FROM TRINITY TO UNITY:  
THE MERGER OF THREE SCHOOL CULTURES INTO ONE

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Amanda Beaudette Donovan

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Abstract

Opening a new elementary school presents many unique challenges, and it often involves students and teachers merging together to form a new school community. A complex situation that schools face as a result of a merger is the potential clashing of the established school cultures and the cultural development process at the new school. The purpose of this descriptive case study was to describe the process by which a new school’s culture developed after a merger and the characteristics of the new culture, through the perspectives of teachers and administrators at X Elementary School, beginning with the first months of operation and concluding with the sixth year post-merger. The central research question that drove this study was: What is the process by which cultures from three different elementary schools merged to form a culture at a new elementary school, and what are the characteristics of the newly formed culture? The purposefully selected participants were teachers and administrators at X Elementary School, a suburban elementary school in the Northeastern United States. Data were collected and triangulated through focus groups, interviews, and examination of documents. By understanding the process by which multiple school cultures merged to create a culture at a new school, we can better understand how stakeholders can work together to establish a culture that helps support student success.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

When you walk into a school, you quickly begin to get a “feeling” for what it is like to learn, work, or be part of that school’s community. There may be children in the office laughing and giving teachers high-fives, or they may be waiting quietly to speak to the secretary with notes in their little hands. There might be children's artwork hanging in the hallways or there may be bare brick walls. The principal may be wearing casual clothes while sitting at his or her computer, or perhaps he or she is wearing a suit and working with children in a first grade classroom. All of these things provide a particular feeling at the school. What is this feeling? Where does it come from and how does it develop? How does this feeling evolve as a new, empty building turns into a place for teaching and learning?

Culture is a critical thread that weaves through every aspect of a school. It is difficult to define, yet very powerful as it permeates everything that goes on in a school. Deal and Peterson (1990) state, “School cultures are complex webs of traditions and rituals built up over time as teachers, students, parents, and administrators work together and deal with crisis and accomplishments” (p. 7). However, since it takes time to build a school’s culture, the opening of a new school presents a unique situation. Stakeholders have the challenge of creating a culture as they establish their vision for the school. It is even more complicated when multiple schools with different cultures merge to create a new school. If we understand the process by which different school cultures merge to create a culture at a new school, then we might gain better insight into how teachers, students, parents, and administrators can work together to create a school culture that best
supports student success. The purpose of this descriptive case study was to describe the process by which a new school’s culture developed after a merger and the characteristics of the new culture, through the perspectives of teachers and administrators at X Elementary School, beginning with the first months of operation and concluding with the sixth year post-merger. School culture is generally defined as the beliefs, values, norms, traditions, and expectations that unite the members of a school community (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Much of the research previously conducted on school culture focuses on three main areas:

1) The role that school leaders play in influencing their school’s culture, and the ways in which they can influence whether a culture is positive or negative, have been studied extensively (Bush, 2003; Deal & Peterson, 2009; Fullan, 2001; Reeves, 2009; Stolp, 1996).

2) The process of and challenges involved in trying to change a school’s culture is another area examined in many studies (Connolly, James & Beales, 2011; Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Deal & Peterson, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Marlow, 1997; Winterman, 2008).

3) A third area that has been the focus of a great deal of school culture research is the relationship between culture and school performance. Many have found that there is a direct link, and that a positive school culture yields strong academic performance (Angelides & Ainscow, 2000; Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Winterman, 2008).

From these studies, it is clear that school culture is an essential component of the school community, and that studying it provides valuable insight into the experience of students and stakeholders.
Although many studies have been conducted examining school culture from various perspectives, very few studies have been conducted on the development of culture at new schools or at schools following a merger. When students and teachers merge to form a new school community, it is a dramatic and often stressful change with a prolonged adjustment period (Kyriacou & Harriman, 1993; McHugh & Kyle, 1993; Wallace, 1996). One of the most important issues schools face as a result of these mergers is the clashing of established cultures and the cultural development at the new schools (Wallace, 1996). Even though many districts find themselves consolidating and/or merging schools for a variety of reasons, there are many aspects of this process that remain unexplored. Because an increasing number of schools are finding themselves in this situation, and because of the connection of school culture to academic achievement, it is an area that merits further exploration (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Fullan, 2001).

**Significance of Research Problem**

It is important for a new school to establish a culture, but school culture takes time to develop. This dilemma played out at a newly built school in the Northeastern United States that opened in September 2009, X Elementary School. Faculty members and students were transferred from the other three elementary schools in town, referred to here by pseudonyms, Ames School, Brown School, and Cedar School, to alleviate the overcrowding they were facing. (Following redistricting of students, the three original schools remain operational with fewer students, making the new school the fourth elementary school in the district.) They began creating school rules, a mission statement, new traditions, and discussing shared expectations, values, and practices. These things
take time, and culture has to evolve into historically-transmitted patterns and deep-set beliefs (Stolp, 1996).

Establishing a positive school culture is important for the entire school community for many reasons. It is widely accepted among educational leaders and researchers that the organizational culture of a school greatly influences the degree of academic success of students and level of performance of teachers (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Fullan, 2001). Dedicated, motivated teachers also contribute to student success, and schools have a better chance of retaining dedicated and motivated teachers if there is strong leadership and a positive school culture (Flores, 2004; MacNeil et al., 2009). In addition, school reform will only take place if it is supported by the school’s culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009; MacNeil et al., 2009). Because school culture is an essential component to school change, and because it is also a significant factor in student and teacher success, it is important to examine the way in which it develops at a new school. Many new schools are opening across the country, and having information about the process of how a school culture develops may help them be better prepared to address this critical area.

In addition to opening new schools due to mergers and redistricting, population growth is causing many districts across the country to examine ways to accommodate new students such as building brand new schools. C. William Brubaker (1998) explains how an examination of demographic trends in the 1980s led to the conclusion that many new school buildings will be required well into the twenty-first century. Brubaker states:

The trends included a rise in birthrate, the movement of people to the south and west, the growth of some cities and states, greater use of school facilities by more
people, reawakened interest in better education, and satisfaction of the pent-up demand for high-quality buildings. (p. 28)

Building new schools due to population growth, financial strain, and district reconfiguration are common themes within the literature.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to describe the process by which a new school’s culture developed after a merger and to describe the characteristics of the resulting new culture. Along with documents, this study focused on the perspectives of teachers and administrators at X Elementary School, beginning with the first months of operation and concluding with the sixth year post-merger.

**Research Questions**

There was one central research question with four sub-questions that drove this research study. The central research question was:

What is the process by which cultures from three different elementary schools merged to form a culture at a new elementary school, and what are the characteristics of the newly formed culture?

In order to address the overall research question, these sub-questions were considered:

1. How do teachers at X Elementary School describe the current culture and make sense of the process of the school’s cultural development?

This was an important question, because teachers were both key contributors and observers of the school’s developing culture, and their perceptions provided insight into the process. They spent every day working in the environment and experiencing the emergent culture and changes as they took place.
2. How do administrators at X Elementary School describe the current culture and make sense of the process of the school’s cultural development?

School administrators greatly influence the development of a school’s culture, so looking at it from their perspectives gave a unique voice to the process. They viewed the culture from a leadership standpoint but were also influenced by other stakeholders, which impacted the way they perceived certain situations.

3. What characteristics of the distinctive cultures of the three original schools are represented in the emerging culture at the X Elementary School?

Because most students, teachers, and administrators at X Elementary School attended the three original schools before the merger, elements of the original schools’ cultures were carried over to the new school in some variation. Understanding the degree to which each original school’s culture was reflected in the new school’s culture provided insight into the process of cultural development.

4. What is new and unique about the culture at X Elementary School?

Although the new school’s culture was influenced by the cultures of the three existing schools, there were elements that were unique to X Elementary School. Understanding these elements helped make sense of the progression of the new culture over time.

**Theoretical Framework**

Researchers examine culture, one of the many domains of organizational studies, in various ways and are divided in terms of interpretation. Martin (2002) explains that different intellectual traditions, such as neopositivism, interpretive approaches, and postmodernism, are all represented in studies of organizational culture. One of the major divides in cultural research is the perspective of culture as a variable versus culture as a
metaphor (Martin, 2002). Studies that take on a functionalist approach often view
culture as a variable, whereas studies with a symbolic approach use culture as a lens
through which organizations can be studied. When used as a measurable variable, the
perceived quality of the culture can be used to predict outcomes such as degree of
productivity. When thought of as a metaphor, aspects of culture such as an
organization’s values and artifacts have symbolic meaning, which can be used to better
understand the organization and its people. These different ways of looking at culture
lead to various definitions of organizational culture.

One definition is that of Joanne Martin (2002) who takes a symbolic approach to
culture:

A cultural observer is interested in the surfaces of these cultural manifestations
because details can be informative, but he or she also seeks an in-depth
understanding of the patterns of meanings that link these manifestations together,
sometimes in harmony, sometimes in bitter conflicts between groups, and
sometimes in webs of ambiguity, paradox, and contradiction. (p. 3)

Martin believes that culture is extremely complex and is often oversimplified; therefore,
she advocates the use of an approach that draws upon the three different points of view to
study a single culture, rather than a single perspective theory. The three theoretical
perspectives most commonly used by organizational culture researchers that make up this
framework are: the integration perspective, the differentiation perspective, and the
fragmentation perspective (Martin, 2002).

Given the complex problem of multiple schools with different cultures merging to
create a new school, Joanne Martin’s multi-perspective framework, the Three Perspective
Theory of Culture, was beneficial. It provided a thorough understanding of the superficial cultural elements as well as those that were deeply rooted, which gave a more complete view of the culture. Using all three perspectives simultaneously provided a framework to help understand the way in which these manifestations related to one another either in harmony, conflict, or ambiguity (Martin, 2002). Before understanding the way in which these perspectives work together, it is important to know them individually. Therefore, the next three sections examine Integration, Differentiation, and Fragmentation separately, comparing them by the position each takes on the following three dimensions: orientation to consensus, relation among manifestations, and orientation to ambiguity (Martin, 2002).

Integration

When a culture’s organization is viewed through the lens of an integration perspective, there is organization-wide consensus, consistency among manifestations, and clarity rather than ambiguity. Martin (2002) explains, “From the integration perspective, culture is like a solid monolith that is seen the same way by most people, no matter from which angle they view it” (p. 94). This perspective focuses on similarities and views all things from a broad point of view in order to overlook differences. Most integration studies are very descriptive in nature and look primarily at managers and professionals who are more likely than lower-level employees to abide by their organizations’ espoused values. Some believe that the opinions of people in leadership positions matter more because they have more power over the direction in which the organization moves and the decisions that are made (Martin, 2002).
Although it is considered to be problematic, integration researchers acknowledge that there may be some inconsistencies, differing interpretations, conflicts, and ambiguities within some organizations. According to the integration model, “Only what is shared is, by definition, cultural. It does not make sense, therefore, to think about high or low consensus cultures, or cultures of ambiguity or conflict” (Schein, 1991, p. 247-248). Groups are not considered to have cultures in those particular areas. In addition, integration researchers believe that even if deviation exists among cultural manifestations such as stories and rituals, these deviations don’t represent the fundamental nature of the culture. It is thought that assumptions at a deep level are shared among members of an organization even if there are deviations at the surface level.

While the goal is to have every member of the organization on the same page, consensus does not mean total, 100% agreement. Subcultures may be recognized in an integration study, but they are viewed as groups that need to be better trained or disciplined so that they are in compliance with the cultural norm that has been established by leadership and majority. Deviation is seen as a problem within this perspective, and the members of subcultures that exist need to change their thinking so that the organization can operate as one cohesive unit.

**Differentiation**

With a differentiation perspective, there are inconsistencies among interpretations of cultural manifestations; consensus exists within each subculture rather than the whole organizational; and clarity is achieved within subcultures while ambiguity is channeled outside of the subcultures. Inconsistencies are unavoidable and often times appreciated
when viewed from the differentiation perspective. A way this may be evident is when
an organization puts emphasis on one issue publicly or formally, and then takes the
opposite position in casual or day-to-day interactions. For example, members may be
commended for collaboration at one time, but then when discussing issues in an informal
setting, they may be antagonistic and display rivalry. From the differentiation
perspective, this type of discrepancy is to be expected.

From the differentiation perspective, people who show opposition or deviate are
not disregarded, and there is no attempt to bring them on board, as is the case with the
integration perspective. It is believed and expected that many organizations are
multicultural, and in differentiation studies, a great deal of consideration is given to these
subcultures. The various subcultures are examined and are found to be operating
independently, conflicting with one another, or reinforcing one another. They can be
occupational, functional, hierarchical, or context-specific, and it is typical for them to
have their own priorities within the organization. Within the differentiation perspective,
some studies focus on a peaceful relationship among subcultures, while others highlight
the hierarchal inconsistencies and conflicts (Martin, 2002).

**Fragmentation**

Cultures viewed from the fragmentation perspective lack stable consensus, have
inconsistent interpretations of manifestations, and acknowledge ambiguity as common
and normal in all aspects of the organization. According to Martin (2003), “The
fragmentation perspective is the most difficult perspective to articulate because it focuses
on ambiguity, and ambiguity is difficult to conceptualize clearly.” This perspective is
often unclear, involves irony and paradox, and focuses on difficulty of interpretations.
In fragmentation studies, ambiguity is seen as a normal, unavoidable, and a pertinent part of an organization. It recognizes that there are many different points of view and a variety of interpretations in every situation, and these viewpoints and interpretations rarely form consensus. In addition, power is disbursed among many members of the organization rather than held by one person. Culture often remains undefined in fragmentation studies, and a state of constant flux is present. When cultures are viewed through this perspective, people are temporarily connected to one another by certain issues, sometimes content themes, while others are associated with other people surrounding a different set of issues. Martin (1992) describes these connections based on shared concerns as a web whose various parts become significant at different times depending on the particular issues that are of concern and the attention or inattention they are given. With this perspective, the boundaries of subcultures are permeable and fluctuating.

**Three-Perspective Theory**

The process by which the cultures of Ames, Brown, and Cedar Schools merged to form a new school culture, and the resulting new culture, was examined through multiple lenses. Because merging organizations experience cultural change on many levels, looking at the merging school cultures and the resulting culture through Martin’s Three-Perspective Theory of Culture provided a complete picture. In order to apply all three perspectives at any one time and view the same situation through these different lenses, one must take on a subjectivist approach to understanding culture. Martin (1992) describes three propositions in which this approach is anchored: 1. All three perspectives are needed to understand certain cultural elements; 2. Some insights are not offered from
a single perspective, but can be obtained with three perspectives working in unison; and 3. A three-perspective approach can be used to study a single context. Although Martin recommends using all three perspectives to the same degree, she also acknowledges that the researcher may take on a “home perspective,” one that is easier for researcher to see than the other, and then use the other two perspectives as secondary (Martin, 2002).

Martin utilizes three dimensions of comparison: the degree of consensus, relationships among cultural manifestations, and the orientation to ambiguity (Martin, 2002). The integration, differentiation, and fragmentation perspectives look at these three dimensions of comparison in opposing ways. Martin explains that because the three theoretical perspectives view these three dimensions through different lenses, they in fact complement each other. “Each perspective has conceptual blind spots that the combination of the three does not. For example, the integration view is blind to ambiguities, and the fragmentation and differentiation views are blind to that which most cultural members share” (Martin, 2002, p. 120). None of the perspectives alone can do what the three can do together, and the combination of all three addresses the complexity of culture and fills in any gaps that using just one perspective would leave.

Using Martin’s three-perspective theory provided an effective framework to analyze data for this study. According to Martin (2002):

The better cultural studies include both materialist and idealist concerns, examine the broadest possible range of cultural manifestations, view any claim of cultural uniqueness as an empirical question, and use all three theoretical perspectives in a single study- not assuming that culture is only that which is shared. (p. 138)
Viewing the emerging culture of X Elementary School through the lens of the integration, differentiation, and fragmentation perspectives jointly provided a thorough and comprehensive framework for this study.

**Positionality Statement**

I am currently a doctoral student and practitioner employed as a fifth grade teacher at the elementary school where this research was conducted. I am witnessing the problem of developing a culture at a new school first hand. The school at which I teach is newly built and opened in September 2009 following a merger. As a teacher, first at one of the schools that merged and then at the new school, I have witnessed the experience of students, families, faculty members and administrators throughout the process. Taking part in the effort to establish a school culture by initiating school-wide activities and routines over the past couple of years has been part of my role as a teacher and teacher leader at the new school. It is important for the reader to know that I teach at the school where I conducted this research, and I acknowledge that my experience may have shaped my interpretation and perspective on the situation (Creswell, 2013).

However, as the researcher, I bracketed out my personal experiences and focused on the experiences of the participants and the findings of the study (Creswell, 2012). Bracketing is the practice of acknowledging and then putting aside beliefs, feelings, and perceptions in order to be more open and loyal to the phenomenon or process being studied (Creswell, 2012). It allows the researcher to keep past knowledge and personal viewpoints from interfering with the experiences of study participants (Creswell, 2012).
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Culture is frequently cited as a key element in high performing organizations, including schools. Little is known, however, about how culture develops in a new school as a result of a merger. This case study shed light on this little studied but extremely important topic. In order to provide a context for this study, the following literature review presents three bodies of literature: 1) organizational culture, 2) school culture, and 3) organizational culture in mergers. Although organizational culture is the broad concept under which school culture and organizational culture in mergers often fall, in this literature review it is presented as a separate, introductory body of literature in Section 1. School culture, a distinct, well-researched topic that merits its own section, then follows as Section 2. Similarly, organizational culture in mergers presents a unique set of dynamics that requires a focused analysis; so this body of literature, much of it derived from the business world, is examined in detail in Section 3. Within each of the three bodies of literature presented, there are two or three subtopics that introduce a more specific thread of literature that is relevant to and will help in understanding the problem of practice investigated through this research.

Organizational Culture

Before addressing the topic of school culture, it is important to first understand the broader field of organizational culture. Scholars define organizational culture in various ways, and there is not one, agreed upon definition. Joanne Martin’s (2002) definition rather broadly stated:
When organizations are examined from a cultural viewpoint, attention is drawn to aspects of organizational life that historically have often been ignored or understudied, such as the stories people tell to newcomers to explain “how things are done around here.” (p. 58)

Schein (2009) provided us with another definition that was commonly accepted. He explained that organizational culture was:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members. (p. 17)

Another definition that was more specific and fit the school setting well explained that organizational culture:

Encompasses the taken-for-granted values, underlying assumptions, expectations, collective memories, and definitions present in an organization. It represents “how things are done around here.” It reflects the prevailing ideology that people carry inside their heads. It conveys a sense of identity to employees, provides unwritten and often unspoken guidelines for how to get along in the organization, and it enhances the stability of the social system that they experience. (Cameron & Quinn, 2011, p. 17)

Schein (2009) and Martin (2002) discussed the similarities and differences among these and other definitions of culture and the patterns found within the definitions. Along with many definitions, there are also different representative models that carefully depict the various aspects of organization culture. These models are used to better understand the
concept and to apply it to a particular context. In addition to representative models, leadership and sub-cultures are important aspects of organizational culture; all three are explored in the following subtopic sections.

**Models.** Several scholars of organizational culture created conceptual models that presented the complex concept of culture in a more concrete fashion. They are an important aspect of organizational culture, and many researchers have applied the models to their findings and have used them to help others understand the concept as it applies to their works.

One such model was the “Theoretical Model of Culture Traits” created by Denison and Mishra (1995). Denison and Mishra used survey data from CEOs from 764 organizations and a series of case studies at five firms to investigate the relationship between culture and effectiveness. Through their findings, they identified four cultural traits of an organization: adaptability, mission, consistency, and involvement. These traits were measured and related to organizational outcomes. In each quadrant of their organizational culture model, Denison and Mishra also described these traits in detail as they applied to the necessities of leadership.

Cameron and Quinn (2011) presented an organizational culture model and focused their research on leadership and cultural change. Their “Competing Values Framework” model had four quadrants: clan (collaborate), adhocracy (create), hierarchy (control), and market (compete). They were named for the characteristics represented by the core values identified in the model. These four core values were expressed along a continuum of stability and control versus flexibility and discretion, and internal focus and integration versus external focus and differentiation. Cameron and Quinn explained how
this framework provided guidelines that helped leaders improve their organizations’ overall performance and add value. It also provided guidance during times of change.

Schein (2009), in his book *Organizational Culture and Leadership (3rd edition)*, described a model for organizational culture, which included the following levels: artifacts, espoused values, and assumptions. Schein’s theories and models were frequently used as a basis for others’ research. He explained that culture change involved “unlearning” and “relearning” which made it transformative. Although the process of culture change is complex, Schein identified the general steps as: disconfirmation, cognitive restructuring, learning new concepts, imitation and identification, and refreezing. Every step in the change process produced specific feelings in those involved, which required particular attention by leaders. Their roles changed as culture was created, embedded, transmitted, and refrozen.

