

Cultivating And Sustaining A Positive School Culture In Selected Eswatini Secondary Schools: Deputy Principal Perspective

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This study explored the concept of positive school culture in Eswatini schools in the Manzini region through the perspectives of five deputy principals. The study examined strategies employed by deputy principals in cultivating and sustaining a positive school culture. The Ecological Systems Theory (EST), developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, was used as a lens in interrogating this study. The researchers employed the interpretative paradigm and the qualitative case study design facilitated by selection of five deputy principals in providing the data. The deputy principals were purposefully selected to participate in the study and their schools conveniently selected. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data from the participants. Data were analyzed thematically guided by the research objectives and emerging themes. The findings reveal that strategies for fostering a positive school culture include building strong relationships, using positive reinforcement, applying structured behavior management, involving students, and integrating cultural values. However, deputy principals face several challenges, such as limited parental involvement, inadequate resources, and low staff motivation and support. To cultivate positive school culture, the study proposes professional development programs for deputy principals, allocation of resources to support deputy principals, communication, and collaboration with the school community.

Key words: Positive school culture, Eswatini, Secondary school, Sustaining, School Leadership, Collaboration.

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Introduction

In the past, the leadership style of schools was mainly related to principal leadership. However, in recent times, the deputy principal has been considered as an essential leadership position in schools who also takes genuine leadership roles in promoting and maintaining an effective school culture (Mpuangnan & Roboji, 2024). Specifically, deputy principals, as educational administrators and managers in the future, are liable to shoulder major leadership and administrative responsibilities. Allen, Grigsby and Peters (2015) note that deputy principals help create an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning. Although their leadership techniques may be different from those used by school principals, they have an immanent power to influence the school positively.

School culture refers to the beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes that comprise the way things are done in a school (Moran, Walsh & Sloan, 2025). Culture is a critical element for offering meaningful and practical guidance for daily life in school. It involves a range of factors which reflect and create school spirit, traditions, and expectations, and embrace a safe, caring, supporting learning and teaching atmosphere involving good values and high expectations (Mpuangnan, Govender, Mhlongo & Adjei, 2024). Furthermore, school culture cannot be ignored since it can influence the behaviors of learners or the overall educational performances of schools. As a result, it is important for school personnel to understand the components of school culture. Cultivating and sustaining a positive school culture can enhance school staff and learners' emotions, connections, and performances (Lu & Chen, 2025). School culture is a term which is loosely defined at times but embedded in the heart of any school and, in many cases, has a tremendous role to play in a school's success. Increasingly, educational theory, policy, and practice discuss the importance of building a positive school culture. A successful school must cultivate a positive culture that fosters equity in education, knowledge-sharing, collective decision-making, professional unity, development opportunities, shared responsibility, valued diversity, collaborative learning networks, respectful relationships, and support for the well-being of all staff.

Research questions

- i. What strategies do deputy principals in Eswatini schools utilize to cultivate a positive school culture?
- ii. What challenges do deputy principals encounter in cultivating the positive school culture?

Literature review

School culture as defined by (Rhiannon, Barker, Hartwell, Egan and Lock (2023) refer to shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions and behaviors within a school community. It encompasses the norms, traditions, and rituals that define the school's environment and influence the experiences of students, teachers, and staff. A positive school culture is essential for fostering academic achievement, promoting social and emotional well-being, and creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Research (Allen, Grigsby, & Peters, 2015) has consistently shown that a strong and positive school culture is linked to improved student outcomes, including higher academic achievement, better attendance, and increased motivation. Yusuf (2015) observes that a school culture affects not only students but also teachers, influencing their job satisfaction, professional growth, and effectiveness in the classroom. A positive school culture fosters a sense of belonging and community, which is crucial for both students and staff.

Importance of deputy principals in school leadership

From a deputy principal's perspective, the question lies with how to create, foster, and sustain a positive school culture in a meaningful way. Their leadership role must fulfill the demands of the systems in which they operate (Harris et al., 2019). They act as the bridge between the administrative functions of the school and the learning environment of the classroom, supporting both staff and learners (Bush, 2008). The complex "dance" of engaging with staff and the wider school community reflects a demanding yet vital leadership dimension of the deputy principal role (Armstrong, 2015). In the current era, marked by increasing workloads and accountability, leadership requires a sense of "leaderliness" grounded in practical support, visibility, and emotional intelligence (Oplatka & Tamir, 2009). Keeping things simple while being approachable and respected is a trait increasingly associated with effective deputy principals (Barnett et al., 2012).

