"Performing math, dancing to history":

A case study on school culture in an arts-integrated, urban middle school

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to analyze the school culture of an arts-integrated, urban middle school in Richmond, Virginia. Four teacher interview questions and classroom and school observations were conducted based on two contributing factors in shaping school culture (visions and values and physical environment). The findings of this study showed a strong, positive school culture with emergent themes of: a supportive administration, a shared vision, a feeling of community. The drawbacks from the positive school culture emerged in the themes of the physical environment and issues in education [ie: standardized testing]. This research begs further inquiry into what the threshold of a positive school culture is when running in conflict with a lack of funding and resources.

Introduction

Horace Mann once said, *"Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery."* But, if this is so, perhaps we need to re-calibrate the wheel. The education system in the United States struggles to provide an equitable education for all (Latta, 2019). An equity gap exists in education. This gap refers to disparities in student outcomes across, "race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, physical or mental disabilities and other demographic traits and intersectionalities" (EAB, 2019). Inquiry into public policy surrounding education leads to questions of how to achieve equity in schools across the nation. This question is especially pressing as we re-enter an almost post-pandemic world where most students are back in classrooms after having two years of their education thwarted. It is necessary to fairly allocate resources and funding at a federal, state, and local level in order to prevent the inhibition of any student in the United States' education (Jarvis, 2018). Approximately 8% of teachers leave the profession each year. However, a National Education Association survey has shown that post-pandemic, approximately 55% of educators are planning on leaving the profession sooner than they had planned (2022). Moreso, 90% of educators are experiencing burnout. In my research I hope to look past numerical data and statistics and see what underlies a school and its ability to educate students, other than funding. My research focuses on the foundation each school lies on: its culture. School culture is a powerful tool that can either help or hinder students and their success depending on whether it is positive or negative and strong or weak.

A strong, positive school culture has multiple benefits, some of which include improving student performance and productivity, creating community, and encouraging enthusiasm for the school and learning (Deal, Peterson, as cited in Jerald, 2014). School culture is shaped every day in each and every action, or lack thereof. It is built continuously over the course of time. Daily "traditions, routines, and expectations" which "reflect the mission and values of the school, in and outside of the classroom are key to a healthy culture" (Garrick, 2019). When these things are present, over time, a strong, positive school culture develops.

My study was conducted through a series of interviews with four teachers of different subjects, naturalistic classroom observations, and descriptive observations throughout an urban middle school under the pseudonym of "Yellow Middle School" (YMS). I focused on two different core factors which shape school culture: visions and values and the physical environment. I sought to determine the school culture of an urban, arts-integrated middle school in central Virginia using measures that were based off of the two aforementioned school culture factors. I compared what messages and themes emerged from the interviews based on the beliefs, ideas, and values held by teachers and compared them to the data collected from my observations about what message the environment sent about school culture. I found ~~that there~~ major patterns that aligned between triangulation of the two methods of data: supportive administration, shared vision, and community. ~~But,~~ I also found that the physical environment's condition and lack of resources ran in conflict with the messages being sent by teachers and by the positive displays of student work, achievements, and murals throughout the school and classrooms. I also found that general issues in education such as standardized testing pushed back against a strong, positive school culture according to the teachers I interviewed.

In this study I have outlined a review of relevant literature, followed by my research design and methodology, a presentation and summary of my findings, and then a discussion and conclusion of my research including limitations and future directions.

Literature Review

School Culture

In Kent Peterson's (2002) *Fieldbook To School Culture*, he outlines school culture: what it is, why it is important, and how it is shaped. Because my measurement of school culture is mainly being pulled from Peterson's work, his definition of school culture is important to unpack and understand. The term school culture is far from new, according to Peterson, "in 1932, educational sociologist Willard Waller argued that every school has a culture of its own, with a set of rituals and folkways and a moral code that shapes behavior and relationships." (Peterson 17).

My research hinges largely on what Peterson deems as the "bedrock of culture," which is visions and values (Peterson 22). Schools with a strong, positive culture have visions and values which are shared among administrators, faculty, and students in a way that Peterson says, "solidly anchor daily activities with a deeper purpose." (Peterson, p. 22). It is our beliefs which shape our behavior and a strong, positive school culture shares beliefs which stem from the school's vision for itself and its students (Ritchhart, 2015, as cited in Dole, 2017). School culture is an important facet in the educational world and conversation because if we want to improve our schools, we must focus dually on funding and resources but also on creating a thriving social and cultural environment for students, in other terms, a strong school culture.

