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Fall 12-16-2019

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The Crossing of Academic Success and Extracurricular Activities in School Culture:

An Educator's Perspective

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## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

### Abstract

Many schools tend to emphasize extracurricular activities or academics in their school culture, however it is important that both school culture pillars should not just coexist but enhance each other. The objective of the research was to investigate educators' perceptions of the role of academics in establishing the culture of a school, and the frameworks of school culture that educators feel should be in place to integrate academics and extracurricular activities. Teacher interviews were conducted to determine the role academics have in developing school culture along with the integration of academics and extracurricular activities (ECA). While there is a great deal of research on the positive impact of ECA on academics, there is little scholarship on the role of classroom academics in establishing a school's culture. Understanding the intersection of academics and ECA in school culture will help to maximize the exposure that all students should receive for their accomplishments no matter the area in which they are attained.

*Keywords:* school culture, academics, extracurricular activities, establishing

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

### The Crossing of Academic Success and Extracurricular Activities in School Culture: An Educator's Perspective

This EDCI 590 research project focused on the academic and extracurricular aspects of school culture and the perspectives of the faculty and staff that work in a middle school in Northern Virginia. The purpose of this research was to identify the aspects of school culture that will help to maximize the exposure that all students receive for their accomplishments that support both academics and extracurricular activities. During this research I studied middle school teachers' perceptions of the characteristics that they believe develop a supportive school culture. A school's culture can be defined through many different influences and factors, but schools usually identify themselves according to their academic excellence and their extracurricular activities (ECA). In this paper academics will refer to activities that involve teacher and students working together to meet the standards set forth by the state, however, ECA will refer to those activities that are not directly connected to student's achievement of a definable state standard. Many schools tend to emphasize either ECA or academics in their school culture, however it is important that both school culture pillars should not just coexist but enhance each other. Paterson (2018) states that a culture that is strong creates ideals that make people proud to be a part of that group, and this type of culture development in a school allows faculty and students to look out for and take care of one another from both an academic and individual stance (p. 34). Ediger (1997) helps confirm this by stating that the recognition of talents and abilities (both academics and ECA) of both educators and students assists in meeting their approval needs which may lead to those individuals seeking higher levels of achievement overall (p. 36). The development of a strong culture like this will help grow the balance to excel in both academic and extracurricular endeavors that the school makes available.

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Cultures vary not only from country to country but are very different even between small areas such as schools and classrooms. Clayton (2003) explains that culture is the “pattern of thinking and behavior” among a group of people (p. 15). As a result, culture is more than just the explicit aspects that can be seen by others, but it possesses implicit characteristics or unspoken features that cannot always be observed directly (Clayton, 2003, p. 14). Clayton’s (2003) definition of this *implicit culture* is made up of six characteristics; namely that culture is pervasive, shared, learned, unknown to members, dynamic, and the root of an individual or groups. Clayton (2003) also addresses *explicit culture* as the aspects of cultures that we see and use to symbolize a group of people (such as food, clothing, language, etc.), even if it may not be an accurate representation of that group (p. 181). The understanding that much of culture is both implicit and explicit becomes important when establishing a school culture that is beneficial to everyone in the school. An example of implicit school culture in academics can be identified in the attitudes toward teachers and the way that classroom rules are developed and enforced. An example of implicit school culture in ECA can be identified by the way certain activities bring more prestige than others. For example, often athletes tend to be given more flexibility during their sport seasons and receiving more support and praise from the school than those excelling in a more academic ECA. An example of explicit culture can be seen between both academics and ECA in terms of concrete objects such as budgets, space allocation, hall decorations, and special events. Many schools have pep rallies and celebrations multiple times a year for students participating in different ECA, but those excelling in academia will not see any explicit praise until end of the year awards or graduation. In my research I focused on both implicit and explicit aspects of school culture that affect the academic and ECA settings of a school.

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

School culture helps to develop the ideals that support everything that the school wants to accomplish. Schools have shown that when they have students participating in both sport and non-sport ECA, their students' academic achievement increases. O'Dea (1994, as cited in Turner, 2010, pp. 32-33) conducted a study on 421 graduating seniors that showed the average grade-point-average (GPA) of students that participated in ECA was 3.201, while the students who did not participate in ECA had an average GPA of 2.556. The average GPA for all the seniors was 2.825 with 24% of the students' GPAs who participated in an extracurricular activity falling between 3.00-3.49. In contrast, 23% of the students who did not participate in an extracurricular activity had a GPA between 2.00 to 2.49 (pp. 32-33). This suggests that the foundation of ECA in schools shows that they may build culture in a positive way that allows for student achievement to take place at a higher level. If so, it is likely that the more that schools can blend its culture through academic achievement and ECA together, the schools become better places for students to reach academic and non-academic goals. For the purposes of my study, the major aspects that are involved in forming school culture are the pursuit of academics and the immersion of extracurricular activities. Through this research project I explored the cultural aspects that allow schools to create environments that champion both academic superiority and extracurricular envelopment.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Defining and Improving School Culture**

The main challenge for schools, as focused on by Thompson and Jacobson (2007), is that schools have trouble balancing their core academic values and the win-at-all-cost attitude that is found throughout our society. This contrast is what sometimes causes schools to struggle with balancing their goals for curriculum and involvement outside of the classroom. Dr. Kent (2006)