The role of the deputy principal is both complex in nature and broad in scope, encompassing leadership tasks such as administration, management, discipline, governance, and instructional leadership (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010). Among these duties, fostering a positive school culture stands out as a central responsibility in shaping the school's identity (Fullan, 2007). A strong school culture serves as the "glue" that binds all school stakeholders, promotes a shared vision, and builds pride among staff and learners (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Despite the challenges inherent in the deputy role, these leaders often part of the school's senior management team are expected to lead by example in sustaining effective and inclusive school cultures (Leithwood et al., 2020). Their leadership greatly influences teacher morale, learner engagement, and the overall tone of the school environment.

Understanding school culture

Successful school leaders recognize the crucial role organizational culture plays in driving school improvement (Deal & Peterson, 2009). In many cases, positive change hinges on transforming the school's existing culture (Fullan, 2007). A school's culture encompasses its values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors all of which influence how staff, students, and the wider community interact and approach learning (Stolp & Smith, 1995). A positive, collaborative culture fosters innovation, risk-taking, and a growth mindset (Louis et al., 2010). Conversely, a stagnant or negative culture can hinder progress and create an environment where improvement feels difficult or even unwelcome (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). Transforming a school's culture, particularly in rural and impoverished communities, presents complex challenges (Bush & Glover, 2016). Convincing parents of the value of education for their children is crucial, especially where access and engagement have historically been limited (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). Additionally, motivating both parents and students to stay engaged with the school is essential for sustained improvement. Ultimately, the goal is to cultivate a positive school environment that fosters academic achievement for all.

In Eswatini schools, deputy principals play a crucial role in shaping a positive school culture (Motsa & Morojele, 2017). Their leadership style significantly influences the overall school atmosphere. One key approach is transformational leadership, where they inspire and motivate staff and students to reach their full potential and work toward a shared vision (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). This can be fostered through collaborative decision-making, involving teachers, students, and parents in shaping school policies and initiatives (Hallinger, 2011). Such participation builds a sense of ownership and strengthens the sense of community within the school.

Creating a positive school culture goes beyond just student achievement. Deputy principals can prioritize teacher well-being by offering professional development, fostering a supportive environment, and addressing concerns (Barker, Hartwell, Egan, & Lock, 2023). This translates into improved classroom experiences and learner outcomes. Student welfare programs focused on mental health, emotional learning, and support services also contribute significantly (Thapa et al., 2013). Positive reinforcement acknowledging student successes further enhances the culture. A safe, inclusive environment is vital. Deputy principals can enforce clear expectations and promote respect and diversity (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009). Anti-bullying strategies are necessary to prevent harm and promote student well-being.

Enhancing the school climate extends beyond academics. Organizing extracurricular activities and community events builds engagement and belonging (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). Partnering with parents, NGOs, and businesses creates a wider support network. Celebrating achievements, both big and small, reinforces pride and shared values. Of course, challenges remain. Resource constraints may require deputy principals to innovate and adapt. Additionally, strategies must align with Eswatini's cultural values and norms (Msibi, 2013). Cultivating a positive school culture is an ongoing process, not a one-time effort. Sustained action is necessary to ensure long-term success. Further research in Eswatini can help identify what works and how deputy principals can overcome barriers. By taking these steps, they can shape a transformative, inclusive, and thriving school environment.

Components of a positive school culture

Creating a positive school culture hinges on a fundamental principle: equipping teachers with the necessary resources for successful teaching (Yusuf, 2015). Instructional resources, encompassing textbooks, supplies, technology, and curriculum supports, play a crucial role in shaping the classroom experience (Bettini et al., 2016). These resources influence how teachers present lessons, define the scope of instruction, and ultimately, how student learning is evaluated.

The availability of strong curriculum resources directly impacts the quality of classroom instruction. Studies have shown that teachers with access to high-quality resources experience greater success compared to those who lack them (Bettini et al., 2016). Having the right tools empowers teachers to effectively manage their classrooms, deliver engaging lessons aligned with curriculum requirements, and ultimately, guide students towards achieving learning objectives.

The absence of these resources, however, can have detrimental consequences. Teachers who struggle to find appropriate materials often experience feelings of inadequacy, increased disconnection from their students, and communication breakdowns within the classroom (Du Plessis et al., 2015). This sense of frustration can negatively impact the learning environment and hinder student progress. Conversely, leaders who prioritize addressing the resource needs of their staff create a supportive environment that fosters professional development and empowers teachers to help students achieve their full potential (Bredeson, 2006).