The other main focus from Peterson's field book in analyzing school culture is architecture and physical environment. Where you learn sends a message and communicates the value of your education (Peterson p. 69). The architecture, lay-out, design, and overall quality of the building in which you go to school gives latent meaning to the value of your education, not necessarily from staff and faculty, but nonetheless the message is received by students. The physical environment shows students what is valued and also can affect their emotional state which affects how well they are able to learn (Sjoblom, 2016, Baafi, 2020). It is important to create spaces that allow students to learn and grow in a safe and secure environment (Ritchhart, 2015, as cited in Dole, 2017).

Positive versus Negative Culture

In 2009, The International Journal of Leadership in Education published a study that looked at three different schools and the link between the *health* of the school and student achievement based on standardized test scores. MacNeil, Prater, and Busch who carried out the study used "healthy" and "unhealthy" to describe the dimensions of each school's culture (2009). "Healthy" is synonymous with a strong, positive school culture. While "unhealthy" is synonymous with a strong, negative school culture. "Healthy schools provide a climate more conducive to student success and achievement" (MacNeil, Prater, Busch, 2009). Healthy schools have deeply-held values and beliefs and these are shared amongst faculty and staff and supported by the school administration in comparison to unhealthy schools.

A strong school culture exists when the visions and values of the leadership and teachers are shared (Lewis, 2016). Building a strong school culture begins with leaders with a vision who support teachers in carrying out the vision and values. The vision statement serves as a school's

guiding force in terms of school culture. Improving a school's culture begins with "identifying the vision, mission, values, goals, and strategy that the organization wants to achieve" (Kirkpatrick, 2017). When the school as a whole is conscious of their supposed shared vision, they are able to more effectively align their behavior and self with it. A shared vision is a strong vision.

Social Infrastructure - Urban versus Suburban

The research site for this study is an urban middle school. Compared to its suburban counterparts, oftentimes urban schools face different issues that may lead to different levels of student achievement when looking at standardized testing data. Although suburbs across the United States are becoming increasingly more diverse, the characteristics of students in urban schools, for the most part, are lower-class, minority students (Hudley, 2013). The backgrounds of students in urban schools are more likely to equate to needing more school-provided resources to succeed than their peers in suburban schools (Logan, Burdick-Will, 2017). For example, impoverished students might rely on schools for meals meaning more funding allocated to providing free and reduced breakfast and lunches. Although the demographics and characteristics of suburban and urban schools may differ, at the end of the day they are both responsible for providing the best quality education for students that they can but unfortunately sometimes this quality is not equitable across schools.

The perspective of schools as an integral social infrastructure aligns with their role in school culture by providing a means to influence students. Social infrastructure provides a physical space for social growth and well-being (Latham, 2019). Schools are not only educating students but also have the ability to provide a comprehensive teaching of overall well-being.

Schools with a strong, positive school culture can do so by focusing on the student in not just an academic sense but also in a holistic, individualized sense. According to the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environment (2021), this is especially important during the middle school years as students deal with new social and emotional issues and work towards developing their sense of self. Public schools are at the basis of social infrastructure. But, the effectiveness and equitability of the social infrastructure and school education is varied amongst different schools.

Richmond, Virginia

James Ryan's book, *Five Miles Away, A World Apart* (2011), describes Richmond, Virginia as a microcosm of urban versus suburban schools around the United States. His research compared a public high school in Richmond to a public high school in Henrico County, the schools are, as the title suggests, five miles apart but provide vastly different experiences. Ryan explains the struggles of urban schools being that they have a higher rate of students living in poverty. For that reason alone, he believes more funding is needed to combat malnutrition, lack of healthcare, less stable and stimulating home environments, and more exposure to violence and crime. In Richmond compared to Henrico, Richmond has more per pupil funding than its suburban counterpart so it is clear that funding is not the one and only necessary solution (Ryan, 2011). The students at the suburban school did better on standardized testing and were more likely to graduate and attend college than the students in the urban school

One of Ryan's main takeaways after working with the two schools in comparison was their view on standardized testing (Ryan, 2011). He found that the suburban school was focused on achievement past the test, that was simply another hoop to jump through on the way to further

success. On the other hand, the urban school viewed the test as the be-all-end-all, final destination - a case of *teaching to the test*. The school and students were focused on meeting the standard of the test and passing it but not necessarily coming out with flying colors (Ryan, 2011). These different expectations and views of standardized testing are one example of how a school culture is at work at different levels. The individual school culture of each school, according to Ryan, pushes different ideals and values onto students and as a result, the test scores of the suburban school are better than the urban school.

