



What is school culture? Proposing a new, integrative model

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Abstract

For decades, the term ‘school culture’ has been widely used in scholarly, policy, and popular discussions of education, school reform, and school leadership. Yet, school culture remains an abstract term, and different definitions abound. Moreover, important research on aspects of the school environment often does not fall under the purview of school culture research. Drawing from recent work in organizational sociology and cultural sociology, we develop a model that is both more expansive and more specified, accounting for different sources (formal, informal, environmental) and forms (meanings, practices) of school culture. This model views school culture as not only *official* and *top-down* but also as *emergent* and *situated* and highlights the role of alignment across key elements of a school’s culture. Examples from two very different schools – a ‘no excuses’ charter middle school and a ‘progressive’ high school – illustrate elements of the model and patterns of alignment/misalignment. This model can aid scholars, policymakers, and practitioners interested in understanding and, ultimately, improving school culture.

Keywords

Culture, organizational theory, school climate, school contexts, school culture, school improvement

Introduction

For decades, the term ‘school culture’ has been widely used in scholarly, policy, and popular discussions of education, school reform, and school leadership. Reform efforts

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often target school culture, and research has linked characteristics of a school's culture to a host of outcomes, including improved student learning (Bryk, 2010; Leithwood and Sun, 2018), students' college aspirations (Holland, 2019; Noll, 2022; Nunn, 2014), teacher trust and collaboration (Bristol and Shirrell, 2019; Hargreaves, 1994; Van Maele and Van Houtte, 2011), school improvement (Deal and Peterson, 2016; Lee and Louis, 2019), and equity (Harvey, 2022; Liera, 2020). Yet, despite its wide use, school culture is an abstract term, and different definitions abound. Moreover, important research on aspects of the school environment – like peer networks (Ispa-Landa, 2013; McFarland et al., 2014), disciplinary climate (Drake, 2022; Golann, 2021; Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Nolan, 2011; Paulle, 2013), and accountability pressures (Diamond, 2007; Hallett, 2010; Jennings, 2010; Turner, 2020) – often does not fall under the purview of school culture research. The result is a lack of coherence in the field that prevents mutual understanding or knowledge development.

To address these problems, we propose a model of school culture that both brings order to the currently disparate literature and facilitates empirical analysis of this consequential, yet often nebulous, dimension of school life. Drawing from recent work in organizational sociology and cultural sociology, we develop a model that accounts for different sources (formal, informal, environmental) and forms (meanings, practices) of school culture. Our model views school culture as not only *official* and *top-down* but also as *emergent* and *situated* and highlights the role of alignment across key elements of a school's culture. After outlining our model, we use the examples of two very different school settings – a 'no excuses' middle school and a 'progressive' high school – to illustrate the various components. We chose these two schools, both located in cities in the Northeastern United States, because they were the subjects of extensive ethnographic data collection and have different goals and orientations. As our goal is to make a theoretical contribution to the existing understanding of school culture, we use empirical data not to advance an argument about the schools but to illuminate the ways our model can unpack key dimensions of school culture and their intersections in two quite dissimilar school contexts.

Importantly, the concept of school culture can have multiple uses. School leaders and reformers who target school culture tend to see it as a set of practices and norms that either do or do not promote positive outcomes. In this piece, we are agnostic about whether a particular element of a school's culture is desirable. Instead, we take a more analytic approach, unpacking the various elements that comprise shared meanings and practices. Our hope is that this model can be useful to scholars interested in school culture by providing theoretical tools they can use to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the school environment. Currently, scholars who are aware of the importance of school culture and interested in understanding the social life of schools can be hard-pressed to know where to begin with such an amorphous concept. Our model could be helpful here, as it both identifies key elements of school culture and calls attention to the ways in which they manifest in an empirically observable fashion. Moreover, it speaks to the multi-modal nature of culture, suggesting scholars may use different methodological approaches depending on their area of interest and empirical questions.

School culture in educational research

Research on school culture has its roots in the study of organizational culture, which emerged as a distinct field in the late 1970s and early 1980s (though early organization scholars had previously called attention to the importance of norms, values, and social interaction in unpacking informal dynamics within organizations (Barnard, 1938). Interest in organizational culture grew in part due to research on Japanese management practices, such as long-term employment and socialization, which were seen as sources of workforce loyalty and commitment (Lincoln and Kalleberg, 1985; Ouchi, 1981). Culture became a way to explain differences in performance across organizations (Peters and Waterman, 1982). As academics analyzed cultural factors, popular business writings also stressed leadership and culture as levers for effectiveness and higher performance. This resulted in a proliferation of bestselling books in the 1980s focused on culture as a strategic imperative for managers (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Peters and Austin, 1985; Peters and Waterman, 1982).

Meanwhile, as education researchers and practitioners responded to external pressures for school improvement, they embraced the culture concept, with the managerialist conception from the business world shaping the emerging study of school culture (Prosser, 1999). To this day, the academic and practitioner discourse on school culture remains largely centered on culture as a leader-controlled mechanism for improvement (Gruenert and Whitaker, 2015; Lemov et al., 2022). This work often takes a normative stance, distinguishing between schools with ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ cultures, rather than trying to understand shared patterns of meanings and practices. For example, in *School Culture Rewired*, Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) describe culture as ‘essentially a social indoctrination of unwritten rules that people learn as they try to fit into a particular group’ (p. 6). They go on to provide a typology of school cultures, from ‘collaborative’ (the most desirable) to ‘toxic’ (the least) and offer school leaders a survey they can use to assess their own school culture (pp. 81–83).

The managerial nature of so much of the work on school culture (e.g. Gruenert and Whitaker, 2015; Lemov et al., 2022) means that existing models tend to treat school leaders as the key shapers of school culture, likely underestimating the impact of other adults and, importantly, students. An assumption underlying the managerial perspective is that an organization with a unified and coherent culture will perform better (Wang and Lounsbury, 2021). Thus, studies of school culture tend to relate school culture to educational effectiveness, frequently using surveys to assess teachers’ views of levels of collegiality, reflective practice, trust and respect, expectations, leadership, and other dimensions of their work (Dumay, 2009; Lee and Louis, 2019; Louis and Lee, 2016; Maslowski, 2006). Rarely is the informal culture created by students included in studies of school culture. Such a perspective risks neglecting cultural dynamics related to issues like alienation, conflict, and inequality (Martin, 1992; Seo and Creed, 2002) and misses how informal (sub)cultures may or may not align with the official aims of the organization.