Strategies for Enhancing School Culture

One of the most critical strategies for building a positive school culture is ongoing professional development for teachers and staff. Back, Polk, Keys, and McMahon (2016) observe that training in areas such as culturally responsive teaching, conflict resolution, and team-building can enhance educators' skills and promote collaboration. Professional development not only equips staff with tools to address diverse student needs but also fosters a culture of continuous learning (Guskey, 2002). When teachers feel supported and competent, they are more likely to contribute meaningfully to a positive school atmosphere (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Equally important is the active engagement of students in school life. Encouraging student participation in decision-making and school activities cultivates a sense of ownership and belonging (Mitra, 2004). Mechanisms such as student councils, peer mentoring programs, and extracurricular activities provide platforms for student voice (Fielding, 2001). These opportunities empower learners to shape school policies and contribute to a more connected, respectful school community. When students see that their opinions matter, they are more likely to engage positively and responsibly with their peers and school environment (Mager & Nowak, 2012).

Community involvement is another crucial strategy for enhancing school culture. Building strong partnerships with parents, local businesses, and community organizations strengthens the relationship between the school and its broader context (Epstein, 2011). These partnerships bring valuable resources to the school and support diverse learning opportunities, such as mentorships and enrichment programs (Sanders, 2006). Active community engagement helps create a vibrant, inclusive school culture that reflects shared values and supports holistic student development (Warren et al., 2009).

Recognition and celebration play a vital role in reinforcing positive behaviors and building pride within the school community. Acknowledging both academic and social achievements fosters a culture of appreciation and motivation (Marzano, 2003). Whether through formal ceremonies, classroom recognition, or casual praise, celebrating success encourages students and staff to strive for excellence. This approach enhances morale and helps establish a supportive, connected school environment where individuals feel valued and respected (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Challenges in Cultivating a Positive School Culture

While the benefits of cultivating a positive school culture are well documented, the journey toward achieving and sustaining this ideal is often fraught with challenges (Deal & Peterson, 2009). One of the most significant obstacles is resistance to change. Many educators and staff may be comfortable with established practices, even if those practices are not effective. This resistance may stem from fear of the unknown or skepticism about the effectiveness of new initiatives (Fullan, 2007). Overcoming such resistance requires strong, visionary leadership that communicates clearly and demonstrates the value of change through evidence-based strategies (Kotter, 2012).

Another common challenge is the lack of adequate resources. Schools frequently operate under tight budgets, which restrict their ability to invest in essential tools, training, and support systems (OECD, 2018). For instance, underfunded professional development programs may leave teachers without the competencies needed to implement new strategies effectively (Guskey, 2002). Additionally, resource limitations may hinder the availability of mental

health services or extracurricular activities that contribute to a supportive school culture (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). To address these constraints, schools can forge partnerships with community stakeholders to secure funding and support (Epstein, 2011).

Inconsistent levels of commitment among staff can also pose a challenge. Not all educators may embrace school culture initiatives with the same enthusiasm. Some may focus solely on academic outcomes while undervaluing the importance of social-emotional learning and relationship-building (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). This inconsistency can undermine schoolwide efforts. To mitigate this, schools must foster a shared vision and collective responsibility by involving all staff in collaborative goal-setting, promoting regular dialogue around the school's mission, and recognizing individual contributions (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Leadership must also invest in training that equips staff with both instructional and interpersonal skills. These include conflict resolution, communication, and cultural competency skills essential for promoting respectful and inclusive relationships (Gage, Larson, Sugai, & Chafouleas, 2016). Without such training, even well-intentioned cultural initiatives may fall short of their goals.

A collaborative approach to problem-solving is vital. Engaging all stakeholders—teachers, administrators, parents, and learners—in identifying challenges and generating solutions builds trust and ownership (Bryk et al., 2010). Open dialogue can lead to innovative ideas and strengthen commitment across the school community. This inclusive process helps ensure that school culture initiatives are sustainable and grounded in shared values.

Theoretical framework

The Ecological Systems Theory (EST), developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979 was used as a lens in interrogating this study. This framework offers a lens for understanding how environmental contexts at various levels shape human development. This framework emphasizes the interconnectedness of these environments and their combined influence on an individual's growth and behavior. It is particularly relevant when examining the complex factors that contribute to a positive culture. EST proposes five key environmental systems, each nested within the others, that influence development as indicated by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006). These environmental elements are discussed in details below:

Microsystem: This refers to the most immediate environment, encompassing family, school, peer groups, and close relationships. Within a school context, the microsystem would represent the daily interactions students and staff has with each other, the physical environment of the school, and the established classroom routines and expectations. Deputy Principals can significantly influence this microsystem by fostering positive relationships, developing clear expectations for behavior and learning, and promoting a sense of belonging among students and staff.

