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The Connection Between School Culture and Academic Performance

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Preface

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who helped me with my degree project. My supervisor for giving me support and input, my friends Robin and Mia who proofread many parts of the study. Also, my teachers who all inspired me throughout the work. Finally, I would like to thank my husband for the endless support he has given me while I was writing.
Abstract

This is a qualitative study of how school culture in relation to student identity affects students’ academic performance, especially in a low-income community. The study was conducted in southern Malmö at an elementary school where 9th graders were given the opportunity to participate. Nine students answered a survey anonymously which I then analyzed using identity theory. My conclusions indicate that school culture does play a part in affecting students’ performance. The findings suggest that high performing students more strongly identify Academically than low performing students. Finally, this research indicates that more studies on the topic need to be done. I hope this study contributes to a broader interest in how schools can create a culture where students become more motivated and performs better Academically. Possible areas to further investigate would be how low performing students are included by schools and what actions schools take, or could take, to create an academic culture for all students.

Keywords: school culture, identity, academic performance, student performance, academic achievement, student achievement, school identity.
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References
1. Introduction

There was a student I had, who kept writing his neighborhood’s name on all the papers he handed in during class. He lived in a different neighborhood than the school was in, and for some reason he felt it important to assert his affiliation with his community this way. It made me think of the importance that school culture had on my students’ identities, and extensively on their academic performance.

Stets, (2009), discusses how identity can be formed, not only in roles, but also in social and person identities. These different layers of identity are dependent on the context in which they are found. Therefore, it is a natural curiosity to consider how school culture effect our students’ academic identity and performance. Perhaps the management and direction of school culture could push students to assert academic traits more than others? If teachers, and other school personnel, got a basic understanding of the correlation between school culture, student identity and academic performance, then it could result in a school which truly caters to students from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Since school is such a great part of a young person’s life, it is important to note that the school serves as a strong base for identity, just like the neighborhood did for my student. In 2017, Reynolds, Lee, Turner, Bromhead, and Subasic found in their research that students who feel psychologically connected to school as a group reaches higher academic success. This led me to think that if a school could create a strong desire to identify with it, then it would also have greater impact on the students’ lives. In return it could result in better academic performance, manage behavioral issues, and strengthen the well-being of the students. However, if the school fails at creating a strong and positive school culture, the students could seek other contexts to identify with. Other contexts must not necessarily be bad, but they could put students in less beneficial positions in life.

The purpose of this case study is to find differences, and similarities between school culture, student identity and academic performance. Also, I would like to find possible ways to facilitate factors that benefit students and fosters high academic achievement.
2. Aim and Research Question

The aim for this case study is to find out how the combination of school culture and students’ identity affect their academic achievements.

Research Question: How does school culture in relation to student identity affect academic performance? Are there any school cultural factors schools can adapt in order to support academic identity and consequently academic performance?
3. Background

In the school where the study was conducted the management often proclaimed that the school was “a school for all” and repeated at every staff meeting that the school was “every student’s best school”. This is a vision the City of Malmö has for their schools, and they want this to represent how their schools act and perform. The school had general guidelines for how the work should be carried out, but often management referred to the national Swedish curricula when staff or students had questions about certain approaches. To understand better how this relates to school culture, this background chapter will discuss what researchers have found on the subject.

This chapter will present the background of what this study looks at. In it I will present how school culture is defined and in which aspects school culture affect students and schools. A school’s culture can be determined by a range of factors. Some of the elements will be examined here. First, schools and the market for them are presented from a school culture perspective, then administration and leadership are also accounted for through the same perspective. Finally, this chapter ends with a demonstration of the importance of school culture.

3.1 Schools and Market

Bower and Parson (2016) identifies how British schools have become like any other commodity that can be sold according to the market. This is also the way schools have become in Sweden today. You are not, as a pupil, forced to attend the school closest to you, and in return, just as Bower and Parson (2016), and Cudworth (2008) points out about British schools, the schools can market themselves to certain students. Basically, the schools in Sweden are not only required to follow and teach the syllabus, but they can, to some extent choose to do it in different, more profitable, ways. As Bower and Parson highlights, this means schools can somewhat pick which students they cater to (2016). Obviously, a school dependent on profits and market value will want to have students who can aid them in this quest.

Cudworth wrote about the poor attendance and achievement of Gypsy and Traveler children at schools in the UK (2008). He concluded that part of the problem was the
marketization of the school, where some students were worth more than others. The nomadic practice of Gypsy/Traveler children also meant that they performed worse on average, since the British schools, very similar to Sweden, teach according to a National Curriculum which meant that by a certain age a student would be expected to have been taught a certain level of “knowledge”. The children who were not nomadic would therefore benefit more in school and perform better. Schools would then in turn cater to these students more than those who came from a nomadic culture. Wolfgram, Morf, and Hannover (2014) conducted a study with similar results. They looked at how immigrant students performed and identified with their school in German parts of Europe. They found that because the student often felt excluded by the school, and not part of school culture, they also withdrew and kept to themselves thus also detracting from academic success. These practices, although not official in any way, are of course also part of schools’ cultures since it is the way the schools are run.