**Leadership and Change.** Leadership and change go hand in hand when it comes to school culture. Schein and Denison focused a great deal of their research on leadership and change within the field of organizational culture. Along with other scholars, they agreed that leadership played an essential role in creating, evolving, sustaining, and changing culture (Denison, 2005; Fullan, 2001; Lakomski, 2001; Schein, 2004). They emphasized the importance of strong leadership during times of change and explained the ways in which leaders managed culture change. Fullan (2001), Deal and Peterson (1999), Trice and Beyer (1991), and Giberson, et al. (2009) also wrote about leadership or the relationship between leadership and change, each having explored the topic from a different angle.
Fullan (2001) identified and described what he called five core competencies that helped all people improve their leadership skills. These core competencies, or key dimensions of leadership, were: developing and acting with a strong moral purpose, understanding and staying on top of the change process, developing and maintaining positive relationships, sharing knowledge, and creating a vision and setting that foster coherence. Fullan explained that strong leadership was essential in the emotionally intense environment that was frequently created by change. He called adapting to this type of emotionally charged change “reculturing.” This was a very difficult and never-ending process that incorporated all five of the dimensions of leadership, but focused mostly on cultivating positive relationships, building knowledge, and “striving for coherence in a non linear world” (p. 44). Fullan explained that people who embraced the five elements, not only leaders but all involved, dealt better with complex changes, such as reculturing, leading to positive outcomes. In addition, Fullan identified characteristics that he believed all leaders possessed, which he called the *energy-enthusiasm-hopefulness* constellation. These more personal constellations worked in conjunction with the five dimensions of leadership, and for the leader to be most effective and successful, all had to be present especially during times of change such as reculturing.

Trice and Beyer (1991) wrote more specifically about leadership as a process and the ways in which it affected culture. They examined how the leadership of those involved in culture change and innovation compared to that of those involved in the maintenance of organizational culture. Using existing theory and descriptions from scholarly and popular literature, the authors predicted that the characteristics of leaders who created culture change were similar to those who maintained cultures, and that there
were some generic characteristics of cultural leadership. They explained, “A cultural approach to leadership can illuminate the other side of leadership—how leaders influence the understandings and networks of meanings that others hold and express through their actions” (p. 150). Therefore, the ways in which a leader led, as it related to the context, were essential to the maintenance or growth of a culture’s organization.

When elements of charismatic leadership were applied to cultural leadership, Trice and Beyer (1991) found they were relevant. These nine elements were personal qualities, perceived situation, vision and mission, follower attributions, leader behaviors, performance, administrative actions, use of cultural forms, and use of tradition. Leadership that worked towards maintaining a culture and leadership that resulted in culture change or innovation were similar when it came to these elements, particularly with regard to leadership behavior, strong convictions, and belief of success by their followers. These findings led Trice and Beyer to the conclusion that there were possibly some common cultural leadership characteristics. They explained, “Members are unlikely to give up whatever security they derive from the existing culture and follow a leader in new directions unless that leader exudes self-confidence, has strong convictions, a dominant personality, and can preach the new vision with drama and eloquence” (p. 163).

Leadership in a cultural maintenance versus innovation context differed in many ways, especially when it came to the leader’s vision and mission (Trice & Beyer, 1991). Depending on whether the vision was broad or narrow, the leader and followers viewed the organization as having required major structure change or simple maintenance. The
way in which the leader defined the situation or status of the organization impacted the way in which it was interpreted by the followers, which then influenced their actions.

Giberson et al. (2009) also wrote about the relationship between leadership and organizational culture, but they focused on the impact of a leader’s personality traits on the cultural values of the organization. In a quantitative study with thirty-two chief executive officers (CEO) and 467 employees from 32 organizations, researchers collected data using the Big-Five personality traits, personal values measures, and a competing values measure of organizational culture. They examined the relationship between the personalities of CEOs and the shared cultural values of the members of their particular organization. Researchers found that CEO characteristics impacted the norms that influenced behavior, decision making, and interactions of the employees (Giberson et al., 2009).

According to Giberson et al. (2009), many studies that discussed leadership and organizational culture looked at the way in which the leader’s personality impacted the culture in a superficial way, such as the structure of the organization. Giberson et al. found evidence of a relationship between a leader’s personality and the deeper, more involved aspect of the culture’s organization: its values. Specifically, the agreeableness and emotional stability of the CEOs were closely related to the members’ cultural values. Their findings supported the theory that, “CEOs who score high on agreeability will foster a culture aimed at building morale and cohesion, while those who score lower on agreeableness would be more likely to foster cultures that focus on competitiveness and performance” (Giberson et al., 2009, p. 133). Similarly, those who scored high in emotional stability were more internally focused and directed their energy towards
creating change and innovations within the organization in order to stay competitive, while those who scored low were more externally focused. These researchers also found that leaders who scored low on openness to experiences led organizations whose cultures valued stability and control of operations (Giberson et al., 2009). Giberson et al. (2009) concluded by stating:

   The personality of top-level leaders is felt throughout the organization by impacting the types of people who join and remain with the organization, norms that sanction or discourage member behavior and decision making, and patterns of behavior and interaction among members. (p. 135)

   When considering further research in this area, Giberson et al. (2009) suggested researchers conduct a longitudinal study on the process of culture creation and development. They recommended focusing on the decisions of the founders and leaders, as well as the steps they took when establishing the organization.

   **Subcultures.** Subcultures were frequently seen in organizations, especially when viewed from the differentiation perspective, and the nature of the relationships between them varied. As defined earlier, with a differentiation perspective there were inconsistencies among interpretations of cultural manifestations; consensus existed within each subculture rather than the whole organization; and clarity was achieved within subcultures while ambiguity was channeled outside of the subcultures (Martin, 2002). Subcultures could be harmonious and enhance one another, indifferent and function independently, or in conflict with each other (Martin, 1992 & 2002). They could be content-specific (such as personal friendships, race, or gender), functional (along horizontal lines), or hierarchical (along vertical lines) (Martin, 1992 & 2002). The
approach to dealing with subcultures varied depending on the theoretical perspective with which they were viewed and the dynamics of the organization. The following were the different approaches evident in cultural research: 1. a single subculture studied on its own, 2. an entire organization studied with a dominant view and possible emergent subcultural differences, and 3. the exploration of two or more well developed subcultures and their relationships with one another (Martin, 1992 & 2002).

Morgan and Ogbonna (2008) explained that most subculture research focused on the differences between organizations’ subcultures, and they argued that by having examined an organization’s participants through several analytical lenses, greater insight could be gained. To address this, they used the three-perspective framework developed by Martin in their research. Morgan and Ogbonna examined findings from their qualitative study of two large healthcare organizations, having focused on the reactions of professionals following important changes in their respective organizations. They explored the similarities, differences, ambiguities, and incompatibilities among and also within three subcultural groups consisting of doctors, nurses, and non-clinical managers, and the way in which these dynamics affected organizational change initiatives.

A goal of the health organizations in this study was to attain a “cohesive cultural identity” based on the government’s “inclusive policy framework for managing clinical quality” (Morgan & Ogbonna, 2008, p. 62). Some degree of consensus was found among the three distinct subcultural groups on various issues, but their opinions diverged in other areas. For example, while the subcultural groups made up of doctors and nurses agreed that the regulatory guidelines implemented were important, their perspectives on the management-led approach differed greatly. They also agreed on the shared values
and goals of the organization, but they disagreed on the ways in which the goals would be achieved.

A contribution of this study was the identification of small groups with similar values found within the subcultures, which Morgan and Ogbonna (2008) called *nanocultures*. They explained that if nanocultures were studied when researchers were examining cultures and subcultures, then a more complete view of an organization’s culture emerged and theoretical development in this area advanced.

Based on the depth of their findings, Morgan and Ogbonna (2008) concluded that organizational culture was best understood when a multi-perspective framework was used, and data was viewed from the integration, differentiation, and fragmentation perspectives within the same study. They stated, “Adopting a multi-perspective framework enables a wide range of interpretations of the change initiatives of a single organization to be achieved” (Morgan & Ogbonna, 2008, p. 60). They went on to explain that from the integration perspective, their findings may have provided insight for managers to generate particular policies in the future; while viewing the results from the differentiation and fragmentation perspectives, one saw the high degree of uncertainty and lack of consensus within and between the three subcultures. The subcultures clearly had their own set of values and beliefs, which were not always in sync with the organization’s values, but they also seemed to support some parts of the organization’s core philosophy.

In a quantitative study with 3,400 participants at a Danish insurance company, Hofstede (1998) collected survey and interview data that showed three subcultures within the company: professional, administrative, and customer interface. Conflict among these
subcultures caused rifts that led to substantial consequences for the company. This study was a sequel to a research project Hofstede conducted that resulted in the identification of “six clear and mutually independent dimensions of (perceived) practices distinguishing the 20 organizational units from each other” (1998, p. 3). The six dimensions were: 1. process oriented vs. results oriented, 2. employee oriented vs. job oriented, 3. parochial vs. professional, 4. open system vs. closed system, 5. loose vs. tight control, and 6. normative vs. pragmatic (Hofstede, 1998). Although Hofstede was able to find common cultural traits within organizational units, he did not test for subcultures within the units because of the sample size.

Survey results reflected conflicts within the organization and disconnects between subcultures (Hofstede, 1998). For example, administrators and professionals who were making decisions for the company lacked understanding when it came to customer interface. In addition, misconceptions of management with regard to the ambition and level of education of women in the company were evident. Hofstede explained how this study, “shows the importance for higher management of complex organizations to be aware of the cultural variety within the organization they lead” (p. 11). He went on to say that it was essential to look at each subculture individually to fully understand the culture of the organization. Hofstede concluded that culture surveys like the one used in his study provided managers with “maps” of the subcultures within an organization, which spurred conversations about how much “cultural variety” existed and how much was desired. Recognizing subcultural needs helped reduce conflict among subcultures and decisions made company-wide.
Sackman (1992), in a combined ethnographic and phenomenological study with fifty-two participants in three different divisions of a firm, examined how culture was structured within an organization using an inductive reasoning methodology. Sackman collected data from interviews, observations, and written documents, and looked at the extent to which members of the firm shared four types of “cultural knowledge.” The four different kinds of knowledge considered were: 1. dictionary knowledge, which, “comprises commonly held descriptions, including labels and sets of words or definitions that are used in a particular organization,” 2. directory knowledge, which, “refers to commonly held practices,” 3. recipe knowledge, which was based on judgments and, “refers to prescriptions for repair and improvement strategies,” and 4. axiomatic knowledge, which, “refers to reasons and explanations of the final causes perceived to underlie a particular event” (Sackman, 1992, p. 142).

Findings showed nine cultural groupings based on the four kinds of cultural knowledge Sackman identified (1992). Seven subcultures formed around dictionary knowledge. Another subculture, the top-management group, was established in regard to axiomatic knowledge. Finally, seen throughout the entire organization and spanning all three divisions, was directory knowledge. No subcultures were identified based on the data gathered with regard to recipe knowledge. The motivations behind the hiring of organization members, the expectations of management, and the particular roles that members held within the organization all influenced the subgroups and the type of cultural knowledge around which they formed.

Sackman (1992) recommended that the findings of his study be used to form possible hypotheses for future cultural studies using deductive research methodologies.
By looking at the culture of an organization and the predefined subcultures simultaneously, this framework provided a more specific and possibly detailed analysis of culture.

**School Culture**

Within the broad field of organizational culture described above is the more specific area of school culture. According to Hargreaves (1995), the concept of culture used in an educational setting was first introduced by Willard Waller in 1932. In his book, *The Sociology of Teaching*, Waller explained:

> A separate culture, we have indicated, grows up within the school . . . The whole complex set of ceremonies centering around the school may be considered a part of the culture indigenous to the school . . . And this specialized culture is perhaps the agency most effective in binding personalities together to form a school. (p. 13)

With Waller’s work as the foundation, theorists have developed various perspectives regarding school culture. As is the case with the more general area of organizational culture, there is not one agreed upon definition of school culture. In addition, most of the definitions contain some level of ambiguity because of the intangible nature of the concept (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008). With that said, Deal and Kennedy (2006) explained that many who researched and wrote about school culture used Schein’s model of culture which included three levels: artifacts and practices, values, and basic assumptions. Deal and Peterson (2009) explained the term culture helped school leaders understand the:

> Unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations. The unofficial pattern seems to permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk
about or consider taboo, whether they seek out colleagues or isolate themselves, and how teachers feel about their work and their students. (p. 6)

Similarly, Reeves (2009) explained, “The meaning of the term ranges from policies and procedures to personal preferences to deeply embedded belief systems . . . Culture is reflected in the behavior, attitudes, and beliefs of individuals and groups” (p. 37). As is the case with organizational culture, the way in which school culture is defined differs depending on the theoretical perspective the researcher takes. Regardless of the perspective, three of the main areas of school culture research are leadership, change, and academic performance. Since the first two areas are inextricably intertwined when discussing culture, they are combined into Subtopic 1 below, followed by academic performance in Subtopic 2, which is also strongly influenced by leadership.

Leadership and Change. Leadership and change are important aspects of school culture and have been studied extensively and often in relation to one another. Bush (2003) explained that leaders hold the responsibility for creating, sustaining, and changing school culture. It is essential that they lead by example and that their actions reflect their words. Reeves (2009) agreed and explained, “The single greatest impediment to meaningful cultural change is the gap between what leaders say that they value and what leaders actually value” (p. 37). In addition to leading change by their actions, Reeves described three more essential factors that leaders must keep in mind when implementing culture change. They have to decide on and clearly communicate what aspects of the culture will remain unchanged, because maintaining a sense of stability is important. Leaders also need to choose the right “culture tools” to use for their school including, “‘Power tools’, such as threats and coercion; ‘management tools’, 
such as training, procedures, and measurement systems; and ‘leadership tools,’ including role modeling and vision” (p. 39). Finally, Reeves explained that it is essential for leaders to maintain constant personal attention and do the “scut work,” meaning the less glamorous tasks.

As mentioned earlier, Fullan (2001) identified the five key components of effective leadership in his framework for leading change: moral purpose, understanding change, relationship building, knowledge creation and sharing, and coherence making. Fullan discussed the application of these components to the education setting and identified positive outcomes such as, “enhanced student performance, increased capacity of teachers, greater involvement of parents and community members, engagement of students, all-around satisfaction and enthusiasm about going further, and greater pride for all in the system” (p. 10). He explained that every leader should continually focus on working on the five components of leadership in order to become more effective. This is especially important during times of change.

Fullan (2001) also discussed three leadership “lessons.” The first was the need for “slow learning,” meaning that in complex situations, such as culture changes in organizations, leaders need to listen and observe with an open mind and be patient rather than jumping to conclusions and acting hastily. The second lesson, “learning in context,” means learning in the workplace. Learning this way is specific to the situation and involves a leader’s colleagues; therefore, it not only helps the individual advance in terms of leadership skills, but it simultaneously helps improve the organization, or context. Some examples of this for principals in the school setting are mentoring and coaching programs, support and study groups, and visits to other schools to observe initiatives
(Fullan, 2001). The final lesson that Fullan pointed out is “leadership for many.” He explained that in order to obtain universal commitment, there must be leaders in all parts of the organization. Being surrounded by leaders helps foster people’s internal commitment and in turn builds strong organizations (Fullan, 2001). This is very important to remember when it comes to building, changing, or maintaining a school’s culture.

Deal and Peterson (2009) likened school culture to a tapestry and explained that, “Thriving school cultures are cobbled together by using local materials and shaped in accordance with community ideals and expectations” (p. 129). Because of this, school principals need to resist the temptation to try to shape a school’s culture based on that of another school. Although the other school may be considered a “model school,” it will not be effective to mimic the culture of that school (Deal & Peterson, 2009). A school’s culture has to develop from within and is constantly evolving.

Deal and Peterson (2009) also explained that although the principal or other designated administrator may be identified as the leader, teachers, staff members, parents, community members, and others are also cultural leaders. According to Deal and Peterson, these cultural leaders do the following:

Reinforce the underlying mores, values, and beliefs in subtle and often important ways. They shore up the central mission and purpose of the school. They create and sustain motivation and commitment through rites and rituals. Leadership at its best is shared, with everyone pulling together in a common direction. (p. 199) Before attempting to simply strengthen, modify, or entirely transform their school’s culture, leaders should first read the culture making sure to acquire a deep understanding
of both its history and present state. They should inquire about the goals and visions for the future held by the school community (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Only after leaders have carefully done these things can they move forward. Deal and Peterson (1999) identified eight symbolic roles that these leaders take on to strengthen their school’s culture including: historians, anthropological sleuths, visionaries, symbols, potters, poets, actors, and healers. Sharing leadership and fulfilling these roles, “builds strong and cohesive cultures” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 87).

Connolly, James, and Beales (2011) referenced Fullan, Deal and Kennedy, Smircich, Cameron and Quinn, and others discussed here in their longitudinal, instrumental case study about an 8-year culture change process in an educational setting. They identified external reality, interpretation, organization, competing subcultures, and process as five perspectives on cultures and applied them to the organizational culture change process of a school. These perspectives were based on the different views of organizational culture as well as ontological variations. Connolly et al. drew upon much of Martin’s work and explained that the perspectives they examined “overlap” with the perspectives that Martin studied including integration, differentiation, and fragmentation.

Connolly et al. (2011) explained how their study could also help clarify the findings of previously published works that examined organizational culture changes in the educational setting. After using the perspectives they have identified to analyze a real life change process as well as others’ works, Connolly et al. concluded that, “the way educational leaders and managers set about organizing culture change is conditioned by their perspective on organizational culture and the essence of what they consider they are changing.” It is helpful for school leaders to know this and take it into consideration.
before they engage in a culture change situation. It is also important for researchers to take this into account when studying a school going through a change in its organizational culture.

**Academic Performance.** An organization’s culture has a significant impact on its effectiveness (Denison & Mishra, 1995). More specifically, there is evidence of a strong link between organizational culture and financial performance in the business world (Deal & Peterson, 2009). As Deal and Peterson (2009) explained, studies show that companies with strong cultures outperform similar businesses in many ways such as greater increase in revenue, stock value, and work force. This connection between an organization’s culture and performance is evident in the school setting as well. “For over 30 years, organizational culture has been linked to school performance, and having the ‘right culture’ is still considered central in improving school and staff performance” (Connolly, James, & Beales, 2011, p. 422). Schools working toward improvements in learning and teaching make more progress toward reaching their goals when cultural patterns support reform (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Whether studies address the sense of community, teacher efficacy and motivation, student attitude, school climate, or leadership style and quality, the findings are similar in that they show a link between school culture and student achievement (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Engles, Hotton, Devos, Bouckenooghe, & Aelterman, 2008; Pritchard, Morrow, & Marshall, 2004; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009).

School culture affects student achievement, and a school’s principal influences the culture; therefore, principals impact student achievement (Engels et al., 2008; Habegger, 2008; MacNeil et al., 2009). In order to improve student achievement and
teacher morale, it is imperative for principals to focus on culture development in the learning environment (Engels et al., 2008; Habegger, 2008; MacNeil et al., 2009). Highly motivated teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy come from schools with positive cultures, and students learning from these teachers perform better academically (Engels et al., 2008; MacNeil et al, 2009). Assessing the school’s culture and climate and using the results to concentrate on students’ learning goals, as well as fostering positive relationships with teachers, parents, and students, are important steps that principals can take towards improving academic performance (MacNeil et al, 2009).

In a mixed-method study, Engels et al. (2008), collected data with semi-structured interviews with principals and questionnaires for teachers and principals, to examine principals’ ability to create a school culture that inspired teaching and learning. The personality traits of principals, their well-being and function, and teachers’ perceptions of some school culture variables were investigated. As Engels et al. (2008) explained:

In schools with very positive school cultures we find principals with high achievement orientation, who focus on creating a flexible, stimulating, participative and supportive environment, who do not only identify with roles of mentor or innovator but manage to devote most of their time to their preferred role. (p. 170)

They identified principals who had a “Type A” personality, were innovative, had a strong vision, and were supportive as those with leadership traits that were most effective and were capable of transforming a school culture and greatly influencing teaching and student learning.
MacNeil et al. (2009), in a quantitative study with 24,684 students and 1727 teachers, collected survey data, which showed that schools with strong school cultures had more motivated teachers and better student performance and outcomes. The schools they examined were categorized as Exemplary, Recognized, or Acceptable according to the state rating system, which was based on a criterion-reference test measuring academic skills. MacNeil et al. compared these data to those they collected using the Organizational Health Inventory (OHI survey) which asked questions about various facets of the school environment.

In the study by MacNeil et al. (2009), organizational health scores reported by Acceptable schools were lower than those of Exemplary schools. The greatest variance was between schools with Recognized and Acceptable ratings in the areas of Goal focus and Adaptation. MacNeil et al. (2009) explained that it was important for principals to concentrate on these areas in order to develop a healthy school climate. When principals establish clear goals and a powerful vision that are supported by the school community, their leadership will have a positive influence on the climate and culture of the school (MacNeil et al., 2009). In addition, all schools go through stressful times, but if principals put structures in place beforehand to help maintain stability and manage the stress, their schools will be better able to adapt during challenging times. MacNeil et al. concluded that students scored higher on standardized tests if their school had a “healthy learning environment.”

