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LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVES ON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL CULTURE

A Dissertation in

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by

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on the creation of positive school culture at the independent school level. The central questions guiding this research were: (1) What comprises school culture in independent schools? (2) How do stakeholders at The Polk School define school culture? (3) According to the stakeholders at The Polk School, who has the most influence over the school culture? (4) How do stakeholders in one independent school perceive school culture in their school as opposed to public schools? Is it the same? Is it different? If so, how? (5) What impact, if any, does school culture have on academic performance (as perceived by independent school stakeholders)? (6) Do the leaders in one independent school see themselves as influencing school culture? Do the other stakeholders in this school see the leaders as influencing school culture? If so, what specific actions can school leaders take to influence school culture positively? In order to address these questions a single-site case study was conducted at an independent school, The Polk School, located in the Middle Atlantic States.

This case study used a multitude of in-depth interviews as a means of data collection. Nine school community members holding different positions within the school community were interviewed, twice each. A review of the literature was conducted that focused on a variety of scholars. Some of the literature focused on defining school culture; other articles and books were case studies conducted using school culture as a focal point. Literature focusing on the connection between school culture and academic achievement, leadership theory, and leadership and its direct effect on school culture was also included.

The emergent theory created in this study can be used as a tool for practitioners. The study was conducted in a manner that allowed for the detailed examination of a single school environment. Future studies can look to compare what was found at The Polk School with findings from schools across geographic regions, or comparing schools located in close proximity

to one another. Research can also be conducted within a single school, focusing on individual

stakeholder groups (students, faculty, and administration) and their views on positive school

culture and their specific role in creating it.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Chapter 1
Introduction

For seventeen years of my life I have been closely involved with independent schooling. For twelve of those years I attended The Monroe School[1], an independent, secular day school in the Mid-Atlantic Region. For one additional year I had the pleasure of teaching at The Polk School,[2] which is located less than a mile from The Monroe School. During this extended period of time I have grown both accustomed to and fond of the way these schools educate their students - academically, athletically, and developmentally.

During my single year as a teacher in an independent school, I saw The Polk School, a school that has a history rich in tradition, go through an immensely difficult transition of key leadership positions. I observed a once positive and supportive school culture turn negative and distrusting. Collaboration became less and less prevalent as individual leaders became unsure of whom they should trust. The faculty was forced to act as a buffer between the strife occurring at the top of the educational hierarchy, and the students who knew little of the situation.

In one short year a generally positive school culture had become toxic, and the school, as a whole, began to suffer. The effects of this decline were felt profoundly upon completion of the 2004-2005 academic year when the upper school lost approximately 25% of its faculty. The great majority of these faculty members left of their own volition and were not yet of retirement age.

As I bore witness to these events, it became obvious that the head of a school has a great deal of influence on the school culture, and that, during this difficult period, perhaps that influence was not employed in the most effective manner possible. Because school culture is so closely tied to relationships between individual personalities within school walls, it is one area

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[1] Pseudonyms have been used in this study to insure anonymity for those schools and individuals included in this study.
[2] Ibid.

upon which a school headmaster has limited direct influence. However, the indirect influence and power that the headmaster has in this arena should not be underestimated, and is further discussed in the later chapters of this study.

Because my aspiration is to become a headmaster at an independent school, I consider it crucial to understand the nature of school culture, and the headmaster's role in developing and promoting educationally appropriate school cultures.   This knowledge can be seen as something proactive in nature. It is a knowledge base that can lead towards the creation of initiatives that boost student achievement and morale through improved faculty and staff efficacy. Marshall (1993) speculates that students in school environments they deem to be positive will model themselves after the adults who have created such environments, and will strive to please them. This sequence leads to greater student achievement both in and out of the classroom.

It was during a qualitative studies class that I realized how it was I could analyze my experience at The Polk School using a lens that could both expand my knowledge base greatly, and assist the school that was to be the focus of my study. During this class, I conducted a pilot study (Schochor, 2007) which became the foundation of this larger, more comprehensive study. The pilot study allowed me to fine tune my interviewing abilities and it improved my data analysis capabilities exponentially.

Though the literary and scholarly foundation of school culture is very well-established, the vast majority of this literature is focused primarily on public schooling. That trend is logical considering that 89% of all U.S. secondary students attend public schools (Council for American Private Education, 2008). Though this statistic is only reasonable considering that vastly more public schools exist than independent schools, it does create a gap in the literature where independent school leaders are concerned.

For as long as educational research has existed, it has been accepted that there are tangible and intangible facets to as the concept of "education." School culture is perhaps one of

the most vital and prominent intangible aspects of the educational institution (Marshall 1993, Lowry 2002; Midgley & Wood, 1993) and consequently has been studied through a multitude of different lenses. Those lenses have all helped me to shape the design of this study and to grasp precisely what school culture is, and why it is so crucial to study.

Administrators in public schools are held accountable for learning about school culture and the impact it can have on student achievement and development (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2007). This study, however, focuses on independent schools, and it is my belief that independent school leaders are not well versed in the intricacies of school culture, how it can affect their schools, and what they can do to positively influence it. This fact has little to do with their drive or ambition to be the best school leaders they can be, and more to do with the stark reality that scholarship on independent school culture is much less abundant than scholarship regarding on public schooling.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is multi-pronged. The primary purpose of this research is to specifically identify the aspects of school culture that exist in an independent school setting, and to examine the interplay among these specific aspects within a given school culture. Other related research questions will also be answered, such that an emergent theory (also referred to as a conceptual framework) concerning independent school culture can be properly contextualized and comprehended.

The participants in this study are all members of The Polk School community, and they represent a wide variety of stakeholder groups generally associated with independent schooling. Following the analysis of data retrieved from the two interviews conducted with each participant, and a comprehensive review of the existing literature, I propose an emergent theory regarding the

creation and development of school culture. This emergent theory is directly linked to the input received from these various stakeholders, thereby legitimizing my findings and more closely demonstrating the actual experiences of those involved in the development and maintenance of a given school culture.

Research questions

The research questions that guide this study are a product of: a review of the pertinent literature; my personal experiences; and the experiences of those interviewed as part of a previous pilot study I conducted on this topic. These events have led me to structure my proposed inquiry into the nature of independent school culture, and the school leader's role as it relates to this phenomenon, into four distinct components reflected in the following research questions.

1. What comprises school culture in independent schools?

   - How do stakeholders in one independent school define school culture?

   - According to these stakeholders, who has the most influence over the culture in independent schools?

2. How do stakeholders in one independent school perceive school culture in their school as opposed to public schools? Is it the same? Is it different? If so, how is it different?

3. What impact, if any, does school culture have on academic performance (as perceived by independent school stakeholders)?

4. Do the leaders in one independent school see themselves as influencing school culture? Do the other stakeholders in this school see the leaders as influencing school culture? If so, what specific actions can school leaders take to influence school culture positively?

Significance of the study

The significance of this study goes hand in hand with the significance of school culture. Because this study is concerned, first and foremost, with the discernment of what goes into creating a school culture, it is imperative that the importance of school culture is explained.

School culture is a term that represents a multitude of different interactions occurring within school walls. Definitions of school culture abound in academic scholarship (Erikson, 1987; Maehr & Midgley, 1996), and it has become very difficult to distill exactly what goes into the term's construction. While this term has come to mean many things over time, its importance in the efficacy of a school to accomplish its mission cannot be overstated (Maehr & Parker, 1993).

Over the years, school leadership has changed in many ways (Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 2004). The roles and responsibilities of current heads of school have expanded to include things previously thought outside their respective purview (Davies, Ellison, & Bowring-Carr, 2005; Bizar & Barr, 2001; Thurston, Clift, & Schacht, 1993), and these ideas are currently being expressed in new ways, unfamiliar to those only knowledgeable in the standard views on leadership and leadership theory (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998).

The different roles that school leaders are expected to play is a vital aspect of this study. Due to the unreliability of self-reported data (Judson, 2006; Davis, 2007), the data retrieved in this study, concerning the complex role of the school leader and his or her place in the creation or maintenance of a certain school culture, comes from a wide variety of stakeholders, and not solely interviews conducted with the school head. These views help to create an equation that is not leadership heavy in its influence, but instead looks at all of the factors that play into school culture equally, and determines a more inclusive, representational, and shared view of positive school culture.

Part of the drive behind the resurgence of interest in school culture is the concept that school culture and academic achievement are inextricably intertwined (Comer, 2005; Newell & Van Ryzin, 2007). Independent schools, though not reliant upon standardized testing to determine funding, still use standardized testing to determine success on some levels. The use of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) as a college entrance examination is a perfect example of the kind of standardized testing that can influence independent schools and their ability to reach the enrollment numbers they deem necessary during a given year.

Independent schools thrive on their reputation and identity. The perception of a school is at least partially based on that school's ability to transition its students into "top-tier" colleges and universities. Failing to do so can cause a school's reputation to suffer, further limiting enrollment and placing a vice grip on resources that a school requires for growth and development.

This study also aims to answer questions inextricably related to the creation of school culture. Important to any study is the ability to properly contextualize the findings and conclusion of a given project. In this vein, the literature has been dissected and questions have been asked of the participants that will allow for an in-depth understanding of how public school culture is different from independent school culture, and how these differences might influence the findings of this study. In addition to providing a proper context for the findings of this study,

the answers to these research questions may very well assist public school principals to make use of the equation created here in this study, even though the case site is an independent school.

School culture, and the myriad of issues that surround it, are very important due to their general omnipresence within school walls. Though scholars disagree about what specifically comprises a school's given culture, they do agree on the fact that school culture is something that exists in all schools, and is a product, on some level, of the relationships that exist therein. Discovering ways that different school leaders can influence these relationships and improve school culture could very well lead to a positive trickle-down effect. Policies that are created at the top of the educational hierarchy, prioritizing school culture, help to advance the interests of faculty members, students, and parents alike.

Outline of the Dissertation

The first chapter of this study is a very broad outline of the purposes behind this project, and how this study plans on addressing those issues. In addition, the specific research questions guiding this study have been set forth, and the significance of this study and its place among existing school culture scholarship is explained.

Chapter Two outlines literature relevant to the research questions posed in this chapter. The review presents scholarship broken down into twelve independent subsections. These subsections address topics associated with school culture that relate to the different purposes behind conducting this study. Chapter Three states how the study was conducted from a methodological standpoint. The major topics covered in this section have to do with participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion regarding the limitations applicable to this study.

Chapter Four provides a proper contextualization of the data received from the participants in the study. The chapter is broken down into nine sections; one section will be devoted to each participant. Each participant has their respective section broken down into sub-sections covering: participant background, their view on what school culture is at its core, school culture as it relates to school leadership, school culture as it relates to academic achievement, and, finally, the differences between a public and independent school culture. Each participant profile is replete with textual examples of how the interviewee feels about the five sub-sections outlined above such that his/her input can be properly contextualized prior to its analysis.

Chapter Five presents the product of data analysis and literary analysis in the form of an emergent theory. This emergent theory is explained in depth, including sections devoted to detailing each individual component, and how each component is important in the analysis of school culture. Chapter Five also includes the reasoning behind the placement of the different elements in the equation.

Chapter Six is devoted to addressing three specific key themes of the study, along with identifying future implications of this research on theory, practice, and subsequent studies on school culture. These self-identified themes are the result of analysis of both the data gathered in the study, and the research written by noted scholars. The conclusion of this thesis presents a summary of the earlier chapters and implications for future research and practice.

Chapter 2
Review of Relevant Literature

Introduction

Although legislators herald academic achievement as the single most important aspect of schooling, the developmental component of education remains critical in the eyes of administrators and educational scholars alike. For this reason, determining the effect of school culture on students' development is a necessary aspect of this study.

Related to the idea of academic achievement is the notion that students from different racial, and socio-economic backgrounds achieve (in an academic sense) at a lower rate than their white, more financially stable, counterparts. This idea is related to school culture, because, while independent schools might have the ability to choose their student body, many schools do not have that same option, and must therefore deal directly with any existing achievement gap.

The following section focuses on the fundamental purposes of education and the role they play in how educational scholars and school administrators view the responsibilities of schools and school leaders. This section will specifically and effectively link the academic and developmental views on school culture to one another.

The subsequent section of the literature review takes some of the aforementioned ideas and theories about school culture and finds studies that have applied them in real-life academic settings. Much can be learned from the application of educational theory to everyday educational situations.

Because school culture is a phenomenon experienced by every person who walks through the doors of a given school, it is difficult to determine the best vantage point to critique and analyze it. The penultimate section of this literature review discusses some of the finer points

made by scholars having to do with this idea of proper perspective in school culture research. In addition, the concept of school culture does only exist here in the United States. The following section takes a look at some views of school culture posited by scholars studying schools outside of the United States in an effort to understand how school culture is viewed in different contexts.

Finally, I take this theoretical discussion about the varying facets and views of school culture and its effects on students, and apply them directly to independent schools, highlighting some of the differences between public and independent schools as they relate to school culture. These differences should help to contextualize the findings of this study in a way that make them useful to both independent and public school heads.

Defining school culture

McBrien and Brandt (1997), writing for The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), define school culture as "any combination of values, cultures, safety practices, and organizational structures that occur within school walls" (p.1). Issues such as pedagogical concerns, differing ethnicities, and interpersonal relationships among school stakeholders contribute significantly to school culture. As Barresi and Olson (1994) state, "School culture is associated with deeper, more substantive characteristics that relate to the dynamic interactions of the school's inner publics -- administrators, staff, faculty, students, and parents" (p. 2).

Hoy and Miskel (2005) see culture as the "dynamic relationship between bureaucratic role demands and individual work needs as people are brought together in the workplace" (p. 27). This view emphasizes the dynamic nature of culture in the workplace (for all intents and purposes the workplace in this study is a school). School culture is a dynamic entity, as it can change at any moment as the result of a number of different actions taken by any involved stakeholders.

Hoy and Miskel (2005) also make the point that "as organizational members interact, shared values, norms, beliefs, and ways of thinking emerge. These shared orientations form the culture of the organization" (p. 27). School culture is not something that society uses to label particular schools, or something that exists beyond the control of the actors within a given school; rather, it is a direct result of those actors and their interactions with one another on a daily basis.

School climate, for purposes of this paper, is synonymous with school culture. Though there are differences between the two, as Sergiovanni (1987) points out, the differences are minimal enough that literature focused on school climate will still offer much to the school culture discussion. A particular school culture is responsible for creating a particular school climate. The idea of culture encompasses the interpersonal relationships between those that exist at a particular school, while the climate is the environment created by all of those relationships occurring simultaneously within the same school (Ben-Avie, Emmons, and Haynes, 1997).

Though there are a multitude of studies that focus on the effect of administrators (Edinger, 2006; Robertson & Tang, 1995) and teachers (Williams, 2007) on the school culture phenomenon, McBrien and Brandt's (1997) definition encompasses all major school culture stakeholders, including parents. Parents are often forgotten in the school culture discussion due to their obvious lack of direct effect or interest in school culture; however, they play an integral part in the creation of school culture.

Peterson (2002) adds his definition of school culture:

[school culture is] the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school. These unwritten expectations build up over time as teachers, administrators, parents, and students work together, solve problems, deal with challenges and, at times, cope with failures (p. 267).

Peterson's laundry list is a thought-provoking way of communicating what constitutes a school culture. Within this list one will notice that all of the terms used by Peterson are intangible. Peterson's definition is both clear and wide ranging, and his understanding of those

involved in creating and maintaining school culture effectively encompasses all of the major

stakeholders in the process.

School culture is that sense or intangible feeling one gets upon walking into a school

building. Achievement First, a non-governmental educational group striving to prepare inner-city

youths for college, states that, "Just as there are clearly identifiable commonalities in the

instructional approach among the small handful of high-performing urban schools, it is striking

that all of these schools have a very similar 'look and feel'" (Achievement First, 2004, p. 1). As

in the example given by Achievement First, this feeling can be positive and comfortable, where

students and teachers feel empowered, or it can be negative and filled with tension and anxiety

(Daugherty, Kelley, and Thornton, 2005).

School culture is an intangible presence that every school possesses, and it can most

certainly affect more tangible and currently "pressing" issues such as academic test scores and

student discipline. In *The Survival Guide for Iowa School Administrators,* Edgar Schein is

quoted as stating, "There is a possibility, under emphasized in leadership research, that the only

thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture and the unique talent of

leaders is to work with this culture" (p. 1). Schein, a prominent educator and administrator at the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, suggests that leaders play a prominent role in creating and

maintaining a positive school culture. He contends that leaders must know how to create and

maintain this culture, and this maintenance of the school culture must be one of their focal points

to be considered successful. "Culture is created in the first instance by the actions of leaders;

culture is also embedded and strengthened by leaders. When a given culture becomes

dysfunctional, leadership is needed to help the group unlearn some of its cultural assumptions,

and learn new assumptions" (Schein, 1991, p. 317).

Leaders and school culture

Many researchers, like Schein, believe that the creation and maintenance of school culture begins and ends with school leaders. An article in *Newsweek* states, "They [principals] set the tone for what happens from the moment the opening bell rings and can turn a troubled school around with a combination of vision, drive and very hard work" (Kantrowitz and Mathews, 2007, p. 1).

One researcher in agreement with the *Newsweek* authors is Gary Yukl, who offers a thought-provoking perspective of school culture in his 1994 book, *Leadership in Organizations*. He points out that school leaders have the greatest potential for creating and supporting certain aspects of school culture by using (consciously or otherwise) five major mechanisms. These are:

> Attention: Leaders communicate their priorities, values, and concerns by their choice of things to ask about, comment on, measure, praise, and criticize.
>
> Reactions to Crises: Crises are significant because the emotionality surrounding them increases potential for learning about values and assumptions.
>
> Role Modeling: Leaders can communicate values and expectations by their own actions, especially actions showing special loyalty, self-sacrifice, and service beyond the call of duty.
>
> Allocation of Rewards: Criteria used as the basis for allocating rewards such as pay increase or promotion communicate what is valued by the leader or organization.
>
> Criteria for Selection and Dismissal: Leaders can influence cultures by recruiting people who have particular values, skills, or traits, and by promoting them to positions of authority (Yukl, 1994, p. 356).

These five mechanisms are excellent examples of how some researchers view and express their findings on school culture. Yukl effectively explains what different actions mean and can be construed as to meaning from a leadership, top-down perspective. This research is directed towards school leaders whom many researchers believe are in charge of both creating and cultivating school culture. This particular bit of research examines how school leaders can be proactive in affecting or being affected by school culture.

Yukl's perspective of school culture addresses the idea that leaders absolutely affect those who surround them; a concept that was touched on many times during the interviewing process of my pilot study. Multiple pilot study respondents commented that although school culture may be something shared by multiple aspects of the school community, the entire community is held in some ways at the whim of the school's administration. They are, after all, seen as being in charge of all hirings, firings, and associated personnel matters. They oversee the process of individual student acceptance, and they are the creators and final arbiters of many of the independent school's policies (Gummere, Johnson, Parkhill, Parkman, and Springer, 1961).

Sybouts and Wendel (1994) reiterate Yukl's view that school administrators are at the forefront of all issues pertaining to school culture. Their perspective is slightly different from Yukl's in that they believe school culture is something that is created either positively or negatively by the school leader without the leader necessarily being consciously aware of such consequences. According to Sybouts and Wendel (1994), a school principal can create a school culture whether it is purposeful or not. Intention can play a very small role in the creation of school culture if the principal does not consciously recognize nor prioritize this responsibility. A school leader that ignores or avoids proactively affecting school culture will in all likelihood result in a culture of neglect and apathy regardless of initial intention.

It is the belief of Sybouts and Wendel (1994) that school culture is something that can be created both intentionally and subconsciously. Therefore, all school leaders must be knowledgeable on the subject because whether they intend to or not, they are the ones eventually responsible for creating their school's culture, be it positive or negative.

School leadership has an effect on school culture (Tucker and Codding, 2002; Ediger, 1997; Wren, 1999; Marcoulides, 1992; Snyder and Ebmeier, 1992; Duke and Iwanicki, 1992; Dodd, 2000; Patterson & Protheroe, 2001; Welch, Lindsay, & Halfacre, 2001). This effect, however, can be positive or negative and is wholly dependent upon the school leader's ability and

efficacy in constructing or maintaining a positive school culture. Picucci, Brownson, and Kahlert (2002) believe that school leaders are the gatekeepers of positive school culture. In their experience they have found that student performance hinges on the effective leadership of school administrators. These school leaders were vital in the setting and maintaining of a positive school culture in their respective schools, which led to dramatic improvements in student achievement (Picucci, Brownson, and Kahlert, 2002). The authors point out that positive school culture promotes academic and developmental success on the part of graduating students all while re-enforcing the notion that effective leadership is absolutely central to the creation of a positive school culture.

Picucci, Brownson, and Kahlert's statement (and others like it) could cause those in the United States' Department of Education to re-think what constitutes "good research." If bottom line standards like testing scores can be enhanced by improving school culture, an element not directly correlated with the subjects being tested, perhaps school culture is just one more way to attack a problem that the majority of the country wants to see ameliorated.

Traditional school culture

In a study such as this one it is important to understand what a "traditional" school culture may look like in terms of interpersonal relationships. One example of a "traditional" school culture given by Leithwood, Begley, and Cousins (1994) addresses the past concept of school culture, such that the context of where school culture must go in the future can be truly understood. These authors state that in a traditional school culture one would find that, "Norms of authority and discipline along with a competing need for close personal bonds characterize teachers' interactions with students. Typical norms act to isolate teachers from asking their peers for, or offering to their peers, professional advice" (Leithwood, et. al., 1994, p. 129). There exists

a feeling of isolation in traditional school cultures that could contribute to a lack of

communication and perhaps a feeling of mistrust between different stakeholding factions

(administrators and teachers, for example). In traditional school settings teachers feel isolated

and relatively lonely in terms of professional relationships. Here, administrators must walk a very

fine line between being involved in matters where teachers need them (e.g. school discipline), and

staying away from instructional matters that teachers deem to be their own personal areas of

expertise (Leithwood, et. al., 1994). All in all, traditional schools are littered with professional

distrust and tension, elements that can cripple any hope of creating a positive school culture.

It is important to understand that the school I have chosen to closely study is an

independent school, and is seen in the public eye as one of the more traditional and privileged

schools in existence (Powell, 1996). The school that I examined in this study lists its respective

traditions as one of the aspects of their school of which they are most proud (a view readily held

by multiple participants when interviewed). Through my research I have found that these

schools, though proud of their tradition, have a faculty and an administration very much in tune

with the idea of creating a more collaborative school culture than the more traditional model

defined by Leithwood, Begley, and Cousins. Though these independent schools are proud of

their respective traditions, they are not traditional in many senses. This is the beauty of

independent schooling. Each school is its own example, not cut from the cloth of any other

school, but fully independent in the manner by which it goes about accomplishing the goals it sets

for itself within a created mission statement.

School culture and academic achievement

Research shows that school culture and academic performance are intimately related

(Mcevoy and Welker, 2000; *Journal of Educational Research*, 1997; Hoy, 1990). Renchler, in

his 1992 journal article, "Student Motivation, School Culture, and Academic Achievement" discusses what exactly a positive school culture can do to improve academic achievement when he states that, "achieving the goal of making the individual classroom a place that naturally motivates students to learn is much easier if students and teachers function in a school where academic success and the motivation to learn is expected, respected, and rewarded" (Renchler, 1992, p. 9). Renchler's viewpoint shifts the focus of the student achievement argument from the importance and quantity of direct instruction received by each student, to the quality of the instruction and students' intrinsic motivation. Attaining a positive school culture will lead to students becoming more pro-active in their educational experiences, thus making every minute of instruction more valuable than in institutions where a negative or toxic school culture persists.

The importance of raising student test scores is at the forefront of public and independent education (Dunn and DeBello, 1999; Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, and Williamson, 2000; Camara and Kimmel, 2005), and, unfortunately, the raising of these test scores has superseded the necessity of giving students a well-rounded education (Carmona, 1995; Riley, 2002). The next logical question would be, "what exactly makes an education, 'well-rounded?'" A generally accepted answer to this question includes subjects such as those contained within the fine arts (music, theatre, art classes, etc.), physical education, and any subject that is not directly tested by Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards or any other widely used standardized tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the ACT, and Scholastic Aptitude Test II's.

A journalist from the Milwaukee area covered a specific incident in which a district's fine arts program was coming under fire due to funding issues tied to The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). A brief portion of his article is provided here to illustrate a real-life situation in which school culture is being placed at risk due to NCLB's standards and the general belief that achievement on high stakes testing cannot be improved by such "fringe" courses.

The slashing of music and art programs is continuing in dramatic fashion. In addition to revenue controls, the recent Elementary and Secondary Education Act (often referred to as the No Child Left Behind law) imposed by the Bush administration has put music and art programs in rough shape and left with a dim future. In hopes of reducing the budget, school districts throughout the state are taking drastic measures by cutting out pieces of art and music programs and in some cases eliminating teaching positions completely (Hurley, 2004, p. 1).

This cut in the arts department was met with a good amount of resistance from students and teachers alike, but the aforementioned financial issues concerning funding may be at the heart of the final decision.

Compare that storyline with the reactionary piece written by Richard Semler, superintendent of the Richland County School District in Washington State, "At a time when there is increased accountability and pressure for schools to raise reading, writing and math scores, it's important that we not lose sight of the arts…that we continue to fund arts education in an appropriate way" (Semler, 2006, p. 1). Semler, a man who has worked his way to a top position in public education, makes the importance of art clear when he states that:

- Students benefit from creative learning.
- Students with high levels of arts participation outperform "arts-poor" students on virtually every academic measure.
- Sustained involvement in music and theater are highly correlated with success in mathematics and reading.
- A solid exposure to the arts helps level the playing field for children from disadvantaged circumstances (p. 1).

Semler believes schools that are cutting "fringe" programs are doing their student constituencies great injustices that extend beyond simply offering a wide range of courses. Semler sees direct correlations between these "fringe" subjects and student achievement in "tested" areas, so the question posed is whether these subjects will allow students to reach the same levels in tested subjects, such as reading and math that they would with more concentrated direct instruction in these specific areas.

The argument set forth by Semler, which seems to be in contradiction to the way most school districts are dealing with issues of student achievement, is starting to take root. However,

school districts are continuing to cut these "fringe" programs in order to more directly deal with their perceived crisis of not reaching adequate yearly progress (AYP). Linear thinking has ruled the collective thought processes of public school administrators in the years since NCLB was authorized. For these reasons, public schools have taken to doing exactly what was done in Milwaukee. They are cutting what are seen as "fringe" subjects currently not being tested on recognized, standardized scales in order to commit more time and resources to direct instruction of tested subjects. These fringe subjects, however, seem to mean something to the student body and school community as a whole that cannot be quantified or standardized. However, because of that inherent inability to be quantified, they are being slashed in order to make room for a whole new curriculum with goals based mainly on reaching AYP.

A current school improvement project in Boston, Massachusetts is focused on improving, among other things, school culture. This project has emphasized collaboration and effective communication among teachers and students. In fostering this culture, schools involved in the experiment have experienced large increases in their average standardized test scores, student attendance, and college enrollment rates (Center for Collaborative Education, 2006). Those who work for the United States Department of Education (e.g. The What Works Clearinghouse) generally require empirical data for studies to be considered legitimate (Mageau, 2004; T.H.E. Journal, 2004; Kadel, 2006). However, there exist exceptions to this general rule. One could look at this cooperative project in Boston and perhaps develop hard data sets which could propel school culture research beyond the stringent What Works Clearinghouse standards.

School culture and the achievement gap

Both Butler and Dickson (1987) and Gaziel (1997) focused on the creation of a positive school culture for the purpose of raising academic achievement. The difference between these

researchers is that Gaziel looked at bridging the achievement gap between students of different

races, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds (Singham, 1998; The Register-Guard, 2005;

Ikpa, 2003). In Gaziel's study, positive school culture seemed to have the most wide-ranging

benefits for Asian, Black, and disadvantaged students. These benefits included but were not

limited to academic achievement, which at the secondary level is something this review of the

literature has posited is of the utmost importance for schools to procure governmental funding or ,

if they are independent schools, the necessary enrollment numbers for continual growth and

development.

Gaziel's findings are very important in that they address the problem of the ever

expanding achievement gap between those who live in financially comfortable situations (high

socio-economic status) and those who subsist in relatively lower socio-economic statuses in the

United States. Though I do not discount Gaziel's findings in terms of school culture influence

based upon racial or ethnic grouping, it is of much more interest that the achievement gap be

closed between those who are financially secure, and those who struggle to make enough money

to survive (Hampden-Thompson, Gillian, and Pong, 2005; Noble, Tottenham, and Casey, 2005).

The issue of the achievement gap in the United States is generally accepted among

educators and researchers (Jackson, 2003), and thus identifying where it exists is no longer

enough. Researchers and educational professionals alike must now try to find solutions to this

growing problem before it becomes even more widespread and burdensome.

This issue must be recognized by the current generation of educational professionals if

this gap is to be narrowed and progress towards achievement for all is to be seen as of the utmost

importance. Jackson points out that teachers are not solely responsible for the existing

achievement gap. Therefore, teachers need to be aided in closing the gap by something more

powerful and all-encompassing than simple curricular changes (e.g. more class time for reading

and math) alone. I speculate that improving school culture could be at the heart of a possible solution.

> Jackson (2003) concludes:
>
> If we recognize that students from specific minorities will, for complex historical and psychological reasons, tend to have more difficulty identifying with the academic work that is essential to their future, we can consciously create academic microcultures in which such students thrive (p. 579).

The issue of the ever-expanding achievement gap can be addressed by the creation of accepting, diverse, inclusive, and responsive school and academic culture, a goal that must be taken on by schools across the country if vast academic improvement is to be realized.

An argument, that ties in nicely with that of Jackson concerns how some schools around the country are handling budgeting pressures by allocating less funding for extra-curricular activities. McNeal (1998) studies the influence that extra-curricular activities have on the development of a positive school culture. Budgeting pressures are forcing schools to make some extra-curricular activities available to only those who can reimburse the school appropriately for the selected activity or sport. Whatever a school must pay out for their students to take part in a selected activity, students in some areas are expected to fully compensate the district.

