.

### **Justifications for the Importance of the Problem**

TTOCs are the emerging next generation of teachers. The experiences they have as TTOCs shape the future course of their careers and life decisions. Despite this, there is remarkably little research that attempts to integrate the experience of being a TTOC with positive school culture. One of the few examples I could find was Charles Edwin Boyer, who in 1998 wrote a paper entitled, “*Behaviours and Attitudes of Teachers toward Substitutes: The Relationship between Effective Practices and Attitudes of Inclusion.*” The article still focuses on practice but it does link the effectiveness of that practice with the school and teachers’ views on TTOCs. Generally

though, TTOC experiences are a negative afterthought or, minimally, a set of convenience-making decisions by the powers in the school or district. For example, in the article, “*A Qualitative Study of Perceptions of Substitute Teaching Quality*” by Peter W. Cardon (2002) the author observes that the perceptions of TTOC quality are virtually all negative, going back nearly a century to the earliest studies in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Cardon, 2002). Even today, beyond the simple expectations of writing some sort of after-action report on the day, in a system where the power imbalance tends to force the writer away from honest appraisal, there is little in the way of inclusion of the TTOC experience into the daily operation of the school, much less into any plans for change.

It has been said by many that you can judge a culture by how it treats its weakest members. How do our school cultures stack up on this ideological point? I believe many don't have a clue how their school culture is perceived by outsiders like TTOCs. I would be willing to posit that many would have difficulty articulating the culture of the school they are in themselves. Platitudes and vision statements abound, but practical expressions of these things might well be harder to find.

### **Deficiencies in Evidence**

A review of the literature showed a good research base on school culture and, similarly, a good base regarding substitute teaching. Much of what exists about TTOCs are survival guides and assessments of TTOC performance and efficacy. There is little literature that attempts to collect data from TTOCs regarding school culture or to integrate TTOC experiences with school culture.

## **Who will Benefit from this Research?**

It would seem obvious that TTOCs might benefit from this research, especially in the raising of awareness of TTOC experiences with school cultures, but they are not intended to be the sole beneficiaries. It is also hoped school leaders will benefit from a new perspective on school culture. By incorporating TTOC experiences and awareness into their framework for change and the encouragement of positive school cultures, more pro-social and welcoming school cultures may emerge and all teachers in a school will benefit from successful and happy replacement work while they are absent. Students will also benefit from the improved performance of TTOCs due to the fact they are being supported and valued in schools that do so.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

I intended to answer the following question through my research: “What are TTOC’s views on school culture; how do they know a positive or negative one when they see it?” TTOC’s views are rarely sought when a school undertakes to change its school culture or when a school is checking on the progress of some sort of school culture initiative. I think their insight might be a valuable aid in developing good plans for school cultural change or as one of the checks and balances a school uses to know how they are doing on something the school has initiated. Future research in this area may take the insights gathered here and utilize them to that end.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

For my literature review, I broke my topic down into component parts as, after a preliminary search, I was able to find a plethora of research on School Culture and Teachers Teaching on Call (TTOC) as separate issues but very little on their intersection.

I cast my net quite widely to ensure I had a mix of older documents, newer works, works from other jurisdictions, less formal documents and even commentary from professions outside of teaching. I wanted to be certain the conclusions about themes were not just a product of any preconceptions I might have but, were actually supported by as varied a scope of evidence as possible. In a similar vein, I sought background information on the thematic areas that would make the research I propose informed by the literature. I did not expect to find a great deal that directly answered or addressed my Research Question. This proved to be a correct assumption about the literature, according to my review. I needed to find background information on school culture and TTOC work, individually, before attempting to marry the subjects through my research design.

### **TTOC Literature**

Thematically, I found the literature on TTOCs to largely fall into two main topic areas: Survival guides or discussions on the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of TTOCs in the classroom. There was a subset of the second that attempted to provide a sociological view of the TTOC in relation the public and the educational community. An example of this subset is *Representations of Substitute Teachers and the Paradoxes of Professionalism*, by Lisa Weems, in 2003.

