



EXPLORING THE SCHOOL CULTURE AND VALUES OF SUSTAINABLE, SUCCESSFUL SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

In the wake of post-apartheid educational reforms, South African secondary schools continue to grapple with persistent challenges such as underperformance, resource limitations, and socio-economic disparities, particularly in historically disadvantaged communities. Despite these systemic issues, some schools exhibit resilience and sustained success, prompting inquiry into the cultural values and practices that underpin their effectiveness. This study aimed to explore the school culture and core values that contribute to the sustainability and long-term success of secondary schools. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative approach was employed using a generic qualitative design. Data were collected through purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews with key school stakeholders. Thematic analysis revealed several interrelated values and practices integral to school success, including discipline, strong school ethos, community involvement, collaborative planning, teamwork, positive role modelling, monitoring and evaluation, and effective communication. These elements collectively foster a resilient school culture that promotes academic performance, teacher morale, learner wellbeing, and institutional longevity. Based on these findings, the study recommends fostering a values-driven and collaborative school culture, strengthening community engagement, promoting inclusive planning and monitoring practices, and encouraging effective communication and role modelling. The study concludes that sustainable secondary schools are built on intentional cultural practices that enable adaptability, cohesion, and long-term growth, ultimately producing not only academically successful learners but socially responsible citizens.

Keywords: *school culture, sustainability, values-driven leadership, community engagement, educational success.*

Research Background

School culture encompasses the shared assumptions, values, norms, leadership styles, and unwritten practices that define the character and functioning of a school. It is an evolving construct influenced by a school's historical, demographic, and socio-cultural context (Schein, 2020). Culture shapes how members of the school community interact, make decisions, and respond to challenges (Ismail et al., 2022). A sustainable secondary school is one that maintains its core educational mission while adapting to changing conditions without compromising the wellbeing of learners, staff, and the broader community (Oloba, 2025; Yli-Panula et al., 2022). Successful schools demonstrate strong academic performance, learner well-being, effective leadership, and community engagement, all underpinned by a robust, values-driven culture that supports resilience and continuous improvement (Javornik & Mirazchiyski, 2023; Pantazidis & Pechtelidis, 2025). In the South African context, post-apartheid educational reforms have sought to redress inequalities through curriculum revision, inclusive education policies, and infrastructural investments (Motala, 2020). Yet, many schools still struggle with poverty, under-resourcing, and governance issues (Sibuyi et al., 2024). Despite these systemic barriers, some schools have achieved sustained success through strong leadership, community involvement, and deliberate cultivation of positive school cultures. Research increasingly supports the link between school culture and long-term success, showing that shared values, inclusive practices, and culturally grounded leadership enhance institutional resilience and performance (Bush et al., 2019; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). This highlights the importance of intentionally shaping school culture to improve academic outcomes, teacher morale, learner development, and overall institutional longevity.

Research Problem Statement

Despite ongoing reforms in curriculum, infrastructure, and teacher training, there remains a limited understanding of the internal cultural elements and core values that make some secondary schools more sustainable and successful than others (Zickafoose et al., 2024). While school culture, including shared values, leadership practices, and relational norms, has been widely acknowledged as a key determinant of educational quality and institutional resilience (Ismail et al., 2022; Schein, 2020), policy and practice often overlook these intangible yet critical factors (Le Fleur, 2022; Van Jaarsveld & Mentz, 2021). Schools operating under similar socio-economic conditions often display stark differences in outcomes, suggesting that internal

dynamics, such as leadership style, staff cohesion, teacher commitment, and community engagement, play a more decisive role in sustainability and success than external resources alone (Liggett, 2024; Wang'ombe, 2023). For instance, schools with strong instructional leadership, a shared vision, and inclusive practices tend to outperform peers even with equivalent material constraints (Parlar et al., 2024; Maqhubela, 2025). However, many education initiatives continue to prioritise measurable outputs, neglecting the cultural foundations that underpin long-term improvement (Arendse, 2019). As a result, attempts to replicate successful school models often fail when applied in different contexts without a deep understanding of the unique cultural and relational elements that sustain them (Mohapi & Chombo, 2021). Without this insight, transformative policies risk remaining superficial, undermining sustainable progress.

Research Gap

While extensive literature exists on school success and leadership, few studies focus specifically on the intersection of school culture, core values, and sustainability in secondary education. Much of the current research examines leadership or organisational effectiveness in isolation, overlooking how these dimensions interact to foster long-term institutional resilience (Bush et al., 2019). As Edwards et al. (2023) note, limited attention has been given to how leadership both shapes and is shaped by deeply embedded school values. This gap is particularly pronounced in developing education systems, where structural reforms alone cannot explain educational outcomes. In contexts like South Africa, systemic inequalities and socio-economic disparities heighten the importance of cultural elements such as community engagement, shared values, and trust in sustaining school success (Nyathi et al., 2024). The limited transferability of findings from developed countries underscores the need for research grounded in the lived realities of under-resourced schools. Scholars such as Akabor (2020) describe school culture as a “hidden curriculum” that influences the longevity and depth of reform implementation, while Stoll and Fink (2005) caution that ignoring shared values can result in superficial change (Engelbrecht, 2020). In the South African context, Ngubane and Makua (2021) highlight the need to incorporate indigenous frameworks like Ubuntu in educational practice, though such perspectives remain under-represented. Collectively, these insights point to an urgent need for research that examines how school culture and values shape

the sustainability of secondary schools, especially in resource-constrained environments, a gap this study directly addresses.