In addition to this top-down managerial focus, the research lacks a shared conceptualization of what exactly constitutes school culture (Erickson, 1987). Conceptualizations of school culture have been both broad and narrow. Broad definitions of school culture

– like ‘beliefs, values, habits, and assumed ways of doing things’ (Hargreaves, 1994: 165) or ‘school’s unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations’ (Deal and Peterson, 2016: 6) – encompass almost all aspects of schools and may be difficult to operationalize. In contrast, narrow definitions tend to identify specific practices or attitudes like ‘academic press’ and ‘trust and respect among teachers’ (Louis and Lee, 2016) or professionalism, organizational structure, quality of learning environment, and student-centered focus (Schoen and Teddlie, 2008). While important to the project of school improvement, such narrow conceptions do not speak to other aspects of the social life of schools, such as the cultural models students bring to school or even norms and expectations for behavior. Finally, with both broad and narrow definitions, researchers emphasize what is happening within organizations rather than how organizations are shaped by what happens outside of them. From an ‘open systems’ perspective, which informs most contemporary organizational theory (Scott and Davis, 2015), researchers ought to attend to the role of the school’s social context, which can have a powerful impact on the social life of schools, affecting level and type of resources, adult and student meaning-making, decision-making, and many other dynamics.

Importantly, the broader context and student and teacher subcultures are not absent in educational research on schools. They are not, however, typically present in studies explicitly focused on school culture. We refer to the literature that discusses ‘culture *in* schools’ rather than the ‘culture *of* schools’ as ‘school culture adjacent’. In terms of the importance of cultural context, work in the Inhabited Institutions tradition, for example, investigates how teachers and students within schools make sense of and adapt to new structures and cultural models originating from the broader policy and institutional environment (Hallett, 2010; Nunn, 2014; Reyes, 2015). In addition, an important strand of educational research examines the potential mismatch between the cultural capital students bring with them from their family and the school’s cultural expectations (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Lareau, 2011).

In terms of informal culture in schools, extant work has examined teachers’ beliefs, informal interactions, and social networks and their connections to formal culture (Berebitsky and Salloum, 2017; Horn et al., 2020). In addition, a large body of literature covers student-focused dynamics such as interpretive reproduction (Corsaro, 2017) and cultural production and resistance (Willis, 1977), as well as the varying values and practices of student cultures (Coleman, 1961; Pascoe, 2011). Such studies of the informal nature of teacher and student life are typically carried out not only in isolation from each other, but separately from an investigation into the broader cultural dynamics of the school. The aim of our integrative model is to both broaden our conceptualization of school culture by including important aspects of contemporary organizational and cultural theory and to integrate the ‘school culture adjacent’ literature into the explicit study of school culture.

Given the current state of school culture research, we ask: *What are the key elements of school culture and how can researchers study them? How can school culture be conceptualized in a way that accounts for its complexity and breadth?* In the following section, we propose a model for the study of school culture that is analytic rather than normative, and that offers a conceptualization of culture that is neither overly broad nor unhelpfully narrow.

An integrative model of school culture

Given the disparate nature of contemporary literature on or related to school culture, we turn to scholarship in organizational culture and the sociology of culture to develop a model of school culture that is grounded in recent advances in these fields.¹ Our model, as displayed in Table 1, presents three *sources* of school culture (formal, informal, and environmental) and two *forms* of school culture (meanings and practices). Together, these create the six dimensions (or elements) in our model.²

First, drawing from literature on organizational culture, we distinguish between *formal*, *informal*, and *environmental* sources of organizational culture (Chatman and O'Reilly, 2016; Denison, 1990; Scott and Davis, 2015; Van den Berg and Wilderom, 2004). Formal sources – the focus of much prior school culture literature – represent official, top-down organizational culture as promulgated by the school itself. Informal sources refer to the unofficial subcultures of students and teachers developed through interactions and shaped by identities and experiences. Environmental sources encompass the ways the broader context in which the school is situated shape culture within. Organizations are open systems, embedded within and shaped by their local (i.e. proximate) and institutional (social, cultural, economic, political, etc.) environments. As mentioned earlier, most research on informal and organizational sources, such as peer networks and institutional logics, has hitherto resided outside of the school culture field.

Second, borrowing from the sociology of culture, we differentiate between cultural *meanings* and cultural *practices* (Lizardo, 2017; Patterson, 2014; Simko and Olick, 2021). Cultural meanings include the ways in which people think – the beliefs, values, frames, and schemas that individuals and groups share within a given society. These meanings serve as cognitive frameworks that shape how people perceive the world, interpret experiences, and make sense of their social reality. Cultural practices, on the other hand, refer to how people act – the tangible and observable actions undertaken by individuals or collectives. Cultural practices range from individual skills, dispositions, and habits to collective routines and rituals.

We define school culture as the shared practices and meanings unique to a particular school that shape and are shaped by participants' experiences.³ Intersecting our cultural sources and cultural forms results in six dimensions of school culture (see Table 1 for questions to ask and examples of what to look for to identify each dimension):

1. **Formal cultural meanings** refer to the school's official purposes, values, beliefs, narratives, and frames. Formal meanings can be found in organizational artifacts like mission statements, organizational vocabularies, and organizational stories and myths (Deal and Peterson, 2016; Stemler et al., 2011).
2. **Formal cultural practices** refer to the school's official policies, procedures, rituals, materials, and design. Formal practices include disciplinary policies, explicit organizational routines, school traditions, teacher evaluation forms, and even the structure of the school day (Doyle, 1986; Skiba, 2000).
3. **Informal cultural meanings** refer to the values, beliefs, narratives, frames, and assumptions found in teacher and student subcultures. These might include

Table 1. Six dimensions of school culture.