McNeal chooses to focus on the importance of extra-curricular activities as they pertain to student development and school culture, "Educators in some schools and districts realize the importance of these activities to the school culture and student development but they have no way of discerning which activities are more beneficial and for whom" (p. 183). McNeal and other professional educators are convinced that these activities that occur outside the realm of an accepted school curriculum are beneficial for students. However, because they do not have empirical evidence linking certain activities to specific benefits for individual students, educators experience resistance when attempting to obtain the funding necessary to give their students a choice of extra-curricular activities.

McNeal continues, "Other schools and districts have eliminated all or some of their nonacademic activities on the contention that they are not central to the student's academic development" (p. 183). Many "intangible" benefits that have long been associated with the secondary school experience are beginning to disappear due to an ever growing need to produce students that are high academic achievers. Moreover, quantifying the importance of extracurricular activities to individual student development is more complicated than tracking an individual student's standardized test scores.

The developmental effect of school culture on students

School culture is not always an inactive and passive object in the view of researchers. Maehr and Midgley (1996) believe that school culture can be a proactive force that affects students. These researchers found that school culture can affect the aspirations, ambitions, and goals that students come to hold. They state that, "As the culture of the school serves this purpose, it frames the quality of motivation and learning that will be exhibited" (Maehr & Midgley, p. 66).

Seeing school culture as a frame for considering what goes on within school walls can be a useful perspective from which to view the school culture phenomenon. It has already been pointed out that school culture can have effects on tangible goals that the school may have for its students (e.g. Adequate Yearly Progress as stipulated in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). It has not yet been pointed out that school culture may also dictate many of the goals students hold beyond academia.

The way in which Maehr and Midgley (1996) state their argument makes the creation and maintenance of school culture seem like a truly reciprocal process. Just as administrators,

teachers, students, and parents can affect any given school culture, the culture, once created, can have a definite effect, be it positive or negative, on those that created it.

One example of how school culture can work against the individuals that create and maintain it is given by Wilson (2002), a scholar who conducted a case study at an Australian secondary school, Barracks. While studying Barracks he noticed that those who were unlucky enough to study and teach there, "expressed their helplessness by displaying a lack of initiative, interest, motivation and action" (Wilson, 2002, p. 79). After spending much time at this school witnessing and observing what helplessness and despair members were experiencing, Wilson determined that, "it was a result of a school culture in which individuals learned that it was difficult to influence events" (p. 79). Wilson, in his experience at Barracks, came to a conclusion that many others have also come to (Telford, 1996; Ferraiolo, Hess, Maranto & Milliman, 2004; Ouchi, 2004) – that school culture is a social phenomenon that can influence a particular school positively, or, if it is created carelessly or maliciously, it can influence these same schools negatively.

Though school culture can exist in the form it does at Barracks, the goal of this study is to create a knowledge base that will allow educators to better understand school culture. By understanding school culture more completely, school leaders can learn how to improve it, the elements which comprise it, and its effects on those that live and work within its confines on a daily basis. To this end, Comer (2005) conducted a study looking at the positive social effects that school culture can have on its students and teachers. The article makes references to key notions of student development and their internalization of, "attitudes, values, and ways of the adults and institutions around them" (p. 757).

The creation or destruction of any school culture should be viewed as a cyclical process. Schools can begin to trend upwards in terms of school culture, or they can spiral downward. In either case, the culture undergoes a true transformation, one that may take quite a bit of time to

complete. Comer characterizes this process as a time-intensive event where ideals, values, and attitudes are internalized and acted upon. Following this train of thought, it seems as though school culture, according to Comer, is somewhat of a top-down process. The administration would set the school culture example and model that example for the faculty, then both the faculty and administration would model this school culture for the student body who would consequently internalize what they have absorbed from watching and listening to the faculty and administration interact. Perhaps these same students could even bring some of this culture home with them where their parents could then see the school culture's effects on these students.

Comer makes perhaps the single most important point yet about school culture, "We often forget that, for many children, academic learning is not a primary, natural, or valued task. It is the positive relationships and sense of belonging that a good school culture provides that give these children the comfort, confidence, competence, and motivation to learn" (Comer, 2005, p. 757). Comer alludes to the aforementioned idea that school culture has a direct impact upon the academic achievement of students. In his view, this academic achievement is a by-product of a socialization process in which students are properly educated developmentally, which then allows them to succeed cognitively and socially.

The purposes of education and their impact on school leaders and environments

To be a great leader, one must know his or her constituency, and in the case of education, that constituency is synonymous with the student body, parents, and community. In addition, as Hodgkinson points out, great school leaders must also be able to identify what it is that makes their community unique and how this community has perceived, currently perceives, and will perceive the educational purpose(s) of their school (See Table **2-1**). Understanding all of these things will allow the school leader not only to deal with outside entities effectively, but it will

also allow them to ponder how it is, "these transcending meta-values…can be applied in specific contexts…." (Begley, 2008, p. 8)

Table **2-1**: Fundamental purposes of education

Aesthetic	- Purposes behind education is, "truth, beauty, goodness, justice, happiness, self-fulfillment - Leads to intellectual liberation - Concentrates on student psyche, feelings of self-worth - Produce productive members of a Democratic society - Still in existence today, but never without at least one other purpose of education present
Economic	- Created for the simple purpose of transforming education into an avenue leading towards greater societal efficiency - Oft intertwined with the aesthetic purpose of Education - Pure examples of economic purposes today exist in vocational or trade schools
Ideological	- The impulse to perpetuate and advance a nationalistic spirit, to inculcate rising generations with a nationalist (or euphemistically *patriotic*) ethos is universal - Citizenship training, moral education, and character education all examples of ideological purposes of education - Examples of this purpose of education can be seen in parochial schools which exist to further Catholic ideals, even though they are not located in Vatican City - School can be viewed as isolated communities with their own ideological overtones

Figure derived from: Hodgkinson, 1991; Strike, 2003

School leaders must therefore be aware of their school's particular mission, what educational purpose it serves first and foremost, and why it serves this particular mission. Along

with the school's educational purpose, a school leader must be exceptionally responsive when it comes to dealing with the surrounding community. A successful school leader will be responsive to the communities he works in, while not necessarily allowing the strongest voices within the community to simply impose their various wills upon the school (Begley, 2008).

As occurred with NCLB, there are times when it seems one educational purpose is emphasized at the complete expense of other educational purposes, something Begley considers the opposite of ideal. Begley (2008) suggests that school leaders put, "their professional goals and purposes at the forefront of their administrative practices" (p. 7).

In addition to school leaders using their own experiences and knowledge as a way to deal with issues that arise within school communities, Begley suggests that school leaders can use the purposes of education to guide them through educational dilemmas, which he defines as a problem that allows, "a choice between equally unsatisfactory alternatives" (Begley, 2008, p. 10). These purposes of education can be used like unwritten policies, in that a school leaders' knowledge of them can allow administrators to make decisions by looking at potential consequences through the single lens of the dominant educational purpose of the school in question.

Finally, Begley suggests that educational purposes can be used as a way to galvanize whole districts or school buildings towards specific ends. For example, a school principal could see that the school has a student body that divides itself into a multitude of discrete student cliques (Maag & Kemp, 2003). In order to counteract this potentially detrimental societal phenomenon, the school leader could look to ideological purposes of education as a way to address this problem. Because the ideological purposes of education stress ideas such as community and other shared values that can come in the form of nationalistic or patriotic tendencies, the school leader could articulate this purpose in an attempt to organize a campaign against the formation of damaging cliques.

Purpose driven leadership and independent schools

In studying school culture and the effect independent school heads have on this phenomenon, it is of the utmost importance that independent school leadership is described and analyzed through the existing literature base that focuses on both educational purposes and popular leadership methods (See Table **2-2**). Tying together ideas of school culture with ideas of school leadership (specifically, independent school leadership) is vital in determining the exact role an independent school head can expect to have in forming or maintaining his or her school's culture.

Table **2-2**: Purpose Driven Leadership Practices

Managerial Leadership	- Focuses on functions, tasks, and behavior - Complete tangible duties - Also known as organizational, or transactional leadership
Instructional Leadership	- Focuses on teaching and learning - Looks to impact student learning and teacher efficacy - Centers around student growth
Transformational Leadership	- Leaders as change agents - Leaders exhibit inspirational and charismatic abilities - Leaders able to stimulate co-workers, employees, and students - Leader as visionary - Individualized consideration for all those who are a part of the community - Inspires those around them to raise their feelings of self-worth and self-esteem
Participative Leadership	- Leaders must create and maintain collaborative decision-making environments - Leaders must be aware of the pitfalls of collaboration and take pro-active steps to prevent these instances from occurring
Moral Leadership	- Leader seen as moral agent - Leader must be careful how he/she wields his/her power so as not to take advantage of or alienate employees/co-workers
Contingent Leadership	- Focuses on reaction of leader to different situations that arise in a given environment - Places emphasis on context and the difficulty of making immediate but necessary decisions when faced with varying contextual backgrounds

Figure derived from: Leithwood & Duke, 1998; Leithwood, et. al. 1994; Wilpert, 1995; Shamir, House & Arthur, 1995; Chen, et.al.1996; Sergiovanni, 2001

The educational purposes served at the preparatory schools focused on in this study are dominated by ideological tones, followed closely by economic or transactional functions. Contrary to Hodgkinson's theory (as depicted in Table **2-1**), the aesthetic purpose of education has nearly been lost (though rhetoric of aesthetic purposes abound within school mission statements). This ideological dominance could be attributed to what Strike refers to as the "thickness" of independent school values, meaning that they are, "robust and life encompassing" (Strike, 2003, p. 69). This fact presents a problem, because as these values become thicker, they exclude more people from being a part of the community these schools create for themselves.

This thickness issue could pose a problem for independent school heads. By allowing their school values to become thick, they could be unintentionally isolating themselves from the community at-large. A diversity director has been hired at the Monroe School and initiatives have been taken at The Polk School to directly combat this concern. Neither school wants to be seen as an elitist or isolationist institution. For this reason, the role of these school leaders is to determine ways in which their schools can reach out to the surrounding community and share its resources, in an attempt to expose the less financially fortunate members of the community to opportunities they may not otherwise encounter. The thickness problem does not usually involve public schools, because they draw on the students that geographically surround the physical school building, thereby eliminating any risk that they might be seen as isolationist in nature.

On the positive side of the thick / thin values argument, independent school communities themselves tend to run very smoothly because of their unique value system. This thick value system can be seen in all parts of the independent school, even as far as the admissions office. Here, decisions are made every semester concerning which applicants will fit into the school community the most effectively, and which applicants may not fit in well at all. Those who

appear to be misfits simply will not be admitted, whereas those who seem to complement the school value system well will be welcomed with open arms.

School community members understand each other and respect each other because of their co-existence within the community, and there is simply not much friction among students and teachers. Physically speaking, "Violence is not a word commonly associated with elite independent schools. Indeed, implicit in the physical and philosophical affect of independent schools today is the virtual absence of physical violence" (Nash, 1999, p. 227). This understanding and feeling of community stretches beyond a simply physical nature. This excerpt from The Polk School mission statement plainly states that the school is a community in and of itself with values, expectations, and goals all its own.

> Part of the inherent nature of independent schools is their separate identity, their individual personality. Being independent allows them that freedom, and offers students a place to feel at home, an environment where they belong, an atmosphere where they can thrive and learn (The Polk School, p.1, 2007).

This is a clear example of some of the thick values that pervade independent school walls, and make them places that may, from the outside, seem relatively exclusionary. However, it is these same thick values that allow The Polk School to run so smoothly, both administratively and in student-centered matters.

A problem for independent school leaders is the constant necessity for fundraising. Not only do these professionals need to be adept at running their schools, they must also be skilled at raising the amount of money necessary to take on difficult and expensive tasks such as vast building projects and frequent updates in technology. In my year as a teacher at The Polk School, I was invited (along with the rest of the faculty) to the Headmaster's "vision speech." This speech was solely concerned with the fundraising campaign trail, and what that meant for future building projects at The Polk School. In the book, *New Strategies for Educational Fundraising*, Michael Worth (2002) states that, "The president's role in fund raising is an integral part of his or

her larger educational and support activities" (p. 65). Though Worth uses the term president, headmasters face the same pressure as these university presidents because they, unlike public school leaders, have no steady and guaranteed form of school income and funding other than student tuition. Independent school student tuition rarely accounts for a majority of any school's operating budget, and for that reason, successful fundraising is an absolute necessity.

Taking all of this into account, headmasters must be prepared to lead in transformational manners (when fundraising), instructionally (when they are called on to perform teacher and administrator evaluations), managerially (when they are asked to review and update the school budget), in a contingent manner (when they are called upon to decide on an honor board hearing where a student may face expulsion), in a participative manner (when trying to garner teacher or student buy-in), and finally in moral ways (when dealing with co-workers, so as not to disempower them and make them feel as though they hold little worth to the school). The headmaster, like many school leaders, must transition effectively from one style of leadership to another, making it even more important that headmasters understand and employ the many different forms of leadership mentioned in Table **2-2**.

Bridging the theoretical gap

Though much of the literature on school culture is purely theoretical (unlike the majority of Leithwood's work), some school culture-related literature tries to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and tangible outcomes (Gitlin, Peck, Aposhian, Hadley, & Porter, 2002). Among these studies there have been specific projects undertaken that attempt to empirically prove that school culture is important in accomplishing more measurable school goals. In 1987 Butler and Dickson conducted one of these studies on a public high school in Oregon. Their

study lasted from 1983 through 1987, and used an eight-step process that set student performance

goals based on student achievement data. Success in this study was not merely determined by

changes in student achievement, but also by positive changes in the students' general demeanor

and attitude. The study was focused on improving not only what the school intangibly "felt like,"

but also what improving culture could do for those things that are both measured and scrutinized

by politicians and parents alike, such as academic achievement.

The study was premised on an eight-step program that if followed, in Butler and

Dickson's view, would produce a positive school culture. These eight steps are:

1.) Everyone emphasizes the importance of learning.
2.) Strong leadership guides the instructional program.
3.) The curriculum is based on clear goals and objectives.
4.) There are high expectations for quality instruction.
5.) Incentives and rewards are used to build strong motivation.
6.) Parents are invited to become involved.
7.) Teachers and administrators strive to continually improve educational effectiveness.
8.) There are pleasant conditions for learning. (Butler & Dickson, 1987, p. 1)

Butler and Dickson have been able to create a to-do list for those interested in creating a

positive school culture in present day schools. This list is atypical in the way it is postured, and is

also unique in that it touches on many points that the interviewees in my pilot study highlighted.

However, the emergent theory created in my pilot study, and refined in this dissertation is

expressed in a much less prescriptive way than Butler and Dickson's eight step process.

Who can best study school culture?

An entirely different perspective on school culture is taken by Sarason (1971). He

believes that there is a problem with professionals outside the realm of education attempting to

gain access to different school communities and accurately reporting on them. Sarason makes a

point that school culture is neither being studied by those who can most easily and completely

gain access to it nor those involved in the creation and maintenance of it. He believes that the social and behavioral sciences generally ignore issues that specifically and only pertain to education. Sarason blames this bias on the generally arrogant and conceited traditions of academia.

As Sarason states in his book, "one of the most frequent reactions they [those doing research on school culture] come away with is that the school is a 'closed' place that views with marked suspicion any outsider who 'wants in' in some way" (Sarason, 1971, p. 10). According to Sarason, a different kind of academician must first gain entry to these school communities to do any kind of accurate data gathering and data analysis so that school culture can be accurately dissected and improved by those who, by their very profession and nature, will not isolate education from the different behavioral sciences.

However, in a more recent study, Hoy (1990) listed multiple ways that researchers can look at school cultures along with the strength and weaknesses associated with each view. Specifically, Hoy mentioned that successful organizational cultures in arenas not related to education (i.e. business) can provide good models for struggling school cultures. Hoy's perspective suggests that the problem Sarason saw in 1971 no longer truly exists in the present day schooling environment. The literature analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of these corporate cultures can be used to analyze some aspects of school culture as well.

International views on school culture

Barnett, McCormick, and Connors, scholars from New South Wales, found that school culture can increase both teacher and student motivation to both improve and learn. In addition to a boost in teacher and student motivation, these three scholars concluded that this rise in

motivation, especially on the teacher's part, leads to greatly improved attitudes towards their jobs (Barnett, McCormick, and Conners, 2000).

The argument posed by Barnett, McCormick, and Conners illustrates the long reach school culture has in the present day. It is not something specific to the United States, and though this dissertation study is focused on the independent schooling sector of the United States, a thorough and well-done study may have useful application well beyond independent schools in the Mid-Atlantic States, and could even include schools in different countries and on different continents.

Understanding school culture, specifically what it takes to create one that is either positive or negative, is an important task for people across the globe to undertake, as every theory can have parts or specific aspects that are applicable to particular schools in countries worldwide. Using an example from earlier in this chapter, Wilson's (2002) study of school culture in Australia has taught us quite a bit about school culture as an isolated phenomenon, even though the context within which it is analyzed here is literally a world away from where his study took place.

In addition to Wilson's (2002) research, Blandford and Shaw (2001) describe in great detail the effects that school culture can have on international schools. These schools are, as their name implies, places where students and instructors from around the world congregate and engage in formal educational practices. Like any other school, these institutions have hierarchies, and school culture plays a large role in the efficacy of these schools because of the number of diverse backgrounds represented by teachers and students. School culture at these schools is described by Blandford and Shaw (2001).

> The school culture may be visible and explicit, or vague and implicit. It may be strong and dominant, or virtually impotent. A helpful climate of an international school might be defined as *the way in which all of us in this school agree to work together in order to provide the best service for the learners.* It affects everything from the way decisions are made to the way students learn, and is in turn affected by these factors…. (p. 155)

These international schools deal with a wide variety of backgrounds, and still have to find a way to make their school a place that individuals from these backgrounds feel comfortable enough to engage in meaningful learning. Though these international schools have little on their surface that connects them to the public schools in the United States or independent schools here in America, the notion of a positive school culture helping to foster positive relationships is one that spans the globe.

The question of recognizing and utilizing school culture literature is not an all or nothing proposition. Different schools can take different parts of the theories that exist and attempt to create something all their own, which makes doing any legitimate research on school culture that much more relevant and important. Barnett and his associates decided that instead of focusing on the administration or student body when looking at school culture, they would concentrate on identifying and analyzing what effects positive school culture has on teachers. This research is just another example of the many ways that the multiple effects of school culture can be interpreted and used across international borders.

The differences between independent and public school culture

To begin this section, it is necessary to define what exactly is meant by "private" or "independent" schooling. A definition given by Gummere, Johnson, Parkhill, Parkman, and Springer (1961) is that, "an independent school is typically a nonprofit institution, independent of political control and support, owned and operated by trustees serving without pay in the public interest" (p. 1). This statement articulates some of the more important and pertinent differences between public and independent schools.

Another perspective on the responsibilities of public school leaders is offered by Bass

(2000) when he states that:

> Increasingly, the leaders of learning organizations will set goals either through participation or direction of their various constituencies. In the case of [public] school systems, as learning organizations, they will strive to align the educational interests of relevant governmental agencies, school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, students, parents and the community (p. 18).

Public school leaders have a wide spectrum of constituencies to accommodate (Sybouts & Wendel, 1994; Elsbree & McNally, 1951; Reilly, 2000). Public school leaders must do all they can to placate the various community members that have children at their school while also making sure that their decisions abide by laws and policies passed by legislators and school board members.

On the other hand, independent school leaders must first accommodate or appease the Board of Trustees, and second, they must accommodate the parents of current students. Beyond those two major demographics, the headmaster must make judgments and decisions that will affect other stakeholder groups; however, all of these groups exist within the school over which he or she presides. Outside of their school walls, independent school headmasters need not concern themselves with any other specific constituents or individual personalities.

Insight about the makeup of independent school community is offered by Madsen (1996), an author who focuses on independent schooling:

> Because the board members, parents, and principals share power, all constituencies feel a sense of ownership which leads to accountability of student outcomes. School participants work toward the same mission and goals because they have a vested interest in maintaining the school community. A sense of belonging, continuity of traditions and an inner connectedness provides meaning to the participants. Creating school ownership is dependent on the leadership and management of the private school principal (p. 1).

Though this statement may seem like a conglomeration of "buzzwords," it paints an accurate picture of independent school administration. It is no coincidence that words like continuity, tradition, and community find their way into the same paragraph when referencing independent school leadership. It would be logical to say that the independent school experience

includes a heavy dose of ideological overtones. I would even say, referring to both my

experience and the literature, that in order for many of the academic goals that secular preparatory

schools have to be reached, the schools must possess a very strong ideological foundation.

The term "academic goals" is used pervasively throughout independent school literature.

This term generally means, "where do the high-school graduates get accepted to college?"

Though these same independent schools might bombard an administrative or faculty interviewee

with ideas about classical curriculums and standardized test scores, the bottom line for all of these

schools is that their local (and in a few cases national) reputation as a school remains strong by

providing results which point to their ability to get students into the "top tier" of colleges and

universities. An independent school in The Mid Atlantic States, The Monroe School's mission

statement reads, "The program is college preparatory, designed to help boys gain admission to

and then flourish at selective colleges and universities…" (The Monroe School, 2007). The

question then becomes, what effect does knowing the educational goal of a preparatory school

have on that school's leadership and culture?

While the following perspective on independent school culture does not align with my

own personal experiences, some scholars believe that independent schools exist within a rigid set

of self-imposed structures that do not allow the school culture to become anything the school

cannot directly control through policy or other related mandates (Forcey & Harris, 1999).

Although the previous viewpoint on independent school culture is not one I have personally

experienced, the fact that school leaders are so close to the student body with few administrative

or bureaucratic buffers means that should a school leader decide that he or she wanted to have a

vice grip on a given independent school's culture, they probably could.

School culture in independent schooling can also be seen as easier to improve on some

levels than public school culture because the students within the school culture at most

independent schools have had their basic needs met according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1968). This can be in direct contradiction to the situation in certain public schools where students arrive hungry or perhaps even in fear of what might be waiting for them once they leave the school premises (Taylor, 2005). This specific situation will lead to a culture in which students are disengaged and thinking about issues that have little to do with their ability to perform certain duties, tasks, and responsibilities given to them by school community members.

Some might argue that the single most important stakeholder in the independent school community, when it comes to issues of school culture, sits on the Board of Trustees. These individuals are usually business executives and other local professionals who have either attended the school themselves, or have offspring who have attended the school. In public schooling, very often people who sit on the Board have little to no direct connection with the schools they represent and are generally considered state officers (Hamilton & Reutter, 1958). While this form of community involvement may allow for more objectivity, it is devoid of the close relationships shared by independent schools and their Boards (Madsen, 1996). The effect on school culture, considering that school culture is in large part based on the relationships formed between individual stakeholders within a school, can be sizeable.

The closeness with which the Board of Trustees can get to know a situation involving any individual person on their school's campus can allow for a great deal of contextualization, whereas an individual on a public school board may have a more difficult time (depending on the size of the district and its schools) attaining that same level of personal knowledge about school-related issues. On the other hand, a given Board of Trustees of an independent school, being so close to certain issues, could lose impartiality on various issues.

Chapter 3
Methodology

Introduction

The goal of this study is to discern how a given school culture is created, and how independent school leaders can affect school culture, if at all. To get to the essence of this question, I have focused all of my effort on one school and its current cultural situation; asking many questions about how the current culture is viewed and how different stakeholders in the school perceive its creation and general maintenance.

This chapter focuses on the methods used to accomplish the aforementioned goal. The breakdown of this chapter highlights not only the different processes used in the collection and subsequent analysis of research data, but also looks to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of such processes, thereby allowing for an insight as to the process concerning emergent theory creation. Finally, this chapter discusses some of the limitations of the study. This section allows for the results of this study to be used in the most effective manner.

Data collection procedures

In addition to the interviews that were conducted with a wide variety of Polk School community members including: senior and junior administrators, senior and junior faculty members, members of the Board of Trustees, students, recent alumni, and parents, the data set has been enriched by also taking a look at The Polk School's different mission statements.

Sampling

The sampling for this study was purposeful in its nature. Maxwell states that purposeful sampling is "a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). These selections, in Patton's (1990) view, must bring forth many topics that are absolutely central to the research. In that vein, those selected to participate were chosen because they could well represent varying positions held in their respective independent school community. Bogdon and Biklen add that purposeful sampling takes place when, "You choose particular subjects to include because they are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory (Bogdon & Biklen, 2007, p. 73). Purposeful sampling is also referred to as "criterion-based selection" (LeCompte & Preissel, 1993, p. 69) because technically, as the researcher, it is of the utmost importance that purposeful sampling is done with a specific criterion in mind so that it does not turn into basic convenience sampling (Maxwell, 2005).

The representative sample for this study was based on professional status and formal position within The Polk School community. Hierarchically speaking, a Board member, the headmaster, an upper-level administrator, four faculty members (from different departments), one recent alumnus, and one current student made up the representative sample in this study. It should be noted that three of these participants are not only employees of The Polk School, but also parents of children who attend that school.

Examples of this method of sampling can be seen in the interviewees I had selected for my pilot study. Random sampling, one of the other process options, is described by Maxwell (2005) as having no definite direction, which is not necessarily a bad thing if one's sample is large enough that probability would allow all perspectives to be covered. However, in a small setting like my proposed population, I believe it to be important that those participating in the

study represent various walks of life and educational positions within the larger Polk School community. In addition, the population being studied is not large enough to allow for a random sample to be taken; therefore, it was imperative that I selected a different form of sampling.

Miles and Huberman contend that the first thing a qualitative researcher must to do when deciding what people or organizations to study is to "set boundaries: to define aspects of your case that you can study within the limits of your time and means…." (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 27) In this study people and institutions were selected based on their accessibility and on their ability to answer the proposed questions in a comprehensive manner. Thus, my dissertation data came from sources that range in experience, age, race, ethnicity, and position.

A researcher conducting a study on one specific group or organization, or in this case one specific independent institution, is not new. My current study has chosen to focus on independent schools. In a project conducted by Aleman and Salkever (2003), the researchers were looking at elite small liberal arts colleges when they stated that "institutions were selected as the institutions to be studied if their history, missions, and founding reflected a thorough and continued dedication to the ideals of liberal education" (p. 563). The Polk School serves as an example of a college preparatory independent day school. It is this classification of school that I am interested in studying (having both attended a similar school and taught at one).

I decided to eliminate one of the two schools from my pilot study in an effort to increase my ability to analyze the data I receive from The Polk School. As Becker states, "Both long term involvement and intensive interviews enable you to collect 'rich' data; data that are detailed and varied enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on." (Becker, 1970, p. 51) It is this rich data that I have accessed in this study.

Like Kratzer (1997), it was my intention to, "grasp the complexities of relationships between and among various members of the school community; and gain a variety of perspectives on the school's ethos, mission, and goals…." (p. 349). To do this effectively it was important to

limit the study to a single site where more perspectives could be explored and relationships examined.

Interviews

After the representative sample of participants had been selected from the overall population of The Polk School, interviews were subsequently conducted. As stated before, these interviews were one-on-one and lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. The information gathered constituted the foundation of my data analysis. After the first round of interviews, I conducted brief follow-up interviews to delve more deeply into some of the pertinent issues brought to light in the initial interviewing stage.

The interviews conducted with various members of The Polk School community were driven by questions that are included with this dissertation (See Appendix A). Multiple participants of this study represent more than just one isolated stakeholder view of the institution. For example, some individual participants are parents as well as alumni, and faculty members. Including participants with these dual roles offer an enriched version of what could otherwise be isolated and one dimensional data. The validity, comprehensiveness, and veracity of the questions included were tested when I reviewed them with colleagues and peers. These academic peers evaluated the questions, their appropriateness (for soliciting answers to the aforementioned research questions), and their structure, so that before any of these questions were asked to a member of the study, they were validated as acceptable ways to elicit information from individual members of my suggested sample.

According to Patton (1990), interviewing is one of the most powerful ways of collecting data about human beings. These interviews can be conducted individually, as group interviews, or as written responses to different questions posed by the researcher (Crowley, 1994). The

researcher can choose to begin this process with questions using the internet in order to elicit the most responses possible, follow up with telephone interviews, and finally end up in a face-to-face situation with selected participants. In this study the internet was not used. Instead, I spoke to some people in positions of formal authority, and they, in turn, led me to the majority of my eventual sample.

Though interviewing participants in research studies is usually a structured activity, Maxwell (2005) believes that there is a lot of useful information to be gleaned if a researcher can break the researcher/participant barrier and spend unstructured time with study participants. Due to the limited scope of this study, interviews that entailed more informal approaches complemented the more formal interviews nicely, and provided some insight that perhaps would not be available if only formal structured interviews were conducted. Maxwell (2005) also makes it clear that prestructuring one's methods of research is important, but single case studies can be more loosely prestructured than multiple case studies.

The specific types of interviews I have conducted in this study are labeled as semi-structured (Gillham, 2000). These interviews tend to be relaxed, and questions asked have to do directly with already identified key issues in one's study. For purposes of this study, those key issues have been previously highlighted in the aforementioned research questions. The most important aspect of these semi-structured interviews is the flexibility that comes with them. While there are overarching themes that drive the general direction of these interviews, the specific tangential digressions that might be taken are at the discretion of the interviewee, thereby making them feel comfortable and in control.

Finally, the interviews conducted did not take place in an isolated fashion; rather, each interview built on previous interviews and interview responses. This method is designed to ensure that the data gathered will go as deep as possible in attempting to understand the

intricacies of school culture as it is seen from the various perspectives represented by the participants in the study.

Grounded Theory

Sherman and Webb (2001) state that "The generation of grounded theory relies on the inquiring, analytical mind of the researcher/theorist" (p.124). The task is to discover and conceptualize the essence of specific interactional processes. The resulting theory provides a "new way of understanding the social situations from which the theory was generated" (Sherman & Webb, 2001, p. 124). Because this was a study about school culture, the fact that grounded theory has everything to do with interactional processes and the deciphering of complex human interactions made it an attractive technique for this dissertation project.