An example of a survival guide is, *A Handbook for Substitute Teachers*, originally by Ann Westcot Dodd, in 1989 and reviewed by Sandra Tracy, in 1990. The survival guides attempted,

with good intentions no doubt, to assist the teacher with classroom strategies around management and coping with the extremely difficult challenge of earning instant credibility with the students. A number of thematic assumptions or ideas were found in these documents such as, the TTOC was an inexperienced teacher or practitioner (Lucas, 1996, Warren, 1988); classroom management was a primary purpose of the TTOC's work (*Techniques*, 2003, Warren, 1988, Mckay, 1991); a top-down bureaucratic model of school organization (Lucas, 1996) and that there may not be effective infrastructure in place in the schools to adequately cope with TTOC issues (Tracy, 1990, Mckay, 1991).

Discussions of efficacy tried to remain carefully neutral but contended that many perception problems surround TTOC work. An example of this is, *A Qualitative Study of the Perceptions of Substitute Teaching Quality* by Peter Cardon, in 2002. While the articles skirted the blame game, a TTOC reading them might have a hard time avoiding a sense of inadequacy or a redirection of blame or responsibility onto themselves, depending on how each individual article was framed.

Additionally, I found a research article, *Substitute teaching: Survival in a marginal situation* by Clifton and Rambaran (1987). This article quite cogently defines why so many educators are unhappy with TTOC work. It also seeks to show that TTOC work is a marginal situation with low prospects for success for the TTOC because, they don't fill the roles that would legitimize them in the school and they are unaware of the rituals that guide success. It also makes a number of broad calls to action for school and district leaders to address this situation.

I also discovered a Weems article from 2003 that was a sociological study attempting to establish public assumptions around the character and professionalism of a TTOC. This author states the

TTOC is defined three ways in popular culture: Incompetent teacher, “weirdo” or “kook” and guerilla superhero. The article used deviant historiography, which is a discovery of how sub-cultures (in this case TTOCs) come to be seen as deviant or outsiders. This then can highlight dominant views in the larger culture. This work offered some unique insight into the perception publically of TTOCs and helped me see if those perceptions are present in Coquitlam School District, regarding our own TTOCs.

Writ large, there was a great deal of “help” for TTOCs in the sense of helping them survive a difficult situation or an acknowledgement that the situation was difficult for a variety of reasons. Suggestions for systemic improvement were also widely present, in articles like, *Not Just a Warm Body*, by Ismat, Abdal-Haqq (1997) or *No Substitute for Quality* by Margaret Tannenbaum (2000). The help within these articles largely gave administration and permanent teachers the task of improving the lot of TTOCs. Better infrastructure, better planning and better understanding of the TTOC situation were proposed. These are laudable ambitions with which no one would argue.

However, seeking the insights of TTOCs themselves was notably absent from these suggestions for improvement. This implies to me a hierarchical structure of power as it doesn’t place the insight of the TTOC on par with that of permanent teachers or administration, despite the fact the decisions made will have direct effect on the TTOC community.

### **School Culture Literature**

School culture has a very ambiguous set of definitions, preconceptions and beliefs that have morphed quite markedly throughout attempts to study it. Providing one clear and concise

definition is beyond the scope of this paper and, I would argue, is a tough task for even the experts in the field, as it is a very complex set of conceptions. Something that is consistent through time is the idea that schools can potentially be communities (Higgins-D'Allessandro & Sadh, 1998). The community approach is laudable, as it tends to level some of the inequities of the stakeholders but, operationalizing this has caused much difficulty, as the terms of reference for culture are not always well-defined and open to much interpretation. I think it is safe to say though, for the purposes of this discussion, that school culture is the shared beliefs, values, normative behaviours and celebrations within an individual school community. From this understanding, we can conceive if there is a place for TTOC input, beliefs and values within that frame or if there is not. I sought from my investigations of school culture, to see if there was an acknowledgment of the role TTOCs play in the school cultures in which they find themselves and how that acknowledgment was defined and implemented. From this, I hoped to gain insight on how to question TTOCs with regard to school culture when I performed my research.