	Formal (organizational)	Informal	Environmental
Cultural meanings	<p>Box 1</p> <p>Ask: What are the organizational purposes, values, and narratives explicitly communicated through formal structures and processes?</p> <p>Look for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mission statements• Stories of school's founding• Core values <p>(E.g., Strive is a 'no excuses' school)</p>	<p>Box 3</p> <p>Ask: What are the informal beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions that emerge among organizational members, and how do they interact with formal structures and processes?</p> <p>Look for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students' attitudes toward school or teachers• Teachers' views of students <p>(E.g., Bell students were often skeptical of content that seemed unlikely to have a material impact on their lives)</p>	<p>Box 5</p> <p>Ask: What beliefs, values and assumptions rooted in the school's social, cultural, economic, and political environment influence formal and informal organizational meanings and practices?</p> <p>Look for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community beliefs about quality of school• District-level narratives about school reform <p>(E.g., Strive was under significant pressure to show annual improvements in students' test scores)</p>
Cultural practices	<p>Box 2</p> <p>Ask: What are the official policies, practices, and structures of the organization?</p> <p>Look for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Disciplinary policies• Official school routines• Teacher evaluation forms <p>(E.g., Bell used the student-run 'Community Council' to handle many discipline issues)</p>	<p>Box 4</p> <p>Ask: What are the informal practices and norms that emerge among organizational members, and how do they interact with formal structures and processes?</p> <p>Look for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Patterns of teacher collaboration• Student dress and comportment <p>(E.g., Strive students regularly engaged in small acts of resistance in the classroom)</p>	<p>Box 6</p> <p>Ask: What practices, constraints and affordances rooted in the school's social, cultural, economic, and political environment influence formal and informal organizational meanings and practices?</p> <p>Look for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• District-level policies• Types of resources in the community <p>(E.g., In the face of scarce resources, Bell educators 'made do' with less)</p>

attitudes toward school and the views teachers and students have of each other (Calarco, 2018; Corsaro, 2017; Hallett, 2010; Horn et al., 2020).

4. **Informal cultural practices** include the rules of thumb, norms, habits, and informal networks present in teacher and student subcultures. These practices include how various members of the school communicate with one another, whether (and how) teachers tend to collaborate, norms for teacher-student relationships, or how students and adults dress (Diehl, 2019; Eder, 1985; Jurasaitė-Harbison and Rex, 2010).

5. **Environmental cultural meanings** are beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, frames, and values that circulate outside of the school but impact school-level meanings and practices. At the local level, this might include beliefs about the quality or efficacy of the school, while at the institutional level it may include policy ideas about the major problems facing contemporary education. At both levels, teachers and students may themselves hold or resist these environmental cultural meanings. For example, students may feel pressured to perform because of discourses circulating in their families or communities, or teachers in schools serving low-income students may be influenced by deficit ideas about poverty and achievement (Cobb, 2017; Diehl and Golann, 2023; Nunn, 2014).
6. **Environmental cultural practices** refer to practices, constraints, and affordances rooted in contexts outside of the school that, in turn, influence school-level meanings and practices. These can be accountability measures, school funding, levels and types of resources in the community, or cultural practices such as musical habits or ways of dressing that impact life within the school (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Spillane et al., 2011).

Bringing together the formal/informal/environmental and meaning/practice creates a typology that can aid researchers and practitioners alike in understanding the multifaceted nature of school culture. We view school culture as emergent (i.e. the outcome of local and ongoing negotiation between and among adults and students) and situated (i.e. school culture is shaped by the nature of the school's embeddedness both locally and institutionally). In other words, school culture is not only designed by school leaders but is refracted through teachers' and students' own understandings and practices. Moreover, school culture is shaped by the neighborhoods in which schools are located and the broader social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which schools operate. Finally, identifying different forms and sources of culture helps us recognize areas of tension and complementarity within schools.

Our model is intended as an analytical tool to help researchers investigate how and why school-level patterns of behavior emerge – both those educators might find desirable and those that might seem troubling. It can guide inquiry into questions such as: Why do two schools with identical formal meanings and practices (as laid out in mission statements and handbooks) have very different on-the-ground cultures? Why does a particular reform work well in an affluent school but not at all in an under-resourced school? Why do disconnections often arise between what schools say they value and what actually happens in classrooms and hallways? How are school-level meanings and practices impacted by the community and policy environment?

Building on previous work on the alignment between purposes and practices (Mehta and Fine, 2015), we take a wider lens, one that incorporates all six elements of the model and looks at alignment across multiple domains. Both informal and environmental aspects of school culture can bolster or undermine formal aspects – making it easier or harder for the school to achieve its official goals. Tensions between meanings and practices are also important to consider, as what people say does not always match what they do (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014). A school, for instance, may espouse a student-centered

approach but rely on traditional didactic teaching practices. Focusing on these cross-category interactions can help us understand why and in what respects aspects of school culture do or do not reinforce one another.

Our model of school culture makes several contributions. First, it is a conceptual model that uses theoretical tools derived from recent advances in the study of culture and organizations to examine the different dimensions of school culture, dimensions that are often muddled or overlooked in existing literature. Second, it is a comprehensive model that casts a wider net to encompass research and topics that have typically fallen outside of the field of school culture. Given that relevant work (the ‘school culture adjacent’ literature) is scattered across multiple research traditions and uses an array of terms, a comprehensive model can help to build shared knowledge by offering a common vocabulary on which to draw. For example, our model includes two factors often overlooked in school culture research: the role of students and the impact of social context. Third, our cross-category model highlights alignments and misalignments across dimensions. School culture is a complex amalgam of parts, and understanding this complexity can help researchers, practitioners, and policymakers identify where conflicts might emerge, say, between formal school policies and informal teacher practices, or where complementarities can be developed to foster school cultures that promote student learning and well-being (Mehta and Fine, 2015). Fourth, in contrast to normative views of school culture – which often evaluate culture as existing on a continuum between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ (e.g. Lee and Louis, 2019) – our model offers an analytic tool for identifying the multiple dimensions along which school culture can vary. In addition, it can help researchers and practitioners identify where cultural alignment or misalignment exists, and how different sources and forms of culture interact – sometimes in harmonious ways, and sometimes in ways that produce conflict or exclusion.

Applying the model

To demonstrate how this model can be used in studying school culture, we draw from two case studies, conducted separately by the first and second authors, of schools in high-poverty urban areas in the Northeastern United States. We chose these schools because both were the focus of intensive ethnographic fieldwork that captured shared routines, meanings, and practices as well as the perspectives of different stakeholders. In addition, though the schools are in similar social contexts (they are both in high-poverty urban areas and serve largely students of color), they respond to the context in quite different ways, with one school emphasizing relationships and student interests and the other emphasizing order and academic rigor. Finally, both schools are more deliberate than is often the case about promoting particular norms and practices, making them especially useful with respect to illuminating the elements of school culture. As noted previously, we use these cases not to make an empirical argument but to show how our model of school culture can capture the richness and nuances of daily life in many types of schools.

