A Narrative Inquiry into a Principal's Understanding of School Culture and Its Influences on Principal Leadership

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A Narrative Inquiry into a Principal’s Understanding of School Culture and Its Influences on Principal Leadership

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership
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    July 2, 2020

Keywords: school leadership, organizational culture, leadership influence

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to those who have been most supportive in this long, winding journey for me. To Christi, my best friend, and loving wife: Thank you for all of your support, your thoughts, your questioning, and your endless positive encouragement. Your changing your life, so that I can meet this goal, was certainly not easy, but the grace during it, and your enthusiasm for me has been a sincere help, and honestly, I would not be here without you. I love you. To Jackson, my amazing son: Thank you for challenging me, and reminding me why I am doing this. Your ability to help me see secondary education in action, and to have a few moments of lacrosse, really helped me to focus on what I was doing, and to remember that in the end kids are the reason I am teaching, educating, and studying to be better. To Mary Elizabeth, M.E., my precocious daughter: Thank you for all of the smiles and positivity you’ve had throughout this journey. Your personality has helped to lighten the load, and your focus on your cheer and your academics helps me to remember to focus on completing this and becoming a better person through it. Here is to all of us pulling together for each other, and to all of us working together to make our homes, our schools, our communities, and our world a better place.
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ABSTRACT

Culture has been discussed and written about at great length from roots in anthropology (e.g., Tylor, 1920; Mead, 1928) to development of the concepts of organizational culture (Schein, 1985, 2010) and school culture (e.g., Bolman & Deal, 2013; Deal & Peterson, 1991, 2009). Societies, organizations and schools as organizations create, develop, and maintain culture—deep-seated assumptions, values, ways of thinking and acting that characterize how we do things, how we live.

In a school the principal is often cast as responsible for influencing or creating a culture and climate for change (Fullan, 2008; Jones et al., 2013). Thus, it is important for a principal to understand school culture (Pritchard, Marshall, & Morrow, 2003), especially if a principal wants to attempt to change culture. School culture has been called a powerful force that can support or block school change efforts (Redding & Corbett, 2018).

This was a qualitative study, guided by narrative inquiry and using semi-structured interviews and a school walk interview to explore a high school principal’s understanding of school culture, how she saw the elements of culture in her school, and how those elements of culture influenced her leadership and decision-making. Findings of the study illustrated three elements of school culture that were important to the principal: family atmosphere, history, and discipline. A fourth element—renovation—illustrated how elements of school culture affected her decisions during a major school event. Tensions among elements of culture were also identified (e.g., family atmosphere and discipline).
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Roland Barth (2002) noted that a school’s culture has an immense impact on the “life and learning” of a school. Barth described school culture as “a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization” (p. 4). This description suggests that a school’s culture may be complex and comprised of many elements or attributes.

Much has been written about school culture, its importance, its influence, and how one might attempt to change and build culture or its elements (e.g., Deal & Peterson, 1991, 2009; Fisher, Frey, & Pumpian, 2012; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Prosser, 1999). Organizational culture researchers in other fields such as business or health care (e.g., Bass, 1985; Block, 2003) contended that while an organization’s culture is influenced by and develops through leadership, culture within an organization can also affect the development and success of its leaders. In the case of school leadership, there appears to be little written about how a school’s culture may affect its leaders, particularly the principal.

Background

Culture is important to an organization (e.g., Bolman & Deal, 2013; Schein, 2010). Schein (2010) described an organization’s culture as the “way we do things around here” (p. 235). He noted that an organization’s culture builds over time as the employees interact with and adapt to the external environment, solve problems, and go through various changes. What employees
learn and gain from these experiences become values, beliefs, principles, policies and practices that are followed every day, forming the culture of the organization. Some literature on organizational culture also suggested that leaders can affect the culture of an organization (e.g., Chatman & Cha, 2003; Klein, Wallis, & Cooke, 2013). Leaders’ skills and behaviors, as well as the decisions they make and paths they choose to take, can influence and reinforce cultural norms of an organization.

Working to manage an organization and influence its culture requires a leader to have a clear view, or vision, of what he/she is attempting to achieve. Hershey, Blanchard, and Johnson (1996) discussed three basic competencies for influencing organizations: diagnosing, adapting, and communicating (p. 575), all of which help the leader to attempt to move the organization closer to a desired vision. Hershey et al. made a case for the importance of a leader understanding the organization, being able to note what is going right from what is going wrong, making mindful decisions about where to go, and ensuring the team is clear on what is happening.

Schools are generally described as organizations (Bidwell, 2001; Herriott & Firestone, 1984), and there is a body of literature that looks at the concept of school culture (e.g., Deal & Peterson, 2009; Teasley, 2017). Deal and Peterson (2009) noted that an organization’s culture is “a shared webbing of informal folkways and traditions that infuse work with meaning, passion, and purpose” (p. 1). They further explained that the “symbolic fibers” of a school’s culture are important to understand and to “nourish” (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. 4). Teasley (2017) observed that a “school's organizational culture provides a sense of identity, promotes achievement orientation, helps shape standards and patterns of behavior, creates distinct ways of doing things, and determines direction for future growth” (p. 3).
Similar to literature on organizational culture, leaders are perceived as able to influence a school’s culture (e.g., Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Sergiovanni, 2009). Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) stressed that a school leader must “dig deep into the psyche” of the school organization to “figure out why certain actions or attitudes are entrenched” (p. 4). Sergiovanni (2009) explained that the leader’s effect on culture comes through his or her vision. “The heart of leadership has to do with what a person believes, values, dreams about, and is committed to – that person’s personal vision” (p. 3). Through this vision, the principal can work to realize the change they are looking to achieve within the culture of a school. This vision can help to unify the direction the leadership team of a school; with a leadership team moving in the same direction, there is a greater chance of meaningful change within the culture of a school.

**Problem Statement**

Organizations have cultures (Schein, 2010), and leaders can influence the cultures of their organizations (Chatman & Cha, 2003; Driskill & Brenton, 2011). Schein (1985) noted that “the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture” (p. 2). Schools are generally described as organizations, and they too have their own organizational cultures (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Deal & Peterson, 2009). School leaders can and do influence the cultures in their schools (Barth, 2002; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Sergiovanni, 2009). Deal and Peterson (2011) noted, “School leaders from every level are key to shaping school culture. Principals communicate core values in their everyday work” (p. 51).

While there is substantial literature on organizational culture and school culture, together with the importance of the leader in influencing and shaping organizational and school culture, there is little that I found written about the influence of organizational cultures and school cultures on leaders and their leadership. This was the crux of this research study; there is a gap
in our knowledge of how the organizational culture of a school may affect the school’s leaders, particularly the principal of the school.

**Purpose of the Study**

I was curious about how a principal comes to understand a school’s culture and how the principal perceives the effect of that culture on the way he or she chooses to lead the school. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore the experiences of a secondary school principal in a school district in Central Florida, in an effort to understand how the principal came to know and understand the culture of the school and the principal’s perceptions of the effects of the school’s culture on the principal’s leadership of the school.

The primary questions guiding this study were:

1. How does a high school principal come to know and understand the culture of a school and its elements?
2. What are the principal’s perceptions of the effects of the school’s culture and its elements on his/her leadership?

**Overview of Research Design**

This study used a qualitative research design. Patton (2015) explained, “Qualitative inquiry documents the stuff that happens among real people in the real world in their own words” (p. 12). Looking at a context, event or situation through a person’s own words helps the researcher to better understand the context, event or situation and what is meaningful about them to the individual experiencing and talking about them. To understand who a person is and what is meaningful to her/him, we need to speak with the person, hear the story that is told, and listen closely to the details of the narrative that unfolds.
Narrative inquiry further informed this qualitative study. Grbich (2013) described narrative inquiry as allowing the researcher to focus “on stories told by participants” (p. 216). My goal was to delve into the depths of the background and experiences of the participant to better understand how the context, events or situations in the principal’s experiences shaped what the principal came to know about the school’s culture and its elements and how the school’s culture may have affected the principal’s leadership. Qualitative research guided by narrative inquiry was appropriate for this study.

**Importance of the Study**

Organizations develop cultures unique to each organization. Decades of research have shown that leaders affect the organizational culture within the organizations they lead. However, little research has been done on how the culture of an organization affects the leader of the organization. Schools are organization, and schools also develop cultures of their own. Again, research has shown that principals affect the cultures of their schools. And, similar to organizational research, there has been little research on how the culture of a school affects the principal, specifically the principal’s leadership practices. This study contributes to literature on school culture and leadership where little research has been done on the effects of a school’s culture on the principal’s leadership of the school.

**Assumptions**

The assumptions I brought to this study came from my readings in current research, professional dialogue, and professional experience. The first assumption was that organizational culture affects those who interact with that culture. Because of this, I believe that those who work in a school are affected by the culture of the school in some form, regardless of the position they have within the school.
My second assumption was that leaders in organizations, specifically principals in schools, can affect the organizational cultures of their schools. In this study, I expected that the participating principal may describe the ways he/she has attempted to affect the culture of the school, but I was also concerned with how the principal perceived the culture of the school may have affected the principal and the principal’s leadership practices. Believing that the principal can affect the culture is a starting point for understanding that the culture may also affect the principal.

My third assumption was that it is possible to gather details of the characteristics and effects of a school’s culture on those who live and learn in that school’s culture. To this end, I believed it was possible for the principal who would participate in the study to talk about her school’s culture and perceptions of how the culture of the school affected the principal and the principal’s leadership practices.

Delimitations

This study looked only at one principal in a secondary school located in a school district in Central Florida. In looking at a specific principal, I did not look at other school leaders’ understandings of the culture of the principal’s school (e.g., assistant principals, department heads) or the perceived effects of the school’s culture on other school leaders.

Limitations

This was a qualitative research study looking at one specific principal, in one specific school. This limits the ability of this research to be translated to other similar situations. However, Myers (2000) noted “that while qualitative studies are not generalizable in the traditional sense of the word, nor do they claim to be, that they have other redeeming features which makes them highly valuable in the education community” (p. 3).
Definitions of Key Terms

*Culture.* Benedict (1935) explained culture as, “bind[ing] men together…the ideas and standards they have in common” (p. 11). Mead (2004) described culture as “the system of transmitted and learned behavior of all human beings everywhere on the planet” (p. 16). She describes as “a culture” (p. 16) as “the particular forms of behavior that belong to a particular group of people” (p. 16). Mead’s description of ‘a culture’ is a good starting point for thinking about the possibility that a particular school may have a culture particular to that school.

*Custom.* Benedict (1935) described custom as “possible social schemes for dealing with a common problem” (p. 1). She noted that custom plays a “predominant role…in experience and in belief, and the very great varieties it may manifest” (p.2). These customs, built together, help to define the culture of a given group of people.

*Elements of culture.* In attempting to describe culture, sociologists have come up with endless lists of elements of culture. In *Sociology: Understanding and Changing the Social World*, the University of Minnesota (2016) compiled five elements which seem to be common to most cultures: symbols, language, values, beliefs and norms.

*Leadership.* Northouse (2016) identified four components “central to the phenomenon” of leadership: “(a) Leadership is a process, (b) leadership involves influence, (c) leadership occurs in groups, and (d) leadership involves common goals” (p. x). Combining these components, Northouse defined leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 6).

*Organizational culture.* To many, organizational culture is simply “the way we do things around here.” In a recent book, Schein (2010) defined organizational culture as “the foundation
of the social order that we live in and the rules we abide by” (p. 3). In this definition he provides connection to the phenomenon of culture as described by Benedict and Mead.

*School culture.* Looking at many definitions of school culture, I have found that I agree most with Barth’s (2002) definition. A school’s culture is “a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization” (p. 4). This definition encapsulates the many and complex elements of school culture and again reflects the nuance of its influence in schools.

Kaplan and Owings (2013) provided insight into both the complexity of school culture and the nuances of its influence in schools. They described three levels of school culture (p. 10) that they adapted from the work of Schein (1985, 1990) and Hoy and Miskel (2008). The first level is artifacts and creations (e.g., building design, school colors, mascot). These can be seen as “cultural symbols” (Schein, 1985), but they may not be broadly understood. The second level is values (e.g., trust, teamwork, loyalty). These are less visible, but represent ideas that are both desirable and important to the school. The third level is basic assumptions (e.g., expectations of human nature and relationships) that are invisible but generally taken for granted. These basic assumptions are very much at the root of a common phrase that often contributes to challenges in changing schools or any organization: “This is the way we do things around here.”

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided background information about organizational culture and how leaders can affect the cultures of their organizations. Next, schools were identified as organizations with their own unique organizational cultures, and, similar to leaders of other organizations, it was shown that the leader of the school, the principal, can affect the culture of the school. The problem statement, purpose of the study and research questions were stated,
followed by an overview of the research design and the potential importance of the study.

Assumptions, delimitations and limitations were identified, and key terms were defined. Chapter Two will provide a review of relevant literature.
CHAPTER TWO:
REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Culture exists within every organization, and organizational culture affects all individuals within each of those organizations (Schein, 2010). Furthermore, leaders can influence organizational culture (e.g., Driskill & Brenton, 2011; Schein, 2010). Research has also examined the concept of school culture (e.g., Bolman & Deal, 2013; Deal & Peterson, 2009) and looked at the way that principals of schools can shape the cultures of their schools (Barth, 2002; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Sergiovanni, 2009). However, there is limited research on the ways in which a school’s culture affects the principal of that school, perhaps changing the principal’s perceptions or actions. The purpose of this literature review resided in two parallel thoughts: (1) to examine the research on organizational culture and cultural elements, and more specifically research on school culture, and (2) to examine the research on the relationship between organizational/school culture and leadership.

Literature Search Strategy

Peer-reviewed journals were accessed through the University of South Florida’s library system by searching electronic databases, including: Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, SAGE, and Web of Science. Search terms included: organizational culture, school culture, school leadership, principal, and principal culture. A total of 72 articles were found through this search, which in turn were reduced down to 42 after excluding literature
that was not directly related to school culture, organizational culture, or the effects of that culture on personnel within organizations.

In addition to the peer reviewed literature, I sought out seminal works in the areas of organization culture, organizational behavior, organizational leadership, and school culture. Seeking out information on culture, I looked through the indices of over three dozen books related to organizations, leadership, and schools. When looking in the indices, I paid attention to where culture was mentioned and looked to see if culture was mentioned with regard to its effect on leadership. Not finding anything with culture creating an effect on leadership, I looked to see how culture was viewed and how leadership was viewed in relation to culture. While not pointing to the effect of culture on leadership, these sources did give a background to the way culture exists in organizations.

Combining the peer-reviewed research with these seminal works helped to limit the scope of the research to three main themes: (a) organizational culture; (b) school culture; and (c) leadership and culture. These themes helped to identify gaps in the literature around the effects of culture on school principals, and the themes also helped to better focus the research for this study.

**Anthropological Roots of the Concept of Culture**

The concept of ‘culture’ was first studied in the field of anthropology and sets the stage for the study of organizational culture, school culture, and leadership and culture. A brief examination of this history provides a foundation for the themes identified in research on organizational culture.

Anthropology in England is often traced back to Sir Edward Tylor, and it is Tylor who is often cited as one of the first to define culture from an anthropological position. Tylor (1920)
wrote, “Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (p. 1). In this one sentence Tylor established the essence of culture as a “complex whole” comprised of many elements, “acquired…as a member of society.”

In the Foreward to Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), Franz Boas wrote that “descriptions of primitive people give us a picture of their culture classified according to the varied aspects of human life. We learn about inventions, household economy, family and political organisation, and religious beliefs and practices” (p. xiii). As Mead began her research into culture, she looked at the forms, history, purposes, values, and other elements of culture, and how they impacted the society she was studying. Her work emphasized that ‘culture’ can be ‘learned’ in many interactions and experiences.

In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Clifford Geertz compiled a collection of his own essays characterizing his perspectives and theorizing on “what culture is, what role it plays in social life, and how it ought properly to be studied” (p. vii). In his discussions of his and others’ work, he indicates specific views of culture with which he resonates. In the Preface to his work, he writes, “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (p. 5). In Chapter 1 Geertz expresses his appreciation for Ward Goodenough’s perspective on culture: “A society's culture...consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members…culture [is located] in the minds and
hearts of men” (p. 11, insertion in original text). Geertz himself asserts, “Culture is public because meaning is” (p. 12), and “Society's forms are culture's substance” (p. 28).

From literature in anthropology, we learn that ‘culture’ is acquired by members of a society from the whole of the knowledge, beliefs, morals, laws, customs, artifacts, etc.—cultural elements—that members learn and interpret through their interactions and experiences. We also learn that these cultural elements help the members of a society to understand what is valued and important for one to know or believe or demonstrate to be considered a cultural member.

In relation to this study, I think that a principal comes to a school as an outsider. To be viewed as a cultural member, the principal must seek out, interpret and learn the cultural elements of the school. As the principal engages with the school, I think the principal develops perceptions of the school’s culture while also seeking to be a cultural member. So, I feel it is possible that a principal’s leadership decisions and actions might be influenced by this dynamic.

**Organizational Culture**

An organization is “a group of people, structured in a specific way to achieve a series of shared goals” (https://thelawdictionary.org/organization/). An organization has a culture. The first edition of Edgar Schein’s *Organizational Culture and Leadership* was written in 1985. In its fourth edition, Schein (2010) defined organizational culture as “the foundation of the social order that we live in and the rules we abide by” (p. 3). He explained that the “cultural forces” in an organization are powerful “because they operate outside of our awareness…but explain many of our puzzling and frustrating experiences” within the organization (Schein, 2010 p. 7). All of these forces work together to guide stakeholders of an organization, whether explicitly or implicitly, through the decisions they make and actions they take. Schein cautioned that “culture
is deep, wide, complex, and multidimensional, so we should avoid the temptation to stereotype organizational phenomena in terms of one or two salient dimensions” (p. 156).

Driskill and Brenton (2011) illustrated the complexity of organizational culture; they observed that “culture consists of the webs of significance that we have spun for ourselves” (p. 4). They further explained that organizational members both create and are “indoctrinated into” the “language, artifacts, values, celebrations, heroes, history, and norms…[and] unique beliefs and assumptions” of the organization (p. 5). An organization’s artifacts, values, and basic assumptions help to drive the culture, build the culture, and maintain the culture that is developed (Driskill & Brenton, 2011). The authors noted that the facets of an organization’s culture are observable to those inside and outside of an organization.

Chatman and Cha (2003) saw power in organizational culture. As “a system of shared values (defining what is important) and norms (defining appropriate attitudes and behaviors)” (p. 21), an organization’s culture can weaken or strengthen organizational performance. They noted that “strong organizational cultures …dramatically influenced their firms’ later success” (p. 24). Typically, success is the goal of an organization’s leader, and as such, organizational culture is an important facet of the organization which requires the leader’s attention. Schein (2010) further noted that “the most central issue for leaders is to understand the deeper levels of a culture, to assess the functionality of the assumptions made at that level, and to deal with the anxiety that is unleashed when those assumptions are challenged” (p. 33).

From literature on organizational culture, we learn that an organization is a group of people, working together within a particular structure to achieve shared goals. In this study, I see a school as an organization. We also learn that the concept of ‘culture’ has been applied to organizations, most notably by Edgar Schein (2010). Organizational culture is foundational to
the ‘social order’ within the organization; it is “deep, wide, complex, and multidimensional” (p. 156), and it plays an important part in the way an organization functions. Organizational members are ‘indoctrinated’ into an organization’s culture, but members can also influence and create cultural elements (Driskill & Brenton, 2011). In this study, I think it is important for a principal to look for cultural elements of the school and seek to understand the meaning of these

Table 1.

Definitions and Elements of Organizational Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Cultural Elements</th>
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| Driskill, G. W., & Brenton, A. L. (2011). Organizational culture in action: A cultural analysis workbook (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. | “…culture consists of the webs of significance that we have spun for ourselves” (p. 4). Organizational members both create and are “indoctrinated into” the “language, artifacts, values, celebrations, heroes, history, and norms… [and] unique beliefs and assumptions” of the organization (p. 5). | • Artifacts  
• Assumptions  
• Beliefs  
• Celebrations  
• Communication style  
• Heroes, outlaws  
• History, place  
• Informal rules  
• Language  
• Metaphors  
• Norms  
• Rituals  
• Stories  
• Symbols  
• Values (p. 45) |
| Schein, E. H. (2004). Organizational culture and leadership (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. | …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 as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 17) | • Artifacts  
• Behavioral regularities  
• Celebrations, formal rituals  
• Climate  
• Embedded skills  
• Espoused values  
• Habits of thinking, mental models  
• Metaphors, symbols  
• Norms  
• Philosophy  
• Rules of the game  
• Shared meanings (pp. 12-13) |
elements to the school as an organization. Table 1 provides an overview of the Schein (2010) and Driskill and Brenton (2011) definitions of organizational culture and the cultural elements they identified in their work.

**Organizational Communication**

Organizational culture is everywhere within an organization, but it is built and maintained through the communications of the organization. Mumby (2007) described organizational communication as relational. He stated, “In simple terms, organizational communication scholars study the dynamic relationships between communication process and human organizing” (p. 3290). Modaff, Butler, and DeWine (2011) defined organizational communication “as a discipline [that] seeks to help people understand the central nature of communication in all aspects of organizational functioning” (p. 2). They further noted that “communication is central to the existence of the organization” (p. 3) and explained that the process of communication pulls the organization together and works to keep the organization moving in a cohesive direction. Communication can help build and maintain the culture of the organization, as communication can influence the “norms, values, and beliefs of organizational members” (p. 89).

Garicano and Wu (2012) looked at organizations, how they operate, and how they pass knowledge throughout the systems of the organization. Communication was a clear necessity in their research and played an important role in how the organizations functioned. They explained how communication “shapes the relationship between individual knowledge and governs the organizational process and structure” (p. 1395). They further explained how horizontal communication passes information in a way that allows for the division of labor, and
specialization, while vertical communication allows those in charge to leverage the talent in meaningful ways for the organization.

Research into the relationship between communication and organizational culture has shown a direct relationship between the two. The relationship between communication and the performance of an organization has also been studied, and the connection generally is thought to be particularly strong. Garnett, Marlowe, and Pandey (2008) examined communication, organizational culture, and performance, explaining that “…communication does influence performance, as evidenced by the culture-performance relationship. Communication mediates the relationship between mission-oriented culture and performance, and it moderates the relationship between rule-oriented culture and performance” (p. 278). Their research showed that organizations that are trying to reach a particular mission goal do much better with good communication, while those looking to only follow the rules are kept from failing by the effects of communication.