3.5.2 Administration and Leadership

The way the school is run also affects the culture students of said school meet on a day to day basis. In a comparative study carried out by Tichnor-Wagner, Harrison, and Cohen-Vogel in 2016, the differences in school culture between high performing schools and low performing schools with similar demographics, defined which traits are crucial for a high performing school. They found that well defined practices with a strong culture of learning, including formal collaborations, well-structured democratic leadership practice, and the joint expectations of high academic performance from all connected to the school were key. An important part was how various school leaders were active and reinforced learning in everyday work.

Hoadley and Galant (2016) investigated how the organization of schools corresponded to academic performance. They did not want to solely look at the culture of a school, but also the framework surrounding it and how this implemented differential teaching. This had them find that high performing schools had more complex structures in how the professional work was distributed, they had strongly defined roles among the staff and there was a professional solidarity between staff. This contrasted with the lower performing schools where the structures of work distribution were basic and simple. The roles were not as strongly defined, and the solidarity was very bureaucratic.
3.5.3 Importance of School Culture

The culture of a school is made up by many layers, all affecting each other in various ways. The importance of school culture is stressed by many and explained with strong words and defined differently depending on who is the messenger. This is important to keep in mind while examining this study as it is the backdrop for the results and analysis and inadvertently the conclusion it leads to. To illustrate this a quote is added to make you understand the emphasis school culture has:

School culture is critical to establishing successful school learning environments. It provides one of the most significant foundations for successful student achievement.
(Cleveland, Powell, Saddler, & Tyler, 2008).

It includes how a student or teacher perceives the social construct, and academic culture in their school, how the school is run in terms of how the classroom structure is set up, how the school is set up, and even how the district of education is run and set up (McCollum, and Yoder, 2011). Their conclusion as to why school culture is important is that the culture of a school conveys the social behavior the school expects from the students, the school’s established academic goal, the organizational structure, and its’ vision. This is supported by others as well (Ho and Lin: Hoadley and Galant: Demürtaş: Elias et. al.)

Bower and Parsons examines the teachers’ identities during a reform of a high-poverty school (2016). They find three main identities among the teachers, who are all reacting to the reform in three main ways. The study shows how important teachers are for school culture, but mentions that there are many more elements making up a school culture, like administrators, families, students etc.

Other benefits of a positive school culture are that it can strengthen the identity of students with aggressive behavior and thus create a better learning environment. Bushman, Baumeister, Thom, Ryu, Begeer, and West found that low self-esteem has no significant correlation with aggression, however high self-esteem had some correlation
with aggression but only when combined with narcissistic traits (2009). They also concluded that stronger traits of narcissism also had stronger correlation with aggression than self-esteem had, but that high self-esteem seemed to contribute more than low self-esteem to aggression. This means that individuals who do not feel part of a group, but rather act on their own, are more prone to aggression than those who feel part of a group. In a school setting this could imply that developing a feeling of participation in the group could curb aggressive behavior in students.

There are a lot of factors which makes a strong school culture positive, for example a key factor according to Demırtaş (2010), is that of a strong collaborative leadership and collaboration between teachers. His study looks at what factors effect student achievement the most and is focused on the primary school in Turkey. The findings were that collaborative leadership was the strongest correlation for student achievement. Also, the collaboration between teachers and the unity of purpose for the entire school affected student achievement positively.

Further, the research of Cleveland, Chambers, Mainus, Powell, Skeple, Tyler, and Wood (2011) also bring to light the importance of other factors which makes up good school culture. They suggest that cultural approaches, differentiated teaching, teachers being educated on classroom management and the importance of parents and the community being involved in the school as success factors for higher academic performance. In addition, Offenbacher (1968) suggest that students in low-income communities where the rate of failure is higher, mainly lacks ability to deal with emotional and cultural aspects of their lives. This is where the school needs to step in and cultivate their students’ identity with academia, and other areas related to a successful life. Although she conducted this research many years ago, her conclusions are echoed in more contemporary research by for example Ray-Taylor, Baskerville, Bruder, Bennett, and Schulte (2006). They identify six challenges high performing schools face when trying to achieve better across the student body (including the lower performers of low socio-economic background) with one of them being the school culture. In more detail Ray-Taylor et al explains that school culture needs to be safe for changes to happen. They argue that if the culture is safe then teachers are more prone to take risks that can lead to academic improvement for all the students and not only the ones who respond to traditional teaching methods (2006).
However, Reynolds et. al. concluded that school climate, which is connected to school culture, is less important than the students’ own school identities. They suggest that instead of strengthening the culture itself, schools should focus on connecting their students to an academic identity, based off the school, in order to achieve high academic performance throughout the student body.
4. Theory

In this chapter I will present the theory which is necessary in order to understand the findings from this case study. First, I will write about identity theory, and then I will go on to school culture.

4.1 Identity theory

A comprehensive source for what identity is can be found in Burke and Stets (2009) book on identity theory. In it they define and explain different aspects of identity which I will use to analyze the results I receive from my case study. Hence, what follows are the different theoretical terms and explanations the way Burke and Stets present them. The terms will be referred to the same way throughout this study. Finally, for a well put together description of identity I quote:

> Clearly, roles are embedded in groups. Having a role identity thus provides a social identity in terms of the group or organization in which the role is created. (Burke and Stets 2009, p. 122)

Everything in this chapter is from Burke and Stets, unless stated otherwise.

4.2 Definition of Identity

The word “identity” comes from the Latin word “identitas” which translates to “same” according to the Oxford Living Dictionary online. The origin of the word is echoed in the theories presented in the philosophical research field, where identity theory has one major divide. that of identity theory and social identity theory. The first focus on the individual identity and its development whereas the latter focus on group identity and how for example an organization can create a group identity. For us, the importance lays in the relationship between the individual and the group, in this case the school.