Methodology and Research Design

Research Question:

1: What is the school culture of Yellow Middle School?

1A: What message do teachers send to students about school culture?

1B: What message does the environment send to students about school culture?

In the discussion section below I will discuss whether or not 1A and 1B align after analyzing the themes that emerge between triangulated data from interviews and observations.

IRB Process

Before I could fully engage with my research project and begin opening a line of communication with potential research participants, it was necessary to gain permission from the University of Richmond's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This process ensures that the researcher has fully laid out their plans including their research inquiry, purpose, means of collecting data, and certifications in research ethics and protection of participants. This process is lengthy but for good reason as it ensures an ethical development of one's research project. The most difficult part of the IRB was gaining permission to work inside of schools. I reached out to

one urban middle school and multiple suburban middle schools. I was able to gain permission to work within the urban school almost immediately but could not do so for any of the suburban middle schools. I also was dealing with a time constraint as May and June were the months I conducted my research and schools are dealing with state testing, the end of the school year, and the daily operational rush. I decided to focus primarily on the urban school in which I was granted permission. My research inquiry therefore shifted towards a singular analysis of this particular school's culture.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a social inquiry. It is an attempt to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena to make sense of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin, Lincoln, 2008)". Qualitative research seeks to understand the beliefs and attitudes held by people that shape their behavior (Pathak, Jena, Kalra, 2013). The qualitative research involves emerging questions as one studies the natural setting and uses interviews and observations to understand a social phenomenon. The data is then analyzed and themes and patterns surface upon cross-examining the data from, in my case, interviews and observations. The meaning of those themes is then interpreted (Creswell, 2018). The focus of qualitative research aligns with what I am studying in terms of how people behave due to their beliefs, values, and ideas, the subsequent contribution to the school culture from this behavior, alongside classroom and school observations.

Sample Selection - School/Teachers

The school I selected in central Virginia will be referenced under the pseudonym Yellow Middle School (YMS). I chose YMS as my research site based on its interesting approach to

educating students while also looking at demographics and school performance. The school is unique and provides an interesting perspective on an alternative attitude towards education upon reading its mission and purpose statement. At the time in which I selected the school, I did not know if it would exemplify the stated purpose on the website. My research on school culture works to qualify whether or not the intended vision is affirmed throughout the school.

In terms of participant selection, it was a priority ~~for me~~ to be able to interview and keep an open line of communication with the school's head administrator because leadership is a primary motivator in promoting a particular school culture.

I was able to interview and observe the classrooms of four teachers in the urban middle school. It was sometimes difficult to find people who had the time to sit down and talk with me. ~~But,~~ I was able to find teachers who represented a bulk of the curriculum [math, social studies, English, theater (art)] and a wide variety of experience in the teaching profession. My sample size is limited and my research cannot be generalized but is an inquiry into the workings of this particular school and what its culture is promoted as, whether or not this follows the school's mission and purpose statement, and what factors may affect school culture such as funding and access to resources for staff and students. Although every school is different, many schools with similar populations in similar locations share the same qualities and issues and this study aims to extend our understanding of how school culture is promoted in alliance with a school's intended vision.

Interviews

During my interviews I asked a set of questions that slightly adjusted due to natural fluctuations in conversation. I allowed the interviewees to go on any tangents that they desired in

an attempt to answer the questions asked. I audio recorded the interviews then transcribed them into writing using a tool called oTranscribe. Interviews are an important and commonly used method of qualitative data collection (Merriam, Tisdell, 2015). Interviews allow the researcher to gain insight into the thoughts and opinions of the participants (Creswell, 2018). This is an important component of my research because in order to understand how school culture is shaped by visions and values, I need to know where people stand in regards to these things.

Interview Questions

1) How long have you been in the teaching profession? How long have you been at this school?

2) What subject did you intend to teach - is it the subject you are currently teaching? And what pushed you into teaching?

3) How many students are in your classroom? How do you think class size affects your own personal teaching style?

4) Do you have an open line of communication between you and your students' parents? If so, how do you initiate and maintain this relationship?

5) Do you believe that the school administration gives you the proper support to provide an effective learning environment for students and can you tell me why? Additionally do you have the necessary educational resources for your students?

6) Do you feel like you have a voice in the school's direction and vision?

7) What does the term "student success" mean to you?

8) What is your goal in the classroom? How does this compare to the school's overall vision and goal?