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

describes school culture as a jigsaw puzzle made up of five parts that fit together to form the culture. Kent (2006) identifies the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle as being internal culture, internal sub-cultures, leadership and culture, external culture, and cultural change. The author conducted a study at a West Midlands school in the United Kingdom, focused on each part of the jigsaw that was seen within the school. The internal culture puzzle piece at this school was investigated through student interviews aimed at determining the values and ideals that make up the culture in a school and how students perceive that culture (Kent, 2006, p. 24). Kent (2006) states that believing that an organization has only one culture is disingenuous; subsequently, he investigated the subcultures of the school and how they interacted with the overall internal culture (p. 24). Kent (2006) also investigated the ability for leadership and culture to exist dynamically and the effect that leadership can have through cultural change at a school-wide level (p. 24). The final two pieces that Kent investigated are the impact that the external culture of the community has on the school's culture, and if cultural change takes place in a school, what influences those changes (p. 24). Kent (2006) states that each of the pieces plays a significant role in how things at this school and others are done. Kent (2006) concluded that "culture is a complex force that cannot be readily transformed by any one person" (p. 24). The major findings that Kent (2006) outlined were that leadership can influence culture but that they are only one of a set of cultural gatekeepers (those who steer culture in the school) that students recognize as having impact on school culture; subcultures are not developed in accordance with the school's culture but are developed in response to the need of the school society and hold less power in established internal cultures; and the external culture that surrounds the school has an effect and is powered by influence that was found in previous years and generations that is exerting power and preventing cultural change (p. 29). Kent (2006) concludes that to understand a school culture

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

you must use these connected puzzle pieces to recognize the true nature of the way a school chooses to do things (p. 29).

A school is always trying to build a community that allows students who attend the school to feel like they belong and can participate in activities that spark their interests. As a result, a student feeling a sense of belonging to a school is important for educators to realize and understand when looking at and developing a healthy school culture. Akar-Vural, Yilmaz-Ozelci, Cengel, and Gomleksiz (2013) argued that the feeling of belonging to a school is “the perception of students as individuals, respecting their existence, and supporting them in a social environment” (p. 215). They also identified the factors directly linked to this feeling as being connected to school attendance, academic achievement, preparation for school, fulfilling the given task and homework, and active participation in ECA (p. 215). Akar-Vural et al. (2013) conducted a study to determine the sense of belonging in a school by students which is the perception of students in regards to others respecting their existence and supporting them in a social environment. The researchers used the Sense of Belonging Scale and personal information form with 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students at a primary school in Aydin, Turkey that had a similar socioeconomic level. The scales lasted an average of 25 minutes and were compared with a UCLA Loneliness Scale and Social Support Appraisals Scale for Children's classroom and teacher subscales for validity (Akar-Vural et al., 2013, p. 220). The results provided evidence that the scale and information form created by Akar-Vural et al. (2013), the Sense of Belonging Scale and the personal information form, were all valid and reliable. Based on the evidence, Akar-Vural et al. (2013) concluded the Sense of Belonging Scale was a better predictor of negative behavior towards a school and gave reliable data to be used as tool to help the staff of a school to create a sense belonging for all students (pp. 225-226). The scale



## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

developed by Akar-Vural et al. (2013), was put through multiple tests to determine the reliability and validity. The researchers' Sense of Belonging scale and their personal information forms were found to have a strong correlation and validity both in their construction and the data obtained when compared to the UCLA Loneliness Scale and Social Support Appraisals Scale for Children. Akar Vural et al. (2013) determined that their Sense of Belonging Scale showed highly related scores with the UCLA scale and there were high and positive correlations between the Social Support Appraisal Scale (p. 224). Therefore, the scale can be considered valid and provide guidance for educators when interacting with students inside of the school setting (Akar-Vural et al., 2013, p. 225).

Building on this belief that belonging to a school is important and helps to support school culture both academically and non-academically, Ediger (1997) argues that school culture needs to be created where teachers and administrators are aware of changes and trends in education as well as acknowledging the talents and abilities of individuals from a place of acceptance and respect (p. 36). According to Ediger (1997), the setup in schools is not one that tends to reflect this belief of school culture being supportive of both academics and non-academic pursuits. Ediger (1997) provides an example of how a basketball game has so many different parts of a school interacting and how the sport brings a greater presence of the outside community into the school through the city's weekly newspaper. The school is very willing to support the basketball team with new uniforms and hold the players in a very high esteem. In contrast, the curriculum standards seem to be irrelevant and lack importance while those who make the honor roll are not as gratified in the paper or held in as high esteem as the basketball players (p. 37). Ediger (1997) observes that as most high schools have developed this athletic culture it forces the school to make a distinction between academics and sports. The other non-academic talents in the school

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

seemingly get left out of the discussion. Ediger (1997) makes a case for this with the letter from a student who is upset that sports teams are getting more recognition and respect for their letterman jackets than those whose talents are found in the performing arts sections of the school's extracurricular activities. The necessity for all students to receive the recognition for their achievements is something that faculty, parents, and others need to be aware of and support for the student to attain success (p. 38). Ediger (1997) argues that the principal is the key individual to drive the changes necessary to develop the proper academic and non-academic parts of the school culture which are "nurturing and caring for others" (p. 39). This demonstrates that school staff are the most important piece of implementing a school culture that is based on both academic learning and extracurricular activity access.