The most important notion in identity theory is that it has moved from being studied on individual basis to being studied on a group basis (Miedema, ter Avest, Bakker, and Betram-Troost, 2007). According to Miedema et. al, when examining the identity
formed within, let us say, a school, one must understand that although the objective is the group, everyone who is part of the group contributes to the wholeness of the identity. They claim that each individual contribution is significant and without just one of them, the whole group will end up with a slightly different identity.

In this case study the individual identity as it is positioned in the group identity, is investigated. Therefore, the meanings of the different roles in response to group identity are the focus of this chapter.

### 4.3 Parts of Identity

The parts of identity are mainly made up of three concepts: The self, the language, and the interaction. The self is the conscious perception one has of one’s identity. The self is made up by several identities which forms the self, the view one has of oneself. The language consists of symbols and meanings which are responses to certain stimuli, which then responds to other stimuli for action. Symbols creates the same responses among people who belong to the same social context. The interaction is the way language is used between and by identities. For example, symbols help an identity with the context. A principal has another symbol than a teacher, and the symbols communicate what they each do. This makes it easier for the identity of “teacher” to know what is expected in relation to the identity “principal”. However, the person in a principal role will determine some aspects of the identity “principal”. For example, the principal can be a strict or a humble leader, depending on which choices the person makes in their identity.

### 4.4 Current Conceptions

Bucholtz and Hall, (2005) presented a study where they explained that identities are products of linguistic activity and is a social and cultural device meaning they are not an innate psychological happening. Many things affect identity and among them, Bucholtz and Hall have concluded that identity forming occurs in overlapping happenings between oneself and others. They can be habitual, intentional, conscious, semi-conscious, and/or a product of others perception of you, and a negotiation within yourself between ideologies and values. These different forms are represented by the
linguistic produce of a person. In the following chapters explanations of the different factors are presented.

4.4.1 Personal vs the Group

There are several concepts which are depicted with opposite ideas of identity. The first pair is the aspect of the “Personal” vs. the “Group” (Bucholtz et al). It explains how the identity in a person relates to the personal aspect, and then how that same identity relates to the group aspect. The group can be any group of which the person is part of. There can be groups within groups also, for example a group of friends who can be found in a group of students (a class), to be found in a group of more students (the school). Bushman, et al presented findings that students who isolated themselves, or were isolated by their peers, while having strong narcissistic traits were more prone to aggression. In relation to the concept of personal vs. group, it is understood that a narcissist would value the person more than the group in this concept (2009). Apart from this, there are other concepts and they all follow each other in some way. The next concept which Bucholtz et al. presents, clarifies how groups can be valued differently.

4.4.2 In-group vs Out-group

This concept explains that a person can identify with an in-group, which is the group that is favored and desirable by the individual to be part of. The opposite to the in-group is the out-group. The out-group is a group of others, and it is undesirable by the person whose identity we are studying. These groups can be formed through different ways. To give an example of this and how complex the definition of what an in-group is Riedl Cross, Bugaj, and Mammadov conducted a study in 2016.

This study investigates the different memberships that students identify having. The middle-school students respond to whether they are part of groups or not, and in this study the emphasis was on academic group membership. They found out that students would be unwilling to identify being part of the academic group if it meant they risked being isolated and bullied by their peers. Those who did acknowledge membership in the academic group also strongly identified with school. Their conclusion was that middle-school is an important impressionable time for students and willingness to
belong to the academic crowd, thus identifying with school, should be encouraged by teachers.

There are ways to bridge the gap between different groups, making the boundaries for which is the in-group, and which is the out-group become more fluid. It has been pointed out by Knifsend and Juvonen (2014) that for example a school with many different ethnicities represented in the students also results in a higher complex social identity. They showed that if there are arenas where students from different backgrounds can share interests and meet, then they will also develop their individual identities without being bound by for example their ethnicity. In addition to this, Shannon (1995) found that students of bilingual backgrounds, in urban schools, thrived in their classroom solely because their teacher had created a classroom where they felt part of the culture. Their languages where of equal importance to English and the teacher was very consistent with her values and norms of her classroom, making her students feel safe and appreciated. Bucholtz et. al continue with the third concept, which is how the groups are formed.

4.4.3 Habitual vs Intentional

Groups can be formed either habitually or intentionally. Out of the habitual groups are for example a person’s family such a group. It is formed out of informal actions in everyday life. The groups which are intentional are those which the individual seek out and often has a certain purpose. An intentional group could be a choir that a person is part of. The identity the person feels as part of the groups they are in can be obvious and even sought out, or it can be more of an abstract feeling.

How a person behaves in a certain group is important to understand, and part of understanding has to do with deciphering whether the participation is of habitual or intentional nature. Two studies can exemplify how this happens. The first example is Diamond and Huguley’s study from 2014 which looks at the correlation between low academic performance and race. It identifies three factors that seem to facilitate the lower academic achievement among black students. First, it is indicated that the racial demography of a school matters, where black students in a majority white school would perform worse than their peers. Also, when students had similar racial or the same racial
friends, they would in a majority of whites' school perform poorly. Finally, the students at majority black schools or all black schools did not necessarily perform as bad as their socioeconomic peers, instead they seemed to perform above average.