9) How would you describe the school culture? How does the school culture support students?

10) Have you ever considered changing professions? If so, why?

Observations - Naturalistic Approach

Observations allow the research to take notes on behaviors and activities in their natural setting for further analysis (Creswell, 2018). My observations were divided into two separate sections guided by my research questions and Peterson's factors that contribute to school culture. The two sections I used during note-taking were environmental variables and teaching and learning variables (teacher-centered). The subsections of environmental variables included:

- Quality and frequency of posters, signs, banners

- Cleanliness and organization of classroom

- Educational resources available to students in environment [eg: books]

- Access to technology

- Quality of school design, architecture, and lighting

The subsections of teaching and learning variables included:

- Strategies and techniques accommodate a wide variety of diverse learners

- Teachers facilitate learning that is connected to student backgrounds and experiences

- Quality and frequency of student assessment

- Collaboration support and encouraged among teachers and school staff

- Curriculum is representative of or connected to school values

- Teachers provide support and encouragement in classroom

I also collected descriptive data as I walked through the school. This included what I saw on the walls, in the classrooms, in the halls, and just in general during my days in the urban middle school.

The naturalistic observation approach I used is one of the most commonly used ways to observe the classroom setting in an objective manner (Shapiro & Heick, 2004, as cited in Leff, 2011). Naturalistic observation is unintrusive. In my personal experience observing, my presence was barely acknowledged and allowed me to sit in on the classrooms and truly experience the day-to-day behavior and classroom culture.

Data Collection and Analysis

Before working with the participants in my study, I explained my study and gained their consent to participate. Each participant who was interviewed signed a consent form beforehand that made them aware of the confidentiality of what they disclosed and the way in which it would be presented in a non-identifying manner.

I analyzed the transcribed interviews first in order to find commonalities and differences between the beliefs and ideas of each interviewee. I then analyzed my observations to find any common themes. The themes in which I found were based on visions and values and the physical environment, two contributing factors to school culture, as stated by Peterson in his *School Culture Fieldbook*. The frequency of themes and consistency across different teachers determined whether or not the school culture was weak or strong and negative or positive.

More specifically, I used thematic analysis to look for patterns in the triangulated data from interviews and observations. Pattern matching is one of the "most desirable techniques as it involves the comparison of predicted patterns and/or effects with the ones that have been

empirically observed, and the identification of any variances" (Bekhet, 2012). In my analysis of the collected data I have looked for both where patterns are present and where these patterns do not align or, as aforementioned, gaps are present and there is a disconnect. In terms of my study, the patterns and themes that emerged were a part of the school culture and consistency goes alongside a shared vision and value, which is an attribute of a strong school culture. It is in the areas that do not align that the school culture weakens.

Findings - Interviews and Observations

I interviewed four educators of varying experience levels in the field of education and at YMS who spanned across four subjects: English, math, history, and an art elective. Teacher 1 is a veteran teacher who has taught most of their almost thirty-year career at YMS. Teacher 2 has been teaching for nine years but this is their first year at YMS. Teacher 3 has spent half of their sixteen-year teaching career at YMS. Teacher 4 has been teaching for eleven years and spent the last five years teaching at YMS. I observed each of their classrooms alongside interviewing them. I recognized patterns and themes and also gaps and disconnects in these patterns between the interviews and what I observed.

Administrative Support

Among the teachers I interviewed, I found there to be a strong sense of support from the administration. Teacher 1 found that the admin was supportive in terms of, "making sure we have everything we need to be successful in class," but also proactive in finding and researching new and suggested resources and supplies and "[doing] their best to do their own research on it and if it's something that they can pull off and do, we get it." Teacher 2's response qualified these same sentiments, feeling supported and like the school "has their back." Being inside of the school, in

the hallways I observed the support of the administration just by seeing their presence and them showing up and being there, greeting and hugging students at the beginning of the day. I watched students walk into school and be showered in compliments and positivity by the principal, hearing phrases like, "you look beautiful today." On a Friday morning, students entered the building to see the principal with balloons and treats for the students.

Once again, the feeling of administrative support was shared by Teacher 3 who when asked if there are any areas in which the administration could improve, answered, "for me and my classroom: no." When the interview was underway and I inquired about student behavior and management, Teacher 3 shared that on tough days, "you don't feel the support to take care of those behavior situations."