The first school, which we call Bell High, is an urban ‘progressive’ (or student-centered) high school serving 400 students in grades 9–12. Eighty-eight percent of Bell’s students identified as Black, 8% as Latino, and 3% as multi-racial.⁴ The vast majority

lived in low-income families. Bell's teaching staff was racially diverse, and teachers generally had at least 5–10 years of experience. The second school, which we call Strive Academy, is an urban 'no excuses' charter middle school serving approximately 250 students in grades 5–8. About two-thirds of students at Strive were Black and one-third were Latino, and 84% received free or reduced-price school lunch. Strive teachers were mostly White and relatively young and inexperienced. The first author conducted nearly 300 hours of fieldwork at Bell High over a three-year period, beginning in fall 2019, and 32 interviews with students and staff. The second author conducted 15 months of fieldwork at Strive Academy between 2012–2013 and over 100 interviews. They each collected and analyzed a variety of documents. In both cases, the researchers were participant-observers with no official role or goal of impacting the schools. They observed in classrooms and other spaces, volunteering when it was helpful, but otherwise remaining in the background.

Strive Academy and Bell High are distinct from most other schools in the U.S. in two important ways. First, unlike most schools in the U.S., which operate on a neighborhood model (with smaller elementary and middle schools feeding into large high schools), they are schools of choice. Strive and Bell are located in urban areas, where elements of school choice – in which students elect an option other than their neighborhood school – have become increasingly common.⁵ Strive is a charter school, which means it is publicly funded but privately run. Charter schools generally exist as alternatives to traditional public schools and often have particular themes or areas of focus (e.g. Strive's 'no excuses' identity). Students must apply for admissions, but most charter schools do not have admissions criteria. Instead, like Strive, they operate on a first-come, first-served basis, with additional applicants going into a lottery. Bell, part of the public school district's efforts to create opportunities for innovation within the district, represents another form of school choice. Bell and other similar schools are still operated by the district but have more autonomy and ability to be innovative than traditional public schools. With its focus on competency-based instruction and strong relationships between students and adults, Bell attracted students interested in this model who, like many Strive students, wanted to avoid their neighborhood public school. Bell is nonselective: there are no admissions criteria, and nearly all interested students were able to enroll.

Second, Strive Academy and Bell High are distinct from most other schools in the U.S. in that they are relatively new and were designed with explicit visions for curriculum, teaching, and interactions between educators and students. For example, Strive was designed to be highly structured, while Bell's founders wanted to create a place where students could take ownership over their own learning. Whereas in the vast majority of schools – both in the U.S. and more broadly – meanings and practices have been inherited or evolved over time in response to a host of conflicting forces and demands, creating far less coherency, at Strive and Bell school leaders were quite intentional about promoting routines and goals aligned with the schools' missions. Yet even within these two schools, we see how complex culture is and the ways that everyday meanings and practices can undermine even the most well-articulated design.

We begin unpacking our model by first using examples from the schools to illustrate each 'box'. Then, because a key tenet of our model is that school culture is a function of the intersections between different elements, we turn to relationships *between* the boxes,

again using the two schools to show how the model allows us to understand school culture as constituted by different elements and by their intersections. We demonstrate that an analysis of points of alignment and lack of alignment across a school's culture can provide important insights into its successes and challenges.

Examples of school culture in action

Formal cultural meanings (Box 1) – Strive

Strive marketed itself as a 'no excuses' school. On its website, it articulates this philosophy as a commitment by the school to take responsibility for ensuring that all students are prepared for college and refusing to make race, poverty, or low academic skills an excuse for why students cannot achieve. Core to the no-excuses model is setting high expectations for all students. As the director of the school explained:

We educate all of our children, every single one of our children, to college readiness standards. We don't treat our students with disabilities or English language proficiency issues or anything like that, we don't treat them any differently. Every single one of our students [is] educated to college level standards.

This 'no excuses' mind-set runs counter to the low expectations that are often placed on students of color and students with special needs.

Formal cultural practices (Box 2) – Bell

Bell used a restorative justice approach to discipline. This means that rather than moving to punish students for breaking school rules, the school focuses on repairing harm and rebuilding relationships (Fronius et al., 2019). Signs hanging in classrooms outlined steps in the process, from 'making it right' restorative conversations to referral to 'Community Council' (this was originally known as Youth Court, but Bell, deciding the name was an unhelpful reminder of the criminal justice system, changed it). Adults at Bell frequently referred to the restorative process and avoided language or actions seen as 'punitive', such as threats or detentions. Educators rarely raised their voices at students. At Community Council meetings, which were held regularly, student leaders worked with a mentor teacher to investigate and track events and recommend steps for resolving conflicts and restoring relationships. Conversations at those meetings typically emphasized understanding other people's perspectives and working toward mutually agreeable solutions.

Informal cultural meanings (Box 3) – Bell

Many Bell students, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, lived in challenging economic situations. They often worked after school and on weekends to help support their families, and matriculating to college could seem out of reach due to their families' finances. Indeed, when school was remote in the 2020–2021 school year, many

worked during the school day, often missing classes, a source of significant frustration for Bell educators (Cucchiara and Ferguson, 2025). Students' financial situations shaped how they thought about the educational endeavor. Thus, Bell students often distinguished between content that would be useful to them later in life and content that would not. Some teachers made use of this distinction, arguing that a certain skill would help them on the job market or when they were in a leadership position at work. For example, one teacher frequently reminded students that they would need the skills he was teaching later in their own careers. Thus, when he was encouraging students to speak more clearly when they were giving presentations to the class, he asked, 'How many of you plan on being successful? How many of you plan on making money?' Students immediately raised their hands, and he nodded, saying, 'When you are successful, people are going to want to hear from you. You have to project your voice'. Other teachers, who were less able to make these connections or whose assignments seemed designed to promote purely academic skills, often struggled to keep students' interests.

Informal cultural practices (Box 4) – Strive

Although the formal practices of Strive tightly regulated student behavior, students also created their own subcultures in which they constantly engaged in minor acts of resistance. When a teacher's back was turned or a teacher did not enforce rules consistently, students quickly took advantage. They snuck into backpacks, shredded paper, took off their shoes, wore patterned socks instead of the required solid-colored socks, leaned their chairs back, and erased names off the infraction list on the board. If a teacher put forth the expectation of no talking, students tapped on their desks or hummed. Teachers also acknowledged that the school's 'sweating the small stuff' system could lead them to become overly focused on behavior. As one teacher noted, 'I think that's kind of the double-edged sword of a no-excuses environment, is that it's pushing me to pick up on everything, and call out everything, and notice everything'. Thus, the formal organizational practices of close and constant monitoring of student behavior created an informal subculture among students of resistance and antagonism toward teachers.