The example above is of identifying with habitual groups and the consequences they have in different environments. If students habitually seek out a group where the members share the ethnic and cultural identity symbols, they might end up confining themselves academically because they might alienate themselves from the whole group (i.e. the school). Also, the perception of the smaller group by the bigger could manifest the smaller group’s feeling of shared identity, and therefore lack of shared identity with the bigger group. This habitual forming of groups, and identities need to be made more intentional. For example, Reynolds et al concludes that if schools strengthen the academic identities in their students they ultimately and indirectly also strengthen the academic performance. In fact, they claim their research suggests that school identity is more important than age, gender or socio-economic background (2017).

The second example is Ho and Lin who carried out a study in 2016 where they looked at how group identity was formed over virtual classrooms. They found that the interaction was strengthening the group identity even though the participants could not physically see each other. The social capital exchange strengthened the identity which in turn made participants more likely to trust the group and to offer emotional support to others in the group. When this increased, the sense of group identity became even stronger. It thus became a positive snowball effect. The teachers of the virtual classroom experienced the classroom more manageable when the group identity became stronger. This indicates that if the social exchange within a group strengthens, and becomes more intentional, it also makes it more manageable. Further, Bucholtz et al. explains that an identity or part of one can be either “Conscious” or “Semi-conscious”.

### 4.4.4 Conscious vs Semi-conscious

The conscious identity is the one a person is fully aware of, perhaps even enforces. The semi-conscious is the one where a person behaves in accordance with the identity they feel, but do not really think of the behavior as connected with the identity. For example, a conscious form of identity is when students have a mid-term meeting with the teacher
and their parents. The student is aware that it is the academic performance that is the focus of the meeting and takes on the identity of a student to correspond accordingly. On the other hand, a semi-conscious form of identity is when a big brother takes care of a younger sibling without reflecting that he is doing it because of the family relationship. Often this can be tied to who is present when the identity is expressed.

To be conscious about yourself is important and here is an example of why. Arambula-Greenfield and Gohn published their study on how a school transformed itself from basically being closed to having students perform above state average (2004). The school staff and the authors of the study all credit this turn around to the system the school adopted. This system is called Paideia and is based on three major ideas: didactic teaching, coaching and practice, and Socratic questioning. The school expected all students to achieve their best and they involved the community and the parents as well. The study presented how the school managed to implement their Paideia program throughout the school and it also showed the results in comparison with the state average.

When members of a school are semi-conscious of their roles, they cannot fully carry out their mission, neither as teachers nor students. Cleveland et al, conducted a case-study on ways school culture, equity and student performance was present – or not, in a rural Appalachian school. They identified four measurements which were not implemented but could help improve academic achievement if employed. They identified the necessity for teachers to be educated on classroom management, the level of differentiated instruction in the classrooms, the need for more engagement from the parents and community, and finally the requirement for more culturally responsive teaching (2011). If these four requirements were improved, the academic performance would most likely go up. This leads us to the last concept of identity, the way “others perceive you” vs. “how you see yourself”.

4.4.5 Others Perception of You vs How You See Yourself

This shows itself when a person negotiates between their values and ideologies and therefore displays conflicting parts of identity or when a person acts in a way some people are not used to seeing but others are (Bucholtz et al). An example can be the
student who is very goal-oriented and wants to perform well in school but also wants to be popular among friends and perhaps acts undesirably in the classroom to impress other classmates (Riedl Cross, Bugaj, Mammadov, 2016).

Nero (2005) has conducted a study on how English as a Second Language (ESL) students identify with English as a language. She has found that many students identify as being native speakers of English, even when the learned English as a second language. This is an example of how others perceive you vs how you perceive yourself; because, these students identified as native English speakers, but were placed in ESL classes. Hence, there can be a contradiction in how others see you and how you see yourself.

Sometimes it is the lack of being noticed at all which stands in the way as seen in a study on low performing schools. Elias, White, and Stepney examined 483 middle-schools in New Jersey, USA and their academic results. They wanted to know why schools with poor academic performance, mainly in low-income and low socioeconomic neighborhoods, had such difficulty in breaking the trend and become successful schools. Their findings indicated that those schools needed to focus more on a nurturing and supportive school culture, student democracy and character building as well as increasing students’ confidence (2014). This is supported by Welch (2015) and by Shannon, who in her study found that low performing students became more successful with time after being in a school environment where they were included and valued (1995).
5. Method

In this chapter, the method chosen will be explained, dissected and presented with advantages, disadvantages and design. I chose to do a qualitative case study because I wanted to get in-depth answers which would help me understand all the complex parts of the students’ identities. This case study was conducted in a school in the south part of Malmö. The school ranges from pre-school to ninth grade. The school is in a community with different types of housing, including villas, condos, rental apartments, and semi attached houses. The community has been plagued by criminality and poverty, and there is a culturally diverse population. The case study was conducted digitally through students' school accounts, by using a survey. The survey was done completely anonymous by nine ninth graders.