Teacher 4 felt the administration "does the best they can," acknowledging that the job is brutal and not easy at all. Furthermore, Teacher 4 emphasized the administration's focus on a culture beyond academic meaning, "a sense of self and purpose that when you walk into this building, [you] have a place here and [you] are valued as an individual that is part of this collective." The administration drives this message and emphasizes the importance of having a purpose in what you are doing which guides your actions and behaviors in a positive manner in YMS.

Shared Vision

YMS's vision statement is: "To affirm and prepare students to be their authentic selves through The Arts." This vision statement is written outside of every classroom as a reminder for students when they enter: "our purpose." The emphasis on the arts cannot be missed inside of the school, walking the hallways, and inside the classroom. The hallway is decorated top to bottom

with displays of student work, student achievements, and murals spanning left to right with positive messages. The walls truly speak to you: "together in unity, build your intelligence, you are important, I feel at home, there's nowhere quite like this place, lift every voice and sing, you belong here."

Whether or not this shared vision is valued and exemplified amongst the staff and throughout the school is an indicator of the strength of the school culture and whether it is positive or negative. Each teacher emphasized a holistic approach to educating students, which aligns with the school's vision of not just educating students academically but in a way that encourages them to find who they want to be and give them the support to be that person. Teacher 4 qualified this belief, especially as a art elective teacher even more so than the core class teachers, believing that their class aligned with the goals of the school. In their class, students pursue learning that helps them, "find [their] authentic selves" and help "understand who [they] are." Teacher 1 and 3 corroborated in their answers in emphasizing that they do not try to produce perfect students with perfect grades, as Teacher 1 claimed, it is about, "taking a student where they are and seeing growth, holistically, socially, academically." Teacher 2 agreed with the school's stated vision and its effect on the diverse population of students, claiming, "through the arts there's this emphasis on creativity and expression of self and open-mindedness." Teacher 2 further explained that it was, "not just about the content," but more so about students, "figuring out who they are and feeling comfortable to be themself and express themself." Teacher 1 also shared this sentiment by describing how the school brings together students from various, diverse backgrounds into one space, "where they can get to know each other, share ideas and concepts, experiences." Teacher 2 even stated that eight years into their

teaching career, they were "drawn to [Yellow Middle School]" because of the arts-integrated curriculum and the way it promoted student growth in every sense.

Teacher 3's sense of what it means for a student to be successful was having students, "develop a habit of academic excellence in terms of effort and routine." But, Teacher 3 found that this did not necessarily align with the school's vision because no matter what the vision of the school may be, they are "beholden to the district which is beholden to the state which is basically all about test scores," which made Teacher 3 believe that their vision was in conflict with the schools. Although, Teacher 3 agreed that the commitment to an arts-integrated curriculum is a "nice push against" the testing craze and that, "it's healthy, it's good, but I wish it would go further," because it is, "not enough to offset the harmful effects of the system in general with the testing and teaching to the test."

I found that Teacher 1's classroom was less decorated and had less of an arts-integrated approach than the other teachers. Teacher 2 and 3 had student artwork displayed throughout the classroom and pictures with and of students displayed. Teacher 4's door had inclusive posters that encouraged students to be themselves and displayed that the classroom was a safe place for each and every student to do so.

Teacher 4 believed that the vision of YMS, to promote authenticity through the arts, is generally felt throughout the school and creates a unique approach to education. They claimed that, "The goal of the school in general, arts-integration, is nothing lives in a silo, we can perform math, we can dance to history, all of that kind of stuff."

Community

The principal of YMS moved their family into the school district to ensure that their own children would attend the school in which they led, which shows a belief and support in the school, its quality, and its vision. In an article from 2015, when just beginning at Yellow Middle School, the principal stated: "being part of the community I serve is the only way I know to do things." And I watched this behavior exemplified when I first sat down with the principal of YMS and every day when I came in to observe and saw constant support and genuine care for the students from the administration and faculty.

Teacher 3 spent three years as a substitute before deciding to become a licensed teacher, because of their extensive experience in "dozens, if not a hundred schools," they have come to the conclusion that at [Yellow Middle School] the students are "closer than any other schools, they feel more like a community." Teacher 1 also emphasized that the school cares about the "betterment of not only the student but for the community and school as a whole" Teacher 2 who was drawn to YMS because of its community stated they were, "excited to be a part of that and [they] see that in this building every day." Teacher 3 also exemplifies the need to consistently be there for your students because as a teacher you are in charge of your individual community within your classroom and exemplifying this vision of unity that will then echo throughout the school. They referenced a quote from Sir. Thomas More: "You must not abandon a ship in the storm because you cannot control the winds." In relation to the quote, Teacher 3 sees themselves as the captain and they must, "captain the ship no matter what, no matter how bad or stressful it gets."