Paterson (2018) explains that to develop or enhance school culture, or as he calls it "school spirit," the school must utilize Five Pride Enhancers (pp. 35-36). Paterson (2018) explains that these pride enhancers are school staff showing they believe in the school, helping to develop traditions, establishing outside involvement, receiving input, and making it fun. School staff must show their belief in the school by participating in spirit days, attending after school activities, and showing that they are in support of the students outside of academics. Paterson (2018) continues that staff must work to establish traditions that will permeate throughout the school and create a buzz for the activity. The history and past accomplishments should be integrated by developing interactions that connect the alumni, history, and community with the current students that are attending the school. Paterson (2018) states that schools must also be aware that one group in the school should not oversee establishing the pride and that input should be solicited from all levels of the school and outside of the school to help develop procedures that everyone in the school can support. Finally, Paterson (2018) explicates that the last tenet of

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

developing these school culture improvements is that whatever is developed needs to be just as fun as it is valuable and not have it become burden on the school or those involved. The development of these pride enhancers will help to create a school culture that is supported by both the student population and the educator population that coexist in schools. Paterson (2018) believes that when the culture is established, the effect on students results in better behavior, better care for school facilities and of school property, and often better student performance (p. 34).

### **Extracurricular Activities and School Culture**

The definition of an extracurricular activity is varied and broad; however, Bartkus, Nemelka, Nemelka, and Gardner (2012) defined ECA as academic or non-academic activities that take place with the support of the school but are occurring outside of school hours and are not part of the instructional curriculum. They also are voluntary and do not involve any form of academic evaluation or credit (p. 698). Turner (2010) identified ECA as being sports and non-sport activities which are part of the “unwritten curriculum” where students can develop skills such as “leadership, values, sportsmanship, self-worth, as well as the ability to deal with competitive situations” (p. 1). Both sources are defining ECA as those activities that take place after school and are not a fundamental part of the curriculum that is being taught in the classroom.

After school activities help to support the curriculum and create the type of culture that is supporting students' needs both inside and outside of the classroom. Bradley and Conway (2016) argue that extracurricular activities provide academic achievement benefits through the influence of non-cognitive skills that help to promote learning and academic achievement

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

(p.703). Bradley and Conway (2016) explain that this occurs through a dual step transfer process stating that the impact or transfer that an activity has on a non-cognitive skill during the extracurricular activity will also positively impact academic achievement (p. 705). Bradley and Conway (2016) use this process is showing that participation and support from a school for extracurricular activities (both sport and non-sport) will create a building of skills that demonstrates improvement in both the activity and academic subjects. Bradley and Conway (2016) state that the skills enhanced through extracurricular activities are motivational-social skills such as motivation, conscientiousness, openness to experience and increased self-efficacy. These skills develop through the first transfer of participating in the extracurricular activity and then may enhance academic achievement, which would be the second transfer. As a result, the authors believe that any extracurricular activity that is performed competitively in an organized school environment, several times a week with strong school support may enhance the development of these skills which can enhance academic learning (p. 723). The ability of schools to support their students in extracurricular activities allows for the building of these skills that will allow for a second transfer to enhance academic success.

### **Academic Achievement and School Culture**

McGuigan and Hoy (2006) establish that academic achievement has been linked to a school culture that has academic optimism; a characteristic of schools that are academically successful through greater emphasis on academics, evidence of higher collective efficacy among faculty, and having more trust between faculty, parents, and students (p. 205). McGuigan and Hoy (2006) state that the three traits listed above are representative of the behavioral, genitive, and affective aspects that make up academic optimism (p. 205). The authors establish the definitions of each characteristic as such: academic emphasis (behavioral component) is the goal

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

of school wide academic success, collective efficacy (cognitive component) is the belief of faculty that they can be successful in teaching the standards, and trust (affective component) between all levels of a school (parents, faculty, and students) (p. 205). McGuigan and Hoy (2006) developed a study to determine how academic optimism could be used in schools with low socio-economic status to improve scores on 4<sup>th</sup> grade state mandated tests in math and reading. The researchers established that educators cannot control their socioeconomic status of the students in their schools, but through an enabling structure a school can allow for enhancements to each part of academic optimism. McGuigan and Hoy (2006) state that enabling structures are constructs that improve the effectiveness of school structures and procedures that empower the work of teachers (p. 213). The model McGuigan and Hoy (2013) developed predicted that with the enabling structures scores would increase in math and reading with academic optimism (p. 213). The results of the researchers' study proved that academic optimism and school achievement were linked and were consequently enhanced when paired with enabling school structure. As a result, McGuigan and Hoy (2013) believe that educational leaders can take tangible actions to allow their school to develop a culture of optimism which is linked to improved academic performance for all students (p. 224).