School culture literature I found sometimes took the form of a how-to guide to discovering and improving school culture, like *A School Culture Audit*, by Williamson and Blackburn, (2009) or, it investigated teacher perceptions of organizational change, like the Shachar, Gavin and Shlomo article, *Changing organizational culture and instructional methods in elementary schools: Perceptions of teachers and professional educational consultants* (2009). Also present were success stories of how failing systems were restored to health through a variety of methods, such as the Cianca and Lampe article, *Restoring Hope* (2010).

School culture literature has also proposed many different models of school culture (Bell, Kent, 2010.) and there is great history in this discussion. The discussion has taken many twists and turns with time, through, for example, an integrationist perspective that assumes organizations have a set of predictable behaviours that can largely be influenced by administrative staff or a postmodern conception of school culture as a set of competing subcultures, each with equal validity (Bell, Kent, 2010). These conceptions largely take the form of teacher or administrative perspectives, notably absent are TTOC and student perspectives. One could argue that the teacher perspective includes the TTOCs views on school culture, but I would say that their view is likely to be significantly different than the permanent residents.

### **Merged Literature**

Starkly absent from most of the literature I reviewed was the TTOC perspective on school culture or even consideration of the TTOC's role within that culture or system. Two documents I found attempted to intersect these regimes of thought in some way. One was the Boyer article, *Behaviours and Attitudes towards Substitutes: The Relationship between Effective Practice and Attitudes of Inclusion*. (1998). Although focused on teaching practice, the acknowledgment is there that the school culture plays a powerful role in TTOCs being able to perform their duties effectively. It articulates the need for effective dialogue between administration, teachers and TTOCs in aid of TTOCs being effective and aware of the situation in which they are teaching. It also acknowledges the marginalization of TTOCs in decision-making at school level. It speaks to some teacher practices as well that contribute to this marginalization, like giving busy work,

review or non-instructional duties to the TTOC. I found this article to be very insightful and quite heartening in that it showed great awareness and sensitivity to the TTOC condition.

The Ledoux article, *School Culture in Action*, (2007), despite its nondescript title, actually delves into what pre-service teachers want and think about in a school culture. This article actually sought the opinion of pre-service teachers (who will be TTOCs as soon as they finish their teacher training) directly regarding the culture of their university. While not focused on the public school setting, the article does ask a number of salient questions about perception of culture from an audience that is not directly instrumental in its formation. This is at the heart of what I intend to study with my research.

Despite the lack of specific references to the subject area I intended to research, broadening my scope to look into the conceptions underlying the ideas of school culture and TTOC work has helped me more finely hone the point of my research. I have attempted to gather the information TTOCs hold with regard to school culture, in the hope that it may inform future research or school change plans.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The research design for this study was a qualitative study of participant's opinions about school culture. The intention was to gather insight on the TTOC's views on what makes a positive or

negative school culture and what things indicate this to the TTOC when they enter the building for work. A qualitative study was selected for this project because it allowed the greatest flexibility in the participants' responses and because it tends to minimize thoughts and feelings of the participants being "lost in translation" the way a survey might. One significant disadvantage to a qualitative design is that it is not readily generalizable to other populations of TTOCs outside the school district. Another is that it is susceptible to researcher bias and requires significant effort to minimize this potential. The chosen research is action research of an information-gathering variety though, so bias is less of a factor than it might be in a study aiming for greater generalizability, reliability or statistical significance.

