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ABSTRACT

PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS OF  
PRINCIPALS WHO INFLUENCE POSITIVE SCHOOL  
CULTURE IN A MIDWEST ADVENTIST UNION:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

Evelyn P. Savory

Chair: James Jeffery

## ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

School of Education

Title: PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS OF PRINCIPALS WHO INFLUENCE POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE IN A MIDWEST ADVENTIST UNION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Name of researcher: Evelyn P. Savory

Name and degree of faculty chair: James Jeffery, Ph.D.

Date completed: May 2014

### Problem

Principals struggle to sustain a positive culture in their schools. Many studies have identified that principals play a key role in influencing the school culture. However, no known study has examined leadership characteristics of Adventist principals and their influence on positive school culture in Adventist schools.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe leadership characteristics of principals, who foster a positive culture in Adventist schools in a Midwest Seventh-day Adventist Union.

## Method

This qualitative multiple-case study design was utilized to explore and describe the lived experiences of principals and key stakeholders, school board chairs, and teachers about their perceptions of leadership characteristics of Adventist principals who influence positive school culture. The criterion used to identify the purposive sample was the inter-rater reliability process, in which education leaders from Midwest Adventist Union and four of the local conferences identified schools that have a positive school culture based on an agreed standard, and gave permission to conduct the study. Data collection occurred through in-person interviews with 12 purposively selected participants, informal observation, and field notes obtained at the four school sites. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded, and made categorized in an ongoing iterative process to establish validity, draw meaning, and make conclusions about the issue.

## Findings

Principals in this study influenced a positive school culture by embracing their multifaceted role as chief culture leaders in their schools. However, they also acknowledged that the task of maintaining a positive school culture required total dependence on God, and a pervasive attitude of continuous improvement, which could not be achieved without the *co-leadership* of teachers and collegial collaboration with all stakeholders, staff members and school board, primarily the board chair. The principals described being intentional to treat staff members as trained professionals, and to include them first in planning for improvement of the school. Key stakeholders, school board chairs, and teachers viewed their principals' leadership as paramount in creating and

maintaining a positive school culture, as they looked to them to set a focused direction and high standards of conduct for the school environment. A majority of the stakeholders believed school culture had a greater influence on behavior and achievement among students and teachers. The study revealed shared vision, diversity celebrated, and a pervasive attitude of continuous growth and improvement as common elements that defined positive school culture. In addition, commitment to behavior and core values, interpersonal communication, and the importance of principal relationships emerged as best leadership qualities for cultivating and maintaining positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools in a Midwest Seventh-day Adventist Union.

Andrews University

School of Education

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PRINCIPALS WHO INFLUENCE POSITIVE SCHOOL  
CULTURE IN A MIDWEST ADVENTIST UNION:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Evelyn P. Savory