Research Rationale

Understanding school culture and core values is essential for informing leadership development, shaping responsive education policies, and guiding effective school improvement strategies (Mincu, 2022). When leaders are attuned to the cultural context of their schools, they can build trust, foster shared purpose, and enhance staff and learner motivation, all of which are vital for the successful implementation of educational reforms (Heystek & Shula, 2024). Policies grounded in the values and beliefs of the school community also have a greater chance of sustaining change beyond superficial compliance (Mohapi & Chombo, 2021). Moreover, identifying the cultural and value-based drivers of success in thriving secondary schools provides a framework that can be replicated in struggling schools, especially where positive school cultures promote collaboration, shared vision, and collective responsibility (Wuletu et al., 2024). Tailoring interventions to align with these cultural dynamics increases their effectiveness and scalability (Mantai, 2021). Insights from this study further offer school leaders and stakeholders practical strategies to cultivate sustainable, value-driven school environments, enhancing teacher morale, learner engagement, and community participation (Alzoraiki et al., 2024; Ausat et al., 2024). Leaders who recognise these cultural forces can create inclusive, adaptive, and development-oriented institutions (Morris et al., 2020). This research is timely and relevant amid ongoing educational transformation and post-COVID-19 recovery efforts, offering critical direction for building culturally responsive and resilient education systems that align with South Africa's national development goals (Gomez-Caride, 2023; Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2021).

Research Aim: To explore the school culture and core values that contribute to the sustainability and long-term success of secondary schools.

Methodology

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which views reality as socially constructed through individuals' experiences and their interactions within particular contexts (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). The paradigm emphasises that knowledge develops cooperatively through interactions between the researcher and participants, emphasising the need to investigate the individual meanings people ascribe to their experiences (Nickerson, 2022). This paradigm is

particularly well-suited for examining the cultural practices and core values within schools that support their enduring success and long-term sustainability. The study employed a qualitative research approach to enable a rich, in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and perceptions regarding the core values of a sustainable and prosperous school culture. Qualitative methods are well-suited for investigating complex social phenomena where the emphasis is on understanding meaning and context rather than quantification (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Denzin, 2018). The flexible and naturalistic nature of qualitative inquiry supports the investigation of the school culture and core values that contribute to the sustainability and long-term success of secondary schools (Tenny et al., 2017; Tisdell et al., 2025). A qualitative approach aligns with the study's aim to explore the school culture and core values that contribute to the sustainability and long-term success of secondary schools. This approach grants the researcher an opportunity to gather rich, in-depth accounts that are essential for uncovering the underlying values that support the sustainability and continued success of secondary schools.

The study used a generic qualitative design, which offered methodological flexibility by enabling the investigation to concentrate on meaning-making in a broad sense without being restricted to a particular qualitative tradition like grounded theory or phenomenology (Ellis & Hart, 2023). The design allowed the researcher to identify patterns and themes that support sustainability and long-term success. This design made it easier to gather and analyse extensive, detailed data that captured the depth and diversity of participants' experiences related to school culture. Purposive sampling was used in this study to select participants with direct and sustained engagement in the school environment, ensuring relevance and depth of insight into the culture under study (Campbell et al., 2020). It is a non-probability sampling method aimed at obtaining rich, information-rich cases. The researcher chose one secondary school with a documented record of consistent academic performance over the past decade because of its consistent performance to provide a context of proven success. Participants included the principal, one deputy principal, one departmental head, and three teachers, each with at least three years of service at the school. This sampling strategy ensured that the data reflected a range of perspectives from individuals deeply familiar with the school's cultural dynamics and organisational structure.

Data for this study were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, a method well-aligned with the interpretivist paradigm, which values understanding individuals' lived

experiences within specific contexts (Ruslin et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews were suitable because of their flexibility, allowing the researcher to ask guided but open-ended questions, probe for clarity, and adapt based on participants' responses (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This approach enabled participants to share their experiences and perspectives freely, particularly around school culture and organisational characteristics. Interviews were scheduled at times and venues convenient for participants, including school premises, homes, or restaurants after school hours, and each lasted approximately two hours. All recorded data were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and a clear understanding of the core values that contribute to the success of school culture in a secondary school. Thematic analysis was employed to systematically interpret the qualitative data, following the six-phase approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006), becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, identifying potential themes, reviewing and refining these themes, defining and naming them, and finally producing the report. This method complements the interpretivist paradigm and a generic qualitative design by enabling the researcher to organise complex participant narratives into meaningful themes that capture both shared and unique experiences, while maintaining the context-specific meanings within the data. The analysis emphasised participants' personal experiences and interpretations to ensure that the findings accurately represented their views on the role of core values in fostering the sustainability and enduring success of secondary schools.

Ethical principles were upheld throughout the study. All participants provided informed consent before participating. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, and they were free to withdraw from the study without any penalties. The research received approval from the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee, under clearance number SEM-2019-053.