I used a focus group of five volunteer participants to solidify some common themes and to help trigger TTOC's thoughts and memories around the idea of school culture. I then used electronically distributed questionnaires with 13 volunteer participants from the focus group and elsewhere to further deepen my understanding and to see if the data gathered from the focus group was reflected in individual responses. The questionnaires helped to counteract any apprehension or actuality of bias coming from group-think in the focus group. Participants in both the focus group and the questionnaire response were given the opportunity to review the data they supplied to ensure that it accurately reflects their feelings and thought on school culture.

## **Participants**

Participants were selected from a purposeful sampling of the volunteers responding to the invitation to participate. Every effort will be made to ensure as diverse a group of voices as

possible can be heard within the research design. The minimum criterion for participation was current or recent work as a TTOC in the Coquitlam school district. A sample maximum of 10 for the focus group was selected so the opportunity for all voices to be heard was assured. A sample maximum of 15 for the interviews was selected to control workload-based inaccuracies in coding qualitative responses.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study was that it is not generalizable to populations outside of the school district. Other school districts might have a very different culture around TTOC work and thus the findings here may not accurately reflect their experiences or practice. Also, because of the limited sample size, the results of the focus group and questionnaire responses do not allow for statistically significant findings even within the school district.

The reliability of the information gathered is not high, particularly in the focus group, because of the fact that is based on personal opinions of a small number of individuals and its validity may be questioned because those opinions may not reflect the actuality of school culture in the sites described. The statements also might not necessarily reflect the participants' true feelings because of the risks around honesty in social situations like a focus group. The reliability was maximized, given the size of the sample, by using individual questionnaires to ensure accurate understanding of participants' perspectives. This also served to minimize the potential for biased interpretation of responses by cross-referencing the focus group and individual interview data.

The replication of qualitative studies is inherently low, as they have a research design focused on the individual or group anecdotal response and this offers much scope for uncontrolled variables

in the responses such as state of mind, personal issues, group think, personal bias or misinformation.

## **Ethics**

Before undertaking the study, ethics approval was sought from the school district and the university. All participation was confidential and anonymity outside the focus group and interviews was assured. Pseudonyms were used in place of any person's or place names described by participants or interviewer. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary and informed consent was sought from all participants. Informed consent letters included the purposes of the study, the role of the participants and the researcher and the participants' option to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or mistreatment.

## **Instruments**

Two types of instruments were used for data collection for the purposes of this study: Focus group and questionnaires. There was an initial document that gave an introduction to the research study and invited TTOCs to participate. The distribution of this document was through the TTOC Committee in Coquitlam school district.

The nominal group technique was used in the focus group to identify main themes and commonly held perceptions around TTOCs and school culture. The questions for thought and discussion were:

- What are the characteristics of a positive school culture, from a TTOC's perspective?
- What are the characteristics of a negative school culture, from a TTOC's perspective?

Using the nominal group technique, participants were allowed to formulate their own ideas, state them and then, as a group, prioritize them. The researcher asked the participants to frame each idea separately, if the participant had a number of them.

Questions on the questionnaires took this form, with the opportunity to elaborate given after each question:

- Can you describe a positive school culture you have encountered in your work as a TTOC?
- Can you describe a negative school culture you encountered in your work as a TTOC?
- Can you describe elements or factors that make for a positive school culture?
- Can you describe elements or factors that make for a negative school culture?
- Can you describe something that indicates to you a positive school culture exists in a building?
- Can you describe something that indicates to you a negative school culture exists in a building?
- Are there aspects of the physical arrangement of a school that can give a TTOC an idea about the culture present?
- Are there aspects of student behaviour that indicate to a TTOC the type of culture present?
- Are there aspects of staff behaviour that indicate to a TTOC the type of culture present?

## **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

### **Focus Group**

Early in the study, a focus group was held made up of five TTOCs of varying experience selected using a callout for volunteers to the TTOC community through the TTOC Committee and the snowball method (one candidate suggesting another good candidate).