May 2014

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....  | ix |
| Chapter  |    |
| 1. INTRODUCTION .....  | 1  |
| Background to the Problem.....                               | 1  |
| Statement of the Problem .....                               | 2  |
| Purpose of the Study .....                                   | 2  |
| Research Question .....                                      | 3  |
| Conceptual Framework .....                                   | 3  |
| Research Design .....  | 6  |
| Rationale and Significance of Study .....                    | 7  |
| Assumptions .....  | 8  |
| Limitations .....  | 8  |
| Delimitations .....  | 8  |
| Definition of Terms .....                                    | 9  |
| Summary .....  | 11 |
| Organization of the Study .....                              | 12 |
| 2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....                                   | 13 |
| Introduction .....   | 13 |
| The Principal's Role.....                                    | 14 |
| Principal's Leadership Practices .....                       | 18 |
| Managerial Leadership.....                                   | 18 |
| Instructional Leadership.....                                | 19 |
| Reform Leadership.....                                       | 23 |
| Leadership Characteristics and Positive School Culture ..... | 24 |
| School Culture: What Is It? .....                            | 26 |
| Defining Positive School Culture .....                       | 28 |
| Collegial Ambience .....                                     | 29 |
| Celebratory Rituals .....                                    | 30 |
| Supportive Social Networks .....                             | 31 |
| Humor in School Setting.....                                 | 32 |
| A School Model of Positive Culture .....                     | 32 |
| The Principal and Leadership .....                           | 34 |
| Transformational Leadership Theory.....                      | 36 |
| Idealized Influence .....                                    | 37 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Inspirational Motivation .....  | 38 |
| Intellectual Stimulation .....  | 39 |
| Individual Consideration .....  | 40 |
| Transformational Leadership and Ethics.....                               | 41 |
| Seventh-day Adventists Education System4.....                             | 41 |
| Beliefs About Christian Education .....                                   | 43 |
| Summary .....   | 45 |
| <br>  |    |
| 3. METHODOLOGY .....  | 46 |
| <br>  |    |
| Introduction .....  | 46 |
| Research Questions .....  | 46 |
| General Question.....   | 46 |
| Sub-questions .....   | 47 |
| Rationale for Qualitative Case-Study Research .....                       | 47 |
| Data Collection .....   | 48 |
| Purposeful Population Sample .....  | 49 |
| Interview Procedures and Protocol.....                                    | 52 |
| Interview Questions .....   | 55 |
| Questions for Principals .....  | 55 |
| Questions for Stakeholders .....  | 56 |
| Data Analysis .....   | 57 |
| Trustworthiness/Internal Validity.....                                    | 59 |
| Generalizability .....  | 60 |
| Ethical Issues.....   | 61 |
| Summary .....   | 61 |
| <br>  |    |
| 4. POSITIVE CULTURE DEFINED .....   | 63 |
| <br>  |    |
| Introduction .....  | 63 |
| Shared Vision .....   | 64 |
| Character Development .....   | 66 |
| Setting High Standards .....  | 67 |
| Embracing the SDA School Vision .....                                     | 68 |
| Denominational Standards and Governance Structure .....                   | 69 |
| Stakeholders and Principal Commitment<br>to SDA Education and School..... | 70 |
| Commitment and service of board chairpersons .....                        | 70 |
| Commitment and service of teachers .....                                  | 71 |
| Commitment and service of principals .....                                | 74 |
| SDA Schools Different From Public Schools.....                            | 81 |
| Spiritual School .....  | 82 |
| Intentionality in Creating a Spiritual Atmosphere.....                    | 83 |
| Instill a Spirit of Worship .....   | 83 |
| Faculty and Staff Worship .....   | 84 |
| Yearly Spiritual Themes .....   | 84 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Week of Prayer and Evangelism .....   | 85  |
| Diversity Celebrated .....  | 87  |
| Accepting and Honoring One Another .....                                      | 88  |
| Individuality Celebrated.....   | 89  |
| Inclusive Involvement.....  | 90  |
| Pervasive Attitude of Continuous Growth<br>and Improvement .....              | 92  |
| Intentional Planning in the Area of Growth and<br>Curriculum Improvement..... | 92  |
| Planning for Curriculum Growth and Improvement.....                           | 93  |
| Principal as Instructional Leader.....  | 94  |
| Strategic Planning .....  | 96  |
| Financial Viability and Stability .....                                       | 97  |
| Summary .....   | 99  |
| <br>  |     |
| 5. BEHAVIOR AND SCHOOL VALUES .....   | 100 |
| Introduction .....  | 100 |
| Well-kept Physical Plant .....  | 100 |
| Welcoming and Inviting Atmosphere .....                                       | 101 |