Findings and Discussions

1. Discipline

Discipline emerged as a central value in the participating secondary school, contributing significantly to its culture and long-term success. Participants shared various practices and perspectives that reflect the institutionalisation of discipline among staff and learners. Teacher Three expressed a sense of pride in their school's disciplinary standards compared to others in the circuit: *"I am not saying we are just giving ourselves credit or rating ourselves highly, but*

in terms of our school around our circuit, in terms of discipline, I think we find ourselves to be the best.” She further elaborated on how discipline is embedded in classroom management: *“We do have a policy that governs our discipline. We have classroom rules that are developed in each class that learners should adhere to. This was developed by the learners, facilitated by the teachers.”* In reinforcing discipline among staff, Teacher Three added, *“Our learners do not see us (teachers) fighting with one another.”* The Departmental Head emphasised that discipline is not only expected from learners but is a standard for all members of the school community: *“Discipline is part of our culture in this school. We make sure that both learners and we, the staff members, are well disciplined. We don’t tolerate any misbehaviours or misconduct from anyone. For learners who are giving us problems, we call their parents or guardians; they help us to resolve such.”* Teacher One highlighted the involvement of the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) in maintaining order during school assemblies: *“The RCL helps to maintain discipline on the assembly ground by controlling noise-making while announcements are going on.”* The Deputy Principal confirmed the critical role of the RCL in fostering a culture of discipline through participatory governance: *“We rely much on the RCL to build a culture of discipline in our school by being part of the disciplinary decision-making process.”*

Teacher Two described the function and effectiveness of the disciplinary committee in the school: *“We have the disciplinary committee, a harsh, cruel disciplinary committee. But they are medicines: their strictness helped to reduce the pattern and the pressure of the crime and the disorder that was happening in other schools.”* He further explained how teachers collaborate with the disciplinary committee: *“When we (teachers) see something that is wrong, we report to them. That information does help them in making their disciplinary task so simple and lighter work for them. We do tell the learners who frequently disobey the school rules and regulations to bring their parents to school for talks. We try; even if our children of today are out of hand, we try our best to keep order, because if we leave everything on their shoulders, they might even kill each other.”* The Principal highlighted the use of empathy and love in his approach to maintaining discipline: *“In order to maintain discipline in our school, I always tell the learners at the assembly point that I love them with all my heart, like in the scriptures in the Bible. I love them like my biological children; that is why they are able to respect me. I can take them alone to the assembly. When I say silent, they do and listen to me.”* The Deputy Principal linked the school’s culture of discipline to the positive outcomes observed in learners:

“I can see success in our learners because of the discipline that we taught them. ... The community can see and recognise them, because we are building them in totality.”

The data presented illustrates how discipline is deeply embedded in the culture of the participating secondary school and is viewed as a foundational value that contributes to its sustainability and long-term success. Discipline is not only enforced through rules and regulations but is cultivated as a shared responsibility among learners, teachers, and school leadership. The involvement of structures such as the Representative Council of Learners and the disciplinary committee reflects a participatory and collaborative approach to school governance. This aligns with Leithwood (2021) assertion that shared leadership and inclusive school cultures promote a sense of accountability and order. Teachers’ active role in reporting misconduct and supporting disciplinary processes also affirms the idea that sustainable discipline emerges from collective ownership and consistent enforcement (Davids, 2024). Furthermore, the school’s approach to discipline balances firmness with empathy, as demonstrated by the Principal’s emotional connection with learners and his use of moral authority rather than coercion. This resonates with the principles of restorative discipline, which promote positive behaviour through respect, care, and relationship-building (Lodi et al., 2021). The emphasis on staff modelling disciplined behaviour, as well as the integration of learner voices in developing classroom rules, suggests a culture that is both democratic and structured. Such practices are critical for long-term school success, as they help create safe, predictable, and respectful environments conducive to teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Ultimately, the school’s commitment to discipline not only enhances academic outcomes but also contributes to producing well-rounded, responsible citizens.

2. School ethos

The participants described a strong sense of unity, support, and shared values within the school community. Their responses reflect how social cohesion, mutual care, and collaborative culture contribute to the sustainability and long-term success of the school. Teacher One highlighted how a spirit of mutual support extends into financial collaboration: *“In our school, we also do stokvels (a social club where members contribute a certain amount of money monthly). For example, we contribute R1500 in a group of 12 people on birthdays. This has helped us build beautiful homes. We are having beautiful homes because of our school.”* She also spoke about emotional and practical support among staff: *“We care for each other. Even as teachers, we*

support each other. If they do not see me at work for two days, they will start calling to check what is wrong.” On school events and celebrations, she shared, *“In our school, we do not host baby or bridal showers. Instead, when a baby is born, we visit with presents. For weddings, we contribute R100 and go to help cook and support. I once invited my colleagues to my brother’s wedding; they came to support and help me cook.”* She further illustrated learner-focused support: *“Former learners who have graduated return during holidays to help with subjects like mathematics. Others donate uniforms or provide bursaries. That makes us happy as a school because it helps learners go to university and return to support us.”* On parental involvement, she noted, *“The parents are also happy about extramural activities; for the cultural dance, they support us by making the beads that go with the attire.”* She also emphasised the care for learners: *“We buy uniforms for learners from struggling families. We also buy sanitary towels and roll-on for the girls. This reduces absenteeism and helps them perform better.”*