My lack of advanced research experience was something that had to be addressed in order to produce a study of any true meaning. To this end, borrowing techniques from grounded theory was helpful because it allowed for the creation of an organic, emergent theory, even from subjects that have little research written about them (such as independent school administration), or are especially difficult to decipher (Sherman & Webb, 2001).

Grounded theory is an attractive methodology for the purposes of this study because of its flexibility when it comes to conceptual frameworks and their place in a given research project (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Usually conceptual frameworks derived from previously authored literature provide the direction for qualitative research; however in cases where a researcher is hoping to create something new and untethered to previous research, using some of the techniques associated with grounded theory is a highly regarded alternative. As Corbin and Strauss state, grounded theory is,

theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process….A researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind…rather the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data. (p.12).

This form of theory creation was appropriate for this project because rather than simply regurgitating the multitude of theories already created by the numerous scholars who have published articles and books on the subject, this study looks to theory creation as a way to develop a new perspective on the subject of school culture.

Coding

One of the more helpful pieces of literature about the subject of project-based grounded theory was Strauss and Corbin's book, *The Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (1990). Strauss and Corbin discuss the process of grounded theory by explaining that coding is what researchers do to their interview data in an effort to break it down into its components, thus making it much less overwhelming and cumbersome, and much easier to analyze. Charmaz (1983) states that coding is, "simply the process of categorizing and sorting data" (p. 111). While coding is the main focus of this section, it is important to first make clear the different methods being used during the coding process, such that once the coding process is brought to light, the experience of the researcher and how the data have been scrutinized in this study can be fully understood.

In discussing the process of how to best analyze and codify the data received in a qualitative study, Goertz and LeCompte (1981) suggest a constant comparative method. Their description of this method requires the researcher to always be thinking critically about the data received in a given study,

> As each new unit of meaning is selected for analysis, it is compared to all other units of meaning and subsequently grouped (categorized and coded) with similar units of

meaning. If there are no similar units of meaning, a new category is formed. In this process there is room for continuous refinement; initial categories are changed, merged, or omitted; new categories are generated; and new relationships can be discovered (p. 58).

This method has been used to its full extent in this study. It was critical to ensure that the categories produced from the data collected were as refined as possible before trying to decide how each category is related to school culture. It is important that this method and the requirements that come with it are explained at the outset of the coding section, because this method was used in the analysis of the data from this study from the beginning of the data collection and examination process.

The constant comparative method, as defined above, is an ongoing process until the data set has reached a saturation point. The term saturation point is defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as the time when, "no new information seems to emerge during coding, that is when no new properties, dimensions, conditions, actions/interactions or consequences are seen in the data" (p.136). The constant comparative method provides a process for which a conclusion is never truly achieved, however once a saturation point has been deemed to have been reached, theory creation and the final steps of analysis can commence. Strauss and Corbin make sure to note that there are different degrees of saturation dependent upon the time constraints under which the researcher is working, and the level of specificity necessary for data analysis and examination.

Strauss and Corbin note that the coding process begins with a stage called "open coding." They explain that this is, "the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p. 61). These researchers then state that this process needs to be executed until a saturation point is met. During my pilot study, the overarching question that I was using underwent a complete transformation, and the data that had been gathered prior to that transformation had to be re-evaluated and re-coded through extensive, and at times, repetitive open coding. The meaning of words that had been collected during this

pilot study were re-evaluated. At different points in the study it was necessary to go back through individual interviews multiple times in order to add new words that took on new meanings in light of my changed project's new topic, or to remove words that no longer had meaning for this new topic. The aforementioned pilot process prepared me for the practice of taking raw data, and analyzing through multiple different and distinct lenses until a saturation point can be met.

Following Corbin and Strauss' clear instructions on some of the techniques associated with grounded theory, axial coding was the next logical step to take. Axial coding is defined as, "the process of relating categories to their subcategories, termed axial because coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions" (Corbin & Strauss, 1998, p. 123). To accomplish this task it was imperative that the data I received be immediately placed into well-defined and separated "bins."

When the open and axial coding processes were completed, selective coding represented the final stage in the coding process. The selective coding process was a way to make sense out of all the interviews that had been conducted in this lengthy study. It proved to be a vital step in putting together what was learned directly from my respondents with what was formulated through the analysis of school mission statements and related scholarly literature. Corbin and Strauss succinctly state that selective coding is, "The process of integrating and refining the theory" (p. 143).

It was very important to scribe copious notes or draft memos while conducting this series of interviews in (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition to writing up memos and field notes, it is recognized that, "In grounded theory the researcher becomes familiar with the literature on a phenomenon in order to assist in interpretation of the data and to enhance validity or trustworthiness of the findings" (Kezar, 2005, p. 634). The emergent theory created in this study must find a place within the context of the research that has already been completed in the field of school culture. Allowing certain aspects of grounded theory to guide this process helped me to

become familiar with the background of school culture while still allowing the data that I

received to point me in the direction of what became my newly created conceptual framework.

Case studies

Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg (1996) believe that, "A case study is…defined as an in-depth,

multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon.

The study is conducted in great detail and often relies on the use of several data sources" (p. 2).

These same authors conclude that, "The study of the single case or an array of several cases

remains indispensable to the progress of the social sciences" (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1996, p.

iii). According to Gillham (2000), "In case study research, theorizing *emerges*" (p. 35). This

study is an example of a case study responsible for the creation of an emergent theory.

Merriam (2002) believes that case studies can be one or all of the following: "…a

particular person, site, program, process, community, or other bounded system…that exhibits

characteristics of interest to the researcher" (p. 179). Merriam is of the opinion that much can be

learned from case studies, and in particular, that single case studies allow for the greatest amount

of data contextualization. This contextualization, she contends, can create "a vivid portrait" (p.

179) or allow for the information within a study to be used by individuals not directly connected

with the study or the site/individual involved in that study.

The case study method of research is quite popular among beginning researchers due to

the relative simplicity inherent in its design. Robert Yin (2003) states that one "would use the

case study method because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions – believing

that they might be highly pertinent to the phenomenon of study" (p. 12). In this particular study,

contextual differences and nuances are the focal point; because I am working to determine the

components of independent school culture by studying different social and academic facets that exist within The Polk School walls.

Furthermore, Yin (2003) believes that the most important application of the case study is to "explain the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies" (p. 15). This study will require far richer data than that which could be gathered using either a survey or a simple experiment. It was a case study completed at a single site (the campus of The Polk School), and data from a variety of contributors was collected.

Through the duration of this study I have received data from a variety of stakeholders and from reading various literature produced by The Polk School. Having varying forms of data and perspectives represented in my data has allowed me to triangulate this data effectively, an important step in effectively validating the data I have collected and subsequently analyzed (Yin, 2003).

Finally, it is important to understand how a case study like my own will make itself available to different audiences. While it is understood that a single case study has legitimate limitations, Yin (2003) states that, "the description and analysis of a single case often suggest implications about a more general phenomenon" (p. 144). The general phenomenon that is the focal point of my study is independent school culture, and the effect of independent school leadership on school culture. This case study has served as a conduit for information that has allowed me to create and promote a conceptual framework about independent school culture that can be shared with schools that share common characteristics with The Polk School.

Limitations

Pointing out the limitations of one's study allows for an accurate estimation of any study's true relevancy. Understanding a particular study's given limitations shows a deep understanding of the subject matter being studied, and allows those using the study for educational purposes to contextualize results in a way that can help them properly interpret the data set gathered, and emergent theory or framework relayed by that study. Merriam (2002) points out that the primary limitation a researcher must be prepared to indentify has to do with the fact that, "the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis…." (p.421)

In that tradition, some limitations of this study exist because the bulk of my experiences as a student and faculty member come from independent schools in the Mid-Atlantic Region. Comparisons of the findings from this particular study to schools where I have not taught or personally attended, especially ones that operate in ways wholly unfamiliar to these select independent schools, represent a substantial limitation.

Other limitations of this study have to do with the data set itself and the researcher's ability to take the requisite amount of time to study the data before making a final analysis and conclusion (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001; Sherman & Webb, 2001). This study began two years ago, and changed forms throughout those two years. Had more time been available to conduct and develop this study, perhaps an advanced form of this study could have been created. Because time was of concern, the study was limited to the nine participants and eighteen total interviews conducted. Though every stakeholder perspective was represented in the sample selected for the study, more representatives from each stakeholder position could have allowed for richer data, and perhaps led to a slightly different conclusion.

As a twelve-year student at The Monroe School and one-year faculty member at The Polk School, I carry with me researcher biases that must be accounted for. Though I taught for only a

single year at The Polk School, some of the participants in this study I have known for years. My experiences at both The Monroe School and The Polk School were very positive, and these positive experiences have had a hand in shaping my perspective on independent schooling as a whole.

In addition to knowing some of the participants in this study, my experience in independent schooling made the process of identifying and being granted access to an independent school that much easier. Because of the connections I had made in previous years, individuals were happy to welcome me into their schools and allow me to conduct this research study because they trusted me to conduct the study in a way that would ensure the school and its reputation remained unharmed.

Finally, limitations can exist based solely on the direction and agenda of a study. This study set out to focus on independent school culture, its creation, and ideas closely related to these topics. From those facts alone, this study can be more helpful to those who work or attend independent schools than those who work or attend public schools. While this study could be helpful for any school leader in an attempt to improve or evaluate a school's given culture, the fact remains that, because the parameters through which independent and public schools operate are so different, it might be difficult for a public school administrator to use this study as a means of directly influencing his or her school culture.

Chapter 4
Results

Introduction

This study took place at The Polk School, a school that educates males from kindergarten to twelfth grade. The Polk School has been an all-boys school throughout its distinguished history (founded in the 1840's), and it is the oldest, non-sectarian school for males in the state. The campus sits in an urban setting, but the Polk School has some of the finest outdoor athletic facilities in the area. The Polk School has three main buildings that house the lower (elementary) school, the middle (junior-high) school, and the upper (high) school. The lower and middle schools share the half of the campus that sits on the south side of River Avenue, while the upper school sits on the opposite side of River Avenue. Connecting the two halves of the campus is a stone bridge twenty feet above River Avenue, a bridge created so students going from one side of River Avenue to the other would not have to deal with the occasionally heavy traffic.

Students from The Polk School generally graduate and go on to four year colleges and universities. The Polk School is a college preparatory school with a focus on developing the individual student, which is why its faculty to student ratio is one of the lowest in the state (8 students to every 1 faculty member). Over 60% of the faculty members at The Polk School hold advanced degrees, and the school remains single-sex because it is The Polk School's belief that this kind of learning environment will produce the greatest cognitive and developmental results for its students.

The board member, student, alumni, teachers, and school leaders who took part in this study initially expressed some concern over their lack of formal knowledge about school culture. This fear translated into many pre-interview questions about what, specifically, we were going to discuss. These fears quickly abated when I assured the participants that only open-ended

questions would be asked during the course of the interview, and that their responses, in their natural form, would be the best answer I could possibly receive due to the grounded nature of this study.

I expected some apprehension from the participants regarding their responses to my questions due to fear of possible ramifications from administrators. After reassurance, all participants shared a sense of confidence that their answers would not be construed as detrimental to The Polk School, and that the study depended on their candor and openness. The participants were able to move beyond inclinations of self-censure in part due to the assurance of their individual anonymity, and they shared, seemingly without fear of any repercussion, thereby making the data collected rich and unobstructed.

While at times the interviewees struggled to conceptualize school culture, the purpose of this study was to retrieve their opinions and ideas, distill them, and report them in a grounded, practical, and pragmatic way.

School culture is not something that has a single and clear definition. Thus, there is no easy solution for "fixing" toxic school cultures. Some school culture scholars, such as Wayne Hoy, posit, "Why the allure of these abstract and ambiguous concepts?" (Hoy, 1990, p.2) The answer to that question is found in the interview responses shared in this chapter.

In considering the abstract and ambiguous nature of school culture, it comes as no surprise that the ways in which the different participants chose to describe their views on school culture and leadership varied immensely. Some participants discussed school culture utilizing semantics and culture theory, while others decided to describe their views by relating personal experiences and stories. Some participants felt the need to clarify my questions concerning school culture by asking questions in an attempt to determine the desired direction of the interview.

The result of these different interviews is a wide-ranging compilation of perspectives on school culture from various stakeholder points of view. Almost half of those who participated in this study belong to more than one stakeholder group in The Polk School community. This fact served to enrich the data set resulting from the interviews, as these subjects combined their many varied experiences and perspectives regarding the questions posed on leadership and school culture. These individual responses are recounted, along with descriptions of each participant, such that their comments are taken in proper context.

Each of the nine vignettes provide a descriptive background for each subject in the study. While the questions posed to each participant were very similar, the direction in which the interviews proceeded diverged greatly. This chapter provides the necessary framework for proper dissection and analysis of their data by identifying the individual perspective of each interviewee. The vignettes are split into five distinct sections: participant background, views and definitions of Polk School culture, influences of school culture on academic achievement, leadership and Polk School culture, and finally how Polk School culture differs from public school culture.

The following table (**4-1**) can be used as a quick and easy reference throughout Chapter Four and subsequent chapters. It should also be noted that the order in which these vignettes are organized follows a general independent school authority hierarchy, however, the four faculty members and their vignettes are in no particular order with no authoritative differences.

Table **4-1**: Study Participants

Name	Sex	Position	Years in Position
Fred	M	President of Board	2 years
Bentley	M	Headmaster	6 months
Derrick	M	Administrator	3 years
Barrett	M	Teacher	25 years
Ted	M	Teacher	9 years
John	M	Teacher	5 years
Olivia	F	Teacher	8 years
Roland	M	Alumnus	3 years
Hugo	M	Student	4 years

Fred

Participant background

Fred is a highly accomplished attorney who was born and raised in Baltimore. As an alumnus, and one who had a generally positive experience at The Polk School, he had no hesitation when selecting a school for his son. As his son progressed through The Polk School, Fred decided that he wanted to give back to the school by joining the Board of Trustees. Fred has been "on the Board for twelve years" and found the experience to be satisfying and challenging.

As Fred stated, "it is an exhaustive process." However challenging his varied responsibilities have been, Fred's experiences with The Polk School have been positive and wide-ranging. He has been a student, an alumnus, a parent, and a board member. Although Fred's experiences are particularly diverse, his position of wearing multiple stakeholder hats as a member of the greater The Polk School community is not atypical.

As a student, Fred attended The Polk School, and he still speaks of his experiences there with a fair amount of wistfulness and sentimentality. In his opening statement he referred to The Polk School as, "…a family kind of culture, a community with a strong sense of itself." Fred made many references to the fact that, "[The Polk School is a] small school compared to its peer schools," and that this was a major factor in the school feeling like a family. This family atmosphere exists because, "I think generally there is more of an interest taken in the individual student."

Defining Polk School culture

The theme of preparedness and individual attention was central to Fred's view of the culture at The Polk School. He stated that, "its [The Polk School's] goal is to certainly have every kid who leaves The Polk School as best prepared for college [as possible] and, in doing that, what they strive for is to try to get each kid to reach their maximum potential given whatever God given ability they have or don't have." In comparison to independent schools that surround The Polk School, Fred believes that The Polk School offers the most individual attention to students which supports the family-like culture regardless of a student's given baseline intellectual level. This is a perception shared by other study participants, and is a characteristic of which the school is very proud.

Considering that Fred has experienced The Polk School from so many different vantage points, his opinions regarding the genesis of school culture and its defining forces are vital to this study. Fred takes a generally hierarchical approach to the development and maintenance of school culture. Noting that the Board had to deal with transitions in the most important of leadership positions within the school, Fred explained that during:

> The last two years [former headmaster] Jim was there, and then the prior year and a half [former headmaster] Todd was there and finally for two and a half years before that [former headmaster] Ned was there. You add that up, that's six years. And during that six year timeframe, because of the instability of the headmaster position, the Board was somewhat micromanaging the school in terms of its culture.

Fred is very aware of not only the power that the Board possesses, but also of the way in which it has been viewed by the rest of the school community during The Polk School's recent past. He understands the immense power which can be wielded by the Board, and he understands that this power comes with a negative implication when used in certain situations deemed unacceptable by other stakeholder groups. His experience as President of the Board taught Fred that, although the Board may be in control of the hiring and firing of the headmaster, it will create for itself a negative stigma should it be seen as petty, power hungry, and micromanaging when attempting to compensate for a problematic headmaster.

Moving towards a discussion regarding the composition of school culture, Fred states, "I think the way to handle culture, most appropriately for school, is putting all of these constituents or stakeholder groups together and finding out from them what their priorities are in terms of culture? Who are we? Who do we want to be? What do we aspire to?" He believes this to be the method most useful in determining the specific desires of each stakeholder group, and perhaps more importantly, how they might proceed toward reaching those particular goals for their school. Fred, in an effort to clarify some of these thoughts on a more specific level goes on to state:

> You can write a mission statement, and you can put down on a piece of paper or in some development brochure what the culture is, but, the culture really is a living and breathing system. It is not a tangible piece of work, it's people. It's how people act, it's what they do every day, it's how they dress, it's how they treat each other, it's whether or not they hold each other accountable and if so, to what extent and under what circumstances, that's the culture.

Ideas about leadership, accountability, and control dominated Fred's definition of culture. He, like many school culture scholars, believes that a school's culture is a living, breathing organism that cannot be explicitly defined, but can be identified.

Fred also touched on the subjects of school identity and reputation. In discussing how his views are related to a school's given culture, he stated that:

> The internal identity is usually not the same, and certainly not always the same as the outside identity, and when the inside identity changes, especially in a positive way, the outside identity takes a while to catch up. There is a lag period between what happens within the school and that same school's reputation outside of the school.

In discussing this idea further, I suggested that perhaps a school's identity within the community is simply the school's culture with an outside, third party perspective. He was quick to agree with that sentiment. This line of discussion resulted in the following statement:

> I think you can define any school's culture and change any culture. And I think different schools look at their culture differently, at different times. And I really think The Polk School is in a phase now where they are trying to create their culture and then move towards it as opposed to just passively being defined by it.

In the independent school world where, as Fred expressed, "perception is reality," it is of the utmost importance that a school create a positive culture for itself so that third-party perception and school reality are aligned, avoiding any internal contradiction, as the school moves forward and pursues potential clients (students).

Leadership and Polk School culture

Fred shared his ideas on what stakeholder group he perceives to be in charge of creating and maintaining a positive school culture; "I do think that it's probably, primarily the responsibility of the Board to assemble, as best they can the data from the various constituencies and set the culture or set up philosophical policy that would foster a positive culture."

Although the Board is in charge of the single most important personnel decision an independent school faces, that of the headmaster, Fred acknowledged that once that decision has been made, a bit of their control over the culture dissipates. He stated that an effective headmaster "can't be afraid of tough decisions, can't be afraid of making those tough decisions, they can't be afraid of disagreeing with people who are Board members, and they have to do whatever it takes within reason to foster a positive school culture." While Fred comprehended that decisions made on the school level must be made by the headmaster, he was one of the few people interviewed who explicitly expressed a limit to that power; a perspective one could only presume is intertwined with his experience as a member of the Board.

He continued to outline these views by explaining that:

I think when the problem arises, and I've seen it first hand, is when the Board of Trustees gets involved in implementation. They shouldn't. And that is the headmaster's job. And the headmaster, a good headmaster will surround himself or herself with very capable people because they can't begin to implement a long range plan solo.

The key to proper culture building in Fred's view is "a shared vision" among key stakeholder groups. While that does not mean a consensus must be reached for every decision, if a school wants to redirect its culture, it must be prepared to begin the process of reaching a general consensus so that goals can be shared, and competing interests and opinions can be addressed.

Fred's perspective on this issue aligns with many of those participating in this study, for Fred is not the only participant who raised certain issues that arise when the Board is seen as

being overly-involved. However, he believes that his personal experience on the Board has allowed for personal growth. Additionally, he feels the school has benefitted because the Board is more self-aware and sensitive to the possibility of such complex situations arising and has become more adept at handling said situations.

His insights into the interaction between the Board and the headmaster continued as he related that "They [the headmaster] need to be a good leader who needs to be politely aggressive in constantly doing whatever it takes to foster the culture. They need to understand the culture… and their view on the culture has to be in keeping with the school's view, which means the Board's view, because it begins and ends there." Fred holds nothing back in his description of the Board as the man behind the curtain. Although the headmaster should be the one out in front of the school, making culture-related decisions, and remaining available for questions, comments, or suggestions, the Board has the primary responsibility of aligning the school with its mission, which in Fred's view, is one way of beginning to establish a culture.

While it might seem as though Fred places an undue amount of responsibility and power with the Board, he repeatedly indicated that, "I do think that it is essential all constituencies are on the same page in terms of culture." He elaborated by offering this counter example, "Unless you are on the same page, unless everyone agrees what the culture is, then you can't really effectively build it or foster it because you start to compete; people begin to have competing interests." Fred believes that for a school culture to be a positive presence there must exist a certain level of agreement and continuity throughout the entire environment.

Academic achievement and Polk School culture

When asked about academic achievement and whether or not a positive school culture plays any role in enhancing said achievement, Fred gave this response, "I absolutely believe that

positive school culture improves academic achievement within school walls." He stated that academic achievement and school culture are closely tied together because "the expectation, where students are concerned, really comes from the teachers inside the classroom."

Fred has a clear vision of the chain of command at The Polk School, because immediately upon stating that teachers and students drive academic achievement within the classroom, he added that, "I also think the expectation where the teachers' performance is concerned has to come from the administration, be it the head of the upper school, the headmaster, or the academic dean, or whomever. So, I really think that the school culture really rises or falls based on leadership." Fred's perspective places a great importance on the ability to lead. He feels that, with a philosophically unified leadership and chain-of-command, The Polk School can better itself in many ways, one of which being academic achievement.

Differences between The Polk School culture and public school culture

Fred was a product of the independent school student experience, and all of his experience since graduating from secondary school has involved independent institutions. His child has also attended an independent school (The Polk School, specifically). Therefore, the vast majority of his views on public schools and public school culture have been formed through his interactions with many close friends who have experienced public schooling first hand, as well as his role as a leader and active member of his local community.

In speaking about the differences between independent and public schools, Fred stated that, "No matter what your background, if you go to a private school, it is a privileged culture." In this statement, Fred referred to everyone who attends The Polk School, regardless of their socio-economic status. Fred further clarified this sentiment:

It's a privilege in general because the other thing that happens [while at Polk School] is…
you develop relationships, and you make connections in a private school environment,
that by and large you will have the rest of your life. I mean, you know, at 51 years old, it
has been an enormous benefit for me to have gone to a private school in this town.

In this context, Fred's use of the term "privilege" referred to experiential privilege – as
opposed to financial privilege. The Polk School offers an environment in which any student can
make connections for life that will more likely continue beyond those connections made at a
larger, seemingly more impersonal school environment.

More emphatically, Fred identified a recurring theme in his comparisons of the cultures
of public schools and The Polk School:

I had the support I had academically. I mean, if I was in a public school, I could have
very easily gotten lost. So, it's the personal attention which, The Polk School, the teacher
to student ratio is so good that it really provides you with an enormous leg up in terms of
maturing in all facets of life, academically and otherwise. So, I think that is probably the
biggest distinction between The Polk School and public school.

In Fred's perspective, size of the student body and the student-to-teacher ratio arguably
have the most noteworthy impact in the discussion regarding the differences between independent
and public schools. Fred wholeheartedly believes that the individual attention given to each
student allows for that student to have a much greater opportunity to reach their potential -
academic, social, and athletic, than if they attended a much larger public school.

Bentley

Participant background

       Bentley is currently the headmaster of The Polk School. His varied leadership experience includes having acted as an administrator at a number of schools in various regions across the Eastern seaboard. This extensive administrative experience has expanded Bentley's knowledge base regarding the concept of school culture, as well as the effect of school culture on stakeholder groups within independent schools.

       This is Bentley's first year as Headmaster of The Polk School. Thus, I had the rare opportunity to learn the perspectives of an administrator who is in the process of assessing the current condition of the culture at The Polk School, and how he might be able to influence that culture in a positive manner.

Defining Polk School culture

       Bentley has a fascinating view of culture that takes into account all stakeholders. "School culture is best described as the spirit or feel of the community. What are the values that we have and hold dear? Is there language to describe shared experience? Is there a sense of how the mission imbues all decision making and experiences of, in our case, the boys in the school." Ideas of community and different groups of interest abound in Bentley's definition, and the lynchpin to creating a positive spirit or atmosphere is "making sure that the right people are in the right places, and provided with the right resources so that our boys have every opportunity possible to be successful."

He went on to describe facets of a positive school culture by asking a series of probing questions of himself and The Polk School in general:

> How are we, as a school, living our mission as an elementary school, a middle school, as an upper school? How is it that kids experience that mission day in and day out? And my role is to help to create opportunities where the mission statement can be a well-lived experience.

Headmaster Bentley opined, on more than one occasion, that the school's mission statement has a major impact on Polk School culture. In mentioning the mission statement, Bentley gave me his perspective on how a school culture, in his ideal world, might look: "I think that when an organization functions at its best, its mission and its culture are reflected in one another." A new leader, looking to stabilize and inspire confidence, may look to the school mission statement (a statement with history and multiple stakeholder input) to provide guidance. Headmaster Bentley understands the importance of leading in a way that allows for the most amount of growth and stability.

> I believe that the challenge for leadership is being sure that you yourself are well fixed to the mission and that your personal and professional values will match up with the values of the culture of the school….I can think of lots of instances where that does happen, and maybe a couple of instances where it doesn't happen and that's where you see fall out or related difficulties.

Bentley continued to discuss his view on school culture and how it is he thinks people in his position have the ability to guide its direction.

> One of the challenges that occurs when a leader comes in and is trying to take a school and a culture through a place that the school and culture wants it to go to, and that's where you can either have friction or you can have a dynamic attention which leads to wonderful growth. It's simply a matter of, the old analogy, are you going to push or pull. If you pull, you're going to throw your back out and you're going to get real tired, and you're probably not going to be any fun. But if you find a way to generate the energy from within to push, what wonderful success you can have.

Bentley's extensive administrative experience has allowed him to both identify and appreciate the impact a negative school culture can have on an institution of learning.

So what's it look like when I use the word, "dysfunction?" You have a leader at the top who's out of touch with the mission of the culture, and does not understand what's important in the way of experience. Doesn't understand what's important in the way of the lived experience of adults and is even less concerned about the lived experience of the kids. That's when there's a dysfunctional way of adapting to a given school's culture. And, I've been to places where a leader is out of touch with what's important for the institution.

Bentley makes it clear that all stakeholder groups must be happy and feel involved in a given school's culture for a positive atmosphere to exist.

Bentley sees it as the headmaster's duty to communicate effectively with all stakeholders regardless of age or hierarchical position:

You can never communicate enough, but you have to learn how to communicate effectively. And what that means is you can say the same thing to people, but you have to say it or communicate it in different ways. So, you say to students, "I want you to know that you all are the most important thing, and you are why we are here, and you are what makes me tick, and I'm going to do everything I can to make sure you have a terrific experience while we are here." You would do that differently for a kindergartner, or a fifth grader, or a seventh grader, or a ninth grader, or a twelfth grader. And you communicate that differently with the parents, and you know, for me, I have to pull out sections from the mission statement. I try to truly match it up with lived experience…and of course you communicate things differently to the faculty and the trustees as well.

According to Bentley, the necessity of communication and its value in the process of creating a functional school culture cannot be overstated. It is the key to student, faculty, parent, and Board participation and support. In addition, proper communication allows for appropriate transparency on the part of the administration, thereby fostering trust and goodwill among a myriad of stakeholders hailing from different backgrounds, and looking to achieve different, but related goals.

Leadership and Polk School Culture

Bentley shared a number of views regarding the intersection of leadership and school culture. He deftly communicated the present condition of The Polk School, and the aspects of school culture that he considers to be enduring constants:

> At different points, the engine of the culture can be in the control of different stake holders, it kind of depends upon where the school is in its own developmental experience. I think, right now, from where we are, and I hope this doesn't sound conceited, but I think the school, our school, is looking to me as a new head, to the Board, an engaged Board that has elected me unanimously as they have, and to a senior administrative staff that I've inherited, and the school community saying, "Ok, what's it going to be?"

Bentley believes that the direction of The Polk School is presently under his partial control, as other stakeholder groups look to him and fellow administrators for positive direction.

Bentley gave some examples of what can be done by those in leadership positions to foster a positive school culture:

> I want to push that responsibility and power back to the different stake holders and to engage folks, and say, "It's not my school, it's not your school, it's OUR school." I want to engage kids in really hands-on direct leadership roles. I want to say to faculty members, "we're involved in a review of our professional growth or evaluation system," and to gather fifteen rank-and-file faculty members and some administration, and say that we are all going to solve this problem, no one vote counts more than the others….Those are the kinds of things which they'd accomplish a task but accomplish a much larger goal by setting an important tone.

Headmaster Bentley does not become easily flustered, does not hastily enact policies, and tries to avoid unilaterally creating rules. Instead, he often leads by building consensus and empowering other stakeholder groups, stepping in only when conflict arises or his individual purview as headmaster is specifically required.

Academic achievement and Polk School Culture

Regarding the influence of school culture on the academics at a given institution, Bentley stated, "I fundamentally believe that the culture makes a difference [in the academic achievement of its students]." It is important to note that academic achievement, for the purpose of this and other interview discussions includes, "the rank-and-file test scores and grades of students." Headmaster Bentley's belief that school culture has an intense and direct effect on the academic achievement of his students supports the theory that studying and evaluating school culture with an objective of creating a positive learning environment will improve student morale, satisfaction, and achievement.

Independent and public schools share a misplaced focus regarding the importance of standardized test scores. In public schooling, test scores directly influence school funding from governmental agencies. Comparatively, independent schooling test scores can influence the popularity of a school, affecting its enrollment numbers and having a direct influence upon its annual operating budget.