Closely related to school culture is the concept of school climate. There is a great deal of overlap between the school culture and school climate literature, and many findings show a connection between climate and academic achievement (Williams,
Similar to school culture, school climate is a term for which there are many definitions. It can be referred to as the school environment, the social system, norms and expectations, the psychosocial setting, the teachers’ or students’ morale, and in many other related ways (Johnson & Stevens, 2006).

Johnson and Stevens (2006), in a quantitative study of 59 elementary schools, collected questionnaire data from teachers and standardized tests scores from students to study the association between student achievement, school climate, and community and school context. Their findings showed a positive relationship between student achievement and teachers’ perceptions of school climate. Johnson and Stevens also found that in schools in communities with low socioeconomic status, school climate had less of an influence on student achievement than in high socioeconomic communities.

According to Johnson and Stevens (2006), schools with better student achievement had an innovative school environment, teachers with strong relationships with one another, students who were cooperative and friendly, teachers who were involved in making decisions, and suitable facilities and resources. They explained that climate and achievement went hand-in-hand and often impacted one another. “School climate probably influences and, in turn, is influenced by student achievement” (Johnson & Stevens, 2006, p. 118). When Johnson and Stevens added community and school context variables, it changed their model especially in the areas of school climate and teacher characteristics. Although school climate had a statistically significant effect on student achievement, it was also influenced by school context (Johnson & Stevens,
That is, students in better-resourced schools benefited even more by positive school climate than students in poorly resourced settings.

**Organizational Culture in Mergers**

Mergers occur in all industries and fields, but they are not always met with success. “Regardless of the environment in which they occur, reorganizational endeavors are inherently risky, demanding strategic initiatives to enhance the potential for implementing a productive consolidation without experiencing dysfunctional repercussions” (Stinchcomb & Ordaz, 2007, p. 147). Research shows that one of the main reasons for dysfunctional repercussions is a lack of attention devoted to organizational culture (Beard & Zuniga, 2006; Marks & Marks, 2011; Saunders, Altinay, & Riordan, 2009; Stinchcomb & Ordaz, 2007). In order to minimize culture clash, deliberate steps should be taken to ensure that proper consideration is given to the individual cultures of both parties as well as the developing culture of the new organization, before, during, and after a merger. Too often the focus during a merger is on financial aspects and organizational strategies, and culture becomes a low priority (Marks & Mirvis, 2011).

Because they are often involuntary, mergers can cause employees to feel vulnerable and powerless leading to confusion and anxiety (Stinchcomb & Ordaz, 2007). Positive leadership and open and honest communication are important elements that help minimize culture clash and assist employees in dealing with the uncertainty brought upon by a merger. Leaders should work towards developing strong relationships and practices and promote positive communication (Marmeout, 2011). During a merger, leaders need to know that building a new culture is an essential part of constructing a new organization.
(Marks & Mirvis, 2011). With the right kind of leadership and preparation, although culture differences can be problematic to merging organizations, they can also lead to creative problem solving, innovation, and strong relationships (Marks & Mirvis, 2011). The literature on mergers, as it applies to culture, falls into three subtopics discussed below: 1. Pre-Merger Preparation, 2. Culture Clash, and 3. Leadership and Communication.

**Pre-Merger Preparation.** A common theme throughout much of the literature is the importance of pre-merger planning. It is an essential step in minimizing culture clash (Baughn & Finquel, 2009; Saunders, Altinay, & Riordan, 2009; Stinchcomb & Ordaz, 2007). Stinchcomb and Ordaz (2007), in their exploratory case study, used data from interviews and records to explore the role that organizational culture played in the merger of two public sector organizations, and then described strategies used to improve their compatibility. Stinchcomb and Ordaz explained that members of an organization should learn about the other organization’s culture before a merger, and should also put a committee or transition team in place to help with the planning of the merger and to anticipate any problems that may arise along the way. In this case study, the transition team was also responsible for maintaining communication and answering any questions that arose before or during the integration. Any commonalities between the two organizations’ cultures, such as structural features, were pointed out and discussed in order to identify some common ground (Stinchcomb & Ordaz, 2007).

Locke (2007), in a case study of two merging higher education institutions, explored the significance of similarities and differences between the management styles and organizational cultures on a proposed merger. His findings suggested that the new
institution’s academic and scholarly development could suffer if management was not considerate of the existing cultures and subcultures. Locke recommended a holistic approach to merger preparation and integration. The traditional pre-merger investigation of the financial and legal circumstances should be expanded to include the nature of the culture and subculture as well the potential repercussion of a merger (Locke, 2007). Locke and Saunders et al. (2009) also recommended that a cultural audit be given to merging organizations pre-merger in order to gain a better understanding of and appreciation for each individual culture. This audit, which should consist of interviews, focus groups, and surveys, would function as a foundation for upcoming steps taken to aid in the merger process (Locke, 2007). Moreover, such recommendations should be acted upon immediately when a deal is reached (Weber & Tarba, 2012).

Marmenout (2011), in a multi-method experimental study, examined the way employees’ feelings about a merger evolved over a period of time and how peer interactions influenced this evolution. Marmenout identified ‘collective rumination’, repeated, negative discussions of organizational problems by groups of peers, as a predictor of negative reactions to the announcement of a merger. Findings revealed that conversations with colleagues significantly aggravated employee responses to mergers. This negative pre-merger reaction can have a major impact on the entire merger process and cause immediate culture clash. Recommendations for management to minimize culture clash due to collective rumination include: encourage active involvement, engage in enjoyable or neutral distractions, and practice positive leadership by encouraging a positive climate, relationships, and communication (Marmenout, 2011).
Culture Clash. Post-merger culture clash and conflict can lead to uncertainty, stress, vulnerability, a feeling of instability, and decreased performance and productivity (Bajaj, 2009; Marmenout, 2011; Stinchcomb & Ordaz, 2007). Marks and Mirvis (2011) focused a great deal of their research on culture clash and proposed a framework for managing culture, identifying three phases: precombination, combination, and postcombination. The first thing people notice during the beginning stages of a merger is what makes their company different from the other company even if there are actually many similarities (Marks & Mirvis, 2011). These perceived differences could then lead to negative reactions and exaggerations. To help minimize this culture clash and instead use culture to reach financial and strategic goals, Marks and Mirvis (2011) identified four essential steps: “1. Define a desired cultural end-state. 2. Deepen cross-cultural learning. 3. Drive the combination toward the desired end. 4. Reinforce the emerging culture through substance and symbolism” (p. 864).

Many scholars such as Weber and Drori (2011) explained that the cultural differences between the merging organizations impacted the severity of the culture clash. Bajaj (2009) argued that if merging organizations had either very similar cultures or very different but equally strong cultures, there were greater degrees of culture clash as both sides were fighting to preserve their own cultures. On the other hand, if one organization had a much more dominant culture, that organization would experience less of a culture clash and benefit when it came to post-merger cultural construction (Drori, Wrzesniewski, & Shmuel, 2011).

Beard and Zuniga (2006) presented a case study that examined the use of culture assessment as a tool in the cultural integration process of two companies in the financial
services industry. The cultures were individually assessed in order to better understand their differences, identify possible culture clashes, and then figure out how to best deal with these differences. Beard and Zuniga explained that there was a connection between companies with organizational cultural differences and the inability to meet the expectations of shareholders, and that, “high-performing cultures were responsible for overall corporate strength” (p. 15-16). They created and implemented a Culture Merger Integration (CMI) instrument and put a “culture team” into place including employees from both companies. This culture team collected data and monitored the culture assimilation process. Their main goal was to find potential differences in the cultures and help management with interventions to deal with these differences, and they recommended that other organizations implement a CMI to assist in any merger endeavors (Beard & Zuniga, 2006).

**Leadership and Communication.** Scholars emphasize the need for open and honest communication beginning with pre-merger planning and continuing throughout the entire process of cultural construction (Saunders et al., 2009; Stinchcomb & Ordaz, 2007). Distrust in an organization can result from weak leadership and poor communication (Saunders et al., 2009). Two-way, frequent communication initiated by leaders of newly merged organizations, no matter what their management strategy, is necessary for the success of a merger (Badrtalei & Bates, 2007).

Two ways to help minimize merger culture clash is through strong leadership and communication amongst all stakeholders (Schein, 2004). As the post-merger culture construction begins, it is important to maintain an environment of open, honest communication and to get all members of the organization to participate and take
ownership of their role in the process (Weber & Drori, 2011). One of the first post-merger priorities, according to Drori, Wrzesniewski, and Shmuel (2011), is to come up with a shared understanding and move forward with that partnership in mind. This develops through communication and will help minimize the high degree of uncertainty that often emerges and evolves as cultural construction begins (Marmenout, 2011). Marmenout (2011) explained that information should be shared quickly and with transparency, because when people are provided with little information they will often focus on the negative when discussing the merger with colleagues and draw their own conclusions. Leaders should make an effort to have a positive attitude with regard to the merger. In order to decrease collective rumination among employees, leaders should also explain what is happening with the company at large and as it applies to the particular work groups. This communication can help managers build strong relationships with employees and a positive culture (Marmenout, 2011). In addition, Schein (2004) suggested that it is part of the leader’s role to decide how to best manage culture clash by leaving it alone to naturally evolve, allowing one culture to dominate, or blending the two cultures by picking elements from each to preserve.

**Conclusion**

To provide a context for this case study, three bodies of literature were examined in-depth: 1) organizational culture, 2) school culture, and 3) organizational culture in mergers. Focusing on organizations from a cultural vantage point draws attention, as Martin (2002) aptly noted, “to aspects of organizational life that historically have often been ignored or understudied, such as the stories people tell to newcomers to explain, “how things are done around here” (p. 58). This perspective is crucial to understanding
how mergers, including school mergers, evolve and what measures leaders can take to ensure their success. Since this study involves school mergers, a thorough review of school culture followed. This review focused on the indispensable role that school leaders play in establishing a positive school culture, especially during a school merger, which in turn affects academic performance. The review of literature on organizational culture in mergers revealed the importance of pre-merger planning and the invariable post-merger clash of cultures if such planning is not properly undertaken. In addition to pre-merger planning, the literature suggests that communication, particularly on the part of leaders, is crucial to reducing culture clash.

Following the thorough review of literature on organizational culture, school culture, and organizational culture in mergers, the next chapter will focus on the methodology used in this descriptive case study.
Chapter Three: Research Design

Introduction

A school’s culture greatly affects and is affected by those who attend, work, visit, and are affiliated with the school, and it is constantly changing and evolving. It is something that is often difficult to identify, but it is very powerful and influences every aspect of school-life while impacting all stakeholders (Deal & Peterson, 1990). School culture takes time to develop, and many variables contribute to the creation of a culture. The merging of three schools presents a unique cultural dilemma. How do students, families, faculty members, and administrators join together to create a culture at a brand new school? This descriptive case study describes a new school’s culture following a merger and the process by which its culture has begun to develop, through the perspectives of teachers and administrators at X Elementary School, during the first five years of operation.

Methodology

The central research question for this study was:

What is the process by which cultures from three different elementary schools merged to form a culture at a new elementary school, and what are the characteristics of the newly formed culture?

Some sub-questions that were considered in order to answer this research question were:

1. How do teachers at X Elementary School describe the current culture and make sense of the school’s cultural development?
2. How do administrators at X Elementary School describe the current culture and make sense of the school’s cultural development?
3. What characteristics of the distinctive cultures of the three original schools are represented in the emerging culture at the X Elementary School?

4. What is new and unique about the culture at X Elementary School?

   Based on the central research question, a qualitative research design was appropriate. This approach was used in order to explore and describe the meaning that individuals and a group give to a particular human problem, the process of school culture development following a merger and the resulting new school culture (Creswell, 2009). Data were collected using multiple sources in the participants’ setting, the elementary school at which they were employed, and interpretations were made based on the data using an inductive approach. Gathering, organizing, and interpreting data about the experiences of teachers and administrators, as well as the examination of documents, led to the identification of concepts and themes about the school’s cultural development and resulting culture (Thomas, 2006). These concepts and themes revealed the information with which to provide a holistic account of the problem of practice (Creswell, 2009).

**Research Tradition**

In order to address the research question and investigate the post-merger culture and the cultural development process as experienced by teachers and administrators, a descriptive case study approach was used for this study. It focused on the process of cultural development at an elementary school, a real-life situation happening in present time. With one exception noted below, participants were interviewed and focus groups were held in the school setting, so it was not possible to control the behaviors of the participants or the events taking place in that setting, which is important in case studies.
The participants provided their individual perspectives on the cultural development process and the current culture (Creswell, 2009; Yin, 2009).

Given the context of this problem of practice and the research question, a constructivist position was used. The environment in which the research was conducted, as well as interactions with the participants, influenced the way in which the problem was investigated. The researcher’s experience could not be completely removed from the research process, so it was important that bias was made clear and values were kept separate (Ponteratto, 2005). This was done through bracketing. The researcher bracketed past experiences related to the study by identifying them rather than ignoring them, and then set them aside in order to focus on the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2012). The constructivist position requires prolonged interpersonal contact and a close relationship with the participants in order to discuss and truly understand the process of culture development based on their experiences. This naturalistic inquiry was achieved through in-depth one-on-one and focus group interviews (Ponteratto, 2005).

Participants

The case study participants included teachers and administrators at X Elementary School, where there were approximately seven hundred students, thirty classroom teachers, and two administrators at the time of this study. The school is located in an upper-middle class suburb in the Northeastern United States. It is a high performing school district where enrollment is increasing every year. Parents are very involved in their children’s education, and the Parent-Teacher Organization is strong.

Participants were deliberately chosen using the sampling strategy, purposeful selection. Information about this particular school’s culture was gathered from the
participants’ perspectives, which helped to address the research question. This information was not obtainable from another source (Maxwell, 2013). The teachers ranged in age and experience from new teachers in their early 20s and in their first three years of teaching, to veteran teachers in their early 60s with 30+ years of experience. Most participants previously taught at one of the three original schools, but some were new teachers or administrators who were not employed in the district prior to the merger. The administrators who participated were an assistant principal, principal, and former assistant principal.

**Recruitment, Access, and Protection of Human Subjects**

Written permission from the school district’s superintendent to proceed with this study was obtained by submitting a letter and following up with an email. The school’s principal then granted written permission after receiving a description of the study. Letters explaining the study and asking for participation were placed in teachers’ and administrators’ school mailboxes. Receipt of informed consent from all participants was obtained before proceeding. Although the researcher taught alongside the participants, because she was not their supervisor there was minimal risk. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and the transcriptions of interviews and focus groups were kept confidential. Participants were not discriminated against or compensated in any way.

**Data Collection**

The three principles of data collection for case studies as identified by Yin (2009), which were applied in this case are as follows: use multiple sources of evidence, create a database, and maintain a chain of evidence. Data were collected through focus groups, interviews, and examination of documents (Creswell, 2009). One-on-one in-depth
interviews of administrators were conducted first, followed by focus group interviews of teachers, and concluding with the collection of documentation.

Interviews are essential to case study research and are one of the most important sources of information (Yin, 2009). Yin identifies two benefits of interviews: they are targeted and focus specifically on the topic being studied, and they are insightful providing inferences and explanations. Seidman (2013) explained, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). For these reasons, collecting data through interviews was essential to this study. Two of the four basic types of interviews were conducted, focus groups and semi-structured (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2012).

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews of administrators allowed the researcher to have control over the questioning, and participants provided historical information from their perspectives about the school merger (Creswell, 2009). This gave insight into the ways in which the school’s culture was developing. These one-on-one interviews were conducted using a guided conversational approach rather than a structured or rigid approach (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2012; Yin, 2009). This allowed for active listening, which cultural research requires, instead of aggressive questioning. It encouraged interviewees to explain things from their point of view and focus on the things they viewed as important components of their school’s culture (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2012). Two of the interviews took place in the administrators’ current offices at the school, while one was conducted at a coffee shop at the request of the participant. They were held immediately following the conclusion of the school day, and an audio recording of each interview was made.
For the focus groups, a single-category design was used, with the category being teachers who taught at X Elementary School (Casey & Krueger, 2009). These teachers provided information that helped describe the informal organizational culture of the school. Barbour (2007) explained, “The capacity of focus groups to facilitate comparison and afford insights that would not be provided by other methods is seen as their main contributions” (p. 41). This was an environment where participants naturally influenced and were influenced by others and used each other’s comments to form their own responses (Casey & Krueger, 2009). Focus groups work best when participants are comfortable enough to provide their opinions without feeling self-conscious, and utilizing a single-category design where the participants all have something in common or are in the same circumstance can provide the kind of nonthreatening environment that encourages them to freely respond to questions (Casey & Krueger, 2009).

Focus group interviews were helpful in obtaining a range of thoughts and feelings that participants had about the cultural development and current culture of X School, as well as the different perspectives of teachers from the three original elementary schools (Casey & Krueger, 2009). In order to achieve this, four focus groups were held, separating participants based on the schools at which they taught prior to the merger, as well as those new to the district. The groups were organized as follows: one for teachers from each of the three original schools (one group for Ames School, one group for Brown School, and one group for Cedar School) and one for teachers who were new to the district. Each of the four groups had three to five participants. The focus group interviews were held in a classroom on the second floor of the school and took place right after the conclusion of the school day. An audio recording of each interview was made.
The third method of data collection that provided important information in this study was the examination of documents. Yin (2009) explained, “Because of their overall value, documents play an explicit role in any data collection in doing case studies” (p. 103). He went on to identify the four strengths of using documentation as evidence. They are considered stable pieces of evidence that could be reviewed multiple times. They are also unobtrusive, meaning they occur as part of the natural setting and aren’t created for or because of a study. They contain specific event details as well as names and references. And finally, documents have broad coverage, meaning they include many events and settings over an extended period of time (Yin, 2009).

The documents included in this study were: 1) the school’s mission statement, 2) the school’s core values, 3) a statement made by the principal and assistant principal found in the front of the parent handbook, and 4) the welcome page of the Parent-Teacher Organization’s portion of the school’s website.

Although documentation can provide important data, because of the potential weaknesses of using this type of evidence such as access withheld, reporting bias, or collection bias, it is essential to also use other sources of evidence (Yin, 2009). Therefore, documentation data were analyzed only after conducting in-depth one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews. Yin (2009) stated, “For case studies, the most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (p. 103). The documents were used to support the data collected on a deeper level through the focus groups and one-on-one interviews to see if they provided insight into some of the underlying assumptions. The documents from X Elementary School that
were reviewed, paired with the focus group and one-on-one interview data provided an overall picture of the schools’ cultures.

Data Storage

Transcripts and recordings of the interviews were kept on the researcher’s personal computer and in a locked file cabinet in her home office. Confidentiality was maintained, and the researcher was the only one with access to the data. Transcripts and recordings will be destroyed three years following the completion of this study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the six steps identified by Creswell (2009): organize and prepare data, read through all data, code data, use coding to create descriptions, categories, or themes, represent themes with a narrative, and lastly, interpret and make meaning of the data. Listening to and transcribing focus group and one-on-one interview data was the first step. Then transcriptions and the documents collected were coded and categorized. Meaning units were identified, and then secondary codes were applied and reorganized based on common themes. Both grammatical and elemental coding methods were applied. Attribute Coding, which is a grammatical coding method and Descriptive Coding, which is an elemental coding method were used for first round coding. For the second round, Pattern Coding was used, and the development of themes, explanations, patterns and processes emerged at that time (Saladna, 2009). Explaining the reasons for the codes chosen while connecting them to the research design was an essential step in the analysis, as was studying emergent patterns while supporting them with a complete description and explanation of the case (Yin, 2009). Because analyzing case study evidence is one of the most difficult aspects of carrying out a case study, it was important
to consider the analytical approach prior to developing this study (Yin, 2009). Of the four strategies recommended by Yin (relying on theoretical propositions, developing case descriptions, using both quantitative and qualitative data, and examining rival explanations) relying on theoretical propositions fit this study and provided a lens through which to view the data.

Martin’s three-perspective theory, described in chapter one, was applied to the data collected in this study. One way the data were represented was with Martin’s model of matrices (1992; 2002). Miles and Huberman (1994) explained how creating a matrix of categories and organizing evidence within these categories can be a useful analytic strategy. Because culture is defined in many different ways and studied from several perspectives, a matrix framework can help clarify how a particular study is defining the concept by focusing on the manifestations of a culture (Martin, 1992). Martin explained, “We can explore how interpretations of these cultural manifestations relate to each other by summarizing the results of a cultural study-the pieces of a cultural puzzle-in one or more matrices” (p. 127). Data of the cultural manifestations (forms, practices, and content themes) were represented from different perspectives (integration, differentiation, fragmentation) while each piece was clarified and compared (Martin, 1992). Forms can include rituals, stories, jargon, humor, and physical arrangements (Martin, 1992). Practices (formal and informal) can include: organizational structure, rules and procedures, task and job descriptions, technology, unwritten norms, communication patterns, standard operating procedures, etc. (Martin, 1992). Content themes (external and internal) are, “common threads of concern that are seen as manifest in a subset of forms and practices” (Martin, 1992, p. 37). Presenting and explaining the data in the
three-perspective matrix format aided in describing the process by which three cultures merged to form a new culture at X Elementary School.