The purpose of the focus group was to develop themes around positive and negative school cultures and rank them by importance. The nominal group technique was used to collect the information on positive and negative school cultures, place them in broad thematic areas and to rank the level of importance of each area. The data gathered from the focus group discussions was analyzed and coding was developed for the information gleaned from the interview participants. It was expected that there would be many items upon which the participants generally agreed and these data points that were common formed the basis of the coding for the responses across the study. The focus group ranking of the importance of their thematic areas allowed that element to be compared with what the questionnaire respondents viewed as important in their responses.

It was expected that the data would be ongoing and iterative and develop from the discussion amongst the participants in the focus group. It was also believed that early analysis of the data would generate many common themes that might be reflected in the individual questionnaire responses later conducted. Flexibility and open-endedness were paramount in the selection of questions and discussion points for the individual questionnaire responses growing from the focus group. The questionnaire items were also carefully selected to provide the opportunity to look at issues in several ways, with the intention that this would help with consistency of responses from the participant.

The focus group was asked to identify the characteristics of both a positive and negative school culture. These items were documented on chart paper and then the group collaborated to identify common themes in the many examples and place them in a rank order of importance. The

themes decided upon were the decision of the focus group, reflecting on the examples all participants provided. The focus group identified the same elements for both positive and negative cultures and ranked their importance in the same way.

The focus group identified the following factors in determining whether a positive or negative culture existed in a building, from the TTOC point of view. The order in which these are presented is the rank order of importance the TTOCs placed upon them.

1. Welcoming/Start of Day
2. Lunch room staff behaviour
3. Respect for the work of the TTOC
4. Teacher preparation for the TTOC
5. Appearance and condition of the physical plant of the school

While the focus group indicated different examples for distinguishing a positive culture from a negative one, they felt the rank order was appropriate to both situations.

## Questionnaires

The questionnaires that followed the focus group were done via email, with the ten questions shown in the Instruments section above provided to the selected TTOCs (see Appendix 1). TTOCs were selected from volunteers and using the snowball method. Thirteen interview packages were sent out and ten were returned by the due date. The researcher read the responses to the questionnaire questions carefully looking for evidence for each of the focus group's ranked issues. Each issue was assigned a colour code and when a point was made that reflected that item, it was highlighted in that colour. The colour codes allowed for an easy accounting of the various responses into a total number of hits for the theme. The ranking by the focus group allowed for an easy comparison between the questionnaire response and what the focus group had identified as important. If the focus group felt, for example, that Respect was the third most important element in determining a positive or negative school culture, then that item could be compared to see what scored third in the questionnaire data.

## Results

The results of coding the questionnaire data only somewhat bore out the expectation that the questionnaire responses would mirror the values placed on the themes by the focus group.

The scores were as follows:

Category	Scores
Welcoming/Start of Day	56

Lunch room behaviour	42
Respect for the work (of TTOCs)	64
Teacher preparation for TTOC	7
Physical plant/Appearance of the school	28

The chart places the items in the rank order of importance the focus group placed on them. As can be seen, the questionnaire respondents viewed the importance of these themes differently than the focus group did. The questionnaire respondents changed the the top item for the focus group to second place and moved the third item to the top spot. Also to be noted is the comeback of the Physical plant item, which the focus group noted as marginally important in culture perception. Lastly, both groups placed Teacher preparation low in importance on perceptions of school cultures.

Beyond the number of instances of events related to the themes indicated here, the TTOCs provided a strong narrative with compelling exemplars for many of the themes presented, particularly in the focus group but also in the interview data. While the scope and intentions of this project prohibits full inclusion of their entire documentary evidence, the power of those stories, both on the positive side and the negative side, speaks highly of the seriousness and veracity of the participants in this research project.

It is interesting to note some of the comments from TTOCs first-hand on school culture. A few case studies in some of the responses to the questions asked by the interviewer may illuminate more personally the experiences TTOCs have with school culture.