Teacher Two emphasised practical, emotional, and academic support: *“Our principal is very supportive. For instance, when a new colleague had an accident, the principal and I went to the scene. He even paid for the car to be towed and kept the colleague’s goods safe until family arrived.”* She added, *“We assist each other with deadlines. If someone is behind, we push each other to meet submission dates; even if they’re late on the due date, they must submit. We may grumble, but we assist to avoid negative reports.”* On staff support during life events, she shared, *“We attend funerals far and near. In 2015, we went to Johannesburg and Pretoria. We contribute R50 as condolence and R100 for travel. Even if all cannot go, there are always representatives. We also support colleagues during weddings by helping cook, especially among female staff. We avoid going to male colleagues’ homes to prevent issues with their spouses.”* She also noted learner support: *“If a learner is performing well but comes from a poor background, the principal asks us to contribute. This year, for example, we each gave R50 to help such a learner maintain academic performance.”* Teacher Three focused on shared norms and compassion: *“It is social cohesion. If a staff member has a funeral, we offer condolences and show we are with them. When someone is sick, we send a card. This is our norm, to show support. Greeting is just the norm. Whether it’s staff or visitors, we greet each other all day.”*

The Departmental Head described the collaborative and family-orientated environment: *“If someone has an occasion, we collect funds, buy refreshments, give a gift, and support each*

other like family, whether it's weddings or funerals." On learner support, they shared, *"During matric farewells, educators often buy outfits or pay for learners' attendance."* They also noted their approach to staff development: *"If a teacher is not performing, I sit with them to find out the issue. Sometimes I even visit their family at home. We are that close. We can sit around the table, enjoy coffee, and talk about work-related matters."* The Principal attributed the school's success to collective support: *"The school is at the level it is today because of the support from parents, teachers, and ex-learners."* On retirement celebrations, the Principal shared, *"We host retirement parties. We give gifts both collectively and individually and deliver speeches to appreciate our colleague's contribution."* They also highlighted community partnerships: *"We have Samaritans like the Makhuma group. They donate school uniforms yearly. Other community members also contribute."* They praised parental involvement: *"Parents help reduce late coming by ensuring learners leave home early. They even urge learners they see on the street to hurry to school."*

The data presented illustrates how a strong, values-driven school culture grounded in mutual support, care, and community engagement significantly contributes to the sustainability and long-term success of secondary schools. Participants consistently highlighted the deep-rooted sense of belonging, emotional and financial support among staff, and learner-focused interventions, such as donating uniforms and supporting academically gifted but financially struggling learners. These practices demonstrate the embodiment of social capital, which Lin (2017) describes as networks of relationships characterised by trust and cooperation that enable societies, and by extension, school communities, to function effectively. This ethos fosters a climate of collective responsibility, reinforcing commitment to school goals and creating a stable environment conducive to teaching and learning. Moreover, the nurturing relationships among staff, learners, parents, and the broader community reflect the "ethic of care" in educational leadership, as advocated by Moshel and Berkovich (2025), where interpersonal relationships form the foundation of a thriving educational environment. Acts such as contributing towards learner needs, attending staff funerals, celebrating retirements, and supporting life events show how informal social norms translate into a strong, cohesive culture that retains staff morale and enhances learner support. These collective practices promote emotional well-being, reduce absenteeism, and foster community-school partnerships, all of which are essential to school resilience and sustainability (Pulimeno et al., 2020). Thus, school ethos, as evidenced in this data, is not merely about institutional values but about lived, daily

practices that sustain school success over time.

3. Community involvement

Community involvement emerged as a key school culture and core value that contributes significantly to the sustainability and long-term success of the school. Participants described various ways in which the local community actively supports and partners with the school, highlighting both academic and extracurricular collaborations. The Principal emphasised the inclusive nature of the school's culture, stating, *"The learners, teachers, and the community at large [are all involved]."* The Departmental Head elaborated on the sense of ownership the community feels towards the school: *"We believe the school belongs to the community. That is the bottom line, and the community feels they are part of the school."* Teacher One shared a practical example of community participation in co-curricular activities: *"Some community ladies heard us singing, since our school is close to the village. They came to listen and watch us. They asked if they could give us guidance on how to do it properly. We warmly welcomed them... the program was highly successful due to the assistance they rendered."*

The Deputy Principal discussed strategic collaboration with local feeder schools to build a strong sports culture: *"The feeder primary school is part of the community. We are working together to strengthen our school sport culture. We've been going to X Primary School to train their Grade 4 and 5 basketball. We're doing this because when they graduate, they'll come to our school, so we decided to catch them young."* The Principal also highlighted infrastructure support from the community: *"The community built a library next to our school. The library is well-resourced, with books provided by the municipality. Our learners are always given access... this gesture has contributed to our learners' good academic performance."* Teacher One described community support in organising cultural events: *"Parents agreed to contribute money for the [cultural day] function, and it is done every year during heritage month."* The Departmental Head reflected on the spiritual involvement of community members and its positive moral impact on learners: *"We call the priests twice per year; we also call women of prayer, mothers from various denominations. They offer prayers when we reopen in January and before exams. The word of God they preach helps the school record better moral standards than any other school around us. Our learners are always conscious of those teachings and put them into practice."*