5.1 What is a Survey?

A survey is essentially the same as a structured interview with one main difference. Instead of having the interviewer face to face, the answers are filled in by the respondent alone. Bryman (2008) offer descriptions of different surveys, a method he explains being a set of close ended questions. He lists different types of surveys which are used in social studies. There are more physical surveys that are distributed either through post or from a teacher to a class. Both methods are then collected after the respondents have answered either by them sending it back through the post or by students handing their answered surveys to their teacher. Bryman (2008) stresses the importance of surveys having an easy to follow layout and being constructed with closed or semi closed questions. He explains that this is important because there is no interviewer present to explain any question, nor to develop the thought behind the question if the respondent is not sure. Further, he advices that a survey should be short, or shorter than an interview, in order to keep the respondent engaged. There is a risk, he says, that the respondent gets tired and rushes through the questions if they feel it takes too long to answer each question thoroughly. Summarily, whether the survey is completed through post or perhaps in class, it needs to be constructed in a way where respondents feel engaged the whole time and gives short answers to close-ended questions. However, there are other ways of distributing a survey than in physical form.
5.2 The Use of Online Distribution

This research used a web-based survey as a method for gathering data. Bryman (2008) defines this as being a non-direct communication between respondent and researcher, i.e. a survey filled in at any time by the respondent. The opposite would be a direct communication where respondents and researcher correspond directly to each other. Since this research used a survey distributed by link sharing on a closed-access forum it would qualify as web-based. Further, Bryman’s examples of synchronized or asynchronized data collection makes it clear that this research was done asynchronized, i.e. not in real time.

5.3 Advantages

Using the data collecting method of a survey, gives a range of benefits to the case study. First, according to Bryman (2008) it makes it possible to both distribute and collect data effectively. Second, the data analysis will be easier for me as a researcher to put together, which gives me more time to focus on the variables that relates to my research question. The third, and most important aspect of a survey is that it eliminates the interviewers bias. In this case study the survey was distributed and collected digitally through Google forms. I had the results in a digital spreadsheet and could quickly compare them. For the case study to be as neutral as possible in order to spot correlations, it helps when all subjects get the same questions. The questions should be in the same order for all respondents. Another advantage is that a survey will be without the tone of voice that an interviewer risks having in an interview. This eliminates the interviewer affecting the respondent in any way. All together the chosen method is a more manageable and more reliable way of collecting the in-depth data needed for this case study.

5.4 Disadvantages

However, there are some disadvantages to using a survey. Just as Bryman (2008) points out, the respondents cannot ask me direct questions about the survey while filling it out. This might present a problem since respondents could chose to not answer a question if
they do not understand it (Bryman (2008). Another important aspect is that they are not in my presence when they fill it out, hence as Bryman (2008) points out they might rush through it. This would give me incomplete answers or unanswered questions altogether. Also, in this case, I cannot ask any follow up questions since the survey is done anonymously and without registering the respondents’ email. This also means that I cannot ask respondents to clarify what their answer means or ask them to develop their answer.

Additionally, there are some other factors needed to be considered when using a survey. For example, I cannot be sure whether the answers come from my students, or from even just one student. A student might give the link to the survey to a friend outside school or a sibling. If any student chose to fill out the survey in presence of others, perhaps this could affect the answers given. However, I decided these risks to be very small since the survey is completely anonymous and students could choose to fill it out at anytime, anywhere. Another example is the risk of students lying. I cannot fact check their responses to, for example, merit points. However, the anonymous design again helps to counter any need to boost the points since no one knows who the respondent is.

5.5 Design

It was important to keep the survey simple, yet interesting, and as Bryman (2008) emphasized, easy to follow. For the first set of questions I therefore gave the respondents an introduction by written instructions as to how to answer the following questions. In some of the questions that followed I made specifications, for instance “answer with three words…” I chose to give some questions the design of a more open-ended wording in order to promote the free writing type of answer I wanted. However, the questions were carefully worded to make sure the respondents knew what I wanted to know (Bryman, 2008). The last set of questions were more limited in their design, because I chose to give the respondents several factors (three) to illustrate their answer. This was done to more easily identify and compare results between different respondents. The order of the questions was carefully constructed. I wanted the students to feel engaged throughout the survey, so I chose to put the questions requiring shorter answers at the end of the survey. I believe this helped the students to be devoted to answering all questions in-depth.
According to Bryman (2008) it is more convenient to use vertical design for the questions than horizontal. However, I only had one question where this could be applied, and I chose to give the alternative answers in a vertical manner and encouraging respondents to only answer one of the options.

Since I used an online software to construct, distribute, and collect my survey, it also came with the feature of feeling airy and not too crowded, which according to Bryman (2008) also is an important aspect of the survey design. Additionally, some of the survey was broken into “chapters” in order to give better overview by the respondents.

5.6 Ethical Considerations

Regarding the ethical dilemmas that might arise in a study, I beforehand evaluated the different ethical considerations based on Bryman’s recommendations (2008). He presents four areas of demands or needs: need for information, need for consent, need for confidentiality, and need for use of the collected data.

In the first area of need, Bryman explains that the information given to potential, actual, and past respondents must be simple yet extensive. The researcher cannot leave out information, because if they do the following needs will be harder to achieve thus the ethical standard very low. Following the demand for information, Bryman explains the need for consent (2008). This means that respondents must be given the opportunity to consent taking part in the research. Sometimes this need will be hard to meet, but for this research it was not as I will explain further into the text. The need for confidentiality is that respondents need to feel confident in the researcher and that their answers, or actions, to the researcher is not made available to others. Bryman (2008) gave suggestions as how to achieve this which I will also discuss further on in the text. The fourth and last area of need is that of the use of the collected data. This goes into the previous need a bit, however, what it means in detail is that respondents should be given insight as to how the collected data will be used by the researcher.

