

School Culture in High-Performance Title One Schools in South Texas

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A research study was designed and conducted to identify effective school characteristics of four high-performing, high-poverty schools in South Texas. An eleven effective school characteristics model, including school processes, was developed based on a synthesis of effective school research and served as the theoretical framework for the study. The characteristics include Culture, Leadership, Instruction, Improvement, Home and Community Relations, Curriculum, Environment, Professional Development, Vision/Mission, Resources, and Staff. The mixed-research study collected and analyzed data from professional school staff, principals, and parents related to the schools' eleven effective characteristics and their processes. Results of the study supported the essentiality of the eleven school characteristics and identified Culture as an area of improvement. School staff perceived Culture's essentiality for school effectiveness and its application in the schools relatively low. The schools' cultural processes perceived by school staff and parents were very positive and consistent with past studies of effective schools. Caution is provided that high-performing schools may lose focus on Culture due to academic success.

Keywords: high-performing schools, culture, characteristics, effective schools, parents

INTRODUCTION

A study to identify effective school characteristics and their processes in high-performing effective Title One schools in South Texas Educational Region One was designed and completed—*Effective School Practices In Title I Schools Exceeding Educational Expectations (E3)* (Padilla, Guerra, & Zamora, 2019). The study's findings supported an eleven effective school characteristics model designed from the analysis of 100 effective school characteristics models in the literature.

The eleven effective characteristics model included: culture, curriculum, environment, home and community relations, instruction leadership, professional development, resources, staff, and vision/mission (Padilla et al., 2019). Culture can be defined as deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed historically (Deal & Peterson, 1990). The impact of culture in school effectiveness is strongly supported by numerous authors and past studies (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch) and

considered “the determining factor” (Purkey & Smith, 1983, p. 444), “critical factor” (Macneil, 2009, p. 77) or “key” (Rosenholtz, 1989, p.216) to a school’s academic success. A recent research study found a “positive relationship” was found between organizational health, a measure of school culture, and student achievement in a high-need, high-poverty school district (Zamora, 2016, p. 149). However, the practices or processes involved in a successful school culture are complex (Schein, 1990) and continue evolving (Kythreotis et al., 2010; Bektas et al., 2015; Thapa et al., 2013). The purpose of this writing is to focus on the study’s findings on culture as an effective school characteristic and its processes to expand the understanding of culture in effective schools.

BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK

Four Title I schools in the South Texas Region One were selected after applying a rigorous selection process (Padilla et al., 2019). The four schools were designated as “High-Performing” Reward Schools by Texas in 2015-16 (TEA, December 10, 2016), received other state academic distinctions, included at least a 400 student population, and did not have an enrollment of more than the 7.7% state average of students who qualified for the Gifted and Talented program (TEA Texas Academic Performance Report 2015-16 State Profile). The analysis showed these four “High-Performing Reward schools were ranked amongst the top 20% academically achieving schools in Texas (TEA, December 12, 2016). Not only were these high-performing Title I schools, but they were also ranked high-achieving among all Texas schools (Padilla et al., 2019). The four schools selected were: Lincoln Elementary, Guerra Elementary, San Carlos Elementary, Anne L. McGee Elementary, and RC Flores-Mark A. Zapata Elementary—all in the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District. These schools were assigned random codes to ensure strict confidentiality (Padilla et al., 2019).

To guide the study, an effective school model consisting of eleven characteristics was developed from 100 effective school characteristics models found in the research literature (Padilla et al., 2019). From highest to lowest frequency, the eleven characteristics common to the 100 models were: Culture, Leadership, Instruction, Improvement, Home and Community Relations, Curriculum, Environment, Professional Development, Vision/Mission, Resources, Staff, and Other. However, “Other” was not included in the study’s model because it reflected numerous factors found very limited in the models analyzed. Notably, Culture was the most frequent characteristic found among the 100 models analyzed (Padilla et al., 2019).

Effective School Characteristics Study: Culture

The effective school characteristics study was a mixed-methods case study comprised of three data collection methods: school staff, and parent surveys, school staff and parent focus group sessions and principal interviews. Processes defining each of the eleven effective school characteristics were derived and defined from the same set of 100 effective school characteristic models (Padilla et al., 2019).