Mesosystem: This level focuses on the interactions between microsystems. In the context of your study, it would be important to consider how the school environment interacts with students' families and the broader community. Effective deputy principals might develop strategies to build strong relationships with families, collaborate with community organizations to provide additional support for students, or create partnerships that enhance the school's resources and learning opportunities.

Exosystem: This system encompasses settings that indirectly influence the individual but are not directly participated in. For instance, a parent's workplace or a community center would be part of the exosystem. Deputy principals might consider how factors like national education policies or resource limitations within the education system (part of the exosystem) affect their ability to implement strategies for a positive school culture.

Macrosystem: This level represents the overarching cultural values, laws, and societal structures that influence all the other systems. Understanding the cultural context of Eswatini schools is crucial. The research could explore how cultural values, such as respect for elders or emphasis on community, are integrated into the school environment by deputy principals.

Chronosystem: A later addition to EST, the chronosystem acknowledges the passage of time and how historical events or transitions can influence development across the lifespan. This might be particularly relevant in your study if there have been recent significant changes in Eswatini's society that could impact schools and how deputy principals approach cultivating a positive school culture.

The Ecological Systems Theory (EST) provides a relevant framework for this study on positive school culture in Eswatini schools as the theory moves beyond the immediate school environment (microsystem) to acknowledge the influence of interconnected systems. Family dynamics (microsystem) and national education policies (macrosystem) are just two examples of these various layers. This comprehensive perspective allows the research to explore the broader context in which deputy principals operate and make decisions. By utilizing EST, the researcher was able to analyze how deputy principals consider these different systems when developing a positive school culture. For instance, the research examine how deputy principals address student needs within the classroom (microsystem) while simultaneously fostering collaboration with families (mesosystem) and considering the constraints and guidelines imposed by national education policies (macrosystem). Cultural responsive strategies are crucial in this study and the macrosystem, which encompasses cultural values, becomes particularly important in this context. The research explores how deputy principals cultivate a positive school culture that is sensitive to and integrates the specific cultural context of Eswatini. This focus on cultural responsiveness is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and ownership among both students and staff. The exosystem allows the study to consider how external factors, such as

resource constraints, might impact deputy principals' ability to implement certain strategies. Understanding these challenges can inform recommendations for better support and resource allocation, eventually empowering deputy principals to create a more positive school environment. The chronosystem reminds us that school culture is not static. The research can investigate how recent societal changes in Eswatini might influence deputy principals' approach to cultivating a positive school culture. This exploration can provide valuable insights into how to build a sustainable positive culture that can adapt to evolving contexts, ensuring a thriving learning environment for all members of the school community. Therefore, EST offers a framework for a holistic understanding of how deputy principals navigate various environmental systems to cultivate a positive school culture in Eswatini schools.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, situated within an interpretative paradigm, to explore the strategies employed by deputy principals in cultivating and sustaining a positive school culture in selected secondary schools in Eswatini. The multicase study design allowed for an in-depth understanding of the context-specific practices of deputy principals, providing rich insights into the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). This design was particularly beneficial in educational research, as it enabled the investigation of multiple contexts and settings (Flick, 2018).

In this study, five participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that deputy principals who possessed relevant experience and knowledge regarding school culture initiatives were included in the study. The criteria for selection included deputy principals with a minimum of three years of experience in their roles, as well as active involvement in initiatives aimed at fostering a positive school culture (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach was essential for gathering rich, detailed data that reflected the experiences and strategies of those directly involved in school leadership.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews were designed to provide flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring that key topics were addressed (Kallio et al., 2016). Additionally, focus group discussions facilitated dialogue among participants, enabling the exploration of shared experiences and collaborative strategies (Bloor et al., 2018). This combination of data collection methods yielded comprehensive insights into the practices of deputy principals.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data collected from the interviews and focus groups. This method involved several key steps, including familiarization with the data through transcription and initial readings, generating initial codes from the data that captured significant features related to the research questions, and collating these codes into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Once themes were developed, they were refined to ensure that they accurately represented the data and addressed the research objectives. The final reporting presented the findings in a coherent narrative, supported by direct quotes from participants to illustrate the themes identified.

Ethical considerations were paramount in this study. Ethical approval was sought from the relevant educational authority in Eswatini, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were made aware of the study's purpose, their rights, and the measures taken to ensure the confidentiality of their responses (McLaughlin & Kearns, 2015).

Findings

Deputy Principals' perspectives on school culture

The deputy principals' perspectives on school culture reveal its critical role in shaping a thriving educational environment. Their insights illustrate how school culture acts as a foundational element that influences every aspect of school life.