In this research the respondents were given a short text informing them about the study, that the study would be anonymous, and that they as respondents would be free to
partake or to withdraw at any time. Additionally, the information also stated that their answers, the collected data, would only be seen by me and my teacher at university. Lastly, they were made aware that their responses would be used as the base for my degree project in order for me and other teachers to understand school and students better.

Although Bryman (2008) suggests that under age students should have their parents consent for any participation, this research was carried out completely anonymous. The respondents were fifteen-year-olds who were told before even accessing the survey and then again in the information of the survey that they were free to participate, and free to withdraw their participation at any point if they wished. This, coupled with the difficulty of even reaching some of the parents due to social factors, made me to decide to not ask for parental consent. Summarily, the greater good of the survey outweighed the consent from parents, whilst considering that the respondents were anonymous, even to me.

5.7 The Survey

The survey was distributed digitally to nine students in the 9th grade, after the students volunteered their interest. The survey was constructed in three parts, starting with information about why and for what the survey was for, then getting some background information before finally asking the actual questions. It was done using semi open-ended questions to which the students would answer with free writing. The students would give background information on the merit they had achieved, and what gender they identified as. The options for gender identity were male, female, non-binary, or the option to not answer. I chose to do this because I experienced that gender is a taboo topic in this school.

The questions focused on the students' perceived identity, their assumptions on how others in school perceived them, and how they perceived others. The questions were designed to both give the student the freedom to express themselves, and to try to limit their words in order to perhaps get better matching results. In the following table is my own translation of the survey accompanied with the type of answer asked for:
Table 1 - Questions and Types of Answers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Type of answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What kind of student do you consider yourself to be in school?</td>
<td>Free writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which student group do you think your friends are part of?</td>
<td>Free writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kind of class is your class?</td>
<td>Free writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering your entire grade (all ninth graders) what type of students are they?</td>
<td>Free writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think your teachers think of you as a student?</td>
<td>Free writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which type of student group do you think your friends think they are part of?</td>
<td>Free writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kind of student would others in your grade say you are?</td>
<td>Free writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write three words which best describes your school.</td>
<td>Limited writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write three words which best describes your grade.</td>
<td>Limited writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write three words which best describes your class.</td>
<td>Limited writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write three words which best describes your friends at school.</td>
<td>Limited writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write three words which best describes you in school.</td>
<td>Limited writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 "Questions and types of answers"

See appendix I for a copy of the survey.
6. Results and Analysis

This chapter will present the results and the analysis based on the theory presented earlier. In relation to the research questions I felt that Personal vs. Group Identity, Habitual vs. Intentional, Conscious vs. Semi-Conscious, and School Culture were the most relevant areas to analyze. They appear in this order as well. Both the results and the analysis will be presented coherently in this chapter and no distinction between the two will be made.

The initial results from the survey shows that out of the nine answers, five were female and four were male. Hence, no one identified or wanted to claim non-binary nor abstained from answering. Looking at their merit, most are high achievers, with only three exceptions if we consider anything above 280 to be a high achieving score.

Diagram 1 – Merit Points

Diagram 1 - Merit Points

Note: The highest merit point one can achieve in the Swedish school system is 340 points. To pass all subjects one would achieve a merit point of 160 if taking 16 subjects.

6.1 Personal vs. Group Identity
It becomes clear who strongly identifies with the bigger group (i.e. the school) and who does not. There are those who do not identify with the group in any particular or strong way, and there are others who do. There are also some who identify with the group by strongly being part of smaller constellations which in return connect strongly with the group. To show this I will highlight three of the students’ different answers. Ali answers a lot of questions with “I don’t know”, and only elaborates when asked about how others perceive him or what he thinks of his friends. He answers the question on how he thinks his teachers perceive him with “the “bad” one”. When asked what group he thinks his friends are part of he says, “Those who everyone think are tough but nobody understands us”. Fatima focus a lot on her friends when answering, and how she is towards others and is very aware of how she is perceived. She writes that her school is “fun, good, and positive” and then writes that her friends are “the best, the best, the best”. Hawa has a strong academic identity and is confident in many of her answers that she is a top student, but also answers the question of what her peers in ninth grade are like with:

   Everything from high achieving students to those who don’t come to school.
   Those who do everything to make others happy to those who have it as a hobby to suppress others for their own achievements.

All in all, most students seem to be part of the group or part of smaller groups who identifies with the bigger group. Two out of the nine students do not seem to feel part of the school since they never answer with any identifiers of the group.

6.2 Habitual vs. Intentional

When looking at whether students seem to identify with groups or not it is clear that the two students, Ali and Jamila, who do not feel part of the big group also seem to repeat themselves more in their answers. This is exemplified by Ali’s “Don’t know” answers and Jamila’s repetitive choice of words such as “problem student” and “chaos” when describing herself. Repetition of identity cues suggests it is learned or habitual identity
behavior. On the other side we have two other students who, when they answer, like to explain their identity. Kareem answers that his teachers and his peers probably think he is:

A good student who does everything he is supposed to. As a swot and straight A’s student.