Environmental cultural meanings (Box 5) – Strive

Like all public schools, Strive operated in a policy environment of accountability. However, as a charter school, Strive faced stronger accountability pressures, and school leaders felt pressure to demonstrate annual improvements in students' standardized test performance. High student proficiency rates on state tests lent assurance that the school charter would continue to be renewed, that funders would contribute, and that students and families would be attracted to the school. One of Strive's biggest selling points, as advertised on both its website and external flyers, was its standardized testing performance, which significantly exceeded that of the local public school district. Strive boasted test scores that placed it in the top quarter of its peer schools in the state. As the principal explained, boosting test scores 'was my definition of success'. In other words, the larger policy context's emphasis on tests and accountability shaped meanings within the school, ultimately determining what counted as school success.

Environmental cultural practices (Box 6) – Bell

Bell operated in a context of scarcity, both within and outside of the school. The school was part of an under-funded school district, and, though its leaders raised some additional funds through a nonprofit connected to the school, resources, including supplies and staff, were always scarce. This scarcity had a major impact on the professional life of the school, creating an ethos of ‘making do’. Teachers at Bell were used to being flexible, moving quickly from one challenge to the next (such as when the school was closed because of asbestos in the building), and being creative about gathering resources. For example, the school had no library until a few teachers created one, soliciting donations, purchasing books at book banks, and turning an unused classroom into an informal library. While this lack of resources had its roots outside of Bell (in state funding patterns and school district policies), it ultimately prompted a host of practices within Bell, as educators strove to do more with less.

Alignments and misalignments

As noted earlier, to understand the culture of a school, it is not enough to identify the individual components. Instead, it is essential to analyze the ways in which the various components intersect, sometimes reinforcing one another and sometimes conflicting. Here, we provide examples of each. We use the case of Bell to demonstrate how formal and emergent elements of the school’s culture aligned, ultimately creating especially strong patterns around relationships. Next, we use Strive to illustrate a lack of alignment between key elements and why it mattered.

An example of alignment – relationships at Bell

Relationships were central to the design and day-to-day functioning of Bell High School and an important part of the school culture (Sheikh and Cucchiara, 2024). While the school’s mission and structure foregrounded connections between adults and students, Bell’s culture, as experienced and enacted in daily life, involved a complex web of meanings and practices that are not captured by blanket claims about the value of relationships. In this instance, though, we can see how alignment between different dimensions of Bell’s culture (including influences from the external environment) ultimately served to advance the school’s official goals, creating high levels of coherence and consistency around building and maintaining relationships.

Formal meanings and practices (Boxes 1 and 2) at Bell emphasized strong, positive relationships, especially between students and adults. For example, the school’s website proclaimed, ‘relationships are paramount’, while its mission statement pledged to create a ‘nurturing community where students feel valued’. Meanwhile, the first of the school’s three ‘community agreements’ (featured prominently in the staff handbook) was ‘build trusting and respectful relationships’. This priority shaped the design of the school: It was relatively small (under 400 students), placed students in ‘advisories’ with the same teacher for all four years, used restorative disciplinary practices, and employed a sizable ‘culture team’, including social workers and climate support specialists, to help meet

students' social and emotional needs. Thus, Dr. Janos, one of the school's two founders, explained that she always said the following when talking to prospective families:

The first thing I want you to know is we're a small school, and so coming to a small school means that your child is not going to be invisible. We build on a foundation of very strong relationships in this building. Children are well known. We work really hard to make sure everybody is connected to somebody in the building.

School leaders frequently referred to this belief in the importance of relationships. When asked to describe Bell, Ms. Connor, the principal, explained, 'the biggest piece of what Bell is trying to do is make school a place where kids actually want to come. And we believe that we do that through building really, really strong relationships with them'. Ms. Connor made a point of interacting regularly with all students, greeting them at the door each morning, and chatting with them in the hallways in familiar, friendly ways. Thus, we see that formal meanings and practices in this realm were aligned in prioritizing relationships.

The emphasis on relationships extended beyond the school leaders. In interviews, teachers and staff consistently referred to positive relationships as one of the school's greatest strengths, demonstrating their own informal meanings (Box 3). For example, Mr. Wilkerson, a social worker, described what happens when students came back to visit after graduation:

Even when our students come back from college, they're saying the same thing, like, 'I love college. I love the experience. I love the education I'm getting, but I don't have the relationships with my professors that I had with you all here'. That's what keeps all of them coming back.

Similarly, Ms. Carson, an English teacher, explained that strong relationships can help keep students engaged: 'Relationships I think are something that works for us Kids like their teachers, and they want to do well'. Finally, teachers and staff at the school generally saw the school's restorative justice practices as a means of building and maintaining relationships. For example, Ms. Barry, an English teacher, noted that what made Bell unique was 'the intentional building of those relationships and in the restorative practice, because you never throw them away It is the building of relationships and the restorative practice that teaches them we are always here for you'. While the restorative justice system was a mechanism for dealing with conflicts and misbehavior, to this teacher and others, it was also a way of coming to know and understand one another.

In interviews and informal conversations, students similarly described the school as a place where relationships between students and adults were strong (Box 3), suggesting a high degree of consistency across all levels of the school's culture in this domain. They generally saw the teachers as supportive and always willing to help. For example, Jeremy, a senior said, 'The teachers are really cool, and they really do care about you. They really want to see you succeed. They really help you out, stay after school. They help you out with anything'. Students also appreciated adults' efforts to know them as people, rather than just students in a class. When she was asked what she liked best about the school, Cierra, an 11th grader, observed, 'The teachers, and the staff. . . it's like they also get to

know the students rather than just acting like they're robots or machines, or whatever. They actually get to know you, and they address you like you're a person'. According to students, part of what made teachers at Bell seem so supportive was the respect with which they treated students (something the first author observed as well). Students noted that it was rare for teachers to raise their voices or threaten students. As Ethan, also an 11th grader, observed, 'Even if somebody's messing around in their class, they'll still try to be kind and politely ask them, can they stop?' Here we see high levels of alignment across formal and informal meanings and practices (Boxes 1–4), embodied by educators' respectful and affirming treatment of students.