Deputy Principal 1 (DP 1) encapsulates this idea by stating, "School culture is the foundation of everything we do here." They describe school culture as the "vibe," including the unwritten rules and interactions among all members of the school community. This focus on fostering a sense of community, respect, and belonging is essential for creating a safe learning space where students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. A positive school culture not only enhances student engagement but also promotes resilience and well-being.

Emphasizing the importance of high expectations, Deputy Principal 2 (DP 2) asserts, "School culture, for me, is very much about setting high expectations for both students and teachers." By creating an environment that values hard work and academic achievement, they aim to cultivate a culture of learning that challenges and supports everyone involved. This commitment to continuous improvement encourages both students and staff to strive for excellence, reinforcing a collective drive towards reaching their full potential.

Deputy Principal 3 (DP 3) expands on the concept of school culture by highlighting its holistic nature: "School culture is more than just academics." They emphasize the importance of prioritizing the overall well-being of students and staff, advocating for a positive climate that fosters mental health and emotional support. When students feel safe and cared for, they are better equipped to engage in school life, enhancing their overall educational experience.

The interconnectedness of school culture with the broader community is also a key theme, as articulated by Deputy Principal 4 (DP 4): "School culture can't exist in isolation." By actively building relationships with parents and local organizations, they aim to transform the school into a community hub. This approach not only promotes cultural values but also fosters a shared responsibility for student success, reinforcing the idea that education is a collaborative endeavor that extends beyond the classroom.

Finally, Deputy Principal 5 (DP 5) reflects on the complexity of school culture in their context, noting, "I'm still learning about school culture in this context." They recognize that it is a "complex web of traditions, values, and

challenges unique to my school in Eswatini." This acknowledgment of the complexity of school culture highlights the importance of creating an inclusive environment that caters for diversity. By respecting cultural heritage while preparing students for the future, they ensure the significance of developing a school culture that is both adaptive and rooted in community values.

The deputy principals' reflections indicate the complicated nature of school culture and its profound impact on the educational environment. From fostering community and setting high expectations to prioritizing well-being and engaging with the community, these leaders are committed to creating a positive school culture that supports the growth and success of all students and staff. Their insights illustrate that a strong school culture is essential for cultivating an inclusive and thriving educational community. Several strengths are evident in the deputy principals' perspectives. They demonstrate a holistic understanding of school culture, encompassing academics, student well-being, and a sense of community (deputy principals 1, 3). This complex approach is crucial for fostering a positive and supportive learning environment where students can thrive. All the deputy principals prioritize student success, highlighting the importance of setting clear expectations (deputy principal 2), creating a safe and secure space (deputy principals 1, 3), and fostering a culture of continuous learning (deputy principal 2). Additionally, deputy principal 4 recognizes the vital role of community engagement in shaping school culture. Building strong relationships with parents and local organizations can create a robust support system for students and enrich the school environment. Finally, deputy principal 5 demonstrates a willingness to learn and adapt to the specific context of Eswatini, which is essential for developing a culturally responsive school culture. While the deputy principals articulate their general understanding of school culture, the responses lack specifics on the concrete strategies they implement to cultivate it. The deputy principals' perspectives offer a springboard for understanding how school culture is conceptualized and fostered within Eswatini schools.

Strategies employed by Eswatini school principals to develop and sustain a positive school culture

The insights provided by the deputy principals highlight effective strategies for cultivating a positive school culture, showcasing their commitment to fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment.

Deputy Principal 1 (DP 1) emphasizes the importance of relationship-building, stating, "Building strong relationships is key. We hold regular assemblies to foster a sense of school spirit." By encouraging teachers to know their students well and creating safe spaces for open communication, they lay the groundwork for a supportive school community. Regular assemblies serve as a platform for promoting school spirit, which can enhance student engagement and foster a collective identity among students and staff.

Positive reinforcement is another strategy highlighted by Deputy Principal 2 (DP 2), who asserts, "Positive reinforcement goes a long way." The establishment of a student recognition program not only celebrates academic achievements but also acknowledges good sportsmanship and acts of kindness. By publicly recognizing staff contributions, this approach boosts morale and fosters a sense of shared purpose within the school. Such practices can enhance motivation and create an environment where students and staff feel valued and appreciated.

A structured approach to behavior management is also critical, as noted by Deputy Principal 3 (DP 3): "A clear and consistent set of expectations is crucial." Having a well-defined code of conduct ensures that students, staff, and parents understand the behavioral expectations within the school. Establishing clear routines and procedures contributes to a predictable and organized learning environment, which is essential for student success and well-being. Deputy Principal 4 (DP 4) discusses the significance of student involvement, stating, "We offer a variety of extracurricular activities to cater to diverse student interests." By actively involving students in decision-making through student councils and leadership programs, the school fosters a sense of ownership and engagement. This inclusion not only empowers students but also helps them feel more connected to the school culture, enhancing their overall school experience.