Recently, a new method of communication has come to the forefront across many sectors of society: online social networking. Korzynski (2014) explained how “effective organizational leadership…depend[s] upon efficient communication…online social networking is revolutionizing the way this occurs” (p. 460). He went on to explain how these new social networks allow leaders to interact with stakeholders more quickly and pass information along in new and different ways, but he noted that leaders “need to adopt a leadership style that is appropriate to the new working environment” (p. 472). While online social networking can be a great tool as a form of communication, each leader needs to ensure his/her leadership style encapsulates it in a meaningful way for the leader and for the followers.
Literature on organizational communication emphasizes the importance of communication in building and maintaining organizational culture, as communication can influence the “norms, values, and beliefs of organizational members” (Modaff, Butler, & DeWine, 2011, p. 89). Communication is a tool for leaders to get information out to and throughout the organization, and communication is also a tool for organizational members to get information to their leaders. In this study, I would expect that a principal coming to a school would use communication to gain understanding of the school’s cultural elements, but also to express the principal’s values, vision and goals for the school. I also think it is possible that school members will communicate their beliefs, values and goals to the principal, and the principal may be influenced by these communications.

**School Culture**

In looking at the parallels between organizational culture and school culture in their book, *Shaping School Culture* (2009), Deal and Peterson noted that an organization’s culture is “a shared webbing of informal folkways and traditions that infuse work with meaning, passion, and purpose” (p. 1). They further explained that the “symbolic fibers” of a school’s culture are important to understand and to “nourish” (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. 4). Without these fibers, the culture will grow weak and will often turn negative.

Similar to the concept of organizational culture, school culture has multiple definitions. Meier (2012) noted “an extensive body of literature had been developed in the area to define school culture and equally widespread are the definitions utilized in the field in an effort to describe it. Over 150 definitions for this term have been produced” (p. 805).

Prior to diving into discussion on school culture, it is important to note that school ‘culture’ is viewed as distinct from school ‘climate.’ Hoy (1990) indicated that “climate of an
organization may roughly be conceived of as the ‘personality’ of the organization” (p. 150), while culture refers “to the belief systems, values, and cognitive structure” (p. 151). This was more succinctly described by Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) as “culture is the school’s personality, climate is its attitude” (p. 11).

For this study I have chosen to look at ‘school culture’ rather than ‘school climate’ as the literature on organizational culture suggested that it is the deeper levels of ‘culture’ that are important for leaders to understand. Zhu, Devos, and Tondeur (2014) stated that “each school has a culture of its own, and understanding [its] features is helpful in making it a better school” (p. 557). Deal and Peterson (2009) defined a school’s culture as “the unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations” that form an “unofficial pattern” that “permeates everything” (p. 6). Deal and Peterson (1991) also noted that “school culture is created through the experience and interplay of many people” (p. 15).

The sources of a school’s culture are important to understand if one is looking to change that culture. Van Houtte (2005) noted three sources of school culture: the social environment, the internal structure, and the actions of the school leader (p. 81). School leaders “must attend to the trial and error, action and reaction through which the school's culture will evolve” (Deal & Peterson, 1991, p. 15).

A study by Marcoulides, Heck, and Papanastasiou (2005) looked at the perception of secondary school students about the culture of their school and its relation to their achievement. The authors found that “student beliefs and values about what types of courses students should take, student participation in the school’s educational program, students’ attitudes about learning,
student interactions with peers and teachers, and the school’s overall academic climate” (p. 141) all influence the way students viewed the culture of the school.

Changing a school’s culture requires “a place to create a sense of community; each student should be able to realize his or her potential; each teacher should feel fulfilled; each parent should experience joy in watching their child learn and grow” (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. 70). This may appear to be an idyllic path, but it is one many in education are hopeful to achieve.

The literature on school culture holds that each school has its own ‘culture’ comprised of a complex web of beliefs, values, rules, traditions, norms, and expectations that “permeates everything” (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. 6). We learn that a school’s culture evolves through the experiences and interactions of many people through “trial and error, action and reaction” (Deal & Peterson, 1991, p. 15). Morgan’s (2006) metaphor for organization as organism in an environment helps us think about how an organism grows in relationship to varied forces in its environment, variations of the species, and needs of the organism. Morgan’s metaphor stressed the importance of “organic forms of organization in the process of innovation” (p. 66). An organic view of school culture highlights the potential for unseen aspects and nuances of the culture that grow and change as the culture develops and that can affect the perceptions and actions of those within the culture. This, in turn, highlights the importance of a principal understanding the culture of a school, its elements, and the perceptions of the school’s cultural members, especially if a principal looks to change a school’s culture.

Table 2 provides an overview of the Barth (2002), Deal and Peterson (1990, 2009), and Kaplan and Owings (2013) definitions of school culture and the cultural elements they identified in their work.
Table 2.

**Definitions and Elements of School Culture**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Cultural Elements</th>
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| Barth, R. (2002). *The culture builder. Educational Leadership, 59*(8), 6-11. * | A school’s culture is “a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization” (p. 4). | • Attitudes  
• Behaviors  
• Beliefs  
• Ceremonies  
• Myths  
• Norms  
• Traditions  
• Values |
| Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. D. (1990). *The principal’s role in shaping school culture.* Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Education. | The concept of culture is meant to describe the character of a school as it reflects deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed over the course of its history. Beneath the conscious awareness of everyday life in any organization, there is a stream of thought, sentiment, and activity. This invisible, taken-for-granted flow of beliefs and assumptions gives meaning to what people say and do. It shapes how they interpret hundreds of daily transactions... Culture consists of the stable, underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behavior over time. (p. 7) | • Architecture  
• Artifacts  
• Assumptions  
• Beliefs  
• Ceremonies  
• Heroes and villains  
• Language  
• Lore and history  
• Traditions  
• Values (pp. 16-19) |
| Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. D. (2009). *Shaping school culture: Pitfalls, paradoxes, and promises* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/A Wiley Imprint. | …the unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations. The unofficial pattern [that] 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) | • Architecture  
• Artifacts, collections  
• Banners, mascots, school song  
• Communications  
• Displays of past achievements – awards, trophies, plaques, recognitions  
• Mission statement  
• Norms, expectations  
• Rules  
• School name  
• Stories  
• Symbols (pp. 34-43) |
| Kaplan, L. S., & Owings, W. A. (2013). *Culture re-boot: Reinvigorating school culture to improve student outcomes.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin/A SAGE Company. | School culture may be understood as a historically transmitted cognitive framework of shared but taken-for-granted assumptions, values, norms, and actions—stable, long-term beliefs and practices about what organization members think is important. School culture defines a school’s persona. These assumptions, unwritten rules, and unspoken beliefs shape how its members think and do their jobs. (p. 4) | • Assumptions  
• Beliefs  
• Decision making and problem-solving structures  
• Norms  
• Rules and policies  
• Social climate, rules of social interactions  
• Partnerships  
• Traditions and routines  
• Values (pp. 5-6) |
Leadership and School Culture

A school’s culture “provides the context in which the whole education process occurs” (Gruenert, 2000, p. 14). Looking at the concept of school culture, it is clear many people are involved in the creation and the maintenance of the overall culture of a school. While many people are involved, the principal, through his/her unique position in the school, has many duties and responsibilities which can directly influence the culture of a school.

Sarason (1982) explained that “the role of the principal may well be unique in the light it sheds both on the characteristics of the system and life in the classroom” (p. 140). A principal is both manager of the operational ‘system’ of a school and leader of the vision for the quality of the lived learning environment of a school. Davis (1921) noted that early in the creation of secondary schools, a principal’s duties included the need to “formulate a vision and a policy for the school over which he presides and to communicate this vision” (p. 350). This responsibility has maintained its importance for today’s principals. Ritchie (2013) described how a principal needs to develop the vision as “the single goal of creating and nourishing the best possible environment for teaching and learning” (p. 21).

A principal’s vision and the actions a principal takes to build and sustain that vision can have an impact on the ‘life’ of a school. Jones, Stall, and Yarbrough noted that “vision ‘sets the stage’ for many aspects in the school community particularly aligned to the [school] culture” (p.59). The vision is at the center of decision making. Jones et al. (2013) further posited that “the principal must create a culture and climate for change…the principal has the responsibility in the facilitating, communicating, and providing opportunity for growth” (p. 59). And, Fullan (2008) argued that a school principal directly affects a school’s culture, whether positively or negatively.
Principal’s Perception of School Culture

A principal’s perception of a school’s culture and climate is important. In this review the perception of culture is focused at a whole-school level. Pritchard, Marshall, and Morrow (2003) described how multiple cultures exist within an organization, but one can look at an overarching culture when viewing the organization. In this study, the focus is on a principal’s understanding of the overarching school culture, and it is acknowledged that subcultures within a school may be different from the overarching culture of the school. It is also acknowledged that it is important for a principal to be able to unpack the beliefs, values, expectations, and perceptions of those subcultures as it is possible that the principal and a subculture(s) are not on the same page regarding the vision of the school and how things work in that school.

Urick and Bowers (2011) looked at how principals’ perceptions of their individual influence over instruction can affect the school climate and culture. They found that principals have a significant effect on school climate and culture based on the perceptions that principals have of in their positional influence over instruction.

A principal’s perception of school culture is important in his/her understanding of how the school functions, and equally important to the culture of the school are the perceptions of other stakeholders, including teachers. Karadağ, Kilicoğlu, and Yılmaz (2014) described how “perceptions of primary school teachers affect school culture and academic achievement” (p. 105). They observed that that teachers’ cynicism influences the culture of a school as well as school achievement.

Communication

Principals have a unique position of authority in a school, and because of this position they have many people listening. As with organizational culture, communication plays a key
role in developing and sustaining a school’s culture. Shafer (2019) describes the importance of communication in building a strong school culture:

A culture will be strong or weak depending on the interactions between people in the organization. In a strong culture, there are many, overlapping, and cohesive interactions, so that knowledge about the organization’s distinctive character — and what it takes to thrive in it — is widely spread. (para. 5)

Furthermore, Shafer explains the importance of a leader’s communications with the members of the school’s culture. Shafer writes,

In a strong school culture, leaders communicate directly with teachers, administrators, counselors, and families, who also all communicate directly with each other…A culture is weaker when communications are limited and there are fewer connections. (para. 6-7)

Ramsey (2009) also acknowledged the importance of communication but further advocated that words have power:

When school leaders communicate effectively, students learn, parents and community members understand and support what the school is doing, and the process of teaching and learning moves forward. But when educators fail to communicate fully, misinformation, misinterpretations, misunderstanding, and mixed messages can cause the system’s wheels to spin or come off altogether. (p. 2)

A key responsibility of the school principal is instructional leadership. Lunenberg (2010) stressed the importance of the principal’s role in promoting learning and student success. He wrote:

The instructional leadership of the principal is a critical factor in the success of a school’s improvement initiatives and the overall effectiveness of the school. The primary
responsibility of the principal is to promote the learning and success of all students. (p. 5)

Promoting learning and student success requires communicating as an instructional leader. Stronge, Richard, and Catano (2008) stated,

Principals of high-achieving schools communicate to all stakeholders that learning is the school's most important mission (Cotton, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005)…Effective principals make student success pivotal to their work and, accordingly, pay attention to and communicate about instruction, curriculum, and student mastery of learning objectives, and are visible in the school” (p. 5, 8).

Jenkins (2009) further noted, “Effective instructional leaders need to be good communicators. They need to communicate essential beliefs regarding learning, such as the conviction that all children can learn” (p. 36). Communication of ‘essential beliefs’ contributes to shaping a school’s culture.

As Peterson (1989) noted, a principal’s instructional leadership can “have a substantial influence over the culture of the school, instructional and curricular processes, and student performance” (p. ii). The constant reinforcement of essential beliefs by the principal and consistent communication by the principal as instructional leader can affect student success. Communicating essential beliefs contributes to a principal’s efforts to influence a school’s culture.

Redding and Corbett (2018) acknowledged the importance of a school’s culture, particularly when a leader wants, or needs, to make changes to improve school outcomes. They noted, “A school’s culture is a powerful force that will work for or against improvement efforts…At any school, a positive environment of respect and trust is key to enabling the teamwork needed to solve problems and meet challenges” (p. 1). They further observed that
communication contributes to building strong community which is critical to maintaining a strong school culture with “common interests and shared values” and relationships “based on communication and association” (p. 21).

**Informal Interpersonal Influence**

Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor (2010) explained how “the clearest type of interpersonal influence is referent power – the influence that comes from members’ liking and respect for one another” (p. 415). A principal has many opportunities for interpersonal influence in day-to-day communications and interactions.

Peterson (1989) described how his studies “challenge the notion of secondary school principals as direct, intensive instructional leaders” (p. 5). He described how principals can influence the school in other, more indirect ways:

Principals may shape the culture and ethos of their schools through a variety of informal interactions on both instructional and non-instructional issues and that many of these small managerial tasks shape teaching and learning. For example, principals may communicate their vision of the school while they are taking care of maintenance problems, student discipline, or teacher conflicts. They may be assessing teachers while responding to heating problems or while praising teachers’ efforts during their short visits to classrooms. (p. 5)

Peterson’s (1989) recognition of the small, but consequential, interactions with stakeholders highlights the importance of the principal’s interactions with others in influencing a school’s culture. Informal interactions contribute to the principal’s interpersonal influence. Deal and Celotti (1980) also suggested that interpersonal influence was important, noting that “administrators may be able to accomplish much more as ‘colleagues’ or ‘symbolic leaders’ than
by working through inadequate formal channels” (p. 473). Informal interactions can have influence.

Influencing a school’s culture is possible. Van Houtte (2005) posited that “in order to alter culture, new ideas and beliefs have to be communicated to the members of the organization, who need to absorb them” (p. 81). However, Van Houtte further explained that “changing culture requires a ‘system approach’ (Maehr & Midgley, 1996, p. 126): all school participants – pupils, teachers, parents, etc. – need to be involved in it” (p. 81).

Empathy has a special place in interpersonal interactions and communication. Empathy also helps a leader develop ability to listen to followers. Holt, Marques, Hu, and Wood (2017) discussed how listening leads to empathy, helping the leader bond in a more meaningful way with their followers. “Empathy starts with the thoughts and feelings of others…this means being present – seeing and hearing what is going on. Effective listening, then, undoubtedly plays an important role in developing one’s sense of empathy” (p. 34).

Empathy enables one person to understand the thoughts and feelings of another, helping to build a relationship between the two. Cornelis, Van Hiel, De Cremer, and Mayer (2013) explained that “those high in empathy can and do take into consideration follower's needs and adapt their behavior accordingly” (p. 611). The ability to understand others’ needs, take them into consideration, and adapt behavior contribute to relationship building which contributes to building trust.

Trust

Hurley (2012) posited that people choose to trust someone and that they go through a decision-making process that is influenced by multiple factors. Among these factors are open and honest communication and benevolent concern, meaning serving others’ interests and taking
actions that demonstrate a genuine concern for others. Lee (2016) defined trust “as followers’ willingness to be vulnerable to the leader based on the followers’ perceptions of the leader’s ability, benevolence, and integrity” (p. 1795). How the leader acts and how followers perceive the actions of their leader contribute to followers’ trusting that they can be ‘vulnerable’ to that leader.

Slater (2008) noted that “principals employ various communication skills and strategies to build trusting relationships” (p. 67). Some of the skills noted include listening, verbal and non-verbal behavior, openness, and empathy. Also important to the development of trust is sincerity. Caza, Zhang, Wang, and Bai (2015) explained that for followers there is a “conscious, cognitive response to perceived emotional sincerity, in that leaders judged more sincere were also judged more trustworthy” (p. 528).

Developing trust is important because it has been shown to affect the performance of individuals within an organization. Ugwu, Enwereuzor, and Orji (2016) noted that “trust in leadership was significantly associated with job performance” (p. 634).

More specifically related to school leadership, Seashore Louis, Dretzke, and Wahlstrom (2010) analyzed survey responses from a national sample of U. S. teachers. One of the variables they were looking at was the development of trust relationships among professionals. They found that leadership was positively related to student learning. They particularly noted that “student math achievement scores are significantly associated with focused instruction, professional community and teachers’ trust in the principal” (p. 323).

We learn from the literature on leadership and school culture that a principal’s influence within the school begins with the principal’s unique position in the school. From this position, principals can influence the culture of a school through formal or informal interactions and
communications. Through these interactions and communications, the principal builds interpersonal influence and referential capacity with members of the school’s culture.

The influence of the principal is linked with the trust members of the school culture have in the principal. When school members decide to trust in the principal, they allow themselves to be vulnerable. Trust has been shown to improve the performance of employees and even improve the performance of students, again, highlighting its importance for the principal. Gaining trust is a long, dedicated process, requiring the principal to be open and consistent in the way he/she communicates and interacts with members of the school’s culture. Through listening, openness, empathy, and sincerity, the principal can develop trust.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the literature search strategy and the anthropological roots of the concept of culture. Three areas of relevant literature were presented: organizational culture, school culture, and leadership and school culture. Within organizational culture, organizational communication was discussed as a key contributor to the development and sustaining of an organization’s culture. Within leadership and school culture, the principal’s perception of culture, communication, informal interpersonal influence, and trust were discussed as key contributors to the principal’s relationship with a school’s culture. Chapter 3 will describe the methods to be used to conduct the study.
CHAPTER THREE:

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of a secondary school principal in a school district in Central Florida, in an effort to understand how the principal came to know and understand the culture of the school and the principal’s perceptions of the effect of the school’s culture on the principal’s leadership of the school. This chapter describes the research design, underlying research paradigm, the setting and participant, data sources and collection methods, and approaches to data analysis. The chapter concludes with criteria for trustworthiness, limitations of the study, and researcher reflexivity.

Research Design

I used a qualitative research design. Stake (1995) described several defining characteristics of qualitative research. He noted that it is (a) “holistic” with its “contextuality…well developed”; (b) “it is case oriented” with “a bounded system”; (c) “it resists reductionism and elementalism; and (d) “it is relatively non comparative, seeking to understand its object more than to understand how it differs from others” (p. 47). In this study, I wanted to understand the perceptions and experiences of one secondary school principal in one school district. I was not seeking to compare this principal’s experiences with the experiences of any other principal.

Patton (2015) explained, “Qualitative inquiry documents the stuff that happens among real people in the real world in their own words” (p. 12). Looking at a context, event or situation
through a person’s own words helps the researcher to better understand the context, event or situation and what is meaningful to the individual. To understand what is meaningful to an individual, we need to speak with the person, hear the story that is told, and listen closely to the details of the narrative that unfolds. In this study, I wanted to uncover and convey “a detailed and rich story” (Patton, 2015, p. 259) of a principal’s experiences in coming to understand the culture of a school and perceptions of its effects on the principal’s leadership.

**Narrative Inquiry**

More particularly, I used narrative inquiry to frame the study. Grbich (2013) described narrative inquiry as allowing the researcher to “[focus] on stories told by participants” (p. 216). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) further explained the “characteristics” of narrative inquiry as “a way of understanding experience…a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place…and in social interaction with milieus” (p. 20). Narrative inquiry emphasized the importance of the participant’s story as it can provide context and details of the participant’s experiences and perceptions. Interviews were a way of exploring the participant’s story.

Narrative inquiry provided a framework for me to listen to my participant, Ms. Gabrielle Watkins. I asked semi-structured questions and listened to her responses. I went back to discuss her responses with her over a series of weeks; this helped me to gain a deeper understanding of her experiences and the stories she was telling me. This in turn helped me to better grasp her understanding of the elements of culture in her school. She had a wonderful ability to self-reflect and to verbalize past situations. This gave me examples to pursue with her to help me understand how she saw the elements of culture at WHS, what she understood about them, and how her decision-making and leadership were influenced.
**Participant**

In an effort to gain the greatest depth of knowledge of a set of experiences, I gathered the narrative of one specific participant, Ms. Watkins (pseudonym), the principal of a public high school in central Florida. Preference was given to this individual because of her depth of knowledge of the school in which she works and leads. Also, I work in the same district; our shared knowledge of the district context helped in my understanding of many events and experiences in her school. I have a professional rapport with Ms. Watkins which also helped to facilitate access to her, and her time, which was essential in gathering information to conduct this research.

Ms. Watkins is the principal of Winterbeach High School (WHS), a pseudonym, and has been at the school as principal for more than ten years. Prior to her time at WHS, she had a good amount of experience as a principal in other schools. In her time at WHS, she has developed her leadership team. Her Assistant Principal for Curriculum (APC) and Assistant Principal for Administration (APA) have come up through the ranks of WHS and have been working with her for some time.

**IRB Approval**

All data were collected under District and University IRB approval. Prior to conducting interviews, signed informed consent was collected from the participant, following University IRB guidelines. Interviews were recorded, with participant permission, using multiple devices, and lasting approximately 60 minutes each. Recordings were transcribed.

A signed physical copy of the informed consent as well as other physical data that were not the property of the participant were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the USF College of Education. Recordings and transcriptions were stored digitally in a Box.com folder per IRB
guidelines. After completion of the study, digital and physical data will be retained for 5 years and then permanently deleted from the Box.com folder or shredded and disposed of properly.

**Setting**

Winterbeach High School (WHS) is located in the center of a city, drawing most of its students from within the city limits, or areas close to the city. It is over 100 years old and is named for its home city. The student population is approximately 2,200 students, with a demographic distribution of 43% White, 32% Black, 20% Hispanic/Latino, and 1% Asian, based on the most current academic year.

Academically, WHS has been listed by the Florida Department of Education as a C school for the last several years. The school has a 79% graduation rate and its 6% dropout rate. WHS also includes several academies that are designed as schools-within-a-school to help students connect more with the school and with a cohesive cohort.

I chose Winterbeach as the setting for this study for several reasons. Personally, I have a professional rapport with Ms. Watkins that has developed over several years. Our schools are in close proximity, and I have attended several meetings at WHS where we were both in attendance. Our conversations helped me to grow in understanding about her leadership and helped her to get to know me as a person and researcher. Also, I know several of the teachers working at WHS. For a variety of reasons each of them transferred from where we were working together to WHS, and we still maintained a good relationship after they moved to WHS. At the same time, one of the administrators at WHS used to be an administrator where I was working. On top of all of this, one of my children is now attending WHS. All of this helped when I asked Ms. Watkins to participate in the research, and it gave me a basis for understanding WHS when she was telling her stories about the school and the district.
Data Sources

Interviews

Speaking directly to people allows the researcher to gather information about a particular phenomenon from individuals who have lived with or through the phenomenon being studied. Interviews with Ms. Watkins helped to illuminate what she saw in elements of school culture in her school, how she came to know the cultural elements, and how she perceived the cultural elements affecting her leadership. Stake (1995) noted that “each interviewee is expected to have had unique experiences” (p. 65), which helps to convey a unique story and context.

I conducted three semi-structured interviews with Ms. Watkins. A semi-structured interview focuses on specific questions through a conversational style. In a semi-structured interview, the participant responds to specific questions, and the interviewer can add probes specific to the conversation. This helped to provide some structure to the narrative and helped with inviting explanation, clarification, and depth of description the participant may wish to impart. A semi-structured interview is “often the best way for learning about the motivations behind people’s choices and behaviour, their attitudes and beliefs, and the impacts on their lives of specific policies or events” (Raworth, Magrath, & Walsh, 2019, p. 1). Semi-structured interviews are used when the researcher wants to delve deeply into a topic and to understand thoroughly the information provided. Using a semi-structured interview format helps a researcher to avoid missing issues which could play a key role in the research (Stake, 1995, p. 64).