Community involvement is a fundamental core value that fosters a strong sense of partnership

between schools and their surrounding communities, which is essential for the sustainability and long-term success of secondary schools. As reflected by the participants, this involvement manifests in multiple dimensions, including academic support, cultural participation, and moral guidance. The Departmental Head's assertion that the school belongs to the community aligns with Epstein et al. (2025) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, which emphasises that student success is maximised when families, schools, and communities work collaboratively. Furthermore, the Principal's mention of community-built infrastructure, such as the library, demonstrates tangible support that enhances learning resources, consistent with the findings of Ullah and Usman (2023) and Abumandour (2021), who highlight the positive impact of community resources on student achievement. Moreover, community involvement extends beyond physical support to active participation in school activities and moral development, contributing to a holistic school culture. The collaborative sports programs with feeder schools and cultural events funded by parents illustrate the practical engagement that builds continuity and inclusivity, promoting a shared identity and collective responsibility (Martínez, 2024). The spiritual involvement noted by the Departmental Head further nurtures positive moral standards among learners, aligning with literature that highlights the role of community values and cultural traditions in shaping students' character and discipline (Mulang & Putra, 2023; Ramadhani et al., 2024). Collectively, these community-school partnerships create a supportive environment conducive to both academic excellence and social development, which are critical for sustainable school success.

4. Planning

Planning emerged as a crucial component of the school culture that contributes significantly to the sustainability and long-term success of the school. Participants highlighted the importance of structured, inclusive, and proactive planning processes involving various stakeholders within the school community. The Principal emphasised the role of collaborative planning in fostering order and organisation within the school: *"Planning makes our school have order because we are able to plan, we are organised. The planning is not restricted to me as the principal only; we distribute the responsibility amongst school committees. Various committees and groups are given the responsibility to come up with plans that are then considered and rectified by all members of the school. We always plan ahead; we don't do a fire brigade approach. For example, whatever we want to do next year, we start the planning*

this year.” He further highlighted the role of planning in ensuring curriculum coverage and learner achievement: “Effective planning makes our learners achieve their goals. It helps the teachers to finish the syllabus and also makes our teachers achieve their goals.” He also referred to specific tools used in planning: “For our planning to be effective, we first of all develop the timetable and follow it to the letter. For example, we address challenges that teachers might have encountered while teaching. Also, we take the ATP (Annual Teaching Plan) very seriously in our school.” The Deputy Principal noted that planning is a collective responsibility and involves different school structures: “We have committees. The committee will sit down and plan together, then report to the SMT. The school then comes together to consider the committee’s plan and deliberate on what to do.” He also described the involvement of parents and the School Governing Body in the planning process: “We meet with parents and all the other members of the SGB. We sit down and plan. We ask every member to bring suggestions on how we want the school to look. Some issues concerning school progress are referred to us to deal with, and during our meetings, we discuss and plan how things should be done.” Teacher One affirmed the collaborative and committed nature of the planning culture in the school: “In most cases, when we want to do something, we sit down together and come up with a plan ... we stick to our plans.”

Planning is a foundational aspect of school culture that underpins the sustainability and long-term success of secondary schools. The data highlights that effective planning in the school is characterised by its inclusivity, proactivity, and structured approach. According to the Principal, planning is a collective responsibility distributed among various committees, ensuring that the school operates in an organised manner rather than reacting to crises. This collaborative effort aligns with literature that emphasises shared leadership and participatory planning as critical for fostering school improvement and achieving educational goals (Mukua-Marua et al., 2023; Sarong, 2024). The Principal also underscored the importance of tools such as timetables and annual teaching plans to ensure curriculum coverage and learner achievement, reflecting findings by Farhang et al. (2023), who argues that systematic instructional planning directly impacts teaching effectiveness and student outcomes. Moreover, the involvement of diverse stakeholders, including the School Governing Body and parents, further reinforces the communal nature of planning within the school. The Deputy Principal’s account confirms that planning processes are not confined to staff alone but are extended to the broader school community to reflect shared goals and accountability. This participatory

approach aligns with Lee and Louis (2019) view that sustainable school cultures thrive when there is collective responsibility and engagement among all stakeholders. Teacher One's affirmation that plans are collectively developed and adhered to demonstrates commitment and ownership, which are essential for consistent implementation and continuous school progress. Thus, the collaborative and systematic nature of planning, as demonstrated in the school, is vital for its sustainability and long-term success.