**Trustworthiness**

Yin (1992) identified four tests used to establish the quality of social research. Three of these four tests applied to this case study: construct validity, external validity, and reliability. Yin provided suggestions for dealing with these tests when conducting a case study. In order to address construct validity, the following were used: multiple sources of evidence including one-on-one interviews, focus group interviews, and documents (triangulation), establishment of a chain of events, and a draft reviewed by key informants. Triangulating data checked the accuracy of findings, and themes emerged based on the data from these multiple sources (Creswell, 2009). To address the external validity, a particular theory was used in this study, Joanne Martin’s Three Perspective Theory of Culture. Finally, to address reliability, case study protocol was used. Since the study was conducted at the school where the researcher worked as a teacher, it was important to remain aware of the possible influences and to understand that the researcher limited these influences with the use of bracketing. This allowed her to acknowledge any personal feelings or beliefs, and then put them aside in order to be open to the experiences of the participants and the study’s findings (Creswell, 2012).

**Conclusion**

In order to understand the process by which a culture is formed at a new elementary school following a merger, a qualitative case study was conducted. A case study with a descriptive nature illustrated the complex, developing culture of X Elementary School through the perceptions of teachers and administrators who
experienced the changes brought upon by a merger. Purposeful selection was used to identify teachers and administrators for in-depth one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews at X Elementary School. Documentation was also examined. Data were then analyzed, coded, and represented in matrices. Interpretations were made and validity and reliability was addressed. This case study described the intricate process of the cultural development of X Elementary School following a merger, as well as the characteristics of its newly formed culture.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

This chapter presents key findings from administrators and teachers at X Elementary School as gathered through one-one-one interviews, focus group interviews, and examinations of school documents. The data collected contribute to the understanding of the process by which cultures from three different elementary schools merge to form a culture at a new elementary school. They also help one understand the characteristics of the newly formed culture at X Elementary School.

Data were collected and analyzed to inform the following research questions.

Central question:

What is the process by which cultures from three different elementary schools merged to form a culture at a new elementary school, and what are the characteristics of the newly formed culture?

Sub-questions:

1. How do teachers at X Elementary School describe the current culture and make sense of the school’s cultural development?
2. How do administrators at X Elementary School describe the current culture and make sense of the school’s cultural development?
3. What characteristics of the distinctive cultures of the three original schools are represented in the emerging culture at the X Elementary School?
4. What is new and unique about the culture at X Elementary School?
Participants and Documents

To investigate these questions, three one-on-one interviews and four focus group interviews were conducted, and four documents were reviewed. The new school will be referred to as X Elementary School or X School, while the three original elementary schools in the same district will be referred to as Cedar School, Brown School, and Ames School. The one-on-one interviewees were administrators, and the focus group interviewees were teachers.

The three X Elementary School administrators interviewed in this study are listed in Table 4.1 by pseudonyms assigned by the researcher. Their backgrounds and experiences in education vary, but they all transferred to X School from other schools in the district the year it opened.

Table 4.1

One-on-one Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Position at X School</th>
<th>Time in Position at X School</th>
<th>Former School</th>
<th>Position at Former School</th>
<th>Time in Position at Former School</th>
<th>Other Recent Positions/Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Six years</td>
<td>Cedar</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>One year</td>
<td>Assistant Principal and Teacher out of district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Former Assistant Principal (Half-time)</td>
<td>Three years (retired)</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Ten years</td>
<td>Teacher in district (20 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>Integrated Preschool</td>
<td>Four Years/</td>
<td>Cedar</td>
<td>Integrated Preschool</td>
<td>Twelve Years</td>
<td>Teacher at Cedar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Focus group participants were separated into four groups based on the school at which they taught before moving to X School. These groups will be referred to as the Brown group, Cedar group, Ames group, and new group. The new group was made up of teachers who did not teach in the district prior to teaching at X Elementary School. There were five participants in the new group. Two had been teaching at X School since the year it opened, and three were in their second year. For two teachers this was their first job after college, and the three others taught in different districts. There were three participants in each of the three other groups. They consisted of teachers from the three original elementary schools in the district, Brown, Ames, and Cedar, and they ranged in age and experience.

The four documents analyzed can be found on the X Elementary School website. They include: 1) the school’s mission statement, 2) the school’s core values, 3) a statement made by the principal and assistant principal found in the front of the parent handbook, and 4) the welcome page of the Parent-Teacher Organization’s portion of the website.

**Themes**

The key findings presented in this chapter are organized according to the themes that emerged during the data analysis phase. The first theme, *the leadership of building administrators greatly impacted the experiences of staff members as well as the overall*
school culture, has two subthemes that are manifested through practices and forms within this theme: communication and decision making. The second theme, the ultimate goal of teachers and administrators was to always do what was best for children, also has two subthemes: student success and needs and student behavior and discipline. The third theme, collaboration among teachers was a key factor in the school’s cultural development, is broken down into three subthemes: professional relationships, subcultures, and building layout. The final theme that emerged, the establishment of traditions greatly impacted the cultural development at X School, likewise has three subthemes: the parent-teacher organization (PTO), other schools, and all school meeting (ASM). Data of the cultural manifestations organized into these themes and subthemes will be described as they relate to the cultural development at X Elementary School.

The same themes and subthemes will be used to describe the cultural development process at X School following the merger, as well as the characteristics of the newly formed culture. A description of the developing culture based on data collected will be accomplished through the integration, differentiation, and fragmentation perspectives throughout the chapter concurrently in order to provide a thorough and descriptive analysis.

Leadership

The first major theme discussed in this study is leadership. More specifically: the leadership of building administrators during the first six years of the operation of X Elementary School greatly impacted the day-to-day experience of staff members as well as the overall culture. Since communication and decision making are two major components of leadership, they make up the subthemes in this section: the quality and the
amount of communication between staff members or families and administrators fluctuated as the culture developed; and staff members were involved in the decision making at X Elementary School at varying degrees.

**Communication.** According to the X School Core Values written by the school council and found on the X School website, “Honesty and open communication will be the foundation of our partnership with educators, family and community.” The importance of communication is also highlighted in a statement written by Tom and Barbara on the first page of the X School Parent Handbook on the X School website. It states, “Establishing and maintaining open communication between home and school is the first step in creating a positive working relationship.”

Consistent with these documents, Tom spoke about the importance of being available to children, families, and staff members during the school merger process and the way in which he made that a priority. He wanted staff members to feel comfortable and to be reassured that their needs were going to be met at their new school. As teachers came into the building to unpack their boxes and set up their classrooms, Tom said that he told them he would take care of whatever they needed.

When addressing the topic of communication, Tom talked mostly about his communication with parents, and explained that he made it a habit to respond to emails and phone calls quickly, “because that was how I felt we would respond to their questions, problems, concerns. What matters to us is that we’re building a community here. A big part of building a community is communication.” Tom also spoke of the great importance of being open and providing people with honest explanations for the decisions that he made. He used the example of the class placement procedures. It was
done differently at all three of the original elementary schools; therefore, Tom explains, “We made a really careful and deliberate plan to inform people.” Part of this plan included the distribution of a form that contained an explanation and justification of the placement process as well as a place where parents could provide their input.

Tom talked about how at times people still did not agree with his decisions, even after he explained his reasoning. He said he still clearly communicated with them and told them he understood that they looked at it differently. He expressed the importance of “honoring their point” and then explaining “this is how our school operates for a reason.” No matter what the outcome, Tom said that he made sure to communicate with parents throughout the process.

Barbara discussed the way in which communication was essential in developing a strong school culture, and how she felt the communication at X Elementary School was “pretty good.” She appreciated Tom’s direct approach and thought that he was honest and open with people, which allowed for “teachers or families to be heard.”

Barbara shared examples of situations where parent feedback led to change. In order to provide a forum for parents to share their thoughts about certain aspects of X Elementary School, the school council held a series of parent focus groups. Concerns regarding communication arose during the focus groups, such as parents wanting to hear more from the specialist and not having any information about math awards night. School leaders shared those concerns with the appropriate parties. As a result, the specialists began creating a monthly newsletter, and clear information about the awards night was provided. Barbara explained that with information obtained through parent focus groups, “I think that’s where things have gotten tweaked through time.” Barbara
discussed how the communication at X School was strong, and that when concerns arose, improvements were made to address those concerns.

Dan described his communication style as one that involved a great deal of listening and coaching. He said that during the transition to the new school, he supported teachers by leading by example and individual coaching. He told them, “You can do it. I know how you feel,” referring to the unease and anxiety that he described some teachers experienced. Dan felt that his role was to help “make teachers successful,” which he did by meeting their needs and supporting them with ideas and resources. Dan expressed the importance of following through and carrying out plans that he talked about with students, teacher, and parents in order to maintain credibility.

During year one, Dan thought it was best to “stay within some sort of framework to get off the ground.” The framework that he thought would help unite the new school community was one created by implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS. According to Bradshaw and Pas (2011), PBIS is a “school-wide prevention model” which “aims to improve school climate and student behavior” (p. 530). It also “aims to prevent disruptive behavior through the application of practices and systems consistent with the three-tiered public health prevention framework” (Bradshaw & Pas, 2011, p. 530). Dan had implemented PBIS at Brown School and thought that it would be helpful in creating a framework upon which to build the new school’s culture, so that it could establish “its own identity.” To do this he set out to “find a core of supportive teachers that would help me disseminate, if you will, my vision, help me evoke it, not a top-down kind of thing. I wanted it to be a ground floor thing.” Therefore, communication at the beginning was essential for Dan. In order to
teach students and staff members the behavioral expectations associated with PBIS, he provided teachers with reminders to reinforce the expectations with students, and he conducted many “check ins” with students making sure they understood. This constant communication is what Dan felt would minimize “potential issues.”

Dan explained that he got a sense from some teachers that they felt like “outcasts from the school they came from” and didn’t know why they were transferred to X School. To counter those feelings, Dan said he made an effort to reach out to teachers with a message, “We’re going to make this work. Stay with me.” Along with accomplishing many other things, he felt that PBIS could help with teacher morale. He explained, “I wanted everything to be positive, and I knew that there was a lot of negative starting with the staff, because a lot of them didn’t want to be there. They felt like they were moved there.” He also found it helpful to address these feelings on an individual basis and by leading by example.

Dan reported that because he only knew approximately one-third of the student body, parents, and staff members the first year at X School, he thought it was very important for people to get to know him and for him to communicate his ideas. When looking back at year one, Dan explained that he had a vision for the way in which some things should be done. There were many things he wanted to accomplish to achieve this vision, so he knew that he wouldn’t be able to do everything all at once. Therefore he chose to advocate for the things that he felt would tie the school community together.

Perhaps the greatest challenge that Dan encountered the first year at X Elementary School was the fact that he was only there half-time. It was the first time that the role of assistant principal was half-time, and he felt that he was being pulled in two different
directions, which made maintaining active communication with students, families, and staff members difficult. He reported that opening a new school and “trying to get up off the ground” was “doubly hard when you’re there every other day.” Dan described this as a big obstacle and asked, “How can you follow up on some things in a timely fashion?” Since he was only at X School half-time, he found it very difficult to implement and follow through on certain initiatives, especially those related to PBIS and developing the school’s culture and climate. Dan reported that the fact that the assistant principal position changed from full-time to half-time the year that X Elementary School opened was very impactful, especially during the first year of operation.

Participants in the Brown group spoke at length and had varying opinions about the communication between teachers and administrators at X Elementary School. They started off quite positive explaining the way in which Tom told staff members that he is always available to them and made them feel that if they needed help the “door is open and you can go talk about it.” But one teacher expressed her disappointment regarding a conflict with a colleague that she felt Tom did not address. She explained, “You can make your voice heard, and your voice can be listened to, but unless there’s action, sometimes it feels like it hasn’t been heard.”

Former Brown teachers also spoke about some mixed feelings and confusion around communication tools such as the “Monday memo” and “morning announcements.” Teachers explained that Monday memos were emails from Tom containing reminders about things going on during the week, such as field trips, early release days, “all school meeting,” and other events that affected large groups or the building as a whole. Fifth grade students made morning announcements over the
loudspeaker. They included the date, the lunch choice for the day, the pledge of allegiance, and any important information from the office. Some Brown group participants described Tom’s Monday memos as very helpful and thought they were unique to X School. They couldn’t remember if Tom started sending out his memos during Year One or later, but they spoke about these emails as being convenient reminders.

Participants in the Brown group said that some things should have been in Tom’s Monday memo or in the morning announcements but were not, which caused them to feel “out of the loop.” One teacher also expressed frustration about not knowing what day an event was taking place, saying, “There are structures in place where I feel like that could be reminded.” They described feeling confused at times about whether or not information was communicated to staff members. One participant said, “I think it was very difficult to communicate throughout the building on different things. We’re trying to be better about communicating.”

The Brown group also spoke about “blanket statements” that were occasionally made by Tom at staff meetings or through “paper communication.” They explained that these statements were made as a result of someone doing something of which the administration did not approve. They described a memorandum that was recently distributed telling teachers that they could not punish a whole group of students or an entire grade level, and they could not take away recess as a punishment. Teachers spoke about how unusual it was to receive communication from Tom on paper, and how it felt “very official.” They also discussed a time at a staff meeting when Tom explained to teachers the parameters for showing movies at school. Former Brown teachers described
this type of communication as vague and expressed the desire for more direct and personal communication. “It’s clear that someone did something that was unexpected or that the administration was unhappy about, but then it feels like we usually get that communication as blanket statement.” They described this practice as anxiety provoking, and one teacher said, “I think, sometimes I feel like I feel guilty for something that’s said as a blanket statement that sometimes is really directed at one person or one group.” Brown group participants were unclear if Tom had also addressed his concern with the staff member(s) who committed the perceived offense.

Former Cedar School teachers reported a decline in the amount and quality of communication from administrators to staff members during the first six years of operation of X Elementary School. They were pleased with the presence of the administration during year one, and they described how [Tom] walked through classrooms every day “just to be seen.” “In the beginning when we first opened, [Tom] was a leader of the building. He was evoking these messages, “We’re together; we’re a team.” In subsequent years, however, Cedar teachers felt that they had to inform the administrators about everything they did or that went on in their classrooms, but that it was not reciprocated, and that communication back to them was “nonexistent.” An increased “sense of secrecy” and lack of openness regarding certain information was also concerning to some participants in the Cedar group.

The Ames group talked about the general feeling of excitement and the enthusiasm when it came to forming a new school community. They thought the communication was strong and that the administration put in a great deal of effort to
encourage the building of new traditions and a school culture. According to one teacher, Tom told them:

We could have better hours, and there was a lot of discussion about how we took this from this school, this from this school, this from this school, but now we need to start what is [X Elementary] School. I feel that was a big part of our first year here.

Teachers from Ames School also spoke about a change in the level of communication, which they reported occurring around the third year after the merger. They described Tom during that time as “distant” and “disconnected,” and they said that the communication was “just about surface issues” and “very last minute.” One teacher shared that she never felt the communication was very good, explaining, “There’s a communication problem here. No one seems to be in charge.” The group spoke about Tom’s Monday emails as his main form of communication and described them as last minute and disorganized. Another teacher said, “The people don’t feel heard.” This was different from their experience during the first two years at X School.

Decision Making. Although Principal Tom wanted staff members to be united, instead of coming in and changing the way people did things, he reassured staff members that they could keep using their same routines, methods, and procedures, and he felt that a natural evolution would occur. Tom explained that when changes had to be made, “I was very careful to say, it’s not how I want it. I just really care about how we decide together that this is going to happen this way.” Tom expressed that during year one it was important to make sure staff members felt heard and contributed to the decision making that occurred.
Tom reported that in addition to making sure there was a great deal of collaboration among staff members, that when making decisions the priority was to do what is best for the students. “A lot of discussion happens about ideas, proposals, thoughts, changes. Nothing happens, I don’t know of any decision, which I’ve ever made unilaterally. I’ve always been getting input from those people who are affected by it.” With that said, although Tom reported that he carefully listened to others’ input, there were situations in which it was not possible to come to a consensus, and he had to make a decision. He added that as the principal, even if it was a team decision, he was responsible for any “failure.” According to Tom, he made the final decision, and he took responsibility for things that did not go as planned or turned out to be the wrong choice.

The assistant principal, Barbara, also viewed decision making at X Elementary School as a collaborative process. She explained that when making a decision “whoever the stakeholders are involved in certain aspects of change would be incorporated. I don’t think there’s a mentality of just top down.” Barbara also described a situation where staff members were asked to provide input about school-wide student behavior via a survey. Although the opportunity to provide input was provided and staff members participated, they did not receive the suggestions or have the level of participation that they were hoping for. Barbara noted that in addition to the survey, committees consisting of staff members were sometimes formed when decisions had to be made.

When asked about the decision making process at X School during the three years that he was assistant principal, Dan noted that although he had a certain vision for the school, he was also very open to listening to staff members’ ideas. According to Dan, when teachers shared their ideas, which they often brought over from their former
schools, he asked them to tell him more and “enlighten us all.” Then whether they were ideas for the classroom, grade level, or whole school, he encouraged teachers to put them into practice and evaluate their success afterward. Dan explained that this process allowed everyone the opportunity to feel like they contributed, and “when you feel like your thoughts and ideas are worth something, you work a little harder to make it happen.” Furthermore, “if [staff members] have the power to make some decisions about things going forward, they’re now invested in it more. They don’t want to see it fail. It’s their idea.” Dan said that he took a positive approach and, he “would look to them as consultants because they knew about it.” He encouraged staff members to guide him through their ideas and then supported them while they carried them out.

Dan went on to explain that when school-wide decisions had to be made, he often reached out to staff members seeking volunteers to form committees. Those who were like-minded responded to his request and joined forces. He described how he formed the PBIS committee so that staff members could get together and share ideas. Dan described his strategy as first leading by example, and “then you move with teachers who support what you’re trying to do.” He went on to say, “I knew there were teachers there who didn’t buy into some of the stuff I was into, but I knew the ones that were, and they’re the ones I would go to.” Then he took volunteers to serve on the committee. “Once we have buy in from committee members, they can help sell it to the school.” So although the PBIS committee was formed around Dan’s vision, staff members designed the framework, components, and made all of the decisions about implementation.

Reports from teacher participants about decision making at X School varied, but the responses that were most in line with those of the administrators’ were from teachers
who were new to the district and didn’t come from Ames, Brown, or Cedar. One participant from the new teachers’ group explained that it was infrequent that a teacher had an idea or made a decision that wasn’t supported by the school leaders. She felt that “things are so reasonable” that when a teacher’s idea is not supported, it’s for a good reason, and that teacher is okay with that decision. “I think there is that leeway and it’s based on what works for you within the frameworks of [the administrator’s] philosophy.”

Another teacher elaborated:

The reason is explained, makes you feel heard and understood, like [participant] was saying, but also that yeah, there are some clear lines that we have here that drive our expectation and our philosophy and this is why we are doing it this way.

The teachers new to the district also spoke at length about a decision that Principal Tom made to keep a particular grade level as four self-contained classrooms rather than to departmentalize, as was the model at other schools in the district. The teachers felt strongly that departmentalizing was going to be best for their students, but after listening to their ideas for this change, Tom disagreed. Reflecting back on the process and Tom’s explanation for this decision, these teachers expressed that they gained respect for Tom and his vision for the school through this process. One new teacher explained, “I definitely see a lot more benefits now than I did before.” She went on to explain her appreciation for the fact that Tom had certain ideas of what he thought was best for students school-wide, and that he made decisions based on those ideas:

Now that you’ve had some time to see culturally what that really does to the building and the team and the kids and the classrooms, it is nice to have that
umbrella. He had that wisdom at that point to say, we’re not going to do it that way and there are reasons.

Other teachers in the group agreed and were pleasantly surprised with the results of Tom’s decision. One teacher explained that although she would still prefer to departmentalize, she sees more benefits of remaining a self-contained classroom than she anticipated.

In their description, teachers from the Brown group portrayed decision making at X Elementary School, as it relates to leadership, as an open and collaborative process. They provided an example of their participation in the decision making process. When they suggested to the assistant principal that they felt that the school’s bimonthly school assembly, all school meeting (ASM), would run more smoothly if the seating arrangements were done differently, Barbara listened to the suggestion and made the changes accordingly. A teacher expressed her satisfaction with this exchange saying, “I feel like we have a voice. I feel like they listen when we say something that matters.” Another participant agreed and felt like administrators listened to teachers’ ideas. She said, “I think they look at what we’re saying, and if it makes sense and it’s not going to hurt anybody else, let’s do it.”