Deputy Principal 5 (DP 5) highlights the integration of cultural values, saying, "We integrate Swazi cultural values and traditions into the school environment." Celebrating cultural events and encouraging students to share their heritage enrich the school community. Collaborating with local organizations provides additional resources and helps ensure that the curriculum is reflective of the students' backgrounds. This focus on cultural responsiveness is crucial for promoting a sense of belonging among all students, allowing them to feel valued and recognized within the school setting.

The insights provided by the deputy principals offer a valuable window into the strategies they utilize to cultivate a positive school culture in Eswatini. However, a closer examination reveals both strengths and areas that warrant further exploration. A significant strength lies in the emphasis on relationship building (deputy principals 1, 2). All the deputy principals acknowledge the importance of fostering strong connections between students, staff, and parents. This focus on community is crucial for creating a supportive and inclusive environment where all members feel valued and safe. Additionally, deputy principal 2 highlights the power of positive reinforcement through student recognition programs and staff appreciation. This approach can boost morale, encourage desired behaviors, and contribute to a more positive school atmosphere.

Deputy Principal 3 recognizes the importance of structure and clarity. A well-defined code of conduct and clear routines provide a sense of security and predictability for students and staff, fostering a more focused learning environment. Furthermore, deputy principal 4 highlights the value of student engagement through extracurricular activities and leadership opportunities. These strategies can help students feel more connected to the school, develop

a sense of ownership, and foster positive social interactions. Finally, deputy principal 5 emphasizes the importance of integrating Swazi cultural values and traditions into the school environment. This approach can promote cultural pride, cultivate respect for diversity, and create a more welcoming space for all students. However, while these responses provide general strategies, details about their implementation remain unclear. Further research could explore how these approaches are adapted to different grade levels or how they address the specific needs of diverse student populations. Additionally, the long-term sustainability of these strategies and their impact over time remains unexamined. Research could investigate how deputy principals address challenges like maintaining consistent implementation or adapting to changing student demographics.

Furthermore, the responses rely on the deputy principals' perspectives, and including data on student behavior, academic achievement, and staff well-being could provide a more objective evaluation of the effectiveness of these strategies. Exploring the challenges deputy principals face, such as resource constraints or cultural barriers, along with how they overcome them to cultivate a positive school culture, would also be valuable.

Challenges faced by deputy principals in cultivating positive school culture

The findings from the deputy principals revealed challenges that significantly impact the cultivation of a positive school culture in their respective environments. Each deputy principal articulated specific obstacles, highlighting the complexities of their roles in fostering an inclusive and supportive educational atmosphere.

Engagement with parents was identified as another significant challenge, particularly in rural contexts, as noted by Deputy Principal 2 (DP 2): "Engaging parents can be challenging, especially in rural areas. Transportation issues or work schedules can make it difficult for them to attend meetings or participate in school activities." This statement reveals the importance of building strong school-home connections. Overcoming barriers such as transportation and time constraints is crucial for fostering parental involvement, which can lead to enhanced student success and a more robust school community.

Limited resources emerged as a primary concern for Deputy Principal 1 (DP 1), who stated, "Our biggest challenge is limited resources. Large class sizes make it difficult to provide individualized attention." This limitation not only affects the quality of education but also the ability to engage students meaningfully. The lack of adequate funding for extracurricular activities further compounds this issue, preventing the enrichment of the school environment, which is vital for holistic student development.

Moreover, the challenge of staff motivation and support was articulated by Deputy Principal 3 (DP 3), who remarked, "Motivating and supporting staff can be demanding. Teacher workloads are high, and burnout is a concern." This insight highlights the critical role of staff well-being in shaping school culture. Fostering collaboration and a shared sense of purpose among staff is essential, yet it requires ongoing effort and attention from school leaders. Without adequate support and collaboration, the potential for creating a positive and motivating work environment diminishes, impacting the overall school climate.

Deputy Principal 5 (DP 5) raised the complexity of balancing cultural traditions with the demands of a globalized education: "Balancing cultural traditions with the need to prepare students for a globalized world can be tricky." This perspective emphasizes the need for educational strategies that respect and integrate cultural heritage while also equipping students with the skills required for success in an increasingly interconnected world. Addressing this balance is essential for fostering a positive school culture that values both tradition and innovation.

The diversity of the student body, as described by Deputy Principal 4 (DP 4), also presents challenges in creating an inclusive school culture: "Our student body comes from diverse backgrounds with varying needs and learning styles." This diversity necessitates tailored approaches to education that address individual student needs, ensuring that all students feel included and supported. A lack of resources or training can hinder the ability of staff to cater to these differences effectively, potentially leading to feelings of exclusion among students.