Although there was nothing in the school's official materials about creating a school that felt 'like a family', students and staff repeatedly refer to the school's *'family vibe'* (Box 3). For example, Ms. Jaz, a member of the culture team, observed, 'Bell is a very loving, huge family. Like I said, every family has their arguments at times but the one thing I love about Bell is we never cannot come back together and be that family'. Students often made the same point. As Mia, a sophomore, explained, 'Bell is kind of like a school where it makes you feel like you're in a big family. You could tell your teachers care about you'. This sense truly pervaded the school. Morning announcements, in which the principal came over the intercom to share 'shout outs' celebrating students' hard work or accomplishments and remind them of events or school expectations, always ended with the following: 'We are excited for another great day. We want you to know we push you because we love you', an outright declaration of affection that might have felt out of place at another school but was a matter of routine at Bell.

Indeed, adults and students frequently interacted in ways that felt both affectionate and informal, with adults using pet nicknames, hugging, and teasing students (Box 4). For example, Monique, a tenth grader, used familial language to talk about her social studies teacher, with whom she had a 'love-hate relationship': 'He's my school dad, almost. He really pushes me to do my work. [laughs] Me and him argue a lot, but that's just because me and him are Leos, so our personalities clash a lot'. Not only did this student feel close to her 'school dad', but her reference to astrology as a tool for understanding their relationship suggests that she – perhaps with this teacher – had invested some time in analyzing it, teasing each other the way family members might. Relationships between students and the culture team (whose job was to monitor hallways and promote positive behaviors) were often especially intimate. Thus, Sam, a senior, explained,

When you think of [the culture team], you think of family. You think – it's not Miss Jaz, Mr. Chris. It's no Miss. Everybody knows we have that respect for each other, so it's like, 'Chris, Chris, Chris', and he'd be like, 'What, what, Nephew?'

This way of cultivating and experiencing relationships – that they were more than just close, that they were 'family' – likely had its roots in participants' cultural toolkits, especially those of students and staff who came from African American communities where traditions of fictive kinship remain salient (Nelson, 2013). Indeed, it was particularly common for members of the culture team, all of whom were Black and from similar neighborhoods to the students', to draw upon notions of kinship. As such, they were deliberately building upon shared meanings and social practices *outside* of the school

(Boxes 5 and 6) to create a sense of connection *within* it (Box 3), an important example of the impact of the school's environment on its culture.

Student-adult relationships at Bell also involved regular, informal 'check-ins', or exchanges in which an adult, concerned that the student is struggling with an issue in their lives, goes out of their way to have a conversation. Students spoke of this as something they most appreciated about the school. Thus, in describing Bell, Imani, a senior, mused,

'Teachers here are great. They're very supportive. I know a lot of people *say* that, but they *actually* show up for it. If they do see you in a bad mood, they're just not going to be like [mimicking a stern voice], 'Why aren't you in class?' They actually stop and talk to you and are concerned for your health'.

Adults linked this practice to an awareness that students frequently dealt with challenging situations at home (such as food or housing insecurity) or had had traumatic experiences (especially related to violence). As a result, their inclination was to act carefully and thoughtfully, to avoid making assumptions, taking things personally, or creating unnecessary conflict. For example, Mr. Dom, a member of the culture team explained that when a student missed class, the first step was always to find out what might be happening for that student: 'Most of the time, I get them on the phone and just ask them, 'Why didn't you go to class yesterday?'' He saw this as sending an important message to the students, who feel, in his words, 'When someone's watching me, that means someone cares'. According to Mr. Dom, often students missed school because they had to work or were looking for jobs or because of other issues in their lives. For these reasons, he explained, check-ins were also a way of finding out what supports students needed:

They may need to speak to someone in our Behavioral Health Department. [Sometimes it's] checking in with another student, even helping them with some work that may be difficult. Let them know where to go to get certain resources from. It's a lot of things that we do to help keep students engaged.

Rather than assuming that Bell students were acting out or missing class because they were 'bad' or 'didn't care', educators at Bell tried to understand the challenges students faced and looked for ways to help them. Thus, these frequent informal 'check-ins' were a direct response to the environment in which Bell was located – a working-class neighborhood in one of America's poorest cities. In these instances, we can see how informal meanings and practices in the school (Boxes 3 and 4), influenced by the external environment (Boxes 5 and 6), came together with formal dimensions of school culture (Boxes 1 and 2) to create high levels of consistency around relationships.

An example of misalignment – relationships at Strive

In contrast, an analysis of meanings and practices at Strive in the same domain demonstrates how a lack of alignment can undermine a school's goals. As a small charter school serving 250 students, Strive sought to establish a strong community among students and

adults. Two of the school's four core values were caring and respect. In the student handbook, caring is defined by qualities like 'We take care of each other' and 'We help each other' and respect as 'We treat each person as valuable' and 'We accept individuals for who they are'. Looking beyond the school's formal declarations (Box 1), we can also observe school structures and practices that align with these aims (Box 2). For example, each student was assigned to an advisor and met weekly with a small group of advisory students. The purpose of the advisory was to ensure that all students had an adult at the school who was responsible for them and who served as their primary point of contact. To demonstrate caring, the school required teachers to have their cell phones on until 9pm to receive phone calls from students who may need assistance with homework. To build community, the school had an open-door policy for parents to come visit the school and their children's classrooms any time they wished. Despite these formal efforts, a lack of alignment with other elements created significant challenges. In particular, Strive's disciplinary practices structured informal student and adult relationships (Boxes 3 and 4) to produce a tense and antagonistic relational culture.

Formal values and practices at Strive around relationships contrasted sharply with the informal experiences and perspectives of students and adults. Both students and teachers described relationships at Strive as strained and difficult to establish. 'I think [teachers] just look for problems', said Davon, an eighth grader. 'They walk down the hallways looking for problems. We could be the most silent class and then [the teacher will] just all the time be trying to find somebody that's talking'. Because teachers were tasked with 'sweating the small stuff', they constantly monitored student behavior, from heads on desks to side conversations (Box 2). This led students to feel like their teachers were picking on them or out to get them (Box 3). Viewing teachers as disciplinarians, students lost sight of the care and respect the school sought to cultivate. For example, when asked why some kids were always in trouble, Felicia, an eighth grader, put it this way,

'They probably feel like there's nobody out there, like, there's nobody that actually cares for them. Like every time a teacher says, 'We're here to help you', the kids say, 'No, no, you're here to pressure me and make me feel terrible and you're just stressing me out throughout the day'.

