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Culture Change for Inclusive & Trauma-Sensitive Schools

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Abstract

As schools in the United States grapple with persistent inequities, some are taking bold steps toward becoming more inclusive and trauma-sensitive learning environments. This conference paper examines how three schools are actively transforming their cultures to promote inclusion, trauma-sensitivity, and a sense of connection for both students and teachers. Through participatory practices that elevate student voice and affirm teacher agency, school leaders are catalyzing systemic change rooted in belonging and shared purpose. Using data from in-depth mixed-methods case studies, we identify leadership strategies that disrupt traditional hierarchies, foster psychological safety, and co-create inclusive learning environments. Through analysis of leadership practices, vision setting, and collaborative action, we uncover how these schools are shifting from compliance-oriented cultures to ones rooted in care, justice, and equity. We offer a framework for school leaders to build trust, share power, and lead with empathy, illustrating how transformational change is possible when human dignity is placed at the center.

Keywords: Belonging; Case Study; Collaboration; Equity; Leadership