A second example the Brown group provided to describe decision making was one involving the interview process. A teacher explained how Tom invited her to join a hiring committee for new staff members, which gave her a voice and made her feel valued. This participant expressed her appreciation for being given the opportunity to take part in this important decision making process.
Participants in the Cedar and Ames groups expressed relative dissatisfaction with the decision making process at X School. When asked, former Cedar teachers all agreed that staff members did not play much of a role in the process. Ames teachers responded similarly and explained, “People don’t feel heard.” One participant also reported staff members were not asked for any input, but rather were just told what to do. Another participant in the Ames group went on to explain, that even when teachers “bring something up at a forum where you’re supposed to be able to bring something up,” it was then unclear if anything was done to move forward with their ideas or address their concerns.

Communication and decision making are two main components of leadership, and as such, are the two subthemes within the theme of leadership. Although administrators at X Elementary School spoke about the importance of communication and the need to communicate clearly with different stakeholders, many of the teachers did not feel that the administrators’ communication was sufficient. Tom and Barbara spoke mostly about their communication with families, while Dan told about the ways in which he communicated with staff members. Former Brown School teachers were satisfied with the decision making process, and they felt that administrators were open and available to listen to any problems, but they found some of the ways in which they communicated to be unclear or confusing. All three administrators, as well as the group of teachers who were new to the district, talked about the importance of staff members taking part in the decision making process at X Elementary School and were pleased with the way in which this occurred. The Cedar and the Ames groups felt dissatisfied with both the administrator’s communication and the decision making process at X School.
Child Well-Being

The second major theme that emerged through the data in this study is: the ultimate goal of teachers and administrators at X Elementary School was to always do what was best for the children. This theme is also referred to as child well-being. The importance of keeping the well-being of students as the number one priority can also be seen in the X School Mission Statement. According to the X School website, the first line in the mission statement reads, “The mission of the [X] School is to foster personal academic growth through exploration and intellectual curiosity in a supportive and safe environment.” The first subtheme in this section is: meeting the academic, social, and personal needs of students and helping them succeed were priorities of staff members. The second subtheme is: discipline at X Elementary School was handled in a way that emphasized the positive behavior of students. As explained by administrators, focusing on positive behavior and disciplining students in a way that emphasized this behavior management style was another way that the adults at X School kept the well-being of children at the forefront. The two subthemes in this section are referred to as student success and needs and student behavior and discipline.

Student Success and Needs. Principal Tom reported that he made it very clear from the beginning that his priority was the students, and the number one goal of the new school community was to “do right by kids.” “That becomes the first and foremost lens by which we look at everything. Are we doing what’s right for the kids?” On the first day of school this took a more practical form, and Tom said his plan was to “get the kids in safely, feed them, then get them home safely.” He made sure he was ready to “handle all the myriad of problems and unforeseen stuff.” When things did arise, he went back to
what he called “the fundamental question” which was, “What are we doing for the kids?” He felt that everyone at X School shared this attitude, but he also stated that in conversations with staff members, he made it clear to them, “It’s not about you. It’s really about the kids.” Tom found that this ideal has now become “ingrained” in staff members, and that over time people “have a better sense of what are our priorities here as a group and the culture and what do we value and what do we do for kids.”

Principal Tom explained that the “key component of our success” after the merger was that all staff members shared the common goal: do what is best for students. Tom shared a story about a conversation he had with the X School cafeteria workers after a change was made in the way in which students paid for their lunches. According to Tom, if a student’s account had a negative balance, the person in charge of food services instructed cafeteria staff members to “take the tray of food from the child and throw it away and give them a cheese sandwich and a milk.” However, Tom recounted that when he talked to cafeteria staff about this, they insisted they were “not going to embarrass or humiliate a kid because their parents couldn’t load their lunch account in time.” Tom was also adamant that this was not going to happen, and he explained that they were not going to involve district food services, because “we take care of our own.” Potentially embarrassing or punishing a child in this way was absolutely not going to happen at X Elementary School. Tom went on to say:

What was heartening was, I didn’t have to ask the cafeteria staff or remind them to do it. They just knew that’s what we do. We take care of kids. We make sure they get lunch. We make sure they’re fed.
Tom and the cafeteria staff viewed this as one way of taking care of students’ needs in order to help them succeed.

X Elementary School assistant principal, Barbara, spoke about the ways in which new initiatives and differentiating instruction for the unique needs of students contributed to their success. She told about the importance of opportunities for differentiation at X School, such as the occupational therapist’s posting of stations for “sensory walks.” These stations were important, because “if a child needs that opportunity, it’s there and it’s a positive thing, and then the child can come back and be open to learning.”

Barbara described a new initiative that was intended to help support student well-being in unstructured areas. This was the future implementation of a change in the specialists’ schedules to include their attendance at recess. Having specialist teachers join students on the playground would enable the facilitation of games when needed and potentially help support those who benefited from assistance in social situations. According to the school’s website, the X School Mission Statement indicated that students will have a “supportive and safe environment.” Barbara described how new initiatives will support that goal.

Barbara also spoke about how there were many new technology initiatives, because technology plays such an important role in the lives of students. She emphasized the importance of providing them with opportunities for “positive interactions with the technology in terms of learning, so that they can use it in their world.” Barbara explained that teachers were open to incorporating technology in their instruction in order to help students succeed, and that this has become part of the culture at X Elementary School.
Assistant Principal Barbara identified the Collaborative Problem Solving approach and Social Thinking methodology as helping with the social-emotional well-being of students. She discussed her support of the Collaborative Problem Solving philosophy, which is “kids do well if they can,” and she thought that if students were struggling then it was important to figure out what skills they lacked. Deciding “how we can help them and what learning opportunities we can provide for them” were Barbara’s goal for students who were not doing well at school.

Dan, the assistant principal at X Elementary School for the first three years after the merger, had a similar overarching objective as Tom the first year of X School: to unite the school community. But Dan focused on certain aspects of that goal and went about accomplishing it in a different way. He felt that it was important to bring the school together around a set of core values that were positively supported. He viewed this as the foundation upon which student success was built. During year one, the X school council put together the [X] School Core Values. They are on the X School website along with 2-3 sentences describing the mission of each. They are, “academic growth,” “personal growth,” “kindness and respect,” and “community.” Although Dan did not refer to the [X] School Core Values specifically, he was a member of the X school council.

When former assistant principal, Dan explained the benefits of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS, he talked a great deal about the success and needs of students. He felt that implementing PBIS would set students up for success and enable staff member to better meet their needs. The ultimate goal of PBIS was to create a school environment that was very positive, according to Dan.
You can tell when you walk in the front door. There is an ethos about the building that, this is a nice, happy place to be. I want to be here. I want to either go to school here or I want to work here. There must be some interesting things going on here I’d like to know more about.

This was Dan’s vision for X Elementary School, which he hoped to obtain through PBIS. Dan felt that in year three, his last year as assistant principal, X School had made progress with the implementation of PBIS, and it was on its way to reaching this goal. He also explained that PBIS was as much for staff members as it was for the students, because it provided a framework of expectations for the entire school community.

Teachers at X School who were new to the district had distinct experiences and impressions of student success and needs. They felt that student success began with the high expectations that administrators placed on teachers as well as lofty goals that teachers set for themselves. One new teacher explained, “I think that there’s definitely an expectation, whether it’s implicit or explicit, you must do your best.” New teachers explained that school leaders had very high standards for teachers, and they stated, “I have to be my best all the time,” and “I have to ensure that my kids are their best all the time.” They explained that teaching within a culture with those expectations can be “scary” initially, but “I think once you feel okay operating within that context, I actually think it’s amazing.” They went on to say that this was the culture that X School leaders intentionally created, and that teachers liked teaching there because of it. “They do feel like everything is expected of them, but they have every opportunity to do what they want.” Teachers explained that it was a high achieving school, and that teachers were responsive to all the needs of the students because of the goals they’re expected to meet.
New teachers provided an example of a decision Tom made, which they saw as contributing to student success and high student achievement. As described in the leadership section, Tom required teachers at X School to teach all subjects to one class of students rather than switching classes for different subjects, as was the case at the other schools in the district. One new teacher explained that the self-contained model that Tom preferred led to more holistic and child-centered teaching, and it allowed “for a lot more development and connection with the students over the course of the year.” Another teacher in the new teacher group agreed and spoke about the trust that developed between the students and their teachers in the self-contained classrooms, which she attributed for the high level of student achievement. They found that this allowed for “gentle pushing.” One teacher said, “Kids will take risks when they feel safe, and I think we allow them to feel safe because they’re connected.” The new teachers group credited administrators with encouraging them to take time to build trust and create a foundation within their classrooms enabling students to feel secure.

Being the only ones who were hired by the current principal, rather than transferred from one of the other elementary schools, the experience of coming to X School was a unique one for the teachers new to the district. They spoke about the interview process and their impressions of Tom’s vision for the school based on that experience. They explained that it felt as if Tom was looking for a good “match” for X Elementary School, and that he did this by asking questions about their educational philosophy, discipline style, attitude towards collaboration, etc. Questions about Collaborative Problem Solving and the Responsive Classroom gave them the impression that the school was child-centered and took on a holistic teaching approach. Based on
their interview experiences at X School, not only did new teachers feel like they gained a clear sense of the school culture, but they explained that this first impression was consistent with their view of the current school culture.

Teachers who formerly taught at Brown School described X Elementary School as student-centered. They explained, “I’ve always felt like there’s a strong emphasis on student-centered learning in the classroom.” According to Brown teachers, the administrators expected teachers to give students choices within the curriculum to engage in activities and projects that best suited their learning styles. This student-centered approach was also “something that’s valued by many people here, not just by the administration.”

Former Ames teachers reported some confusion about two of the programs at X School that attended to student well-being. They felt there was some ambiguity surrounding the implementation and use of PBIS and the Responsive Classroom, and that using them simultaneously was problematic. A participant explained, “They send us to all these Responsive Classroom trainings, but then they want us to do PBIS.” Another teacher elaborated, “I think that that maybe is part of the problem. There are too many things that don’t go together.”

**Student Behavior and Discipline.** Principal Tom reported that he was very direct in communicating to staff members that discipline at X Elementary School would be handled in a way that kept the well-being of the students in the forefront. In speaking about the “guiding principles” by which decisions regarding behavior and discipline were made, he said, “It’s about, what is it that that kid needs?” In discussions with teachers who were “exasperated” with a student who had behavior challenges, Tom reported
saying, “That kid needs you more than you realize. You have to be able to set aside your personal biases, frustrations and deal with that kid.” Tom also described the way in which being proactive in their discipline approach with children who presented with behavioral challenges and staying “one step ahead with the struggling kids” has become part of the framework at X Elementary School.

According to Tom, he and the assistant principal, Dan agreed that students should not be punished as a form of discipline, and instead they viewed misbehavior as a learning opportunity. Tom explained, “The consequence relates to the offense. If a kid didn’t do his homework, they don’t miss recess.” Making sure that staff members clearly received this message was important to Tom. Both Tom and Dan also felt strongly that there should not be any group punishments at X School.

When the school community came together after the merger, teachers from different schools had varying expectations for behavior and discipline practices. Tom explained that some teachers expected students to be suspended for breaking certain school rules, but he felt that suspending a student sent “a very clear message” that “you’re not wanted here. We’re going to exclude you from our community. You have failed in some way.” Tom and Dan were in agreement that students would not be suspended at X School.

Tom explained that at some of the other elementary schools in the district from which X School teachers transferred, the administrators dealt with all of the behavioral issues. If a child was misbehaving in class, he or she was sent to the principal’s office. Some teachers expected this to be the practice at X School, but Tom believed that it was best for teachers to discipline their own students. He explained that when a teacher called
him in to talk to a hypothetical student, Fred, who was misbehaving, “then you’ve told Fred that you can’t handle him and now you need help.” He went on to say that the student will behave when an administrator is in the classroom, but he or she will go back to becoming a discipline problem not long after he leaves. Instead, Tom reported that he works with the teacher to help him/her build a relationship with the student. He noted the exception of when a student exhibits behavior that causes him to be a danger to himself or others. If that is the case, Tom feels it is necessary to intervene and remove the student from the classroom.

Although Tom clearly relayed to staff members who were transferred to X School his expectations regarding discipline, when he hired teachers after the merger, he was able to select individuals who he thought already fit within this framework. Asking questions in order to “get a feel for” a candidate’s experience with “difficult kids and behavior kids” was something that Tom reported doing during the interview process. He looked for aspiring teachers who talked about meeting the needs of the “challenging kid” and the “button pusher.” He explained, “Teaching the smart well-behaved kids is easy. Anybody can do that. You want to be a teacher? You want them all.” Through the interview process, Tom was able to select teachers who he saw as a good fit with the culture of X Elementary School in terms of behavior and discipline.

Barbara, the assistant principal, reported that students at X Elementary School were very well behaved, and she credited the teachers with handling a great deal of the discipline within the classroom setting. She explained that by implementing the social competency program in which they are trained, the Responsive Classroom, teachers were able to prevent problems from escalating. As part of their training, teachers were
preemptive with their discipline rather than reactive, according to Barbara. She described an example where a proactive strategy was used in a whole school setting too. Fifth grade students were paired up with kindergarteners for a program where the fifth graders had misbehaved in the past. Teachers prepared them ahead of time in the classroom by reinforcing the expectations. By encouraging the fifth grade students to become role models and leaders, they were more engaged and better behaved.

Barbara reported working with students who were having behavioral issues on figuring out what was actually happening and using it as “more of a learning opportunity than more of a hardcore consequence.” She hoped that this was the school-wide philosophy, and she felt that although they may not have said it directly, that teachers supported this philosophy.

Barbara identified challenges with the implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS at X Elementary School, and she explained that it “might not have taken hold.” Barbara discussed the challenge she had with some staff members not feeling like PBIS could “blend” with the Responsive Classroom approach, although she was confident that it could. Barbara described the difficulty she had encouraging consistency and getting staff members invested. Relaying to them that PBIS was for the whole school community rather than just for the classroom community was her message.

When former assistant principal, Dan, talked about behavior and discipline at X Elementary School, his focus was on administrators’ and staff members’ proactive and positive connections with students through the use of PBIS. He explained the importance of teaching students and staff members the behavioral expectations for the different parts
of the building, which were established by the PBIS committee during X School’s first year of operation. Breaking it down into the different locations of the school, and doing one part at a time was the approach that Dan felt was most effective. For example, in October all students and staff members focused on the expectations in the cafeteria. Administrators and teachers would first teach students the reason for the particular expectations, which was often safety. Then they would model appropriate behavior in that setting and practice with students making corrections when needed. Finally, teachers and administrators would provide students with feedback focusing on the things they were doing correctly.

Dan explained that “kids want to do well,” and he often enlisted the help of students to check in with other students. When he followed up with a child who had past behavioral issues, Dan was encouraging, saying, “I’m hearing good things. Let’s keep it up.” He tried to be proactive in delivering this message to students. Dan described the way he would sit with students at lunch to check in with them and then move methodically from table to table. Dan explained how this would help “build positive relationships as an administrator.”

According to Dan, not only did students have to go through this process of learning and practicing the behavioral expectations at X Elementary School, but the teachers and support staff did as well. Dan expressed regret that he did not have more time in his schedule to work with staff members to teach and model for them. He explained, you:
Can’t just put things in play and hope that they’re going to take off. You have to kind of steward it a little and keep it in front of them and look for the people that will take it and run with it and support them. The rest will come along.

Sharing his time between X School and Brown School did not allow Dan to implement PBIS the way he saw as necessary.

The focus group consisting of X Elementary School teachers who were new to the district reported that PBIS was helpful in creating “behavioral targets” and a system that provided a uniform language for students and staff members at all grade levels. Teachers explained that expectations and behaviors were reinforced every couple of weeks at all school meeting. They viewed students as “consistently well behaved,” “consistently high achievers,” and “motivated.” It was clear to teachers new to the district that the discipline process at X School was not punitive in any way, and instead “we try to take kids through the process of understanding the mistake. It’s more of a cognitive process.” They reported that administrators passed down this discipline philosophy, and “if you truly are in this culture and you believe that, it’s a very comfortable place to work.”

Cedar teachers shared that although they arrived at X School after the merger ready to teach, they were concerned about the lack of behavioral and systematical structures regarding student expectations. Despite the concern that there were “no systems in place” and a “lack of vision,” staff members were described as “so bright eyed and bushy tailed,” so “everyone was just forging ahead.” The core values and mission statement were areas of dissatisfaction as well. Teachers were aware that the school council created a mission statement, but they felt that it was not communicated or sufficiently implemented.
Former Brown teachers talked about three key messages they felt were delivered and reinforced by administrators regarding discipline and behavior: student-centered, individual consequences, and positive reinforcement. They reported that administrators encouraged teachers to be student-centered in addressing student behavior. One teacher explained giving a misbehaving student the choice of where to sit, “You can sit on the rug or you can sit on the chair. Either way, they have to pay attention.” The Brown group also shared that Tom did not support whole group or punitive punishments.

Teachers who came to X School from Ames School reported feeling very unsupported by administrators regarding student behavior and discipline. They explained that there were no consequences for students who misbehaved which led to teacher frustration. The Ames group attributed an increase in challenging student behaviors to higher academic expectations, and they expressed concern that there were no perceived consequences. They found that out of frustration “some people just say, the hell with it,” and one Ames teacher explained, “I just close my door and do my thing.” Ames teachers identified the lack of support they felt regarding discipline as having impacted the school culture.

The general well-being of students was a priority at X Elementary School, and the ways in which teachers and administrators fostered success, met the needs of students, and addressed student behavior and discipline were large parts of the school culture as it developed. Participants reported having high expectations for students and teachers, and they did what was necessary to help students feel safe, supported, and successful at school.
Collaboration

The third theme, referred to as collaboration, is: collaboration among teachers was a key factor in X Elementary School’s cultural development. Because staff members came to X School from three different schools, learning to work together was the main focus during the first six years of operation. Subtheme one is: teachers developed a variety of professional relationships with their colleagues. Some found that there was frequent collaboration and saw strong professional relationships between teachers, while others viewed this as an area in need of great improvement. Many participants recognized the development of subcultures within the greater school culture, so this is subtheme two. Subtheme three is: the building layout was an obstacle in the quest for collaboration. The subthemes within the theme of collaboration are referred to as: professional relationships, subcultures, and building layout.

Professional Relationships. Teachers new to the district described the collaboration at X Elementary School as one of the things that drew them to the school, beginning with the interview process. One of these teachers shared, “I fell in love with the collaboration.” Participants described the way in which many teachers arrived at school early and stayed to do work after the school day had ended. One teacher explained that she felt trusted by the administration and didn’t want to let them or her teammates down. She said, “I just feel that the culture is one that we’re all in this together.” The new teacher participants noted that the collaborative culture was one of their favorite things about X Elementary School.

Reports from Brown School teachers regarding collaboration varied. Some explained that there was more collaboration for professional reasons rather than for
socialization, while others said that it really depended on the team. Contrary to reports from new teachers, some Brown group participants said that teachers left right after the dismissal of students for other obligations, so there was less time for “causal conversations.” In order to maximize their time, they were motivated to meet during their common planning time to collaborate professionally.

Teachers who formerly taught at Brown School also spoke about the value and rarity of vertical collaboration. They noted the benefit of staff meetings when Tom organized activities that required teachers from different grade levels to work together. They explained that this only happened a couple times a year now, whereas right after the merger it was more frequent. In year six of X School, staff meetings focused more on “what needs to get done,” and Brown teachers missed having the opportunities to collaborate with teachers in other grade levels.

Former Cedar School teachers identified a “lack of sense of collaboration and community” and a “lack of cohesiveness” among teachers that has increased over the years. They described administrators as leading with a “hands-off approach” in an effort to respect staff members as professionals. Although they appreciated the respect, they feared that in doing this, administrators were giving up too much control. They thought, “You’re losing that sense of we’re a community, we’re in it together.” Teachers noted that this type of leadership “doesn’t create a uniformity” across or within grade levels, and that inequitable treatment sometimes impacted the teachers’ ability and desire to collaborate.
Teachers who previously taught at Cedar School felt very positive about the environment and collaboration that during X School’s first year of operation. One teacher shared:

I felt that the first year it was a cohesive group of people with a common purpose, common goal. Very driven. It was exciting. The staff seemed engaged in what they were doing but also as a community, what the community was doing, and it was very collaborative.

When reflecting on the more recent culture, the Cedar group said they did not know who some of the other staff members were or what their positions were at X School. When referring to new staff members, one former Cedar teacher said there was a greater need to make “them feel included into an environment, and it comes from the leadership.” She shared that staff members, such as long-term substitute teachers, were sometimes not introduced or properly welcomed into the school community.

Former Ames teachers also spoke about a lack of collegiality and said they did not know who some of the other staff members were. They felt that there was “no effort made from the administration” to create “a unified community,” and that the administrators had a “very laissez faire attitude.” Ames group participants said that in year six there was less effort towards collaboration than there was during their first year at X School, and that the school community was not “united in our beliefs.” They saw this as greatly impacting teamwork and the ways in which staff members developed professional relationships.