School Staff Culture Processes Results

Participants responded to prompts indicating the essentiality of each characteristic process to school effectiveness and its corresponding level of application at their school. The study defined essentiality as to how important and essential the process was to produce maximum success for all students. The study defined the application as to how strongly and accurately the process was applied at their school. Participant responses about essentiality and application were indicated on a five-point Likert type scale, from zero to four, representing 0-Not Applicable, 1-Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Agree, and 4-Strongly Agree. The responses to each characteristic's processes were averaged to obtain a total rating for the characteristic (Padilla et al., 2019).

The total school staff surveys completed were 130 (83.9% participation rate), with 89.2% representing teachers. Culture earned the third-lowest essential overall average, and the second-lowest applied total average among the eleven characteristics. The Culture was also the character with the third most significant difference between essentiality and application total averages, just one point below

Professional Development that had the second most considerable difference but considerably less than “Parent Relations,” which showed the greatest difference (Padilla et al., 2019). All eleven characteristics received rating levels of essentiality and application between the “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” levels. No characteristic received a rating level of “Not Applicable,” “Strongly Disagree,” or “Disagree.”

Culture Processes Results

Culture was comprised of 26 processes. School staff rated the essentiality of each Culture process and its application at the school. These ratings are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
AVERAGE SCHOOL STAFF RATING OF CULTURE PROCESSES

<u>Culture Processes</u>	<u>Essentiality</u>	<u>Application</u>	<u>Difference</u>
I feel my contributions at this school are important and respected.	3.69	3.53	0.16
School, parents, and the community have high expectations for the maximum success of ALL students.	3.67	3.39	0.28
The school, parents, and community take responsibility for student achievement.	3.57	3.17	0.40
The school, parents, and community take responsibility for student discipline.	3.46	2.92	0.54
The school is a caring and nurturing place.	3.73	3.56	0.17
I like working in this school.	3.75	3.68	0.07
An atmosphere of trust and respect exists between students and teachers.	3.78	3.65	0.13
An atmosphere of trust and respect exists between teachers and administrators.	3.75	3.47	0.28
An atmosphere of trust and respect exists between the school and parents.	3.66	3.39	0.27
Students display a positive attitude towards school.	3.63	3.18	0.45
Accomplishments by students, faculty, and staff are recognized and celebrated.	3.77	3.50	0.27
Teachers in this school collaborate with each other about student work.	3.83	3.73	0.10
Experienced teachers invite new teachers into their rooms to observe, give feedback, and support.	3.72	3.31	0.41
A conscious effort is made by faculty to make new teachers feel welcome here.	3.78	3.45	0.33
I feel loyal to this school.	3.76	3.64	0.11
I would recommend this school to parents seeking a place for their child.	3.59	3.46	0.12
Teachers are passionate about teaching and communicate this to students.	3.82	3.63	0.19
Teachers truly care about our students.	3.90	3.72	0.18
People work at this school because they enjoy and choose to be here.	3.71	3.48	0.23
There is a sense of family in this school.	3.69	3.47	0.22
The administrative team and the staff make maximum success for all students the highest priority in the school.	3.82	3.78	0.04

<u>Culture Processes</u>	<u>Essentiality</u>	<u>Application</u>	<u>Difference</u>
All students are meaningfully connected to an adult at school.	3.60	3.26	0.33
School staff model the behaviors expected of students.	3.80	3.71	0.09
I feel that I am making a significant educational difference in the lives of my students.	3.87	3.76	0.11
School staff, students, parents, and the community have pride in the school.	3.71	3.52	0.20
School staff believe the school determines achievement far more than family background or other social factors.	3.66	3.54	0.12
Culture Characteristic Average:	3.72	3.49	0.23

The average ratings of the Culture processes indicate staff perceived the school's application ratings lower than the essentiality ratings for each process. The top five rated essential Culture processes were:

1. Teachers genuinely care about our students. (3.90)
2. I feel that I am making a significant educational difference in the lives of my students. (3.87)
3. Teachers in this school collaborate on student work. (3.83)
4. Teachers are passionate about teaching and communicate this to students. (3.82)
5. The administrative team and the staff make maximum success for all students the highest priority in the school. (3.82)

The Culture processes were categorized into several general perspectives:

- how the participant individually views Culture
- how the school perceives Culture
- how students perceive Culture
- how teachers perceive Culture, trust and respect between the school and parents, trust and respect between teachers and students, and trust and respect between the principal and teachers.