In this example, the participant is responding to, *Can you describe something that indicates to you a positive school culture exists in a building?*

First impressions are lasting and how I am “orientated” in those first moments make a huge impact on my impression of the school, culture, and how my day will go. It takes only a few moments to smile, say hello, and make a guest teacher in the building feel welcome and confident to get the day started. If the first point of contact can make the greet and set-up a priority, even 2 minutes or less of their own time, it would greatly influence the overall impression.

In this case, the participant is responding to, *Can you describe something that indicates to you a negative school culture exists in a building?*

Negative school culture exists when you can feel the tension and hear the gossip mongering of the staff when you are being excluded from but yet are able to act as a fly on the wall, so to speak. When everyone keeps to themselves, or to their little cliques that they have formed and no one is willing to talk to let alone help out the new person.

Here is an interesting insight on the physical plant and how it can affect impressions. In this case, the TTOC is responding to, *Can you describe something that indicates to you a positive school culture exists in a building?*

The look and feel of the building when you enter. There is a physical feeling that either draws you in or makes you cringe that is sometimes just an instinctual reaction, and other times can be from what you tangibly see. If it is a vibrant, buzzing, friendly school the likelihood of it having more positive culture are greater.

Another in response to the same question:

The building is well taken care of, old or new, you can tell that people work there, or attend and treat the school as a second home. There is an inviting mix of student work, displays of community and an overall feeling of hope.

Here is a TTOC's response to, *Can you describe a positive school culture you have encountered in your work as a TTOC?* It focuses in on student expectations and preparation by the teacher:

When the students arrive, they are friendly, they find their seats at the bell and show a willingness to listen, regardless of having a TTOC. It is evident that the students have been given tools to work well under different circumstances and are well practiced on classroom expectations. It is expected that some students exhibit behavioural and academic difficulties and mention that the TTOC does it differently. However, asking a positive role model/ leader/student to peer tutor will minimize any uneasiness the student may feel, because they are used to working well together as a class. Most often, SEAs assigned to the class know the students well and are extremely helpful.

Here is an interesting insight on, *Are there aspects of staff behaviour that indicate to a TTOC the type of culture present?*

- friendly secretary, not having to leave collateral to get a key.
- having attendance folder and keys given on entry to the school.

The response regarding keys is a very personal bugbear for me. There is a long-standing history of disrespect for TTOCs around the issue of classroom keys. A lack of leadership in this area by the school district was the primary background cause for this situation. I made it a mission in the Spring of 2012 to ensure that every TTOC in the Coquitlam School District got keys when they went into every school in the district, without having to buy the privilege by leaving personal property. It can now be said that a respectful system of key sign-out and sign-in is common

practice and that keys not being given out are the exception rather than the rule in School District 43. The reader is reminded that Lauren Rousseau, a substitute teacher and all 14 children in her class died at Sandy Hook Elementary because she could not lock the door to her classroom.

The small sample size and the research design prevents generalizability and statistical significance in these results, but what the TTOCs viewed as important in their perceptions of school culture and the rank order of importance does shed some insight on the research question.

To remind the reader, the research question asked, "What are TTOC's views on school culture and how do they know a positive or negative one when they see it?"

Clearly, the views of the participants in the focus group diverged somewhat from those of the questionnaire respondents. The focus group concentrated their perceptions on school culture quite strongly around the "Welcoming/Start of Day" and "Lunchroom behaviour" themes and largely disregarded the influence of the Physical plant on perception of school culture.

As can be seen from the chart of responses, the questionnaire respondents placed their strongest support behind "Respect for the work of TTOCs" even surpassing the strongly valued "Welcome/Start of Day" theme. They also downgraded "Lunchroom behaviour" to third place in the order and a modest comeback was made by the "Physical plant/Appearance of the school" item.

The questionnaire items, which were more narrative in style and asked for specific examples of positive and negative cultures, plus breaking down some of the indicators, (differentiating between staff and student behaviour, for example) may have prompted more focus on the practice of TTOC work and shifted the results. The specific question asked about the physical

plant may have been responsible for some of the comeback of that item, though some TTOCs reported on elements of the physical plant in responses to other questions asked.