Subcultures. Two X School administrators, Tom and Dan, spoke about the way in which they encouraged teachers to work together in grade level teams. Dan explained,
“I really like the team approach. I think you get a lot from working with others. Nobody feels the whole pressure.” They explained that some teams worked together closely, while others have faced challenges collaborating. Principal Tom described a situation where a grade level team “started off as a really strong unit, but there’s been some stress at the grade level, and they’re not acting as a cohesive unit anymore.” Some sources of stress that he identified were demands, changes, and personalities.

Assistant Principal, Barbara noted that communication within the team was better at some grade levels than others. She elaborated, “I can’t say that across the board I think everybody is incredible at it, because there’re definitely some bumps in the road.”

Teachers described the way in which these grade level teams became subcultures. A participant from the group of new teachers explained, “We each have our own mini-cultures within the building, and I think we do have leeway within that to come up with our version of what that means.” Participants shared that teachers at the same grade level worked to put together a coherent program that allowed students in all classes to have a similar experience. Teachers noted that the expectations, norms, and practices were consistent within grade levels, and that “there is a strong grade level culture.” One teacher went a step further and explained, “As a teacher, my number one goal is being aligned with my team”

Participants in the group made up of new teachers found it interesting that at staff meetings and other events at which most teachers are present, they tended to sit with other members of their grade level teams. One teacher explained that because team members spend so much time together, “We feel so safe within our teams and our
community, and even if there’s disputes or whether we get along, whatever it is, that
draws us back.”

Former Ames teachers described a variety of relationships within the subcultures
of their grade level teams. Some explained that they had very collaborative teams whose
members were respectful of differing opinions, while others shared about teams that were
fragmented and whose members were rigid and easily offended. When describing his/her
team, one participant stated, “We all felt strongly that we wanted the experience in each
of our classrooms to be very similar.” Teachers described particular teams that had a
difficult time working together as being inflexible, not open-minded, and “stuck on what
they’ve always done.”

Administrators and teachers also described division within the subcultures that
developed based on the original schools at which teachers taught. Dan explained, “There
would be pairs within the teams, and they typically were from the schools where they
came from, at the expense of the one” who was from another school. Teachers from the
Ames group also told about pairings within grade level teams and described them as
“teams within themselves.” They spoke about an experience that one former Ames
participant had when she was part of a team with three teachers who all came from
another school. She described it as “horrible” and said “I pretty much did my own
thing.” One of her former Ames colleagues shared that she had a different experience
with a team where all members collaborated, but she acknowledged how difficult it was
for some other teams.

Although they discussed working closely within their grade level teams, Brown
group participants also described some inconsistencies and lack of consensus within these
subcultures. They explained that some teachers were more comfortable with the ways of their former schools and were not always open to trying new things.

Brown group participants also discussed the way in which staff turnover throughout the past six years due to retirements and moves impacted the consistency and collaboration of grade level teams both positively and negatively. One teacher felt that it helped bring her team together. She explained that it was the first time in six years that there wasn’t someone new on her grade level team. When she described the way in which the new teachers had to be mentored, she reported, “I think it’s draining, but it’s made us want to be a little more unified.” After being at X School for three or four years, there were no other teachers on her grade level team that came from another school in the district. Therefore, she stopped hearing people refer to how things were done at their old school. Another Brown group participant described the challenges with having a grade level team that was constantly changing:

Just when you think some cultures are put into place, other people leave and come in. It just makes you realize that when things are smooth and settling in, then it changes. You rebuild the culture slightly differently or completely differently.

Some of the teachers who were new to the district felt that other X School teachers viewed them as their own subculture. They explained that they “definitely feel like we’re seen in the building as teachers that are new to the district, whereas a lot of teachers came together from other schools.” They went on to say that teachers still talked about how things were done at their former school, to which they could not relate.

Former Cedar School teacher also explained that there were subcultures by grade level and also within grade levels. In addition, one teacher reported that there were
subcultures based on the different positions held by staff members throughout the building, mentioning specifically paraprofessionals, classroom teachers, custodial staff and lunch staff.

**Building Layout.** All four groups of teacher participants spoke about the obstacles that the physical structure of the building at X School presented in regard to collaboration. Teachers who formerly taught at Cedar School explained, “The building layout is not conducive to a sense of community.” They went on to say that physical structure of the school has impacted teacher collaboration and the development of the school’s culture. Obstacles caused by the building layout were blamed for “a sense of pride that we’ve lost.”

Former Ames School teachers thought “there were issues with the building” in terms of structure, and they explained that they did not know the names of some staff members. Participants also voiced their concern about not having a central location where teachers could “meet by chance” and explained, “You go days, weeks, without seeing people.” The Ames group found that having two staff lunch rooms rather than one was detrimental to collaboration.

Brown teachers reported that during year one, the administrators had a clear expectation that grade level teams work together to become a cohesive unit. This was communicated to teachers at a staff meeting, and as a result “there was a real effort for collegiality within teams.” Participants went on to explain that getting to know people who did not teach the same grade as them was more difficult during the first year because of the building structure and teachers’ schedules. They shared that classrooms for each
grade level were next to one another, but that there were no neutral places to “congregate” or “chat” with other colleagues.

Former Brown School teachers and new teachers found that the buddy program fostered collaboration with colleagues and increased “vertical communication,” despite the unfavorable layout of the building. Beginning the first year post-merger, the buddy program paired third, fourth, and fifth grade classes with preschool, kindergarten, first, and second grade classes. Teachers found their own buddy classes, and then made arrangements to get together for activities multiple times throughout the year. The Brown group shared that the buddy program was a good way to get to know teachers who worked in another part of the building. It “tied together a lot of people in the school that may not have otherwise come across each other very often.” Brown teachers explained that they got to know other teachers with whom they would not have otherwise had the opportunity to collaborate, and their students got to know children in other grade levels, which was a positive experience.

Participant reports about collaboration at X Elementary School were quite varied. The grade level teams in which teachers worked developed into subcultures. Some of these subcultures were unified, worked closely together, and reached consensus, while others were riddled with ambiguity, lacked consistency, and at times alienated member(s). According to several participants, the building layout hindered collaboration and made it challenging for teachers at different grade levels to interact or work together. Overall, collaboration at X Elementary School was identified as playing an important role in the school’s cultural development.
Establishing Traditions

The final major theme that emerged through the data in this study is: the establishment of traditions impacted the cultural development at X Elementary School. This theme is referred to as *establishing traditions*. The list of “core values” on the X School website includes the statement, “We will foster a sense of community through school spirit activities, service to others and traditions.” Staff members brought some of these traditions to X School from other schools in the district, while others originated at X School. The parent-teacher organization, or PTO, greatly influenced the implementation of special events and establishment of traditions. All school meeting, or ASM, was one of the first practices to become a tradition at X School, according to teachers and administrators. These three subthemes are referred to as other schools, the parent-teacher organization, and all school meeting.

**Other Schools.** Teachers and administrators repeatedly referred to practices, routines, rituals, and traditions from their “old” schools. Many people felt a sense of ownership of the traditions that came from their former schools and thought that it was important for them to be implemented at their new school. Assistant principal Barbara explained that when the three schools came together, some things were taken from each school, but that X School also developed its own unique traditions.

Former assistant principal Dan talked about the challenge of having three groups of staff members with three different sets of opinions about what should be implemented at X School, explaining that some people were very passionate about certain programs. When it came to deciding on special events or routines for specific grades, Dan suggested that teachers have discussions with their grade level colleagues about alternating from
year to year. They could try one team member’s idea one year, and then try another one the next year. Then they could then decide what worked best, which would allow everyone the chance to feel heard.

Dan talked about the importance of establishing traditions that best suited X School and that helped unite the new school community. He also cited two practices from Brown School that he intended to implement: all school meeting and the dismissal procedures. He tried putting the same dismissal procedures that he used at Brown School into place at X School, but he found that the layout of the building prevented them from working well. He made adjustments accordingly so that it was an appropriate fit for X School. All school meeting will be addressed in the next section.

Teachers from Brown School spoke about the realization that there were many differences between the three original elementary schools, of which they were not aware until they were all brought together at X School. They told about the ways in which these differences impacted their first year after the merger. Teachers found it “interesting seeing what was coming from other buildings,” but they also felt some resistance to different ways of doing things. This added to the feeling of being overwhelmed “by how much there was to get done before opening the new building.” Brown teachers reported that these differences lead to feelings of resistance, anxiety, nervousness, and anticipation during year one.

Brown teachers also talked about how they worked together at the particular grade levels to decide what they would take from their former schools to implement at X School. They recounted the way in which they took something from another school and “made it our own.” They made adjustments and modifications to projects, activities,
special events, and traditions that were brought over in order to make them work at their new school.

As former Brown School teachers reflected upon their first couple of years at X School, they were very uncertain about the origins of the X School traditions. They said things such as, “I think that was from [Cedar] School,” “I think it probably happened at other places too. I’m not sure,” and “I think we had that at [Brown], but I don’t know.” These comments were made in reference to the origins of special events or programs that became traditions at X School, such as field day (whole school), the physics Olympics (fourth grade), all school meeting (whole school), a gingerbread theme (first grade), and the after school program.

Former Cedar School teachers also described the ambiguity around deciphering what traditions came from which school. Some of the traditions that they identified as coming from other schools in the district were hobby night, field day, and the art show. Participants could not come to a consensus about whether or not hobby night came from another school or originated at X School. Cedar teachers said that field day was held at Cedar School, but it was done very differently. One X School tradition that the Cedar group decided did not come from another school in the district was the last day of school send-off of students, which they described as unique.

When asked about traditions at X School, a teacher from the group of teachers new to the district said, “I do think there are specific things that make [X School], [X School].” They spoke specifically about how X School was known by other schools in the district for their end-of-the-year “exit projects.” New teachers went on to talk about the differences they noticed between the various schools in the district, which were
similar to those that Cedar and Ames teachers identified. A participant explained, “It’s interesting in the same town that the cultures can be so very different, effective, but very different.”

Former Ames teachers reported that most of the traditions at X School were things brought over from Brown School, because “we had mostly [Brown] kids.” They explained that there were a greater number of students who transferred to X School from Brown School than from the other two schools. They spoke about the great influence that former Brown School parents had on the implementation of many programs.

**Parent-Teacher Organization.** According to teachers, administrators, and information found on their website, the X School Parent-Teacher Organization, or PTO, is quite active. Their extensive page on X School’s website states, “[X] School PTO provides many important enrichment programs, community-building events, and services that enhance the educational experience of every student at the school.” The site also asks for volunteers and mentions the numerous volunteer opportunities. Some of the sponsored events and activities are listed as well as the dates for their monthly meetings. Any parent or guardian of a child enrolled at X School is automatically a member of the PTO, and the “members create the objectives, policies and bylaws.”

Principal Tom spoke highly of the parents of X School students, and described them as being an important asset to the school. He said, “The parents, again, are a huge part of this. They’re a part of how we interact with each other. They’re viewed as equals, not just parents. They’re part of our team.” Tom spoke about the importance of always being “mindful of that.” In a statement written by Tom and Barbara on the first page of the X School Parent Handbook on the X School website, they explained, “Parent
participation is a necessary ingredient in creating a quality educational experience.”

The mission statement written by the school council on the X School website also states, “We are committed to nurturing a partnership among educators, family and community.”

Barbara described the way in which members of the PTO worked with Tom during the first year to establish the organization and decide how to handle fundraising. She explained that parents, teachers, and Tom also had discussions about the traditions at the various schools in order to decide what they wanted to implement at X School. She stated, “I think it was blending with everybody and talking about it and hashing it out.”

When reflecting back on the first year at X School, Dan explained how he found that members of the PTO wanted to hold events and start traditions that they brought over from their previous schools. He felt that it was important for X School to develop its own unique traditions, and if things were done that came from another school, they had to make adjustments to fit with the new school community. Dan acknowledged that everyone naturally started with what they knew, practices from their previous schools, but he said that these ideas were often in conflict with one another. It was important to recognize that and be open to new ideas, explained Dan. He felt that they should only carry over things that “would really pull people together.”

Teachers who formerly taught at Cedar School spoke favorably about the PTO and felt that they were important in the establishment of traditions at X School. They explained, “The PTO came in very strong and worked hard to create some overlapping customs.” Participants spoke about the way this helped administrators put some “customs, traditions, and systems in place that exhibit community and create expectations for the students.” According to Cedar teachers, the majority of the things that were
brought to X School from other schools were brought over by the PTO, and they felt that the PTO was very positive in helping to establish a school culture.

Former Brown School teachers praised the PTO for effectively coming together and making decisions for their new school. They described the great financial, time, and emotional investment that the parents made towards X School, and how there was an expectation that families would be involved in the school community. A participant explained, “The PTO is so well funded and extremely active and extremely generous.” According to Brown teachers, most of the PTO sponsored events came from other schools, although it was unclear which schools, and one particular event was unique to X School. The PTO organized a back-to-school party the first year as a way for families to come together, get to know one another, and to celebrate their new school. Brown teachers said, “That was a really strong thing because it’s still happening.” It was a novel event that the PTO started based on a need, and it became a tradition at X School.

When former Ames School teachers talked about the way in which parents at X School spearheaded many of the special events, they did not speak as favorably about them as the other participants. They felt that the first year after the merger “there was this really big push from the [Brown] parents to impose the [Brown] culture.” One teacher spoke about the way principal Tom used to “push back” when this happened, but she felt that had changed, and now “the parents are allowed to just decide.” When they talked about the PTO-organized field day, a participant said, “There is not one teacher in this building that would say that they approve or like field day.” Those from Ames School did not share the positive feelings about the PTO that were expressed by participants from other schools.
All School Meeting. One of the main traditions established at X School during the first six years after the merger was all school meeting, or ASM. Tom explained, “All school meeting can influence this culture. We can celebrate as a community.” According to Barbara:

All school meeting is the opportunity for all students and staff to come together as a school community. As a group, the students are learning what it means to be a respectful audience. During this time, fifth graders are able to demonstrate leadership skills by running the meeting. Students are able to share announcements, presentations are made, and school traditions perpetuated.

All participants talked about the importance of ASM to the X School community.

Dan saw all school meeting as an essential “vehicle” for working towards the goals of creating an identity for X School and bringing the school community together. He also expressed the necessity of ASM being important in the eyes of students and staff members. Dan’s vision for all school meeting included holding it every six days (X School ran on a six day cycle), but instead it was every twelve days. According to Dan, only one of the other three schools in the district had a strong all school meeting, so he thought there might have been a different knowledge base among staff members and other administrators with regard to the benefits. Because of this, he believed that perhaps others did not see the need for it as he did, so it wasn’t the focus or a priority. Therefore, scheduling ASM more than once a cycle was difficult. Dan felt this made it “hard to acknowledge success in a timely fashion and speak to issues that might come up.” Upon his retirement, all school meeting was becoming part of the culture at X School, but Dan wanted it to be more structured and to have a distinct set of expectations, which he did
not think were in place at that time. He explained, “My vision of it was not the way it was when I left.”

Participants in all four focus groups brought up the topic of all school meeting. The overall feeling was that it had evolved over the years and had become a tradition at X School. New teachers appreciated that the increase in student presentations and performances provided them with a better idea of what was happening at other grade levels. Ames teachers identified improvement in the ASM procedures. Brown teachers spoke about the progress in the development of ASM as being similar to that in other areas of X School. They explained:

[We] came together as a committee, tried to decide on certain things and as the years went on, tweaked it on how it worked for here. Don’t you think that’s how it’s almost been for a lot of things that we’ve put in place here?

Brown teachers also talked about the change in the format, setting, and schedule for ASM over the years. Teachers who formerly taught at Cedar school acknowledged that “all school meeting has evolved” and thought it was more structured than in the past, but they also explained that further change was needed. “I still envision it changing slightly, because not all the school is on board. Not all the teachers are on board with it.” They felt it was important to have full buy-in from staff members in order for ASM to become a more influential part of the school culture.

During the first six years of operation of X Elementary School, students, parents/guardians, teachers, and administrators worked to establish traditions that represented the school community. The well-funded and dedicated parent-teacher organization (PTO) had a large role in organizing special events that evolved into
traditions. Some families and staff members held on to practices and traditions from their former schools and worked to modify and implement them at their new school. Some had ideas for new things that were put into place, took hold, and evolved into unique traditions. As participants talked about traditions, there was a great deal of ambiguity about whether or not specific traditions originated at X School or were carried over from one of the other schools in the district. All school meeting (ASM) was a practice that teachers and administrators brought over from another school in the district, modified, and implemented at the new school. Along with other practices and events, ASM has evolved over the years and has become an important tradition at X School.

**Characteristics of the New Culture**

Parallel to the emergence of themes was the evolution of a new school culture. This culture contained elements related to the aforementioned themes. According to Schein (2004), “Culture is created by shared experience, but it is the leader who initiates this process by imposing his or her beliefs, values, and assumptions at the outset” (p. 225). Many of the beliefs, values, and assumptions that Tom expressed and put forth upon the opening of X Elementary School took hold and became an essential part to the new culture. Providing students with a safe environment in which to learn and grow was at the center of the culture at X Elementary School during year six. Much of this could be attributed to the confident leadership of Principal Tom. There was also a clear focus on families. Whether it was families of students or teachers, Tom’s emphasis that family was most important strongly impacted the school culture. This was especially significant for and appreciated by teachers who were balancing family life and careers.
A partnership between teachers and students’ families was another central element of the new culture. Teachers and parents communicated on a consistent basis, and administrators also made it a priority to contact parents regularly and to nurture that relationship, whether it was on an individual or whole school level or through the PTO. Tom also made his belief that teachers should work within grade level teams clear from the beginning, and this format took hold and became part of the new culture. Some of these grade level teams collaborated well, while others were more fragmented; nonetheless, they were teams in some shape or form by year six.

There were many ceremonies, rituals, and traditions that became an important part of life at X School. They helped to celebrate achievements, communicate and reinforce values, and strengthen the culture (Deal and Peterson, 2009). Yearly events such as the back-to-school bash and last day of school send-off were unique to X Elementary School and became essential traditions by year six. Daily, weekly, and monthly rituals and traditions such as all school meeting, morning announcements, and staff meetings were brought over by students, parents, and staff members from other schools during the merger, and were modified and became influential elements of the current culture. At many of these events, the symbols of X School that “represent intangible cultural values and beliefs” were present (Deal and Peterson, 2009, p. 33). Some of the symbols that helped to unify members of the school and define the current culture were the school mascot and logo, front hallway bulletin boards, birthday pencils, and certificates for certain accomplishments. Although many of the obstacles presented by the structure of the building were overcome, the architecture continued to impact some elements of the new culture such as communication and collaboration.
Conclusion

X Elementary School administrators and teachers found themselves in the unique position of being part of a school merger and the opening of a brand new elementary school. During one-on-one and focus group interviews, participants reported that this process produced a multitude of feelings including excitement, enthusiasm, anxiety, rejection, and uncertainty. The data from these interviews, in addition to data collected from the examinations of school documents, were analyzed, and four major themes emerged: 1) the leadership of building administrators greatly impacted the experiences of staff members as well as the overall school culture, 2) the ultimate goal of teachers and administrators was to always do what was best for children, 3) collaboration among teachers was a key factor in the school’s cultural development, and 4) the establishment of traditions greatly impacted the cultural development at X School. Within each of these themes were two or three subthemes. Analysis of the data provided a better understanding of the cultural development process of a new school following a merger as well as the characteristics of this new culture.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

Introduction

This chapter opens with a review of the purpose of this study and the research questions, methodology, and major findings. A section describes the way in which matrices are used to display data of the cultural manifestations in relation to the theoretical framework, and then the findings are discussed relative to the literature review and theoretical framework. The final sections include discussion of the limitations, implications for practice, recommendations, considerations for further research, and the conclusion.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research study was to describe the process by which a new school’s culture developed after a merger and the characteristics of the new culture. The research focused on the perspective of teachers and administrators at X Elementary School beginning with the first months of operation and concluding with the sixth year post-merger. There was one central question with four sub-questions that drove this research study. The central research question was:

What is the process by which cultures from three different elementary schools merged to form a culture at a new elementary school, and what are the characteristics of the newly formed culture?

In order to address the overall research question, these sub-questions were considered:

1. How do teachers at X Elementary School describe the current culture and make sense of the process of the school’s cultural development?
2. How do administrators at X Elementary School describe the current culture and make sense of the process of the school’s cultural development?

3. What characteristics of the distinctive cultures of the three original schools are represented in the emerging culture at the X Elementary School?