In addition to highlighting the direct relationship between academic achievement and school culture, Bentley discussed the impact an independent school's culture has on academic achievement.

> Part of the question is, from a policy perspective, who is it that is important to the school, and if you have a school which is geared to the kind of population which will naturally feed in one way because of whatever those limitations or opportunities might be, then that's going to predict what your range of academic achievement is.

In other words, if an independent school is primarily focused upon graduates' admittance into "top-tier" colleges and universities, then the admissions process would be geared to accepting students seen as capable of achieving that goal. It is necessary that an independent school understand both its perceived (external community) and actual (internal) academic goals. This

comprehension will enable the school to attract applicants well-matched to furthering the

fulfillment of the institution's mission statement.

Differences between The Polk School culture and public school culture

Some differences between an independent school like The Polk School and public

schools were referenced in the above sections. Bentley continued this discussion highlighting the

issues of logistics and resources. Bentley stated that, "because of the structure of public schools,

there is a greater challenge for public school leaders to have a hands-on influence in changing the

school culture." The notion of school size playing a prominent role in the formation of school

culture and the empowerment of different stakeholder groups was not limited to this discussion.

In this same spirit, Bentley recalled memories of doing doctoral research in Pennsylvania

and encountering different school administrators from various school districts who had stories

and experiences to share with him. From this and other related experiences, Bentley identified

the distinctions between independent and public schooling as the roles and responsibilities of

different administrators:

> The issues concerning the engagement of student leaders, that was left to a Dean of
> Students, who reported to the Assistant Principal, who reported to an Associate Principal,
> who reported to the Principal. It was many levels down. The Principal, on the other
> hand, is taking on a role of active leader in professional development and other things,
> and trying to really work with faculty, and training faculty to try to create an effective
> culture.

Bentley's perception of public schooling is characterized by the assumption that the

indirect authority and power of the principal or school head is not a result of some flaw in the

foundation of the system, but a result of assigning too many responsibilities for any one person to

successfully accomplish. It is fair to suggest that Bentley believes the head of an independent

school has more direct authority and control over the school's culture, in part due to the relatively small size of the independent school.

> The Headmaster did not hesitate to use my name to make his point clear:

> There aren't the number of kids [in independent schools] to dictate the leadership decisions….If you have a school of 2,500 kids, and a kid gets expelled for cheating, I don't know what the ripple effect is going to be in that school culture. But if you have an upper school of 300 kids and the student-run, student-lead honor board makes a recommendation to the Headmaster that Dan Schochor be expelled for cheating, that has [a] definite ripple-effect in the school.

> The idea that a school's size has a direct influence on that school's culture is a popular observation among participants in this study. Increased familiarity among students, faculty, and administration make independent schools, and in particular The Polk School, very different than area public schools. That familiarity, according to Bentley, is what allows independent school heads to be so involved and hands-on in the creation and maintenance of promoting a successful school culture.

Derrick

Participant background

Derrick has the most international educational experience of all the study's participants, having been a student, teacher, and administrator on three different continents (Europe, Asia, and now North America). His range of experiences is different from other participants in this study, and thus offers a vastly different perspective to the collected data set. In addition to his wide range of cultural and ethnic experiences, Derrick has an impressive amount of experience as a teacher in Mid-Atlantic independent schools - having taught English at a Polk School rival for eight years prior to being named to an administrative position at The Polk School.

Following his recent ascent to an administrative position, Derrick was determined not to lose contact with the classroom and issues or problems that arise therein. To ensure this would be the case, Derrick shared his plan to remain connected to the students:

> I have chosen to teach a class, the person who was in my position, she taught sometimes and she didn't teach sometimes. I chose to teach a class when I came here, so that I am the recipient of my own policies, and all of the policies that my team or my group has helped to put together. If I teach, then I am a recipient of those policies.

In Derrick's estimation, there is a hierarchy and a "food chain," to be followed in independent education. He feels that it is a necessity for those higher up in the "food chain" to make sure that they remain in close and constant communication with both the faculty and students.

Defining Polk School culture

In discussing who is most responsible for setting a positive tone in school and creating a positive school culture, Derrick opined that:

> The faculty is number one in influencing school culture….They are the ones when it comes to class, setting the tone in most classrooms. They are the ones who are assigning work. They are the ones who are assigning grades. They are the ones who are running all of the activities around school. I think faculty set the tone for the school and set the culture, whatever it is.

In addition, Derrick also believes that parents play an integral role in molding a school's culture. He states that "parents would be a close second for me [in terms of school culture creation] because of their influence upon the student and upon their lives outside of school." Again, the idea of a sphere of influence existing beyond school walls makes an appearance in this study. While school culture, for the purposes of this study, is a phenomenon existing within school walls, multiple participants in this study have mentioned the notion that a great force in the creation and structure of school culture exists beyond any of their control, in the students' off-campus environment.

Derrick elaborated on this concept of an external sphere of influence when he stated that:

> I think that is possible [to control school culture], save for two limiting factors. One is the experience of the students outside of the school. The students bring a whole lot of baggage to the school, maybe baggage is a negative term, but they bring their outside experiences on to the school campus, even though they spend 7-8 hours a day here, they spend 15, 16 hours somewhere else. They spend the weekends somewhere else. They spend 160 days somewhere else. They are only in school for a small portion of their lives.

Regardless of the particular effect this outside life has on each individual student, each student will bring their own external issues, problems, and experiences into the school. Administrators, faculty members, and Board members should be well prepared to address and confront these issues generated by external forces.

Continuing this line of thought and analysis, Derrick supplemented his first statement concerning outside influences on school culture:

> Any school's culture is partly dependent upon the socio-economic background of the students, and the culture within their own house. If the culture within their own house is not supporting of doing homework, or participating in community activities and so on, it's going to be hard to encourage that in school, and I see that in other schools between students where there is not the culture of supporting homework in the house, it just doesn't happen no matter how proper the atmosphere in school.

Derrick began to highlight some of the frustrating experiences that he has had in the past. While he mentions that socio-economic backgrounds can be at the root of some of these issues, the bigger issue is a culture that exists within the home from which the student emerges every day, and to which each student returns every night. Derrick has spent much of his time in environments that have left indelible impressions upon him. These situations involved students who came from places where they were not supported, and all of the support he and his peers could offer, while the students were in school, could not counteract the negative influences exerted upon these same students once they left school premises.

Leadership and Polk School culture

When he spoke of the headmaster and his position at the top of the educational hierarchy, Derrick focused on ideas of control and organizational structure. When asked to view school culture through his current lens as an administrator, Derrick changed his analysis of the school culture phenomenon, stating that, "Well as far as what I said about the teacher being the most effective and important aspect of school culture….I think the headmaster is the most important, is the most important individual aspect of culture within school." Although he believes that teachers are the most instrumental stakeholder as the greatest influence on students in the creation of a positive school culture, Derrick does not underestimate the importance of an effective headmaster regarding school culture as it applies to the school community as a whole. While teachers as a group wield the most power in creating a specific culture, speaking purely about individuals within a school environment, the headmaster is more responsible than any other individual in a given school.

In an attempt to clarify his perspective regarding the power and control wielded by the headmaster, Derrick stated that:

> I think the headmaster is a person who sets processes in place, who sets the tone for the school, focuses upon the personal mission of the school and really ensures that lines of communication are open, that procedures are followed, that people are working with each other effectively, and that one hand knows what the other hand is doing. And, quite frankly, the headmaster must hold the administrators accountable, hold the faculty accountable, and hold the students accountable and the parents as well for their responsibility in moving towards a shared goal.

Here, the concept of accountability arises in conjunction with the notion of formal authority and leadership emanating from the headmaster position. Derrick feels that one of the most important responsibilities that a headmaster has is to ensure that all stakeholder groups are functioning toward a common goal or shared vision. Derrick indicated that "he [the headmaster] is the one who brings all the different communities together to make sure they are really all

pulling in the same direction. It is a huge opportunity, a massive job, and, it has a dramatic effect upon, upon the culture of the school." This observation places effective and constant communication at the top of the list of necessary traits for a capable headmaster to possess. According to Derrick, a Headmaster must not only be able to oversee the actions of a multitude of different sub-communities, but also communicate to them, in a language they can each understand, the school's direction, their shared goals, and most importantly, the methods they must employ to achieve these goals.

Derrick's final point concerning the role of headmaster and its relation to school culture identifies the managerial / procedural aspects of the position. Quite simply, "No one is hired or fired without the approval of the headmaster." The fact that the Headmaster has total knowledge and control over personnel decisions is an immensely important aspect of his/her job as it pertains to school culture, especially if we are to believe that a given school culture depends entirely upon the individuals comprising the school community. That notion, combined with Derrick's assertion that The Polk School's faculty is the single most important stakeholder group in creating and maintaining a solid school culture, makes the headmaster's personnel decisions that much more critical.

Academic achievement and Polk School culture

Derrick believes that there is a direct link between a given school's culture and the academic achievement of students within that school; as he explains, "there's nothing more important to the learning environment and student achievement than a positive school culture which emphasizes and values learning and students' intellect." Derrick, as an administrator who deals with school curricula on a daily basis, believes school culture plays an immense role in student achievement.

To this end, Derrick explained:

> A positive school culture is more important than buildings, fancy textbooks, or generous resources. I think a positive culture in a school is more important to student achievement than any other factor. Clearly effective teachers are the primary factor in student achievement, but effective teachers are those that instill a positive learning culture and that is crucial for student achievement.

Derrick is a fervent believer that a positive school culture can do more to elevate student achievement than many of the more tangible factors legislators, and some scholars, focus on when trying to raise test scores and student GPA's (grade point average).

Differences between The Polk School culture and public school culture

While Derrick is very clear in his belief that teachers at The Polk School are in firm control of school culture, he goes out of his way to differentiate his experience at The Polk School from his experiences at public institutions. Speaking on this topic, Derrick stated that:

> We here at The Polk School have such small class sizes, pretty well-behaved kids, and good resources, a situation exists here in that our teachers can control their environment. They can set the tone in there. They can ask students to do things and the students will do them. I worked in public schools before where I have asked students to do things and they refused to do what I asked. Or, they were throwing some piece of furniture. And, you know, the amount of control I have over that culture, what I could do there was limited by what the kids were already doing prior to any situation there. But, I strongly feel that our teachers have enough control over the situation in order to influence culture.

The reason Derrick places so much of the responsibility of creating a positive school culture on teachers at The Polk School is because he sees teachers as being in a very advantageous position. They have the enviable ability to communicate comfortably and effectively with their students.

Barrett

Participant background

Barrett is a veteran teacher at The Polk School. He has a twenty-five year history at The Polk School and in that time has seen administrators, Board members, headmasters, faculty, and students come and go. This provides him with a long-term perspective on school culture at Polk, and how it has been created and maintained over time. Though all of this experience provides an excellent complement to the list of interview participants, it was also helpful to see how his lack of experience at other schools changed the way he views school culture, particularly at The Polk School.

Defining Polk School culture

Barrett sees school culture, quite simply as "the invisible structure of the school…it would include the assortment of roles those people in The Polk School community play, expectations of students, expectations of teachers, and the expectations of parents." As a member of The Polk School faculty for twenty-five years, Barrett is very familiar with the different stakeholder groups that exert their respective wills in any given situation.

In holding with a generally accepted and widely-repeated theme, Barrett observed that The Polk School functions somewhat like a family, and that people within The Polk School community see themselves as being part of something bigger than just themselves or the cohort with which they spend the majority of their time. "I think everyone expects a familial atmosphere. If anything of that sort gets beat to death at The Polk School, it's that we are like a big family. And…for good or for ill, it is most certainly a family…and some of it is for good and

some of it is for ill. Like a family." While Barrett understands that generally having a family atmosphere can lead to cohesion, collegiality, and congeniality, he is also aware of the possible drawbacks to being a family atmosphere, and recognizes that The Polk School is not above having some familial skirmishes from time to time.

Barrett's familial acceptance took quite a while. Though he had been at The Polk School for over twenty years in 2004, he noted, "for 23 years, I have felt like I'm at The Polk School, but I'm not of The Polk School." However in 2004 he was asked to be part of "the advisory committee to the search committee for finding a new headmaster at The Polk School." It was this experience that allowed Barrett, for the first time, to feel as though he was truly part of The Polk School family, rather than a long-standing distant relative. Barrett pointed out that The Polk School operates like a family, and that he found out just recently that he was, in fact, truly a part of this family and not simply an engaged bystander.

In addition to the family atmosphere, Barrett identifies athletics as a major component of the culture at The Polk School, "One has to look at the strong athletic school culture here. How does this culture then translate into the classroom? Well, you know, sometimes you have students with an exaggerated sense of privilege, based on the fact that they are valuable members of some important athletic team." Though Barrett is quick to point out that athletics can be detrimental to the school culture if students' ideas of self-worth and self-importance are exaggerated, he also mentions that, "My whole time here we always have [had] kids who struggle somewhat academically, but who get a real boost in self-esteem because they can shine in other arenas, especially athletics. So, that can really keep a kid going." As one might expect to hear from a faculty member with a great deal of practical and first-hand experience, Barrett is very quick to point out a balanced view of the positives and negatives associated with the stigmas he sees attached to The Polk School and its school culture.

Barrett feels very strongly that competition, especially among faculty members, detracts from the creation of a positive school culture at a place like The Polk School. In reaction to a policy that would tie salary to performance evaluations, Barrett stated his position on this issue:

> You need to turn the faculty into a highly cooperative team that feels like it possesses the product of its work jointly. So, don't pit them against one another. You know, you've got to make the decisions you've got to make in terms of compensation and some people are going to get rewarded and some people are going to be less rewarded, that's fine, but don't tie that to the social dynamic of the faculty. We need not to be distrusting of one another. We need to be trusting, and urging one another on like teammates do.

He would go on to state that the issue here is that some of the people setting policy come from a business background where "you've got 200 guys out there on the trading floor in head-to-head competition with one another, you have a whole series of 'guy of the week' and 'guy of the month' and all of this head-to-head stuff, well because they are individual players, they are individual performers, and that works." Again the comparison between business and independent school emerges. In this context Barrett asserts that having experience running a business can help run an independent school like The Polk School, but that knowledge must be tempered by the proper amount of contextualization for it to be truly helpful in an academic setting. A successful leader must understand that specific, unrelated experience and knowledge must be circumstance-appropriate when interjected into a new and untested situation.

Leadership and Polk School culture

Barrett's view of the leadership role at The Polk School and how it influences the school culture is encapsulated by this statement, "The headmaster's office is just a nexus. If there is default there and he does not take an active role in promoting positive school culture, then, among other things, you get trustee meddling." Thus, it would seem that Barrett envisions the

headmaster less as a culture creator, and more as a culture mediator who is besieged by a

multitude of diverse stakeholders with various stakeholder perspectives.

Barrett likens the position of headmaster to the job of chief executive officer in a non-

profit corporation:

> The chief executive in a non-profit corporation…runs the Board. It doesn't look like that
> on the organizational charts, but if he or she doesn't run the Board, then they are not run
> by anyone, which means then they will wander around and look for their job, and much
> of what they will find to be their job is not what it should be.

Unfortunately, The Polk School has not had stability in the position of headmaster for a number

of years, and this instability has forced the Board to take a more active role in the school,

something Barrett believes is disadvantageous.

Academic achievement and Polk School culture

Though Barrett focused much of what he said about culture on positions generally

deemed higher on the chain of command than his own, when the topic changed to academics and

achievement, he was quick to point out the necessity of a positive culture among his peers:

> Here's the baseline assumption that I have. You cannot do highly professional work if
> the only audience that you work for are people who are 16 years old…if the only
> audience you have is those kids, you won't work at the highest professional level. You
> need some adults paying attention. Now that could mean supervision, but it's better if it
> meets collegiality....

The previous statement alludes to the importance of an informal version of professional

development. At The Polk School, Barrett has a situation where he receives professional

development on a daily basis, which, he feels, contributes to him becoming a better, more

responsive teacher. He feels that a school culture developed and maintained by empowered and

professionally developed teachers like himself, would directly lead to more fulfilling class

periods for their students, and inevitably, more learning would take place during designated class time.

For Barrett, one particular experience stood out as being especially illustrative of this concept of improving students experience indirectly via the individual improvement of teachers and their teaching practices. He described a period of time during which a team of "learning specialists" frequently floated from classroom to classroom:

> When, in the heyday of that team, Jen Wineman was in and out of every one of these classrooms all the time, and every one of us was working better as a result of that. She and Josh Mason would key into your students and they just both had an ability to say, 'Here's a special talent that you could waste a month or two discovering, so I'm not going to let you waste a month or two.'

He felt that the practice of objectively observing and making non-judgmental, non-threatening observations was integral in the swift and effective learning and improvement of The Polk School teaching staff.

Barrett went on to comment about the ability of these specialists to key in on different individual students in the classrooms, and make suggestions as to how best to reach them on a one-on-one level, thereby fine-tuning the teacher's approach and improving the students' classroom performances. Barrett gave this example:

> Notice how Andy Black is able to think critically about this specific book…and you would start every year expecting that you've got these bright lights in your classroom. This is fantastic. You know, and they are watching how you treat those kids. The impact that we have on one another has an impact on the kids.

The fact that Barrett was able to recall specific names of students from years past, along with the exact advice given to him from the learning specialists, speaks to the forceful influence of this continuing education process.

Differences between The Polk School culture and public school culture

Barrett has worked within the independent school environment for almost three decades; however his experience as a student was at a parochial school. This personal experience provided him with insights into the question about differences between public and independent school culture.

During this stage of the interview Barrett looked around his room; arms outstretched and stated, "Well, look at this room. I own this room. I am pretty much in total possession. I've got space. Nobody in public schools gets anything remotely like that." Barrett's classroom is adorned with photographs of current students, former students, and himself in non-classroom settings. Books pack all available shelf space, and the books range from Shakespearean novels to modern classics. This concept of ownership pervaded much of the commentary he had about the differences existing between public and independent school culture. From property and space to responsibility and authority:

> Nobody gets to own anything [in public schools]. And it starts with the principal who should have a whole lot of power that principals don't have in actuality. You know, all those people nagging them, and sucking authority out of the school, which means then that the administration sucks the authority out of the teacher….

> Barrett continues, as he grows more impassioned:

> You know, my ability to understand the individual learning needs of my students, and to tailor my curriculum to make the best use of their time against the skills that they need to get out of Language class, that's my professional skill. That's what I do. To the degree that people want to have me paying attention not to those kids in this curriculum, but paying attention to some set of standards in Washington or in 25th Street, or headquarters, they are just stealing my attention from the students.

Barrett conveyed a feeling of frustration regarding how standards and the bureaucratic aspects of public schooling weigh down the experience of school culture enormously before the evaluation of an individual school facility is even considered.

Olivia

Participant background

Olivia is a veteran teacher in the math and sciences department at The Polk School. She

is yet another study participant who brings multiple vantage points to this study, as she plays the

role of parent, as well as the role of teacher. Olivia described herself as a no-nonsense type of

teacher, and recounted a story that had taken place only days before the interview:

> I know everybody's name here, they know who I am, and the wonderful thing about being
> here for a while is my reputation precedes me. Today I went in and substituted for a
> class, and said, 'This is my free time, you have something to do, these are the directions
> and the directions said, 'Do not share answers with anybody in this room.' and it was a
> vocabulary assignment. So, I'm thinking, 'right, nobody's going to share answers.' I'm
> going to get my paper and grade a couple things. And I looked up and there was not a
> word in there. Not one word the whole time. So, I asked someone else to watch me; it
> was like they took a test. And it was like I'd said, 'I know you will respect the fact that 5
> minutes ago I thought I had a free period.' And they did.

This is not an uncommon story where Olivia is concerned. An eight-year veteran of The

Polk School, she has been involved with turnover on every level including the Board, the

administration, the faculty, and students. She has seen many peers in her department come and

go during her tenure, but she has remained a constant.

Defining Polk School culture

When Olivia thinks of school culture, she thinks about "the general intangibles that

emanate from student behavior, faculty behavior, interaction between faculty and students." The

faculty members participating in this study repeatedly stress the relationship between faculty

members and students as a gauge for a given school's culture. Olivia points to her experiences in

the job market as a teacher, and, later, as a member of a committee partially responsible for the

hiring of a specific administrator at The Polk School as a way to more precisely explain what she

means when she uses the term school culture:

> About 8 years ago, I was interviewing for a job so I visited a lot of different schools, and there were very tangible differences in school culture. How serious are the students about the work? How do the students interact with the teachers? Do they call them by their first names? Do they feel comfortable talking about different subjects? What sort of things do the students and teachers talk to each other about, if they talk at all? Do you hear sir or ma'am at the end of the sentence?

Olivia utilizes this list of questions when evaluating a particular school's culture.

Specifically, it is worth noting Olivia's omission of any reference, either directly or indirectly, to

a given school's administration. That is not to say that she believes the administration has no

control over a school's culture, but when she thinks of school culture, it is specifically the

relationship between faculty members and students that drive that culture. To that point, Olivia

states, "I like to think that what happens in the hallways and in the classroom are what constitutes

the core of the school culture."

In Olivia's estimation, an important part of school culture is the teachers feeling that they

are valued members of the school community. These positive feelings help shape and dictate the

relationships they share with their students. Talking about this very notion, Olivia specifically

referenced the time she spent on the administrator search committee at Polk School.

> I am a member of the search committee, and I was the voting justice that the head of the Board of Trustees appointed, and I was included in that process. And, when we got down to the finalists, I was part of the team of 4 that went to the finalists' campuses and weighed in on our opinion of our day and the constituents that we met and everything. That was very affirming, and I never felt at any time that I was being patronized.

In this statement, Olivia highlights the importance that genuine support from the

administration and Board play in her view of The Polk School. It was very important to her that

she be given partial ownership of such an important decision, but as important, if not more

important, was the fact that this committee was formed in good faith, and that the conclusion of

the committee was accepted by the Board of Trustees. Olivia contrasted this positive experience

with other experiences she has had in the past at schools other than The Polk School:

> The fact that they wanted a faculty member there and, like I said…it was a wonderful look for me from the other side of how they [administrators] appreciate what we do. It was really a feel good experience. There were certain times, at peer schools, that I felt undermined by some administrators….

Olivia's experience on the search committee, among other things, affirmed the idea that

the administration at The Polk School supported her efforts in the classroom, and was eager to

obtain her input as a member of the search committee. As a part of this committee she made trips

to the various candidates' schools in order to observe them on their current campus. This feeling

of being a valued and vital part of the school community has allowed Olivia to perform at her

optimal level, while not feeling threatened by the current administration.

This experience seemed to make a profound impact on Olivia. A good portion of our

interview time together was devoted to talking about the different perspectives related to her trips,

what she learned from them, and how much, of that new knowledge and experience, she was able

to pass on to other members of her committee and their superiors. In the following passage,

Olivia shared more of what she learned during her time on this panel, and how that experience

has expanded her view of school culture:

> One of the schools that we visited was in Florida, so the school culture was vastly different. There was an outdoor cafeteria. There was essentially no dress code, and it was co-educational. The school was K-12 and co-ed from 4th grade on, but it was an Episcopal school, and it just had a completely different feel. [The principal at this school] was a strong woman and had a kind of firm hand when she administrated. Our candidate was the head of the upper school, and he didn't know about, or have control over any part of the budget at all.

Olivia represented the role of an educator on this committee, but learned a lot about what she

calls "the other side" (administration) as well. For example, the fact that there exists perfectly

viable and successful division heads at independent schools around the country who have no

budgetary control or knowledge of the school at which they work was a completely alien idea to

Olivia prior to this trip.

Leadership and Polk School culture

Olivia's view on leadership and school culture, as one might imagine, is also partially

derived from her time on the aforementioned administrator search committee. Beyond what she

learned on that trip, she tends to believe that the best school leaders are the ones that act like

coaches; allowing the game to be played on the field, but making adjustments from the sideline as

necessary, "I think there has to be someone keeping everyone in check, and someone whom you

trust, someone who likes what he does and likes being around, adolescents and kids, people, and

teachers." Olivia makes sure to reference the idea that school leaders must enjoy their work and

more specifically those they work with; however, she is quick to point out that leaders need to

make sure no one stakeholder group extends themselves beyond their designated role.

She believes that one way to make sure people are aware of their specific roles and their

various responsibilities is through the proper use of communication:

> I think that communication is how we [speaking for the administration] support you [the teacher] in what you are doing. This is our goal, and this is where we are going. This is how I would like you to help me. I know all of this and even though I don't have an MBA, I know something really cool. If everybody weighs into a decision…it takes more time. If you make just your own decision, you can make it faster. But, you know, in education, it was really interesting when we went to that search committee and this administrator we were interviewing his essentially compacted curriculum and the school had reaped great academic rewards.

This ability to communicate is essential for any successful school leader, and especially at a place

like The Polk School, where it is important to pay individual attention to every stakeholder

whenever they require it. Unlike public schooling, in independent schooling the school's head

must, at least in some instances, treat his or her students (and their parents) like clients of their

business, because without their patronage, that independent school ceases to exist. Olivia, in stressing the importance of communication related to independent school leadership, identified an important point reiterated by many of her fellow study participants. If a given school culture is at least in part dependent upon the ability of administrators as "coaches" (referring to the earlier analogy), than it is vitally important that, as coaches, these administrators can successfully communicate, whenever necessary, with their players.

Academic achievement and Polk School culture

As an advanced placement teacher, Olivia derives much of her satisfaction from watching students not only grow cognitively and developmentally in her classes, but also watching them perform well on high stakes Advanced Placement (AP) tests. Olivia believes that "positive school culture can influence academic achievement positively." She continued using the advanced placement classes as a reference point for some of her academically-related experiences, "Did I eliminate things, to sort of teach for the test? Uh-huh. A little bit. But, if the test is the gateway to college acceptance and college credit, ultimately, you have to buy into the system." Olivia believes that as an advanced placement instructor, it is her responsibility to prepare students for the inevitable high stakes that come every spring in the form of college applications.

In that spirit, Olivia mentions the importance of student contribution to their own academic success:

> It [success on the advanced placement exam] is really not a function of their intelligence. I mean to a certain point yes, ok. But an above-average kid, with above-average math ability, if he works his tail off, he's going to pass the test. And if you want it, here, you know, if you want it for yourself, in your own brain and you believe that you can do that, and you want to put in the time, like they go there [pointing outside of her classroom], sitting across the hall, busting your chops, at 3:15 on Thursday when the school day is over, because you know you're going to have a quiz the next day…you can pass the test.

Again communication plays an absolutely central role in a students' academic success. Olivia also believes that students at The Polk School possibly suffered from a lack of high expectations, because once she decided to raise expectations and accelerate her classes to meet advanced placement standards, she found her students, for the most part, responded and exceeded all expectations. It was this encouraging communication, the raising of certain class standards that Olivia saw as the real turning point in some of her higher level classes.

Differences between The Polk School culture and public school culture

Olivia points out that the most obvious and clear difference between an independent school like The Polk School and a public school is "the socio-economic class of most of the students who attend." Again, the mentioning of an influence not controlled or dictated by the school has a very large impact on the given culture of a school regardless of the school's geographical location.

She reported that independent school class size enables her to be more intimately involved with the productivity and functionality of each of her students. She commented that "the students having their homework done is so important because that dictates the whole class." Olivia is glad that she can keep such a close eye on her students and make sure that they finish their daily assignments completely and correctly before moving on to more advanced concepts or theories. Because she has the ability to monitor individual progress through the collection and close, detailed evaluation of daily assignments, she can decide how she needs to tailor her daily class activities.

Olivia was able to speak about her class and its dynamic the last couple of days, and how she handled the homework and class pacing:

> I knew that today was a day where I had to regroup and go back over homework and spend the whole class going over the last two homework assignments. Well, if nobody did them, then that does change the whole way I'm going to do things. But I could work with what they did and I got everybody involved, in groups at the board….

Because she is able to make sure that her students are progressing at similar paces, she can better adjust her daily class plans to accommodate the class as a whole. These adjustments would be practically impossible at a school where class sizes are almost double the average class size at The Polk School (which is about fifteen students per class in the upper school). According to Olivia, the influence that class size and teacher resources (time being the most precious of those resources) have on academic achievement and other issues directly related to school culture cannot be overestimated.

Ted

Participant background

Ted is currently a faculty member at The Polk School, and has been involved with independent schooling for almost a decade. He has a background in business. A product of independent schooling, he feels a very close kinship with those he teaches.

His chosen career path is one he enjoys immensely:

> As a teacher, and the reason I chose to teach, was that I wanted to have a maximum impact on people and to make a powerful difference in the world. As a teacher, I have a tremendous amount of impact on the students in my classroom, and who I have been given the immense responsibility of their education in a particular area.

Faculty members interviewed in this study repeatedly shared this same perspective. Be it explicit or implicit, their ability to influence the school culture rests on how well they can connect with students on an academic level, particularly in their given area of expertise.

Defining Polk School culture

Coming from the business or economic model of running institutions, Ted has learned that one must be constructively critical of the business or institution he/she is a part of in order to be truly successful. Speaking about The Polk School and some of the similarities it shares with the bigger corporations, Ted has been a part of during his professional life, he stated, "in cultures, because they exist in any organization, stuff, otherwise known as shit, flows downhill. It is true in the business world, and it is also true in schools."

Ted explained that "students make up the majority of the human beings in any school. So, the culture they have and the values they have, and what the norms of how they interact with one another and how they interact with 'formal authority figures' is clearly cultural behavior." He also believes that "the interaction among the faculties, and among the faculty and their authority figures, the administrators, comes downhill."

While Ted is very quick to empower his students and to give them the responsibility of establishing and maintaining a positive school culture, he realizes that the hierarchy of formal authority currently existing within The Polk School can have an influence on the culture without even conscionably attempting to do so. While students, due to their numbers, can reflect the school culture more effectively than any other stakeholder within a school, it can be difficult at times for them to have the control Ted feels they deserve. This limited amount of control over school culture is imposed by the decision-making power of the faculty, the administration, and the Board of Trustees.

