

EXPLORING SCHOOL CULTURE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMPOWERMENT FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the dynamic interplay between school culture and community engagement and how their convergence empowers educational outcomes. A mixed-methods research design was utilised, combining quantitative survey data and qualitative thematic analysis to explore perceptions, lived experiences, and perceived impact among stakeholders. Results revealed that a nurturing school culture, rooted in inclusivity, shared values, and Catholic tradition, directly correlates with academic motivation and student engagement. Community involvement further amplifies this effect by fostering trust, belonging, and real-world relevance. However, challenges such as favouritism, academic pressure, and social inequality persist. A proposed empowerment framework is presented, emphasising collaborative practices, adaptive leadership, and community-rooted partnerships as pathways to sustain school improvement.

Keywords: School Culture; Community Engagement; Student Empowerment; Catholic Education; Mixed Methods; Stakeholder Perception

1. INTRODUCTION

School culture and community engagement are powerful agents of transformation within educational systems. School culture, a collective term for the values, beliefs, and practices that shape school life, plays a critical role in determining student achievement, teacher performance, and institutional resilience. Community engagement, the collaboration between schools and their broader networks—families, organisations, local leaders—enhances relevance and inclusivity in the learning environment. While both are individually impactful, their integration can catalyse sustainable educational empowerment. This study aims to uncover how these elements coalesce in practice, drawing insights from a Catholic educational context.

Effective school cultures exhibit shared vision, respect, inclusivity, and academic rigour [3]. According to Bryk and Schneider [1], trust among educators and students promotes mutual accountability and holistic development. Faith-based schools often embed spiritual values into their culture, resulting in distinctive identity and discipline models.

The framework emphasises six types of involvement, including parenting, volunteering, and collaboration with the community [5]. Engagement enhances student outcomes when families and communities are seen as partners rather than stakeholders on the periphery [9].

Many studies have been conducted on teaching pedagogies [10-14], student preferences and readiness [15,16], student motivation and attitude [17-19, 20], teachers skills, competencies, and challenges [21, 22, 23], assessment techniques and tools [24, 25, 26, 27] and other related factors [28-34] in order to enhance students learning outcome but little was done on student empowerment.

Despite ongoing educational reforms, many schools continue to face challenges related to low student engagement, academic underperformance, and inconsistent stakeholder involvement. School culture and community engagement have been widely acknowledged as critical factors influencing these outcomes. However, there is limited empirical evidence on how these two dimensions interact to empower students, particularly within faith-based educational contexts. This study seeks to address the gap by exploring:

1. How school culture shapes the learning environment and influences academic and socio-emotional development.
2. How does community engagement enhance educational outcomes and stakeholder collaboration, and
3. what framework can be developed to strengthen empowerment practices through the integration of school culture and community involvement?

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to analyse school culture and community engagement through both statistical trends and lived experiences.

2.1. Participants

Data was gathered from 61 students, 25 teachers, 6 administrators, and 3 parents. The sample reflected a diverse set of stakeholders actively involved in a Catholic school.

2.2. Research Instrument

The study utilized a structured survey questionnaire to gather quantitative data from students, teachers, administrators, and parents. The survey explored various aspects of stakeholder involvement, including roles within the school community, length of engagement, perceived levels of support, and participation in school culture and community initiatives. To complement the quantitative data, open-ended questions were incorporated to collect qualitative insights. These questions invited respondents to describe their perceptions of school culture, share experiences with community engagement, suggest areas for improvement, and identify challenges and opportunities. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods to determine trends, while thematic coding was applied to the open-ended responses to uncover recurring patterns and deeper insights.

2.3. Data Gathering Procedure

The data collection process followed a systematic and ethical approach to ensure accuracy, validity, and inclusiveness of perspectives. Prior to data gathering, consent

was obtained from all participants, including students, teachers, administrators, and parents. The structured survey questionnaire was distributed physically and electronically to ensure accessibility across different stakeholder groups. Respondents were given clear instructions and ample time to complete the forms, with the support of designated coordinators in each participant group.

After the surveys were collected, open-ended questions were reviewed for completeness and clarity. These qualitative responses provided additional context and allowed for richer thematic insights. The collected data were organized, encoded, and subjected to descriptive statistical analysis to summarize trends and frequencies. For qualitative responses, a thematic analysis approach was employed, wherein recurring words, phrases, and sentiments were identified and grouped into meaningful categories. This dual process enabled the researcher to explore both the measurable indicators of school culture and community engagement, and the lived experiences that shaped them.