4. What is new and unique about the culture at X Elementary School?

**Review of the Methodology**

A qualitative research design was used to investigate the post-merger culture and cultural development process at X Elementary School. A descriptive case study approach was used for this study. This approach was the best choice to address the research question because it focused on a real-life process happening in present time (Creswell, 2009; Yin, 2009). Data were collected through one-on-one interviews of administrators, focus group interviews with teachers, and the examination of documents. Interviews are important sources of information for case studies as they provide insightful information and explanations and focus on the specific topic being studied (Yin, 2009). The semi-structured, in-depth interviews allowed administrators to provide historical information about their own experiences during the school merger (Creswell, 2009). The single-category design focus groups enabled teachers to use one another’s comments to form their own responses, which provided information describing the informal organizational culture of the school (Casey & Krueger, 2009). The documents were stable and unobtrusive pieces of data that were already a natural part of the school make up, so they provided important data (Yin, 2009).
After they were collected, data were then coded using first and second stage coding methods. Through this data analysis process, four themes emerged: leadership, child well-being, collaboration, and establishing traditions. Within each of these themes were two or three subthemes: 1) leadership (1.1 communication, 1.2 decision making); 2) child well-being (2.1 student success and needs, 2.2 student behavior and discipline); 3) collaboration (3.1 professional relationships, 3.2 subcultures, 3.3 building structure); 4) establishing traditions (4.1 the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO), 4.2 other schools, 4.3 All School Meeting).

**Matrix Framework**

Two sets of matrices display data of the cultural manifestations of the newly formed culture at X School. Because culture is defined in many different ways and analyzed from several viewpoints, a matrix framework can help clarify how a particular study defines the concept by focusing on the cultural manifestations (forms, practices, and content themes) (Martin, 1992). For each theme, there is a matrix with data displaying the content theme, practices, and cultural forms in that particular area of the newly formed culture. Each matrix shows the data individually from each of the three theoretical perspectives: integration, differentiation, and fragmentation. The perspectives differ in the position each takes on the following three dimensions: orientation to consensus, relation among manifestations, and orientation to ambiguity (Martin, 2002). These matrices are represented in Appendices A-D.

A compilation of the data displayed in the matrices that are organized by theme, Appendices A-D, can be found in a second set of matrices as Appendices E-G. These are modeled after Martin’s (1992) matrices demonstrating her three-perspectives, so there is
one matrix for each perspective. They allow for a more holistic view of the data showing possible connections or lack of connections among practices, forms, and content themes (Martin, 1992). A matrix for each perspective--integration, differentiation, and fragmentation--provides a visual display of the findings and shows how the themes represent themselves through the lens of each perspective.

**Interpretation of Primary Findings**

This section presents an interpretation of the primary findings of this study as they relate to the existing literature and theoretical framework. It is organized by the four themes that emerged during the data analysis process: leadership, child well-being, collaboration, and establishing traditions.

**Theme 1: The leadership of building administrators during the first six years greatly impacted the day-to-day experiences of staff members as well as the overall culture.** Leadership plays a crucial role in creating, evolving, sustaining, and changing culture (Denison, 2005; Fullan, 2001; Lakomski, 2001; Schein, 2004). Therefore, participant responses regarding leadership at X School following the merger were essential in describing the new school’s cultural development, and their perceptions varied. Administrators identified clear and frequent communication and collaborative decision making as priorities. Many teachers felt that there was a decline in communication from year one to year six post-merger and that the communication was inadequate. Although some teachers were satisfied with the decision making process, others thought there was room for improvement.

The literature on organizational culture explains that maintaining a sense of stability during times of culture change is essential. Reeves (2009) recommends that
leaders choose which aspects of the culture will stay the same and clearly communicate this to all stakeholders. Directly following the merger, Tom communicated to teachers that they did not have to change their practices, routines, methods, and procedures, and he was confident that these things would evolve over time. This sense of stability that he provided for teachers was crucial in helping them feel comfortable directly following the merger.

Marks & Mirvis (2011) advise that steps be taken to properly consider the individual cultures of organizations as well as the developing culture during all stages of a merger in order to avoid culture clash. Although administrators did not expect teachers to change their practices directly following the merger, there is no evidence that the individual cultures of each school were taken into consideration when new routines and practices were established at X School. After the first year post-merger, Tom and Dan began making need-based decisions, and put some additional procedures into practice.

Following a merger, it is essential for members of the organization to clearly communicate in order to establish a shared understanding and to move forward with that partnership in mind. As the culture develops, this communication and understanding help to minimize the uncertainty that often emerges with such a change (Drori, Wrzesniewski, and Shmuel, 2011; Marmenout, 2011). At X School, one of the things that administrators did to create this shared understanding was to implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). As Tom, Dan, and the PBIS committee began teaching about and establishing the practices of PBIS at X School, it provided students and teachers with a framework and a common language. Teachers felt part of the decision making progress as they were invited to become committee members and learn
about PBIS. It was in the beginning stages of helping to minimize the uncertainty and instability that some teachers felt after the merger.

Dan was the driving force behind PBIS, and he truly believed in all it could do to help build a culture at X School. When it comes to culture change, school leaders’ actions must reflect their values, and they also have to lead by example (Bush, 2003; Reeves, 2009). Dan’s actions matched his words, which were clearly in line with his values. He felt it was just as important to model and teach teachers about PBIS, as it was to do so for students. Through this process, Dan spent time building positive relationships, sharing knowledge, and creating a vision and setting that fostered coherence, which are three of the key dimensions of leadership as identified by Fullan (2001).

Fullan (2001) explains that strong leadership is essential in the emotionally intense environment that is frequently created by change. The two additional key dimension of leadership that Fullan identifies are, developing and acting with a strong moral purpose and understanding and staying on top of the change process. This study revealed that administrators at X School addressed all five of the components to differing degrees. Participants’ perceptions of leaders’ actions in each of these areas varied depending on the individual participant’s expectations and professional experiences before and after the merger.

The main area of dissatisfaction among teachers regarding leadership was communication. There was a perceived inconsistency, lack of clarity, and decline in frequency of communication at X School. Marmenout (2011) explains that information should be shared quickly and with transparency, because when people are provided with
little information they will often focus on the negative. There were many negative responses when teachers were questioned about communication. The study revealed that although communication practices were mostly well received during the first couple of years following the merger, satisfaction with the communication reportedly declined as the school became more established.

In order to gain a complete understanding of leadership at X School, it was viewed from three separate perspectives concurrently. When viewed from the integration perspective, the focus was on those who agreed with the administrators’ beliefs and who felt that they were communicating effectively and providing teachers opportunities to be part of the decision making process. Through the differentiation perspective, the attention was directed to the inconsistencies. Those who were satisfied with the leadership with regard to communication and decision making were placed in one subculture, while those who found fault in those areas made up another subculture. These subcultures functioned separately from one another and at times were in conflict, but within each subculture there was harmony. When viewed from the fragmentation perspective, there was a great deal of confusion regarding the discipline practices and behavioral expectations at X School. At times the teachers felt there was consistency in the communication practices of the administrators, but at other times they viewed it as very inconsistent and ambiguous. There was no consensus among participants regarding the proper steps taken to discipline students, and the decision making process was unclear.

Appendix A represents data of the cultural manifestations of the newly formed culture at X School associated with leadership in the areas of communication and
decision making. The rows display findings as seen through the different lenses of the three perspectives, integration, differentiation, and fragmentation. The columns show the content themes, which are common areas of concern within the organization, and the practices and forms in which the content theme manifests. Practices are the actions within the organization demonstrating the content themes, while cultural forms often have more of a symbolic meaning (Martin, 1992).

**Theme 2: The ultimate goal of teachers and administrators was to always do what was best for children.** Maintaining the well-being of students at X School was a priority for teachers and administrators. Participants reported that meeting the academic, social, and personal needs of students and helping them succeed were priorities of all staff members. Focusing on what was best for students, while addressing their behavioral and developmental needs became a large part of the cultural development at X School.

The principal at X School made it very clear multiple times that his ultimate goal was to do what was best for the students. He explained how he communicated to staff members that everything centered on the children, and doing what was right for them and keeping them safe were his priorities at the new school. Members of an organization are most likely to let go of the safety of their former culture and follow a new leader if that leader possesses confidence, strong convictions, a dominant personality, and enthusiastically and clearly articulates a vision for the organization (Trice and Beyer, 1991). In addition, when principals set clear goals that accompany a powerful vision, which then gain the support of the school community, their leadership will positively influence the school’s culture (MacNeil et al., 2009). Principal Tom strongly expressed his vision directly following the merger, and many teachers believed in this vision as well
and followed his lead. However, some staff members were less aware of more specific goals or action plans designed to support his vision.

Teachers and administrators took many steps in the effort to provide students with an environment that enabled them to feel safe, happy, and successful. Participants identified the PBIS process and the Responsive Classroom approach as two ways that staff members worked towards providing this type of environment for students. Some teachers were satisfied with the implementation of these programs and saw them as reasonably successful, while others expressed confusion or disappointment with their application, as well as with the way that administrators handled discipline at X School. Some participants felt unsupported when it came to student behavior issues in the classroom, and they sensed a lack of behavioral and systematical structures regarding student expectations. Teacher dissatisfaction in these areas is problematic as it can impact morale, which in turn can affect student success. Highly motivated teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy come from schools with positive cultures, and students learning from these teachers perform better academically (Engels et al., 2008; MacNeil et al, 2009).

In order to maintain or improve student achievement and teacher morale, it is vital for principals to focus on the school’s cultural development (Engels et al., 2008; Habegger, 2008; MacNeil et al., 2009). One way to do this is by assessing the current culture and then using the results to concentrate on students’ learning goals, as well as fostering positive relationships with teachers, parents, and students (MacNeil et al, 2009). Some organizations assemble “culture teams” to assess the culture before and after a merger (Beard & Zuniga, 2006). Although there was no team in place to formally
examine the developing culture at X School, principal Tom talked about the way in which the culture was evolving. He explained that when there were stressors to the organization, the way in which these situations were handled helped build the culture. MacNeil et al. (2009) recommends that principals put structures in place before encountering challenging times in order to help maintain stability and manage stress.

Child well-being at X School was examined through three specific perspectives. Each offered a unique view of the experience of administrators and teachers. When looked at through the integration perspective, the focus was on the collectivity-wide consensus that the administrators and teachers reached, which was to always do what was best for the students. When seen through the differentiation perspective, although teachers and administrators spoke about the shared value of putting student well-being at the forefront, the focus was on the inconsistencies in the way this was carried out.

Subcultures developed based on discipline techniques and philosophies among teachers and administrators, and within these subcultures was consistency. Each subculture consisted of teachers who transferred from the same school. Their expectations regarding behavior management were often based on the way behavior and discipline were handled at their former schools. Through the fragmentation lens behavior management, discipline, and student success and well-being were as unclear and uncertain, but this ambiguity was acceptable.

Participant responses about child well-being, more specifically, student successes, needs, behavior, and discipline, representing the newly formed culture at X School, are summarized in Appendix B. The rows show manifestations separated into the
integration, differentiation, and fragmentation perspectives, and the columns show the content theme, practices, and forms.

**Theme 3: Collaboration among teachers was a key factor in the school’s cultural development.** Following the merger, learning how to work together was a priority among staff members at X School. The data showed that a variety of professional relationships developed. Some of these relationships involved strong collaboration between teachers, while others were dysfunctional and fragmented. Obstacles such as the building structure made it challenging for teachers at different grade levels to collaborate. Some of the subcultures that developed by grade level thrived and were unified and productive, while others lacked consensus and were in need of support.

The ongoing process of developing or changing a culture, also termed reculturing, can provoke a plethora of emotions for stakeholders (Fullan, 2001). As a result, according to Fullan (2001), cultivating positive relationships is one of the most important roles of a leader while fostering a new school culture. This study revealed that bringing together staff members was a priority of the administrators at X School directly following the merger. They encouraged people to get to know one another and to work as a team with the other teachers who taught at the same grade level. Consistent with the school culture literature that says striving for consistency and coherence is essential during the cultural development process, X School administrators expressed this importance to grade level teams (Fullan, 2001).

As teachers began working with their grade level colleagues, some teams formed strong relationships. They shared ideas for activities and lessons from their former
schools and decided which ones they wanted to implement at their new school. They agreed upon values and goals, and although they didn’t always directly support the beliefs and values of the organization as a whole, they still seemed to support the school’s core philosophy (Morgan & Ogbonna, 2008).

During the beginning stages of a merger, one of the first things people notice is what makes their organization different from the other organizations even if there are actually many similarities (Marks & Mirvis, 2011). As a result, these perceived differences could lead to negative reactions, as was the case for some grade level teams at X School. Within some of the subcultures, small groups called nanocultures also developed (Morgan and Ogbonna, 2008). These nanocultures were often a pair of teachers who transferred to X School from the same school. According to the literature, in order to avoid negative interactions within a subculture and the formation of nanocultures, it may have been helpful for administrators to not only encourage collaboration, but to further guide teams through some of the steps recommended to avoid culture clash such as finding a desired end-state, learning about one another’s cultures, working towards the desired end, and reinforcing the emerging culture (Marks and Mirvis, 2001).

The grade level teams developed into functional subcultures that at times enhanced one another, but mostly functioned independently (Martin, 1992 & 2002). Participants revealed that there was little collaboration outside of the grade level subcultures, which may have been due to a lack of effort or opportunity to understand one another personally and professionally. The literature expresses the importance of recognizing differences in order to help reduce conflict between subcultures with decisions made across organizations (Hofstede, 1998). Because of the lack of collaboration among staff
members outside of their grade level teams, there was little recognition of differences, but there also did not appear to be much conflict as most grade level teams functioned independently of one another.

When viewed from the integration perspective, collaboration at X School has enhanced its culture, and many staff members were supportive of the administrators’ vision for a unified, child-centered school. When seen from the differentiation perspective, the collaboration was inconsistent school-wide, but obtained consensus and clarity within subcultures, while pushing ambiguity outside of the individual grade level teams. The fragmentation perspective revealed lack of consensus and consistency and the formation of nanocultures within subculture, while highlighting the ambiguity regarding collaboration (Martin, 1992 & 2002).

Appendix C displays data of the cultural manifestations of the most recent culture at X School connected to collaboration, more specifically, professional collaboration, subcultures, and building layout. The theoretical perspectives used to examine the data separate the rows, and the columns are divided into the three manifestations, content themes, practices, and forms.

Theme 4: The establishment of traditions greatly impacted the cultural development at X School. Building traditions is an important element in the cultural development of a new school. In this study, participants spoke about the way in which they brought along some of the traditions from their former schools, such as all school meeting (ASM), and implemented them at X School. Other traditions originated at the new school as special events or activities and then evolved into traditions. The active parent-teacher organization (PTO) was instrumental in initiating many the new and
borrowed traditions. These traditions became an essential piece of the developing culture at X School.

Members of the new school community brought components of their former school cultures with them to X School. Many teachers were surprised at the degree to which the practices at the three original schools differed, and there was a great deal of confusion as to which school certain events originated. As administrators made decisions regarding special events and rituals, and their vision for the culture became more apparent, teachers had to let go of some of the special events and rituals that were traditions at their former schools that they wanted implemented at X School. This was part of the process to “unlearn” their old culture and “relearn” based on the direction in which X School it was headed (Schein, 2009). According to the literature, this transformative culture change process was similar to the process of an already established school experiencing a culture change. It was complex, and all members of the X School community were at various stages of the process. Individuals had a variety of feelings as they went through each step, and it was important for administrators to pay attention to the personal reactions of staff members, which they did to varying degrees (Schein, 2009).

There was a degree of excitement about establishing traditions that were unique to X School. Although cultural differences can be challenging for merging organizations, they can also lead to creative problem solving, innovation, and strong relationships. The right kind of leadership and preparation are essential in fostering and facilitating this novel culture (Marks & Mirvis, 2011). Many participants reported that the parents, teachers, and administrators collaborated to think of new ideas for events that became traditions at X School. Other were critical of the way in which administrators handled
these cultural differences and felt that they were simply giving all of the power to the PTO.

According to the literature on business mergers, the severity of the merger culture clash varies depending on the cultural differences between the merging organizations. If the cultures are very similar or are very different but both strong, there will be a greater degree of culture clash, whereas if one culture is more dominant, there will be less of a culture clash post merger (Bajaj, 2009; Weber and Drori, 2011; Drori, Wrzesniewski, & Shmuel, 2011). Since staff members at X School came from three different elementary schools in the district, as well as other places of employment outside of the district, there were more than three distinct cultures merging together. It is unclear whether one culture was more dominant than the others, but teachers spoke about the strong influence that Brown School parents had on school traditions, rituals, and special events. This may have been a reason that Brown teachers appeared to be more satisfied with the cultural development at X School.

When the establishment of traditions at X School was viewed from the integration perspective, the shared values of the parents, teachers, and administrator were guiding the implementation of traditions. The ambiguity regarding the origin of events from other schools was excluded, and the focus was on recognizing the consensus and consistency of all school meeting and the feelings regarding the other traditions that were put into place. When viewed from the differentiation perspective, the inconsistencies among staff members’ thoughts regarding traditions were brought to the forefront, and subcultures made up of teachers who taught at the same school before the merger emerged. Within those subcultures there was consensus regarding which traditions should be implemented
at X School, and any ambiguity was pushed aside. The establishment of traditions from the fragmentation perspective revealed a great deal of confusion and ambiguity concerning the schools at which particular traditions originated, who brought certain traditions to X School, and whether or not these traditions supported the cultural development.

The table in Appendix D represents data of the cultural manifestations of the newly formed culture at X School in the area of establishing traditions. The rows display findings as seen through the different lenses of the three perspectives, integration, differentiation, and fragmentation. The columns show the content themes and the practices forms in which the content themes manifest.

**Implications for Practice**

With regard to the cultural development at a new school following a merger, three inferences that may have consequential implications for practice can be made: 1) teachers’ expectations of and satisfaction with the culture at a new school will vary based on their experiences prior to the merger, 2) teachers who are hired post merger will have philosophies that are consistent with those of the administrators, and 3) the break in continuity due to administrator turnover will impact the school’s cultural development.

**Teacher Expectations.** Every school has its own distinct culture that impacts every member of the community and penetrates every aspect of their experience at that school. Therefore, when transferring to a new school following a merger, teachers will have different expectations depending on their prior settings and professional experiences. If teachers feel favorably about their former school’s culture, and aspects of their new school’s culture are similar, then there is a greater chance that they will be satisfied with
the culture at their new school. In this study, teachers’ expectations of the culture at X Elementary School varied based on their teaching experiences prior to the merger.

Tom and Dan made a conscious effort not to mimic the culture of another school. However, some of the “new” routines and procedures that they put into place were consistent with the way things were done at other schools in the district, so the teachers who came from those schools did not feel as much of a change. They were more easily able to acclimate and accept these elements of the evolving culture. On the other hand, some of the decisions that Tom and Dan made felt like vast changes for other teachers. They were inconsistent with the practices teachers experienced at their former schools, which resulted in some dissatisfaction and resistance. Teachers from Ames and Cedar schools appeared to be most displeased with the cultural development at X School, while teachers from Brown and those new to the district seemed more accepting of the evolving culture. The discipline practices, level of collaboration among staff members, and the communication between administrators and staff members were the areas that were most problematic and seemed to differ most from Ames and Cedar.

**Post-Merger Hires.** Teachers who are hired by the school principal and hiring committee at a new school may be more content with the developing school culture than the teachers who transfer from other schools in the district. Leaders have certain ideas about how things such as discipline, communication, procedures, and decision making should be handled, and through the hiring process, they will select teachers with similar ideas and philosophies or those who they determine can help propel the new school closer to the culture they envision. These teachers most likely will fit in with the culture that the administrators hope for, but not necessarily the culture that is present at the time. When a
new culture is still developing, more instances of turnover provide a greater opportunity to shape the culture, especially if the culture is fragmented. When a school community supports the principal’s visions and goals, their leadership will have a positive influence on the culture of the school (MacNeil et al., 2009).

In its first six years of operation, there was a great deal of staff turnover at X School. Because the culture was still developing and was not yet secure or in the “refreezing” stage, the new staff members, perhaps unintentionally, may have moved the culture closer towards the school culture that Tom envisioned (Schein, 2009). The teachers at X School who were hired after the merger had teaching philosophies most in line with Tom’s vision and goals. The questions he asked during the interview processes demonstrated the importance he placed in certain areas and aspects of the school’s culture, and he selected teachers who had similar values and philosophies.

**Administrator Turnover.** When a school’s culture is becoming established and the key figures in upholding it leave, this turnover may disrupt the developing culture. Because Dan was only at X School half-time, the elements of PBIS took longer to implement than he would have liked. When he retired after the third year post-merger, it had not yet solidified as a framework for the culture. This break in continuity caused a disruption in the implementation of PBIS, and the practices that were in place were not necessarily reinforced with the same attention that Dan had given to them. Marks and Mirvis (2011) explained that the final step in minimizing culture clash after a merger was to reinforce the developing culture. Some elements of PBIS were not reinforced when Dan left X School. Although other leaders were hired and continued with PBIS, it was not as great of a priority, and they did not appear to carry it out with the same level of
passion or consistency as Dan had. The internal commitment among teachers was not fostered to the same degree when Dan was not there to steward the messages and practices of PBIS (Fullan, 2001). This caused some confusion and ambiguity regarding PBIS, and many teachers felt that X School lacked a certain structure or framework as the culture evolved.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, there are several recommendations regarding cultural development for educators who are beginning the school merger process. First, it is essential that specific attention be given to the cultural development process pre-merger, during the merger, and post-merger. This begins with administrators. School leaders need to take the time to learn about the cultures of the merging schools and consider these elements during every step of the process. Before making any modifications to a school’s culture, Deal & Peterson (1999) recommend that leaders first read the culture carefully in order to gain a deep understanding of its history and current state. They should understand the school community’s goals and visions. This is also an important recommendation for leaders of merging schools. They need to learn about the existing cultures of the original schools before establishing a culture at a new school.