Teachers likewise acknowledged the challenge of connecting with students (Box 3). Mr. McCudden, a teacher in his first year at the school, explained that in his seven years of teaching, including two at a struggling urban school, it had never taken him this long to get students on his side. It was not until he went on a field trip with his students that he was able to form some connections. Similarly, Ms. Wasulik, a teacher who had won the teacher-of-the-year award at her former school – a charter school in the same city – explained that she previously had found it easy to build positive relationships with her students. At Strive, she was taken aback at the amount of student resistance she experienced. 'I feel like I'm picking them to death', she commented, comparing students to 'the ugly duckling' who keeps getting picked on by the other animals.

The lack of alignment around conceptions of respect was especially problematic. For students, being picked on was akin to disrespect, an example of the intersection between informal (Box 3) and environmental (Box 5) meanings. In low-income urban

communities, respect is hard-won and disrespect can have deadly consequences (Anderson, 2000). Students, the vast majority of whom were Black and Latinx and from low-income families, subscribed to a reciprocal notion of respect (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1999) where 'you have to give respect to get respect'. They thus felt justified in showing disrespect to their teachers because they did not feel treated with respect themselves. As Shariece, an eighth grader, explained, 'All right, these teachers be thinking they our parents. They holler at us and they get in our faces. That gets me mad'. Her friend added, 'And they snap at us like we dogs'. She demonstrated, 'They do this [snapping fingers], they be like [snapping fingers]'. She complained that she got detention for telling her teacher, 'You don't come in somebody's face and snap in their face, what is wrong with you?' While students understood that they should not disrespect a teacher, they also felt that they could not let disrespect slide. Matt, a seventh grader, put it, 'You can't disrespect somebody then later think, oh cool – we're cool, right?' He explained that his dad has a friend who would disrespect him and then come back and act like they were friends. 'My dad says, "I want to punch him in the face," like, "don't talk to me. You disrespected me a couple minutes ago"'. To this student, and, perhaps, his father too, accepting disrespectful behavior was not an option, because, ultimately, disrespect was a threat to their self-worth, status, and even safety. Thus, the differences between how Strive students understood authority and respect (Boxes 3 and 5) and how their teachers did shaped student-teacher relations (Box 4) (Hemmings, 2003). The fact that their teachers, most of whom were young, White, and middle class, were not familiar with students' cultural meanings, created significant tensions.

Yet not all teachers failed to understand students' cultural meanings in this regard. An exception was Ms. Wallace, a White teacher at the school who was well-liked by students. When she first started teaching and was working to establish her authority, she was strict with students to earn their respect and to adhere with the school's formal expectations (Box 1). At the same time, she was careful to make sure that students did not feel disrespected. 'I'd talk to them like I would talk to my friend, not like a kid', she said. 'I'd tell them, I'm not talking to you like you're a kid. Am I disrespecting you? Tell me if I'm disrespecting you because I want to know'. Although Ms. Wallace did not share the same racial or socioeconomic background as her students, she recognized the importance of respect and disrespect in her students' home cultures. She understood that slighting a student by calling him out in front of his peers might seem harmless but took on greater significance for students when viewed through the lens of respect. Understanding students' home environments and how they intersected with school relationships was critical to the success of teachers like Ms. Wallace. Ms. Johnson, another White teacher, also built strong relationships with a group of Black boys by taking them to football games on the weekends and providing them with open gym opportunities where they could play basketball. By connecting with students and their families outside of school and sharing their interests, Ms. Johnson was able to forge positive relationships. However, the positive relationships Ms. Wallace and Ms. Johnson formed with their students were not the norm. Far more often, strict disciplinary policies and practices led to antagonism between adults and students, creating a relational culture notable for high levels of tension and conflict. In contrast to Bell, then, we see at Strive misalignment between official (Boxes 1 and 2), informal (Boxes 3 and 4), and environmental (Boxes 4 and 5) meanings and

practices around student-teacher relationships, creating a school culture that did not match the care and respect the school intended to cultivate.

Conclusion

While scholars and practitioners agree that school culture is important – indeed, that culture can ‘make or break’ a school’s success – conversations about school culture are too often vague or reduced to easy-to-measure but overly narrow topics like teacher beliefs, attitudes about collaboration, or attendance. This is problematic, as vague definitions are difficult to operationalize, and narrow approaches – that do not take multiple perspectives or meaning-making into account – can weaken efforts to understand the social life of a school or create culture change. In other words, researchers, educators, and policymakers know culture matters to the experiences of students and adults, but do not always have the language to talk about what it is, where it comes from, or how to shape it. Rather than suggesting we abandon the term, our goal is to reanimate it in ways that are useful for researchers, policy makers, and educators interested in understanding and impacting the unique set of meanings and practices circulating within each school.

In this article, we have put forward a new model of school culture, one that builds upon existing work – as well as theoretical developments in organizational sociology and the sociology of culture – and encompasses formal and informal meanings and practices and influences from the school’s environment. We have described the components comprising the model and used examples from two very different schools to illustrate each. Through these examples, we can see the complexity of school culture and the importance of examining its multiple facets to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of teachers, students, and staff. Our model makes several contributions: it offers conceptual categories that help researchers identify different sources (formal, informal, environmental) and forms (meanings, practices) of school culture; it takes a comprehensive view of school culture that brings under its umbrella a wider scope of educational research; it attends to cross-category interactions, highlighting conflicts and complementarities that can profoundly shape school culture; and it moves from normative to more nuanced understandings of school culture. While reformers and school leaders may continue to find the normative use useful, as it provides a helpful shorthand for describing patterns of behavior they hope will or will not continue, we argue that our model may ultimately be more generative with respect to understanding the processes that shape educator and student experiences and meaning-making.

In addition, we have highlighted the importance of looking beyond individual elements to examine patterns of alignment and misalignment. We have seen how the alignment between Bell’s formal approach to relationships and meanings and practices rooted in students’ cultural models and in the social context ultimately supported the school’s overall goals. In contrast, a lack of alignment between key elements of Strive’s culture, especially between formal meanings and practices around discipline and student and community conceptions of respect, served to undermine the school’s efforts to create a supportive environment.

We chose our two schools intentionally to highlight comparisons in various elements of school culture, but, like all choices, our decision was not without drawbacks. Bell and

Strive's status as schools of choice designed to be alternatives to mainstream schools likely means that school leaders were more explicit and intentional about promoting particular meanings and practices. On the one hand, this is a strength of our choice, because it allowed us to identify dynamics that might be more subtle at other schools. On the other hand, it could also have led us to overstate the impact of the formal elements of school culture. Despite these concerns, we remain confident that the components of school culture we describe here would exist in all schools, no matter their size, grade levels served, location, or mission.