Kareem then conflictingly answers that he is a “rowdy student” and that his friends are “chaos”. This type of conflicting answers can also be found in Amir’s answers. When asked what his teachers think of him and what others in his year think of him, Amir answers;

I think I can be both calm and mischievous, also think respectful and considerate. A both older and bigger guy, some might think I am friendly. There are a lot of suspicions, so it’s hard to tell.

Intentionally, both Kareem and Amir try to be in one way (positive) but somehow show an attachment to another side of them (more negative).

6.3 Conscious vs. Semi-conscious

All students are conscious to some degree of their identity since all of them have answered the questions. Others might be unaware of the rest of their identity, where a few seem very aware and secure in who they are. Khadija does not show any clear reflection in her answers as to who she is or who her friends are and answers the same to many of the questions:

Good fellowship […] Good fellowship in class […] Good group […] Good friend, considerate […] Nice, considerate […] Fun, considerate, nice

This could be seen as a semi-conscious perception of her own identity. She come across as someone who has a limited view of who she is. Perhaps she is still figuring it out, considering her age, or she is unsure and goes by what others have told her that she is. Compared to another student who seems to have thought a lot about who he is:
I think I am the calm student, I try as much as I can. If I get stuck or don’t know how to solve like an assignment or whatever, I will still try as much as possible.

Amir

Amir shows a lot of insight in his answers and uses complex words to describe himself. He has identified with being a struggling student, and this also shows in his grades. However, he seems to have accepted that he is not the best and instead that he will do his best. Out of all the students he is one of two who has explicit and thought through answers. This is a great example of someone who is very conscious of his identity.

6.4 School Culture

The answers derived from the survey showed indirect signs of how the school culture was at the school. Some of the students expressed that the teachers viewed them as “rowdy” or “chaotic” students. Their answers gave the impression that they did not feel the teachers expected them to succeed. Jamila who has a very low merit point and consistently portrays herself in a negative way is perhaps the student who shows where the culture of the school also faulters the most. When asked what type of student she is, Jamila answered:

Unmotivated, not serious, problematic student. […] They [the teachers] probably think I am stupid, annoying, but maybe sometimes they think I am trying.

Most telling about the school culture is her answer to what her own class is like:

Fragmented, like, they [management] have put all who are not good in one class, they changed it when we started ninth grade.

She also refers to some of her classmates as “refugees” which does not necessarily mean that they came to Sweden seeking refuge, but that they are not normative in their behavior for how she perceives people should act. Her answer also shows that she thinks their class is put together the way it is because they are not high performers. Whether this is the reason or not is not relevant, since the school culture is what the
students perceive it to be. For this student it is obvious that she feels unwanted by the school. This is something the school should take very seriously.

Other students who are high performers explain that their teachers perceive them as well adapted and academically motivated. In this regard the school culture of their school has succeeded in making them understand that academic performance is valued. However, when asked about how the students of ninth grade are like Hawa answers:

   Everything from high performing students to those who don’t come to school.
   Those who do everything to make others happy and those who have it as a hobby to put down those who perform well.

Her answer that some students are only there (sic: in school) to put down those who perform well somewhat echoes the perception that Jamila had, that the school does not want those who under-achieve, creating strong in-groups and ostracized out-groups. This may be false, but it is overall true for the students who have answered the survey.
7. Discussion

In this chapter I will discuss my results and the analysis and how they relate to my research question and purpose.

7.1 How does school culture in relation to student identity affect academic performance?

From the results there can be many correlations made between the students of high academic performance, and their strong school identity. The same goes for the students with low academic performance and their lack of a strong school identity. For example, Jamila is not a high achieving student, she has a habitual way of identifying as a bad student/person. From her point of view, she is unwanted by the school. Whether this is the school’s actual position on her or not, the common culture of the school has failed in making her feel as part of the student alumni. There is however one interesting student, Ali, who has relatively high merit points, but whose answers indicate that he does not particularly identify with his school. This means, that although he does not seem to want to be part of the school culture, he still has high merit points. This poses further questions: Why? What is different with Ali? Is it due to non-school culture from perhaps the home? Would he have even higher merit points if he identified more with school?

The results also indicate that most of the students in the study do not consciously identify with school, but some do it less than others. This could indicate that the school does not have a strong base for identity on which students can rely or relate to. This speaks against the theory that school culture has impact on students’ academic performance. However, there could be a school culture, but not as strong as to occupy the students minds consciously. I noticed that those who have the highest merit points are also the ones who seem to reflect the most over their role in the school environment. This gives a hint that these students have a strong academic identity. Students perform according to some sort of identity, but whether this identity is academic, has ties to the school culture, or comes from somewhere else is not established.
I cannot exclude that there is a connection between the school creating academic identities with their high achieving students, but it seems less likely since the students do not identify with the bigger group which makes up the school. Instead, they rather emphasize their identity with smaller groups who in return are connected to an academic school culture identity. As when Hawa answers that some students are only there (sic: in school) to put down those who perform well. Although this is her opinion of some students, it could be an echo of how the school excludes some of their students and make them feel part of the out-group. Being part of the out-group could then become a free pass to oppose anyone in the in-group e.g. teachers, administration and other students.

7.2 Are there any school cultural factors schools can adapt in order to support academic identity and consequently academic performance?

Riedl and Cross (2016) found that students would prioritize being popular over being unpopular even if unpopular meant they were doing well academically. This could be an explanation for the high performing students not fully claiming their academic identity. To combat this problem, I suggest schools work more towards creating a positive image of the academic life.