Academic optimism is an important component in the development of school culture. Academic optimism was first outlined by Hoy (2012) as involving three characteristics that make a positive impact on student achievement when using socioeconomic status as the control for schools. These terms were academic emphasis, collective efficacy of the faculty, and the collective trust of parents and students (p. 76). These characteristics, when grouped together, created academic optimism which created a practical roadmap that Hoy (2012) believes is the guide a school needs to improve student achievement. Hoy (2012) states that the concepts

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

provide distinct paths and are linked to the enhancement of student learning but must be supportive of each other (pp. 88-89). Hoy (2012) establishes that no matter the intervention or program used to improve one of the facets of academic optimism, it must also support the other two elements (p. 89). Hoy (2012) notes that the greatest threat to academic optimism is if a school culture has established learned pessimism at both an individual and organizational level because optimism is just as important as talent or motivation in the success of students (p. 89). Hoy (2012) notes that pessimism in schools can lead to a sense of hopelessness and futility which are major roadblocks to student achievement (p. 89).

The staff in schools (teachers, administrators, coaches, and activity sponsors) play a vital role in supporting the culture that will be reflected in the classroom and school. Young (2018) explains that the most important influencers of school culture are the teachers and administrators who are responsible for the type of culture that a school develops. As a result, teacher retention is very important to the development of a school culture that is helping to combine the academic success and supportive ECA environments that are in place. The school culture is also important in the level of teacher retention that a school experiences. Young (2018) states that teachers leave schools because of lack of support from school administrators, lack of influence over school policy, difficulties with student discipline, unmotivated students, lack of support from communities, and many other reasons (p. 17).

### **Conclusion**

When a school culture is developing, much of the research shows extracurricular activities and academics are supported and have some benefits but are always seen as two separate entities (Ediger, 1997, p. 38). The best way a school can become a pillar of a community is to have working relationship between the extracurricular activities and academic

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

success. While there is a great deal of research on the positive impact of ECA on academics, there is little scholarship on the role of classroom academics, specifically academic optimism, in establishing a school's culture. The research that I focused on is one that helps to identify the aspects of a school culture that will help to maximize the exposure that all students should receive for their accomplishments no matter the area in which it is attained. To address this gap, I interviewed school staff with a wide range of backgrounds to identify the aspects that will help build a school culture that is built on a balance of both academics and ECA.

### **Research Questions**

I focused my study on the following research questions:

1. What are educators' perceptions of the essential components in establishing a healthy school culture?
2. What are educators' perceptions of the role of academics in establishing the culture of a school?

### **Methodology**

By conducting in-depth interviews with teachers of varying experience at the middle school where I teach, I investigated the role that teachers feel that academics and ECA should have in establishing a school's culture and how the framework of a school's culture can support the integration of academics and extracurricular activities.

### **Participants and Setting**

There were six participants in my study, who were recruited based on experience level, content area, and involvement in extracurricular activities. The participants were selected from the teachers, at the middle school where I teach, that are diverse enough to speak about school culture from an academic and non-academic viewpoint. There was not a minimum requirement of experience in years of service, but all the teachers came from different backgrounds to help

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

facilitate the viewpoint of culture from all sections of the school. The teachers selected covered all four core subject areas as well as one of the elective content areas. I excluded ESOL and SPED teachers from my interviews. I contacted potential participants through an invitation to participate email that described the purpose of the study and asked if they would be willing to be interviewed and have the interview recorded. From the pool of volunteers indicating an interest in participating and a willingness to be recorded, I selected six individuals who represented the greatest diversity in terms of subject area, teaching experience, and gender. Any potential participants who declined were removed from the pool and I contacted the next available teacher in that content area. When speaking with each interviewee who agreed, we discussed a time and location for the interview to take place that was quiet, private, and convenient for the interviewee. The signing of the consent form took place at the location of the interview before beginning.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

Before the interviews, I went on a tour of the school building to identify the explicit aspects of the school that are being used to promote the school culture and how the scheduling and time allocation is broken down in the school. To begin each in-depth interview meeting I introduced myself and my background in a casual manner to establish a relaxed tone. Following the recommendations of Rubin and Rubin (2012), I conducted interviews with the goal of developing a basis of trust and reciprocity that allows the interviewee to be comfortable sharing personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings as related to the environments that all teachers navigate daily (p. 36). To maintain the integrity and precision of the interview, I recorded the interview using a digital tape recorder. I explained to participants that the recordings will be erased after I have transcribed them into writing and that I deleted all names of schools and other



## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

individuals from the transcripts. I reminded them that everything they say will be kept strictly confidential and that they do not have to answer any questions they do not want to answer.

The type of interview that I employed was responsive interviewing, a qualitative model which creates a back and forth conversation that is built based on trust between the interviewer and interviewee (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 36). I chose this style as Rubin and Rubin (2012) states it allows for those being interviewed to have control over what they are sharing and allows the interviewer to adjust their questions in light of the answers being given. This allowed for me to mold my questions to each individual person that was interviewed and build the relationships that yielded rich data for my study. The use of open-ended questions allows for the interviewee to raise issues that are important to them (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 37).