Along similar lines, Rubin and Rubin (2005) explained, “Qualitative interviews are more focused, more in-depth, and more detailed than ordinary conversations” (p. 108). The authors explained that it is important for the interviewer to maintain continuity, clarify meaning, and ask
for the narrative story. Their explanation of setting up the interview, getting down into the depth of the subject, and follow-up helped to guide this stage of my research.

The interviews focused on elements of school culture previously delineated in Table 2. Framing questions around these elements helped focus the conversation around what elements of WHS’s school culture were, where they were found, and how Ms. Watkins came to understand these elements and perceived their influence on her leadership.

Interviews were transcribed and shared with Ms. Watkins to enable member checking for accuracy and clarity and to provide opportunity for further comment/clarification. The first interview helped to establish a good rapport with Gabrielle and a general understanding of elements she described as part of the school’s culture. The third interview had her reflecting on her leadership and how her understanding of the school’s cultural elements affected decisions she made.

**School walk.** The second interview as a school walk. A school walk gave Ms. Watkins opportunity to show where elements of her school’s culture were observable. The school walk was a variation of a “Go-Along” interview. Carpiano (2009) noted that go-along interviews help the participant to show and add depth to a story. He described the go-along as “a form of in-depth qualitative interview method that… is conducted by researchers accompanying individual informants on outings in their familiar environments” (p. 264). He indicated that through the use of this technique, the interviewer is able to “examine the informant’s experiences, interpretations, and practices within this environment” (p. 264). Exploring the space with the participant helps the interviewer to ‘see’ the context of the situations and stories the participant may choose to share. de la Croix, Barrett, and Stensfors (2018) further noted, “Walking interviews can be used to gather richer data on the respondents’ context” (p. 453). The semi-
structured interview format lends itself to a go-along interview (Carpiano, 2009); it helps to structure conversation during the walk.

To prepare Ms. Watkins for the walk, I sent her the questions and prompts I intended to ask and asked her to think about the path or paths she wanted to take and the things she wanted to show me along the way – things that she felt represented elements of the culture of the school or that helped her to better understand the culture of the school.

When I arrived at the school on the day of the walk, we went over any questions she had, or lingering thoughts from our first interview, and then we began the walk of the campus. Ms. Watkins was in control of our walk; she selected the direction(s) we took, the places we stopped, the things she pointed out as important or meaningful to her or the school. I audio recorded our conversation, and I also took notes of the things she pointed out and the stories she told about them.

Also during the walk, I occasionally took photographs of places or things that Ms. Watkins pointed out as important. She pointed out several buildings, and the names on several buildings, as well as many smaller artifacts that had historical significance to the school and were important to her. The photographs helped me recall our conversation and provide details in my descriptions of what I saw and heard. Going through the photographs also helped with my recollection of the direction my walk took with her because they were chronologically stored and created a virtual roadmap of the campus tour we took. Initially, I had planned to include pictures of the school in this research, but with an abundance of caution decided not to print them in this research. Each of the pictures is clear, and all are fairly unique to WHS, which could have potentially taken away from the anonymity I was looking to give to the school in this project.
**Documents and artifacts.** Ms. Watkins occasionally would identify documents or artifacts in her descriptions of the school, either on the school walk or in our conversations. For example, a weekly newsletter to the students, a yearbook, photos, even the school website. As a part of qualitative research, documents can be useful. Merriam (1988) pointed out, “Documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem” (p. 118). Documents and artifacts provided information about the context of her narratives and can also suggested additional questions for our interviews.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection and analysis were conducted in three major steps: planning, data collection, and data analysis.

**Planning**

Planning for the research included creation of questions for the semi-structured interviews, working with my committee on refining the questions, and transmitting the questions to the principal prior to the interviews. Also, I coordinated with the principal to schedule interviews, ensuring a comfortable time and place to allow for deeper conversation and sharing of information. Finally, I ensured all material assets needed for the interviews, e.g., recorder, notes, etc., were in place for the interviews to be conducted.

**Data Collection**

Meeting with the principal to do the interviews occurred over several weeks. I anticipated the interviews would take place in the principal’s school at times convenient to her schedule. Communication through phone and email helped to establish a good connection and
also informed the research at varying points. The school walk was conducted at WHS and was
done in a way to cause as little disruption as possible to the day-to-day activities on campus.

Interview questions, included in the appendices, were sent to Ms. Watkins approximately
one week prior to an interview. The interview was conducted and recorded, transcripts of the
interviews were created, and then transcripts were shared with Ms. Watkins to validate the
transcription. Once this has been completed, the next set of questions were sent to help Ms.
Watkins prepare for the following interview.

Interview #1 started with the principal clarifying her understanding of what the elements
of school culture were. Once we discussed her understanding of what these elements were and
what they meant, I asked her for her description of how she saw the elements of culture showing
themselves in her school. Giving her enough time to relate this information was important, and I
kept notes to back up recordings, and recordings were transcribed.

Interview #2 focused specifically on where she saw evidence of the elements of culture in
her school. Conducting a school walk allowed Ms. Watkins to show me where she saw the
elements of culture and to explain her understanding of the importance of these elements.
Showing physical artifacts, or places associated with elements of culture, gave more depth to the
story Ms. Watkins was telling about the elements of culture within her school.

Interview #3 honed in on how the principal came to understand the elements of culture
within her school. Questioning in this interview was directed toward Ms. Watkins’ memory of
her initial contact with the elements or, possibly more importantly, when she realized the
elements had importance. From here the discussion focused on Ms. Watkins’ descriptions of
how she felt these elements of culture had impacted her leadership whether through her style of
leadership, for example, or her decision making. This required the principal to do more
introspection about her leadership and the way the school may, or may not, have influenced her leadership, leadership style, and/or decision making. This interview required me to listen carefully for probes needed to extend explanation or seek clarification.

**Data Analysis**

Following the interviews, each was transcribed, organized, and first-level coded. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) explained coding as “heuristic – a method of discovery” (p. 73). Punch (2014) described first and second level coding in this way:

First level coding mainly uses these descriptive, low inference codes, which are very useful in summarising segments of data and which provide the basis for later higher order coding. Later codes may be more interpretive, requiring some degree of inference beyond the data. Thus second level coding tends to focus on pattern codes. A pattern code is more inferential, a sort of “meta-code.” Pattern codes pull together material into a smaller number of more meaningful units... a pattern code is a more abstract concept that brings together less abstract, more descriptive codes. (p. 174)

Initially, in the analysis, I read and re-read each interview transcript to help reacquaint myself with the interviews, and then began the coding of the data. The first phase of coding was more operational, initial coding of text/examples of ideas in the transcriptions (see Appendix D: Sample Coding). As Rubin and Rubin (2005) explained, in phase one “you prepare transcripts; find, refine, and elaborate concepts, themes, and events; and then code the interviews to be able to retrieve what the interviewees have said about the identified concepts, themes, and events” (p. 201). In phase two, I looked more deeply into the codes, looking for themes that grouped the coded text/examples.
Phase two also relied on comparing concepts across the coding, identifying themes that pulled codes together in more meaningful groups, looking at the bigger picture, and formulating a description of the data. In phase two, I looked at how the data related to the cultural elements in Table 2 and to my research questions, attempting to pull the data together to help answer these questions. Creswell (2005) noted that “data analysis that is inductive…establishes patterns or themes” (p. 37). Through the lists of notes and codes, patterns began to emerge. Understanding that school culture is based in artifacts, values, and assumptions, I was able to pull themes together that seemed to encapsulate aspects of these three ideas.

“Family atmosphere,” pulls together values of both Ms. Watkins as a person, and what she is hoping will come from the teachers and students of the school. This is related to one of her personal values, and what she hopes is an assumption of the teachers and students at WHS. Because of the relation to values, and to assumptions, it seems an easy connection to the culture at WHS.

“History” at WHS was apparent across the campus. From the entrance of the school to the way names are painted on the baseball field at the back of the campus, there are reminders of the history of the school everywhere. This theme clearly connected through the seemingly endless number of artifacts, but also through the value that is placed on knowing and understanding the history of the school. A great deal of importance is placed on history by Ms. Watkins, but also by the alumni and visitors to the school.

“Renovation” emerged through the frequency of the stories that Ms. Watkins related back to it. WHS has a long, storied history, moving three times to end up where it is today. While this renovation did not physically move the school, it was almost as if the school were moved because so much of the structure of the campus was razed and rebuilt. As many of her stories
related back to this time, it seemed a very significant point in Ms. Watkins’s tenure at the school. Its relation to culture comes through the new buildings as artifacts, but also the artifacts that were maintained from prior to the renovation. While there is value that is placed on the newness of the structures and how they reflect the school and the city, it is still clear that the history of the school was important in the renovation.

“Discipline” emerged in conversation with some frequency, and it was important in Ms. Watkins’ view of the school. While many people in K-12 education see discipline only as a punitive measure, a consequence for some action that violates a rule or policy, Ms. Watkins sees it also as self-control, the way people are disciplined when they wake up and brush their teeth each morning. In her eyes, discipline helps make the school run better; if her students are doing a good job of being polite, acting like a family, and generally getting along, they are disciplined, and there is not as much need for consequence. At the same time, she understands that when there was a lot of fighting at the school, it affected the way people viewed the reputation of the school. One of her values is to have the school reflect the community, and she did not believe the community wanted to be represented by fighting. This value attachment, and the assumption that the community wanted a better reputation, also ties to her view of the culture of the school.

As I did three interviews, I started, and restarted, each of these phases after each interview to help refine questions for the next interview.

Limitations

Within this study there are three primary limitations which must be acknowledged. First, I have knowledge of the school and the participant. Second, the quality of the interviews depends not only on my ability to ask the right questions but also on the ability of the principal interviewed to convey useful information based largely on recollection over time. Third, the
principal may have been unable or unwilling to share some specific details about the school’s culture and the effects of the culture on her leadership.

**Researcher Reflexivity**

Both the study participants and researcher affect the research process (Patton, 2015). Reflexivity provides opportunities for me to understand how my positionality and worldview affect the research process (Morrow, 2005). In this study, I interviewed a principal with considerable experience, and I am a teacher in the school district. My goal was to build a relationship with the principal that would help to foster a good exchange of information.

Furthermore, reflexivity also requires me to critique my positionality, lived experiences, beliefs, biases, privileges, and oppressions, which impacts the collection, analysis, and reporting of data (Patton, 2015). I engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process to understand and critique my conduct of the research and my perceptions and reactions to the information that the principal was providing during our interviews, the decisions I made in conducting the research, and my thoughts and ideas as I analyzed my data. I made notes in a research journal throughout the study.

**Trustworthiness**

Creswell (2014) outlined several strategies that can be used to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Using data from multiple sources contributes to *triangulation*. Data for this study came from multiple interviews, documents provided by the participant, and my observations and notes in my research journal following each interview. The use of multiple data sources provided opportunity for me to confirm where I saw similar ideas and themes across multiple sources. *Member checking* enabled confirmation by the participant of the accuracy of the content of the interview transcripts as well as the ‘fit’ or ‘truth’ of the ideas and themes
identified to represent the narratives she provided. Member checking is important to confirm accuracy and decrease the chance of misrepresentation (Creswell & Miller, 2010). Both of these strategies, triangulation and member checking, enabled me to add depth and ‘richness’ of detail to my description and interpretation of the principal’s perceptions and perspectives.

As I am familiar with the participant and the school and district where the study was situated, my reflexivity in my research journal was important for acknowledging any biases I brought to the study, as well as my assumptions and reactions to perceptions and perspectives expressed in the interviews.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter described the research design, the participant and setting, data sources, and data collection and analysis procedures. Limitations were identified, and researcher reflexivity and trustworthiness criteria were discussed.
CHAPTER FOUR:
A WALK WITH THE PRINCIPAL

Jittery, excited, nervous, and just plain antsy, I wasn’t entirely certain how this walk with Ms. Gabrielle Watkins, the principal of Winterbeach High School (WHS) would go. Needless to say, I had everything I thought I was going to need on the passenger seat next to me as I pulled into a visitor’s parking space at the front of the school. I pulled out my phone and called Gabrielle’s office number to let her know I was there. Grabbing my things off the seat, I climbed out of the car to head to the front door of the school.

The first thing I noticed when I climbed out of the car was the weather; warm and dry are fairly common this time of year for central Florida, but the overcast skies were definitively atypical. My hope was that it would bring rain, the amount of pollen in the air was exceptionally high, my allergies were killing me, and I was looking forward to seeing horizontal spaces not covered in a greenish-yellow coating. At the same time, I did not want the rain too soon; I was really looking forward to the tour of the school with Gabrielle.

As I approached the front doors of the school, I looked down at the seal of the school that Gabrielle had described in detail during our last conversation. The bronze wildcat is situated in a circle, surrounded by the Latin motto of the school, and in my mind, I’m imagining one of the underclassmen polishing it with a toothbrush. Over to my right, I see the dark granite war memorial hanging near the front door. Two feet by three feet, it is not gigantic, but big enough
to carry the weight of the names etched alphabetically onto it. Definitely it is in a prominent spot, but I wonder how many people actually realize why it is here.

Looking back to the front door, I read the sign asking all visitors to call the school to set up an appointment for entry, one of the effects of the stay-at-home order issued to help with the COVID-19 pandemic that was quickly spreading across the world. Waiting patiently for Gabrielle to arrive, I noticed the front walk-way, the doors, and even the building itself were cleaner than when I had come here only a few weeks ago, silver-linings of not having students on campus. Custodians had an opportunity to clean without the daily disruption of 2,600 students.

“Good morning!” Gabrielle smiled warmly as she opened the door welcoming me into her school. “How are you doing today?” I replied I was well and made a small joke about the pollen in the air and my allergies. She chuckled and led me through the large, open front office, down a wide-open hallway to her office in the back corner of the new building. While the building is several years old now, the hallways are still immaculately clean, and the paint seems to still be fresh, an oddity in a high school in this part of the world.

We entered her office, long enough for her to grab a radio and her keys. Her office is an unassuming office, big enough to have several people in it, but comfortable, and not so large that it is overwhelming. The walls are decorated with pictures of past students, articles about the school, and an occasional printed flyer about something going on at WHS. This is where we sat for the first interview, and where we will again sit when we do the third which makes it a place I’ll remember for a long time because of her graciousness is letting me speak with her.

Almost as quickly as we enter, Gabrielle motioned for us to head out into the campus. Down the next hallway, she pointed to a large bulletin board with dozens of pictures of high school students, many in their tuxedos or sports uniforms emblazoned with Wildcat logos.
“Anyway, I was going to show you this. This is a lot of our past graduates, and the article” (a copy of a newspaper article hung next to the bulletin board) “is on Tad Michaels.” Tad is a fairly recent graduate of WHS who is now playing professional baseball, and whose family is well known in the city of Winterbeach. He graduated a few years ago, went to a well-known college out of state, and then made the major league. He comes back to campus occasionally to speak with the students and cheer on the baseball team.

Motioning to another sign hanging close to the bulletin board, Gabrielle continues, “And then that’s the picture we got, I thought it was perfect for the kids.” The sign is hanging on the next wall, right inside the back entrance to the main building where students typically enter if they are coming into the building from the campus. She looked at it, and smiled as she read, “In this home we do second chances, we do grace, we do real, we do I'm sorry’s, we do hugs, we do family, we do love.” I could see in her how much she resonated with this sign, its meaning really was a part of her. From our conversations up to this point, it is clear that her “family atmosphere” is extremely important to her and touches like this show she professes it to anyone who is willing to listen.

As she finished, Rachel Dash approached, “What did you need from building six? I’m walking over there.” Rachel is the Assistant Principal of Curriculum (APC) at WHS, and someone I used to work with. Gabrielle turned to her, “I need one more laptop, I have five kids that need their laptops changed out today.”

“Allright, so just one more?” Rachel asked.

“I only had five that sent me text on Remind for them.”

Rachel replied that one lady had already picked up another computer to be changed out. “She dropped it off in the box, so it can sit for seven days. We’ll put ‘Do not touch, do not
touch’. ” She shook her finger in the air, accentuating the point. Everyone laughed, and she headed out.

“ I’m sorry,” Gabrielle said, genuinely apologizing for the interruption of our campus tour. Kids are Gabrielle’s priority. During this time of COVID-19, her ensuring the kids have working laptops is high on her priority list, and this chasing after more computers is a typical exercise in her day. Gabrielle and Rachel both work hard for the kids, and they sincerely want to do what’s best for them and their education.

As we passed another bulletin board of alumni, she stopped. “ But anyway, this is some of our famous alumni. A lot of them anyway, which we could have a lot, a lot more. But these are some of the people that stand out, at least during my time here. My first Harvard kid, John Sandy, the famous singer I think I told you about. The story behind the fact that they flew him in to do a concert, he was really famous at that time, and it built the home side of the stadium.” She is excited about showing me the people on the wall, and there is no mistaking her sincerity.

There are a lot of pictures of students in the building; many of the walls are adorned with groups of pictures, held together in large frames, or stapled onto bulletin boards. They clearly show the kids they are a part of the school; for Gabrielle this helps with building the culture of WHS.

Continuing across the faces she stops at one, explaining how he is the CEO of one of the major resorts in Florida, and right next to him is the CEO of a company that does sound and effects in movies, one of the larger companies that gets their logo just before the movies begin at the theaters. “And here are the Mortons,” she gestures toward an older couple on the board. “They both graduated from Winterbeach.” She goes on to explain how the Mortons were also graduated from a larger public university in the state, how they have been fortunate in their business.
That success in business, and their philanthropy, have helped WHS too. “That’s because of them, they will pay for a Morton scholarship every year. They choose a Winterbeach High School student for four years of college if they’re majoring in business and go to their alma mater. And they’ve done that every year that I’ve been here, so at least I know since 2005.” While many of the students at WHS choose to stay in the area and attend a smaller college, this scholarship to help students go to a larger university also helps to add to the assumption that students can have academic success. Each piece, each element of the school culture helps to reinforce the larger culture of the school. A scholarship like this is definitely an important element. Doing some quick math in my head, I calculate that the scholarship has been a lot of money to donate for that period of time.

Pointing to another picture, Gabrielle continues, “And of course, Owen Ball. Our first NBA player to make one million dollars.” Her smile extends, “Yeah, our person.” It is not hard to notice that she takes pride in the past accomplishments of the school, and really wants to highlight it to anyone that comes into the school. “Most of the historical stuff, you know, mostly we keep in the office. I’ll show you that when we get back up there.” I am thinking that the way Gabrielle describes each of these graduates clearly shows her belief in the family atmosphere she works so hard for at WHS. We exit the building through the large double-door and move into the recently renovated campus.

WBS underwent a major renovation early on in Gabrielle’s tenure as principal. Calling the effort a renovation may be a bit of an understatement though, most of the buildings on the campus were razed, and new ones were constructed on top of where the old ones once stood. For a school that has existed in three locations over its history, this was almost as significant as any of the moves the school underwent. Anyone coming back to campus since the renovation would
not recognize most of the school, and the few buildings that were not razed were larger, and still underwent major renovation on the inside, gutting most of them to bring them into the twenty-first century. Gabrielle makes a point of showing the effect the renovation has had and the many changes to the campus created by it.

We exit the main office building and head to the right; Gabrielle points out the next building. “This building’s one of the original buildings, the auditorium.” The building is large and has a curved roof, making it distinct among the rest of the buildings with their new metallic roofs. The brick exterior is similar to the other buildings, but it is clear the brick here is much older. “It used to be the gymnasium. It’s amazing, I remember when we re-built the school.” She was referring to the renovation. “I remember how all of these men had this big ceremony, and all this Masonries came and put this thing on the side of the auditorium, I’ll show it to you.”

Turning the corner of the building, the granite slab on the side of the building is noticeable, clearly marking the date of its installation during this past renovation of the school. It is probably three feet square and has the masonic compass and square in the middle. This corridor has students pass every day during the school year, and I wonder how many of them see the slab, or understand the meaning, or its significance to the men that put it there. An artifact like this can have a positive meaning to those who put it up, and it can help to build the culture from their standpoint. At the same time, symbols of groups that are selective in their choice of members, and have a fairly homogenous membership, may not elicit a positive response from everyone passing them.

WHS underwent this recent renovation because most of the buildings at this location were built in the 1950s, when the school was moved from its previous location up the street. Being that the campus is essentially land-locked, with no room for expansion, the renovation saw
most of the older, smaller, cramped buildings razed and new ones built where they stood. It was a major capital investment by the school district, and several years of disruption for the school. Because of it though, most of the buildings at WHS now are new, bright, and open when walking through them. The walkways are large enough for the growing population of the school to easily pass through and welcoming to visitors of the campus.

Moving past the auditorium, Gabrielle points to the back corner of the campus, “You know in the very back we had the foreign language building, named for Grace Adams. So, when I moved the foreign language teachers to building one after the renovation, we renamed this building for Grace Adams.” She points to the building that used to be the administrative building on campus, not too far from the auditorium. I nod, as we walk further into the campus. It is amazing to me that even with building so new, there is so much history here.

Approaching the next building, one of the older buildings on campus. She says to me, “Then we have, of course, this building, building six. We keep all of our computers, computer labs, and everything else.” I look at her, “The joy of technology, right?” She laughs and nods, motioning toward building six, one of the other buildings that was not razed during the renovation. The brick here, like the auditorium, is older and more worn, but this building received a newer roof, matching it with the newer buildings.

“It’s called the Robin Ward building, I understand she was an English teacher, and I think it’s on the front side of the building, but if you were to tell the kids to go to the Robin Ward building, they’d ask, ‘where are you talking about?’ If you tell them building six, they get it. Just like the Warren building, they don’t call it the Warren building, even though her name is on it.” She shakes her head a bit, “Easier to say the Warren building, might help the kids to be able to better tell the difference between building 35 and 36.” My curiosity is piqued, “I think it’s
fascinating the ways the buildings are named. Why was it so important for you to keep the names?”

Gabrielle pauses for a second, a habit she has when answering deeper questions, “Well this one has always been the Robin Ward building. I think for the Adams building, I think the Adams had a lot of their grandkids going to school here during the time, that time right before all of the construction started, and they were all very, very supportive of the school.” I looked over at the building and asked her, “The Adams building used to be the administration building, correct?” Nodding, she replies that it used to be and suggests I get a picture of the name on the side of the building. Several times during the walk she’ll recommend I get pictures of the names on the buildings. I think she wants me to understand the history of the school and how the names on the buildings connect the school to the community through the history of the school. History continues to come up in our walk; to Gabrielle is an important part of the culture of her school.