5. Teamwork

Teamwork emerged as a significant component of the school's culture and a key factor in fostering a sustainable and cohesive school environment. Participants consistently emphasised the value of unity, collaboration, and mutual support among staff, learners, and the broader school community. Teacher Two highlighted the school's emphasis on maintaining harmony and collaboration: *"You won't just find us fighting with one another in our school; we prefer unity and teamwork."* They further acknowledged that while differences may arise, the staff are intentional about maintaining unity: *"You know that when people are together, some differences might come, but we ensure that we absorb our differences and remain as a team."* In elaborating on the collective spirit within the school, Teacher Two added, *"We are working as a team, and we always pray that our spirit stays united even through life's ups and downs. We discourage division among colleagues. We love unity and promote it in everything we do. We know that united we stand, divided we fall."* The Principal also affirmed the school's culture of support and collaboration among staff: *"I cannot say I have teachers who are troublesome. I don't have problems with teachers. We are working as a team by giving adequate support to one another. When a staff member is not coping with what he or she is supposed to do, we assist such a person. We are not interested in the downfall of any staff in our school."* The Deputy Principal acknowledged that although occasional disagreements occur, they do not undermine the overall spirit of teamwork: *"Though we might have our little differences, there is an agreement between teachers and SMT in everything we do."* Moreover, teamwork extended beyond the staff to include collaboration with learners, parents, and the wider community. Teacher Two illustrated this broader engagement: *"We (school staff) team up with parents, learners, and community members to plan what we need to do in the school. For example, during the Grade 12 parent meeting, we addressed issues such as the R30 contribution for the matric dance and sweater orders. The parents gave their input, and we all*

concluded and agreed as a team.”

Teamwork stands out as a foundational value within the school’s culture, playing a critical role in fostering sustainability and long-term success. The data reveal that collaboration and unity are actively promoted among staff, learners, parents, and the broader community. As Teacher Two emphasised, the school intentionally manages differences and nurtures a collective spirit to maintain harmony, reflecting the well-known principle that “united we stand, divided we fall.” This collective approach aligns with literature highlighting teamwork as essential for creating a supportive and resilient school environment, where mutual trust and shared responsibility enhance both staff morale and student outcomes (Cojorn, 2024; Sarong, 2024). The Principal’s remarks reinforce this perspective, emphasising supportive peer relationships and assistance for struggling colleagues, which research shows is vital for teacher retention and professional growth (Barker Scott & Manning, 2024). Moreover, teamwork is depicted as extending beyond the teaching staff to actively include learners, parents, and the community, illustrating a holistic, collaborative approach to school governance. The Deputy Principal’s acknowledgement of occasional disagreements, coupled with overall agreement on shared goals, suggests a mature team dynamic that can constructively manage conflict, an important characteristic for sustainable organisational culture (Paredes-Saavedra et al., 2024). Teacher Two’s example of involving parents and learners in decision-making reflects the Department of Basic Education’s (2016) framework of school-parent-community engagement as a critical element for student success and school improvement. Overall, the data suggest that teamwork, rooted in shared vision and collaborative action, forms a core pillar for the school’s ongoing sustainability and positive climate.

6. Role modelling

Participants highlighted that role modelling is a vital component of school culture, reinforcing positive behaviour among both staff and learners. It emerged as a strategy that fosters discipline, commitment, and shared responsibility, contributing to the long-term success of the school. The Departmental Head emphasised the importance of punctuality among staff as a way of modelling expected behaviour for learners: *“We discourage late coming a lot in our school. In fact, we, as school leaders and teachers, see late coming as misconduct because you cannot expect learners to come to school earlier while we come late. We set an example for our students to follow. That is why they hardly come late to school.”* On the importance of

meeting deadlines, the Departmental Head further stated, *“As the head, you must lead by example. If we agree on the due date, you must be the first one, if not the second one, to submit. So, if I can be an example in doing what is right, the rest will follow.”* The Principal echoed similar sentiments about leading by example: *“As a principal, because I am a leader, I lead by example. If you lead by example, they [other staff members] will be able to follow.”* In addition to modelling behaviour among staff, the Principal also described how the school leverages external and internal role models to inspire learners, especially during critical academic periods: *“We invite the role model before they [learners] go for examinations to motivate them before exams. Role models are the important figures in the community—those whose good practices we can emulate. We also invite our former learners who are successful to show the current learners that things are possible.”*

Role modelling is recognised by participants as a foundational element of school culture that significantly influences the behaviour and attitudes of both staff and learners, thereby enhancing the sustainability and long-term success of secondary schools. Consistent with Bandura (2014) social learning theory, which highlights the power of observational learning and imitation, the Departmental Head and Principal emphasised that school leaders must exemplify punctuality, discipline, and commitment. When leaders demonstrate these behaviours, such as discouraging late arrival and meeting deadlines, they establish clear expectations that staff and learners are more likely to internalise and replicate. This alignment between leaders’ actions and school values fosters a culture of shared responsibility and accountability, which is crucial for maintaining order and promoting academic excellence (Culduz, 2024; Plaku & Leka, 2025). Moreover, role modelling extends beyond internal leadership to include community figures and successful alumni who serve as tangible examples of achievement and perseverance. Inviting respected role models to motivate learners before critical periods, such as examinations, provides inspiration and reinforces the belief that success is attainable. This practice aligns with the literature suggesting that positive role models can increase students’ motivation, self-efficacy, and goal orientation (Zhao & Ma, 2025). Therefore, by embedding role modelling within the school culture, secondary schools create an environment that nurtures positive behaviour and academic commitment, supporting their long-term development and success.

7. Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation emerged as a key school culture contributing to the overall effectiveness, accountability, and sustainability of the school. Participants highlighted various monitoring systems, tools, and practices aimed at improving teaching, learner performance, discipline, and professional development. Teacher Three described the role of Heads of Department in supporting teachers through ongoing monitoring: *“HODs, as they are called, are doing that assessment and monitoring of educators just to help them (educators) to improve where they left off.”* The Principal outlined formal structures in place for evaluating academic progress and addressing underperformance: *“We have monitoring tools. Departmental Heads, on a monthly basis, do audits for written work output. Where there is poor performance, there must be reasons, and there must be strategies to address poor performance. ... Syllabi coverage is very important.”* The Departmental Head reinforced this by highlighting routine monitoring of learners’ work: *“Every month as the HOD, I collect class and homework activity books and check the activities that educators are giving in the class or to write at home.”* Teacher Three emphasised the value of attendance monitoring tools used to ensure that lessons are conducted consistently: *“There will be period registers. It will be given to monitor and make sure that every day when we (teachers) leave the class after finishing the lesson, we sign to show that we have been to class that day.”* She further added, *“The school has educators that go to classes to monitor them (teachers) if they are doing what is expected of them.”*

The Departmental Head also explained the school’s proactive approach: *“We would rather come earlier, and we monitor what is going on, because we even have morning lessons.”* Teacher Three provided insight into how learner performance is monitored and addressed: *“In terms of monitoring the performance, the principal, every month-end, after monthly tests are written, will tell us (teachers) to compile a schedule to monitor the performance of the learners and to intervene where there is a need. ... Where he (principal) discovers some irregularities, he will sit down with the teacher concerned and highlight such. I believe this has led to our consistent good academic performance.”* On the professional development side, Teacher Two spoke about peer evaluation and mentorship through the IQMS (Integrated Quality Management System): *“We do peer evaluation through the programme called IQMS. ... For some development, you fill in a document—the PGP. Mentoring happens depending on the HOD. Some have supportive HODs ... others are headed by harsh people.”* The Principal expanded on how IQMS and other professional development tools are implemented: *“The*

IQMS we are doing is to develop ourselves. We are having a committee where we have developmental support groups (DSG), comprising of the senior and the peer teacher. ... They develop a PGP, which is addressed quarterly during preparation for summative assessment in the fourth term.” Teacher Three pointed to the broader school self-evaluation process: *“Another one is called self-school evaluation, which is also used to evaluate the school, the progress, and other things.”*

Monitoring and evaluation are critical components of school culture that significantly contribute to the sustainability and long-term success of secondary schools by promoting accountability, continuous improvement, and academic excellence. The data shows that schools employ systematic and multifaceted monitoring mechanisms, such as regular audits of learners’ written work, attendance registers, and performance tracking, to identify areas needing intervention. These practices align with literature that underlines the importance of structured monitoring systems in enhancing teaching quality and learner outcomes (Ajani, 2023; Meng, 2023). For example, the Principal’s monthly review of academic progress and the Departmental Heads’ regular collection and assessment of homework demonstrate an embedded culture of accountability and proactive management, which are essential for sustaining high performance in schools (Ehren & Bachmann, 2020). Furthermore, the integration of professional development through mechanisms like the Integrated Quality Management System and peer evaluation reflects a commitment to staff growth and reflective practice, key drivers of school improvement (Steyn, 2019). The inclusion of mentoring, personal growth plans, and developmental support groups fosters a collaborative environment where teachers receive targeted support to enhance their instructional skills. This is consistent with research highlighting that effective monitoring combined with ongoing teacher development leads to improved instructional quality and learner achievement (Fuchs et al., 2025). Additionally, the practice of school self-evaluation indicates a culture of self-reflection and shared responsibility, which is vital for sustained institutional success and adaptability in dynamic educational contexts (Barry et al., 2024).

8. Effective communication

Effective communication emerged as a critical element of the school's culture, contributing significantly to its smooth operations, stakeholder involvement, and overall sustainability. Participants highlighted a range of communication strategies employed to ensure information

flows efficiently among staff, learners, parents, and the broader community. The Departmental Head explained the multiple channels used for daily communication among staff and with external stakeholders: *“We use various ways of communication. We have a WhatsApp group, which is faster and easier to access than emails. We also use briefings, an information book, telephone calls, and the school landline to communicate with parents.”* Teacher Two emphasised the practicality and efficiency of digital communication platforms: *“As educators, we have a WhatsApp group where every document reaches us very easily. On these platforms, we can stay informed about important matters and urgent tasks so that things don’t fall apart in our school.”* Teacher Three pointed out the use of SMS communication, especially in engaging parents: *“SMS’s are used, especially when we want to inform parents about meetings.”* The Principal highlighted the innovative use of local media to reach the community: *“Sometimes we go to the local radio station to broadcast important information, for example, during holidays, to remind choir learners to come to school.”*

The Deputy Principal reiterated the usefulness of the radio station: *“When we want to call for a parent’s meeting, our local radio station helps us to pass on the message.”* Teacher One mentioned how written communication is used to ensure parent preparedness: *“We have a letter listing all the requirements for the December holidays so parents can prepare for the following year. It makes things easier.”* They also noted how communication extends to behavioural issues: *“If learners misbehave, we involve the parents through invitation letters.”* Teacher One further elaborated on open communication with leadership, using an example of direct engagement with the principal: *“When I have something to say, I go talk to the principal. For instance, I suggested that the helpers who were only cleaning the offices also help clean the Grade 8 classes. The principal agreed, and the helpers now clean those classrooms too.”* Teacher Three discussed how communication involves feedback as part of continuous improvement: *“We get feedback from management, and both management and teachers give feedback to learners, parents, and other stakeholders. Feedback includes performance reviews for both teachers and learners, highlighting strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.”*