It is very interesting that the "Teacher preparation for the TTOC" item was not strongly supported in either the focus group or in the interviews. It is possible that either, for the most part, teachers leave well-prepared lessons for TTOCs and thus the item is not conspicuous by its absence or, it is possible that TTOCs are expecting perhaps not the best prepared lessons and are compensating from their own toolkit of skills. There is no way to determine that from the data gathered here and this is an area for further research.

It is very clear that if someone wants to make a difference in the TTOC experience in a particular school, a focus on the "Welcoming/Start of Day" theme would yield results. Narratively, the questionnaire respondents and the focus group indicated how they were initially greeted, what supports were offered, whether they got keys and how they were shown the ropes by both secretarial and administrative staff at first, were key contributors to their perceptions about that school. Changes here are relatively easy to implement, as there are few individuals involved and small changes (like the key in-out procedure described previously) could yield big results.

Making changes for the better in lunchroom behaviour is much more challenging. Staffs that occupy the lunchroom are often very comfortable in the set routines and assumptions the TTOC is not privy to. Plus, one is dealing with a larger number of people and social factors of great power are present. In larger schools, the staff room may not even be occupied at lunch, as lunch times vary and the commonplace balkanization of large schools into departments may impair effective change here.

Improvements in "Respect for the work of TTOCs" falls in the middle of the last two in degree of difficulty. A lot of issues here could be corrected with an information campaign and some low order social engineering like giving people a different way to introduce themselves to a TTOC other than, "Who are you today?" It is safe to assume most teachers are caring individuals or they wouldn't be in this profession and it would be more a case of understanding the TTOC's role better and making oneself aware of the real climate of the work of a TTOC today. That could be done relatively easily by a motivated Staff Representative or Administrative Officer in a school site. It could also be a District-wide initiative to inform contract staff of the realities of TTOC work in the District.

Ultimately, the school cultures that exist, both good and bad, can be judged by how they treat the most vulnerable members of the teaching community. Sometimes that judgment is obvious and apparent to all and sometimes it is just the quiet refusal of callouts to a particular school. The onus is upon the staff at a particular site to accept that they have a school culture, figure out what it is, de-facto, and make changes to continue to improve both the perceptions and actuality of school culture in the building. Many of the themes here could provide a framework for promoting discussion and clarity around issues that TTOCs face. If we all asked ourselves, for example, "Did I respect the work of a TTOC today?" or "How did I welcome that TTOC to the building today?" we would no doubt find that we are either doing a pretty good job or that we might need to work on some of those themes. It is imperative that we never forget public education is a social enterprise at its heart and the more we attend to making it a pro-social environment for all that find themselves in it, the greater the likelihood of positive outcomes for everyone.

## CONCLUSIONS

In reviewing the research question again after performing this research; i.e. What are TTOC's views on school culture and how do they know a positive or negative one when they see it?

What I have learned is there are many factors that influence a TTOC's view of a school culture. Whether that is lunch room behaviour, greeting/ start of day or respect for the work, the factors cited by TTOCs all have something in common; an awareness of the social enterprise at the heart of everything we do in public education. Not everyone lives up to the ideals we try to instill in our students, and sometimes they treat TTOCs disrespectfully. This is evidenced by the narratives around negative school cultures. Treating them well is clearly something we should strive to do just for the integrity of it.

Clearly, TTOCs would benefit from this change but, the school culture as a whole and the individual contract teachers would benefit from it as well. Nothing gives greater pleasure and satisfaction than helping another and, as teachers, it is hoped we all live and breathe that willingness to help daily. This is simply an extension of that model to some of our more marginalized colleagues.