Table 2 below represents the average essentiality and application ratings for the general perspectives of the respondents.

**TABLE 2
AVERAGE SCHOOL STAFF RATING OF CULTURE PROCESSES
GENERAL PERSPECTIVES**

<u>General Perspective</u>	<u>Number of Processes</u>	<u>Average of Essentiality</u>	<u>Average of Application</u>	<u>Average of Difference</u>
Personal	5	3.73	3.62	0.11
School	8	3.72	3.54	0.18
Students	1	3.63	3.18	0.45
Teachers	5	3.81	3.57	0.24
School/Parents	5	3.62	3.28	0.34
Teachers/Students	1	3.78	3.65	0.13
Principal/Teachers	1	3.75	3.47	0.28
Grand Total Average	26	3.72	3.50	0.22

Table 2 demonstrates that the highest essential general perspective of Culture is how teachers perceive the school's culture, followed by trust and respect between teachers and students, and then trust and respect between principal and teachers. The participants' perspective of the school culture is the fourth highest essential and second highest in application with the least difference between the two ratings. However, the perspective related to the attitude students have toward the school is the second-

lowest essentially, the lowest in application, and yielded the highest difference between essentiality and application among all general perspectives. The processes reflecting the broad perspective of involving parents and community include the lowest essentiality, the second-lowest application, and the second-lowest difference between essentiality and application. The general perspective reflecting trust and respect between teachers and students is the second highest essentiality, the highest applied, and includes the lowest difference in essentiality and application.

School Staff and Parent Focus Groups and Principal Interview Results

Group focus sessions for professional school staff ranging from 8 to 13 were conducted at each school, with 42 total staff members participating. During these sessions, school staff discussed school culture and highlighted the following cultural strengths of the schools:

- no excuses, get it done attitude
- mutual value and respect among the staff
- open door policy for parents
- a positive attitude toward students
- feeling of ownership of the school by the staff
- administrative support for staff
- focus on the job by all school staff
- school staff take responsibility
- community trusts the school
- bilingualism of staff
- a “no pobrecito” attitude towards students
- support and respect for the students’ Mexican culture.

All four principals were interviewed. There were several consistent responses among the four principals as to what top three strategies or practices they used to help all students learn successfully related to Culture. They discussed the empowerment of school staff to make decisions, establish a positive and motivational school environment, and develop the school to be one team or a family. Through the interviews, they identified other attributes of their school’s culture:

- open communication in the school
- kids feel comfortable
- staff has shared expectations
- staff get to know our community
- school staff support and genuinely care about each other
- open door policy by the principal
- respect for parents
- you have to love what you do
- staff love the kids and do what is best for them
- school staff have high expectations in the school
- good selection of staff.

The principals were very aware of challenges to the school culture introduced by students, including an economically and educationally impoverished home environment, Mexican background, and parents not comfortable communicating with the school.

Parent Survey and Focus Group Sessions Culture Results

In the completed surveys, 43 parents indicated the most important interactions between parents and schools were: Understanding, Respect, and Collaboration (See Table 3).

TABLE 3
PARENT RANKING OF ESSENTIALITY AND APPLICATION OF PARENT RELATIONS PROCESSES

<u>Parent-School Interaction</u>	<u>Survey Rank Average</u>	<u>Importance Value Rank</u>
Understanding	5.0	1
Respect	4.7	2
Collaboration	4.4	3
Trust	3.7	4
Positive Attitude	3.6	5
Support	3.1	6
Communication	2.6	7

During parent focus group sessions, parents voiced strong school cultural aspects in the four schools:

- all school staff have high expectations of students
- teachers care
- there is a genuine love for our kids
- school does all from the heart
- school has confidence in students never gives up and does not settle
- school focuses on maximum student success
- the school helps kids who need support
- school staff motivate and encourage students
- school provide student incentives and lots of recognition
- kids do not want to miss school
- a welcoming environment
- everybody knows everybody
- good communications with parents
- personal relationships with principal and teachers
- school provides good school-parent communications: phone calls meetings and letters
- principal knows parents, past students, and students, by name
- school staff know parents' names and voices over the phone
- parents feel welcomed with a "Good morning" by every school staff member
- school motivates parents to become more involved with the school
- parents feel like important partners
- personal relationships exist with principal and teachers; everybody knows everybody, school feels like a family
- teachers involve parents in kids' education
- school hires the best teachers
- principal has an open-door policy
- principal solves problems.