Heading past the Adams building she tells me, “We’ll come back this way. Is it going to rain today?” My response is that I’d be thrilled, if only for my allergies, and she quickly agrees, “I know what you mean, by the end of the day I’ve got a sore throat from breathing it in all day.” Our walk is brisk, but comfortable, and I appreciate the fact that Gabrielle has such a positive demeanor whenever we speak. Her perspective is infectious, seeming to spread to those around her and to those she works with.

I’ve met several people who work for Gabrielle, and frequently they mention how she is a genuinely positive person. They mention how she is a “straight shooter,” someone who is grounded, and has a down to Earth attitude. I’ve also know a few people who have left other schools to work for Gabrielle; each has mentioned how one of the biggest reasons they left their
previous schools to work at WHS was the way Gabrielle views her school, its students, and her staff.

Reaching the last building at the southern end of campus, it is clear that it is one of the older buildings. The utilitarian, wide, box-like structure is clearly a gymnasium. The paint is newer, and the brick has been cleaned, but it is obvious this is a structure from another time. With its covered walkways heading to the three sets of double doors, the gym has a presence on this corner of campus. A single drive with parking is in front of it, but there is not much parking space, and I wonder where spectators and fans park when they come to watch any of the teams play.

Gabrielle looks up at the gym noting the name. “There it is at the top, Jim Davis Stadium. I’ll take you in the lobby. Yeah, actually Jim Davis and my dad were friends. I remember we had a big type of reunion thing and Jim Davis and Ball were here. The girls’ basketball team was here, and they’re always kinda phenomenal, but they got here, running, they wanted to see Ball. Well, Ball had already left, so I said to them, ‘I’m sorry, he’s already gone. You haven’t missed Jim Davis, the guy the gym is named after. He’s here.’ They went running up to see him, which made him happy, and they were all thrilled.”

Again, I can see that family atmosphere and history are clearly important to Gabrielle. Her history with her father and the connections to past alumni helped to build these elements of the WHS culture. Showing the kids the history, and helping them to see the past alumni, is one way that Gabrielle helps maintain and build the culture at WHS. She is purposeful with it, but she does it in a manner that is so effortless—you’d wonder if it was just hard-wired into her.

Once we arrived into the lobby, Gabrielle points to a pair of jerseys mounted to the wall. One is another famous basketball player, and the other is a former football player for WHS who
ended up paralyzed due to an injury sustained during a game. These jerseys highlight the history and family atmosphere of WHS in an area that gets a lot of visitors and spectators. Opening the door to the gym, the wail of an emergency siren pierces the air. “We can look in here.”

Walking into the gym is much like walking into any other high school gym, well any high school gym with emergency sirens blaring. Several basketball hoops are pulled up to the ceiling, and the bleachers are pushed up to the walls, leaving a vast, open space in the middle, where the main basketball court resides. The Wildcat logo is clear in the middle, and all sorts of lines are marked out across the floor for the various sports that use the space.

Looking around, it is clear to see that this is the home of Winterbeach High School. One end of the basketball court has Winterbeach in huge letters painted onto the wall, while the other has Wildcats emblazoned on it. Across the rafters are banners for past championships, interspersed with banners of companies supporting the school. Above the closed bleachers, pushed tight against the wall, are a series of banners, but one is much larger than the others.

“This is something we did to kind of motivate the kids.” She reads the larger banner, “Wildcats believe. We can. We will.” Seeing the large print, and the school’s logo there really makes it stand out, even among all of the other banners and signs painted in this hall. “Yeah, actually the student council had come up with that one time. They hung a big banner with it up there for homecoming. After the dance, we liked it so much, I told them to keep it up there. Their banner was up for a couple of years, but the paper sign started breaking down, so we decided to do it more permanently, and so we went with this.” It is clear that this sign, and its meaning, carry a lot of weight for Gabrielle and her school. One more artifact that helps her to build the culture, one more that she uses with the kids to help them understand what she is trying to develop at WHS.
I take a few pictures of the gym, making certain to grab one of the banner, and we head out. She directs us in a new direction into the campus, and as we approach a door I exclaim, “Part of me feels like I should be dragging Lysol wipes and hitting all of the doors as we move through them.” During this unusual time, where hand sanitizer is not so much a commodity as it is a rarity, I worry that I am imposing on Gabrielle. Taking an hour out of her day in the middle of this early stage of the pandemic is wonderful for me, but I know she has so much to do to run this school right now. I feel a small pang of guilt touching the door, knowing someone coming behind me will have to spend more time cleaning.

I reiterate to her my thanks, “Thank you for doing this with me.” She responds, “Not a problem, not a problem. I know it’s important to get everything. Have you seen this building, well now that it is no longer the office?” She is referring to the Adams building, one of the older buildings on campus, the former main office building. I shake my head and tell her no, to which she replies, “No. we’ll walk through it to get to the auditorium.” No sooner had we started on our way when her radio calls out, “Ms. Watkins?” Gabrielle responds, “Go ahead.” I hear Rachel on the other end of the radio, “I need to come to you, I’ve locked my keys in one of the rooms in building six.”

Rachel had gone to building six to retrieve the computer they needed to give to the student, and once there got all the way into one of the interior rooms where she set her keys down to grab the computer. Leaving the building she noticed she didn’t have them and called on the radio to Gabrielle. Not one to ever leave a teacher, or an administrator, needing help, Gabrielle called back on the radio, “Okay, I’m coming to get you, to save you.” When she finished her reply, she looks over at me and says, “That’s funny. One good thing about Rachel is she’s a workaholic like me. Makes it kind of nice.”
We change course and head toward building six. As we move, I think to myself about the truth in her statement; both of these women work hard, and both of them really work for their students and staff. I remember when Rachel and I used to work together that the students were always her first priority, and having seen Gabrielle work over these years, it is extremely obvious how much she cares about the kids. Our jaunt across campus now shows that she cares a great deal for her staff.

“She and I are only supposed to be here two days this week, and this is our third day. Last week we were only supposed to work three, but we were here four. There’s too much to do right now, and sometimes we can’t be in the same building because there are already ten people in it.” We arrive at the outside door to building six, meeting up with Rachel.

Gabrielle looks at Rachel and asks her which room she needs opened, “06-207, up there,” as she points toward the second floor. Gabrielle has let us into the stairwell, and we begin to climb. The walls here are painted in the school colors, and there are quotes in vinyl across several of them. WHS’s school colors cover the wide stairwell as we ascend.

“This is something great, I didn’t do this, our Student Success Coach and our Testing Coordinator came up with it. They got all of these sayings and put them up all over the school. They want to get things put onto the verticals of the steps too, it might help to get the kids to read them too.” As we move onto the second floor, she signals to one before the door reading out loud, “A person who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new.” She cocks her head to the side and says, “That looks like Albert Einstein” as she notices a couple of the letters have fallen from the name.

We exit the stairwell, and more vinyl quotes are on the walls of the hallway. Each one is printed in the school colors and hanging at various heights across the hallway. It would be
difficult to move through here and not stop to read several of them, if only for curiosity. Above
the quotes hang pennants in school colors with writing across them, something curious to see in a
hallway that is essentially only a testing wing.

At this point we’ve moved into 06-207, and Rachel explains, “I was looking for the sheet
to go into the bag, and must have left my keys right down here.” Gabrielle looks at her and says,
“You have one more computer for me though. Thank you!” Rachel quickly responds, “You’re
welcome,” and we begin to leave the building. As we move through the hallway, Gabrielle
points out the pennants hanging. “They also did this where every time a kid passes the PERT, or
the FSA, or whatever test it is, they get to sign their own flag. That wasn’t me, that was them. It
is good to have people like that on your team.” Here is where I mention to her that I am stealing
the idea from them to use in my school. Her response to me was wonderful, “Sounds good! It’s
motivational, the kids love it. They all really want their banner.”

These little elements of the WHS culture continue to pile up as we move through the
school. Pennants may not seem a big thing to someone outside of the school, but Gabrielle
notices how important it was to the kids. It is also clear that Gabrielle wants everyone to know
that members of her staff were responsible for it, not her. She makes a point to show off the
work of teachers and staff, helping to build them up, and keep them involved, in the culture of
WHS. I think to myself that she would be a good principal to work for.

I smile and turn to Rachel, “How are you doing during this time of joy?” She says she is
good, but, “a bit absent-minded lately.” I ask if that has anything to do with the significant
increase in responsibilities being heaped onto the administrative staff now. She smiles, nods,
and laughs, all at once. We part ways with her had head on our way.
Gabrielle begins describing how the success coach and testing coordinator work well together. “They work together as a team, so they can help each other with both things, testing and with student success criteria. They take them on a field trip to the local technical center and do different things to help them.” Again, she is pointing out the successes of her staff, and making certain to show how they have come up with the ideas to help the school. Here we have just about reached the entrance to the Adams building, and she looks at a weed growing in the parking lot. “I need to get the yard guy here to spray.” Even the little details are important to her on the campus.

When we approach the Adams building, a sign is plainly visible hanging on the glass of the entrance door, and Gabrielle points it out, “I’ve got to show you this,” as she motions toward the sign and reads, “This is not the main office.” Her small joy in the sign is clear as she explains that this building was the main office for almost fifty years, so they had to put a sign up because so many people expect it to still be the office. Even though the renovation has been complete for several years, many alumni and friends have not been to the school since it was renovated, and this is an important detail for them.

Standing in the lobby of the building, she explains how the front desk used to be in there, and offices on either side. I ask about her office, and she motions to the other side, “Right over there,” and then begins to walk into the hallway bisecting the building. The lobby opens into a hallway about eight feet across and only illuminated by the fluorescent lights. I think to myself about the difference in this hallway compared to the open, spacious, naturally lit hallways of the newer buildings. While this building had its interior renovated, it is still easy to see how the older buildings were not as open, or inviting, as the newer ones on campus.
“This is now foreign language’s world. I like it now that it’s been remodeled.” Down the hallway, a picture is prominently placed on the wall. It is a hand drawn, pencil image of an older building, matted and framed. What’s interesting about it though is that the framed picture has been encased in a larger box as it hangs on the wall. “This is one of the things I did, I kept this picture. We found it when going through the old foreign language building; it was already framed but stashed in the back of a closet. This is the old Adams building, and I wanted the kids to be able to see it, but we had the box built to help protect it.” Encased in a plexiglass box, the picture clearly holds importance in the hallway. If you were to look at it, you’d see the plexiglass box, trimmed out in newer stained wood; inside of it, you’d see the original frame and glass, covering the meticulously drawn image of the older Adams building. Putting the new frame around it protects the drawing, but also helps to highlight its importance as well. We continue walking down the hallway, and a few steps later we reach its end and the door to exit the building.

Walking down the pavement from the Adams building, Gabrielle begins to express her thoughts about the current situation with her school during the pandemic. “You know, I thought during all this time I could get so much stuff done as far as… I mean, we did push the kids into the master schedule. And counselors are filling in the holes. It helps me to know where I need more teachers and staff, and I can prove it with the master schedule. Looking at it I can say, ‘I’ve got one hundred kids in every art class. I think I may need another art teacher. Help me out.’ But the district still tells me, ‘mm hmm, I don't think so,’ which is frustrating.” For me it is interesting to hear how she has plugged all of the students into the master schedule for next year. For most administrators, the process of creating a master schedule is a gargantuan, tedious task by itself, and having to do it during COVID-19 must make it all the harder. But, also
hearing about how the district makes it so hard to get the teachers that the schools need, only has me question further how Gabrielle leads in such a positive manner at her school.

As the thought passes my mind, we pass the side of the auditorium and Gabrielle looks over at the building. “What’s really cool is that if you climb on the stairs up from the dressing rooms, you climb up to this little hole. When you go up through it, there's the most beautiful red wrought-iron looking catwalk, huge catwalk across the stage. But,” (she pauses for effect) “you can't use it because somebody came and built a roof underneath it, you know, does that make any sense?” We both laugh at the absurdity of it. The knowledge she has of little details about the campus, and how important they are to the overall culture of the school, really makes me think about the way she leads. Also, the idea of the catwalk shows how she easily delivers a story. She can take a small piece of information and give just enough to make it interesting, then pause for effect to really bring you into her world. This knack for story telling is well-practiced, and I imagine working with her would show itself in many different situations.

Walking across the campus, we pass through the wide-open courtyard. This central location has several intersecting walkways and has trees around the outsides of the rectangular area. It leaves the impression of a smaller version of a quad located on a college campus. On the outskirts of the courtyard, the sidewalks are especially wide, and each has an aluminum covering about twelve feet above the cement path. I mention to her that I appreciate the covered walkways and note how many states couldn’t have them. She responds in her role as an administrator, “That is true, and now you know, with school shootings. It's almost like it's not good. It's almost not a good thing now, because you can't keep people safe.” After a few steps she then adds, “Although I do love that it almost looks like a college. It's very nice. It's funny when the kids first get [here] they're so overwhelmed, it’s so big. Oh my gosh!” I ask her if that
is also because of the fact that most of the students coming here are coming from middle schools that have less than half as many students as WHS. She nods, knowingly, and smiles.

“What are some of those first impressions kids give you when they come here,” I ask. Her response is quick, and to the point, “The ninth graders were scared to death. Very quiet. Very scared. Mostly the private school kids. They just are all freaked out. You know what I mean?” I respond that I understand, and she continues, “They're very freaked out. But it's, you know, they really don't have to worry, because they kind of connect with each other.” Looking up she notices the back of the campus saying, “Oh, we do have a lot of famous baseball players and their names and numbers on the side of the Base Ball thing. Would you like to see that?” My reply was an enthusiastic, “Sure,” and with that, we head toward the rear of the campus and the fields.

To get to the fields we walked past the cafeteria, a sizable building that has a large version of the WHS mascot painted on the cement floor right out front of the lunch room. The outdoor seating area is expansive, but still has a roof to keep the sun, and the rain, from getting onto the students when they eat lunch. It looks out over the center courtyard and has several picnic tables lined up in a manner that should allow students to congregate together, but not be on top of each other as they have lunch. Once we pass this, we walk past the back of the music building, and over the small access road dividing the campus from the sports fields at the back of the campus.

Going back to our conversation, Gabrielle further explains, “They're overwhelmed, and I'm sure it's kind of scared, but then it's not as bad as what they think it's gonna be.” To which I question, “Your school has a lot of academies, all of the students end up in an academy when they show up, right?” Academies have become commonplace among the schools in the district,
stemming from the idea that they help to create a school within a school. What that means is that most of the kids in the academies are moving together as a cohort, sharing many of the same teachers for the academics, and then sharing the same teachers for many of their elective classes. Theoretically, it helps kids to see other students more often, helping to create a small group of people they can get to know sooner, and probably relate to better at school.

“We put them in an elective, even if they didn’t apply for that academy, we'll put them in an elective,” Gabrielle explains, noting how students cannot survive on academics alone. After hearing this, I ask her about how it impacts the way the kids move through the school, and whether it impacts the groups students seem to hang out with. Her response here is quick and bright, “I think they probably connect more with those kids than they do the others. Most of the band kids kind of stay together; most your drama kids stay together, even though they're not academies.” She describes how the academies also tend to have connections, and how students seem to work well in the groups.

Our walk is nearing the next stop, the baseball field. The first thing I notice as we get closer is how big the structure is behind home plate. It is much larger than most of the buildings I’ve seen at high school baseball fields. Painted in school colors, it stands out clearly at back of the campus, and the bleachers that surround the field reflect a bit of the faint light of the overcast day. It is obvious, due to its size and more pronounced construction, this field carries a good deal of significance for WHS.

Approaching the baseball field, I get to tell her a story of the first time I visited here years ago. As a teacher at Raptor Lake High School (RLHS), I tried to make it to many of the games we played in the area. With WHS being so close, and one of my students playing on the team, I chose to attend the game here at WHS and explained to Gabrielle my experience. “So, the first
time I came to watch a baseball game in this field RLHS was playing WHS for a district championship or something, and I was sitting on those stands over there.” I pointed down the field toward the visitors’ side where the bleachers were at the end of the field. “Within the first inning and a half some giant bird flew over and dive bombed me. I'm convinced it was because I was wearing my RLHS colors!” She laughed, “Yep, that’s it. Someone was trying to tell you something!” It is funny to think about because both WHS and RLHS have had good baseball teams for years. Lately WHS has had more kids go to the majors, and has been on the winning end of the games between the two, but with both teams having so many players that grew up playing together, there is a connection between the two.

Turning the corner around the home dugout, we come to the substantial building that holds the announcer’s booth, some storage, and the vantage spot for the person scoring the game. On the side of the building is a listing of all of the players from WHS who have played in the major leagues. “There’s all the pro baseball players” she exclaims. “It’s amazing, isn’t it? What’s funny, I learned later on, is that the whole Tad Michaels thing, whoever ordered that ordered the wrong number. I didn’t know until a reporter came here to do a story on Tad, and Tad had told him during his portion of the interview that, ‘it was funny that they got my number wrong,’ to which I replied, ‘that’s the first I’ve heard.’ Speaking to Tad later on, he’s ok with it, he says it makes him laugh.” Just as she finished the sentence, her phone rings.

“That might be my kid that needs the new charger,” as she looks down and answers her phone. “Hey Tyrell Ward!” She has a conversation with Tyrell, one of her teachers who is trying to help one of his students get a different laptop from the school. She explains, “We could probably check one out to him today. You just need to go by building six and grab another one. I have a few kids who’ve had some technology difficulties. I’m just trading out their bad laptop
for a better one. Could you come a little bit later? Like one?” There is a pause while Tyrell is speaking on the other, explaining how he has the student’s name and ID number, and wants to be able to help check the computer out. Gabrielle replies back, “Do you have a copy of that paperwork? Do you want me to leave a copy?” He answers and explains he has the paperwork for the student, and Gabrielle joking says back to him, “If I don't have that type of work filled out, I’m coming after you. Haha, I know where to find you. Okay, But I don't really want to leave that laptop in your box, like a custodian could come get it or anybody could pull it out. Just when do you think you’ll be up here?” She finishes the conversation, giving a cheery goodbye just before hanging up the phone.

Personally, I am impressed at how easily Gabrielle jumps from one thing to another. Our conversation has been easy all morning, and her attention to all of the aspects of it has been helpful for me. At the same time, she very easily switches over to help out her teachers when they need it, never being rude with me or them, and not being impatient or bothered by their calls. Her belief in her family atmosphere really comes out when she is being helpful to her teachers and students.

Incidents like these really show me how much Gabrielle sincerely believes in supporting her teachers, and how important it is for her to support the kids. I tell her that I appreciate the fact that teachers are going out of their way to help the students, which prompts her quick reply, “They do. That’s the only type of teacher I want.” Through our previous conversation, I have heard her describe how she looks to hire administrators, and the way she chooses to lead the school, but at this point it is evident that she doesn’t just say that she looks for people who look out for the kids, she really does it.
We continue the walk, moving away from the baseball field. Our path is taking us past the cafeteria again and across the opposite side of the courtyard from where we walked earlier. This side of the courtyard is closer to the newer buildings, I can see the brick seems almost brand new, even after a few years. Looking in the ends of the buildings, through the large windows at the ends of the hallways, it is noticeable how open and light the hallways really are. With so much natural light pouring into the hallways, and the shine on the floors, they seem to go on forever. One of her decisions during the renovation was to not have lockers installed in the hallways, to help open them up, and seeing the hallways like this really proves the point to me.

Passing between the buildings, I ask her what her ideal teacher is. “The one that loves kids. The kids learn from them. They need to be all about kids, but they can’t be so lax that the kids don’t learn anything because they have no control of the class. But they have to be consistent. Fair. But they got to be the type that they want the best for the kids.” This sentiment came up several times in our previous conversation and helps to form the backbone of her leadership style at WHS. Based on our previous conversation, I mention how that sounds similar to the description she gave me for her ideal administrator. “That’s true, and I got lucky because Mr. Talley allowed me to start hiring the teachers when I was an AP. So, all those teachers that I hired, I walked into the job as principal with most of the people I believed to be what we needed.” Her staff here seems to enjoy working with her, and for her, and I believe this is one of the reasons why.

This has been evident each time I’ve visited Winterbeach; the staff seem to sincerely appreciate working for Gabrielle. From the anecdotes they shared with me about the school, and how they express their gratitude for working with Gabrielle, it is clear that the people I have met have a good relationship with her. It is also apparent, with the staff I have had the chance to
interact with, that they are “all about the kids.” From, searching for yearbooks, to leading students to the gym to meet a coach, to a staff member just sitting down with an upset student, they really go out of their way to help the students of WHS.

Our walk has covered the immense space of the campus. We started at the main office and moved through many of the buildings and went on to the fields at the back of the campus. I am struck by how well the school flows from one place to the next. Small details through the campus help to pull all of the buildings together, they all share a set of design attributes that makes them similar, even if not the same (e.g., paint, brick, names). While it is easy to identify the older buildings from the newer ones, a great deal of patience was taken to ensure that they all shared similar characteristics, and it seems to help make the school all the more welcoming. Thinking back on this, I realize how well it connects with the idea that culture is based in artifacts, and that architecture can be a significant artifact for most places, especially a school.

Getting back to the rear entrance of the main office, we approach a door that has a keyless entry installed. It is a bit surprising to see this at one of the schools in our district, and I mention it to Gabrielle. “I love it! Actually, I had asked, whenever we went this direction, rebuilding the school, can we not get one of these for like all of the kids? You could keep every single door in the whole school locked at all times and you would know if a kid was out of class. I could run a report on them [the keyless entry] every time a card flashes.” She’s a pragmatist when it comes to running her school. Keeping track of the kids will help her to know where they are, but the reason is less to control them and more to know they are safe. Her understanding of the safety of kids is well rooted in the last several decades of education, where the safety of students has quickly become even more important than it had already been. Also, it relates easily to her view of the school needing a family atmosphere. She believes that keeping the kids safe is
part of creating the family atmosphere. Thinking back on it, this also relates to the idea that
culture has a basis in assumptions, ensuring the importance of the safety of the kids is an
assumption that Gabrielle wants all of her staff to have at WHS. Making certain that each
students is safe and able to learn in a calm environment is something she wants everyone to do
on a daily basis.

The door clicks open, and we step into the rear hallway of the main office. I notice this
hallway is lined with all of the senior class pictures for the last several decades. There are rows,
and rows of pictures, probably four feet in height stretching the length of the hallway, probably
thirty feet. Each of the pictures shows a graduating class, all of the students seemingly overjoyed
to be sitting for ‘their’ senior class picture. “Of course, we have all of our high school graduates.
They love to come back and see this. They will come back and find themselves, or they’ll find
their sister, or mom, or aunt and uncle. Look at this one, the class of 2013, see how close up they
are?” She’s pointing at how close the front row of the senior class is to the photographer. “Now
go to 14, to 15, now they have to get further back 16, 17, and then now look how far back
they’ve got to get.” Looking at the last few years of the pictures, it is easy to see the
photographer has to be much further back to capture all of the students in the picture. The
growth of the senior class is significant, showing how much the school has grown since she has
taken over as principal.