I have some suggestions for future research and action. One is that a school-based leader might take the information I have gathered here and use it to frame a discussion around school culture as it is perceived in their own school. They might also use this information to make small changes in operation that might benefit perception by outsiders like TTOCs. An example might be a decision to greet every TTOC in the building by name in the morning and check in with

them during the day. Another direction for further inquiry might be to try to illuminate more clearly why Teacher preparation scored so low here. Is it really because teachers are preparing for TTOCs or is the opposite more reflective of reality and TTOCs are filling in the missing pieces? Further research also might focus on how to integrate the experience of the TTOC more fully into the school's planning for change or culture-building exercises. I have shared the results with my colleagues in my own school, with an invitation to examine their own practices and assumptions around TTOCs. Some have come to some startling conclusions and changed their way of doing things because of that and that makes me feel the time spent here was worthwhile.

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## APPENDIX 1

The documents in this Appendix are the actual interview questions presented to the participants.

### **Teachers Teaching on Call (TTOCs): Their Views on School Culture**

Dear Participant:

You are being asked if you would like to participate in a personal interview growing out of a focus group around TTOCs and their views on school culture. The intention of the interview is to further elaborate your experiences as a TTOC around school culture in private, as part of a Masters' level research project by the researcher, Ken Christensen. The intention is to develop a data base of information around TTOC views on school culture which may ultimately inform school and district-based thinking around the improvement of school culture.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to opt in or opt out at any time during the course of the research. You will never be identified personally by the researcher in the course of this research or subsequently. Volunteering to be interviewed will be taken as informed consent of these facts.

Participants to be interviewed will be asked a series of scripted questions around their experiences with school culture. The option to elaborate answers beyond the scope of the scripted questions will be available at any time during the course of the interview.

If you would like to participate, please contact the researcher, Ken Christensen at **hemi429ca@shaw.ca** or **kechrist@sfu.ca**. I thank you for your time and consideration of this request.

Yours,

Ken Christensen

Question #1

Researcher/interviewer: Ken Christensen

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date and time of interview:

\*Can you describe a positive school culture you have encountered in your work as a TTOC

Other comments: Question #2

Researcher/Interviewer: Ken Christensen

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date and time of interview:

\*Can you describe a negative school culture you encountered in your work as a TTOC?

Other comments:

Question #3

Researcher/Interviewer: Ken Christensen

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date and time of interview:

\* Can you describe elements or factors that make for a positive school culture?

Other comments:

Question #4

Researcher/Interviewer: Ken Christensen

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date and time of interview:

\*Can you describe elements or factors that make for a negative school culture?

Other comments:

Question #5

Researcher/Interviewer: Ken Christensen

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date and time of interview:

\*Can you describe something that indicates to you a positive school culture exists in a building?

Other comments:

Question #6

Researcher/Interviewer: Ken Christensen

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date and time of interview:

\*Can you describe something that indicates to you a negative school culture exists in a building?

Other comments:

Question #7

Researcher/Interviewer: Ken Christensen

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date and time of interview:

\*Are their aspects of the physical arrangement of a school that can give a TTOC an idea about the culture present?

Other comments:

Question #8

Researcher/Interviewer: Ken Christensen

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date and time of interview

\*Are there aspects of student behaviour that indicate to a TTOC the type of culture present?

Other comments:

Question #9

Researcher/Interviewer: Ken Christensen

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date and time of interview:

\*Are there aspects of staff behaviour that indicate to a TTOC the type of culture present?

Other comments:

Question #10

Researcher/Interviewer: Ken Christensen

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date and time of interview:

\*Is there anything that you would like to add that hasn't been covered here?



## **ABSTRACT**

This study attempted to give voice to teachers teaching on call (aka substitute or supply teachers or TTOCs) and their experiences with school culture. The author sought to mine the knowledge base of TTOCs around the area of school culture, specifically, what are the TTOCs feelings and thoughts about school culture and what indicators of school culture do they see when they go to work. The intention of the research was to provide insight into how TTOCs perceive school culture and to potentially make use of their insight into school culture to inform future research and school change planning.