Effective communication is a fundamental component of school culture and a core value that supports the sustainability and long-term success of secondary schools. The data indicates that the school utilises diverse communication channels, including digital platforms like WhatsApp, SMS, and local radio broadcasts, to ensure timely and effective information sharing among

staff, learners, parents, and the wider community. Such multi-modal communication fosters transparency, strengthens relationships, and enhances stakeholder engagement, which are essential for creating a cohesive and supportive educational environment (Fisher, 2021; Manoharan et al., 2024). Moreover, the use of both formal and informal communication methods, ranging from written letters to direct conversations with school leadership, reflects an inclusive culture where feedback loops are established, allowing continuous improvement and responsiveness to the needs of learners and staff alike. This aligns with the literature emphasising that effective communication not only facilitates operational efficiency but also builds trust and a sense of community within schools, which in turn promotes a positive school climate (Özgenel, 2020). The feedback mechanisms highlighted by participants demonstrate an ongoing dialogue that supports accountability and the professional development of both teachers and learners (Mousena & Raptis, 2021). By ensuring that communication is clear, timely, and accessible, schools can better coordinate efforts, address challenges proactively, and maintain stakeholder commitment, all of which contribute to their resilience and sustained success in the dynamic educational landscape.

Recommendations

1. Foster a collaborative and values-driven school culture: School principals, senior management teams, and educators should lead efforts to cultivate a values-driven school culture anchored in discipline, teamwork, mutual respect, and care. This can be achieved through consistent role modelling by staff, inclusive rule-making involving learners, and fostering a strong sense of community among all school stakeholders. Structures such as the Representative Council of Learners, staff development committees, and regular values-based assemblies can support the institutionalisation of these values. Promoting collective responsibility for behaviour management and creating a caring, empathetic school ethos will enhance learner well-being, staff morale, and academic focus. By embedding such values into everyday school life, schools can build cohesive and resilient environments that contribute meaningfully to their long-term sustainability and success.

2. Strengthen community engagement and partnerships: School leaders, school governing bodies, and parent-teacher associations should actively develop and maintain partnerships with families, local organisations, faith-based groups, and community stakeholders. This can involve inviting community members to participate in school activities, organising joint

school-community initiatives such as cultural events and sports tournaments, and creating platforms for dialogue between schools and families. Additionally, leveraging local resources, such as skills, facilities, and financial contributions, can improve school infrastructure and support for disadvantaged learners. The significance of this recommendation lies in building a shared identity and promoting collective ownership of the school's success. Effective community involvement enhances learner support, boosts morale, and creates a support system that sustains the school beyond the efforts of educators alone.

3. Implement inclusive, systematic planning and monitoring: School leadership teams, in collaboration with departmental heads, teachers, and SGBs, should establish inclusive and systematic planning and monitoring frameworks. This includes regular strategic planning sessions involving all stakeholders, using tools such as annual teaching plans, performance review schedules, and school improvement plans. Monitoring should be both academic and operational, tracking learner progress, teacher performance, attendance, and curriculum coverage. Implementing professional development programmes like the Integrated Quality Management System, peer mentoring, and self-evaluation workshops can support continuous teacher growth. Inclusive planning ensures shared accountability and a clear roadmap for development, while consistent monitoring supports timely interventions and sustained performance. Together, these processes foster a proactive school culture that is well-equipped to adapt and thrive over time.

4. Promote effective communication and positive role modelling: Effective communication should be prioritised by school principals, administrative staff, and teacher leaders through the use of diverse, accessible, and reliable platforms such as WhatsApp groups, newsletters, local radio, SMS, and community meetings. These channels should be used not only to share information but also to collect feedback and encourage open dialogue among stakeholders. In parallel, principals, teachers, and community figures should actively serve as role models by demonstrating punctuality, responsibility, and a commitment to excellence. Schools can formalise this by hosting motivational talks by alumni, recognising exemplary staff and student behaviour, and embedding character education into the curriculum. These practices build a culture of trust, reinforce core values, and inspire learners to emulate positive behaviours. In the long term, strong communication and role-modelling practices support an inclusive, transparent, and high-performing school environment.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted that the sustainability and long-term success of secondary schools are deeply rooted in a holistic school culture characterised by discipline, strong ethos, community involvement, systematic planning, teamwork, role modelling, monitoring and evaluation, and effective communication. These interrelated values and practices collectively foster environments where academic excellence and social development thrive. The participatory nature of school governance, coupled with a nurturing and inclusive community, creates resilient institutions capable of adapting to challenges while maintaining focus on shared goals. Ultimately, sustainable secondary schools are those that invest consistently in cultivating positive relationships, collective responsibility, and continuous improvement, thereby producing not only successful learners but also responsible citizens prepared to contribute meaningfully to society.

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