Looking back at the pictures, she points out the banner we saw in the gym. “See, this
was the original wording I told you about ‘Wildcats Believe. We can. We will.’” The original
banner is clear in several years’ worth of pictures, before it was replaced with the more
permanent one we saw earlier. It is fascinating to see how well the paper banner held up for as
long as it did. Teaching in a high school, I understand the way that students will pick at things,
or draw graffiti, or otherwise damage things, especially paper signs. Seeing how the senior classes seemingly protected this sign was amazing and really showed how important it became to the students at WHS.

“We ended up making it not long after you had the ‘e’ fall out over here,” motioning to one of the senior class pictures. Looking at the picture, it is clear that the glue finally gave way, and the ‘e’ fell out of the word ‘believe’. Seeing how long the banner lasted makes even more sense as to why Gabrielle helped to make it a more permanent feature in the gym. This artifact has grown and become significant to the culture of the school, and I am left to wonder how many of the students at the school now know its history, or how long it has been a part of the gym.

Continuing to look at the pictures, as I look from class to class, it strikes me that the growth has been huge at WHS, and I ask Gabrielle why she thinks so many kids want to attend her school. “I think we have a lot to offer. I think the athletics being good too helps. Now we have the college-level program that helps. The athletics definitely helps. I hate being at a school where everybody boos or calls, ‘You're horrible’.” Gesturing toward the end of the wall, she points out a picture, only a few years old, “We have this. The very first lacrosse team at Winterbeach High School. We had it framed and signed by the kids.” I sense how central the kids are to her; they are an important part of how she chooses to approach her leadership at WHS. This value of hers is one of the values she is trying to help base the culture on at the school.

At this moment, one of the guidance counselors, Mindy, walks into the office, and Gabrielle receives a phone call at the same time. “Hey, David. Good. How are you? Do you hear me? Yeah. Can I call you back? I’m with a couple of people and let me call you back. Okay.” She points out the vinyl on the wall, “So, ‘enter to learn, go forth to serve,’ Alma Mater.” Just
before noticing Mindy had arrived. Smiling, she looks at Mindy, “Did you need something?”

Mindy was just dropping something off in the office, but seeing how she interacted with Gabrielle, it is clear that Mindy gets along well with her, and that Gabrielle really does have the relationships she has described in our meetings.

Even though she was walking the school with me, and taking a phone call from another teacher, Gabrielle took the time to speak with her counselor. When she stopped to speak with Mindy, it was clear that Mindy had her entire attention for the moment. Gabrielle was not rude to me, or the teacher on the phone, and made a point to stop and make certain her staff had everything they needed. She was sincere with Mindy, making certain Mindy had her whole attention; the few moments of the conversation were warm and seemed familiar, even comfortable, to both women. In our previous conversations, when Gabrielle described how she is a hard worker and how she wants to do all that she can to support her staff, I thought I understood what she meant. Seeing it happen right in front of me only helped solidify the thought in my mind.

Down the wall from the alma mater quote, Gabrielle points out the mantle. Encased in glass, the mantle is a long, scarf-like artifact that has been around for close to a century. Each successive senior class adds their three-inch square onto the end of ever-growing mantle. This artifact has a special place in her heart because it has been with the school for so long, and gives each senior class a small piece to add to the history of WHS.

Just down the wall from the mantle, Gabrielle shows me a picture of the school as it stood when it first occupied the location where it is now. “That’s the original school as it was built here in 1956. Erected in 1955, which I guess is 55-56 school year.” The picture is in black and white, showing the small collection of buildings that originally occupied the space. Buildings
like the auditorium and the gym were not yet erected in this picture, and the space around the school is still open. Urban crawl in the city had not yet moved as close to the school as it is today. I can only imagine when the school was first moved here that people thought it would never be completely surrounded by the city.

Next to the picture of the first buildings at this location is another photograph of the school, this one though of the school as it stood when it was further down the road. “This is the old Winterbeach High School. That was in the visitor parking lot of Donnelly.” Donnelly is the middle school up the road that is adjacent to WHS’s stadium. This is the stadium she spoke about earlier, where the concert was held that helped to pay for the home side of the field.

Donnelly is an immense structure, built out of concrete and steel, and lined with chain-link fence. It stands several stories tall, and its lights are visible for miles around on nights when games are played. Many of the WHS sports teams use the stadium for home contests. From football, to cheerleading, to soccer, lacrosse, track & field, and several other teams all use the stadium. Its size also draws several events the school district hosts, allowing several thousand spectators to view events at once.

Further down from the pictures of the school, more pictures line the wall, showing places and people connected to WHS. One thing in particular piques Gabrielle’s interest. She points excitedly, “Also, something that is important, which the kids didn't understand, ‘Ms. Watkins, why did you put a water skier on the wall?’ I'm like, ‘We’re the water ski capital of the world!’ You know, that’s important.” While it may seem trivial to many, the vinyl picture of the water skier is something Gabrielle believes is important to the school. This artifact helps to connect the school to the community, and it helps to ground the school in the history of the community surrounding WHS. Gabrielle smiles, walking to the front door of the school.
We exit the office, stepping back out onto the front patio of the school. Gabrielle looks down at the seal, “Here it is. All the alumni remember. They get a chuckle when they see it. I’ve heard the story that they would make the underclassmen brush it with toothbrushes if they stepped on it.” The significance of the seal came up in a previous discussion, and she described how she walked into the construction meeting to get them to pull up the concrete to ensure it was there at the front of the school. Looking back down at the bronze Wildcat, I being to connect the significance even more to the history of the school.

After the seal, she points out the war memorial I had seen earlier. She talked about how one of the men had come back to the school and told her that when he was in Vietnam with a few of his buddies from WHS, their call sign on the radio was ‘Wildcats’, a nod to their alma mater. He also told her how he had served with several of the men whose names were on the memorial and how grateful he was they were remembered at the school.

Finishing the story, she then begins to lead us back to her office. We traverse the front office again, though for me this time I saw it differently. All of the things Gabrielle pointed out now seemed to pop out as I scanned the room, and it hit me how much history was in the room. From the mantle, to the class pictures, and even the newer vinyl water skier, each had new meaning for me.

Passing through the open hallway, I noticed how each door had the name of the person who occupied the office. Each also had a small corkboard for attaching notes, and many had flyers or other information that would be important for the students. It was a little eerie when I realized all of the dates were happening during a time when no students were on campus. COVID-19 was having a significant effect on this campus. Along the way, further down the
hall, Gabrielle has a quick conversation with one of the deans about an online meeting happening that they both need to attend, and then we arrive at her office.

As we are entering, she points to another picture frame with pictures several alumni. One of the former students is now working in the NFL as a coach, another is an anchor for one of the local news stations. Several others are in business and she explains how they all have come back to the school since graduating. Keeping the students connected at school while they are here is hard enough, but having so many come back is a testament to the culture of WHS. She credits it to the school and doesn’t mention the family atmosphere, but from my point of view it seems that the family atmosphere does help to connect these alumni to the students at WHS now.

Winding down the conversation, I ask her what she thinks some of the commonalities are in all of the things she’s pointed out throughout the school. After a brief pause, she says, “Commonalities would be relationships. That's what I would say.” I ponder her response for a moment, then ask, “How do you help to get the new kids to understand that, to grow with that?” She takes a bit of a longer pause and responds, “At the beginning of every school year, we have a music video, and it's supposed to be some kind of theme every year. I think that always had an impact. Also, just the fact that we're always available to them. They know that they can just walk up to us and talk to us in the lunch room. Or sometimes, if they catch me out there and it's something I've got to check on, I'll tell them, ‘Have your teacher email me your name and that'll remind me to look into it when I'm back in the office.’ Or they’ll leave little notes. Actually, I have a white board outside my office so if a kid needs me, they can just put their name on it. When I’m able to, I’ll go find them. They know they can also leave a note with my secretary that they need to see me. I will take their names and try to pull them when, I’m able. Sometimes

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it may be that day, sometimes the next day, it just depends on the schedule.” Here too it is clear
that the kids are what really drives her, what really keeps her motivated in her position.

As I am approaching the end of my questions, I ask, “So what’s the thing you are most
proud of here?” When I ask the question, the pause for her thoughts is a bit longer than normal.
She contemplates, considers, and then replies, “The most proud of is, I guess I'm most proud of
the number of kids that want to be here. That choose to come to Winterbeach High School
because they want to. That's probably my most proud. Because really, years ago, Raptor Lake
was the school to go to. We only had 1400 kids here, and they had almost 2,000. Now that's
kind of flipped a little. But the district has closed us now for transfers. We're at 90% capacity. So
now you cannot transfer to Winterbeach High School, they're not approving transfers.” It is
interesting to me to see the switch these two schools have undergone. Many of the schools in
this district have gone up and down in their enrollment, much of it tied to the influx of jobs, or
the downturns in the economy. Here though, the switch from RLHS being the bigger school, to
WHS being the bigger school, can be tied pretty closely to when Gabrielle took over as principal
of the school.

She goes on to explain how she is hopeful that, with her school being closed for transfers,
other schools will be able to build up their enrollment and offer more programs. She continues,
explaining, “What's crazy is that, um… I don't know what I was gonna say at that point. Like, I
don't know why they [the students] want to come here. Although it does help when you have
really great teachers, I think that helps a lot.” She describes how she really appreciates that her
teachers do such a good job educating the kids, and how she is grateful that they continue
wanting to work at WHS.
My question to her at this point, “So, beside the physical change here, what do you think has been the biggest change you've seen since you've come in as principal,” elicits another long pause. “Less fighting. Although now it seems to be coming back again. That's a good thing about online classes, they can’t fight. Well now you're dealing with a whole other world. Like when I started, technology was not or like, you did have the Snapchat and it seems like daily we deal with computers or phone issues because they're fighting over or through the phone. And that's horrible. That's what's made it full circle, almost. We used to have a lot of fights and it went down, down, down, down, down. And then now all of a sudden… But you’ve got a different crew now. They don't care about a 10-day suspension, where before the kids always did. It really is a different group. But the fighting is still reduced from what it was when I started. Also, not so much of the gangs like you saw initially when I started.” My follow up to her was to ask what she think caused that.

“I just think, no tolerance. And I think just the fact that we knew. Then when I kicked the two biggest gang members out all in one span, it calmed things down. I called both their parents. I said, ‘I'm done. I'm withdrawing him right now.’ Now, today I really couldn't get away with it. You know, the district would say ‘no, you have to take him.’ I was just fortunate then, because every time his parents would try set up a meeting, he had been in another gang fight somewhere else. So, I never met with the parents. Every time the district would come to me, I’d say, ‘I had a meeting set up and they never showed. I just don't know.’ But yet they were causing a huge disruption on campus, so I had to kind of do it under the radar to help the school.” Her concern here is helping the school. Yes, there was a problem with gangs, but her primary concern was that the gangs were getting in the way of the rest of the kids’ learning and getting in the way of the kids connecting.
Because of this thought, I asked Gabrielle, “What do you think are some of the biggest things that help keep Winterbeach together?” This time her response was faster, “I think it's the family atmosphere. Teachers are willing to help other teachers, and when I can get the teachers out that don't like kids, that helps a lot. Sometimes you just have wait them out until they retire. Then you try to hire the best you can. Anymore, I don't just hire, if people want to come here, I try to check on them with people I know. If somebody applies here and they work at another school, then I'm going to contact who I know at that school. ‘Tell me about this person.’ That's one thing that Mr. Wagner did. At RLHS, it was hard to get in. You couldn't get in unless you were highly recommended. I contacted every single person who I knew that worked at Raptor Lake to try to get in. Finally, the Ag teacher, who had a good relationship with Mr. Wagner, got me a meeting with him, that's how I got in. But I’d been trying for months, determined I was going to get there.” This mention of her determination caused me to ask her how she thought they taught it at WHS.

“Determination, I'm not sure. But we teach politeness, and always push the idea that they should love one another, treat others as you'd want to be treated. I say it every morning. I think that it comes back whenever you have people that come on your campus and they brag about how polite your kids are and how we have the nicest kids of any place they go. The kids are just polite to people when they come on campus. When the people ask the kids questions, they don't mind at all. They’re all talkers I guess. We’ve got a lot of talkers because they'll talk, and they'll let you know how they feel. Also, I think a lot of our administration has an ESE background. So a lot of them are good about calming the craziness down.”

At this point, we had been walking and talking for close to an hour. I was grateful for the time Gabrielle had given me, but more impressed with her thoughtful responses. Based on the
first interview, I had heard from her that the kids were her top priority and that she was supportive of her teachers and administrators. Walking with her today, watching and listening to her interactions with everyone we encountered, I was able to witness it firsthand. This has helped me to come to my own understanding of the way she chooses to lead at WHS.

As I was packing up, I confirmed our next meeting and mentioned I was looking to speak with her about how the culture of WHS has affected her leadership and how it may have affected her decision making. She looked up, as if what I had said had triggered a thought for her. “One thing I always remember came from my father. He said, you don’t have to make a decision immediately. Most of the time, I try to take my time and think about the choices. There are sometimes where I have to make a decision quickly, but most of the time I will consider things, think about it, and make a decision that is right.”
CHAPTER FIVE:
FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of a secondary school principal in a school district in Central Florida, in an effort to understand how the principal came to know and understand the culture of the school and the principal’s perceptions of the effects of the school’s culture on the principal’s leadership of the school.

To accomplish this, I conducted three semi-structured interviews over the course of several weeks. This allowed me to delve deeper into the perspectives and stories told by my participant, Ms. Watkins. In my interactions with her, I found her to be thoughtful, candid, self-reflective, and very willing to share her experiences with me.

This chapter is presented in three sections. The first section presents narrative that describes Ms. Watkins’ experiences in becoming the principal of Winterbeach High School. The second section presents narrative that describes what Ms. Watkins perceived to be elements of the school’s culture. The third section presents narrative that describes what Ms. Watkins perceived changed in the school culture and how the school culture affected decisions she made.

My goal was to pull together the perspectives and stories Ms. Watkins told in the interviews in a meaningful way. The quotes I use in the narratives are hers; if places or people are named I have worked to include pseudonyms or omit names to protect the identity of the people referenced and to make the place as unidentifiable as possible.
Becoming the Principal

Ms. Watkins did not initially go into education following her graduation from college. She was a business major and had no desire to follow in the footsteps of her father, a former teacher, principal, and superintendent. Right out of college, she took a job in business and began a career she thought she was going to enjoy; several years later, she decided she did not enjoy it as much as she thought. Several of her friends were teachers, and she liked the idea of having summers off, so she jumped into education, where she found her passion:

I got a business degree. I never thought I was going to teach, and then a couple years after working I was like, ‘I don't want to do this.’ Then I had friends who were teachers and I'm like, ‘look at them they’ve got their summers off. I could deal with any type of kids if I get my summers off.” And then, yeah, that's probably why I got into it to begin with. But then it was my passion, my love. I can't imagine having done anything else. And then my kids, they know it and they see it.

Her first position was a challenge. Half-way through a school year, Ms. Watkins took a position as an Exceptional Student Education (ESE) teacher in a small rural town. She noted in our first interview, “I wanted to teach the ones that people said couldn't be taught. I wanted that challenge, I guess you could say.” The kids had been challenging for the previous teacher:

The kids were so bad, they had actually put ExLax in the teacher's drink, and she was done. She retired and left that day, so they were without a teacher for the remainder of the year, so they had several substitutes until they could find someone. I took the challenge. I'd probably been teaching for about two weeks when one of them tried to choke me. Luckily, he ended up letting go.
Ms. Watkins further indicated that the kids really tried to chase her off, but she was stubborn.

She shared the following story:

So that same kid who tried to choke me, ended up being my protector. Another kid was cussing me out in class, and he grabbed him and said, ‘You don't talk to Ms. Watkins like that.’ I stuck through… the kids pretty much… started behaving. They liked me. They knew I cared about them, and after that time, I really didn't have the problems that I had walked into.

So, while her first position was challenging, she survived and kept working in education. In the end she said, “It was my passion, my love. I can't imagine having done anything else.”

As she continued working, she heard about a principal, Mr. Wagner, who was opening a new school not too far from her home, Raptor Lake High School (RLHS). Her understanding of him was that he was an exceptional leader, who was doing innovative new things, and she really wanted to work for him. She explained, “I tried everywhere in the world to get there. I contacted every teacher that I knew that worked there… And, I finally got the AG teacher Mr. Giles to set up a meeting [with] Mr. Wagner, and I was willing to do all the paperwork for special ed. That did not bother me. I could do all the IEPs whatever I needed to do. And so he took me in, And, I was there for several years.”

When Mr. Wagner left RLHS and when Ms. Watkins’ husband took a job in another county, she was courted by the district in that county and left RLHS. She expressed to her new district that she was interested in getting into administration. She said, “I really wanted to do the master schedule. I wanted to be assistant principal for curriculum.” She applied to the district and was told, “We got to get you in the system first, and then we can move you to the high school.” That got her into an elementary school: “Oh my goodness, I was miserable. I mean,
nice people, great people, but I am a high school person. I could not deal with elementary. I hated it. I had to deal with children and families and abuse cases every week…I would cry almost every day on my way home because it was just so depressing…I couldn't get out fast enough. That was the only school I ever left mid-year.”

Finally, an AP position opened at Winterbeach High School. As with any position in a school district, there is a process for application; the APC job was one that required more process than most. To that end, a paper application was submitted, but Ms. Watkins had to make the short-list to be interviewed, and then she had to go through the interview. For her the first two parts were easy, and when she walked into the interview room, the next step seemed easier yet.

Working to get to WHS, Ms. Watkins introduced herself to the principal, Mr. Tally; she also knew many of the teachers and staff at the school because of its proximity to RLHS. Knowing all these people helped. Mr. Talley made certain to call all of the people he knew at RLHS, and he looked into her work experience before he saw her in the interview. Ms. Watkins recalled, “Everybody could tell them. I was a hard worker…I was always working until five o'clock in the afternoon, or whatever. I was putting in a lot more time because everything had to be done, and the guidance counselors loved me. They trusted me when they saw that I knew what I was doing, and I would sit in on parent conferences with them. I really learned everything I learned about curriculum. I learned from the RLHS Guidance counselors.” Ms. Watkins’ dream of being an APC came to fruition.

Moving into the role of APC at WHS was a long-held goal for Gabrielle, and now she was determined to do it well. She knew a great deal about curriculum, knew how to work with students, and was particularly adept at working with parents, teachers, and administration alike. She enjoyed the challenges in this position, from working on the master schedule to helping Mr.
Talley with hiring new teachers; it seemed like a great place for her to be. As she worked longer in the position, Mr. Talley delegated more responsibilities to her and helped her learn more of the responsibilities of administration in a high school. At the same time though, it seemed that Mr. Talley was grooming his Assistant Principal of Administration (APA), who primarily handles all of the school’s discipline, to be his successor. This was fine with Ms. Watkins: “I never, never, never wanted to be a principal. I just want to be an assistant principal. But then there came a time when I mean Mr. Tally just delegated a lot to me.”

Not too long before his retirement, Mr. Talley had to take an extended absence from the school, and Ms. Watkins took over for him while he was out. When she was doing her job as APC, and the duties of Mr. Talley, she realized she was going to apply to be the principal. She explained:

I'm kind of already doing it. And I don't know how long I can do kind of being a principal and an AP; and kind of juggle both. And it's like, ‘What if another principal comes in and I'm doing all this?’ Where I could have an AP that does this work and I do my work?

Concerned that she may end up taking on the work of the principal, on top of her duties as APC whenever the next principal came in, she started considering the position of principal. This thought helped convince her she was going to apply for the position of principal, and she did. In her words, “I was applying for the principal's job because at that point I thought, well, I'm kind of already doing it.” Her application was submitted, then on to the next phase of the process.

Where the process for being hired as the APC was a bit tedious, it paled in comparison to being hired as the principal of the school. Again, Ms. Watkins was feeling like the APA of WHS
was already being groomed for the position, and she felt like she had a bit of catching up to do. Fortunately for her, she was selected as one of the applicants to be interviewed.

Ms. Watkins remembers: “The teachers and the students all wore these little stickers on their ID’s that said, Kendrick for [principal]…No, Watkins for principal, as if people were voting…Watkins for principal, and it had my picture.” She recalled how there were thirteen or fourteen people who ended up being interviewed for the position and how everyone had to go to the district’s HR office to do the interview. “There must have been 15 people on the interview committee, which intimidated you,” she recounted. She went on to explain:

Then they gave you a paper, and on the paper, it listed all these different things that you had to know about. And they said pick five from the list that you could talk about. So, I think at that point, if you didn't know curriculum, you would not do well in that interview. If you didn't have all those experiences, you wouldn't have even been, you wouldn't have been at the top of the list.

Ms. Watkins made the top three and had to meet one on one with the superintendent: “And then you had to talk to her about what your plans were. If you were a principal, what would your plan be? What would you do? And fortunately, I got called, that I'd got the job.”

**Elements of School Culture**

Ms. Watkins knew about Winterbeach High School. Her story of how she came to the school indicated that she really only wanted to work at either Raptor Lake or Winterbeach. She had introduced herself to Mr. Tally, the principal that preceded her, and she knew many of the teachers and staff because of the proximity of WHS to RLHS. She was their AP for Curriculum, and Mr. Talley had increasingly delegated responsibilities to her to help her learn more of the responsibilities of administration in a high school. In our conversations there were three
elements of the culture of her school that come across in her interviews: family atmosphere, history and discipline.

**Family Atmosphere**

The idea of family is important to Ms. Watkins, and her desire to shape a “family atmosphere” in her school is of utmost importance to her. She described this family atmosphere as influenced by her mentors, by her working for/with kids, and by her working with/for teachers. “It's a family atmosphere. Teachers are willing to help other teachers.” Her decisions to hire teachers who are willing to help, are also related to what she looks for in teachers when she is hiring. Her self-described ideal teacher is:

The one that loves kids. The kids learn from them. Um, they need to be all about kids, but they can't be so lax that the kids don't learn anything because they have no control of the class. But they have to be consistent. Fair. But they got to be the type that they want the best for the kids.

This is also true of what she expects of her administrative team. She has hired and developed a team of people in administration that works for the kids and works for the teachers to help the kids. I think about the sign Gabrielle pointed out, and read, on the school walk: “In this home we do second chances, we do grace, we do real, we do I'm sorry’s, we do hugs, we do family, we do love.” She really works hard to help give kids chances to succeed and to give teachers the help they need to help the kids succeed.

**Mentors.** Ms. Watkins’ father was a seminal influence and mentor for her. His past experience in schools as a teacher and an administrator helped give her a strong background in both areas, and helped her to be ready when she stepped into each position. One specific
recollection provides a glimpse into how her father’s mentorship helped shape her thinking about making decisions:

One thing I always remember came from my father. He said, you don’t have to make a decision immediately. Most of the time, I try to take my time and think about it. There are sometimes where I have to make a decision right then, but most of the time I will consider things, think about it, and make a decision that is right.