The insights provided by the five deputy principals offer a springboard for understanding the challenges they face in cultivating a positive school culture in Eswatini. A closer examination of their responses reveals both key challenges and areas that warrant further exploration. A critical issue identified by Deputy Principal 1 is limited resources. Large class sizes make it difficult to provide individualized attention to students, and inadequate funding restricts opportunities for enriching extracurricular activities and programs. These limitations can significantly hinder the school's ability to create a well-rounded and engaging learning environment. Deputy Principal 2 highlights the challenge of engaging parents, particularly in rural areas. Transportation and work schedules can create significant barriers to their participation in school meetings and activities. Building a strong school-home connection is crucial for student success and a positive school culture, but overcoming these obstacles is essential.

Staff motivation and collaboration emerged as another challenge according to Deputy Principal 3. High teacher workloads and burnout can contribute to a less positive environment for both staff and students. Fostering a sense of shared purpose and collaboration among staff is critical, but it requires ongoing effort and support from school leadership. Deputy Principal 4 emphasizes the challenge of catering to a diverse student body with varying needs and learning styles. Ensuring all students feel included and supported within the school culture requires strategies that effectively address these differences. Finally, Deputy Principal 5 identifies the delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage and preparing students for a globalized world. Finding ways to integrate cultural traditions while also developing the skills and knowledge necessary for success in a modern context is a complex challenge for deputy principals.

Discussion

The discussion effectively aligns with several references, particularly in emphasizing the importance of school culture as foundational to educational success. Green (2024) highlights how positive school culture facilitates partnerships, aligning with Deputy Principal 4's focus on community engagement and collaboration with external stakeholders. Both perspectives demonstrate that fostering an outward-looking school culture enhances not only internal school dynamics but also broader educational connections, reinforcing the idea that schools function as part of a larger system. Similarly, Tshabalala and Faremi (2024)'s emphasis on high expectations as a leadership tool resonates with Deputy Principal 2's view that a culture of academic rigor drives excellence among both learners and teachers. Both underscore that visionary leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering a collective commitment to continuous improvement. The alignment between Tshabalala et al. (2024)'s findings on positive discipline and Deputy Principal 3's holistic approach further strengthens the argument that a nurturing environment addressing emotional, social, and academic needs is essential for learner success.

However, Printy and Liu (2021) introduce a perspective on distributed leadership that appears underexplored in the discussion. While the deputy principals focus heavily on the role of leadership at the school level, Printy and Liu argue for a shared leadership approach involving teachers and other stakeholders. This broader framework enriches the understanding of leadership by emphasizing the collaborative and interactive nature of decision-making, which is critical for fostering a resilient and adaptive school culture.

Moreover, the governance dimension presented by Alade and Tshabalala (2024) is not fully integrated into the analysis. Their focus on the structural aspects of decentralization and participatory governance through school governing bodies offers a more formalized perspective on how community engagement shapes school culture. While the deputy principals' reflections highlight the importance of involving parents and local organizations, they do not delve into governance mechanisms, leaving room to incorporate a more structured approach to decision-making. These additional dimensions from Printy and Liu (2021) and Alade and Tshabalala (2024) underscore the importance of integrating leadership, governance, and systemic factors to fully understand and cultivate an effective school culture.

The data about the strategies employed by Eswatini school principals to sustain a positive school culture align with several global perspectives but also reveal areas for growth. Deputy Principal 1's emphasis on relationship-building resonates with Elomaa et al. (2023), who found that fostering supportive connections helps school leaders manage stress and create a positive work environment. Similarly, Deputy Principal 2's focus on positive reinforcement aligns with Rafsanjani et al. (2025), who emphasize celebrating achievements to reinforce desired behaviors and mitigate challenges like delinquency. These parallels demonstrate the universal value of cultivating interpersonal connections and recognition to sustain school culture. Deputy Principal 4's advocacy for student engagement through extracurricular activities mirrors findings by Kilag et al. (2024), who emphasize the importance of inclusive leadership in managing diversity and promoting a sense of belonging. Both perspectives underscore the significance of involving students in decision-making processes to empower them and enrich their school experience. Likewise, the integration of Swazi cultural values highlighted by Deputy Principal 5 aligns with Moran et al. (2025) and Lodi et al. (2021), who argue for the use of restorative practices to honor diversity and promote equity. These approaches collectively emphasize the importance of cultural responsiveness in fostering inclusive school environments.