The ideas of sincerity and authenticity are ones that Ted takes very seriously. It is at the crux of what creates any business, school, or professional culture, particularly The Polk School:

> The school culture at The Polk School is essentially how students fit in to the school and what their role is within the social context of the school. Specifically, it would have to do with: students' social statuses, ideas of integrity or lack thereof, a certain amount of trust,

and a certain lack of pretentiousness because that's what the school is about, it's a culture of openness.

In Ted's view, the school is represented by students, faculty members, and administrators who carry themselves with little or no haughtiness or conceit, and who like to be perceived as honest and respectful.

Those who choose not to conduct themselves in accordance with these views are seen as having a negative influence on the school culture. Conversely, those with reputations of upholding such ideals would be perceived as role models in this specific school culture. Ted stated, "The greatest thing that a person can do, or I can do, to impact school culture is to address people with honesty and sincerity, and respect."

Ted's assessment of school culture focuses on interpersonal relationships, and ideas such as community, control, leadership, and competence. Ted mentioned the possibility of an ideal school culture, and laid out a three step system to reach such a utopia. The process begins with the idea that "students should be pursuing to be the very best they can be, not for me, not for their mommy and daddies, not for the school administration, not for the reputation of the school, but simply for themselves." Schools that support ideals of self-motivation and drive are central to students creating an atmosphere where they are free to succeed cognitively and developmentally. Ted added his second criterion, "Help students start enjoying the process of learning. I think the greatest thing you can teach children in schools, is how to learn. Teach them, the way that process can work to make them 'life-long learners.'"

Finally, Ted shared that:

Inevitably, if someone develops an enjoyment of learning through self-analysis, and tries the best that they can, then grades really take care of themselves, and usually the grades will be far better than they would have been without the passion to learn. Most importantly, regardless of the grades, success in life, in whatever venue they choose to pursue, it will take care of itself. Not at the expense of someone else, but rather to the benefit of others.

The belief that an ideal school culture experiences academic achievement as a by-product of a

positive school culture is a concept Ted stressed throughout his interview. Though it might be

expected that a person with corporate business experience might be very achievement oriented,

Ted avoids personifying those stereotypes systematically. He values the intangible and abstract

features of school culture, and assimilates them with his more tangible, result-oriented business-

like values of school culture. Ted's Polk School experience has altered this result-oriented

outlook.

Leadership and Polk School culture

Although Ted remains adamant about the students' importance in the creation and

maintenance of positive school culture, when pushed on the subject of where the responsibility

ultimately lies for creating this positive culture, Ted concludes that the responsibility begins and

ends with the headmaster. While seemingly at odds with his former opinions regarding students

and their role in school culture, Ted stated:

> I think ultimately, the headmaster has the greatest impact on school culture, because it
> will start and end with him. He runs that careful balance between the Board of
> Education, or at The Polk School, the Board of Trustees, the alumni, the alumni
> association and all those folks, he holds the ultimate value and responsibility of
> communicating with the teachers. He is also ultimately responsible for setting the tone
> and choosing who are going to be the heads of the next level of administration at the
> school.

Although Ted stated that the headmaster has the greatest influence on school culture, he remained

true to his beliefs that communication, community, competence, and control still play vital roles

in school culture, regardless of the individual charged with accomplishing the school's goals.

Academic achievement and Polk School culture

Ted's view on the relationship between academic achievement and school culture is

spelled out:

> Academic achievement doesn't occur in isolation of the social surroundings and the
> culture. In my opinion, culture is something that is a known social surrounding. So,
> without understanding or being a part of that culture, academic achievement cannot
> happen without a positive school culture, without that understanding of the surroundings.

Although Ted shares others' beliefs that school culture and academic achievement are

linked, he takes this concept further than any of the other study participants by stating that

academic achievement is directly dependent upon a positive school culture.

Ted identified the downside of academic achievement being reliant upon school culture,

"Academic achievement can be encouraged with a particular culture of the school. It can be

hindered by the culture of the school, or it can be somewhat upended by the culture of the

school." Ted offered a very frank, unfiltered view of at the inner workings of The Polk School,

and, in his tempered view, the school culture of The Polk School was not completely positive.

Ted commented upon situations outside the realm of the school influence that negatively

influence the students. In his estimation, ramifications of such occurrences or situations can have

a direct effect upon the school culture. For instance, a student whose parents are having marital

issues may not be as attentive as usual, and may begin acting out in class, creating distractions

and disturbances. This kind of behavior influences school culture, and yet the genesis of the

problem lies outside school walls.

Ted, in his closing remarks, stated that, "Cultures exist where survival and being a

member of a group exceeds the importance of doing well academically. This is consistent with

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs with personal safety and social safety, in which case you could

actually undermine…the culture." This observation simply enhances the Ted's perspective

concerning the importance of communication, competence, and leadership in forming a positive

and secure school culture. In order to create such a culture, those who enter The Polk School must feel safe there, and must feel as though they can perform the duties and responsibilities asked of them in a non-threatening environment. If that is not the case, students may be forced to act in ways detrimental to the creation of a cooperative environment and culture.

Differences between The Polk School culture and public school culture

Ted himself was never a student or a teacher in a public school. However, he does have the experience of being the parent of two children attending public school. Ted had a very balanced view about the differences between Polk School culture and public school culture. He believes that "the main difference between any public school and the majority of private schools is a matter of size." In his estimation, this difference is the cause of other discrepancies between cultures at these two institutions, "Because public schools are bigger, they have a more rigid hierarchy, and roles are defined more clearly. Policies are made with this need for clarity in mind, and there is less confusion about these policies because of the clarity with which they're written."

This issue of size also has an impact on how students and faculty members come to know one another. Ted believes that there exists "a closeness between individuals at independent schools that is nearly impossible to duplicate in public schools because of their size" and subsequent impersonality.

The size of a given school also determines the necessary amount of human resource that gets apportioned to each student at that school. Again, the idea of public schools being vastly larger communities means that the culture within the school is affected by issues such as "teacher and staff unionization." This is something that Ted pointed out occurs within public schooling, and not at independent schools.

The Polk School, and other independent schools like it, have an entirely different set of values from public schools. For instance, Ted stated that, "The Polk School values trust and respect as demonstrated by things like not having locks on any of the lockers in the school." He went on to state, "The fact that we're a single-sex school matters, it is a part of our value system, and that particular value is clearly different than any value attributed to public schools." These values can exist because the size of the school community is so manageable.

Because there is relatively no anonymity at a school like The Polk School, each student can be held individually accountable for his actions. Certain value systems can be created with more specific kinds of individuals in mind. Public school leaders, because of their school's large and diverse populations, have a more difficult time assessing the ideas, values, and traditions that are held by the majority of the student body.

John

Participant background

John has been part of The Polk School faculty for the past five years. He teaches in the foreign language department, and has extensive independent school experience. He has worked in day schools and in boarding schools in the Mid-Atlantic Region, and has a good understanding of issues encountered by these schools. As with other members of the study, John was a public school student. His ability to juxtapose these two experiences helped to augment the data received study participants with first-hand public school experience.

Defining Polk School culture

John, when first asked about school culture, spoke very succinctly, "When I think of school culture, I think about how the guys take on, how they react to a school-organized function." John focused on student reactions defining a school's culture. His view of culture represents another vantage point yet unexplored in this study. The belief that a school's culture is dictated by the student body and not by the faculty, administrators, or Board of Trustees is unusual. John stated that, "I mean it is all [school culture] in their reaction. Do they [the students] know how to act, do they know how to perform in certain situations. I take it from their reaction. And based on all those experiences, I can get a view or a glimpse of the culture…." Again, John implied that, not only do students inadvertently create school culture, but many of their reactions are unpredictable and spontaneous, thus characterizing and defining the school culture at any given time.

In keeping with these ideas about school culture, it is John's belief that the faculty and administration need to be open to "giving the students these extra-curricular opportunities not necessarily in the classroom…." It is fair to say that John believes much of what creates a school culture occurs outside of the classroom. He mentions pep rallies, football games, dances, and other out-of-school activities, created by school employees, as a means for a school to exhibit its particular culture.

John's student-centered approach to school culture took definite shape when he stated that students need to "own their own school and own the process, that's culture to me." Thus, for John, the students need to feel influential and somewhat empowered, or the school will stunt their growth, and in the process, stunt the growth of its own culture.

Despite his student-centered emphasis, John also sees teachers as prominent contributors to this process. He noted, "As a foreign language teacher, I have a great impact on the guys who

understand my subject." While not explicitly stating that academic and school culture go hand in hand, this statement might lead to the conclusion that particular academic relationships could play major roles in school culture for both faculty members and students.

As a teacher, John believes that he can make certain substantial connections with students he might otherwise not be able to connect with, "Because we have something in common, a common interest." This student-faculty member relationship based upon common interests and common ideas "allows me to take my relationship with them, a step beyond simply teacher-student within the classroom."

John elaborated, "the people who I can relate to, that's, as a foreign language teacher, are the guys who can move along and excel in a subject, and I think that goes hands down, because the other guys might just think that I'm just their foreign language teacher here to make them work, work, work." John believes that the key to maintaining a friendship or specific relationship that extends outside of the classroom is a teacher's ability to "relate to them." One way that John has been able to better connect with his students is through extra tutoring. "That's the best way to engage kids outside of class. Tutoring is the best, and as I've said in the past few weeks, I've actually put that on them more…." Not only is this a prime example of a way a teacher can engage a student and demonstrate a personal interest in a student's advancement, but it also allows students to feel empowered because they are able to seek out assistance, make appointments, and begin to take responsibility for their academic lives.

Faculty members can also have a negative influence on school culture, one that students can sense in the classroom. John indicated that students might feel as if, "Maybe this guy is just a salesman. Kids can see it, kids know. I think they can see it in your face. Not only that though, they can see whether you have a passion for what you do." This exchange reflects the importance of authenticity on the part of instructors, and the intuitive ability of students to identify teachers they feel are less than genuine. John did not stop here in his evaluation of possible culture pitfalls

over which faculty members have complete control. He stated that "low standards" could

influence a school's culture and that teachers who "did not push" their students academically

were doing them no favors whatsoever.

After speaking about all of the ways that school culture can have an impact on students,

and how faculty members might have an indirect influence, John began to speak about some of

the things he might try to do to strengthen the school's culture:

> One of my priorities would have been to create more of a culture where the classes are all together, holding dances together, there would have been more spirit weeks. In fact, I'm talking about doing a spirit week for the seniors in preparation for the prom this year, which we've never done before.

Again, the theme of students at the center of a school's culture emerges, as does the belief that

faculty members should do all they can to support students and their interests, both inside and

outside of the classroom.

Leadership and Polk School culture

John's belief about administration's role in the creation of school culture was made clear

when he stated that, "The administration can and should set the structure but the students drive

the culture." John is absolutely steadfast in his belief that students are at the center of every

school, and therefore having a school culture driven by anyone but the students would seem to

contradict the idea that those who come to work every day at a school do so first and foremost to

help and support their students. In addition, John believes that ideas of "consistency and

standardization" from administration and faculty could help students "step in and drive their

culture."

Academic achievement and Polk School culture

John has a distinct view on school culture and its influence on students in the classroom. While some of his peers believe school culture to be a major part of academic success, John is more of the opinion that, "it's…doing something outside the classroom, because when they see me in the classroom, it is just me giving them straightforward information, but school culture is really about what's outside this classroom, and I think that is where I can do the most, and provide the most culture." John re-framed his position as a faculty member from an individual who passively observes school culture to a position where he can actively participate.

To allow for further reflection on this matter, John shared what it can be like to be a student in his classroom:

> I have them in their seats, I have them day in and day out doing work, and there has got to be something else. I know that I keep them fairly on task when they are in the classroom. The culture to me is not assigning more work, giving a quiz, giving them Spanish packets in the summer, or putting more Spanish on them. That's not culture to me. That's just school work.

Again John resisted the idea that academia should plays a vital role in the creation or maintenance of a school's culture. He expressed his thoughts about assigning work to students as an integral part of his job, but not a major factor in developing a school's culture. While John was reticent to describe school culture in a way that would be implicitly linked to school achievement or purely academic matters, he does believe that the faculty is a vital part of any school's culture, just not in the way most people perceive it. Just as he believes school culture is created by students away from their daily duties within the classroom, John believes that the faculty has the same influence on school culture when they are interacting with their students outside of the classroom.

Differences between The Polk School culture and public school culture

Finally, John spoke about his days as a student in a public school, and how those experiences compared to his experience as a faculty member of The Polk School:

> I think public school cultures drive themselves more because they have to. The kids do drive it more, at least at my old public high school. The kids ran the dances; there were a few [faculty] volunteers. I mean, when I was on student council at my public high school…you were in charge of doing everything, there were two people who oversaw it, and that was that, we had full control.

Currently, John's public school experience is closer to his ideal view of school culture than that of The Polk School. After learning of some of John's first-hand experiences as a student at the public school level and the autonomy they enjoyed, his views on school culture are much easier to understand.

Roland

Participant background

Roland is a recent alumnus of The Polk School, having graduated within the past four years. His entire education was obtained at The Polk School. His experiences and insights reflect the great influence that campus had on his life. Like some of the other participants, Roland witnessed the extensive turnover at every level while attending The Polk School. Many times throughout the interview he made statements using The Polk School as an example of school performance. That is to say, if he felt that the school operated smoothly in one regard, but not as smoothly in another, he was candid in his comments.

An active member of The Polk School community during his time there, Roland has a fully developed view of the school. An athlete, a member of multiple extra-curricular clubs that

involved time commitments beyond the normal school day, and an accomplished student, Roland

exemplified what many students at The Polk School strive to become.

Roland is currently enrolled at a top-tier, four-year college in the Mid-Atlantic Region,

and has continued his cognitive and developmental growth at his current university. Any

criticism offered by Roland about his former preparatory school was expressed constructively,

and with the best interest of the school in mind.

Defining Polk School culture

In Roland's eyes, his school's culture was created and controlled by the faculty, and was

responsive to the students:

> School culture is definitely the relationship that students have between each other;
> whether it be between groups, or within student groups, or how it is their student groups
> relate to other student groups…and when I say school culture, I also mean school
> spirit….

Like other students and faculty members, Roland is of the belief that students and their

relationship with each other and members of the faculty are truly what drive any school's culture.

"The culture is synonymous with the student body; everything is going to go through that group.

The happiness especially between the bonds of teachers and their students, especially how they

both relate to the school and how a lot of kids treat the school defines a culture…." The positive

influence that faculty members can have on The Polk School culture was something else that

Roland discussed: "The faculty at The Polk School definitely needs to be regarded with the kind

of respect you show by listening to them more…no question there." Roland's view of the key

players in Polk School culture aligns with much of what the other participants believe to be true

as well.

Roland then discussed the creation of school culture, "The culture of what we did on our breaks, like recess, or whatever, break time we had, those relationships forged during those times, I think defined how we related to one another. Inside of class, there was a lot of like playing around, and stuff. We weren't really all that controlled…." Here, Roland seemed to create the perception that Polk School culture, and any school culture if one were to extrapolate, is created in places where Board members, administrators, and even faculty members have limited, or perhaps no, influence.

Even if one believes students are the driving force behind school culture (as John, a prior interviewee asserts), that assumption is held in a context where other stakeholder groups have at least some control or ability to control the interactions among students. Whether students are attending extra-curricular functions (designed and approved by administrators, and carried out or implemented by faculty members) or interacting in the hallways or in the cafeteria between classes, other stakeholder groups control the environments in which students are interacting. Conversely, Roland's view that student interaction directly determines school culture is one that is unbridled by the influence of those groups. He purposefully omits them from playing even an indirect role in the creation or maintenance of a given school culture. In essence, Roland states, "I really think school culture is what sports the kids play and what other activities students do on their breaks…it is what they do with their unstructured time."

Roland indicated that while much of the culture creation occurs during time entirely unstructured by The Polk School, some of it originates in places and times at least partially controlled by the school. "I think a part of the culture was based around the athletics of the school. There really wasn't a 'varsity' academic program, and so the academics, no one really bonded over…." However, just when it seemed as though Roland was changing his mind about where school culture originated and was maintained, he stated that, "in the end I think the culture is defined by what kids do during all of their breaks and then the athletics that they play." The

Polk School controlled and drove its athletic program during Roland's time there; however, Roland was quick to point out that for those who were perhaps less athletically inclined, school culture was the creation of the relationships forged and honed by students themselves while attending The Polk School.

Leadership and Polk School culture

While attending The Polk School, Roland saw extensive administrative turnover. Throughout his four years in the high school, Roland was a student under three different headmasters. This turbulent experience allowed Roland to develop a keen sense of the power that stability can have on a school's culture, and perhaps even the power an administrator or the headmaster might have on a school's culture. However, even in Roland's analysis of what a school leader can do to improve Polk School culture, one can tell how fiercely student-centered he remains:

> For starters, and this is just my opinion, it is so sad that people mundanely go through these ridiculous grinds of schedules like drones and they don't really care or have the time to appreciate what's going on around them. And, if they [the administration] would just mix up the schedules, I mean, we saw them change the schedule, the arrangement of classes, etcetera but I mean we should keep the schedule having to do with classes the same but add interesting, really interesting, projects, retreats, and class trips to certain places that are actually interesting and actually build team bonding. Not, going to a museum or hauling a bunch of kids to a location and lecturing them. But, personally, and this is specific to me, but going to the outdoors I think would greatly help the bonding among students and faculty.

This suggestion comes as no surprise when viewed in the context of Roland's experiences at The Polk School. He was part of a school community that repeatedly needed to depend upon people other than those at the very top of the hierarchy for a positive school experience. Students developed increased self-reliance. Even now, by all accounts, as The Polk School enjoys a much more stable and healthy administrative environment, Roland believes students are at the heart of

any improvements to school culture, and that the administration needs to only provide a structure within which the students can act to create a positive culture and environment for themselves.

Academic achievement and Polk School culture

It has been mentioned time and again that Roland believes students to be at the heart of Polk School culture; however, his views on school culture have focused entirely on what happens outside of school control and the school realm. For these reasons, his take on whether or not school culture influences school achievement was a bit surprising when he stated that:

> I definitely believe school culture has an impact on academic achievement. When you know the group that you are learning with, if you feel more comfortable with them you will do better in class. If you don't get to be as open and willing to make full disclosure, you know, have the confidence to be yourself because you aren't comfortable with your group and your surroundings that definitely hurts the learning curve if anything. In the right, comfortable environment, your grades will go up, and your creativity is going to skyrocket.

Though on the surface this statement may seem a bit counterintuitive, Roland made the important point that, although school culture can affect school achievement, it has much to do with dynamics among students, and much less to do with any policy, teacher, or administrator.

Roland succinctly explained the relationship he perceives between school culture and Polk academic performance:

> Once we were more focused on the social aspects of academics, I think we all came together as a group much more effectively and we started caring about what we were learning; we enjoyed what we were learning, but only because the general surroundings and the people around us dictated that. So…if you can improve the culture with the student body, everything is going to improve, especially the bonds of teachers, and their relationships with students and how they relate to the school, and how a lot of kids treat and think of the school, any school, and when they get really close into the social aspects of the academic side by realizing the bonds of the people that they've met and created, they'll start to enjoy it….

This passage delineates the power structure envisioned by Roland when it comes to The Polk School culture; students are by far the most important players, but the bonds that teachers form

with those students (because they spend the most time with the students of any stakeholder group based within the school) has potency within the classroom. These bonds, however, need not be created within the classroom. Roland emphasizes that the student/faculty bonds outside The Polk School are more of a more personal and authentic nature, and contribute most directly to the school culture.

Differences between The Polk School culture and public school culture

As an alumnus of The Polk School, Roland has had very little first-hand interaction and knowledge of public school culture. However, some of his friends attended public school. His view of the differences between public school and The Polk School culture was a bit different than most of the other participants. "The major difference between the schools are the composition and background of the students." He also believes that those students from different backgrounds "play the same roles [at public schools] that are played in private schools."

Roland's lack of direct experience forces him to make assumptions based on the stories and experiences of others, "From what I understand, the administrators and teachers at private schools are more invested in their students, but I hear that there are plenty of public schools, especially in New England, that perform a lot like The Polk School." His ability to discuss public schooling, admittedly hampered, Roland decided to comment about schools in a particular area of the country because many of his friends in college hail from this particular region and have shared their experiences of high school.

When asked about teachers and the differences between those who work in independent versus public schools, Roland stated that "teachers do what they do because they love it and it has nothing to do with whether they teach at a public or a private school." This perspective about teachers and their ability to be professionally fulfilled regardless of the location of the school or

the backgrounds of their respective students, reinforced Roland's previous point that he sees no major difference between public and independent schooling.

His final point about school culture in public versus independent schooling was noted by previous participants, "The only thing I have heard and do know is that teachers and administrators at private schools value their freedom greatly, and because of some strict state standards, teachers at public school don't have the same luxury." This idea of freedom and autonomy in independent schooling resonates throughout many of the experiences of study participants, and constitutes one of the most obvious differences between the two forms of education.

Hugo

Participant background

Hugo is currently a senior at The Polk School, and has been a student at that school since the sixth grade. He is seen as one of the most respected and revered members of his class due to his generally affable nature, quick wit, and keen, insightful intellect.

His perspective of The Polk School has also been influenced by the administrative changes throughout the school in the past few years. He reiterates this theme throughout the interview and expresses very concisely, "I've had three different headmasters, two different upper school heads, two different deans [of students], you know, I've seen a lot of changes. New teachers, old teachers, teachers leave, teachers come, teachers go, so there's been a lot of change…." It is important to note that these statistics concerning the enormous turnover in key positions of leadership occurred during Hugo's four brief years in high school. This is the

perspective of a student who has seen many administrators attempt to initiate a stable and healthy

school culture. His insights regarding this turnover and its effect on school culture are unusual.

Hugo, in one of his interviews, summarized the purpose behind this study quite succinctly, while

also giving a disclaimer to some of his answers, "The school culture is different for different

people. Like I said, the popular kids can have different school culture than the kid who is getting

picked on." This perspective remained consistent throughout our interviews.

Defining Polk School culture

Hugo has a very novel take on school culture. His responses to questions regarding

school culture were brief and eloquent in their simplicity. "[School culture is] the whole structure

of a school, it's going through the day, and then going to sports practices afterwards, and coming

home and working, and getting up and starting the process all over again." Hugo is one

participant who believes that school culture travels with school community members even when

they leave school premises.

> [School culture] follows you everywhere. I mean, your friends, most of them have to go
> to school, and everything else that goes along with your social life. Sports related
> activities are all tied into school. Your nights are spent doing homework and essays, and
> the pride you take in the school you go to.

Philosophically, Hugo has a more all-encompassing perspective of school culture than do

the other participants. He relates to being a student within this culture, whereas other members of

the study have been able to isolate themselves from the culture and speak about it as an objective

aspect of the school for which they work. Hugo appears more personally involved with the

culture of The Polk School and emphasizes that relationship.

> I think the administrators and the Board of Trustees have a lot of say…but the day-to-
> day, whether your life is miserable or fun or whatnot, is all controlled by the students and
> teachers…teachers can make your life miserable whether it is they are having a bad day,
> or they give you a lot of homework or essays, or whether they do it on purpose or not,

well, some of them do. And the students, of course, there are people who aren't very nice in this world, and then there are people who are, so your days kind of depend on your friends, the students, and your teachers.

Hugo's definition and perception of school culture revolves around his daily activities at the school, and are not tied to structural or organizational theory, but rather to his individual experiences as a student at The Polk School for the last six years.

Hugo explained his perception of what comprises school culture, "school culture is what you do every day for 9 months I guess out of a year, for a good 20 years of your life." Hugo does not believe that school culture exists without continuity:

> Inevitably, you're going to get new students every year and new teachers every year. No school stays the same just so it can have some bit of consistent structure. But…during my freshman year and my sophomore year, my entire schedule changed. Not just what classes I had, but how the schedule was set up and run. You had a different time for lunch, and things were set up differently. I think…even the assemblies were probably very different. Just having the same thing over and over again does make going to school easier when it is more structured and it is the same. You come to get to know teachers. If it's your last year at school, there are teachers you become close with because you work together a lot in your classes and you respect them as a person, and as a teacher. So when you think of how they could help you in the future, whether it would be writing college recommendations, or you need extra help from them, or whatever they'd be there. So, it's nice to have those people around. But, in an environment that's constantly changing, you know, from year to year, you can't always rely on that same person being there for you.

Hugo believes that a positive school culture, from the perspective of a student, "is all about comfort." It is about how well a student can develop a relationship with different teachers or administrators. The heavy turnover during Hugo's time at The Polk School hindered his ability to make some of these connections, a highly influential aspect of his lasting impression.

Leadership and Polk School Culture

Hugo found it difficult to discuss the influence of leadership positions on the school culture of The Polk School. Hugo's difficulty with this topic could be related to a potential lack

of knowledge when it comes to the daily operations performed by the headmaster and other top

administrators, or a belief that the headmaster does not play an integral role in the creation and

maintenance of a positive Polk School culture. The answer may be a combination of those two

issues.

It seemed as though Hugo believes the most important thing a headmaster can do to

encourage a positive school culture is to remain visible to the student body, faculty, and staff:

> You know, I remember growing up in middle school, and Dr. Thomas was already
> around, walking his dog, all around the middle school. You always see him, you always
> say hi to him, you know. He gave speeches for Martin Luther King Day, and whatever
> assemblies we were having and were important to the whole school. He was always there,
> giving speeches and what not, but, I think visibility is the key here, because it lets you
> know that they are there, and it lets you know that they care. That they are taking their
> time out to walk around the school, and see the students, and visit them, and see how
> things are going from the bottom up and not just tucked away in their office doing
> whatever.

This situation that Hugo refers to with Dr. Thomas harkens back to the last time a

headmaster remained at The Polk School for over five consecutive years. The fact that Hugo

goes all the way back to Dr. Thomas, in order to reference a headmaster whom he felt was there

to support him, is illustrative of the instability created by repeated administrative turnover.

However, beyond simple visibility, Hugo sees the headmaster as someone who is in a

position of great power. From this student's perspective:

> Running a school is like a food chain or like the military. There are people, the students,
> who do what they're told. In the same way, the teachers do what they're told by the
> headmaster….The upper school does as it is told to do by the headmaster, and so, I guess
> there is a trickle-down effect. You get what the headmaster does every day, but maybe
> not directly.

Hugo's view of the headmaster seems to be one of formal or positional authority, an

authority which is present to exert influence upon students and teachers, yet create a sense of

cohesiveness, security, honored tradition, and paternal concern. Even if it is unclear exactly how

the headmaster specifically relates to the other stakeholder groups, Hugo believes it is vital that the headmaster have this ability.

In conclusion, it should be noted that Hugo believes, "different kids have students and teachers who can make their daily lives either very miserable or very positive and affect their day-to-day outlook, how their life goes, and will then be a bigger part of the school culture than the headmaster." Though Hugo believes that the headmaster and other administrators have the power to set a structure in place that can affect students and teachers alike, the focus of school culture still remains in the interactions between student and faculty.

Academic achievement and Polk School culture

The question of academic achievement and school culture was indirectly discussed utilizing the interaction Hugo has had with his different advisors. Advisors at The Polk School are simply faculty members who are placed in charge of about 12 to 18 students. These students range in class level (freshman-senior), and vary as to athletic and extra-curricular interests and backgrounds. As Hugo stated, "the purpose of the program is to make sure that every student has, 'a faculty advocate.'" Additionally, the random grouping of students in a given advisory encourages students with different interests and backgrounds to interact, and form new friendships.

Hugo spoke about his experience with his advisor, "one of the people that I found most important to communicate with and keep in the loop in whatever you are doing is your advisor…your teacher advisor." Hugo explained why it is he feels this faculty advisor is so important, especially from an academic standpoint:

> She's been there for me. She's stuck up for me. She's looked after me. She's pushed me when I needed to be pushed. You know, she has told me that this or that needs to happen, that I need to suck it up and just deal with whatever problem I'm having. Which, when

> last year when I was going through a hard time and needed to finish up the year, I mean, she pushed me through, and I ended up with decent grades.

While Hugo spent most of his interview time talking about student-centered views of school culture, his demeanor changed when he began to speak about his experiences with the advisor program at The Polk School. He was enthusiastic, and very complimentary of the program which not only helped to create a very positive school culture for him, but also provided him with support when he was struggling academically.

Differences between The Polk School culture and public school culture

Because Hugo's experience with public schools only lasted five years, he had noticeably less to say on this topic than previous topics. The first difference Hugo mentioned was that, "a lot of public schools have larger class sizes which is you know, harder to deal with." Contrasting that view with his experience at The Polk School:

> My largest class at The Polk School is probably like 17-18 people. At a lot of places classes are bigger than that, you know. Which, to be frank, it's being in that small class environment that's what has lead me to want to go to a small school, like a Western Emporia University. I like the small class environment, and that's what I started growing up with. The Polk School is different from public school in that way and I guess, at the same time, you probably have seen that because of the smaller classes, you have more individual attention from teachers and little things get noticed more.

Hugo's student perspective is that individual attention from different authority figures is a positive aspect at The Polk School that public schools lack due to their size. Tying this together with Hugo's view of the advisor program, it was evident that Hugo appreciated the support and attention he received from educational professionals. The close relationships between teacher/administrator and student were not taken for granted and played a large role, from Hugo's perspective, in creating a mutually supportive, positive school culture.

The individual attention received from these instructors is not the only difference between public schools and The Polk School that Hugo identified. He is quick to point out that The Polk School, "has an honor board led by students." The honor board is a group of students, administrators, and faculty members that hears disciplinary cases concerning students at The Polk School. This board, which Hugo points out is led by students, has the authority to make disciplinary recommendations to the headmaster ranging from reprimand to suspension or expulsion based on the facts of the case before them. Hugo recalled that in public school, such disciplinary actions tended to work more unilaterally with principals making disciplinary decisions involving limited input from other stakeholder groups. The positive effect this has on school culture is that it empowers students, and gives them a sense of ownership they would not have in a public school setting. It also allows for a sense of accountability among students, as opposed to a purely "us versus them" mentality between students and administrators.