As principal Ms. Watkins understands the importance of making good decisions for both her and the school. Good decisions, and thoughtful consideration, are important to her, but also important to the school. It was reflected in our school walk. She reaches out to her administrators, teachers and staff, focusing on decisions that “need to be all about kids.” It is important to her that the adults who work at WHS are “the type that they want the best for the kids.”

Mr. Wagner, her principal when she was at RLHS, was a mentor she admired sincerely and who provided a strong basis for her leadership. “I really wanted to serve under Mr. Wagner for more years because I loved his leadership style, and I felt I needed to kind of study under him for a longer length of time.” She described his gregarious personality and how he would call everyone he knew to check up on a possible new hire, read the announcements every morning to the students, and attend so many school events and community events.

Gabrielle indicated, “First thing in the morning, I welcome everybody to school. I give them, you know, congratulations to whoever won that night before. And then my message is always treat others how you would want to be treated. And then I end it with be nice.” In our school walk Gabrielle talked about why this as important:
…we teach politeness, and always push the idea that they should love one another, treat others as you'd want to be treated. I say it every morning. I think that it comes back whenever you have people that come on your campus and they brag about how polite your kids are and how we have the nicest kids of any place they go.

Being congenial is important for her concept of a family; she wants everyone to be able to live and work in a comfortable setting at the school, and she sends that clear message every morning to her administration and faculty and to her kids.

**Working for the kids.** Ms. Watkins’ description of an ideal teacher is “the one that loves kids. The kids learn from them. They need to be all about kids… they have to be consistent, fair. But they’ve got to be the type that they want the best for the kids.” During our walk on the campus, she received a phone call from one of her teachers, a student had reached out to the teacher because he did not have access to a computer to be able to do the work required while being quarantined. She had a quick conversation and helped the teacher get the information needed so he could deliver a laptop to the student. Little things matter to the students, and the teachers, staff, and administrators play an important role in how kids do at school. She mentioned how she came to know this through her years working with people who were “loving and caring” and who were able to reach the kids because of it.

She carries this mantra of being “for the kids” everywhere she is on campus. From her often-professed openness for communication, to the white board outside of her office for students to leave messages, to her working lunch duty to interact with the kids, she makes a purposeful decision to reach out to help them all. She also explained how she hires people for her school: “The people I hired to be on our team. They all love the kids, and they're all about the kids, and any kid on this campus knows that they can just walk up to us and talk to any of us at
any time.” This openness sends the message that the adults in the school are approachable. If kids can approach her and her administrators and teachers, this helps to keep the school moving forward as it is more likely the school will be able to respond to kids’ needs.

**Working for the teachers.** Helping the teachers is rooted in her understanding of how kids learn and how they can be successful in school. Gabrielle explained she knows that not every student will enjoy every aspect of school all of the time, but she believes that their desire to be in school plays a consequential part in their success in school. Her understanding of this has come from her years of experience in the classroom and as an administrator. She described how she has seen the importance of getting the right academies and electives for students, how students feel more a part of the school when they are in their chosen classes.

I feel like having the academies helps a lot because kids are really, they want to be here for whatever that academy is that they love. And that’s why we want to make sure that our kids get what they ask for. Like if they ask like this is my number one elective I want we try to make sure they get their number one choice.

Giving choice to students is a notable element of the culture of her school. She is also insistent on working for the teachers. If she can help the teachers, she will be helping the students.

She learned the importance of helping teachers from her father, Mr. Wagner, and through working at each of her positions prior to being the principal at WHS. In each position she was able to see how administration either helped the teachers, or did not, and the role it played in running the school. This understanding is long-held for her and is reinforced in many ways. A small example came during our campus walk when one of her teachers was helping to get laptops ready for student pick-up and accidentally locked her keys in the computer room. Ms. Watkins indicated on her walkie, “Okay, I’m coming to get you, to save you.” We then took a
slight detour on our walk to help retrieve the keys. A small thing, but certainly a clear message of her care for her staff.

Working for the teachers also comes through in her helping with professional development. One teacher she hired was fairly new to teaching, only in her second year when she arrived at WHS. Ms. Watkins hired her because “she had that relationship piece with the kids.” While the relationship with the kids was good, the new teacher’s classroom management left something to be desired. Ms. Watkins helped send the new teacher to a training in a nearby city, and she had one of the more experienced teachers across the hall working with her to improve her classroom management. In Ms. Watkins’ perspective, it is just as important to help the teachers because they are the ones helping the kids. Providing her teachers with the tools necessary to do their jobs is an important part of the culture of the school; Ms. Watkins learned this through her years of experience.

History

Winterbeach High School is almost 150 years old, giving the school a history that is dramatically longer than most schools in the county. In our first interview Ms. Watkins noted that she was the first female principal of the school: “The school has been through development, building, moving, reconstruction and multiple changes for many reasons. When the school initially opened, it was several blocks further north in the city, in the current location of the visitor’s parking lot for the WHS sports stadium. It was moved about a century ago to its current location. Ms. Watkins learned to recognize the importance of the history of the school to the school’s culture. On our walk we looked at multiple artifacts of and at the school and talked about notable people who have been to or worked with the school in some capacity.
Across the campus, even though much of it is newer, the history of the school comes through in many ways. From the stories that are told about the school and its alumni, to the school colors, to the many artifacts on campus, history is a rich part of the tradition and culture of WHS. While history is not the only part of the culture, Ms. Watkins recognizes its importance to the alumni of the school, the community surrounding the school. She feels she needs to teach it to her current students so they can continue it when they graduate and leave the school.

**Artifacts.** One artifact, showing the history of the school, is the school’s mantle. Hung in a glass case in the front office, it is a long, winding, scarf-like cloth that has a section sewn onto it every year by the graduating class. Initially started in the early 1920s, it gives the senior class, a small three-inch by three-inch cloth representation tying it to the history of the school. Gabrielle recognized its importance early in her tenure at WHS and knows how this helps to unite the senior class together in their year, but also helps to unite the class to the history of the school. She explained how she initially came to understand this piece of WHS history:

> We actually put it in a glass case. It was never in a glass case. It was in the closet. Well, that is such an historical thing, I mean classes since, like 1923 have been putting their patch on that mantle.

She noted that not every member of the senior class will share the same sentiment with the mantle, but the idea is one that is well known to a good number. Gabrielle also noted that this small element of the history of the school does play, in her perception, a noticeable part in keeping the senior class grounded in the school.

Initially, when I looked at the mantle, it looked like an old scarf with years sewn onto it. When I started looking closer, it was clear that the early squares were hand-made, with a great deal of detail to them. When Ms. Watkins described the history of the mantle, it became much
more important in my mind. Yes, this is a small piece of history in a large school, but being able to have something tangible for each class to tie them to the other classes really can be enlightening for the students.

As I’ve learned through the years, high school students learn better when there is something tangible. Trying to explain chemistry without models is nearly impossible, but doing a reaction in the lab can sincerely help to teach a point. Similarly, trying to explain to a student how their class is connected to the other classes of the school, reaching back over a century, may not be the easiest thing to do. Having the mantle as something they can see, that can be something that a student may understand better. Their class being literally connected to the others, even if only by a few threads, really drives home the connection between the classes, and this helps to bring the culture of the school to the forefront.

As I’ve mentioned, the culture is made up of thousands of little elements, and one like this may seem inconsequential to someone on the outside. Arguably, it may be inconsequential to many of the students currently at WHS. At the same time though, there are a group of students to who, it matters, and it helps them to be connected. In looking at the elements of school culture, not every element will connect everyone at the school in the same way. Along these lines, the mantle serves to help a group of students, and it does a good job of representing the connection between the classes of WHS over the years.

Another artifact of the history of the school is the seal of the school. Today, it is prominently displayed in the concrete immediately in front of the new administration building. It was brought to location of the school when the school was moved here initially, and when the renovation of this campus occurred, and buildings were being razed to erect new structures, this seal was an important element of the school’s culture Ms. Watkins knew needed to be preserved.
She told of when she met with the architects and construction managers about the progress of the school, she made it known that the seal needed to be placed in the concrete in front of the administration building. She continued to watch the construction of the new buildings, and then one day she noticed something:

The funny thing is they had poured the concrete and the seal wasn’t there. It was in my office in the old building. It was in my office, ROTC had polished it, and it was all nice and shiny… Because I walked over one day, you know, just looking, seeing how everything’s things going on. And I see the concrete poured. Well, they were having a construction meeting in the conference room. So I walk in, kind of interrupt the whole meeting and said, ‘Excuse me, the concrete has been poured and the seal is in my office,’ and they were like, ‘Oh, no.’ They had to go back, dig the little hole, and put the seal back in.

She knew this element was important because of the stories she had heard: “I’ve heard the story that they would make the underclassmen brush it with toothbrushes if they stepped on it.” And, she had noted as a fact that so many people would look for it when visiting the school. Making certain to give this artifact a key location was significant; its importance was kept alive because of her listening to the history of the school.

While it may only look like the Wildcat logo in front of the entrance to the school, it provides a touchpoint for the students, staff, and alumni of the school. Like the mantle, not everyone has the same reaction to the seal, but it does sit as a concrete example of the history of the school, and a reminder to the students that the history is important. Personally, it is an interesting inlay in the concrete, and as an outsider, it didn’t mean a lot initially. Like many parts of culture in organizations, some of the elements are created to show the culture to those on
the outside of the organization; some are created for those in it. This one is a reminder to those in the culture of WHS to remember the history, not necessarily for someone walking into the school to understand immediately.

Also important in this latest renovation that Ms. Watkins helped lead the school through was the naming of the buildings. She had learned their histories through stories told by staff, faculty, community members, and even returning alumni. She recognized the importance of these artifacts early, and she made specific notes to maintain the names following the construction. One building that was razed was the old foreign language building. The name that was on the building was a former foreign language teacher at WHS, and so when the new buildings were erected, Ms. Watkins made a point to move the name to the new building that now houses the foreign language department. On our walk she also told the story of another artifact – a picture of an older building, matted and framed and encased in a larger box:

This is one of the things I did, I kept this picture. We found it when going through the old foreign language building; it was already framed but stashed in the back of a closet. This is the old Adams building, and I wanted the kids to be able to see it, but we had the box built to help protect it.

Hung on a wall in the new Adams building, the picture shows what the previous building looked like.

What was noticeable to me the first time I saw it was that the picture, frame and all, was encased in a larger case with a plexiglass covering. It was clear the larger case served to protect the original picture, even though the original frame and glass should have done that. Thinking back on it though, what comes to mind now is how the outer frame gives added significance to the pencil drawing. If the drawing were hung only in its original frame in the hall, it would look
nice, but it would probably end up disappearing into the background to most people. Much like the marketing that is plastered over the terminal in an airport, most of it is just background to the travelers; the picture would have just been background. Putting it into the larger case draws attention to it, and shows the importance of it, for those walking through the hall. This feature is one that helps to keep this picture as an important artifact for WHS.

As an artifact it helps remind those that pass by it about the culture of WHS through the lens of the history of WHS. Many of the newer students recognize their buildings are newer at the school but may not know what the school used to look like. Also, many of the newer students may not understand why the building where they are learning foreign language is named the Adams building. This picture helps to connect them to both the historical look of the school, and the meaning of the name of the building, which was named for one of the former foreign language teachers at WHS.

**Notable people.** From famous basketball players, to notable singers, to business people who have donated scholarships, each of these people has played a role in the history of WHS. In our first interview, Ms. Watkins told the story about a professional singer who was an alumnus: “Believe it or not, [in our stadium] the visitors sat with the home side as the home side didn't exist. They flew him in here. I think by helicopter. This is the word I got. They flew him in by helicopter. He landed on the field, did a concert and all the proceeds paid to build the home side.” Then there are alumni from business and industry: “…the CEO of one of the major resorts in Florida, and right next to him is the CEO of a company that does sound and effects in movies, one of the larger companies that gets their logo just before the movies begin at the theaters.”

In her principalship Ms. Watkins has reached out to others to learn about these people, and reached out to many of these people herself. In displaying artifacts, Ms. Watkins enables the
community to be able to learn of alumni accomplishments. These have helped to bolster elements of culture at WHS, if not creating their own elements. It is because she works so hard reaching to find out this information that she can learn about it, and her work ethic is the primary factor in her being able to reach so many people. Her belief in the value of past alumni drives Ms. Watkins to continue to learn about the people who have attended school at WHS.

Culturally, the value of knowing people is one that is carried through most organizations. At Apple, it is obvious that the employees know who Steve Jobs was and his connection to the corporation. Similarly, at WHS, knowing who Owen Ball is carries a significance. Basketball players want to play like him and get into the NBA like him, while other students see his accomplishments in business following his basketball career as something to strive for.

Understanding the value of those who have come before adds to the culture, the history of the people that comes before adds to the culture, and teaching the current students about it adds to the culture. So, while the people themselves may not be the culture of the school, the stories about them, the artifacts left to remember them, all help to build and maintain the culture of WHS.

**Discipline**

Fighting was a common occurrence at WHS. As Ms. Watkins explained in our first interview, “[I]f you looked at the data…We had 80 fights in one year. It was horrible… [P]rior to me being principal, they would be suspended for 3 to 5 days for fighting.” To me that seemed like a lot, but Gabrielle indicated that it was common practice:

It was documented. It was fights all the time. And I remember every Friday, there would be a fight. I asked one of the kids, I was like, ‘why do you all fight every Friday?’ And he said ‘It’s poppin’ off Friday Ms. Watkins’ - like they even had a name for it, ‘poppin’
off Friday.’ [S]o when I became principal right off the bat, you fight on this campus, you're going to receive a 10 day suspension and we're charging you…And then I wanted to make sure that what I wanted done was being done. So every time there was a fight, I was in their offices. Making sure that they got the 10 days…So we went from 80 fights to 35 fights the following year.

It was important for Ms. Watkins to focus on discipline, especially when she first came on as principal. She explained:

…it gives your school a bad reputation. And it's WHS had such a bad reputation because of all the fights, because a lot of the fight would happen in the street. But what happened at the store? So everybody in the community that drives down sixth Street, what did they see? So we haven't suspended them. If they were within 500 feet will suspend him. If they were hiding behind the store, we got video of it. Or if we saw them a block away, we suspended them.

**Coming to Know and Understand the Elements of School Culture**

The first research question guiding this study asked how a high school principal comes to know and understand the culture of a school and its elements. In my interviews with Ms. Watkins, she referenced upon occasion four ways of knowing or understanding: observation, experience, self-reflection, and time.

**Observation**

Ms. Watkins has an eye for detail. As we moved through the campus on our walk, her stories about the school were vivid, and they conveyed ideas about the school many may not know. At the same time, she also noticed the weeds peeking through the pavement in front of the Adams building. What was more interesting to me about the observation was that she knew
the reason they were peeking through. She had spoken to the gentleman who takes care of the
grounds earlier that week, and he said they were going to spray to kill the weeds, but with the
threat of rain, the spray would just wash off, so they were going to wait. So, the fact that she
noticed the weeds, and knew what the reasoning for them, is indicative of her attention to detail.

Similarly, she pays attention to the details of the students. Ms. Watkins makes a point of
interacting with them throughout the day. Choosing to do lunch duty in the cafeteria to be able
to get to know the students, attending as many events as possible to get to know the students, and
making herself available to speak with them are ways she can learn from them and observe the
way they interact with the school. This is exceptionally apparent in her desire for a family
atmosphere.

Working to develop a family atmosphere at the school is neither quick, nor easy. By all
accounts it is an ongoing task that Ms. Watkins readily welcomes. In her mind, keeping a family
atmosphere helps keep the students and staff connected, and helps her to be able to better see
what is important to the school. Because of the family atmosphere, she has an additional lens to
view the school through, which helps with her observation of the elements of culture at WHS.

Experience

Having been at the school for over a decade, Ms. Watkins has seen a variety of things and
events happen at WHS. From the start, when she was going through a time when fights were
more common, to now when she is trying to get their aviation program off of the ground, she has
had an opportunity to experience many things. And, some events were important. It was
important for the girls’ basketball team to meet Mr. Jim Davis, the man the gym was named
after. When she saw how happy they were to meet him, it helped remind her of the importance
of the alumni to the school.
Another experience was the larger number of fights during the early part of her principalship. Prior to being principal, she had little desire to enter the realm of discipline; she was into curriculum. Once she became principal, discipline was an issue that became much more important, and being able to limit the fights was a priority. Her seeing the impact of the fights on the reputation of the school, and how doling out smaller suspensions wasn’t working, led her to choose to give longer suspensions to slow the number of fights. This experience is connected with the history of the school.

Everything previous is history, but not all history informs the present. Experience has been a good way for Ms. Watkins to inform her present. Through experience she has learned about the elements of culture at her school, and she knows that she has to keep learning if she wants to continue to build and grow the culture in a meaningful way. Through experience, she can inform her leadership and her decision making, so that she can work to make the right decisions. By itself, experience does not teach culture; understanding comes through thoughtful self-reflection.

**Self-reflection**

Looking back, and looking for understanding, are things that Ms. Watkins seems to do well. She is able to thoughtfully tell stories of past experiences and explain how they have helped her to learn and grow. This has also helped her to better understand the elements of the culture of WHS. Going through an event can be an experience, but if one does not process what occurred, it may not have as much weight as it could. Ms. Watkins ability to look back and see what happened, and what was important when it was happening, seems to help her in her decision making and her understanding of her school.
Understanding the school, and the elements of its culture, comes out when she relates stories of the history of the school. From old buildings, to concerts, and even sporting events, she can pull the history through. But, from her self-reflection on the way she handled events like, “poppin’ off Fridays” and losing a band director to a PhD program up north, she hones her leadership. Her decision-making is made better because she reflects on her past decisions, but also because she takes her time.

She noted how her father reminded her that not all decisions need to be made immediately. This thought helps her to remember to reflect on what is going on. Through her reflection she works to try to “make the right decision,” not just make a decision quickly. This in turn also helps her to recognize the way small elements of the culture of the school come about and how they impact the school.

**Time**

As with most people, coming to understand something better can just take time. Looking at learning a language, it takes time to understand the nuances and how to best use the language to convey a thought. Here too, learning the elements of culture at WHS has occurred over time for Ms. Watkins. Being around the school for over a decade has helped her to better understand the way the elements of culture exist at WHS and how they impact WHS on a daily basis. While not every element affects everyone, and not every element affects everything, each of them has its own importance to someone, at some time.

History is easily aligned with coming to understanding through time, and building the family atmosphere is an exercise that only exists because of work over long periods of time. Renovation was something that took time and had an effect on the school in time. What is fascinating to me though is the time element in her understanding of discipline.
Ms. Watkins noted how initially the fighting was a large issue at the school, and she increased the time of suspension to deal with it. Over the years, the fighting went down, but now it is starting to creep up again. Her experience, and self-reflection, have helped her to understand how she can make decisions about fighting and what those decisions might look like. Along those lines, she has a reasonably good expectation of what will occur based on her decisions. At the same time, the amount of time she has been able to interact with the elements of culture around the fighting have given her an insight into this aspect of discipline at WHS. While it is different now than it was before, her understanding of these elements, gained through experience over time, informs her decision-making in a very meaningful way.

**Influences on Leadership**

The second research question guiding this study asked what the principal perceived to be the effects of the school’s culture and its elements on her leadership. In my interviews with Ms. Watkins, she did not overtly say that the school’s culture or its elements affected her ‘leadership.’ However, there were multiple indications of times when she had clearly considered or reflected on the school’s culture and its elements in making decisions.

**Family Atmosphere**

Ms. Watkins perceived that the school’s culture had changed: “our culture, like we were getting better, better, better and the expectations are there, high expectations.” She also believes that the students learned positive behaviors from the administrators and teachers. She explained: “The people I hired to be on our team. They all love the kids, and they're all about the kids, and any kid on this campus knows that they can just walk up to us and talk to any of us at any time…[E]ven the disciplinarians? Yes, they discipline, but they still love their kids. And they still care about them…[The kids] are very polite. Majority of them say Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am.
Yes, sir. No, sir…It's a polite place. Even some of our more difficult kids can even be polite. And some of them, you know, it's great when you can make a difference with some of those students. A lot of times they come in ninth grade as little hellions. By the time they get to be 10th, 11th grade, they've turned around. They become a really great kid.”

As the culture changed to get, “better, better, better,” Ms. Watkins understood the way she made decisions changed some too. From initially focusing on the curriculum of the school, to having to focus on discipline also, she understood that the change in culture necessitated her change in leadership. From leading a school where there were only 1,400 students and not a huge draw to come to the school, to one where they are at capacity and not able to accept more students, her decision-making had to change. Listening to her describe her self-reflection, and seeing how she purposefully made changes to her leadership, made real to me the effect the culture was having on her leadership and decision making.

What strikes me more than the effect was the effect it did NOT have. While she made changes, she also held strongly to her values. Her inner values guided her, giving her a strong base to make decisions from. She may have changed the way she makes some decisions and may have changed her leadership a bit, but her base values remained the same. To me this shows how important values are, especially in relation to culture.

Early on I described how culture is related through artifacts, assumptions and values. Values of the school are often tied to the values of its leaders, and WHS’s values are definitively tied to the values of Ms. Watkins. To me, her keeping to her values even when having to change her leadership helped the school to keep its values and, through them, maintain its culture.

**History**

During the remodeling, it was important for Ms. Watkins to keep the history and the
artifacts that represented it intact. She stated, “Whenever we did the remodel, I wanted to keep the history intact because I felt that is extremely important. Um, mostly to our alumni, people who've graduated from [the] school… I've given many tours, like if they if they have a reunion and they call me. I’ll usually meet up here on a Saturday morning with some and then they even teach me things about the history of [the] school.”

Ms. Watkins maintained artifacts because they were meaningful to the alumni. She shared a story about a monument at the front door:

If you saw the monument there to the right as you're entering the door, um, one of the men, I don't remember his name, but he was here as part of a reunion group, and he had been in the Vietnam War with two of the people that were on that monument, and it was really touching. And he said how their calls to each other through the military radios was Wildcats… He even came home with one of the men… to get the body back to his parents.

Ms. Watkins went on to say why the monument was at the door rather than elsewhere on the campus: [S]ome people want to know why we didn't put the memorial by the flagpole, but knowing the kids and how they sit on things, I felt that it could be damaged, that that's why we put it in that location.

Ms. Watkins also talked about the school mantle and its importance:

… the new kids, they don't know all this history. We actually did something on Wildcat television to kind of teach the kids like, Why is this important? Why was that important? And even the mantle, we actually put it in a glass case. It was never in a glass case. It was in the closet. Well, that is such an historical thing, I think. I mean classes since like 1923 have been putting their patch on that mantle and so we wanted to put it in a glass case… [I]t's kind of funny, I’m a little bit sentimental I guess. But every year before
graduation, when that glass case comes down, it's like my heart drops because I think, oh my gosh, I'm getting ready lose my seniors. I really become attached to them. Plus, the dread of ‘oh no, I’ve got to start over with the 9th graders’…If you look at our discipline record, [seniors are] like at that point there, they know what to do right. I don't have to worry about. They're pretty much young adults at that point. And so, it's kind of sad when you see the glass case come down for graduation, and it stays down until after graduation.