Teacher 4 explained the house system at YMS. Each student is assigned to a house, led by a team of teachers. Like a lot of things in education, it is a good idea on paper to build

community and a sense of identity for students, but Teacher 4 states it is, "burnt out teachers trying to run these events at end of school day, kids are kind of half in on it."

When I first began at YMS, they had just dealt with the loss of a beloved coach and teacher. I watched the school mourn this person and then celebrate their life with a hand-made banner that was signed by students to commemorate the coach and then hung up in the school. The shared grief of the school is an example of a strong community who all felt this person's loss but were able to work through it together.

Physical Environment and Resources

The building, over 100 years old, shows its age. The design of the building is unique, with floor to ceiling windows that let in natural light in the classroom. Time has certainly worn the classrooms. I witnessed broken tiles in Teacher 1's classroom and disheveled and broken shutters. Teacher 3 walked into the classroom to find that the blinds which had nearly fallen onto a student the day before had not been fixed after asking. I sat next to a closet door in Teacher 3's classroom with a sign that said, "these doors do not close." Teacher 2 also seemed to have a lack of a closet door in the back of the classroom, using a tapestry to block out the storage of chairs and supplies.

In terms of resources available in the environment, I saw a lack thereof. Teacher 1's textbooks were outdated, ripped, tattered, missing covers, and missing pages. While I sat in classrooms conducting my observations, it was not uncommon for teachers to come into the classrooms of their colleagues looking for supplies to borrow. In Teacher 3's classroom, the necessary supplies did not always work, and they promised to bring supplies from home that would work. Teacher 2 did not have enough books for the class so it was necessary that they

share and read together. Lastly, an important human resource, teachers, was missing during one particular class I observed. Teacher 4 had a few students come in from a different class where the teacher was absent. The students sat on their chromebooks, doing nothing, with Teacher 4 doing their best to check in with students who were not their own.

Issues In Education

Teacher 2, 3, and 4 cited multiple issues in education that make the teaching profession hard to remain in. Teacher 1 is a veteran teacher of almost thirty years and did not share that sentiment about the profession. Teacher 4 described teachers like Teacher 1 who have been in the field for thirty years and, "they say that the job has gotten harder, when they started it was totally different." The issues that 2, 3, and 4 talked about with the profession were less prevalent when educators like Teacher 1 began teaching.

Covid has taken a toll on education and both Teacher 2 and Teacher 4 reference that this year was about getting students who had been out of the classroom for almost two years back into the swing of things. Teacher 4 explained, "this year has been us coming back together and surviving together this year, rebuilding school culture" and also believes it will take, "many years before [we] get that back."

Another issue that both Teacher 2 and Teacher 3, an English and math teacher, talked about was the relentless standardized testing and curriculum centered around it. It is, like Teacher 4 stated, "cutting through all the red tape and all the bureaucracy of the public school." It is underneath these things that lies the "magical teaching moments," as Teacher 3 stated.

The way in which I measured the school culture, came up with interview questions, and observation sections was based on visions and values, teacher actions and behavior in the

classroom and the physical environment. I used questions in these realms in order to find out about the beliefs and ideas held by the teachers. I found a strong, shared school culture among the four teachers I interviewed which exemplified a supportive administration, a shared vision, and community. In my observations, I found the environment to qualify this in some aspects but due to a lack of resources and funding, the physical environment and access to necessary school supplies also pushed back against the positive school culture that was being crafted by the school leadership and staff. Among the three newer teachers [2, 3, 4] there were also complaints of issues in education such as testing and the lasting ramifications of the pandemic. These issues in education, alongside a poor physical environment and lack of resources do not align with a positive school culture.

Discussion

YMS is an urban, arts-integrated middle school. According to Virginia's School Quality data from 2020, 48.1% of students are economically disadvantaged. The racial breakdown of the school is 63% Black, 28% White, and the remaining 9% is mixed race, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian (VDOE, 2020). Urban schools face particular problems compared to their suburban counterparts. The physical environment of urban schools, when deteriorating, serves as a similar stressor to poverty and inhibits student learning and achievement (Lewis, 1999, as cited in Hudley, 2013). Urban schools also suffer from a lack of resources and supplies or a lack of up-to-date resources. I witnessed this in my observations in Yellow Middle School.