Conclusion

The nine participants and their thoughtful and thought-provoking responses to the questions posed provided great insight into the inner workings of The Polk School culture. While all major stakeholder positions were represented, the varying answers to the questions were very clear, easy to understand, interpret, and study. The background of each participant was provided so that a proper context could be applied to all answers received in this study, and a more accurate analysis could be achieved.

Breaking participant responses into four distinct sections allowed for concise and clear answers to the research questions driving this study. Interviewees' words were used when possible to lend credence to the conclusions made concerning the varied responses to this study's research questions.

The next chapter synthesizes the information presented in this chapter, provides an analysis of the information received from the various participants in this study, and offers a step-by-step explanation of the emerging theory resulting from the collection of this data and its subsequent examination. Chapter Five is primarily devoted to an explanation of the emergent theory created following distillation of the factors that make up school culture, and how those ingredients interact and enmesh to create a positive independent school culture.

Chapter 5
Analysis of the Data

Introduction

This study concerns the formation and development of school culture in independent schooling, and how independent school leaders have an impact on this culture. This chapter addresses the first research question posed during this study concerning the makeup of independent school culture. This framework emerged from my review of the literature, my pilot study, and my own experiences in independent schools, but has been tested, changed, and refined based on this dissertation research. The framework is expressed as an equation that can be manipulated by school leaders who desire to improve one or more aspects of their school's culture.

When I asked the nine study participants questions regarding their understanding of the basic nature of school culture, and who they considered to be most vital to its creation, I expected to receive a wide variety of answers dependent on the perspective and stakeholder position of each individual. Surprisingly, many of the answers provided by the interviewees were similar, allowing me to more easily develop and streamline my emerging theory.

The results from this study were analyzed using many of the techniques associated with grounded theory, a process outlined by Corbin and Strauss (1998), and explained in more detail in Chapter Three. No specific conceptual framework taken from the literature was used to analyze the data received from the various participants. Instead, their concepts formed a foundation for this emergent theory, and contributed greatly to the development of the new means by which to evaluate and assess school culture data. Each initial interview performed as a part of this study lasted thirty to forty-five minutes, and follow-up interviews were conducted with all nine participants.

The interviews were transcribed and coded. During the coding process, it became clear that all nine study participants addressed repetitive themes. These themes were considered, and the relationships among them identified. During my analysis of the interview data, I identified the relationships between the highlighted themes, and used them to develop a model equation for creating positive school culture.

The structure of this chapter will be simple. The equation, created during my in-depth analysis of received data, will be proffered, and its elements addressed item by item. I will offer definitions and descriptions for each component within the equation, and then cite specific examples presented by study participants, in an effort to connect the components to themes addressed.

Each section (Accountability, Competence, Leadership, Community, and Off campus Factors) will be broken down into three subsections: (a) the meaning of each term as used in this specific study; (b) examples of words and phrases that can be associated with the articulated components (including specific, in-text examples from different participants); and (c) the role each of the components play in the equation. Due to the volume of raw data, the specific words selected to represent each of the different equation's elements constitute a minute selection of the total number of words coded for each element. The chosen words were most widely repeated across interviewee data sets, and efficiently represent their associated equation element.

The final subsection of this chapter will summarize the various data sets and analysis from the section. It will recount the different words and phrases used to represent a given component in the emerging theory. It will offer a graph of the components, the words used to describe that element, and, finally, the stage of the equation in which the elements are to be inserted.

In order to understand the findings of this study and their potential influence upon school culture scholarship, it is important to contextualize the data retrieved during this project.

Although the stakeholders interviewed represented various hierarchical levels in the organization, all opinions and ideas were equally considered and valued. This study was designed with an intent to identify and evaluate the perspectives and experiences of the many different stakeholder groups within an independent school. Therefore, it was imperative that I assigned an equal amount of value and importance to each perspective, without showing any preference to any one stakeholder group in my presentation of these findings.

The equation

Using the data collected during this study, I have created a two-part equation to be used in the creation and development of school culture. The first part of the equation addresses the definition of effective leadership:

Figure **5-1**: School Culture Emergent Theory Part I

ACCOUNTABILITY + COMPETENCE → EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

The second portion of the equation addresses interplay between leadership (defined previously), community and factors lying beyond school control:

Figure **5-2**: School Culture Emergent Theory Part II

LEADERSHIP (as developed above) + A RESPONSIVE COMMUNITY+ OFF CAMPUS FACTORS → POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

Although I thoroughly examined and digested the input of the study participants, I developed this emergent theory without outside assistance of any kind.

This equation considers each of the major themes revealed during the interviews that comprised this study. I identified many categories of word and concept during the open coding process. Fortunately, I was able to encompass each of these categories into a manageable number of components for use in my equation.

<div align="center">**Accountability**</div>

Meaning

Certain words and phrases can elicit a sense of accountability on an individual level (students completing tasks assigned to them), as well as a collective sense of accountability (cleaning up litter for the betterment of the entire campus). Some of the references made in the interviews explicitly referenced this concept of accountability, but, more often than not, it was an interviewee referencing a sense of accountability - either on their part or on the part of a different stakeholder, that was coded and recorded. The term "accountability" in this research project does not necessarily mean that a certain individual is to be deemed responsible for a specific duty.

Words and phrases that relate to accountability

Some words or ideas that elicit this sense of accountability include: goals, policies, and responsibility. One may not immediately connect these words with ideas of accountability, but for the purposes of this study, a term like "responsibility" is associated with accountability

because it connotes that persons are holding themselves or someone else accountable for achieving specific standards of behavior.

Responsibility

When discussing the role of a responsible member of The Polk School community, the President of the Board (Fred) indicated that it is, "the *responsibility* of the Board to assemble as best they can the data from the various constituencies…to philosophically set the culture…or set up a philosophical policy that would foster a positive culture." He overtly connected the concepts of responsibility, accountability, and school culture in this statement. The President of the Polk School Board believes the Board must be accountable to the school as a whole, specifically regarding the policy it dictates concerning philosophical makeup. These social and philosophical policies have a direct effect upon the school culture at The Polk School and must be determined and finalized with an understanding of their widespread impact.

Fred is cautious when drafting these policies, because he does not want their meaning to be misinterpreted as disingenuous. As Wilson (2002) stated in his single site case study, "Teachers indicated that many of the sentiments in school policies were there to satisfy accountability requirements and convince external authorities that acceptable change was occurring." In this scenario, the idea of accountability would be used to create inauthentic school policies for reasons other than the betterment of The Polk School environment or its culture. Fred takes great care to specifically mention the benefit he foresees with the implementation of a responsible philosophical policy at The Polk School.

Roland, the recent Polk School alumnus, offered a different point of view. In this statement he provided some advice for those in positions of formal authority at The Polk School:

>I feel like they [Polk School leaders] need to do field trips and active learning at places, or go to academic places of learning, like maybe museums. I know they have increased roles of *responsibility* when they do that, but I think they need to relax a little with how they take the kids outside of the classroom and where they take them outside the classroom.

In this statement Roland is suggesting more free-structured activities that take place outside of the classroom. Roland's point of view regarding responsibility and accountability is very different than that offered by Fred. Roland believes that at the heart of a positive school culture, students must be able to learn and grow in places beyond the classroom. This statement points to his belief that the teachers' and administrators' sense of responsibility could unintentionally prevent them from exploring creative means of fostering a positive school culture

A faculty member like Ted feels a great amount of responsibility for making sure that his students learn what he has been hired to teach them. "As a teacher, I have a tremendous amount of impact on the students in my classroom, and for whom I have been given *responsibility* of their education in a particular area." This responsibility is a direct feeling of accountability to three main stakeholder groups: (1) those that hired Ted, believing he is capable of successfully imparting knowledge in a given subject area; (2) the parents that send their children to The Polk School, who believe that they will receive a fundamentally good education in all disciplines; and (3) the students who attend Ted's class. This feeling of accountability to these three stakeholder groups motivates Ted to be the best teacher he possibly can be, and in doing so, this sense of responsibility has a positive effect on The Polk School's culture.

Goals

A word like "goal" elicits ideas of accountability because it invokes ideas of an individual setting a goal and holding that person accountable for his or her behavior. If the goal is one that is self-imposed, then the individuals hold themselves accountable for reaching that

end. Many study participants used the term "goal" in contexts demanding accountability. For

example, Fred, President of the Board stated:

> The Polk School does have a diverse population. It enjoys the fact that it has a diverse
> population, and I think its *goal* is to certainly have every kid who leaves The Polk School
> as best prepared for college as possible and, in doing that, what they strive for is to try to
> get each kid to reach their maximum potential given whatever God-given ability they
> have or don't have.

In this specific example the term goal was used as a way to discuss how the President of

the Board expects The Polk School to assist its students in accomplishing their own goals. Fred

identified the goal as that of the individual student, but contemplated the role of the Board in

ensuring that each student's personal goals are met.   He perceives The Board as responsible, in

part, for the creation of policies that contribute to the development and maintenance of a positive

school culture.

Sarason, Levine, Goldenberg, Cherlin, and Bennett (1966) state that, "a school

culture…has traditions, dynamics, and goals of its own, which, to those within that culture, set it

apart from the rest of the community" (p. 63). These goals play a large role in the creation of a

culture and an identity within a given school.

Bentley, the current headmaster, had much to say about goals; some his own, and some

for the school as a whole, "if you were to look at my *goal* statements, they are very clear. That's

one of those goals…to understand and to advance the mission and the culture of the school."

Bentley is holding himself accountable for learning and truly understanding what it means to be a

part of The Polk School community, and determining how to advance the school culture in a

meaningful fashion. This is not Headmaster Bentley's only goal for the year. "One of the goals

that I have this year is…to not just be present to the community, but to be engaged with the

community." Again, Bentley has defined personal goals to accomplish in the upcoming year at

The Polk School. In his first year as Headmaster of The Polk School, he is concentrating

predominantly on his own accountability to The Polk School, before defining the responsibilities of others.

Ted has an altogether different view of goals and accountability. "I don't think it is wrong if you have an over-riding or over-arching culture that says that we care, and this is the *goal*, and this is the ideal for our school…." Ted is evaluating goals as something required of the school as a whole. Ted does not believe that goals must be specific, and can encompass school-wide desires to improve in different areas. In Ted's perspective, all stakeholders are partly responsible and accountable for improving the conditions of The Polk School culture.

In another way of communicating ideas of accountability, Derrick states that, "My effectiveness as an administrator is only to the extent that I can work with others and allow others to join me or for me to join them in the same common *goals*." Here Derrick specifically mentions team accountability and responsibility, and communicates that his individual success or failure as an administrator at The Polk School depends upon the ability of his administrative team to accomplish certain goals for their own individual benefit and for the benefit of the wider Polk School community. A failure to accomplish such goals, to take the alternate view of the statement made by Derrick, would engender a feeling of futility on his part, which could have a negative effect on school culture.

Policies

The term "policy" is listed under the general theme of accountability due to the effect that policies have on the people within a school community. A policy is defined by Wordnet (2008) as "a plan of action adopted by an individual or social group." Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (1980) states that a policy is, "any governing principle, plan, or course of action" (p.1392). In this case, the group is less social and more educational, but the idea remains the same; a policy is an

action plan, or an action guide. Many times, policies carry with them an outline of roles to be

played by different members of the community. They can specify possible repercussions for

those who do not follow the policy, or cannot complete the duties within the policy as assigned.

Therefore, a policy is a formal means of communicating an expectation of accountability.

Whether it includes holding people who drafted a certain policy accountable for its results, or

holding the people who are charged with performing certain tasks properly accountable for the

same, accountability figures prominently in every dynamic when policies are created and

implemented on the school level.

As an administrator, Derrick not only creates policy, but is also subjected to following

certain policies. Derrick has a clear view on his proper role in policy creation and following

previously created policies:

> In a school like this…those who are involved in *policy* are consulting with the classroom
> teachers, or going into classrooms, and seeing what happens. I am involved, personally,
> in setting *policy* around here and helping to move, move the school in one direction or
> another. I have chosen to teach a class, the person who was in my position, she taught
> sometimes and she didn't teach sometimes. I chose to teach a class when I came here, so
> that I am the recipient of my own *policies*, and all of the *policies* that my team or my
> group has helped to put together. If I teach, then I am a recipient of those *policies*.

Derrick feels that it is important that he share the experience of performing under his own

policies. This perspective enables Derrick to develop and refine a circumspect appreciation of

The Polk School community that provides him with insights that he can use to strengthen the

school culture.

By participating in the creation of policy and teaching under those same policies, Derrick

might avoid conflict that could arise if faculty members perceive the administrative policies to be

ineffective. This concept of conflict avoidance is imperative in maintaining a positive school

culture:

> Conflict may be a major catalyst for the formulation of policy within the school culture.
> Because inner publics are working in close proximity and in settings that require
> cooperative relationships, school-culture policymakers often strive to create an amiable

climate in the school. Conflict, then, must be avoided or resolved quickly so that the business of the school can continue. (Barresi & Olsen, 1994, p. 26)

Berresi and Olsen point out the important role policy can play in matters of school culture. Derrick, understanding the necessity of conflict avoidance as it pertains to policy, has made a decision to remain in the classroom so that he can experience policies as both an administrator and a member of the teaching faculty.

Headmaster Bentley has a very clear view about policy. It is one that focuses on what might be considered within The Polk School community as macro-policy. Bentley states that, "The Board sets a *policy* and the Board focuses on strategy, and ultimately it is the Board that…ratifies the mission statement, and in some cases, authors the mission statement." The Board, in Headmaster Bentley's opinion, is accountable for maintaining and developing the long-term vision for The Polk School, and they can see to it that their vision becomes a reality through the creation and implementation of policy. In this specific case, Headmaster Bentley acknowledges the power and authority of the Board, while also assigning Board members accountability for the long term health and care of their institution.

Summary

A review of stakeholder perspectives leads to the conclusion that accountability is vital to the creation of a positive school culture, and that the concept of accountability can be communicated in a myriad of ways. In the previous section, I highlighted only three of the many words used by the study participants when they contemplated the concept of accountability.

Accountability is a necessity for effective leadership. It demands that individuals have a responsibility to themselves and to others within the school community to do whatever is expected of them whether they are students, teachers, administrators, or Board members. The

concepts of responsibility, goal-creation and pursuit, and policy formation are three of the most common ways of communicating expectations of accountability.

Competence

Meaning

The term "competence" has to do with the ability to carry out roles and responsibilities in a way that meets or exceeds given expectations. For students, competence is multi-layered. It can involve ideas of cognitive development culminating in high quantitative achievement (GPA, SAT scores), or it can have to do with the developmental aspect of their education and their development not just as a learner, but as a member of The Polk School community. Competence is a necessary element of a positive school culture.

Words and phrases that relate to competence

As mentioned in the previous section, the study participants employed many terms associated with competence. Most representative of the data set were the following: professional, standards, and effective communication. These three terms were selected because each term represents a different "type" of competence. These terms were used by many of the participants in the study in a variety of ways. In addition to being widely used during the interview process, only one of these three words was selected for further analysis, because it was used to describe specific stakeholder groups. In other words, the term "professional" tended to apply to the administration and faculty only, as students generally do not see themselves as professionals.

Professional

The term "professional" often refers to a place of employment. It is a term closely associated with ideas of appearance, preparedness, and ability, and in the school environment, it is a necessity due to the impressionability of the clientele (students). In order to be deemed competent as an educational professional, one must be able to positively influence their students on a daily basis, thereby setting a positive example for these students to strive towards.

Scholarly work has been done linking school culture and professionalism (Thomas, 2000), and the data from the interviews conducted in this project have reinforced these results. A competent school administrator or faculty member must adhere to the aforementioned accepted tenets of the profession in order to be considered a professional educator. One can teach or administer without complying with these professional expectations, however their effectiveness in providing a positive role model for his/her students, according to both the literature and the interviewees, will be diminished.

Barrett discussed professionalism as it applies to the mastering of his teaching craft, "Here's the baseline assumption that I have. You cannot do highly *professional* work if the only audience that you work for are people who are 16 years old…if the only audience you have is those kids, you won't work at the highest *professional* level." In this scenario, Barrett, a man who has taught at The Polk School for the vast majority of his adult life, views the idea of professionalism as a way to reference the expectation he has for himself, as a teacher and educator. While he does not explicitly admit that other peoples' expectations weigh on him, it seems clear that he is motivated to be the best teacher he can possibly be not only by his own standards, but also by those of his departmental peers.

As the head of school, Headmaster Bentley does not underestimate the power of professionalism and developing the professionalism of school employees. One of the examples

he gives of about how positive school culture can be created coalesced around ideas of professionalism, and professional development:

> To say to faculty, we're involved in a review of our *professional* growth or evaluation system, and to gather fifteen rank and file faculty members and some administration, and say that we are all going to solve this problem, no one vote counts more than the others. Those are the kinds of things which they, they'd accomplish a task but accomplish a much larger goal by setting an important tone….

In speaking about public schooling, he noted that "big school districts…try to effect change in school culture through things like really taking on role of primary *professional* developer in their school building." Headmaster Bentley went on to say, "the Principal is taking on a role of active leader in *professional* development…and trying to really work with faculty, and training faculty to create that effective culture." Headmaster Bentley feels that the connection between professional development and school culture is a direct one. In Headmaster Bentley's estimation, it is of the utmost importance that teachers and faculty members be trained and professionally developed. He believes that The Polk School students can reach their full potential if The Polk School teachers do the same.

Derrick also sees professionalism in a mainstreaming context, "In my experience, what happened with that mainstreaming, is few students had intensive education experiences from a small group of highly trained *professionals,* you know, creating an environment suited to their needs and were then placed into classes of 35 people…." Though Derrick is using the term professional in a way that might seem specific to public schooling, there are many independent schools, including The Polk School, that have similarly trained "learning specialists." These highly professional educators play a vital role in assisting students to develop to their potential, and as importantly, allow for teachers to not only reach these few students, but also have the time and energy to reach the rest of their students as well. Derrick highlights the importance of professionalism, and depends on faculty members and administrators to act professionally and

collegially to accomplish the goals he and other administrators set for The Polk School and its community.

Standards

In education there is a stigma attached to the term "standard" that encourages administrators and teachers to think about unwavering standardized test scores related to No Child Left Behind and its ties to federal funding. In the context of this study, however, the term standard has more to do with ideas related to expectations than it does with ideas related specifically to a set of test scores. To create a positive school culture, the people within a given community must all perform to given standards or expectations. When stakeholder groups perform to these given standards, it allows school leaders to create more effective and efficient long term plans. When stakeholders begin underperforming and failing to meet given standards or expectations, school leaders can no longer depend on a certain level of production and performance from their subordinates. Another use of the term standard can connote ideas relating to uniformity and cohesiveness.

Standards have been linked closely to the concept of school culture in scholarly publications, including an article written by Crawford Killian, "The Two Sides of the School Culture Coin" (1999). In this piece, the author provided numerous examples of standards-based education improving overall school cultures. This article provides insight and specificity relating to the direct link between standards and positive school culture.

This variation of standard is one way that John described a situation in which he felt person hours and effort were being wasted due to a lack of standardization. John, in his years at The Polk School as a class advisor and extra-curricular leader, had developed his own individual take on the relationship between high standards, standardization, and positive school culture.

I've taken on different activities every year that I have been here an advisor. Now, this year, after I have been here three years already, I have finally come to the conclusion as a senior class advisor, I wonder why we don't you stay with one class, that way we would get good at it, and have that be it, and if we did more things like that, it seems that we would have a little bit more time to go hands off, and sort of take a breath, and let the guys take over. That would lead to consistency, *standardization*, and efficiency.

Generally speaking, of all the study participants, John was the most supportive of a student-centered and student-driven school culture. He believes that students need more control and ownership of the school culture for the culture at The Polk School to progress. Yet, even John believes in the importance of some standardization. His use of the term standardization, in this particular context, means holding students to a set of uniformed, high standards. He is of the belief that if Polk School students are given enough time and leeway to run certain school-endorsed functions, they would create common ground through the standardization of their behavior and communication which would lead to greater efficiency.

John reported that there are some changes to school policy that could improve the performance and efficacy of existing faculty members. These changes generally involved streamlining some of the duties assigned to faculty members. Following this logic, should these activities become more consistently monitored and implemented, the students would benefit. The school culture would grow exponentially from any kind of efficiency that would allow faculty members to get to know their students on a deeper and more personal level. This familiarity, in turn, would allow teachers like John to perform with greater competence and longevity.

As the only alumnus represented in this study, it was very important to hear Roland's perspective on a wide spectrum of topics related to school culture. Roland addressed the issue of standards when he referenced his final year at The Polk School, "especially towards the end of high school when we did the senior retreats and, people were usually less focused on the academics and more interested in reaching the social *standard* of being able to relate to people and, you know, getting to know people…." Roland uses the term standard in this context to point

out that there should exist a standard by which all students know and can communicate with each

other at a baseline level. According to Roland, it was unfortunate that social communication was

not identified as a standard on which to concentrate until the time of the senior retreat. He felt

that a focus on improved social communication and connection earlier in his Polk School

experience would have dramatically increased the meaningfulness and enjoyment of each school

day. As was mentioned in the introduction to this section, Roland's usage of the word standard

connotes an expectation of student performance and cohesiveness that was, up until the point of

this retreat, lacking on a class-wide level.

      Barrett had a less positive take on standards than some of the other participants in the

study. As mentioned earlier:

> My ability to understand the individual learning needs of my students, and to tailor my
> curriculum to make the best use of their time against the skills that they need to get out of
> a class…that's my professional skill. That's what I do. To the degree that people want to
> have me paying attention not to those kids in this curriculum, but paying attention to
> some set of *standards* in Washington or headquarters, they are just stealing my attention
> from the students.

      Barrett believes that standards can detract from time spent getting to know, understand,

and educate students. Even though Barrett's views of these specific standards are negative, the

fact remains that standards can be very influential in the creation and maintenance of a positive

school culture. To create an overall sense of competence within a school, it is important to not

only make sure that people meet standards that are set for them, but to also encourage the

questioning of those standards to ensure that they are appropriate for the time and place of

implementation.

      In the previous passage, Barrett identified what he believes to be a set of harmful

standards that have a toxic effect upon public school culture across the nation. Barrett questioned

the competence of the administrators drafting the standards disseminated to public schools, and

displayed concern regarding their influence, or lack thereof, on public school students, faculty, and community.

Communication

"Communication" is a term regularly found in educational literature. Communication is considered by many to be the bedrock of a fundamentally sound school culture (Renchler, 1992; Forcey & Harris, 1999; Leithwood, Begley, and Cousins, 1994). In many cases, it holds the key to improving academic achievement (Stiggins, 1999). When there is a communication breakdown within a school, the school can find itself mired. As Wilson (2002) points out in his study of Australian schools, "Fragmentation existed at Barracks [a secondary school] as a lack of organizational cohesion and communication leading to fragmented understandings and courses of action among school stakeholders" (Wilson, 2002, p. 1).

I assert that communication is a subset of competence. It is necessary that those within a school community be effective and experienced communicators. Nearly all participants stressed the importance of effective communication during their interviews. Hugo, a current student, provided me with his perspective on communication in The Polk School. "*Communicating* with the administration is key, but actually I would say your [faculty] advisor is the most important person for *communication* purposes. But if you keep either of them in the dark, they can't help you." Hugo has had a very good relationship with his faculty advisor, and sees her as an ally and an advocate.

In the following quotation, Hugo singles out two key stakeholder groups (the administration and faculty) and explains the importance of open communication with these adults. Connecting his ideas on communication directly with positive school culture, Hugo continued:

I think *communication* with your advisor means if you keep them in the dark they're not going to help you and your life is going to be harder than it needs to be, which is in turn, is going to affect you and affect the school culture which is a big part of a teenagers life, I think. Like I said, you take it [school culture] home with you, it's there every day, and so, I think if it's tough to *communicate* with your advisor, it's going to affect your school's culture and make life difficult for you.

Olivia related what it is that communication in a practical sense means to her, "I think that *communication* is the administration saying, 'we support you in what you are doing, and this is where we plan on going.' 'This is how I would like you to help me, or this is what, I think I can do to help you.'" It was very clear through her interview that proper communication with the administration continues to be of the utmost importance. She noted that when things are running smoothly, people tend to be open about what they are doing in the classroom, and the administration is open not only suggestion, but also to constructive criticism. When open lines of communication shut down on any level, be those lines between faculty and student, faculty and faculty, or faculty and administration, the fallout can have a negative effect on any school's culture, including The Polk School.

Headmaster Bentley recounted some of his experiences as an administrator in other independent schools in order to make his point about communication and its place and effect on school culture:

Effective *communication* was fostered in the times when we [teachers and administrators] were face-to-face, it was engaged communication about issues, about ideas, about kids, and there's a kind of *communication* in schools that happens, that I think especially faculty and staff want, which is just a *communication* of the know.

This communication allows for "transparency" as Bentley puts it, and engenders trust between top level administrators and the entire faculty. Those communications "of the know" referred to by Headmaster Bentley alludes to communication between individuals in positions of great authority. This trust can then trickle down to the students, because the faculty feels secure in their place at the school, leading to a healthy and positive school culture.

After describing the positive effects that communication can have on a given school culture, Headmaster Bentley made some general statements about communication and its place in a given school community, "You can never *communicate* enough, but you have to learn how to *communicate* effectively. And what that means is, you can…say the same thing to people, but you have to say it or *communicate* it in different ways." Bentley went on to further describe the art of effective communication, making sure to stress its importance in the day-to-day activities that take place within school walls.

Summary

In trying to create or maintain a positive school culture at any school, competence is absolutely necessary. Whether it be understanding how to properly do one's job, the ability to understand and meet the standards set for the position one has within a school community, or simply, the ability to get along with and truly understand the many different perspectives within any one school. A positive school culture cannot exist without competence at a multitude of stakeholder levels. Widespread competence-related breakdowns, can lead to educational malpractice, pandemic inefficiency, or costly miscommunications.

Competence is the second of two foundational ideals in the equation which eventually leads to the creation of a positive school culture. Competence, in conjunction with proper accountability, especially at top administrative and faculty levels, will result in effective leadership. This notion of what leadership is, how the participants view leadership, and the role it plays in creation, development, and evolution of a school's culture is examined closely in the following section.

Leadership

Meaning

There are a great many ways of defining "leadership" in academia or in academic

settings. In this study, and as mentioned in previous sections, the term leadership really applies to

those individuals who have proven themselves to be both accountable for their actions and

competent in their position, regardless of stakeholder group. The importance of proper leadership

is illustrated by an example of incompetent leadership drawn from Telford (1996):

> I have witnessed transactional *leadership* causing the undoing of many *leaders* and the
> downfall of several good schools, as it unwittingly brings about a negative school culture
> where confusion, distrust, lack of cooperation and even dissent prevail. Such a culture is
> not conducive to a successful teaching and learning environment, nor to the educational
> well-being of students (p. 12).

Telford focuses on school leadership that fails to accomplish what it must to create a

positive environment for its students.   Field, Holden, and Lawlor (2000) discuss how teacher

leaders have an influence on school culture, "While these principles could underpin the leadership

and management of a specific subject, they would need to be congruent with the overall school

culture to ensure continuity and progression of tasks and changes." (p. 217). These three co-

authors continue this line of thinking, "Subject leaders want to galvanize the talents, energies and

commitment of all those involved with the subject, and will want to ensure that leadership as well

as management objectives focus directly on raising pupils' achievement in the subject" (p.218).

Field and his associates believe that the most important part of leadership comes in the classroom,

and not from any one administrator or Board member's office.

Carroll Shartle (1950) created a list that includes the possible ways an individual

involved in education can be considered a leader. He begins with the premise that a person can

become a leader by being a positive entity within an organization, and influencing others in a

positive manner. He also believes that people can become leaders through events such as formal elections or appointments to positions that carry high levels of authority or influence with them. And finally, Shartle believes that some leaders are people who have a great amount of control over goal setting or goal achievement within a given organization (p.32). Shartle's assessment surely allows for the rise of educational leaders from a variety of professional and personal backgrounds.

Words and phrases that relate to leadership

Leadership has been a much studied and discussed aspect of school culture and achievement. Perhaps because it is easier to study and report the results of research focused on individual school leaders than on entire student bodies or faculty members, it seems that the majority of literature on leadership focuses on those few individuals that sit atop the formal authority hierarchy. Literature about individual teacher and classroom leadership is prevalent, but generally that literature focuses on teacher student relations rather than focusing on the total school environment.

For purposes of this study, any individual, regardless of position in The Polk School hierarchy, can be considered a leader. Three terms that pervaded much of the interview data concerning leadership were administration, power, and respect. One of these three terms (administration) can be directly related to formal authority. For purposes of this study, leadership is more than the formal authority afforded to any individual school employee. Leadership, as defined in this study, is an ability more than a title; it is about interaction among different stakeholders resulting in positive relationships being formed, and the school growing and moving forward because of those relationships.

Administration

The term "administration" usually relates to issues of formal power and authority. This formal power is generally derived from the authority given to a specific position within a school, regardless of the occupying individual. Though the study participants shared dynamic definitions and views on school administration, most interviews addressed leadership as it relates to the concept of formal authority.

Olivia, having been a teacher at The Polk School for eight years, has reached a point in her career where she does not feel dependent on any single administrator for daily guidance. She has seen a great deal of administrative turnover in the past five years, and, perhaps because of this general inconsistency at the top of The Polk School hierarchy, she has found that at times, "Well, I'm just like my own *administration*." Through the duration of the interview she clarified why she felt that way at times, and expressed the freedom with which she tries to carry out her roles and responsibilities as a senior teacher.

In addition to this brief insight, Olivia explained how it is she believes most faculty members feel when it comes to their relationship with those in positions of formal authority:

> Teachers are very temperamental people. They are not used to dealing with being *administrated*. They are free spirits, especially in the upper school. So, they need time to process information that's given to them and once you have people that buy into the way you do things, then you can set the world on fire.