2.4. Thematic Analysis Process

The study employed a thematic analysis approach to qualitatively analyze the open-ended responses collected from stakeholders. This involved reading and coding responses to identify recurring patterns, sentiments, and issues related to school culture and community engagement. The coding process led to the emergence of major themes such as **Belonging and Inclusivity, Pressure and Hierarchy, and Desire for Participatory Engagement**. These themes provided deep insights into stakeholders' perceptions, revealing both strengths and challenges in the school's cultural and engagement practices. Thematic analysis thus enabled the researcher to interpret lived experiences and recommend actionable strategies aligned with the study's empowerment framework.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results in alignment with the study's core research problems: the influence of school culture on learning and development, the impact of community engagement, and the development of a framework for empowerment.

3.1. Influence of School Culture on Learning and Development

A dominant theme was the integration of faith, discipline, and mutual respect. Respondents described the culture as "goal-oriented," "inclusive," "respectful," and a "Catholic way of living." Traditions, spiritual practices, and a strong sense of community were highly valued. Over 90% rated school support as 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale. Aspects contributing to this support included teacher approachability, peer collaboration, and accessibility of school administrators.

Table 1. Rating of Support Felt in School Environment

Support Rating	Frequency	Percentage
5 (Very High)	22	36.1%
4	30	49.2%
3	10	16.4%
2	2	3.3%
1 (Not at all)	0	0%

Respondents linked supportive environments with motivation and improved engagement. As one put it, "If the culture is not peaceful, I will not be motivated to go to school." However, issues like favouritism, academic stress, and inconsistencies in discipline were also highlighted. One student noted, "There's support, but it sometimes feels like some students get more opportunities than others."

3.2. Impact of Community Engagement

Respondents identified active Parent-Teacher Meetings, community service, and volunteer programs as key initiatives. 88% believed community engagement enhances academic achievement through mentorship, real-world application, and exposure to broader social dynamics.

Table 2. Participation in Community Engagement Activities

Community Activity	Respondents
Parent-Teacher Meeting	24
Volunteer Opportunities	11
Community Service Projects	25
All of the Above	2

Common challenges included low parental involvement due to work obligations, lack of resources, and occasional judgment toward non-conforming identities. Despite this, community engagement was consistently regarded as a vital contributor to student motivation and institutional success.

3.2. Thematic Synthesis and Implications for Empowerment

Key themes emerging from qualitative responses revealed three pressing issues:

- **Belonging and Inclusivity:** Respondents highlighted a strong sense of community rooted in faith and tradition.
- **Pressure and Hierarchy:** Several noted the presence of social stratification and stress from high expectations.
- **Desire for Participatory Engagement:** Many advocated for student-led initiatives and more flexible, inclusive policies.

These themes underscore the need for a structured approach that empowers all stakeholders. The findings informed the proposed Empowerment Framework. Based on the results, the following five-pillar framework was developed to promote inclusive and collaborative school environments:

Table 3. Empowerment Framework for School Culture and Community Engagement

Pillar	Description
Shared Vision and Identity	Embed a cohesive mission grounded in faith, discipline, and academic excellence.
Inclusive Decision-Making	Establish participatory structures involving students, parents, and staff in key decisions.
Community-Rooted Partnerships	Leverage relationships with local organisations, parishes, and alumni for collective growth.
Reflective Practice	Promote self and group reflection to address favouritism, bias, or disengagement.
Capacity Building	Provide training for educators on inclusive teaching and engagement strategies.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study confirm that school culture and community engagement are critical pillars in fostering an empowered and supportive learning environment. A culture characterised by inclusivity, discipline, and faith-based values enhances motivation, academic performance, and social development. Simultaneously, meaningful community engagement—through partnerships, volunteerism, and parent-teacher collaboration—amplifies the educational experience by providing students with broader support systems and real-world connections.

Challenges such as favouritism, academic stress, and limited stakeholder participation highlight areas requiring intentional reform. In response, a Five-Pillar Empowerment Framework was proposed to guide institutions in embedding shared vision, inclusivity, reflection, collaboration, and capacity-building within their operations.

5. RECOMMENDATION

The recommendations drawn from this study were based on the significance of the study, along with the results of this study.

- For School Leaders and Administrators:** Institutionalise inclusive decision-making structures and adopt the Empowerment Framework as a strategic tool in school planning and development. Promote regular stakeholder dialogues to ensure transparency and alignment.
- For Teachers and Staff:** Integrate reflective practices and culturally responsive teaching strategies to foster engagement and academic equity. Encourage student voice and collaborative classroom practices.
- For Community Partners and Parents:** Strengthen partnerships with schools by participating in outreach programs, providing feedback, and supporting student initiatives. Increase involvement through flexible and interest-driven engagement opportunities.

- For Future Researchers:** Conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term effects of empowerment-based school culture and engagement practices. Investigate the framework's applicability across different educational levels and cultural contexts.

By embracing a culture of collaboration and empowerment, educational institutions can move toward sustained growth, holistic learning, and community transformation.

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