| Clean, Neat, and Orderly Facilities .....                                     | 102 |
| School Fosters Nurturing .....  | 102 |
| Open Door Policy.....   | 103 |
| Safe Haven .....  | 103 |
| Nurturing Attitude .....  | 105 |
| Family Atmosphere.....  | 106 |
| Openness and Accessibility .....  | 107 |
| School Values Attractive to Parents .....                                     | 108 |
| Family-Oriented School.....   | 108 |
| Learning Is a Priority .....  | 109 |
| Visible, Involved, Proactive Principal and Teachers .....                     | 110 |
| Perception of Leadership Qualities, Consistency, Faith .....                  | 111 |
| Trust .....   | 113 |
| Collegiality .....  | 114 |
| Servant Leadership .....  | 118 |
| Reflective Leadership.....  | 118 |
| Summary .....   | 120 |
| <br>  |     |
| 6. INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION .....  | 121 |
| Introduction .....  | 121 |
| Communication Is Key .....  | 122 |
| Clear Expectations of Conduct.....  | 124 |
| Promoting the School Positively.....  | 125 |
| Principals Promote the School Positively .....                                | 125 |
| Faculty and Staff Promote the School Positively .....                         | 126 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| School Board Promotes the School Positively .....                | 127 |
| Students and Parents Promote the School Positively .....         | 129 |
| Maintaining the Positive Reputation of the School .....          | 130 |
| Principals Maintained Positive Reputation.....                   | 131 |
| Teachers Maintained Positive Reputation .....                    | 132 |
| Chairpersons Maintained Positive Reputation.....                 | 132 |
| Demonstrating Accountability .....                               | 133 |
| Principals' Accountability.....                                  | 133 |
| Faculty and Staff Accountability .....                           | 134 |
| School Board Chairpersons' Accountability .....                  | 135 |
| Total Involvement.....   | 136 |
| Articulating Students' and Parents' Behavior Expectations .....  | 137 |
| Behavior Expectations .....                                      | 138 |
| Discipline .....   | 140 |
| Handling Discipline Issues With Students .....                   | 140 |
| Modeling .....   | 142 |
| Summary .....  | 143 |
| <br>   |     |
| 7. THE IMPORTANCE OF PRINCIPAL RELATIONSHIPS.....                | 145 |
| Introduction .....   | 145 |
| Relationships With School Board and Chair.....                   | 145 |
| Board Chairs' Supportive Relationships.....                      | 146 |
| Board Chairs' Role and Influence in Fostering Relationships..... | 148 |
| Principal's Attitude in Building Relationships                   |     |
| With Board and Chairs .....                                      | 149 |
| Relationships With Faculty and Staff .....                       | 151 |
| Collaboration.....   | 152 |
| Interest in Personal and Social Well-being .....                 | 154 |
| Relationships With Students .....                                | 155 |
| Relationships With Parents .....                                 | 157 |
| Relationships With Church and Pastor.....                        | 159 |
| Caring and Compassionate Relationships .....                     | 162 |
| Vulnerable in Relationships .....                                | 163 |
| Honesty and Transparency.....                                    | 163 |
| Struggles .....  | 167 |
| Positive Emotions .....  | 168 |
| Summary .....  | 169 |
| <br>   |     |
| 8. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....               | 171 |
| Introduction .....   | 171 |
| Summary .....  | 171 |
| Purpose .....  | 172 |
| Research Design and Sampling .....                               | 173 |
| Conceptual Framework .....                                       | 174 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Findings .....   | 175 |
| Question 1: What Constitutes Positive School Culture?.....   | 175 |
| Shared Vision.....   | 175 |
| Diversity Celebrated .....   | 177 |
| Pervasive Attitude of Continuous Growth<br>and Improvement .....   | 178 |
| Question 2: How do Principals View Their Role<br>as Influencing School Culture?.....                               | 180 |
| Behavior and School Values .....   | 180 |
| Interpersonal Communication.....   | 182 |
| Importance of Principal Relationships.....   | 183 |
| Question 3: What Are Stakeholder’s Perceptions of the<br>Principal’s Influences on the Culture of the School?..... | 186 |
| Perception of Chairs .....   | 186 |
| Perception of Teachers .....   | 186 |
| Perception of Chairs and Teachers .....  | 187 |
| Question 4: How Do Principals View Their Role as<br>Transformational Leaders? .....                                | 189 |
| Cultivated Personal Commitment .....   | 190 |
| Cultivated Relationships.....  | 190 |
| Inspirational Motivation .....   | 191 |
| Intellectual Stimulation .....   | 192 |
| Discussion .....   | 192 |
| Recommendations .....  | 197 |
| For Beginning and Practicing Principals .....  | 197 |
| For Conference and School Policy Makers .....  | 198 |
| Implications for Future Research.....  | 199 |