For qualitative researchers, our model can help them clarify their thinking about culture and enhance their analyses by incorporating additional elements (e.g. a researcher who focuses on mission statements and school leaders' goals might do well to pay attention to how informal meanings on the part of students interact with those formal discourses). In addition, by providing language to identify key differences and their sources, the model can help researchers analyze why the daily life of schools varies so much from one to another. This is important, because the differences between meanings and practices across schools, particularly when they are related to the race and class status of students, are key sources of educational inequality (Anyon, 1980; Harvey, 2023; Lewis, 2003). Further, the model can help explain why culture change is so difficult, and why schools that are similar in formal goals and structures often look very different in practice.

This model could also inform quantitative studies of school culture. At its most straightforward, this could mean adding additional elements to current surveys focused on school culture. For example, surveys might ask students about the values and norms of both their neighborhoods and peer groups within schools or whether they feel safe in (or going to and from) school. It might also entail asking school staff whether they agree with the school's mission and vision, about how the broader policy context shapes their work, or about the kinds of knowledge and engagement they have with their students' communities. Meanwhile, recent research has employed computational linguistics as a method for understanding organizational culture (Chatman and Choi, 2022). This includes the examination of existing sources of culturally rich data like school documents, emails, or other forms of internal and external communication. Computational linguistics methods also facilitate analysis of open-ended survey questions, enabling researchers to quickly process large amounts of text for themes and patterns. These new methods could be usefully applied to studies of school culture, allowing for more open-ended survey questions as well as analysis of key documents.

This model also has several applications for policy and practice. First, it illuminates the challenges associated with reform efforts that try to change one aspect of a school's practices without engaging with others. For example, while schools across the country have embraced restorative justice, research on its implementation has found mixed results (Augustine et al., 2018; Davison et al., 2022; Fronius et al., 2019), suggesting, as one author observed, that it 'isn't a simple plug-and-play program that leaders can set and forget after a few workshops' (Goodwin, 2021). Indeed, our analysis would lead us to believe that there are few successful 'plug and play' reforms and that well-meaning efforts often fall short because their proponents have not sufficiently reckoned with the intersections between that reform and other elements of school culture. Second, at a time

when many school and district leaders are interested in assessing school culture, our model could inform the development of more expansive rubrics and guidelines that capture a wider range of factors. Similarly, our model generates questions leaders can use in their efforts to shape their own school's culture, such as, 'Does informal culture at the school support or undermine the formal culture?', 'Does the external environment support or undermine the formal school culture?', and 'What points of tensions do I see between my reform goal and other aspects of the school's culture?' Third, our model can help school and district leaders understand why particular reforms fall short at some schools and not others or why patterns or practices emerge that conflict with stated goals.

More broadly, our model helps to reveal the limitations of dominant, instrumental approaches to understanding school quality – those that focus narrowly on efficiency, accountability, and measurable outcomes. By illuminating the cultural dynamics that shape everyday school life, including values, relationships, routines, and meanings, our model directs attention toward aspects of school quality that are harder to quantify but deeply consequential for students and educators. In doing so, it offers a foundation for evidence-based critiques of managerialist reforms and for more holistic approaches to improvement that take the full complexity of school culture into account.

As we have discussed here, many scholars have noted the relationship between elements of school culture and student learning, school reform, and a host of other outcomes. Yet, considered more broadly, school culture matters because it is both a powerful and a potentially malleable source of inequality. Students and teachers thrive in schools where patterns of meanings and practices nurture them intellectually, socially, and emotionally, and they languish in (or flee from) schools where they do not. Not only do such contrasts lead to inequalities in student outcomes but they also create dramatically different day-to-day experiences for students and educators who must spend so much of their waking life in schools. Thus, our goal in creating this model is not to have the final word on school culture. Rather, we hope to prompt further research into this important topic, research that both deepens our understanding and, ultimately, contributes to improving life in schools.

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Notes

1. As sociologists by training, we draw especially on the sociology of culture in constructing our model. The shifts in the sociology of culture toward a focus on practices, institutional environment, and internal heterogeneity parallel those in other fields. In anthropology, for example, culture has increasingly come to be seen as embodied in practices (Ingold, 2000; Ortner, 2006; Shore, 1996), locally enacted within broader contexts (Appadurai, 1996; Tsing, 2005), and composed of competing meaning systems rather than being a unified entity (Abu-Lughod, 1991). These understandings align with our conceptualization of school culture as constituted by both meanings and practices, as situated in open systems, and as emergent from the dynamic interrelation of multiple potentially divergent and contested sources.
2. Researchers of organizational culture generally accept Schein's (1985) framework that culture can be conceptualized at three basic levels (Chatman and O'Reilly, 2016). We follow Schein in viewing culture as multi-layered and composed of both observable and latent elements. However, we depart from Schein's hierarchical structure, which treats underlying assumptions as the 'deepest' and most causally powerful level. Instead, drawing on recent work in cultural sociology, we conceptualize meanings and practices as distinct yet interacting forms of culture that do not fall into a strict depth model. Emerging scholarship questions the notion that beliefs necessarily underlie or determine practices and instead treats the two as semi-autonomous dimensions that shape organizational life in complex, context-dependent ways (Lizardo, 2017; Patterson, 2014). Our model also expands beyond the organization's internal layers to include external, environmental influences on culture – an aspect Schein's model largely overlooks. These distinctions are important not only conceptually, but also methodologically, as they inform how researchers identify and analyze cultural dynamics in schools.
3. While a broad concept, culture is not all-encompassing. For example, school culture does not include idiosyncratic beliefs and practices, instinctual actions or behaviors, or physical aspects of the building and spaces.
4. Our datasets include interviews with students, faculty, and staff with a variety of racial and ethnic identities. In the discussion that follows, however, we do not include the race or gender identities of our interviewees unless it is relevant to the analysis.
5. School choice options in the U.S. vary somewhat from city to city, but most include a combination of neighborhood schools (to which anyone living in a particular area is entitled to attend), magnet schools (academically selective schools run by the school district), themed schools students can choose based on their interests (also run by the district but generally not selective), charter schools, religious private schools (to which families pay a generally modest tuition), and independent schools (where tuition can exceed \$50,000).

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