Administrators at new schools also need to communicate clearly and frequently with staff members during all stages of the merger, understanding that communication is not only speaking but also listening. Strong leadership and communication are two of the ways to help minimize merger culture clash, and scholars agree that leadership plays an essential role in creating, evolving, sustaining, and changing culture (Denison, 2005; Fullan, 2001; Lakomski, 2001; Schein, 2004).
When preparing for a merger, administrators should assemble a transition team. This team should remain intact and active during and after the merger and cultural assimilation process. It should consist of a representation of parents, teachers, other staff members, and administrators from the original schools who are preparing to transfer. They should discuss the cultures at their present schools and find common ground on which they can build a new culture. Administrators should share their visions and goals for the new school as well as listen carefully and learn about the cultures of schools from which students and staff members are transferring. This team can anticipate possible problems and address issues prior to the merger. Forming a transition team that can meet several times before, during, and after the merger to oversee the cultural development process would help prepare a new school for success. Business merger scholars recommend assembling a transition team prior to a merger, and this would also be an effective strategy for merging schools (Beard & Zuniga, 2006; Stinchcomb & Ordaz, 2007).

Another step that schools can take to prepare for a merger is to conduct a pre-merger cultural audit of the original schools. This audit could consist of interviews, focus groups, and surveys and could act as a foundation for the steps needed to build a new culture (Locke, 2007; Saunders et al. 2009). Another option for a pre-merger audit would be to implement the Culture Merger Integration instrument created and used by Beard & Zuniga (2006) during a business merger. The transition team could use this information to identify and address differences in the cultures prior to and during the merger. A cultural audit and transition team could help schools better prepare for and monitor the cultural assimilation process.
During and after a merger, it is important to put in place some type of behavioral framework or structure such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (Bradshaw and Pas, 2011). Students, parents, staff members, and administrators need a common language and foundation upon which to build a culture, and PBIS provides them with those elements. An administrator who is familiar with and educated about the benefits of such a program would be best suited for leading the implementation. It is essential for staff members to be properly trained and to clearly understand the process so that they can be active participants. This is also something in which the transition team can be involved and help steward.

**Considerations for Further Research**

More can be learned about the cultural development process following a merger by conducting further research at X Elementary School. Involving additional groups of participants such the parents or members of the parent-teacher organization would give an additional perspective. The parents of X School students could provide valuable information based on their experiences of being moved to the new school as a result of overcrowding and redistricting. Since all members of a school make up the culture, other school employees such as para-educators, custodial staff, cafeteria workers, and office staff could also provide further insight into understanding the cultural development process at a new school.

Research on the cultural development of schools following a merger beyond X School would also be of benefit and add greatly to the organizational culture literature. A study investigating the school culture after a merger at secondary schools would provide insight into the process with older students. Another consideration is to study the merger
of schools into an existing school and the way in which the culture of the remaining school is affected.

**Limitations**

One limitation of this study was the sampling strategy used to select participants, purposeful selection. Given that this was a single case study, only teachers from X Elementary School were asked to participate. In addition, although all teachers were asked to participate, approximately 30, only 17 volunteered. The findings of this study represented perspectives, feelings, and experiences of approximately half of the possible participants.

Another limitation is the potential bias of the researcher. The researcher currently serves as a classroom teacher at the school where the research was conducted. As such, the research could contain some biases that could have influenced the interpretation of the data.

Certain steps were taken to minimize these limitations and biases. Participants were provided with the one-on-one interview and focus group questions ahead of time to allow for transparency. The teacher participants knew that their participation in this study would not affect them in their current positions, and the researcher had no supervisory duty over participants. The researcher also implemented several methods to ensure accuracy including: triangulation, a draft reviewed by key informants, bracketing, and detailed description of data (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 1992).

**Conclusion**

This descriptive case study examined the process by which a new school’s culture developed after a merger and the characteristics of the new culture. This study was
conducted at a suburban elementary school in the Northeastern United States during the sixth year post-merger. Data were collected through focus groups, interviews, and examination of documents. This study provided a description of the complex school merger process through the eyes of teachers and administrators. It revealed that the various schools from which teachers transferred influenced the degree of satisfaction they found with the developing culture at their new school. In addition, the teachers who were new to the district and did not transfer to another school had similar philosophies as the principal and were found to be more supportive of his vision for the school than most of the other teachers. Finally, a lack of continuity of leadership and a structural framework for the culture led to confusion and dissatisfaction among some teachers. This information is helpful for other teachers and administrators embarking on the journey of merging schools. By understanding the process by which multiple school cultures merge to create a culture at a new school, we can better understand how stakeholders can work together to establish a culture that helps support student success.
References


Deal, T. E., Peterson, K. D., & Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC Programs for the Improvement of Practice. (1990). *The principal's role in shaping school culture*


## Appendix A

### Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Content Themes</strong></th>
<th><strong>Practices</strong></th>
<th><strong>Forms</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integration</strong></td>
<td>Effective leadership practices</td>
<td>Administrators listen carefully and are available to answer questions Principal provides explanations for decisions, is open and honest, does not micromanage Principal responds quickly to problem, questions, concerns from parents Class placement process Collaborative culture Parent feedback leads to changes Administrators trust teachers Work towards consensus Teachers have a “voice” Teachers on hiring committee</td>
<td>Principal outside when students arrive Weekly memos from principal “Team decision” “Departmentalize” story Looking for “buy in” “Positive approach” is a common term PBIS</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Differentiation</strong></td>
<td>Leadership practices are inconsistent</td>
<td>What teachers say doesn’t matter</td>
<td>Things left out of weekly memos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication problem</td>
<td>Staff members do not feel heard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication is last minute and about surface issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers making effort to improve communication with one another</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff member conflicts are unaddressed</td>
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<td>Secrecy</td>
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<td>Administrators make all decisions</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fragmentation</th>
<th>Confusion about leadership practices</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unsere if things were announced</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers feeling “out of the loop”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unsure if voice is heard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of understanding about PBIS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unclear who is “in charge”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Paper memo” story</td>
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## Appendix B

### Child Well-Being

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Content Themes</th>
<th>Practices</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Holistic concern for child well-being</td>
<td>Specialists on playground</td>
<td>“Cafeteria” story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goal is to help students succeed</td>
<td>Younger students using technology</td>
<td>“Student-centric” school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Expect teachers to do their best”</td>
<td>“High achieving” community</td>
<td>Class is “mini-family”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Holistic and child-centered teaching</td>
<td>Build trust with students</td>
<td>“Collaborative Problem Solving”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive and safe environment</td>
<td>“Nurturing partnership” between families, staff, and community</td>
<td>“Responsive Classroom”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No suspensions or group punishments</td>
<td>Question interviewees about discipline and behavioral students</td>
<td>“All School Meeting”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Story about teacher who wanted student who “had issues”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Q and U wedding” story</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“kids do well if they can” philosophy</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **Differentiation** | Lack of holistic concern for child well-being | Students do not “know” administrators | “I just close my door and do my thing.”

PBIS hasn’t “taken hold”

Behavior expectations by grade levels

No consequences

Higher academic expectations leading to more behavior problems |
| Fragmentation | Confusion about concern for child well-being | Unclear how to integrate the Responsive Classroom and PBIS
Programs “don’t go together” | Confusion with all school meeting |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
Appendix C

Collaboration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Integration</strong></td>
<td>Collaborative staff</td>
<td>Respectful environment&lt;br&gt;Teachers come early, stay late&lt;br&gt;Work together on committees&lt;br&gt;Staff open and accepting</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Differentiation</strong></td>
<td>Impediments to collaboration</td>
<td>“Lack of cohesiveness” and “community” among staff&lt;br&gt;Unequal treatment by administrators&lt;br&gt;Need administrators to unify school community&lt;br&gt;No uniformity&lt;br&gt;Teachers have control due to “hands off approach” of administrators&lt;br&gt;Subcultures by grade level and position&lt;br&gt;New/temporary staff members not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragmentation</td>
<td>Confusion about collaboration</td>
<td>Confusion around social committee funds</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>introduced</td>
<td>Consistent expectations within grade levels</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Some teams do not working together or get along- isolation within teams</td>
<td>Complaining</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consistent expectations within grade levels</td>
<td>Complaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People easily offended and rigid</td>
<td>Commitments outside of school</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Two lunch and planning rooms</td>
<td>No central location</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Each grade level in different wing; two floors</td>
<td>Schedule</td>
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<td>“New teachers” unsure of role</td>
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<td>within school</td>
<td>Staff turnover</td>
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## Appendix D

### Establishing Traditions

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<tr>
<th>Content Themes</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Integration** | Traditions have formed  
Strong parent-teacher organization | Things taken from each school were modified and became traditions  
Recycling  
PBIS  
Committees making decisions  
Trial and error  
Figured out logistics  
Parents viewed as equals; strongly invested  
Fundraising  
After school program | Monthly PTO meetings  
Farewell to students last day of school  
All School Meeting (ASM)  
Student presentations at ASM  
Grade level exit projects  
Art show  
Physics Olympics  
Hobby night  
Back-to-school party  
Gingerbread theme  
Community service  
Field trips  
Book fairs |
| **Differentiation** | Lack of support for traditions | Done differently at each school  
PBIS partially in place  
Parents make all decisions | Not all teachers “on board” with ASM  
Teachers dislike parent-led field day |
| **Fragmentation** | Confusion about traditions | Unclear what other school had for traditions | Unclear if/how other schools did field day |
### Appendix E

An Integration View

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Themes</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effective leadership practices</td>
<td>Administrators listen carefully and are available to answer questions Principal provides explanations for decisions, is open and honest, does not micromanage Principal responds quickly to problem, questions, concerns from parents Class placement process Collaborative culture Parent feedback leads to changes Administrators trust teachers Work towards consensus Teachers have a “voice” Teachers on hiring committee</td>
<td>Principal outside when students arrive Weekly memos from principal “Team decision” “Departmentalize” story Looking for “buy in” “Positive approach” is a common term PBIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic concern for child well-being Goal is to help students succeed</td>
<td>Specialists on playground Younger students using technology “Expect teachers to do their best”</td>
<td>“Cafeteria” story “Student-centric” school Class is “mini-family” “Collaborative Problem Solving”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative staff</td>
<td>“Responsive Classroom”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“High achieving” community</td>
<td>“All School Meeting”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic and child-centered teaching</td>
<td>Story about teacher who wanted student who “had issues”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build trust with students</td>
<td>“Q and U wedding” story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive and safe environment</td>
<td>“kids do well if they can” philosophy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Nurturing partnership” between families, staff, and community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No suspensions or group punishments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question interviewees about discipline and behavioral students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers handle discipline</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline issue is “learning opportunity”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated learners</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent behavioral reinforcement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive discipline and logical consequences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Differentiating” to meet students’ needs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaborative staff</th>
<th>Respectful environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Story about one grade level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers come early, stay late</td>
<td>not working together-problematic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work together on committees</td>
<td>“Little Buddies”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff open and accepting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Traditions have formed       | Things taken from each school were modified and became traditions |
| Strong parent-teacher       | Recycling                      |
| organization                | PBIS                           |
|                              | Committees making decisions   |
|                              | Trial and error                |
|                              | Figured out logistics          |
|                              | Parents viewed as equals;     |
|                              | strongly invested              |
|                              | Fundraising                    |
|                              | After school program           |

| Monthly PTO meetings         | Farewell to students last day of school |
|                             | All School Meeting (ASM)          |
|                             | Student presentations at ASM      |
|                             | Grade level exit projects        |
|                             | Art show                        |
|                             | Physics Olympics                 |
|                             | Hobby night                      |
|                             | Back-to-school party             |
|                             | Gingerbread theme                |
|                             | Community service                |
|                             | Field trips                      |
|                             | Book fairs                       |
Appendix F

A Differentiation View

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Themes</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership practices are inconsistent</td>
<td>What teachers say doesn’t matter</td>
<td>Things left out of weekly memos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication problem</td>
<td>Staff members do not feel heard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication is last minute and about surface issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers making effort to improve communication with one another</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff member conflicts are unaddressed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secrecy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administrators make all decisions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of holistic concern for child well-being</td>
<td>Students do not “know” administrators</td>
<td>“I just close my door and do my thing.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PBIS hasn’t “taken hold”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behavior expectations by grade levels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No consequences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Higher academic expectations leading to more behavior problems</td>
<td>Teachers and staff handle behaviors- not supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impediments to collaboration</td>
<td>“Lack of cohesiveness” and “community” among staff</td>
<td>Grade level teams sit together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unequal treatment by administrators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need administrators to unify school community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No uniformity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers have control due to “hands off approach” of administrators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subcultures by grade level and position</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New/temporary staff members not introduced</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some teams do not working together or get along- isolation within teams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consistent expectations within grade levels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complaining</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support for traditions</td>
<td>Done differently at each school</td>
<td>Not all teachers “on board” with ASM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBIS partially in place</td>
<td>Parents make all decisions</td>
<td>Teachers dislike parent-led field day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix G

### A Fragmentation View

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Themes</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Confusion about leadership practices| Unsure if things were announced  
Teachers feeling “out of the loop”  
Unsure if voice is heard  
Lack of understanding about PBIS  
Unclear who is “in charge”     | “Paper memo” story                                                           |
| Confusion about concern for child well-being | Unclear how to integrate the Responsive Classroom and PBIS  
Programs “don’t go together” | Confusion with all school meeting |
| Confusion about collaboration | Confusion around social committee funds  
Unclear what other grade levels are doing  
“New teachers” unsure of role within school  
Staff turnover | Unclear staff meeting purpose |
| Confusion about traditions | Unclear what other school had for traditions | Unclear if/how other schools ran field day |
Appendix H

Letter of Recruitment - Interviews

Dear Potential Research Subject (actual name used),

My name is Amanda Donovan and I am a student researcher and doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. I am recruiting participants to contribute to a research study I am conducting titled “From Trinity to Unity: The Merger of Three School Cultures into One.” I am contacting you today because you have been an integral part of the cultural development of X Elementary School following its opening. This study seeks to describe the process by which cultures from three different elementary schools merged to form a culture at a new elementary school through the perspective of teachers and administrators. Your experience and input is invaluable for providing such insight.

I am requesting your participation in a 60-90 minute in-person interview regarding your experience during the cultural development process at X Elementary School. There will be no risks involved, and should you have any concerns at any point or feel any perceived risks, you may remove yourself from the study at any time. Questions will be sent to you one week in advance of the interview for your review. This interview will remain confidential. I hope to be able to schedule interviews to take place by the end of January, but no later than March 2015.

Thank you very much for considering participation in this study. Please let me know if you have any further questions, and I would be happy to answer them. In addition, please feel free to contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Sandy Nickel by email at ***** or phone at ***** should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Amanda Donovan
Student Researcher and Doctoral Candidate, Northeastern University

***** (H)
***** (C)
*****
Appendix I

Letter of Recruitment- Focus Groups

Dear Potential Research Subject (*actual name used*),

My name is Amanda Donovan and I am a student researcher and doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. I am recruiting participants to contribute to a research study I am conducting titled “From Trinity to Unity: The Merger of Three School Cultures into One.” I am contacting you today because you have been an integral part of the cultural development of X Elementary School following its opening. This study seeks to describe the process by which cultures from three different elementary schools merged to form a culture at a new elementary school through the perspective of teachers and administrators. Your experience and input is invaluable for providing such insight.

I am requesting your participation in a 90 minute in-person focus group interview regarding your experience during the cultural development process at X Elementary School. There will be no risks involved, and should you have any concerns at any point or feel any perceived risks, you may remove yourself from the study at any time. Questions will be sent to you one week in advance of the interview for your review. This interview will remain confidential. I hope to be able to schedule interviews to take place by the end of January, but no later than March 2015.

Thank you very much for considering participation in this study. Please let me know if you have any further questions, and I would be happy to answer them. In addition, please feel free to contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Sandy Nickel by email at ***** or phone at *****should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Amanda Donovan
Student Researcher and Doctoral Candidate, Northeastern University

*****(H)

*****(C)

*****
Appendix J

Informed Consent to Participate

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): Sandy Nickel, Amanda Donovan
Title of Project: From Trinity to Unity? The Merger of Three School Cultures into One

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are a teacher or administrator at X Elementary School in xxx.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to describe the process by which a new school’s culture develops after a merger, through the perspective of teachers and administrators.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask administrators to participate in an individual interview one time and teachers to participate in a focus group interview one time.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
Individual interviews will take place at X Elementary School either proceeding or following the school day and will last for approximately 60-90 minutes. Focus group interviews will take place at X Elementary School either proceeding or following the school day and will last for approximately 90 minutes.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no foreseeable risks, harms, discomforts or inconvenience that participants may experience.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study.

**Who will see the information about me?**
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.

Your personal information will be protected. Pseudonyms will be assigned and information collected will be coded and categorized with the assistance of computer software which will organize it based on common themes and patterns. Data will be stored on my personal, password-protected computer and on an SD card in a locked file cabinet at my home. The data are anonymous (do not contain any identifiers) and will be destroyed following the conclusion of the study.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**
No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of participation in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Amanda Donovan at xxx or xxx, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Sandy Nickel at xxx or xxx, the Principal Investigator.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
No, there will be no compensation for participation in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
No, there will be no costs associated with participation in this study.

I agree to take part in this research.

______________________________   __________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part                  Date

______________________________
Printed name of person above

______________________________   __________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent                  Date

______________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix K

Interview Questions

Warm-Up Statement:

Thank you for your participation in this interview today. I want to reassure you that should you choose to keep this interview confidential, your answers will remain as such. This interview is for the purposes of this research study, and your answers will not be shared with anyone associated with the xxx Public Schools. I am interested in learning about your experience at X Elementary School with regard to cultural development, and I want you to be as comfortable as possible. Please feel free to stop me at any time to ask any questions you may have.

1. Please briefly provide me with some background information: What is your current position? How long you have held this position? Where did you work before your current position and in what capacity?

2. What were some of your goals or priorities when you assumed the vice/principalship at X?

School culture can be generally defined as the shared beliefs, values, norms, traditions, artifacts and expectations that unite members of a school community (Deal and Kennedy, 1983; Deal and Peterson, 2009; Schein, 2004). (Answer any questions that might arise about school culture.)

3. Think back to your first year at X. How would you describe the school culture at that time?

4. How would you describe the current school culture?
5. What similarities or difference do you see in the school culture between the first year of operation and now?

6. What initiatives influencing or potentially influencing the culture have taken hold and why do you think they have? Which ones have not taken hold? Why?

7. Do you have any future major or continuing initiatives planned that you think may influence the school culture?

8. What factors do you believe are most influential to X’s cultural development over the past five years?

9. Is there anything that you think we missed? Is there anything that you came wanting to discuss that you didn’t get a chance to say?
Appendix L
Focus Group Questions

Warm-Up Statement:

Thank you for your participation in this focus group interview today. I want to reassure you that should you choose to keep this interview confidential, your answers will remain as such. This interview is for the purposes of this research study, and your answers will not be shared with anyone associated with the xxx Public Schools. I am interested in learning about your experience at X Elementary School with regard to cultural development, and I want you to be as comfortable as possible. Please feel free to stop me at any time to ask any questions you may have.

Opening:

1. Please tell me how long you have been teaching at X School and what grade(s) you teach.

Introductory:

2. Where did you work before coming to X School, and for how long?

Transition:

School culture can be generally defined as the shared beliefs, values, norms, traditions, artifacts and expectations that unite members of a school community (Deal and Kennedy, 1983; Deal and Peterson, 2009; Schein, 2004). (Answer any questions that might arise about school culture.)
3. Think back to your first year at X. How would you describe the school culture at that time?

4. How would you describe the current school culture?

Key Questions:

5. What similarities or difference do you see in the school culture between the first year of operation and now?

6. What factors do you see having influenced or currently influencing X’s cultural development?

7. Have you seen any traditions or rituals implemented at X that were part of the culture at your former school? If so, explain.

8. Have you seen any traditions or rituals implemented that are unique to X? If so, explain.

9. To what extent do you think teachers and staff members are involved in decision making at X School?

10. What organizational structures and processes have you observed at X contributing to the culture?

Ending Questions:

11. What factor do you see as most influential to X’s cultural development over the past five years?

12. Is there anything that you think we missed? Is there anything that you came wanting to discuss that you didn’t get a chance to say?