Appendix

|                              |     |
|------------------------------|-----|
| A. LETTERS .....             | 201 |
| B. INTERVIEW DOCUMENTS ..... | 212 |
| REFERENCE LIST .....         | 217 |
| VITA.....                    | 239 |

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Proverbs 16:3

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background to the Problem**

According to the research, schools with strong, positive cultures have service-oriented staff members, foster a collegial environment, participate in celebratory rituals, engage in supportive social and professional networks of development, and readily espouse humor (Peterson & Deal, 2009). Further emphasized is the view that positive culture is the key ingredient for influencing productivity and success in a school. Several scholars support the idea that culture affects everything that happens in a school (Erickson, 1987; Peterson & Deal, 2009). Therefore, principals who function as managers, nurturers, and chief educational officers of schools need to understand leadership and school culture.

Culture researchers agree that culture and leadership are inextricably linked (Block, 2003; Ogbonna & Harris, 2000; Schein, 2004). Based on the literature, one of the primary ways leaders distinguish their role is in the creation, change, and management of culture. Schein (2004) points out that the leader is ultimately responsible for maintaining the structural stability among the groups in the organization. This study explored the leadership characteristics of principals of Adventist schools who have influenced positive school cultures. These characteristics are demonstrated by strong service-oriented staff members, a collegial environment, and participation in celebratory

rituals, supportive professional and social networks, and humor.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Many principals struggle to sustain positive school cultures at their schools (Beaudoin & Taylor, 2004; Engels, Hotton, Devos, Bouckennooghe, & Aelterman, 2008; Peterson, 2002; Rasi, 2000). The research suggests that the struggle to maintain positive culture in schools is directly tied to the principals' leadership characteristics. Raymer (2006) noted that as the principal enters the situation, the effective leader assesses the situation for the positive and negative qualities of the setting and goes about making changes based on his or her leadership approach and interactions. Other studies have identified that the principal plays a key role in influencing positive school culture (Cheng, 1996; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Lashway, 2003b; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Riehl, 2000). However, no known research has examined the leadership characteristics of Adventist principals and their influence on positive school culture in Adventist schools. This is the focus of this study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore, understand, and describe the leadership characteristics of principals who foster a positive culture in Seventh-day Adventist schools in a Midwest Seventh-day Adventist Union. Through lived experiences extracted from interviews, observations and field notes, this study provided data that uncover leadership characteristics displayed by principals who influence and sustain positive school culture. It was the goal of this study to add to the body of knowledge and to inform beginning and practicing principals of best practices of the leadership

characteristics necessary for creating positive school culture in Adventist schools.

### **Research Question**

The following research question provided guidance for this study: How do principals and stakeholders describe perceptions of the leadership characteristics of principals who influence positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Guided by the conceptual themes of transformational leadership and school culture, this study sought to provide deeper insight about principals' leadership characteristics and identify practices that influence positive culture in K-12 schools. The research of many scholars reveals that there is a direct relationship between principals' leadership characteristics and positive school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2001; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

Transformational leadership is defined as an influence process that moves individuals toward a level of commitment to achieve goals of the school and its people. Therefore, transformational leaders focus on articulating vision, developing people by providing individualized support and intellectual stimulation, and by redesigning the institution (school) to provide an appropriate model for high performance expectation (Jantzi & Leithwood, 1996). The concept of transformational leadership, originated, and was first introduced by Burns (1978), who advocated leadership as a relationship between leaders and followers. This leadership approach focuses on change, the sharing of common purpose and values, targeted to the elevation and enhancement of each other (Ciulla, 2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). Two strong proponents of

transformational leadership, Bernard Bass and Kenneth Leithwood, concur that transforming leaders possess the ability to focus on both the collective organization and its people (Stewart, 2006).

On the one hand, Bass expanded on the theory of transactional and transformational leadership conceptualized by James McGregor Burns (Bass, 1999; Bass & Riggio, 2005), with transactional leadership identified by charismatic, inspirational leader behavior. On the other, Leithwood and his colleagues conducted extensive studies worldwide to validate and measure the effectiveness of this leadership paradigm in the field of education (Stewart, 2006). Drawing from the existing literature, the theorists Burns, Bass, Leithwood, and Avilio share the opinion that the transformational leadership model focuses on building people, demonstrating leader behaviors that seek to influence follower relations, as well as align organizational interests to the needs of its members. These theorists also affirm that this model of leadership links the culture of the organization to its leader (Stewart, 2006).

Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) purport that school leaders are successful in cultivating inclusive, collaborative work environments when they apply transformational leadership practices. Based on extensive studies on school restructuring initiatives conducted in a variety of settings in different countries (Leithwood & Slegers, 2006), the research suggests that “transformational school leaders are in more or less continuous pursuit of three fundamental goals: 1) helping staff members develop and maintain collaborative, professional culture; 2) fostering teacher development, and 3) helping them solve problems more effectively” (Leithwood, 1992a, pp. 9-10).