In and of itself, the history may not have directly affected Ms. Watkins’ leadership or decision making, but it definitely informed it. Understanding the importance of the named buildings helped her in the choice to keep the names, even if on different buildings. This in turn helped to keep a small element of the school culture moving forward. The decision she made to hang the picture of the old Adams building in a new case shows her understanding of the importance of this element of culture to the school. So, her understanding of the importance of history in the school culture did have an effect on her decisions.

Renovation

Ms. Watkins felt that her leadership was important when she was helping to move the school through its renovation. Calling it a renovation is a dramatic understatement; most of the buildings were razed and a half-dozen new buildings were built to replace the older structures.

When the initial phases of the renovation were occurring, most of the classrooms were moved into portable classrooms. During one of our conversations, she was wearing a shirt from the time, “Winterbeach Trailer Park, ‘You mess with one of us, you mess with the whole park.’” Gabrielle explained, “I was the park manager… that is when we had 54 portables.” She also explained how she helped keep the students and staff organized during the challenging times:
We actually made the track was the blue field and way back here was the yellow field and we even spray painted the numbers in blue or yellow over there. Some of the teachers really got into it like one of them had theirs looking like a little luau and stuff like that. And some one had flamingos out, it was kind of cute. Yeah, it was It was crazy. I remember taking a picture, because the only way the kids could go from Bluefield or gold field yellow field was they had to walk that back alley and it looked like New York City. You know, 1000 kids at one time.

The experience had the school turned on end, but keeping her students and staff as her first priority helped Gabrielle to lead through the renovation.

Also as a part of the renovation, a great deal of thought went into the design of the new buildings, but Ms. Watkins’ decisions about the school were affected by the school’s culture. For example,

I made the decision that I didn't want lockers. I felt like that was…a thing of the past. And I think it lessens the noise that you have in the hallway. It opens up the hallway…we probably have four more feet of width in each hallway. So, they're not knocking into each other…there's lots more room, and it's quieter in the hallways. I think our academy classrooms help because they're a little larger. So, it's not like you have three classrooms next to each other. I feel like having the academies helps a lot because kids really want to be here for whatever that academy is that they love…I think, you know, having a nicer facility definitely helps. Definitely helps a lot. The old school. There were a lot of, like, really dark places, you know, in so many different corners in areas that are out of sight, and you wouldn't have enough people to be at every corner based on the old structure.
Now pretty much everything's visible. Plus, with all the, you know, technology. The cameras really helped a lot. Individually, these may seem like small pieces, but I am seeing that culture is built through thousands of small pieces over time. Each of these elements helped to inform her and helped her to make a decision she thought was “right,” to move the school forward. In the end, the renovation had a significant effect on the physical look of the school and a significant effect on the culture of the school, which in turn had an effect on Ms. Watkins.

**Discipline**

Over the last 10 or more years, Ms. Watkins has noticed a change in the students, particularly in the area of fighting. The new group of students “don't care about the 10 days [suspension].” In addition, it is more difficult to get repeat offenders into an alternative school. Now Ms. Watkins is thinking about having her own alternative school on her campus where students are “secluded. they can't socialize, they don't go out between classes. They don't go to lunch, nothing.” She is also looking at “right off the bat at the beginning of the year…you take the worst 10 that you had and send them [to alternative school]. [T]hat way your whole school just calms down because they’re like, ‘they don't play…We’ve gotta be nice. We gotta be good. We got to do what we're supposed to do, or we're gonna go…I know that's kind of crazy, but to me that affects school culture.”

Ms. Watkins also talked about a change in the way students ‘socialize’ with each other. She noted:

I think students have changed, they’re very techie, but I just feel like, you know, when we went to high school…how you socialized with people is you went to those sporting
events at your high school or to the dances or whatever. Now, their socialization is done through their phones, so now they don't need to go to a ball game to socialize.

She perceived that students’ interactions through their phones contributes to the fights that occur in the school. She explained:

A majority of our fights start from Snapchat or Instagram, and then we're on a race of trying to get to the kids before the bell rings. But I would say probably even 100% of all fights start from Instagram or Snapchat. Because they’re really tough on their phones. Not so tough in person. And then now you have the problem of people making up fake accounts where the person isn't really saying ‘I want to beat you up.’ Then you’ve got to deal with that.

Computers, and cell phones affecting the fights at a school is something that was not as prevalent when Ms. Watkins started her career in administration. Having to change the way she makes decisions about interacting with students because of them is an effect it has had. This element of the school culture, discipline, is present at every school, but the way that discipline can affect a principal can differ from school to school. WHS has seen its discipline change over the years, and the way the administration chooses to interact with it has changed appropriately.

Ms. Watkins’ reflection on the way the culture of the school was affected by the fights is important and not just because of the effect it had on the daily life of running the school. Ms. Watkins also recognized the effect it was having on the reputation of the school. Her understanding of how important the reputation of the school was to the community helped her decision making around the fighting. During these past years where phones are driving more of the fights, she recognizes that she has to change her leadership to keep the fighting down, which will help to maintain a good reputation for the school.
Tensions between the Elements of School Culture

There are many positive aspects to the culture of WHS, and many elements of the culture have been developed over the years the school has been in existence. Artifacts at the school provide a visible way to see elements of the school’s culture, though not all of them may carry the same meaning to each person. For example, during our school walk, Ms. Watkins showed me an emblem that was placed on the auditorium during the renovation of the school. Its prominent location and size make it noticeable for people passing by. For many, it may show the love that the Masons of the area have for the school and how they are working for its success. For others, it may be a reminder of groups that are particular about who they admit and whose membership may be more exclusive than inclusive. There is tension between the element of history and the element of family atmosphere that the school is trying to maintain.

The cultural element of discipline also contributes to this tension. In her early days of being principal, fighting at WHS was significant. One year had 80 fights, averaging more than two a week. Ms. Watkins saw this element of culture as having a negative effect on the school and its reputation. She changed the way discipline was administered, moving from 3-5 day suspensions to 10 day suspensions. The element of culture here was the fighting, and her decision to move to a more stringent consequence was a small change initiated by the culture of the school. There is tension between the element of discipline and the element of family atmosphere. While the administration at WHS is trying to keep a family atmosphere, disciplinary consequences may be viewed as punitive punishments by those receiving the consequences. Running a school requires administration and teachers to have a set of rules and procedures and to enforce them. At the same time Ms. Watkins wants teachers and
administrators to be ‘trusted’ by students as part of her goal of a caring family atmosphere in the school.

The cultural element of renovation, if cast in a slightly different light, also provides opportunity to consider tension between cultural elements. When Ms. Watkins became principal, she worked to hire teachers who were ‘all about the kids.’ She believes that kids learn from teachers that love kids. At the same time she noted that “they can’t be so lax that the kids don’t learn anything because they have no control of the class.” WHS was struggling to attract students, so she decided to hire teachers who could connect with students to create an atmosphere where students wanted to come to learn.

As Ms. Watkins has overseen the physical renovation of the school, she has also been working at changing the academic culture of the school. She wants teachers who can be more rigorous. She wants teachers that will push students more and help them to achieve greater success academically. In reconsidering how she is making decisions about teacher hiring, she is keeping to her value of putting kids first, but she is thinking about how the element of family atmosphere can accommodate more rigor and challenge in curriculum and instruction.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented findings from the interviews with Ms. Watkins, presenting narrative examples of her coming to the principalship, what she learned of elements of her school’s culture, and how what she knew of these elements of her school’s culture affected decisions she made. Chapter Six will provide a discussion of the findings and connections to relevant literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The chapter will also provide implications for future research, and my reflection on what I have learned and implications for my own leadership aspirations.
CHAPTER SIX:
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND REFLECTION

This study explored the experiences of a secondary school principal, Ms. Watkins, in a school district in Central Florida, in an effort to understand how she came to know and understand the culture of her school, and its elements, as well as her perceptions of the effects of the school’s culture on her leadership of the school. The study was situated in qualitative research and, more specifically, narrative inquiry. I used semi-structured interviews, including a school walk, to gather Ms. Watkins’ perspectives and stories about her experiences and what she saw as various elements of her school’s culture. My goal was to understand what was meaningful to her.

In presenting the findings of the study in Chapters 4 and 5, I used quotations from the interview transcripts to construct narrative descriptions of the stories, experiences and examples that the principal provided. Chapter 4 presented the story of my walk with Ms. Watkins through her school, capturing our conversation as well as what I saw and heard as we walked. Chapter 5 presented narrative descriptions of the findings from the interviews, organized in three sections: Ms. Watkins’ experiences in becoming the principal of Winterbeach High School; Ms. Watkins’ perceptions of the elements of the school’s culture (family atmosphere, history and discipline); and Ms. Watkins perceptions of changes in the school culture (family atmosphere, history, renovation and discipline) and how the school culture affected decisions she made.

This closing chapter will discuss the findings in relation to the review of relevant
literature presented in Chapter 2, present implications for further research, and provide closing reflections on what I have learned from the study in relation to my own leadership aspirations.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Relevant Literature

The concept of culture is one that has been studied for over a century, with roots in anthropology starting with Tylor’s (1920) description of culture as a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (p. 1). Mead (1928) further emphasized that culture can be learned through interactions and experiences. Further into the twentieth century, Geertz (1973) explained his thoughts on characterizing and describing culture, not just as an “experimental science,” but as something that yearned for interpretation. These ideas helped to set the foundation for the study of organizational culture in the late part of the century.

Edgar Schein (2010) first published his book, Organizational Culture and Leadership, in 1985, and this work is considered by many academics in multiple fields as a seminal work in the study of organizational culture. Schein explained that the “cultural forces” in an organization are powerful “because they operate outside of our awareness…but explain many of our puzzling and frustrating experiences” within the organization (p. 7). Like Geertz, Schein proposed that understanding these cultural forces may help leaders to better understand the assumptions that underlie the way their organizations worked and to deal with the anxiety that is unleashed when those assumptions are challenged” (p. 33). Driskill and Brenton (2011) continued to build on this foundation, noting that “culture consists of the webs of significance” (p. 4) that organizational members both create and are “indoctrinated into”—the “language, artifacts, values, celebrations, heroes, history, and norms…[and] unique beliefs and assumptions” of the organization (p. 5).
Schools are generally described as organizations (Bidwell, 2001; Herriott & Firestone, 1984), and there is a body of literature that looks at the concept of school culture (e.g., Deal & Peterson, 2009; Teasley, 2017). Deal and Peterson (2009) noted that an organization’s culture is “a shared webbing of informal folkways and traditions that infuse work with meaning, passion, and purpose” (p. 1). They further explained that the “symbolic fibers” of a school’s culture are important to understand and to “nourish” (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. 4).

These concepts – culture, organizational culture and school culture – provided the foundation for this study. I think that a principal comes to a school as an outsider. To be viewed as a cultural member, the principal must seek out, learn through interactions and experiences, and interpret the cultural elements of the school. As the principal engages with and begins to understand the cultural forces at work in the school, I think the principal develops perceptions of the school’s culture while also seeking to be a cultural member. I believe that a principal can intentionally work to influence or change cultural elements that seem to affect the school negatively while also seeking to ‘nourish’ cultural elements that seem to contribute to the school positively. I also believe that a principal’s leadership decisions and actions might be influenced by this dynamic.

**Family Atmosphere**

For Ms. Watkins family atmosphere is characterized by people who “love the kids” and are “all about the kids.” She explains how she expects teachers and administrators to keep the kids, and their wellbeing, as their primary goal. Ms. Watkins also explains that when looking out for the kids, the teachers and administrators need to challenge them. She noted that her hiring has changed; now she is more cognizant of hiring teachers that have connections, but are rigorous enough to challenge the kids.
For me it was clear that she has worked to create the family atmosphere at the school. With her constant verbal reinforcement, she makes certain everyone hears about it. Her willingness to do whatever is needed to help her students, staff, and teachers also shows how she works to create the family atmosphere at WHS. Each of the artifacts meant something initially to me, but seeing her stop the school walk to help Rachel, or taking the calls from teachers, shows the importance she places on the idea of family atmosphere.

The idea of family is important to Ms. Watkins as is her desire to shape a “family atmosphere” in her school. Mr. Wagner, her principal when she was at RLHS, was a person she admired greatly because of his interactions with his school. The family atmosphere he maintained at RLHS was, in part, due to his gregarious personality, but also due to the many ways in which he connected to the people of RLHS: how he would call everyone he knew to check up on a possible new hire, read the announcements every morning to the students, and attend many school events and community events. Modaff, Butler, and DeWine (2011) might see these multiple connections and communications as helping to build and maintain the culture of the organization, influencing the “norms, values, and beliefs of organizational members” (p. 89). Ms. Watkins’ morning announcements were also intentional: “…we teach politeness, and always push the idea that they should love one another, treat others as you’d want to be treated. I say it every morning.”

Being all about the kids is also part of her value for a family atmosphere. She reaches out to her administrators, teachers and staff, focusing them on decisions that “need to be all about kids.” It is important to her that the adults who work at WHS are “the type that they want the best for the kids.” Ms. Watkins indicated that the people she has hired over the years were hired because they all love the kids: “They all love the kids, and they're all about the kids, and any kid
on this campus knows that they can just walk up to us and talk to any of us at any time.” This
openness sends the message that the adults in the school are approachable; it’s safe for kids to
approach them and talk with them.

A family atmosphere and a safe environment are also important for teachers. Whether
it’s helping a teacher get a laptop for a student, helping a teacher find lost keys, sending a teacher
for professional development, or providing a new teacher with a mentor, in Ms. Watkins’
perspective, it is just as important to help teachers because they are the ones helping kids. Barth
(2003) notes that to build capacity at a school, a principal must look to the “underutilized talent
within an organization” (p. 62). By working to create the family atmosphere at the school, Ms.
Watkins is also helping to build the capacity of the school.

Interviews with Ms. Watkins revealed how hard she works to create a family atmosphere
at the school. She learned the importance of family through her mentors and their leadership
actions and decisions. Her hiring of teachers and administrators is driven by the importance of
working for kids: if someone isn’t working for the kids, they probably are not a good fit for the
school. Her work with kids to stress the importance of being nice, being polite, and treating each
other well is grounded in her value for a family atmosphere. Her work with teachers to help
them have good connections with kids and meet their needs also reflects this value. Lambert
(2003) describes how “teachers become fully alive” in schools that help to develop leadership.
Ms. Watkins does work toward this in her creating a family atmosphere.

Ritchie (2013) described how a principal needs to develop a vision, “the single goal of
creating and nourishing the best possible environment for teaching and learning” (p. 21). While
Ms. Watkins did not specifically state her vision for the school, the concept of a safe
environment is part of the school’s vision and mission. Her value for a family atmosphere and safe environment for kids and teachers is clear.

**History**

Ms. Watkins purposefully brings up stories from the past of the school. Many people may not know that the home side of the stadium was built after the away side of the stadium, and certainly many do not know the story of how it was financed, but to Ms. Watkins it is important that I knew the home side was built because a former alumnus came and held a concert. By itself this doesn’t explain the school culture, but it shows the importance of history, the importance of past alumni, and the importance of retelling the history to others to help carry it on. Wilson (2007) explained this as “the telling and retelling of the stories might help others better understand the past, present, and future” (p. 22). Ms. Watkins wants people to know about the history of WHS because to her it is an important part of the culture of the school.

Winterbeach High School is almost 150 years old; Ms. Watkins understands its history is a very important cultural element. There are multiple artifacts in the school that are visible reminders of the school’s history: the school’s mantle where for every year since the 1920s, the senior class has added a small three-inch, by three-inch cloth representing its tie to the history of the school; the seal of the school prominently displayed in the concrete immediately in front of the new administration building; the named buildings; the old picture of a building, matted and framed and encased in a larger box in the new foreign language hallway. In each case Ms. Watkins expressed the importance of the artifacts and their preservation to the history and culture of the school. This is particularly important given that the school has been moved twice, underwent a major renovation which saw many of the older buildings torn down, and had new buildings erected where the old ones previously stood. It is significant that so many of the
artifacts still exist on the campus. An organization’s artifacts can help to build the culture and maintain the culture that is developed (Driskill & Brenton, 2011).

Also important in the history of the school is the number of notable people who have attended the school, graduated from the school or visited the school. From recording artists, to professional athletes, to business CEOs and educators, there have been hundreds of people who call WHS their alma mater. Many come back to the school, have buildings named for them, or support scholarships in their names. Ms. Watkins recognizes that while not every student may know or understand every name, in displaying their pictures and telling their stories, Ms. Watkins enables current students to learn of alumni accomplishments. Stories of successful alumni and displays of past achievements keeps the cultural elements that they represent alive and encourages current students to create their own achievements (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Renovation

Renovation was important in relation to the history of the school. From the new buildings, to the “trailer park,” and the purposeful design of the school, it was clear that renovation had an impact on the culture of WHS through the new construction. van der Westhuizen et al. (2005) stated, “To influence and change these cultures, the Education Department needs to provide funds for the improvement and renovation of buildings and the provision of adequate facilities” (p. 106).

In the renovation of WHS most of the buildings were razed and a half-dozen new buildings were built to replace the older structures. A great deal of thought went into the design of the new buildings, and Ms. Watkins made decisions that reflected several cultural elements. Creating more hallway space and providing larger spaces for academy classrooms were very much driven by her commitment to working for the kids. At the same time removing lockers
opened up hallways and reduced the tight spaces where students might be unsupervised – both certainly discipline concerns. She was also very mindful of the significance of multiple historical artifacts (e.g., the school seal, building names, the mantle, the old picture) and worked to protect and preserve them.

Ms. Watkins saw the renovation as a way to help improve the structure of the school and also the reputation of the school. Prior to the renovation, the facilities were older, in need of repair, and not necessarily a place many people would want to visit. Physically, the structure of the school would be improved during the renovation, making it a more open, welcoming place. Ms. Watkins was proud of the choices made to do that—from the more open hallways, less noise from the lack of lockers, and even the courtyard that looked like a college campus, they all helped make WHS more approachable. Being more approachable would help change the reputation of the school as well.

Reputation is a big thing for Ms. Watkins. She describes how the community around the school has an understanding of what it expects the school to be, and she has seen how the reputation of the school has changed. When she first arrived at WHS, the school had a reputation of having been a part of the community for a long time, but there was not much “special” about it. The facilities did not have anything to draw students to want to go to WHS or parents to send them. With the renovation, the elements of new buildings, better technology, and an updated campus became reasons for kids and parents to want to attend WHS. The new look of the school was definitely a change in the visual cues of the buildings.

Artifacts are “visible” symbols of an organization’s culture and can be deeply tied to the underlying beliefs and values of that culture (Schein, 2010). Ms. Watkins’ understanding of the school’s history and the importance of various artifacts to alumni and community members as
“they look for them” when they visit the school affected some decisions she made during the renovation.

As I was thinking about the renovation, how it changed the physical part of the school, and how it affected the reputation, I was taken back to Schein (2010). He discussed how “cultural assumptions evolve around all aspects of a group’s relationship to its external environment” (p. 91). Undergoing the renovation changed the way WHS looked; it was easy for the outside environment to see the change, but at the same time, the reputation of the school was also changing because of the changes surrounding discipline.

**Discipline**

Norms are also cultural elements. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines a norm as “an accepted standard or a way of behaving or doing things that most people agree with” ([https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/norm](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/norm)). Fighting was a common occurrence at WHS. Ms. Watkins noted, “We had 80 fights in one year. It was horrible.” One might say that for some students, fighting was an accepted way of behaving. One student explained this to Ms. Watkins: “I asked one of the kids, I was like, ‘why do you all fight every Friday?’ And he said, ‘It’s poppin’ off Friday Ms. Watkins’.”

However, when Ms. Watkins was speaking to people outside of the school, she found that they thought the school had a bad reputation because of the discipline:

…it gives your school a bad reputation. And WHS had such a bad reputation because of all the fights, because a lot of the fights would happen in the street…So everybody in the community that drives down [the] Street, what did they see?

Ms. Watkins had noted in an interview that she had little interest in the discipline-side of the school; she was an Assistant Principal for Curriculum. When she became Principal, she
knew she had to address the fighting and the way discipline was being handled. This was and continues to be a challenge for her.

Prior to her becoming the principal, students disciplined for fighting received a 3-5 day suspension from school. Ms. Watkins changed this:

…right off the bat, you fight on this campus, you're going to receive a 10 day suspension and we're charging you…And then I wanted to make sure that what I wanted done was being done. So every time there was a fight, I was in their offices. Making sure that they got the 10 days…So we went from 80 fights to 35 fights the following year.

Over the last 10 or more years, Ms. Watkins has noticed a change in the students, particularly in the area of fighting. The new group of students “don't care about the 10 days [suspension].” In addition, it is more difficult to get repeat offenders into an alternative school. She also believes that students’ interactions through their phones contribute to the fights that occur in the school. She explained:

A majority of our fights start from Snapchat or Instagram, and then we're on a race of trying to get to the kids before the bell rings. But I would say probably even 100% of all fights start from Instagram or Snapchat. Because they’re really tough on their phones.

Now Ms. Watkins is thinking about having her own alternative school on her campus where students are secluded and not allowed to socialize. She is also looking at “right off the bat at the beginning of the year…you take the worst 10 that you had and send them [to alternative school]…[T]hat way your whole school just calms down…I know that's kind of crazy, but to me that affects school culture.”

Also, as the fighting began to increase, WHS took that on as part of its reputation.

Bolman and Deal (2013) noted that reputation is connected to an organization as a source of
power. “Reputation builds on expertise” (p. 197), and the expertise that WHS was showing at this point was that it was good at fisticuffs; for Ms. Watkins, this was not copacetic. She saw that the power to attract students was waning, and that too was affecting the culture at WHS.

Partially because of the fighting, partially because of the fact it was newer, Raptor Lake pulled in many of the students who would have been going to WHS. Darling-Hammond, Ross, and Miliken (2006) cited Lee and Ready when describing how students choose schools: “higher-achieving students tend to select subunits with reputations for rigor, while lower-achieving students choose sub-units with reputations for lower standards” (p. 188). Fighting was giving the impression that WHS had lower standards, and this was driving students to choose other schools. More importantly, Ms. Watkins’ understanding of the rationale for the fighting showed she had a deeper understanding of its roots, how those roots were related to the culture of WHS, and then how it was affecting the culture of the school as a whole.

Schein (2010) noted that “the most central issue for leaders is to understand the deeper levels of a culture, to assess the functionality of the assumptions made at that level, and to deal with the anxiety that is unleashed when those assumptions are challenged” (p. 33). The continuing challenges that Ms. Watkins has with discipline illustrates that ‘deeper levels’ of the school’s culture and changes in culture membership with the ‘new group of students’ may contribute to the change in effectiveness of the disciplinary sanctions she put into place.