Parents emphatically stated they would recommend their school to everyone. However, in sharing school challenges, one school's parents identified bullying as a problem in the school, reflecting a concern with the school's culture.

One limitation of the study was that the parents were not randomly selected to participate in the study, but chosen by the school. Thus, parents involved may have been more positively oriented toward the school and more actively engaged with the school.

Findings

Results of the study of four High-Performing Title 1 schools supported an eleven-characteristic model of effective schools. Each characteristic included process that operationally defined the characteristic. Among these characteristics, school staff ranked Culture third lowest in essentiality and second-lowest in application among the eleven effective school characteristics model utilized in this study of four high-performing, high-poverty schools. This demonstrates a striking difference between Culture as the most frequently found characteristic among the 100 effective school models and its perceptions by the study's participants as the third-lowest characteristic in essentiality for school effectiveness. Again, it must be noted that participant perceptions in the study ranged between "Agree" to "Strongly Agree" that all eleven characteristics were essential to school effectiveness and applied in their schools.

Of the 26 processes that comprised the Culture characteristic, staff perceived all the processes higher in essentiality than application in their school. This suggests the schools are not addressing Culture to the essentiality level the school staff indicated. The Culture processes with the highest essentiality levels were teachers care about students, feel they are making a significant educational difference in the lives of their students, collaborate about student work, are passionate about teaching and communicate this to students, and with the administrative team make maximum success for all students the highest priority in the school. Findings for the processes are very consistent with similar studies conducted by other researchers (Macneil, Prater & Busch, 2009; Quin, Dris, Bischoff, & Johnson, 2015; Thapa et al., 2013; Cavanagh et al., 2012; Scheerens et al., 2013; Ohlson et al., 2016).

When the 26 processes were categorized into seven general perspectives, the highest essential and applied perspectives related to teachers: teacher's perception of the school culture, trust and respect between teachers and students, and trust and respect between principal and teachers. The lowest perspectives in essentiality and application related to parents and students. Thus, the school staff perceived the Culture processes related to teachers more essential and applied than the processes related to students and parents. Since the school staff and principal are integrated into the school culture at higher and deeper levels than students and parents, this difference in perceptions appeared reasonable. Nevertheless, since the general student category yielded the highest difference between essentiality and application, these schools need to re-examine this area of broad cultural perspective.

During the staff school focus groups and principal interviews, there was a significant focus on the school culture as a positive, respectful team, even as a family. There was mutual support among teachers and principals for all involved in decision making and taking responsibility for the schools' successes and challenges. School staff possessed a positive attitude toward students and respected the students' Mexican background. Many staff members were bilingual, which helped to support student learning. School staff were positive toward parents and the community, helping the schools establish an open door policy. These Culture aspects are similar to findings in previous studies of effective schools (Macneil, Prater & Busch, 2009; Quin et al., 2015; Thapa et al., 2013; Cavanagh et al., 2012; Scheerens et al., 2013; Ohlson et al., 2016).

During the parent focus groups, parents spoke highly of their schools' cultures. They described them as welcoming, caring, and establishing personal relationships with parents, as places where everyone knows everyone, knowing parent and student names, never giving up on students, working from the heart, and showing genuine love for them. A school culture that reflects love, heart, caring, and never giving up on any child is consistent with findings in studies of effective schools (Cavanagh et al., 2012). The results demonstrate much congruence in the parents' and school staff's perspectives about the schools' culture.

DISCUSSION

While Culture was not perceived very high in essentiality or application among the school staff when surveyed, the perceived Culture of these four high-performing, high-poverty elementary schools is consistent with the culture found in past studies of effective schools (Macneil, Prater & Busch, 2009; Quin et al., 2015; Thapa et al., 2013; Cavanagh et al., 2012; Scheerens et al., 2013; Ohlson, et al., 2016). However, the school staff of the effective schools in this study did not perceive Culture as high as the

majority of the other characteristics. This finding is not consistent with the high importance of culture for school effectiveness found in the literature (Macneil, Prater & Busch, 2009; Quin et al., 2015; Thapa et al., 2013; Cavanagh et al., 2012; Scheerens et al., 2013; Ohlson et al., 2016). It may be that in these high-poverty elementary schools that are already high-performing, school culture is a done deal—they have already accomplished an influential school culture. They may be taking culture for granted as they focus more on where the rubber meets the road—instruction, staff, environment, professional development, curriculum, and resources. The principals of these schools may need to be careful because it is a time of failure or crisis when culture is needed most (Deverell & Olsson, 2010). If these schools should falter academically for any reason, they may need to refocus and reculture. To sustain high performance, schools need to periodically assess school culture to make improvements or even to reculture if needed (Fullan, 2001).