A way to succeed with this I would recommend the management and administration of the school to be united and collaborative in more aspects, like between grades or stages, and between teachers. They should give detailed and concise roles for their staff. They should facilitate and support collaborative teaching between teachers, and they should delegate most of the work more precisely. Further, I would suggest that the families and community around the school are incorporated in some ways, and that they contribute to the school culture in a positive way.

Also, if schools worked on making all students feel part of the school and make them belong to an in-group, then I believe they would see a greater engagement in academia than before. Perhaps create mascots, logos or slogans which apply to the school as a first step, then include students in direct democracy, and even making them part of
running the school. Having a school cafeteria or helping maintain the school yard etc. could be ways of direct democracy.

The fact that the Swedish school has become a commodity for parents and students could also influence how schools act when facing different types of students. When a student is not a high performer, the student’s merit points will make the school look bad in the eyes of politicians and other parents. The principle will be held responsible for low performance and if parents choose other schools, the school will lose the earmarked money for the students they lose. This could have the same effects as Cudworth (2008) writes about. According to him, the schools only want to attract high performing students and the idea of school being an equal platform where every child can get education has slowly eroded. This is also backed up by Bower and Parson in a study 8 years later. These similarities between Swedish and British schools should also be considered and examined further and would be a relevant and important research area to explore further.

7.3 Conclusion

In sum, I believe there to be indications of school culture affecting students’ performance, but also that other factors play a part as well. The teenage years are important when forming one’s identity (Knifsend & Juvonen, 2014) and schools should take advantage of this to facilitate and guide students in a productive direction. From the study I would suggest that there are many factors schools can include to create a positive culture and as an effect get higher academic performance.

The limitations of the research have been important to consider as well. First, I believe that my students’ answers could be even more interesting if compared to another school in a different setting, i.e. a high performing school in a more prosperous community. Secondly, although the survey gave me good information, I believe more answers from more students would have benefitted me by giving me a more concise picture of the school culture at the researched school. Lastly, the additional factors which affect a student’s identity is not included due to lack of space and time within the research, but would add an extra dimension to what makes up the identity of a student.
For this study I would like to point out that there are too few results to draw any real conclusions from, but the results indicate this is an area worth investigating more. This type of research is not too common in Sweden, yet it could generate interest and give insights to how we could deal with our ever-changing school system and our growing cultural diversity in students. I believe that if the school has a strong core then other parameters could change in any way and yet the school would still cope very well and execute its’ main mission. I cannot draw a solid conclusion, but I do see indications and tendencies of school culture affecting student performance. I would like to conduct a broader qualitative study on this subject.

Suggestions for future research would include to compare high-performing schools with low-performing schools and their school culture. Also, it would be interesting to compare Swedish school culture with other school cultures, and define what Swedish school culture actually is. Finally, it would be interesting to research the effects of a present versus an indirect school culture.
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APPENDIX I

Skolkultur och prestation

Det har formulerats ett skapet av mig, Sarah Sandström, som underlag för min fallstudie som jag skriver om i min examenssökningsarbete vid Malmö Universitet. Du kommer få frågor om hur du upplever kulturen på din skola och hur du tycker att du presterar i skolan. Du är helt anonym och det finns inga frågor som gör att du går att identifiera. Denna enkäten är som sagt underlag för min fallstudie inom själv och de som jag huvudsakligt kommer att använda resultatet av mina läsare och andra studenter som läser till läsare.

Har du några frågor är du välkommen att mata mig (sarah.sandstrom@mah.se) eller lämna kommentarer i slutet av enkäten.

Du ska ha ett stort tank om att du delar i enkäten, på så sätt hjälper du oss att bli bättre lärare.

---

Bakgrund

Jag vill ha in lite bakgrundsdata om dig för att kunna jämföra dina svar med andra svar. Dina svar kan fortfarande inte avslöja vem du är och du kan känna dig helt trygg med att svara på frågorna.

Är du:

- pojk
- kille
- iskälke
- vill inte svara

Vad är ditt meritvärde?

Kort svarsparti

---

Efter avsnitt 1 Fortsätt till nästa avsnitt

Efter avsnitt 2 Fortsätt till nästa avsnitt
Intervjufrågor

Jag vill ge er att du svara på utförande du kan på frågorne. Ungat endast för hur du upplever och tycker du är anonym så du kan känna dig helt bekvämt med att vara bril för ingen vet vem du är som svarar.

Vilken typ elev tycker du att du är i skolan? *

Lång svarstext

Vilken typ elevgrupp tycker du att dina vänner tillhör? *

Lång svarstext

Vad är er klass mest för sorts klass? *

Lång svarstext

Om du tänker på din hela årskurs (alla nior) vad är de mest för elever? *

Lång svarstext

Vilken typ av elev tror du att dina lärare tycker du är? *

Lång svarstext

Vilken elevgrupp tror du att dina vänner tycker ni tillhör? *

Lång svarstext

Vilken typ av elev tror du att andra i din årskurs ser dig som? *

Lång svarstext

Skriv tre ord som bäst beskriver din skola *

Kort svarstext
Skriv tre ord som bäst beskriver din årskurs
Kort svarstext

Skriv tre ord som bäst beskriver din klass
Kort svarstext

Skriv tre ord som bäst beskriver dina vänner i skolan
Kort svarstext

Skriv tre ord som bäst beskriver dig i skolan
Kort svarstext