**Summary**

Revisiting Kaplan and Owings (2013) perspectives on three levels of school culture – artifacts and creations, values and basic assumptions – Figure 1 below illustrates levels of school culture at Winterbeach High School. There were key artifacts that were very important to Ms.
Watkins (e.g., the mantle, seal, building names). She recognized that these artifacts have been and are important to the school, but she had to learn their importance over time, and they are not necessarily understood by today’s students. Family atmosphere and history were values that Ms. Watkins spoke about most frequently. She had a better understanding of these, and she could really see these values during the renovation. However, she was still challenged at times because discipline concerns worked against the family atmosphere she worked to create. And, some basic assumptions, or important intangibles, are hard to see. The school has an importance to the location, but discipline still affects the reputation of the school, and outsiders don’t see the relationships among students and teachers that contribute to the family atmosphere. Ms. Watkins felt she understood the nuances of these intangibles, but she still knew there was work to be done to get the word out – sometimes to those outside the school, and sometimes to today’s students.
What Is School Culture?

Roland Barth (2002) explained how the “life and learning” of a school is impacted by the school’s culture. He explained school culture as “a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization” (p. 4). As Barth explained it, and has been shown in this study, a school’s culture may be complex and comprised of many elements or attributes.

Elements of culture play an important part in the influence of the school’s culture and can be avenues that leaders work to influence to change in the culture. Much has been written about leaders working to change culture, or build on culture, or alter cultural elements (e.g., Deal & Peterson, 1991, 2009; Fisher, Frey, & Pumpian, 2012; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Prosser, 1999). In this study, there were multiple elements of culture that Ms. Watkins identified as present at WHS, how they could be used, and in some cases were used by Ms. Watkins, to affect change in the culture of the school.

Culture is important to an organization (e.g., Bolman & Deal, 2013; Schein, 2010). Schein (2010) described an organization’s culture as the “way we do things around here” (p. 235). At WHS it was apparent that there were many aspects of the culture that were just the way things were done. One example can be seen in the way that Ms. Watkins was open to speaking with students and teachers. Her white board outside of her office was just one way the kids could communicate with her. The fact her teachers could call her, and have her answer, is another example of the way things were done around WHS.

Schein (2010) also noted that an organization’s culture builds over time as the employees interact with and adapt to the external environment, solve problems, and go through various changes. What employees learn and gain from these experiences become values, beliefs,
principles, policies and practices that are followed every day, forming the culture of the organization. At WHS I saw how the family atmosphere has been built over time; it now seems to surround the school and is almost omnipresent on the campus. The history of the school also has been built over time. From the movement of the campus to its current location, to the building of a new side to the stadium, and all of the alumni who have come through the school, the history has been established as an element of culture over the life of the school.

Speaking with Ms. Watkins, many of the elements of the history of the school were introduced to me. When we walked the campus, the stories took form and had deeper meaning. The example of the seal of the school really showed this. Walking into the school for the first time, I had noticed the seal—sitting right in front of the doors it is hard to miss. Hearing from her about how she had walked into the construction meeting to ensure it was placed there in the concrete gave more depth to its meaning. When we were walking, and she showed it to me and related how she had heard stories of the upperclassmen making the underclassmen clean it with toothbrushes, this really gave the seal more meaning. All of this occurred because of the length of time surrounding the seal, from when it was first installed at the previous location to where it sits now. Just as Schein noted, the importance of this seal has been developed over time through all of the changes of the school.

For me, the idea of culture is similar to what Geertz (1973) was describing about culture when he was distilling Clyde Kluckhohn's words from his work *Mirror for Man*. Geertz noted:

In some twenty-seven pages of his chapter on the concept, Kluckhohn managed to define culture in turn as: (1) "the total way of life of a people"; (2) "the social legacy the individual acquires from his group"; (3) "a way of thinking, feeling, and believing"; (4) "an abstraction from behavior"; (5) a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the
way in which a group of people in fact behave; (6) a "store-house of pooled learning"; (7) "a set of standardized orientations to re? current problems"; (8) "learned behavior"; (9) a mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior; (10) "a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men"; (11) "a precipitate of history"; and turning, perhaps in desperation, to similes, as a map, as a sieve, and as a matrix.

For me culture is something that is made up of many, many pieces. Reading about culture, discussing it with Ms. Watkins, and seeing it on the walk of her school, it has become even more evident to me that culture cannot be just one thing and definitely not the same one thing to everyone.

From my vantage point, looking for a singular description of culture is like listening for the exact right pitch of a song bird in a cacophony of bells, alarms, and squawking hens—it is near impossible. There are so many differing elements that go into culture, for so many different people and from so many different lenses, that attempting to distill it down to a singular definition would be a fool’s errand. At the same time, there are many things that seem to be similar about the descriptions of culture, and many elements that seem to transcend the myriad of definitions.

Of all of the elements of school culture that I have read about, talked about, or seen in person, the one thing that keeps coming back to me is that culture is affected by ten thousand little things. Major events can definitely change a culture, but these are few and far between. Rather, the little things that continue to happen, sometimes frequently, are what really influence the culture. Constantly reminding staff about being “all about the kids,” having signs about family, and “we do love,” all help to be many of the ten thousand things. Knowing the alumni
and their contributions are elements, while telling the new students about them too are elements of the culture. Many are purposeful, and many are subconscious, but all of the ten thousand things are what help to build and maintain the culture.

So, while Barth (2002) noted culture was a “complex pattern” (p. 4) within an organization, I think it is a bit more nuanced than that. Yes, there are patterns, and yes they affect attitudes, beliefs, and values, but sometimes they are not so much patterns as they are breezes. Walking along campus, a breeze can be soft, having little effect on the direction, or manner, in which you are walking. Or a breeze can be stiff and strong, causing you to take an alternate route, or tuck your head, holding your hat so as not to lose it. Breezes may have typical directions they come from and have a predictable nature about them, making them easy to deal with. Similarly, culture may have typical patterns from which it arises, allowing those interacting with it to have an easier time of navigating it and an easier time understanding the culture. Conversely, breezes can also come from random directions, seemingly out of nowhere, either gentle and small, or strong and blustery. The same can be said of elements of culture, sometimes they may come from seemingly obscure directions and can easily knock an organization off its feet.

In this regard, walking WHS and talking with Ms. Watkins, I could see how some elements of the culture were extremely important to some people, while others may not even notice them. Borrowing an old analogy, the culture of a school is like an onion; it has many layers and a strong, tough core. Also, like an onion, culture may have different effects on those who experience it. At WHS, the mantle is one example of layers of cultural meaning that affect some, but not all.
The senior class each year adds their little piece onto the mantel. For the class officers, or those close to them, this is probably a significant event. For people who have been around WHS for a period of time, they too probably recognize the significance of the small piece of cloth being added year after year. But, to someone walking in the front door of the school for the first time, it probably is not much more than an interesting piece of cloth on the wall. These layers, as Schein noted, developed over time and carry meaning to those who interact with them.

Along with artifacts, rituals at WHS play an important part in building and maintaining the culture. Deal and Peterson (2009) stated, “Without rites to note accomplishments or offer symbolic recognition of small wins and incremental improvements, the chance to renew hopes and spirit would decline” (p. 89). Welcoming the students to school each day, and ending her announcements with “be nice,” Ms. Watkins has created her own ritual, and this ritual is, as Deal and Peterson (2009) stated, “the key to understanding the essence of culture” (p. 90). By itself “be nice” is not the description of the culture, but it does cause the concept of family atmosphere to sublimate, bringing it down from an ethereal state to something that is more solid, something more tangible.

Ultimately, understanding the culture of WHS is less an exercise in describing the definition of culture, but rather an exercise in exploring and explaining the layers. It is telling the stories of past alumni and their accomplishments, it is telling the story of how fighting was once a bigger problem, and reminding to those listening that the school has grown over decades. Weaving the pieces together is what describes the culture of WHS, and that weaving is what makes it different for each person looking at the culture of the school.

**How Does One Learn about a School’s Culture?**
For one to learn about a school’s culture, one needs to view the culture through their own observation, their own experience, their own self-reflection, over time. Ms. Watkins came to understand the culture of WHS through her own observations of the school and of individual elements of the culture at the school. As she moved through experiences in the school, she interacted with the elements of culture, which helped her to have first-hand knowledge of them. Through her self-reflection she was able to look at her experiences, and her observations, and come to have a better understanding of the elements of culture. This better understanding of the elements helped to give the elements more depth. Schein (2010) emphasized the importance of getting to “deeper levels of a culture, to assess the functionality of the assumptions made at that level” (p. 33). Understanding the deeper levels of culture helped Ms. Watkins learn how to interact with it and how to influence it. In addition, the time she spent at WHS helped her to come to some clarity about the culture that someone walking in the door on day one could not have.

For someone walking in on the first day, this way of learning culture would require one to open up to many things. Observing culture and experiencing it also requires self-reflection, a purposeful thinking about what has been seen and experienced. This requires patience and practice and time. Learning about culture can take years, as was Ms. Watkins’ experience. For a new leader, or a leader in a new school, this purposeful learning of school culture may be one of the most paramount priorities of the principalship.

With regard to self-reflection, Feldman (2016) expressed, “In critical self-reflection, individuals and collaborative groups interrogate their practice and its consequences, how they understand their practice, and the conditions under which they practice” (p. 135). This intense look at the practice of leadership, and its consequences, should help the principal to better
understand the way their leadership interacts with the elements of culture in the school. It also
may help the principal to better understand the cultural elements through which students, staff,
and teachers may be influenced. To be able to recognize these elements may help the principal
to better understand how the different layers of the culture are affecting those within the school.

Sergiovanni (2009) explained that a school’s culture is “the basic assumptions that
govern what is thought to be true, what is right, and for all intents and purposes, what is reality
for the school” (p. 157). He described the importance of learning the layers of the culture and
how each builds upon the next. Walker and Slear (2011) noted that the principal’s leadership
through the culture directly affects the teachers, and they observed that teachers will be “more
interested in understanding the school culture and learning about what is happening on a larger
scale outside of their classroom” (p. 54). A good leader needs to be aware of the culture of the
school they are in and work through the culture.

Kotter and Cohen (2012) positive that for change, an organization needs to see the
elements of its culture and to determine if the elements are important or not to the organization.
They explain how the “new culture…develops through consistency of successful action over a
sufficient period of time” (p. 5). From this they also noted, “A great deal of work can be blown
away by the winds of tradition in a remarkably short period of time” (p. 5). In walking with Ms.
Watkins, I appreciated how she saw elements of culture throughout the school and how she
consistently worked to make changes. Her consistency in the idea of the family atmosphere is
one explicit example of a successful action over a period of time. While this has been successful
for her, I was also appreciative to see that she was aware of not doing something because it’s
“always been done that way” and the possibility of getting stuck in tradition for the sake of
tradition.
Her idea to attempt to create an alternative school on campus can be seen as trying something different to address a problem. If she continued to wait to move students who were constantly disruptive off campus to an alternative school, she’d never have them leave campus, and they would continue to be disruptive. Her idea to create a smaller version on her campus is a way of changing the way things are done, not getting caught in tradition.

It is also apparent that Ms. Watkins looked at the elements of the school and saw the importance of artifacts like the war memorial or the seal. Looking at them, feeling the history that pulls together through the artifacts, and thinking about how to best display them to continue their influence were important to Ms. Watkins to help maintain the culture of the school. When the renovation was occurring, it became even more important for her to display them in a meaningful way for future students and teachers of WHS.

Implications for Further Research

The findings of this study provide insight into the cultural elements of one high school as perceived and communicated by one principal. Even though a singular perspective is presented, the cultural elements uncovered had meaning for the principal and for the school. Would other administrators in this school see the same cultural elements and in the same way? Would teachers see the same cultural elements and in the same way?

Ms. Watkins was aware of how cultural elements of her school affected some decisions she made. How might other principals describe their awareness of the influence of their school cultures on the decisions they make? In what kinds of decisions or issues being addressed by the decisions are they most aware of their school cultures?

Are there differences between types and levels of schools and the cultural elements that principals perceive in their schools? Do traditional public schools have similar problems with
their cultures compared to private schools? Do they have similar problems to public charter schools? With so many elements of culture in so many schools, there are an endless number of studies that can be done.

With so many possible studies, I am sincerely interested to see how other principals of secondary schools see the cultures of their schools? In the study of educational leadership, much work is done helping future leaders learn to look at their current and future school cultures. Once these future leaders have identified aspects of the cultures, or elements of the cultures of the schools, they are taught to look and try to change the culture of the school. It would be fascinating to do a study of a new principal, or new assistant principal, to see how they acclimate to the preexisting school culture at their new school. It may also be interesting to follow a group of future leaders for several years, have them journal about their perceptions of the ideas of culture in their classwork, then have them journal about how they view the elements of culture in the schools where they are working. Then continue to follow them as they move ahead in their careers and move to new schools and into new positions of responsibility.

Purposefully looking at the way elements of culture impact an administrator’s leadership and decision making is an area that I believe should be studied to help make more empathetic leaders. If a leader can look at, and in, themselves to see how they are affected by the elements of culture at their school, they should be able to take this knowledge to help inform their interactions with the students, staff, and community members who associate with the school. This in turn should help the leader to be more purposeful, and more meaningful, in the way they lead. Also, this may prove to help leaders to be more inclusive, and more aware of students, or groups of students, who may be on the periphery within their schools. Overall, the
understanding a principal may gain should only help to improve their ability to work with the stakeholders of that principal’s school.

Reflexivity Revisited

For me, this study has clarified a great deal about culture, specifically school culture and how a principal interacts with it. I have found that the many small elements of school culture, while not impacting everyone on the campus, had a great deal of import to many people on the campus of the school. As new principals move into their positions at new schools, it seems that learning the elements of their school’s culture through observation, experience, self-reflection, and time is a necessity. It also seems important for them to connect the elements of culture with the artifacts, values, and assumptions of the school culture, to better learn the deeper layers of the culture of the school.

My understanding of culture has come through my own sense-making and meaning-making around the concept. Going into the study I read a great deal about culture, how the elements of culture can affect organizations, and how leaders can attempt to affect the culture of the organizations they lead. Past experience learning about leadership had also given me a background in how a leader can attempt to change the culture though a variety of tools. What helped me make more sense of it though was watching Ms. Watkins in person.

Ms. Watkins interacted with students, teachers, staff, and community members amazingly while I was in her presence. From stopping a school walk to help an administrator to answering a phone call from a teacher trying to help a student, it was clear that Ms. Watkins sincerely understood the elements of culture at her school. Individual elements of culture do not make up the entirety of the culture of the school, but when they all add together, they do. However, if a
principal is not attempting to learn about all of the elements of culture within a school, the principal will never be able to grasp the entirety of the culture.

For me, attempting to learn the elements of the school culture seems to be the strongest way to better understand the way the school’s culture is working. The meaning of the elements may be varied, but they all are specific, important aspects of the culture of a school. My personal meaning making came when I realized that all of the elements are important. While not necessarily important to every person, or even most people, they are important to people within the school, which makes them important to the school. Looking past the utilitarian view of doing the best good for the most people, and seeing that sometimes it needs to be the best good for an individual, or small group, it can be seen how the elements of culture in a school carry so much weight.

Watching Ms. Watkins explain the importance of things like introducing the basketball players to the person the gym was named after gave an insight that the little things matter. Listening to her explain how the first lacrosse team’s photograph carries weight in the school also shows that small things make big impacts. Coming to understand how each of the little things mattered so much to her really showed her dedication to the school, but also showed how hard she works to understand the elements of the culture of the school and how important they are to the stakeholders of the school.

This study highlights the fact that the culture of this school did indeed impact the principal, her thinking about and interactions with the school, and her decision making. The study shows that culture and is multiple elements exist at this school, that the culture affects those within the school, and that the principal, being within the school, can also be affected by the culture.
This study also points to a need for more research into how school culture would affect new leaders, or leaders at new schools, and how new leaders would need to be supported to adjust to the change they will experience when they get to a new school. How do we prepare school leaders to understand how culture can affect decision making? What do school leaders need to know to best take school culture into account in their decision making and respond when the culture begins to flex its muscle when change is on the horizon?

How much of an affect the culture of a school has on a particular leader remains to be seen. Ms. Watkins had a great deal of experience in this school, and she had a solid footing in her values, which seemed to help her when elements of the culture began to affect her decision making. Yes, she changed the way she made decisions, but she did not change her values, and as such, the school continued on a positive path moving forward toward her vision of what she wanted the school to be. If someone else had been in her position who was not as grounded in their values, or who did not have the experiences Ms. Watkins did, the outcomes of the effects of the culture on them may have been dramatically different.

I am grateful for having an opportunity to walk with Ms. Watkins, and I am appreciative of her leadership at WHS. My hope is that I can learn to be as flexible as Ms. Watkins and to have the understanding of the elements of school culture the way she does. I also hope to one day have the self-reflective ability that Ms. Watkins utilizes to inform her leadership and decision making. I hope to learn this firsthand as I will be interviewing for a position at WHS because of my interactions with Ms. Watkins and the way she chooses to lead her school, Winterbeach High.
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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW ONE PROTOCOL

Introduction: First, thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. Your time, experience, and perspectives are extremely valuable, and your contribution is greatly appreciated. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your experiences, and your individual, unique perspective about your school’s culture and the elements of the culture of your school. This is an open conversation, so I encourage you to ask questions, clarify, and engage as you feel comfortable.

1. Tell me about yourself and how you became the principal of Winterbeach High School.

2. From your perspective, what is school culture?

3. How would you describe the culture of your school?

4. Let’s explore elements that often contribute to the culture of a school. Which of these elements do you see contributing to your school’s culture? Tell me about them.

   - Architecture
   - Artifacts/Symbols
   - Assumptions
   - Attitudes
   - Beliefs
   - Ceremonies
   - Communications/Language
   - Decision Making/Problem Solving
   - Heroes/Villains
   - Lore/History/Myths/Stories
   - Norms of Behavior
   - Partnerships
   - Rules
   - Social Climate
   - Traditions
   - Values

5. Where do you see these cultural elements showing themselves in your school?
APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW TWO PROTOCOL

Introduction: First, thank you again for volunteering to participate in this study. I have asked you to bring several artifacts that show, evidence, or demonstrate the elements of the culture of your school. Also, we will be taking a quick walking tour of campus where you can show where some of these elements are present. Again, this is an open conversation, so I encourage you to ask questions, clarify, and engage as you feel comfortable.

We will explore these questions around each of the artifacts you have brought today:

1. Tell me about the artifact.
2. What does this artifact mean to you?
3. What does this artifact mean to the school?
4. How does the artifact evidence or demonstrate elements of your school’s culture?
5. Why is this artifact important to sustaining the school’s culture?
APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW THREE PROTOCOL

Introduction: Again, thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. This is again an open conversation, so I encourage you to ask questions, clarify, and engage as you feel comfortable.

Prior to our meeting today, I asked you think about your history with the school because I am interested in how you came to know the culture of your school and how you see its culture influencing your leadership style or decision making. Our conversation is going to center around the elements of school culture that you have described in our previous conversations.

1. How did you first come to know about [insert element of school culture from previous conversation]? What was happening at the time? How was it brought to your attention?
2. When did you come to understand the importance of this element to the school?
3. In what ways has this element shaped the way you look at the school?
4. In what ways has this element informed you as principal of the school?
5. How has the school’s culture influenced the way you lead the school? Can you give me an example?
6. How has the school’s culture influenced decisions you make? Can you give me an example?
7. How have you used what you know about this element of the school’s culture to influence or change the school’s culture? Can you give me an example?
expectations. And then now, because you're kind of pulled back, you got kids that don't care if they
get 10 day suspensions and you got the difficulty of sending them to alternative school, the worst

I love... just because it's not just, you know, I worked under working ones.

1 That is fascinating. So outside of the fighting, how do you think the rest of the culture of school
here?

2 Actually, I think we have the most polite students because maybe they take that from our
administrative staff because our administrative staff. The people I hired to be on our team. They
all love the kids, and they're all about the kids, and any kid on this campus knows that they can just
walk up to us and talk to any of us at any time. Um, and even the disciplinarians? Yes, they
discipline, but they still love their kids. And they still care about them. I've actually had people
come on campus, and they will stop me to tell me how amazed they are. I had a lady from Keiser,
and she says she visits high schools all over the state. She says, I've been your campus five times.
I've had to go the very back of your campus. And she says, I have yet to open a door for myself,
because of our students. Also, when district people come here and they go and they go in
classrooms and they asked the kids questions and blah, blah, blah our kids do not mind to tell you
exactly. You know, you asked me a question. I'm gonna tell you. They're very polite. Majority of
them say Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am. Yes, sir. No, sir. It's just very. It's a polite place. Even some of
our more difficult kids can even be polite. And some of them, you know, it's great when you can
make a difference with some of those students. A lot of times they come in ninth grade as little
hellions. you. By the time they get to be 10th 11th grade there, they've turned around. They become
a really great kid.

So I think most of the time a lot of different elements contribute to it. The school, The school is
not new, but the school is brand new here. Do you think any of the architecture of the school may
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APPENDIX E. UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA IRB APPROVAL

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

March 9, 2020

Robert Holby
102 Lake Ring Drive
Winter Haven, FL 33884

Dear Mr. Robert Holby:

On 3/6/2020, the IRB reviewed and approved the following protocol:

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<td>Title</td>
<td>A Narrative Inquiry into a Principal’s Understanding of School Culture and Its Influences on Principal Leadership</td>
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The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review.

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (IRP-103).

Please note, as per USF policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in BuiltIRB. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant a modification or new application.

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Walker
IRB Research Compliance Administrator
APPENDIX F. CITI CERTIFICATE

Certificate of Completion

Robert Holby

Completed the Social / Behavioral Investigators and Key Personnel Refresher Course

on Monday, July 15, 2019

USF
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

CITI Certificate ID#: 31017
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert M. Holby grew up across the world, the son of an Air Force officer. A graduate of Lehigh Senior High School, in Lehigh Acres, FL, he received a Bachelor of Science in Science-Business from the University of Notre Dame and a Master of Business Administration from St. Leo University.

For more than a decade, he has served as a teacher, science coach, and mentor in the Polk County Public School District. His experiences include being selected by the National Science Teachers Association as a New Science Teacher Academy Fellow in 2013, leading the Lake Region High School Academic team to win the county championship, and leading the Polk County Academic team to a Top 5 finish in the state finals, all while leading the school’s Key Club and National Honor Society.

How a principal comes to understand culture and how that culture affects the principal is a sincere intrigue for Robert, as he is looking to move into an administrative role and wants to have a positive impact on the schools he will lead. He hopes this knowledge will help him to connect better with the schools he works at and hopes it will allow him to better connect with the people in those schools. He believes the connection to people is often the most important aspect of a leader’s ability to lead.

Finally, to quote Robert’s message to his students before they leave his class, “Have a wonderful day, be safe out there, and do great things. Always Do Great Things!”