Leadership In School Culture

School culture is moldable but it does not happen overnight. It is something that administrators must actively lead in shaping. Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell (as cited in Shafer, 2018),

an expert in school leadership and management emphasizes the importance of principal's and their influence over school culture. They hold the keys, not only to the school, but also to building a strong, positive school culture (Shafer, 2018). Upon analyzing articles written months apart about YMS, alongside a statement from a veteran teacher of YMS, the school's culture has seemingly shifted with new leadership in a positive and tangible manner. Teacher 1 explained: "I've been here a long time but I've seen the good, the bad, and the happenings. But since [current principal's] been here for the past seven years [they've] really created a culture." In order to change and mold a culture, you need to acknowledge its past, public perceptions, and where you want to go with it. This is why it is so important to have a shared vision and affirm it every day in the school building.

Shaping of School Culture Through Years

A letter to the school board was written in December of 2014 when the city was deciding what to do with the urban middle school who faced a continuously dropping enrollment. Four different proposals for the school were offered, none of which this community informant found compelling. The Fine Arts and College Board Springboard suggestion, which is what would become of YMS, was seen as a "buzzwords to woo parents," lacking the, "substance to produce the type of school our community needs." The author wondered how the Fine Arts program could teach the SOL's in the core subjects such as English and math. By December of 2015, after the transition to the new principal, an article had been written talking about how they had led the turnaround of YMS. The principal described the two new programs integrated into the school: "Springboard has provided a framework for academic rigor, and the arts-based curriculum has allowed teachers to spread out and try new things." In only a few months, YMS's community

perception seemed to be changing as community informants positively spoke of the work being done to improve the school, which had already began engaging in community projects each month.

I reached out to the same community informant who had written the letter seven and a half years prior, and they were able to give their current thoughts on how Yellow Middle School has changed in that time as a parent with an eighth grader who currently attends YMS. In the past few years, the principal of YMS has brought, "competence and good communication to the school." The community has felt the strong leadership at YMS and the community-school relationship has seemingly strengthened. Moreso on leadership, the community informant thought that the arts-integrated curriculum was less important than having, "dynamic school leadership and a group of parents willing to remain committed to RPS middle schools." Further, in Richmond, the community informant feels there is, "a lot of energy for strong, community-oriented public schools in Richmond." The school culture has changed and been molded in a tangible way since the community informant's initial letter to the RPS School Board. YMS educates a diverse array of students from throughout Richmond to form a tight-knit community, while also shaping students, "in more ways than just the classroom," as the community informant ended with. This is the premise of a positive, strong school culture - giving students a well-rounded education that goes beyond academics. YMS and its leadership present a genuine care for the students in the community it serves and it seems the public perception of a parent at the school is that the arts-integrated curriculum is well-represented in the classroom and contributes in a positive manner.

The community perception of YMS certainly seems to have shifted but there still is and always will be work to do as the community pushes back against a lack of equity in the public school system. This year (2022), a ninth-grade student reflected on their time at YMS in the Virginia Mercury. They thought their issues would be those of the average middle schooler: drama and boys. But, the reality in an urban school is that the issues that these students are dealing with are bigger than that, as the student stated, "due to facilities and lack of funding." The student describes that the building lacked supplies such as pencils and glue but also lacked heat, meaning students wear winter jackets to school and in school during the cold months. It is the school culture promoted by the school's administration and teachers that still allows this student to look back fondly on their middle school years: "the teachers' diligent efforts are what kept kids in school during these long cold days. The staff and teachers at [Yellow Middle School] never stopped smiling." The reality of the situation is that teachers can make up for a lack of funding and resources to a certain extent, but the effects of these things are felt by students, and the message they send (that their education is not valued), is sent and received and heard loud and clear.

Arts-Integration

In an arts-integrated curriculum, the arts become "the approach to teaching and the vehicle for learning" (The Kennedy Center). Arts are used to enhance the core subject areas. A decade-long study on The Kennedy Center for the Arts Program found that arts-integrated curriculum positively impacts school culture and the school's growth as a community, alongside a supportive administration (Duma, Silverstein, 2014). Learning through the arts draws

connections between the subject matters as a whole, instead of seeing them as individual knowledge, not connected.