The “no pobrecito” (poor child) part of the Culture cited by participants in the study’s effective schools must be elaborated. One of this writer’s authors has been teaching the “no pobrecito” school culture for about twenty years in school leadership courses in the area where these four schools are located. An educator always hopes his/her teachings are learned and applied. “No pobrecito” includes not permitting student economic-social living conditions and life’s experiences to hurt student learning. It does not suggest that these conditions and experiences do not affect student learning, quite the opposite. In the study’s effective schools, these conditions and experiences are acknowledged as challenges, and they are actively and positively addressed. Let’s first describe a “pobrecito” school culture which involves interactions where an adult becomes aware of a young person’s difficulties (poverty, abuse, learning issues, etc.) and responds: “Pobrecito.” The adult then takes compassionate action to make the young person feel good, cared about, and even protected so much that the young person may become dependent on the adult for comfort and help resolve problems. Although the response may come from the heart, the young person continues to be victimized by his/her life’s circumstances, including the new dependency. “Pobrecito” response is prevalent among Mexican-Americans and other ethnicities too. In a “No Pobrecito” culture, the adult still works from his/her heart and cares for and supports the young person. However, it is done to help the young person identify his/her own life’s challenges, address and conquer them him/herself with adult guidance only as needed, and remain independent in the problem’s resolution. As an example, if a student shares a serious problem with a teacher, the teacher listens and then helps the student re-think and resolve his/her problems: I may love you, care for you, and guide you, but at the end, you must address and resolve the problem yourself. To do more to set the young person up for failure now and in the future. Students must ensure their learning is not dependent on their home conditions, adverse life experiences, or even well-intended but encumbering help from a teacher or someone else. Of course, the age of the student affects how to accomplish “No Pobrecito” and may require the support of other school staff members.

CONCLUSION

Culture is considered to be the most influential aspect of a school’s effectiveness (Purkey & Smith, 1983; Sergiovanni, 1992; Rosenholtz, 1989). This was reflected in this study when Culture was the most common characteristic among 100 effective school models in the literature. However, the study found that among this study’s eleven characteristics of effective schools, staff in four high-performing, high-poverty elementary schools perceived Culture as the third lowest in essentiality for school effectiveness and the second-lowest characteristic applied in their schools.

The school staff focus group sessions found Culture included empowerment for school staff, a sense of team and family unity among staff, openness for parents, genuine love and caring for students, taking responsibility for school outcomes, not giving up on students, embracing student socio-demographics, and a focus on getting the job done. Parent focus group sessions described the schools’ culture as very focused and loving of students, with high expectations, welcoming of parents, and almost like a family. These aspects of culture are very similar to elements found in similar effective school studies (Cavanagh et al.,

2012; Thapa et al., (2013); Macneil, Prater & Busch, 2009; Quin et al., 2013), and the findings of this study further support these aspects.

The lack of connection between staff's low rating in a survey of the essentiality and application of Culture in their schools when juxtaposed to the high acclamations of their schools' culture stated in school staff, and parent group sessions appear perplexing. However, it may be since these are schools already experiencing high-performance due to established successful school cultures, so they are much more academically than culturally focused. If this is the case, these schools need to be careful if they experience a crisis or academic challenge in the future because the culture may not be ready for it. These schools should continuously assess their culture and reculture as needed.

The four study schools demonstrated a highly successful school culture that affected staff, students, and parents. While the school staff may de-emphasize Culture in their perceptions of what is essential for an effective school or what is applied at their schools, there remains little doubt that the evidence found in this study supports a thriving school culture is connected to high-performing, high-poverty elementary effective schools and identifies critical processes in establishing a flourishing school culture.

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