Although she did not identify any specific disagreements with administrators, Olivia suggested that a micromanaged faculty is an unhappy faculty. She opined that an unhappy faculty is likely not living up to its potential and thus not instructing students as effectively as possible.

Barrett is a teacher that has words of encouragement for administrators based on experiences that he has had in his time at The Polk School, "When the school culture is defaulted, my experience at The Polk School is that people step up, you know, individual faculty members

and individual *administrators*, step up and in summary do what they need to do to lead the school…." As Barrett explains, administrators are in individual positions of power which means that, at times, it might be necessary for them to act as individuals, as opposed to being part of a team, and make decisions for the betterment of the school. At times, and it would seem Barrett agrees, leadership has to do with making decisions other people in the same stakeholder group find unpopular.

Barrett is quick to point out the importance of remaining an individual, regardless of one's position within a faculty or administration. He indicated that, unlike in years past:

> There is an *administrative* team. We haven't had a school wide *administrative* team most of my career here. There have been division teams. The middle school is way over there [pointing across the street]. The lower school, you know, Dr. Schmitsky ran a great lower school, but it could have been all the way down by Central High [a high school miles from The Polk School] for all the interaction we ever had.

Both Olivia and Barrett specified ways in which they feel administrators can influence The Polk School both positively and negatively. Ted, another senior teacher, added another layer to Barrett and Olivia's analyses:

> If there is a lack of sincerity or a lack of honesty among upper tier administrators, as to how they relate to the teachers, that translates down to the students. It translates in the way the teachers behave, the way the teachers behave with each other, and it naturally spills over to the way the teachers behave with the students.

Olivia, Barrett, and Ted share similar outlooks on the administrators and their position within The Polk School. All three of these teachers agreed that, with the ability to positively influence the community and culture of a school comes the converse power to negatively influence community dynamics if this power is used in a careless or reckless way. It is the responsibility of the administration and faculty, as leaders, to understand and appreciate how their actions can influence The Polk School community and culture.

Power

The notion of power is more informal and unstructured, as compared with the notion of a school administration which has definite roles, titles, and responsibilities that come with each specific position. Whereas the term administration focuses on well-defined and documented situations involving specific employees, the term power can apply to any individual within a school at any moment. As Barresi and Olsen (1994) point out:

> While any of the inner publics may negotiate policy in areas of the school culture where that power is characteristically ascribed to them, administrators, because they are charged with the direction of the school, are often involved in the most visible negotiations…to establish or maintain amiable, cooperative working relationships with constituent faculty, staff, students, and parents (p. 27).

The term power is used here to describe how policies can be negotiated by both those in positions of formal and informal authority. Barresi and Olsen opine that those administrators with allotted power need to be cognizant of the informal power retained by the other stakeholders within the school community.

Headmaster Bentley added his experienced perspective to the point made by Barresi and Olsen:

> In our case, we are a much smaller school. I think there is a greater likelihood for those in formal *power* on the Board to have a direct impact upon school culture because there aren't the levels of buffer that there are at larger, public schools, and there aren't the number of kids to dictate the leadership decisions over.

Headmaster Bentley connects power relationships with school culture and the effect power can have on a given school's culture. The headmaster did not opine regarding whether it was a good or bad thing that the Board had this much power over the culture of the school due to their proximity, relatively speaking, to the student body, the point he made was still clear and uncomplicated. Power, regardless of the hands it is in, will have an effect upon any school culture, and that includes The Polk School.

In addition to this view on power and how formal power might seem to carry more weight at smaller institutions, Headmaster Bentley explained how he and his administrative team can use their formal power to help improve the school culture:

> The school culture has dissolved to a faculty/staff climate and a parent/student climate which has come to expect certain things simply because there hasn't been a consistency at the core level of leadership of a formal *power* and authoritative nature that's been able to say, "Hey gang, this is what's important. This is our mission, and the mission statement that has been generated…over the years, right?" And adheres to it; again culture is how the mission statement is matched to the lived experience. So, I think that, again, when, when you are talking about a school culture that knows itself, loves itself, and then is really proud of it and sort of unabashedly out in front saying, "Here's who we are, we are a great school….

This passage reaffirms Headmaster Bentley's perception that he has the power to affect change within the school's culture, and that he expects himself and other upper level administrators to work together toward the goal of improving and bettering the school culture and community.

Barrett recalled what happened when a prior Head of School was forced to share certain powers and responsibilities, "The first person who stepped into that new position, the headmaster at that time, didn't really want somebody sharing that *power* with him. So, he nickel-and-dimed her to death with tasks. She got tired of that and went away, and another person stepped up…." This insight into The Polk School history demonstrates how power can lead to dissention among people at very high levels of the educational hierarchy. Such a ripple effect of discord (as Headmaster Bentley refers to it) will travel down the chain of command, and can have a negative impact on previously uninvolved parties. With all of this formal power comes the responsibility to use it in ways that will be constructive for the school and its culture, rather than destructive.

When discussing school culture, John repeatedly mentioned the importance of students in the creation and maintenance of a positive school culture. He further commented, "You know, we had a student government [in public school]. We didn't have class meetings of 60 people all together. You know, it was more concentrated than that, and these smaller meetings led to

greater leadership roles for the students in *power*....." John believes that students are the engine

that drives a school's culture, and he believes that these students should be given more power to

move the school forward. Recounting his time at public school and some previous experiences at

independent schools, he has come to realize just how important student empowerment is to a

vigorous and positive school culture.

Respect

"Respect" is a term I have linked to leadership because it is a reaction elicited by proper

and effective leadership. Without respect among peers and stakeholder groups, effective

communication can never take place and the school culture will fail to evolve.

In an article that focuses on school counselors, administrators and respect, Peterson and

Deuschle (2006) observe:

> To build collegiality and mutual respect, non-teachers and site supervisors should invite
> input from principals and other school administrators (Davis, 2005). Such communication
> can proactively enlist the support of key figures in the school culture and also increase
> awareness of education, in general, and professional educators, in particular.

Though school counselors are not a specific group of interest in this study, the

relationship between respect, positive school culture, and school staff is defined quite effectively

by Peterson and Deuschle.

Even as a student, Hugo understands the importance of respect in an evaluation of school

culture. Hugo believes that time and consistency are important factors in creating a relationship

at least partially based upon respect:

> After a while you come to get to know your teachers. If it's your last year, you become
> close with your teachers because you work together a lot in your classes and you *respect*
> them both as a person, and as a teacher. So when you think of [who] could help you in
> the future, whether it would be writing college recommendations, or you need help from
> them for another reason, it's nice to have those people around. But, in an environment

that's constantly changing from year to year, you can't always rely on that same person or teacher to be there.

Hugo bases his analysis on the relationships he has forged with teachers as a student at The Polk School. He expressed some frustration at his inability to spend the requisite amount of time with these people necessary to develop that respect and trust that he sees as necessary to take a teacher-student relationship to the next level.

As a veteran teacher, Ted commented often about the idea of respect, and what it means to him. During our interview, Ted indicated that feelings of respect, honesty or trustworthiness flow within a school setting. "If you tend to treat people with *respect* and honesty, as you expect other people, your peers, your superiors, the people you report to, or people that report to you, to treat you, that also translates down the chain of command." Ted feels that having respect for one's fellow community members is something that will not only help to forge strong one-on-one relationships, but also set the tone for the entire school and its culture. Consequently, treating people disrespectfully will have a negative impact on school culture and will strain relationships that need to be strong in order for a positive school culture to exist.

Ted then explained how the idea of respect can be applied to the way he treats his students:

> To borrow a phrase from a former headmaster, teaching moments come up in human interactions. And as a teacher, and one who, I believe, has a good bit of *respect* for the many in the community, and the many students that we have, I can act during those teaching moments to allow the student to look at what is going on and to possibly learn from that experience.

The respect Ted has for those in The Polk School community, especially his students, guides him in the way that he handles many situations. Before acting with definitive authority, Ted evaluates the amount of respect he has for the involved parties and contemplates what the action might mean for the community as a whole.

Another veteran teacher, Barrett, shares Ted's views on respect and its importance as a vital component of positive school culture, but gave a different perspective on what respect means to him as an instructor. Whereas Ted primarily spoke about how he respected his students and the dynamics of that relationship, Barrett spoke about earning the respect of fellow instructors whom "you deeply respected and admired."

When Barrett spoke about respect, he consistently raised the notion that it was not a right, but rather a privilege that one earned through actions. Barrett provided an example of this viewpoint while discussing The Polk School and the high values it places on athletics in its school culture:

> …if he's [a student] dyslexic, or has attention difficulty, he just is going to struggle every period, every day, all year…and he works his butt off and get modest returns for that, and that there are other places for him to earn the *respect* and esteem of his classmates, and the faculty, both. Good, good, good.

Barrett was so attuned to the importance of gaining respect as a member of The Polk School community that he attempted to empathize with some students that may struggle academically for various reasons perhaps beyond their control.

Summary

Having effective leadership, at all stakeholder levels, is imperative for creation of a positive school culture. The purpose of this section was to not only define leadership, but to explain how different actions by people perhaps not normally considered "school leaders" play a large part in the creation of a healthy school environment.

Ideas associated with leadership are very diverse and may, at first glance, seem unconnected to one another. However, terms such as administration, power, and respect, all have great impact upon the leadership at a given school. Though there are varied views of leadership

included in this section, the fact remains that formal (position-based) authority will always play a role in leadership at a given school.

Considering that school heads are ultimately responsible for the performance at their schools, it follows logically that they have the authority and control to make a variety of decisions unilaterally, if necessary. While the headmaster retains the ability to act as an individual autocrat, it is widely recognized that, in order to be a successful leader, he/she must seek the support of contributing stakeholder groups to gain the various perspectives and insights of professionals from different backgrounds, and so as not to seem disrespectful and isolated.

Community

Meaning

For the purposes of this study, the term "community" will be strictly limited to the school community, in this case The Polk School. Generally speaking, participants in the study used the term "community" to describe the phenomenon that occurs when all stakeholders from the Polk School come together to form a single population.

Scholars have had a difficult time determining exactly what comprises "school communities" in general. There is a noticeable gap in school community literature where empirical evidence of school community is concerned (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997). Although there is little empirical evidence behind the many theories of school community and its effect on students, teachers, and administrators, some scholars have attempted to define what a school community is at its core. As Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps (1997) note "communities are defined as places where members care about and support each other, actively

participate in and have influence on the group's activities and decisions, feel a sense of belonging

and identification with the group, and have common norms, goals, and values" (p. 137).

The idea of community plays a vital role in my equation. An equation for creating

positive school culture must account for the school community as a whole. Gail Furman (2003),

a leading scholar in the role of community as it applies to educational environments states that,

"Advancing of community building in schools claim multiple potential benefits, including a

reduced sense of alienation for students, improved achievement, enhanced collegiality for

educators, and the possibility for practices that are more democratic" (p. 4). This insight, as to

what school communities add to the daily lived experiences of students and faculty members

alike, reaffirms the necessity of this term's inclusion in the school culture equation.

School culture, by definition, is something that affects not only individuals or individual

stakeholder groups, but rather the entire school community. The final portion of the school

culture equation depends upon having a responsive school community so that proper leadership

has its desired effect on the community as a whole.

Words and phrases that relate to community

The word community can mean different things in different contexts. However, in this

study, participants indicated that community meant those people with whom they interacted

within school walls on a daily basis. Some words that were used to communicate ideas of

community by various participants include: family/shared values, extra-curricular, and campus.

The term family may seem a bit of a misfit for this section, however, many participants

brought up this notion of family as it applied to The Polk School. In addition, the only time I

coded this word as meaning or denoting a sense of community was when a participant mentioned

that The Polk School acted or felt like a family. Any mentions of blood-relative family were

coded as "off campus factors" and omitted from this section entirely. The reason I have included

the term value in conjunction with the term family is because many of the participants

communicated ideas about The Polk School community and its tightly-knit, familial nature using

shared values as a foundation for that analysis.

Extra-curricular activities include dances, sporting events, or academic clubs that meet

outside of regularly scheduled school events. These events evoke feelings of school pride and

can involve a large portion of the school community (football games involve the students playing

and the people who are in attendance supporting the team).

Finally, the word campus is used often to refer to the geographical area owned by an

educational institution. It often implies feelings of connectedness and sentimentality towards a

given school. Some scholars even believe that campus layouts and architecture have an effect on

what happens within school walls (Kenney, Dumont, and Kenney, 2005). For all these reasons it

seemed appropriate to include the term campus as a word that conveys feelings related to The

Polk School community.

Family

The President of the Board explained his perspective on The Polk School as a family. He

indicated that, "I think The Polk School is regarded more as a *family* kind of culture, a

community with a strong sense of community, a strong sense of The Polk School *family*…." It is

quite impressive that someone who has spent time within a school's highest and lowest positions

of formal authority believes that the school's true culture is one of family. Fred continued to

speak about his feelings on The Polk School in regards to its family atmosphere:

If you have a long-tenured teacher who, for whatever reason, maybe he or she got divorced, maybe they are suffering with depression, who knows what, but they are struggling. Because The Polk School is a *family*, we wouldn't immediately turn our back on them, but at the same, you know, we would try to get them help.

Fred believes that for The Polk School to have a positive school culture and perform at the highest level possible, people at all levels must be treated with care, compassion, and patience, just like family.

Barrett sees The Polk School in a similar light. When answering a question concerning school culture and what it means to him, he uses the term family to describe what it looks like through his eyes.

This is a school with a fairly continuous community. I mean, we've got lots of kids who are children of alum, grandchildren of alum, so it is a pretty stable school community out there for a long time….When I think of school culture, I think, expect, a *familial* atmosphere. If there's anything that gets sort of beat to death at The Polk School, it's like a big *family*. And, and, you know, for good or ill…and some of it is for good and some of it is for ill. It's like a *family*.

Having been around for 25 years, Barrett has seen The Polk School experience a number of peaks and troughs, just like a real family. He indicated that many of the same afflictions that cause tension within families, cause tension within The Polk School community.

In his role of formal leadership, Headmaster Bentley must oversee culture creation, development, and evolution. He must be a constructive force in fostering culture because of his close proximity to the Board, as well as the other stakeholders groups within the school. In his view, the mission statement sets the tone for the school, but human interaction is something difficult to transcribe. How people treat each other is one of the headmaster's major concerns, but he knows that successful organizations are "able to reflect back the mission of the institution; and this mission is played out in the *values* that, that they reinforce by performing their roles in the lived experience in the community." These values, set forth in some of the school's literature, analogizing the school to family may be comparable to the unspoken values passed down from

generation to generation in a given family. Though the values may change over time, the feeling

and meaning behind them remains constant.

Extra-curricular

In John's perspective, extra-curricular activities topped the list in terms of issues and

events that can influence a school culture:

> When I think of school culture, I think about how the guys take on, how they react to a school-organized function. Whether it be a football game, how they react to a pep rally, how they react to Halloween, a special day. I mean it is all in their reaction. Do they know how to act, do they know how to perform? And based on all those experiences, that really helps to create the culture…the *extra-curriculars* define school culture.

Though John was a bit of an outlier in this study concerning questions of who controlled

the school culture and how it is created, his input was consistently well-founded, based upon his

experiences as a teacher and student at a multitude of different schools. Likewise, the importance

that John assigned extra-curricular activities was not mirrored in any other responses, but there

were quite a few participants who believed that extra-curricular activities play a large role in

forming a school community, and that community plays a large role in the formation of a specific

culture.

As an upper-level administrator, Derrick has involved himself in policy creation and

implementation, but he believes that in order to be the best leader possible, he must remain

involved in other aspects of The Polk School community as well. This is why he has decided to

teach a class when that responsibility is not one specified in his job description. It is also why he

has decided to take a leading role in the creation and supervision of several extra-curricular

activities:

> I also coach, and I participate in the music program, so I participate in *extra-curriculars* as well…as an individual, I started the Jewish Awareness Club last year, you know, a small thing, but we were able to put on assemblies and do some community service work,

team up with some other schools. That's going to add something to the culture. I became the squash coach, and the squash program changed a little bit, and added a little bit to the culture, and then I work for the music program. I am able, as an individual, to contribute x, y and z, on small projects that are not trying to change the culture, just add new hope with building upon what the school already had, movement of the school in that same direction of you know, tolerance of diversity, and of a strong academic program which emphasizes the ethics and sportsmanship and perhaps…further raising the quality of the music program.

Derrick's complement of work, outside of both the classroom and his administrative office, shows both how committed he is to creating a positive school culture, and how important he believes extra-curricular activities to be in the formation of a positive school culture.

Barrett is also of the viewpoint that extra-curricular activities play a sizeable role in the creation of Polk School culture. When asked how big of a role extra-curricular activities play in Polk School culture, Barrett first responded by highlighting athletics as the single most important extra-curricular activity. "At The Polk School, athletics is the big piece of [an extra-curricular] pie." However, he then modified his response by adding the following:

In the last ten years, our drama program has gotten much better. We have an instrumental music program that is real important to some kids; chorus has been for a long time. There's a whole group of kids, who may or may not be involved in athletics, but who…thrive in those other arenas. Newspaper people. I was the advisor for the newspaper for a number of years. There are some kids who just lived in the newspaper office….So, those things are really important. You know, just different activities for different kids. So, yeah, that's definitely part of school culture.

Barrett truly enjoys the time he spends with students outside of the classroom. Although his first reaction was to identify athletics as the most important extra-curricular activities involved in school culture, he subsequently demonstrated appreciation for non-athletic pursuits and endeavors as well.

Campus

The term "campus," as mentioned earlier in this section, elicits ideas of school community and physical togetherness. Derrick on a few occasions incorporated the term "campus" into different answers. When describing the school culture at The Polk School and why it is difficult to make wholesale changes to this culture, Derrick stated that "The culture is everyone who is on this *campus* plus the ghosts of those who are departed." Using the word campus to differentiate those who currently attend The Polk School from everyone who may have had an influence on the school at one time or another (but not currently) is precisely why this word is so important in school culture analysis.

Derrick identified the difference between the experiential difference people can have on and off *campus* when he stated that "students bring their outside experiences on to the school *campus*." This simple statement appreciates that two different realities exist; the reality outside of The Polk School, and the reality within its campus boundaries.

Olivia had some unusual views concerning the idea of campus as community due in large part to her experiences on the Polk School Headmaster search committee. Her role as a part of that committee was to travel to various schools, conduct on-campus visits with the rest of the committee, and interact with the potential candidates. Olivia made the following observation about one of the candidates' schools, "One of the schools that we visited was in Tompkintown, Florida. So, the school culture was vastly different. There was an outdoor cafeteria. There was essentially no dress code, and it was co-educational…." This evaluation of her surroundings explicitly links school culture and campus.

Olivia took from this experience that the school culture at this school in Florida was largely based on its physical campus. The warm weather allowed for a different style of

interaction among its community members, giving the whole school an entirely different feel than that of The Polk School.

While Roland did not mention the term campus specifically in his interview, his views regarding improvement of The Polk School culture do involve the notion of campus. As a former student at The Polk School, Roland recalled times when students were taken off campus by instructors.

His memories of such trips were generally negative, but, in an effort to remain constructive, Roland stated, "I feel like the [Polk] school needs to arrange field trips and active learning at places, or go to academic places of learning like museums. I think they need to relax a little with how they take the kids outside of the classroom and where they take them when they leave the school." In Roland's view, much of the learning and bonding among students that needs to exist for the maintenance of a positive school culture happens beyond The Polk School's physical campus. Though generally complimentary of The Polk School and his time there, Roland feels strongly about the unappreciated opportunities for learning and bonding in places lying beyond the gates of a school.

Summary

The idea that community is vital to a positive school culture is pervasive in the literature (Dean, 1993, Talbert, & McLaughlin, 1996, Dryfoos, 2005, Friedland, 1999). The results of my interviews support this emergent theory. While the ideal of community plays a large role in school culture theory, the data resulting from numerous interviews suggests that the Polk School community, the physical beings that make up The Polk School and even the physical land it sits upon, has an effect upon school culture.

Communities, however, tend to be reactive in nature. For this reason, it is important that communities both be lead effectively and be responsive to the actions of its leaders in order to reach important community-wide goals.

Off-campus influences/factors

Meaning

When discussing a school's culture, the tendency is to study aspects that are expressly associated with the school itself. The equation that I have created has a total of five components. Four components that have been heretofore discussed and have to do with the school proper, the fifth component, however, addresses off-campus factors and influences. As Derrick points out in his interview, "Even though they spend 7-8 hours a day here [at The Polk School], they spend 15, 16 hours somewhere else. They [students] spend the weekends somewhere else. They spend 160 days somewhere else."

Although much good can be done within a school relative to its culture, there is an element that lies beyond the control of any school. When students go home, they are out of the realm of control of any school, and what happens while they are home certainly has an effect on how they are able to perform once they come back onto school grounds (Littky & Grabelle, 2004).

Words and phrases that relate to off-campus influences/factors

The words associated with factors of school culture that occur beyond the school are generally straightforward and need little explanation. It is necessary to note that this single-site case study took place at an independent school and the words and phrases associated with this component would be different at almost any school. The demographics and geographic location of a given student body, along with those of the faculty and staff can heavily influence these off-campus factors that affect individuals outside of school.

This section is a bit different than the previous four in that the analysis is not based on exact words or phrases, but instead it is based on common ideas or beliefs. When participants spoke about the various external factors that might influence school culture, each individual communicated similar themes and ideas, but utilized different vocabulary in their descriptions.

I have split these major themes into two main groups. They include issues of: (1) students' socio-economic status; and (2) students bringing to school burdens unrelated to their school life.

While not a part of the school culture equation, the participants of this study and I have devised a relatively simple way of explaining how a school identity is created. This brief analysis will occur upon the completion of any discussion having to do with outside influences on school culture.

Socio-economic status

The Polk School has an opulent pristine campus in one of the nicest areas in the Mid-Atlantic Region. It has bountiful resources to offer its students, ranging from athletic fields and equipment, to exposure to some of the newest cutting-edge technology. The Polk School is able

to provide most of these resources as a result of the generosity of their alumni and parents of

current students. These parents support the school by paying the school tuition, and many times,

by also donating to the school endowment fund. Understandably, this type of environment is

quite different from educational environments in less affluent areas of town where schools

struggle to even provide books for their students (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2005; Camilli &

Monfils, 2004; Dwyer, 2002).

Ted is a native of the town where The Polk School is situated. He has spent decades in

the independent school system there. He is very familiar, not only with many of the independent

schools in the area (having attended two as a student), but also with the area's public schools. His

insight and experience influenced his perceptions of school culture creation. Ted stated that:

> It varies greatly from school to school, and the culture at The Polk School is different
> from the culture at say, Morgantown Prep, an independent school that I also went to. It's
> very different from the culture in certain public schools, you have Middletown, a largely
> white public school, well-to-do, large, or a culture in a Martinsville, which is a very
> rough section of the city, primarily African-American and poorer. So, the culture is also
> set there.

This idea about cultures being different from one another based on financial and ethnic

demographics is one that was echoed throughout the interviews conducted. If multiple

interviewees believe these factors to be this vital to a discussion regarding the creation of school

culture, then this category should be included as its own element in this emergent theory.

Fred, a man very familiar with the inner-workings of The Polk School and a product of

independent schooling, stated the following regarding the socio-economic situation at Polk:

> No matter what your background, if you go to a private school, it is a privileged culture.
> Look at the average car. First of all, you look at how many 16-year-olds have their own
> car at private school versus public school. And then you look at what they are driving….

Fred's observations imply that those students who attend The Polk School are financially

privileged in ways that many students their same age are not. This difference, according to Fred,

influences the school culture, because it will have an impact on the way they conduct themselves presently as a member of The Polk School and its culture.

Olivia was very forthright in her assessment of the biggest difference she sees between public schooling and the situation at The Polk School. Though careful to make sure she informed me of her lack of personal experience in the area of public schooling, she stated, "It's hard to say [what the difference is between public and independent schooling] because I was kind of in one place in between [public and independent school], but I wasn't at a true public school, and that school didn't have kids in the same socio-economic status [as The Polk School]." Olivia's observations focused on the difference between the students' backgrounds, in relation to socio-economic status.

She felt that, in some situations a child coming from a lower socio-economic status can be unsupported at home, and, thus, under-achieve in the classroom. Through her work she saw such disparate student experiences as possibly limiting teachers' abilities to accomplish their classroom goals.

Burdens carried by students unrelated to school

A school's endowment fund does not translate directly to a utopian environment where a student's home life offers the same support and guidance received within The Polk School walls. This notion of a dichotomous existence on the part of some students was highlighted by Derrick:

> Most of our guys coming here don't have a lot of difficulties, socioeconomically. Nobody worries about where they are going to sleep tonight, what they are going to eat tonight, walking down dangerous streets, family…in trouble. They don't really have that kind of stuff. They have other stuff going on. They may have some problems with drugs, or may have parents who are AWOL (absent without leave). The privileged students have their own set of problems, and I think there might be literature out there really starting to explore that.

Derrick explained how students raised in a financially stable home are not guaranteed a stress and problem free childhood and adolescence. Even though these issues are very different from problems faced in other school environments, they can certainly influence school culture.

Hugo, the only current student involved in the study, provided his insight into one way that an external burden might affect a school's culture. He stated that, "It is harder [to help foster a positive school culture] if you have stuff to deal with that is outside of school culture that drags its way in. You know, like if you have medical issues, I'd hope that affects how you deal with stuff. You know, that [makes being a part of a positive school culture] harder."

As I have indicated above, for a positive school culture to be created and fostered, each element of the equation must be present, and in the case of the element community, that community must be responsive. These external factors can lessen the responsiveness of a given school community, because of issues that might have nothing to do with the school itself.

Summary

Although external influences or factors may be, by definition, things that cannot be altered through any action of the school itself, they must still be accounted for when discussing the topic of school culture. As a place of "privilege," The Polk School may seem less likely to suffer with these problems. While the problems many Polk School students face when they leave campus have little to do with life or death, they still have an undeniable influence on the school's culture.

The placement of this element in the equation is with definite purpose. It is the final component one must take into account when trying to determine whether a school is capable of developing a positive school culture. It holds the place of the final component, because neither the Board, administration, faculty, nor students themselves can alter the external elements to a

great extent. It is imperative that all stakeholder groups understand, appreciate, and respect the existence of external factors that influence the school environment, but over which they have no meaningful control.

Conclusion

The purpose behind this chapter is to give an in-depth look into the theory that emerged as a result of data gathered from this study. The emergent theory itself was designed to be as simple as possible, while comprehensively identifying the most important ingredients that go into the creation of a school's culture. The five different components that make up school culture were defined briefly, and the significance behind their placement within the equation was discussed at length.

A number of textual examples from both recognized academic scholarship and study participants were offered to legitimize the definition and placement of each component. Because it would have been impossible to list every word or phrase associated with these five components, individual words and phrases were selected due to their consistent inclusion within participant interviews. These words and phrases were broken down and explained both in objective metrics and metrics used specifically for the purposes of this study. The purpose behind this exercise was to link the analysis in this chapter directly to the evidence gathered from the interviews conducted with various Polk School stakeholders.

Once all of these data were compiled and analyzed, an observation was made that school culture plays an integral role in identity formation in the independent school community. The specifics of that relationship, along with the input from the President of the Board of Trustees was discussed briefly in an effort to explore the influence that school culture has in the maintenance of a given school's identity or reputation.

Chapter 6
Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Introduction

The previous chapter focused on a description of school culture by the participants of this study. Their interpretation of the varying aspects of The Polk School culture formed the foundation of Chapter Five. Through the analysis of the participants' words and phrases, a conceptual framework about the formation of positive independent school culture evolved.

This chapter looks at participants' perspectives and viewpoints to answer the questions posed at the outset of the study. It identifies key themes concerning: the specifics that distinguish The Polk School culture from school cultures in the public arena, academic achievement and its relationship with school culture, and leadership's effect on Polk School culture.

Subsequently, this chapter delineates specific practices that school leaders and school community members can employ which will have a positive influence on school culture. As has been mentioned repeatedly throughout this study, the research and subsequent analysis conducted throughout this study offers practical and pragmatic help for educational professionals that work in schools similar to The Polk School. Though there are limitations to this study due to the methodology used (single site case study), there are widely-applicable principles and practical lessons regarding school culture to be learned from these participants and scholars that can be shared to benefit educational professionals from any background.

This chapter also addresses the implication of this study for future research. The importance of maintaining a positive school culture has been reinforced by numerous references to recognized scholars, as well as data gleaned from the participants of this study. Ensuring that this phenomenon is studied earnestly and integrated creatively into future practice and scholarship

is of the utmost importance if progress is to be made concerning school culture. To achieve this goal, different ideas about future studies related to school culture are examined. Specifically, ideas about how to improve and continue the line of research conducted in this study are shared and investigated.

Following the discussion about future school culture research, the subject of school culture theory is addressed, including an analysis of the emergent theory created as a result of this research and its place in the current school culture scholarship. The emergent theory created as a result of this study does not exist in isolation, and it is important to understand its place in the existing panoply of school culture literature.

Finally, concluding remarks about the study and its findings will be made in an effort to synthesize the many results of this research. This section will summarize and highlight, in a condensed manner, the most pertinent ideas and theories produced by this study.

How do stakeholders in one independent school perceive school culture in their school as opposed to public schools? Is it the same? Is it different? If so, how is it different?

The pattern that emerges from the study's interviews regarding the establishment of a successful school culture tend to suggest that those with specific public school experience see the major difference between independent and public schooling as being tied to student enrollment and demographic diversity. Those without specific public school experience speak of the bureaucracy and lack of autonomy as being the potential drawbacks for the faculty or administration of a public school.

After carefully analyzing the viewpoints of the participants and reading the prominent literature on school culture, the central factor that separates independent schools and public schools are their respective sizes. The student body can be so large and diverse in many public

schools that the control and autonomy of the teachers and administrators is severely affected. Beyond simply allowing educational professionals autonomy, the size of these schools prevent students, in some cases, from receiving the individual attention that may be necessary for them to excel in the classroom.