One of the main issues that was brought up by teachers in interviews had less to do with the school and more to do with the testing culture that exists in the United States and as stated by Teacher 2 during their interview, the emphasis on testing and test-based curriculum, "just doesn't align with what you know your kids need to be successful." The arts-integrated curriculum goes against this. Yellow Middle School offers a multitude of arts electives from music to theatre to dance for students to choose from (Siegel-Hawley, 2020) . There are also different clubs to engage students in their interests and allow them to explore. The clubs take place during fourth block on Fridays to ensure that students do not run into transportation issues as the school zones students from all over Richmond, further diversifying their population with students of different backgrounds, but nonetheless working to create a community feeling among the school. Additionally, the school has "houses" that form teacher teams who lead the students on their team. The houses build community and offer friendly competition among students, giving students a house to identify within their identity as a student at Yellow Middle School. The houses also offer leadership opportunities for students to take part in. "One of their primary purposes is to build and support the community. There are house handshakes, chants, posters, colors, and T-shirts" (Siegel-Hawley, 2020). Teacher 4 emphasized, this is something that looks good on paper, but does not play out in as great of a manner, relying on "burnt-out teachers."

YMS, as an urban school, serves its population with important resources that address urban-specific issues. One of these resources, who I came into contact with while in the hallway of the school, is Communities In Schools (CIS). CIS provides students with the resources that

they need to be successful including food, access to technology and school supplies, emotional

support. Their goal is to "bring communities of support to students, [by] achieving equitable

learning conditions in schools and beyond." Resources like these help to fill the gaps that exist

due to a lack of funding and resources and provide a positive school environment regardless of

the issues that are presented in an urban school like YMS.

Conclusion

The school culture of YMS trended towards a strong, positive one which was shared

among school administration and staff with classrooms and hallways that exemplified it with

displays of artwork and achievement. The physical environment of the school in terms of design,

functionality, and resources was poor and showed a lack of funding and depleted resources. The

themes that were emergent from interviews and qualified by observation did run in direct conflict

with the message being sent by the state of the school building. It begs a question for further

inquiry: what is the threshold for school culture and student achievement when opposed by a

lack of funding, resources, and an unassuming school building? For example, Teacher 1 claimed

to have all the resources that they needed to provide a successful learning environment for

students yet lacked school supplies and up-to-date textbooks that were not torn apart.

Administration and teachers can work together to cultivate the most positive learning

environment possible but when students are wearing their winter jackets to prevent shivering in

the classroom, they feel the lack of warmth in a literal sense and also in the way of apathy from

the city, state, and country regarding their education and the way in which it is not valued.

Funding is always going to be an important topic in education. The Learning Policy

Institute conducts thorough educational research that is rigorously reviewed in order to help

inform policy decisions. In their article, *How Money Matters For Schools*, Bruce Baker (2018) looks at the effect of increased funding when used correctly in improving student outcomes, especially in schools with students of greater need. Meaningless funding does not improve schools but when used with a purpose and in the right way, funding can improve student performance. Assessing and understanding school culture may help schools figure out what way they can best use their funding to see an improvement in student experience and performance.

Teacher quality is linked to student success. Teachers build school culture, guided by administrators, but need willing educators who believe in the school's mission and purpose. The National Council for Community and Education Partnerships talks about 4 support pillars of student success - self, family, institution, community (Cuseo, 2017). School administrators and teachers can build a strong, positive school culture that encourages student achievement and success. But, in order to do so there needs to be teachers in the classroom and teachers need the support that will prevent them from leaving the profession. Finding and keeping good teachers who want to be a part of a community and support a shared vision and goal for themselves, their classroom, their students, and their school as a whole are a consequential part of building school cultures that allow all students to be successful. Because like James Ryan's book describing the urban-suburban school disparity, no students should live, "five miles away, [but] a world apart."

Limitations

Two major limitations of my study were accessibility and time. It was difficult to gain access into schools and even more difficult to find people who had the time to sit down and talk with me. The time of year and lack of time also contributed to the difficulties I experienced

throughout my research. I began in May, as state testing was approaching, which inhibited the amount of time I was able to spend in Yellow Middle School.

Being limited in regards to availability of participants meant that my research cannot be generalized because I was only able to work with four teachers and the head principal in YMS. My sampling may also be biased because collecting information through interviews, as opposed to anonymous surveys, may make participants less likely to fully express themselves.

Future Directions

The findings of my research require further inquiry into the way school culture is affected by funding and availability of resources and what the threshold between a positive school culture is when going against a lack of funding and resources. With more time, one could look comparatively at test scores in different classes of the same content and level. Then compare this against the perceived school culture within the respective classrooms.

I am also interested in the comparison of the school culture of a suburban and urban school in close proximity with similar demographics and testing results and analyzing the effect of school culture on student experience and outcomes. This would include performing the same interviews and observations within both schools, analyzing the school culture of each respective culture, and looking closely at the two.

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