The use of the open-ended questions in the responsive interview model allowed for the interviewee to answer without being influenced by the interviewer (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 133). They were changed and adapted to fit better with the individual being interviewed to maximize the answers being given for the study. Rubin and Rubin (2012) state that is important to respond to what you hear and that questions should change to allow for the evidence to control how the research evolves as more information is discovered (p. 39). To achieve this conversational freedom for the interviewee, the questions were not preset for each interview. Instead, general open-ended questions were developed to be flexible for each interview. As a result, the questions were the following. Describe some of the aspects of school culture that you have seen in this school? What constitutes a good school culture in your experience? How do you believe that the academic setting affects the culture of a school? How do you believe that extracurricular activities affect the culture of a school? Do you see, or have you seen either academics or extracurricular activities prioritized more in a school you have worked in? Do you

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

believe that the structures within your school allow you to be the most successful in your job? Do you believe that there is a happy medium between the two concepts that will benefit the school? While they are sharing their experiences and perceptions I followed-up with descriptive questions that added more depth to their answers and probed for expansion of topics they believed to be important as related to the question. The follow-up questions were both pre-set and created during the interview to allow for information to be gathered on topics that illicit the most interest from the person being interviewed. Follow-up questions were the following. Do you believe those aspects are beneficial to developing a healthy school culture? Could you explain more about what you mean by the term \_\_\_\_\_? Tell me more about that experience? What impact do you think that had/would have on students/other teachers? During the interviews I was able to use the follow-up questions to call back to previous information they have already presented through questions such as "Is that what you were talking about earlier?" This led to interviewees providing more insight to their perceptions of the topics. At the end of the interview, I asked the interviewee if there is anything else, they would like to say about school culture. In closing, I thanked my participant for their time and cooperation and let them know that if they have any questions, they could contact me by email.

Immediately after each interview, I replayed the full interview recording to keep it fresh in my mind. This allowed for subsequent interview questions to be adjusted not only for each participant but also to guide other questions based on data that had been previously gathered to help pinpoint connections. This reviewal process provided me with a better understanding and provided new ways to approach future interviews. No follow-up questions were required to bolster any of the interviews after they were completed. As a result, no new information was added to the transcripts after the interviews had concluded.

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

When coding the interviews, an in vivo coding method was used to analyze the interview data. Saldana (2009) notes that this type of coding it allows for the terms used by teachers to be put into context based on the background of each individual and allow for connections to be made across different interviews. As multiple content area teachers were interviewed it was important to find connections that crossed all participants and provided a basis for how the school culture is affecting different academic departments of the school. As Saldana (2009) states there is no rule to how data is coded except that if it is something that stands out it should be coded to help develop patterns that can be identified and revised as more coding takes place in the future of the interview transcripts (pp. 107-8). After the first cycle of coding to develop patterns of word use and concepts, I used pattern coding as my method of secondary coding. As Saldana (2016) highlights that pattern coding is used to help identify labels that identify or categorize similarly coded data to help to attribute meaning to a group or organization (p. 235). During this coding process key terms were used to make connections between the literature and interviewees contributions. The literature's connections to academic optimism, distinctions between academics and non-academic activities, enabling structures in schools, the sense of belonging seen in students, and the jigsaw pieces that make up school culture were key factors in the determining the connections that were made with what was said by those interviewed. This helped organize the different perceptions of teachers and recognize the patterns of terms that were used among the interviewees as well as the terms that overlapped with the literature review. The use of this coding in the tandem with the responsive interview style allowed for the participants perceptions, views, and meanings to be translated in the most authentic way possible.

### **Discussion**

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Through the course of analyzing the data collected from interviews with six teachers, of varying experience and backgrounds, several themes developed that informed me of their perceptions of the components of a healthy school culture. The first perception that I found was that all of my interviewees used very similar words to describe what constitutes a good school culture. They described it as being “safe,” “accepting,” “positive atmosphere,” “supported,” and made up of “students, faculty, parents, and the community.” These words all connected back to academic optimism, sense of belonging, and the jigsaw pieces that were identified as markers of healthy school cultures. I found that the teachers I interviewed were able to see and articulate these perceptions regularly throughout the time that I was interviewing them. The teachers also stated that they believed academics to be a major part of a school’s culture. One educator stated that “good schools have high rigor,” while another educator referred to school this way, “hard to keep the culture positive when the grades are not good.” Another participant went even further to describe it this way, “when a teacher knows their mission and communicates it to the student...creates an education environment.” The educators stated that the academic setting was vital to establishing an overall healthy school culture in the school building. The educators also universally agreed that when students are excelling in academics the atmosphere of the school changes to a more positive one, especially in the classroom.

The interviews did outline specific components that these educators perceived to be the most important to establishing a healthy school culture for academics and overall. A couple of these components were not explicitly stated by the educators but based on their responses they aligned well with a couple of ideas that were outlined in the literature review. Those features were academic optimism, sense of belonging, and enabling structures. The components specifically identified by the perceptions of these educators were all built around the ideas of

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

communication, top-down leadership, recognition, accountability, and buy-in. All of these pieces helped to detail their thoughts on what makes a healthy school culture.

As a quick refresher on the terms from the literature review, academic optimism is the combining of academic emphasis (school-wide academic success), collective efficacy (belief that teachers can be successful in teaching the standards), and trust (between parents, faculty, and students) (McGuigan and Hoy, 2006, p. 205). Enabling structures are those are constructs that improve the effectiveness of school structures and procedures that empower the work of teachers (McGuigan and Hoy, 2006, p. 213). Finally, a sense of belonging felt by students was outlined by researcher as respecting their existence and supporting them in a social environment (Akar-Vural et al., 2013, p. 215). The educators did not state these terms explicitly but based on their responses it was undeniable that their perceptions supported these components from the literature review.