However, the strategies discussed by the Eswatini deputy principals lack the systemic focus highlighted in Groenewald et al. (2024). While the principals emphasize relational and cultural strategies, Groenewald et al. argue for addressing structural challenges like learning loss and mental health through targeted leadership development. This perspective highlights a gap in the Eswatini data, which could benefit from a deeper exploration of how school leaders address broader systemic issues affecting learners and staff. Moreover, Wardana et al. (2024) highlight the influence of organizational culture and leadership style on teacher performance, an area not explicitly addressed by the Eswatini principals despite its critical role in sustaining a positive school culture. The reliance on qualitative reflections from the deputy principals provides rich insights but lacks the objective measures emphasized by Elomaa et al. (2023). Incorporating data on student outcomes, teacher performance, and community involvement would provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of these strategies. Additionally, exploring the challenges of implementing these strategies, such as resource constraints and evolving student demographics, would enhance understanding and offer actionable solutions. Combining qualitative insights with quantitative evidence would strengthen the overall analysis and guide more effective practices.

The challenges faced by Eswatini deputy principals in fostering positive school culture reflect broader trends identified in educational leadership literature. Limited resources, as emphasized by Deputy Principal 1, align with findings from Dlamini et al. (2023), who highlight resource scarcity in rural schools as a significant barrier to teacher retention and effective classroom management. Similarly, Shapaka (2024) identifies resource constraints as a recurring issue for principals in Namibia, suggesting that systemic underfunding limits opportunities for individualized attention and extracurricular enrichment. Addressing these resource challenges is critical, as they directly impact the ability to provide holistic education and cultivate an engaging school environment.

Parental engagement, identified by Deputy Principal 2 as a challenge in rural areas, also echoes findings in Ekal and Mungai (2024), who note the importance of building strong school-home partnerships to improve student

performance. However, logistical barriers like transportation and time constraints often hinder such efforts, particularly in under-resourced regions. Tamadoni et al. (2024) recommend adopting context-sensitive solutions, such as leveraging digital platforms to foster communication and participation. While these strategies could be beneficial, their feasibility in rural Eswatini depends on infrastructural improvements and digital literacy.

Staff motivation and burnout, as described by Deputy Principal 3, are widely recognized as critical issues in educational leadership. Gonzales and Roberts (2025) emphasize the importance of fostering collaboration and providing emotional support to mitigate teacher stress, while Mpuangnan et al. (2024) highlight participative leadership and job satisfaction as key mediators of employee performance. However, Acton (2022) cautions that hierarchical school structures often limit the scope for participative leadership, suggesting that reforms in leadership practices are needed to foster a supportive and collaborative work environment. Without these changes, the risk of burnout and reduced morale remains high.

Balancing cultural heritage with the demands of globalization, as raised by Deputy Principal 5, reflects the tension between traditional values and modern educational imperatives. Khanyile and Mpuangnan (2024) note that incorporating cultural traditions into school governance fosters a sense of belonging and discipline, but Acton (2022) warns that rigid adherence to cultural norms may conflict with innovative practices. Addressing this balance requires adaptive leadership capable of integrating diverse perspectives while preparing learners for global challenges. The complexity of these challenges underscores the need for professional development programs that equip school leaders with the skills to navigate cultural, logistical, and systemic barriers effectively.

Conclusion

This study examined the concept of positive school culture in Eswatini schools through the perspectives of five deputy principals. The findings reveal that these leaders possess a clear understanding of positive school culture and actively employ various strategies to nurture it. These include fostering strong relationships, using positive reinforcement, establishing clear structures and routines, and promoting student engagement through extracurricular activities and leadership opportunities. Additionally, they integrate Swazi cultural values and traditions into the school environment to create a sense of belonging and community. However, the study also highlights significant challenges faced by deputy principals in their efforts to cultivate positive school culture. Limited resources, such as large class sizes and insufficient funding for programs, hinder their ability to provide individualized attention and holistic development. Parental engagement, particularly in rural areas, is another barrier due to logistical challenges like transportation and work schedules. Furthermore, motivating staff and fostering collaboration is difficult amid high workloads and burnout. Lastly, addressing the diverse needs and learning styles of students presents an ongoing challenge, requiring innovative and inclusive approaches to ensure all learners feel supported and valued.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and the conclusion the study recommends that Leadership training through workshops and training programs can foster positive school culture, promote student diversity, and build strong relationships with parents and communities.

Increasing funding for schools can increase resources for enriching extracurricular activities and programs.

Facilitating regular meetings between deputy principals and school leadership teams allows for sharing best practices and developing a shared vision for school culture.

Prioritizing employee well-being through stress management workshops and promoting a healthy work-life balance is essential to avoid burnout.

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