Public school culture differs from independent school culture because there is usually a less personal relationship between students and teachers, and subsequently between these teachers and the administrators. These relationships are generally less personal through no fault of any individual educator, but rather because the logistics of these larger schools demand less one-on-one interaction among peers and stakeholder groups.

However, as was pointed out by Ted, public schools have an advantage in terms of policy creation and implementation because of the necessary clarity that accompanies any policy or rule put into operation. The general clarity of these rules allows for a more efficient school, and less time spent discussing undefined or ambiguous details.

Considering that the vast majority of school culture-related literature concerns public schooling, it is important that this study be tied to that great source of literature in an effort to contextualize the results and anchor the conclusions drawn. For this purpose, questions were asked of all study participants about their knowledge of public school culture, and how, in their perspective, it differed from The Polk School culture. The responses varied a bit, however they also contained overarching ideas and themes that pervaded across stakeholder lines.

This section has two individual sections: those that have specific first-hand experience with the public school system, and those that do not. Tying interviewees together based on their position at an independent school seems a bit illogical when the question being posed has more to do with their individual experiences outside of independent school walls.

Interviewees with public school experience

Those with first-hand knowledge of the public school system generally believe that their school culture differs from the school culture at The Polk School based on the student population. Some believe it is the size of this population that makes The Polk School different from public schools, while some believe it is the demographic makeup of this population that differentiates public and independent schooling.

Ted is the parent of two public school graduates. He asserted that The Polk School experience is different than the public school experience due to the size of the enrolled student body. He made a point to remind me that all public schools are not the same, and that, demographically, public schools in relative proximity to one another can be almost polar opposites in terms of their enrollment. However, having made that distinction, Ted stated that the mere size of public schools dictates much of what they physically can and cannot accomplish. One example of this trend happens to be the student to teacher ratio at area public schools versus that at The Polk School.

Generally speaking, public schools in and around the area where The Polk School is located have a student to teacher ratio of 25 or 30 to 1. The Polk School's student to teacher ratio is 13 to 1. This difference in individual attention forces these schools to handle particular situations in different manners simply as a result of staffing. Teachers at The Polk School have an easier time of staying on top of problems that individual students might be having, and that kind of individualized attention is usually not possible at the larger public institutions.

Ted also noted, however, that public schools, because of their generally larger size, have very clear rules and policies by which the students, administrators, and teachers must abide. These rules and policies must be non-negotiable and clear; otherwise the school could have difficulty maintaining order. In his experiences, schools smaller in size, like The Polk School,

have policies and rules that may leave room for individual interpretation. Miscommunications can result, which can cause disruption and harm to the school's culture.

Derrick, another participant with some public school background, also believes the makeup of the student body to be the foundational difference between public and independent schools. However, he emphasizes that the dissimilarity has more to do with what happens to these students off campus than their experiences and relationships within the school. In his experience as a teacher and now an administrator, he understands that the influences outside of school walls are brought into the school environment.

Most of these issues cannot be controlled or changed by any school entities, yet they must be accounted for and understood if the school is going to provide these students with a positive environment and culture. Derrick made it clear that, although some of the problems that students have in public schooling are, generally speaking, more serious than problems students experience at schools such as The Polk School, both environments can present a multitude of different issues.

Interviewees with no public school experience

Though Barrett has never taught at a public school, he felt familiar enough with education in general to offer an opinion as to how independent schools differ from public schools. He came to the conclusion that in independent schooling teachers and administrators are offered a great deal of autonomy, much more than is offered in public schooling. This autonomy allows teachers and administrators to develop at their own pace, which can benefit the school culture because it provides an opportunity for educational professionals to reach their individual potential.

Headmaster Bentley agrees with Barrett in the sense that they both see public schooling as a more bureaucratic enterprise than independent schooling. Headmaster Bentley believes that

it would be more difficult for him to make a positive difference in the lives of his students at a public school than at a place like The Polk School, because of the sheer size of the student body and the stress that places on a given school staff. He suggested that the public school principals are forced to delegate important responsibilities because they simply do not have enough time to complete every task they deem vital, so in many cases these tasks must be delegated to other administrators.

Hugo reiterated the points made by many participants when he stated that, "you have more individual attention from teachers and little things get noticed more." Hugo has repetitiously commented on this idea of individual attention from the student perspective. His retelling of stories with similar themes is demonstrative of how much it means to the students at The Polk School that they readily receive individual attention and help when necessary. This support assures students like Hugo that they will not fall behind. This comment illustrates the importance that Hugo places on the comfort level that he feels at The Polk School, and how uncomfortable he might be at a larger, public school. In his interview, Hugo pointed out that he plans on attending a small college or university because he has identified the importance of individual attention and recognizes he may need this support to reach his full academic potential.

What impact, if any, does school culture have on academic performance (as perceived by independent school stakeholders)?

In an independent school environment, the relationship between academic achievement and school culture is essential to understand considering that the local reputation schools are generally labeled with greatly depends on their ability to place their students into "top-tier" colleges and universities. While in the introduction to this study it was made clear that studies focusing on school culture and its relationship with academic achievement cannot produce cold,

hard, numerical data sets, the consequences for ignoring this relationship could be dire for any school, public or independent.

At The Polk School it appears to be unanimous (among the interviewees) that school culture has a definite influence upon student achievement. Administrators, faculty members, and students (recently graduated and current) understand the importance of a positive school culture, and the amount to which school culture can influence achievement. The way that these community members saw this relationship actualize, however, varied a bit.

Administrators saw the relationship between academic achievement and school culture on a wide-ranging, sweeping level. Their view was broad and reaching, however offered few particulars as to how exactly school culture specifically influences student achievement. They were well aware of this relationship's general importance, and certainly acknowledged its potential influence on The Polk School, but they remained generally theoretical about how they saw this relationship playing out on a daily basis.

Faculty members grasped the idea that academic achievement and school culture were intertwined, and gave some insight as to how they saw the relationship taking form. As Olivia pointed out, she believes that communication is the bedrock of a positive school culture, and that same ability to communicate can lead to student achievement, because all community members (including students) understand what it is that is expected of them.

The students and recent alumnus interviewed gave the most narrow and specific view of the relationship between school culture and academic achievement and how it has affected them in their time at The Polk School. Hugo's ability to discuss this relationship with a faculty advisor greatly assisted him in his academic success. The microcosm of such a relationship builds a positive school culture, and in turn, allows a student to succeed academically. Roland's feelings of peer acceptance and comfort, all byproducts of a positive school culture, allowed him to

succeed academically, because when engaged in academic endeavors, he was able to concentrate solely on the task at hand without the distractions of an unfocused environment.

The relationship between academic achievement and positive school culture unquestionably exists at The Polk School. Although this relationship may be interpreted differently by different stakeholders in some respects, the underlying fact that all stakeholders both acknowledge that this relationship exists, and understand its importance in developing students to their full potential, is a positive indicator for The Polk School.

Chapter Two included a substantial amount of literature that links school culture and academic achievement. This literature points to a relationship between school culture and the academic achievement of students within a given school (Collins et al., 2006; Peterson, 2002; DuFour & Burnette, 2002). School culture is not a quantifiable entity. Academic achievement, on the other hand, has been quantified using test results as a barometer for school achievement. Because the relationship that exists between these two ideas cannot be expressed using simple numbers and statistical data, qualitative studies (like the case study done here) provide the only intrinsic insight into this correlation.

Participants in this study were asked direct questions about their views regarding the connection between school culture and academic achievement at The Polk School. Their answers all affirmed the belief that school culture does influence student achievement. Unlike their views on school leadership and its role in school culture creation, interviewees across stakeholder lines agree that school culture and academic achievement are inextricably intertwined.

Administration

In the case of the administration, their view on this topic was explicit. Bentley, The Polk School's Headmaster believes that, "The culture makes a difference [in the academic

achievement of its students]." The correlation in Bentley's view is very clear and it is very real; school culture has a definite influence on academic achievement.

Derrick, as an administrator who works very closely with The Polk School's curriculum, believes that a positive school culture is the single greatest factor in a student's academic achievement. Derrick did not qualify that statement or make any statements that in any way lessened the significance of that single statement. His professional opinion is that academic achievement cannot be attained without the presence of a positive school culture.

Faculty

Teachers felt much the same way that the members of the administration did. Ted, a senior member of The Polk School's faculty, reiterated Derrick's point and stated that "academic achievement doesn't occur in isolation of the social surroundings and the culture." Not only is academic achievement and school culture related in Ted's estimation, achievement depends upon a positive school culture being present.

Olivia, being a teacher of Advanced Placement curriculums, had keen insight on the influence school culture has on academic achievement and vice versa. She believes that a positive school culture, in which roles and responsibilities are clearly outlined, will lead to her being a more successful educator. She stated that effective communication of roles and responsibilities originates from the administration, but through teacher expectations, becomes translated to the students. Should these expectations and demands be reasonable (neither too high, nor too low), academic success can be attained. However, should a school have standards that are unclear, too high, or too low; the school culture will suffer, and therefore so will student achievement.

Student/young alumnus

Though it could be expected that the student perspective on this relationship between school culture and academic achievement would differ from that of an educational professional, the respondents' views aligned very closely to those espoused by the teachers and administrators. Roland, a recent alumnus of The Polk School, believes that school culture is important to academic achievement because of the comfort level that the students have while they are presumed to be academically engaged. If the school culture is positive and lines of communication are open from stakeholder group to stakeholder group, the students can more readily focus academically and tackle the more difficult academic assignments. If the comfort level among these groups drops, so does the level of academic achievement because students become preoccupied. Scholars have hinted that this phenomenon exists at different levels of schooling (Strage, 2000), and Roland sees it as the key to unlocking any hidden academic potential within a given school.

Much like Roland, Hugo, a current student at The Polk School, believes that when discussing the intricacies and nuances of the relationship between school culture and academic achievement, "it's all about comfort." While Hugo related this statement to experiences with his faculty advisor, the idea of student comfort and feelings of familiarity and support resurfaced. Those participants who are Polk School student community members (or recently student community members) see the issue of academic achievement as very closely related to their feelings of comfort, stability, and support within the walls of The Polk School. Roland derived this feeling of comfort from the friendships forged with his classmates, while Hugo depends on the support he receives from his faculty advisor. Both, however, agree that should those characteristics of The Polk School falter or fall by the wayside in any way, academic achievement will surely suffer.

Do the leaders in one independent school see themselves as influencing school culture? Do the other stakeholders in this school see the leaders as influencing school culture? If so, what specific actions can school leaders take to influence school culture positively?

While it is apparent that the views on school culture and school leadership's place in its creation, development, and evolution vary widely among the interviewees, the vast majority of study participants understand that school leaders have a great deal of influence on school culture and its direction. For the purpose of this study, a leadership role has been defined as any position that carries with it formal authority (Shantz & Prieur, 1996). There were few consistencies regarding how different interviewees envisioned the school leaders' place in school culture creation. The administrators understand that their varied formal positions within The Polk School community afford them power and authority over the majority of The Polk School community. They also comprehend that they must do their best to create an environment where lines of communication are always open, and the members of The Polk School community understand that their input is valued regardless of formal position.

The phenomenon referred to above is something Weaver-Hart and Bredeson (1996) elaborate on, "In complex social systems, like schools, individuals may fill several positions and carry out multiple roles associate with various formal and informal positions" (p. 222). This idea allows administrators to be both unilateral decision-makers and coalition creators, depending upon the specific circumstances surrounding their decision. Leadership means more than simply leading; it means knowing how to lead in a variety of ways that engage a constituency and affords them a sense of ownership of their community. These authors make it clear that, "No leader functions without the group he is charged to lead" (p. 63).

Leadership undoubtedly plays an important role in the creation and maintenance of positive school culture, but the specific role played by a school's administration depends upon the

individuals residing in these various positions of power. Participants from every stakeholder group related that idea, and scholars echoed similar beliefs throughout the research on this topic.

Administration

This study included three individuals in authoritative positions within The Polk School: the President of the Board (Fred), the Headmaster (Bentley), and the upper level administrator (Derrick). Their view of leadership and its ability to independently shape a school's culture was, for the most part, deferential in nature. Though leadership does play an important role in the creation and maintenance of a positive school culture, its level of influence at The Polk School is a matter of dispute among those who hold positions of formal authority.

Derrick believes that the school's faculty is the prime locus of power in terms of developing school culture, a view he shares with the Association for Curriculum Supervision and Development. Kohm and Nance (2007), scholars associated with ACSD, believe that principals interested in creating an open school culture need to make sure that their teachers feel comfortable discussing school issues with each other regardless of who is present (administrators) for that discussion.

Headmaster Bentley firmly believes that a school's culture is a conglomeration of different "lived experiences", and that these experiences cannot be controlled by any one stakeholder group, including administrators or school leaders. He sees himself as an orchestrator, making sure that the correct pieces are in the correct places, and ensuring that, "our boys have every opportunity to be successful." He stops short of stating that he or any other individual has the power to direct The Polk School culture. Headmaster Bentley readily admits that decisions he makes can indirectly influence school culture, but he believes the makeup of The Polk School culture is much too complex to pinpoint a nexus of cultural control within the school.

Fred holds an unusual view on power and school culture because of his long history at The Polk School. Having seen periods of instability rock the school in recent years, Fred believes that, at times, formal authority must be used to guide school culture should the school lose its way.

Referencing his time spent on the Board of Trustees of The Polk School, Fred recounted, "During that six year timeframe, because of the instability of the headmaster position, the Board was somewhat micromanaging the school in terms of its culture...more so than I would have preferred." Fred believes that, because it is the Board's responsibility to select The Polk School's Headmaster, a fair amount of culture-related power and responsibility resides within that single decision, and therefore is possessed by the Board. Duke and Iwanicki (1992) support Fred's observations and believe that the principal has great control over various aspects of schooling, and that this school leader must "assess a school's culture…and understand the extent to which they fit their context" (p. 35). Without this self-knowledge and knowledge of the school's mission, a school leader can have negative effects upon a given school's culture. Fred insists that the Board derives much of its cultural influence and power through this one, paramount, personnel appointment.

Faculty

While some of the aforementioned leaders of The Polk School believe that stakeholders other than themselves are responsible for driving Polk School culture, some members of The Polk School faculty have conflicting beliefs. Barrett, for example, a veteran teacher of twenty-five years, believes that the headmaster has the single most important position relative to creation and development of The Polk School's culture. Barrett explained that if the headmaster is active and aware of his place in The Polk School, he will take the school culture in a determined or planned direction. If the headmaster is unable to clearly define such a goal, the school culture and its

direction becomes defaulted to students and teachers, a task Barrett believes should be strictly within the headmaster's purview. Should the headmaster fail to perform in a way seen as satisfactory by the Board of Trustees, The Polk School will be, "open to Trustee meddling," perhaps further compromising the administrator's goal.

Olivia, another veteran teacher, has a very different view on leadership and school culture. Her view is very much in alignment with Derrick's view that teachers and students form the core of The Polk School culture, and that the relationship between these two stakeholder groups constitutes, "the front line" in school culture creation.

John takes perhaps the most populist stance by crediting the student body at The Polk School with the power to drive the school culture. He believes students must have a sense of ownership at the school they attend and that this sense of ownership, which would lead to buy-in, can be created if the students are permitted to influence the direction in which the school is moving.

Student/young alumnus

Roland, a former student, thinks that John is correct in his belief that students should be given the reigns to the school culture. He also echoes Olivia's sentiment that the most important relationship involved in the development and evolution of a school culture is that which exists between the students and the teachers. Although he understands that the administration plays a very important role in setting the tone for the faculty and students, he is still of the belief that students need to be given the opportunity to direct their school's culture.

Implications for practice

Having interviewed The Polk School community members from every stakeholder group, there is a unanimous consensus that school culture is important to the success of any school, including their own. While the intangibles of school culture itself cannot be evaluated by test scores nor guarantee the enhanced development of every student emotionally and socially, it has been suggested by scholars and the participants of this study alike that school culture plays an influential role in the attainment of all of these goals and greatly contributes to a most successful educational environment.

The research and analysis conducted in this study was specifically geared to benefit independent school practitioners, and to be readily applied in many situations concerning school culture. The purpose of this study, at its core, is to be practical in nature. The literature reviewed in Chapter Two and the emergent theory created in Chapter Five exists to help those in the field make positive, influential decisions concerning their school's culture.

The aforementioned literature reviewed in Chapter Two gives an overview of school culture that practitioners will find helpful, because it includes elements that are theoretical as well as studies performed inside individual schools. The literature selected for Chapter Two also includes a wide spectrum of definitions concerning school culture and is intended to clarify the different terms used in this study's research and analysis. This literature provides a necessary foundation of common terms and knowledge, so that educational professionals can more thoroughly understand the results of this project.

The conceptual framework created in this project was broken down into its component parts in Chapter Five so that it could be more readily understood by professionals in the field and effectively manipulated if need be. Each part was defined not only by the participants, but in many cases by established scholars, studied different components, and offered necessary

clarification. The terms used in the framework (accountability, competence, leadership, community, off campus factors/influences) are terms that educational professionals use in their daily vernacular.

The nomenclature used by the various stakeholders, many from different backgrounds and perspectives, interpreted and used the terminology consistently throughout the study. These inconsistencies, as represented in this study, exist in some form or another within every school community. It is because perspectives can vary so greatly from stakeholder to stakeholder that the equation in this study was created. It is intended that educators will find the equation flexible and malleable.

Because there are only five major components, school practitioners with different student and faculty populations can organize their efforts in altering their school's culture using the simple model created here. Although problems with competence or accountability may take a specific form at The Polk School, these problems can occur at any school in a variety of fashions. Armed with this formula, a school leader can swiftly identify problems and attempt to address them before the school culture begins a downward or negative spiral.

In addition to school leaders better understanding how to address school culture problems as they arise, all stakeholders within the school community will become more aware of their place and effect on school culture after reading this research. Board members, administrators, faculty members, and students will all gain a deeper understanding of school culture and will better understand the effect of their everyday actions on the school's culture. This trend could lead to pre-emptive thinking and acting, thereby lessening the chance of their actions being detrimental to the given school's culture.

This study can have a positive effect and enhance any school's circumstances simply by bringing the notion of school culture to the attention of school leaders. School leaders, faculty members and students are all very busy people with little free time to engage in extra-curricular

activities or duties that extend well beyond a given job description. This study provides these busy professionals with a concise way to think about and approach the concept of school culture. They can also integrate these elements into any subsequent educational environment.

As school community members become more familiar with the different aspects of school culture, as defined in this study, they can begin to refer to the elements of this formula, evaluate their thoughts and actions, and ultimately incorporate the study's ideas into their daily schedule and routine.

This study depended upon the candid insights of members within a given school community. The overwhelming response from all of those interviewed is that school culture is a phenomenon that touches a variety of school-related issues on a daily basis, making the study and its incorporation a necessary undertaking. The practical implications of this study can be wide reaching, but will only enhance the given school communities that are willing to understand, embrace and apply the proposed elements of a successful school culture.

Implications for future research

The strength of this study was its ability to gather information on, understand, and analyze the issue of school culture at a given site. Although this study answered a myriad of questions, it created many more which need to be addressed in future studies concerning school culture.

For the purposes of this specific study, it was crucial to remain at a single site in order to best understand what components create a single school culture. In future studies about school culture, possessing the knowledge provided by the results of this study, it would be very helpful to begin comparing school cultures to one-another (Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Walford, 1998). In

addition, a study at multiple sites could provide much more insight by comparing and contrasting

the influence of different student populations on school culture.

School leadership was a focal point of this study, however because there was only one

headmaster interviewed, it is possible that other headmasters see school culture as less important

than Headmaster Bentley did in this study. While all of the participants discussed the important

issue of school leadership, it was obvious that the recent instability at The Polk School, created by

certain individuals in leadership positions, played a large part in the interviewees' definitions of

these leadership positions.

Should this study have involved multiple sites in which a more stable recent history in

these same leadership positions had existed, the faculty and student opinions may have placed

less importance on the role of these individuals within a given school culture.

This study considered some differences between public and independent school culture,

but unfortunately it included no participants that were currently a part of any public school

faculty or administration. Although the input from a few of the participants on this subject came

from their past experience as public school community members, none of these first-hand

experiences were recent.

A study that involves a public school in direct comparison with an independent school

would also be fascinating, due to the multiple fundamental and inherent differences between the

schools. As Ted pointed out in his interview, one of the greatest factors in school culture creation

and development are the espoused values, traditions, and missions of the individual school.

The student populations of the two schools would also be very different from one

another, and might provide a differing perspective on school culture that could add to the

foundation created by this study. It should be noted, however, that even a dual-site case study

including an independent and public school may be misleading depending upon the demographics

of the schools selected. One must consider that "off campus influences/factors" is a key element

in the emergent theory created from the data collected in this study, and that those factors can vary greatly dependent upon a multitude of elements.

This study included a sample from every stakeholder position within the Polk School community. It would certainly be worth investigating what patterns emerge in studies that look at independent stakeholder groups and their views on school culture in isolation. The largest sample taken in this study from one stakeholder group was three individuals, and those three participants came from The Polk School faculty. Should patterns emerge from data taken in a study with these stakeholder-specific parameters, perhaps new equations would be necessary to accommodate the varying views from stakeholder group to stakeholder group.

In conclusion, this study has answered the research questions posed at its outset. However, in answering those questions, new, more-detailed questions have arisen. These questions can be answered, but the studies needed to address these additional issues would differ greatly from the single-site case study done here.

Implications for theory

The emergent theory created in this study was designed as a figurative alternative to the abstract definitions that generally accompany school culture in current educational literature. In many cases, authors attempt to define school culture by listing words and phrases that they associate with the phenomenon. The place that this emergent theory will have among current school culture literature is tied to its practitioner-friendly form and purpose. The theory itself is a pathway to achieving positive school culture. Those that will look to apply this study in their schools will be able to identify the pertinent aspects of their school environment, and direct their emphasis, time, and effort to where it is most needed.

The emergent theory, expressed in five main components, defines the researcher's view of school culture while it offers a conduit to reach the ultimate goal, creating a positive school culture. The five components, previously mentioned, are the foundations of any positive school culture. While one element might be more of a problem at one school than another, the equation allows individual school leaders to act in the best interests of their individual school communities. The equation does not make the assumption that each element is equally important in every situation, for that is rarely the case.

The product of the research conducted in this study came directly from an independent school, and therefore it is one of very few school culture studies to focus on an independent school as opposed to a public school. Because over 89% of students in primary or secondary education are enrolled in public schools (CAPE, 2008) the vast majority of school culture research has been conducted using public schools as models or case study sites. This research, however, has been conducted with independent schools in mind. The purpose of this study is primarily to aid independent school heads and school community members in better understanding and more objectively analyzing the school culture of which they are a part.

Conclusion

This research has allowed me to gain access and insight into the inner-workings of The Polk School and its individual school culture. Throughout the time I have spent compiling data and subsequently analyzing these data, I have learned a great deal about the relationships that exist among students, faculty members, administrators, and Board members. These relationships form the foundation of all school culture research, and although the term "relationship" is not a part of the final equation in any specific form, the way relationships manifest themselves on a daily basis defines a school's culture.

The reason it is so difficult and challenging to study school culture is that it mutates rapidly, with little warning or apparent reason. This phenomenon cannot be quantified, placed in a pie chart, or a bar graph. It must be examined and made sense of in its own context. These qualities make school culture an elusive phenomenon that can project a warm, nurturing, and welcoming feeling, or a cold, tension-filled setting.

While student achievement and satisfaction at a given school can be quantified and displayed as numerical data, the school culture, that in many ways drives these numbers, cannot. Thus, it is extremely important that school culture be a prioritized subject for discussion and analysis in all schools. For school culture is the person behind the curtain. It is the puppet-master that either allows for schools to be places where students achieve and create lifelong relationships, or suppresses those natural outcomes and instead encourages infighting and distrust among peers.

Simply because school culture cannot be assigned a number value makes it no less important than the participants in this study have suggested. This study's participants came from all walks of life with varied backgrounds. They all held different positions within The Polk School. Not one of them expressed any doubt or communicated any reservations regarding the remarkable role school culture plays in their lives and in the lives of their students.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Board member

When you think of school culture, what words do you immediately associate with that notion?

Speaking in terms of school culture, how does The Polk School differ from a local public school in your opinion/experience?

Is there a link between school culture and academic achievement (in the classroom)?

As the committee in charge of hiring and firing the headmaster, what is your perception of his role in Boys' Latin school culture?

If you see a problem with the school culture, how much blame do you attribute to the headmaster, and how much do you attribute to other stakeholder groups?

Do you see yourself (the Board as a whole) as a functioning member of Polk School culture?

In an ideal situation, what role does the Board of Trustees at The Polk School play in the creation or maintenance of a positive school culture?

Administrators

When you think of school culture, what words do you immediately associate with that notion?

Speaking in terms of school culture, how does The Polk School differ from a local public school in your opinion/experience?

Is there a link between school culture and academic achievement (in the classroom)?

What role do you see yourself playing in Polk School culture?

How responsible are you for The Polk School having a positive school culture?

What stakeholder group is most responsible for the creation and maintenance of a positive school culture at The Polk School?

What would you consider to be your "leadership style?"

Do you feel as though your particular leadership style aligns especially well with the mission of the specific school you're currently leading? Why or why not?

- If so, please explain, perhaps even using terms from your school's mission statement, why you believe this to be the case.

- If not, why not, and what kind of school do you feel would align more perfectly with your particular leadership style?

How can you as an administrator affect the current school culture or help to create a new or different school culture?

As an administrator do you take a pro-active role in dealing with school culture, or do you mainly remain reactive to any problems that might surface?

Faculty

What is school culture in your minds?

What kind of impact do you believe you have on your school's culture?

How do you differentiate between your role in a school's culture and that of the administration?

Do you believe the subject matter that you teach has any bearing on your ability to affect school culture?

What single stakeholder group is most responsible for positive school culture creation?

Speaking in terms of school culture, how does The Polk School differ from a local public school in your opinion/experience?

Is there a link between school culture and academic achievement (in the classroom)?

Student/young alumnus

What is school culture in your minds?

Speaking in terms of school culture, how does The Polk School differ from a local public school in your opinion/experience?

Is there a link between school culture and academic achievement (in the classroom)?

Do you feel as though you are a part of a school's "culture?"

If so, what role do you see yourself playing in that culture?

Who's mainly responsible for keeping a school culture positive? In other words, who would be to blame if a school culture became toxic or negative?

Appendix B

Informed Consent

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Leadership Perspectives in Independent School Culture

Principal Investigator:
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1. Purpose of the Study:

    The purpose of my research study is to examine the school culture phenomena, how it has

    come to be in its current form at Boys' Latin, and how it is leadership specifically can

    influence it. The study will be conducted solely on The Boys' Latin School such that an in-

    depth analysis may be conducted and a definition of what school culture is, and the different

    stakeholders that comprise it may be formed at its conclusion.

My objectives are to speak with a widely varying array of Boys' Latin School community members and to ascertain, from their words, how school culture is viewed, and the impact that an independent school administrator can expect to have on a given school culture.

The methodology I plan to employ is a brief analysis of the school's mission statement and student/faculty handbook, which will be followed up with two rounds of interviews with each individual participant to synthesize and build an understanding of what school culture is at its foundation, and how school leaders can expect to impact said culture.

Procedures to be followed:

The sole method of collecting data will be through interviews. You will be asked to sit for an interview with Daniel Schochor, who will ask you questions about the culture in your school, how you perceive it, and how it is you think school leaders can positively impact this culture. A question sheet will be created in advance; however, each interview is unique and unanticipated questions will be asked based on the answers given to the prepared questions. All interview sessions, however, will be conducted in the same manner, following the same procedures.

The interview will be recorded (voice only) and transcribed into words by Daniel Schochor. Your name or other identifying information will never be associated with this interview and all records will be kept confidential and destroyed at the conclusion of this study.

2. Duration/Time:

   The interviews will likely last approximately 60 minutes. A follow-up interview is planned, contingent upon circumstances or the nature of the interview being conducted. The duration of the follow-up interview should last no longer than 60 minutes.

3. Statement of Confidentiality:

   Your participation in this research is confidential. Pseudonyms will be assigned and used at all times. The data will be stored and secured at Daniel Schochor private residence in a locked office area within a password protected computer. Only Daniel Schochor will have access to this area and the computer files. Only Daniel Schochor and Dr. Jacqueline Stefkovich (advisor) will have access to the data. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

   These recordings will be kept confidential at all times.

   Penn State's Office for Research Protections, the Social Science Institutional Review Board, and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this project.

   Storage of Data

   That data gathered in this study will only be used for the study itself, and shall only be kept in case the principal researcher needs to reference the data for the express purpose of refining or adding to the study itself.

4. Right to Ask Questions:

    Please contact Daniel Schochor at (843) 810-9018 with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you. Questions about your rights as a research participant may be directed to Penn State University's Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775.

5. Voluntary Participation:

    Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty. There is no foreseeable risk of discomfort if you do, in fact, decide to be a part of this research study.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

_____   _____

Participant Signature   Date

_____   _____

Person Obtaining Consent   Date

Vita

Daniel Schochor

Education

The Pennsylvania State University
Ph.D, May 2009

The Pennsylvania State University
M.Ed. Educational Leadership, 2007

Brown University (dual major)
B.A. History May, 2004
B.A. Education May, 2004

Fellowships

The Graham Endowed Fellowship - Educational Leadership, The Pennsylvania State University

Academic Publications
Refereed Journal Articles

Schochor, D. & Ackley, C. (submitted for review) Fundamental Purposes of Education as Applied to Green Schooling. *Values and Ethics in Educational Administration*

Schochor, D. (2008) Fundamental Purposes of Education and Differentiating Between Public and Private Schooling *The Beacon* 4(3), 1-8

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Professional Publications
Articles

Schochor, D. (2008) Penn State's 2nd Annual Law and Education Institute for Administrators. *Perspectives.* Pennsylvania School Studies Council. Dec./Jan. p. 6

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