Academic optimism was outlined by these educators when they talked about how students approached learning that was going on in the classroom. The educators perceived that students were much more positive and willing to work when they felt confident in their studies. As a result of this confidence, the educators believed that it improved the overall feeling that they found in their classrooms and in the school. The educators also linked increased leadership presence, student and staff recognition, good communication between all levels, accountability and buy-in being part of building up this academic optimism. They perceived that leadership in the school must start from the top-down to create channels of recognition, communication, accountability and buy-in to create the academic optimism that was necessary to create a healthy school culture. Examples of what the educators saw as being good culture practices was transparent communication to every level about what was expected of each individual in the

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

school. The teachers felt that there would be more buy-in to leadership plans if the communication lines were more open. All of the educators could detail a school in which they felt more confident in their collective efficacy to do their jobs to the best of their ability when communication lines were open and used. Many of those educators interviewed stated it was a “trickle down effect” when communication and expectations were clear. Another example was accountability at all levels of the school to make sure that the communication was being implemented correctly. The educators felt that in places where accountability was low then the communication also suffered leading to a culture that was less healthy. They also noted that buy-in was harder to attain when the communication and accountability were not installed correctly. They referenced experiences where school initiatives were implemented with minimal school communication of expectations and very little accountability which lead to frustration and contempt among teachers that then trickled down to the students and disrupted the culture. They also felt more frustration when those initiatives would be changed before they had a chance to take hold which they also believed hurt the overall culture of the schools. The educators stated that when they had new initiatives being presented, they felt that it was not something that would benefit the learning process and that it would put the teachers against the other groups that were part of their school culture. They felt that either leadership in the school or above the school did not communicate the expectations and were too quick to change directions. As a result, the academic optimism that the teachers were describing was being hurt because the trust and belief in the teachers to do their jobs was being eroded and that academic emphasis was being reduced. Recognition for both academic and extracurricular activities was outlined as a problem for culture in a school when it was very limited overall. Educators stated that they did not know about different events or that certain groups of students were always being recognized but the

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

rest of the student body was being left out. They felt that this negatively affected overall school culture and that to create more academic optimism everyone in the school should be recognized. As one educator described this perception as that no one was “realizing academics is important too” and that solutions for buy-in with “best practices,” “morale,” and “administration support” were not being implemented correctly to reflect academic optimism.

Another undercurrent that was reflected by these educators was the lack of structures that allowed them to be successful in their jobs at some of the schools that had employed them. The same characteristics of top-down leadership, accountability, recognition, communication and buy-in were identified as lacking enabling structures. The educators felt that they did not have adequate structures in their schools to be the most successful and support academic optimism and student sense of belonging. The educators identified that in many of the schools they had worked at they lacked a clear framework that could support them in the many situations that can arise in school classroom. Multiple educators in these interviews stated that they reached out to their leadership for assistance and were told to “figure it out.” These educators felt that this lack of leadership and structure was hurting the overall culture of the school. Other educators had experienced schools that had structures or frameworks that were in place to help them. As a result, these educators recalled good experiences in which the leadership and structures created an environment that was enriching for all involved with the school. One of the educators outlined a structure they had which allowed them to tutor their students participating in extracurricular activities that was supported by everyone in the culture. This enabling structure allowed for all students to succeed. Another structure outlined by a teacher was an awards ceremony that was voted for by the teachers and had categories related to personality features more than grades. The awards ceremony was a change from the normal academic awards

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

ceremony. Normally only two students per class were honored for their academic achievements throughout the year. The educator stated, "I did a character based awards because I got so frustrated that like our whole award ceremony is only for the most improved and the highest. So you're acknowledging two kids when there's all these kids in between. And the kids absolutely loved it and it was just based off of like teacher votes. [The awards ceremony] was more [based off] characteristics of their personalities versus their academic achievements." As result of the new award ceremony, students were very excited for it because some of them had never won an award. The educator identified the effect it had on the students by stating, "They were really into it and the kids were really excited to know and I sent out this whole explanation [that] they were invited to our awards if they had like so many votes. And we ended up, I think we had 300 and something kids in sixth grade that year and we ended up inviting 200 to the awards. And you know what? It was really interesting to see that some of the kids that have straight A's, even though they have straight A's, they weren't invited because they don't always have like positive interactions and a positive outlook with everybody. And a lot of our students who struggled ended up getting invited." The educators believed that these structures helped improve the overall culture of the school they were working in.

The issue that did arise for some of these educators is that they would help develop these structures to improve the school culture but would receive limited support from the leadership in the school system which would make them less likely to continue that structure. They also stated that lack of communication about these activities from the leadership contributed to the lack of support that they felt. An educator stated that when staff "don't have administrators backing you, then that makes it extremely difficult...then you have unhappy teachers who often are conveying that to their students and then the whole atmosphere of the school is not conducive to learning."



## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

As result, some of the educators stated that it made them not want to continue to implement current structures or create new ones for their school because they felt it was viewed as a burden. One educator stated that “They're not willing to put forth like anything extra to make this school what it could be, to give the students and the staff the experience that they could have,” while another educator stated, “It's a build your own and work on your own and survive on your own.” Another educator stated that in their experience they did not have a structure that enabled them to approach their administrator for help. When looking for help the educator stated, “Basically administration, when you go to ask for techniques because I do go ask for ways to be successful when I realized something's not working, some of them don't have really anything to say,” while another educator said, “They say the support will be provided, but it's not followed through... it is as long as you don't cause us problems, we don't cause problems for you.” As a result, the educators believed they would be rebuffed by the leadership and not be included in overall decisions that affected their part of the school. An educator provided this perception when talking about a scenario when leadership responded to their inquiry for help by saying, ““You just leave me alone... like I don't have time to deal with it.” One of the educators also pointed out that many individuals in leadership in education currently were never educators which could be a reason why they are able to provide the necessary structure to help their new and old teachers be successful. This educator stated, “Most of your administrators these days have never been actual classroom teachers they really don't have much to say.” They felt that lack of communication, accountability, recognition, and buy-in was less in schools that lacked supportive structure. The educators detailed that they rarely have support structures and “it's almost sometimes figure it out,” while other times when support is present it felt like “it's thrown together last second.” Without the proper structures, educators felt that they could not do their

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

jobs and that the overall culture suffered compared to the schools they worked in with enabling structures. An educator supported this belief by stating, "I think with structure it would give teachers confidence, it would create a better culture amongst the staff, and once you get culture amongst the staff together, the students see it, it's just a big snowball effect and it just takes over."

Finally, the sense of belonging that students feel in schools was directly connected by these teachers in overall culture of the school. The educators identified the affect on students through the same prism of communication, accountability, recognition, and buy-in as it related to an overall healthy school culture. They reasoned that when they were struggling to understand the expectations that leadership was implementing that the students also suffered in the process. The biggest overarching factor for these educators was the lack of recognition that students receive for their accomplishments in school. They stated that in schools who struggled with having a good culture there was little recognition of their students which created a divide between groups and subcultures in the school. One educator felt that "students needed to know every adult in their life will support them and hold them accountable." When talking about communication to recognize their students' achievements, an educator stated that "I don't think we reward our students enough." The educators felt that recognition in each of these instances directly related to decrease in good culture. They felt that if the students are not invested then it will make it harder to improve the overall culture of the school. As one educator stated that a student "will be a better student because they are around peers who are hopefully doing well." The educators also felt that the improved recognition in their school culture also helped to increase the communication, accountability, and buy-in among everyone in the school. The

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

students' feeling of belonging in a school culture was a major underlying factor in developing a healthy school culture.

Overall the educators outlined that if a school could increase the ability of its leadership to better communicate, be accountable, recognize individuals, and promote overall buy-in that a healthy school culture would be created that helped to increase the academic optimism found in a school. One educator stated this sentiment saying, "Culture is all about building relationships and being on the same page," while another stated that "small changes in the school [can] make the school actually a really good place." They also emphasized these factors when speaking about the structures in the school that enable them to be successful and facilitate a healthy culture that creates an environment that makes students feel like they belong and excel in all their achievements.

### **Conclusion**

This investigation into the teacher perceptions of a healthy school culture proved to be very interesting and informative. I was not surprised to find that leadership was a major commonality in the issues the educators had in their jobs or was the reason they had some of their greatest experiences. I was surprised how specific the teachers were in the parts of leadership that helped them the most in their jobs. Specifically, the accountability and recognition pieces because I would assume that leaders in schools would always be looking for ways to put out the word that they were successful in their schools and that they would be making sure that those working underneath would be doing their jobs. The lack of structures in schools that allowed this to happen was very interesting as my educators had very diverse experiences in different schools and how the culture was at each of the schools. I had no idea the enabling structures were so important to culture development. The research had pointed me in

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

that direction, but I felt that a majority of schools would have some kind of structure set up to support their educators. In reality, many of the experiences that I had heard about were lacking structure to help the teacher but when structures were present the educators were very enthusiastic about what they saw happening in the culture of their school.

I am concerned that this research did not dig deep enough into these issues. I need to solicit the perceptions of the other parts of school culture such as administration, students, and the community to get a true understanding of how all these parts are related. I still feel that teachers were the place to start but, in the instances, where they were describing other schools it would have been enlightening to be able to speak to those individuals of the culture where the issue was being identified. I felt that the research was also very surface level and would benefit from a deeper investigation. I think that doing more research to uncover different leadership, communication, accountability, recognition, and buy-in strategies would be beneficial to understand the commonalities between schools with healthy school cultures versus those that have unhealthy cultures. Further research should be done to uncover the exact commonalities between schools that have healthy school cultures and if they do have a happy medium between academics and ECA. The educators did believe that there was a happy medium but only one of them identified a school that actually found a happy medium between the two areas.

I think that one thing that could have been different is to include SPED and ESOL teachers to get an understanding how those teachers believe a school culture affects their students. They were omitted from this study because I wanted to speak with teachers who taught the greatest majority of the total student population. I also feel that to get a true understanding of a healthy school culture that I will need to interview more people to see whether or not the trends that I have found here will continue to hold up over a bigger sample.

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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## Appendix A

### ADULT RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

#### **Brief Description**

The purpose of this research is to investigate the intersection of academics and extracurricular activities in school culture. Individuals who volunteer to participate in this study will be interviewed about their perceptions of essential components that establish a healthy school culture. It will take about 20-30 minutes of your time. The risks to participants in this study may include the asking of questions that you may find uncomfortable to answer but you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. There are no direct benefits or rewards for participants in this study. **Please read the remainder of this form before deciding if you want to volunteer to be in this research study.**

My name is Kyle Oltman, I am a graduate student at the University of Mary Washington, and I am seeking your consent to participate in this research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. The information below explains the study in detail. Before volunteering, please ask any questions that you may have about the research; I will be happy to explain anything in greater detail.

#### **Details of Participant Involvement**

I am interested in learning more about understanding the intersection of academics and extracurricular activities in school culture will help to maximize the exposure that all students should receive for their accomplishments no matter the area in which they are attained. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer questions about your perceptions of a healthy school culture based on your own experience. The data you provide will gathered from you answers about the experience you have had in relation to school culture as a teacher. This data will be collected using a digital tape recorder to keep you answers and feelings about the subject in their original authentic form.

#### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

All information about participants will be kept confidential. This means that I will assign a number or pseudonym to your data, and only I will have the key to indicate which data belongs to which participant. I will never reveal any information about you to anyone that would directly or indirectly enable you to be identified. When the research is complete, I will destroy all participant data.

#### **Risks and Benefits of Participation**

The risks to you for participating in this study may include social stigma related to participation in the study. These risks will be minimized by the careful use and destruction of all data linked to participants as well as the use of markers that mask the participants' identity. If you should experience any difficulties during the study, please tell me immediately so that I may take appropriate action. The benefit of this research is that it may contribute to better general understanding of school culture development. There are no direct benefits to you as a participant.

#### **Participant Rights**

You have the right to **ask any questions you have** before, during or after participation, and I encourage you to do so. If you do not want to be in this study, there will be no penalties or loss of benefits that you are entitled to. As a voluntary participant in this research, you have the right to refuse to perform any activities and answer any questions that I ask of you. This research has been approved by the University of Mary Washington Institutional Review Board, a committee responsible for ensuring that the safety and rights of research participants are protected. For information about your rights as a research participant, contact the IRB chair, Dr. Jo Tyler ([jtyler@umw.edu](mailto:jtyler@umw.edu)).

## SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

### **Contact Information**

For more information about this research before, during or after your participation, please contact me (koltman@mail.umw.edu) or my university supervisor, Dr. Patricia Reynolds ([preynold@umw.edu](mailto:preynold@umw.edu)). To report any unanticipated problems relating to the research that you experience during or following your participation, contact my university supervisor, Dr. Patricia Reynolds ([preynold@umw.edu](mailto:preynold@umw.edu)).

*Before signing this form, please ask me any questions you have about participation in this study.*

### **To be Completed by Participant**

I have read all of the information on this form, and all of my questions and concerns about the research described above have been addressed. I choose, voluntarily, to participate in this research project. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*(Separate consent and signature is needed if any audio, video, digital, or image recordings of participants will be made. See the "To be Completed by Participant" section of the new (2019) **Adult Informed Consent Form Instructions**)*

### **To be completed by Researcher**

I confirm that the participant named above has been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered to the best of my knowledge and ability. A copy of this Consent Form has been provided to the participant, and I will keep the original for a minimum of three years.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print name of investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



**Appendix B**

**Interview Questions**

What constitutes a good school culture in your experience?

How do you believe that the academic setting affects the culture of a school?

How do you believe that extracurricular activities affect the culture of a school?

Describe some of the aspects of school culture that you have seen in this school?

Do you see, or have you seen either academics or extracurricular activities prioritized more in a school you have worked in?

Do you believe that the structures within your school allow you to be the most successful in your job?

Do you believe that there is a happy medium between the academic and extracurricular activities that will benefit the school?

Do you believe those aspects are beneficial to developing a healthy school culture?

**Follow up Questions**

Could you explain more about what you mean by the term \_\_\_\_\_?

Tell me more about that experience?

What impact do you think that had/would have on students/other teachers?

Is that what you were talking about earlier?

Is there anything else that you would like to add about school culture?

**Appendix C**

**EMAIL MESSAGE TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS**

My name is Kyle Oltman, and I am an eighth-grade teacher here at A.G. Wright Middle School. As part of my graduate studies at the University of Mary Washington, I am doing research on educators' perceptions of the essential components in establishing a healthy school culture specifically relating to understanding the intersection of academics and extracurricular activities. For this research, I plan to conduct in-depth interviews with middle school teachers in order to learn their thoughts about and experiences with school culture. *If you would be willing to take part in my study, please reply to this email or contact me at the phone number below.*

If you take part in this study, the interview should take less than an hour. It will be conducted in private at a convenient time and place for you. It will be audio recorded and everything you say will be kept strictly confidential. I hope the findings from this research will help to maximize the exposure that all students should receive for their accomplishments no matter the area in which they are attained. If you would like further information or have any questions, please let me know.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Kyle Oltman

540-207-5021

[koltman@mail.umw.edu](mailto:koltman@mail.umw.edu)