School culture, the literature states, can be defined in many ways (Erickson, 1987;

Peterson & Deal, 2009; Segall & Wilson, 2004). The term *school culture* has been used synonymously with a variety of concepts, including climate, ethos, and saga (Deal, 1993), to name a few. According to Stolp (1994), the concept of culture came to education from the corporate workplace with the perception that it would provide direction for a more effective and stable learning environment.

Agreeing with notable culture researchers, the Center for Improving School Culture ([www.schoolculture.net](http://www.schoolculture.net)) adds that culture is not about religion, race, socio-economic status or the size of the school; rather culture influences everything that happens routinely in school (Peterson & Deal, 2009; Phillips, Wagner, & Jack, 2003).

The study also seeks to identify and describe leadership characteristics of principals who influence positive school culture. Burns (2003) maintains that leadership is a moral undertaking as it is a response to human needs expressed in values. Numerous scholars concur with this view (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Lashway, 2003a; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006) that transformational leadership incorporates the relationships and the resources in the organization, with the goal to cultivate follower commitment and involvement in order to achieve change (Allix, 2000; Bass, 1998; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2006). The transformational leadership theorists Bass and Avolio (1994) and Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) confirm the improvement of school cultures when principals foster professional collaboration in the school environment.

In summary and based on scholarly research, it is evident that transformational leadership is strongly undergirded by ethics. With its focus on the individual and professional enhancement of people and the collective development of the organization (Hallinger, 2003a; Iles & Preece, 2006), transformational leadership provides the

conceptual framework that guides the design of this study. The two constructs are discussed more fully in the review of literature.

### **Research Design**

This study utilized a qualitative multiple-case study design, to explore leadership characteristics of principals who have influenced positive school culture. A qualitative rather than a quantitative study was chosen because this study focused on the stories and meanings based upon personal experiences that fit the qualitative design (Schostak, 2002). A multiple-case design was also used to describe the perceptions of principals and key stakeholders to gain understanding of the leadership characteristics of the principals on positive school culture (Stake, 2006).

In keeping with the interview guidelines for qualitative data collection, the interviews were recorded for the study (Creswell, 2012). Principals of the schools who were identified as having exhibited positive school culture were selected based on a selection process using the inter-rater reliability methodology (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, & Marteau, 1997).

As such, with the assistance and approval of the Director of Education in the Midwest Seventh-day Adventist Union and the Superintendents of the four Seventh-day Adventist Conferences, a purposive sampling of principals and key stakeholders was selected to participate in this study. Twelve individuals, including the principal, one teacher, and the school board chairperson, from each of the four schools chosen, participated in the study.

Various sources of data collection were used, including personal interviews, observations and field notes. Open-ended semi-structured interview questions were

utilized to obtain responses from the selected participants from four subgroups in three different locations in the Midwest Adventist Union.

Data were collected from the respective school stakeholders after approval was obtained from Andrews University Institutional Review Board, the Education Director of the Midwest Seventh-day Adventist Union, and the Superintendents of the respective Seventh-day Adventist Conferences where the schools are located. The data gathered from personal interviews were recorded, then transcribed and coded, to identify, understand, and reveal common or related emerging themes of the study. Using the findings, conclusions were drawn about what unique principals' leadership characteristics influence positive school culture in Adventist schools. Additional information about the research design of this study is provided in Chapter 3 of this document.

### **Rationale and Significance of Study**

This study is significant because of the ways that the data could potentially impact the selection and placement of principals in Adventist schools in the future by setting the stage for cultivating and sustaining positive school culture. With culture building being the single most important responsibility of the school leader, it is a critical outcome of the leader to influence the school environment.

Studies have looked at how principals' leadership characteristics influence school culture, but no known research has looked at this phenomenon from the context of the Seventh-day Adventist school. Thus, this study seeks to explore leadership characteristics of Adventist principals who influence positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools. Since many principals encounter this problem, then the results of this study could be

useful in informing other principals of best practices used in Adventist schools to influence and sustain positive culture.

### **Assumptions**

The assumption of this study is that leadership characteristics of principals influence and contribute to maintaining a positive school culture.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of the study include (a) using principals and key stakeholders—teacher and school board chair, as the data collectors for the study, and (b) gathering data about school culture from participants who share similar roles in a common context, but yet there are likely differences from the standpoint of the role classification based on school size (e.g., larger schools with principals who function as full-time administrators and have a support staff, in contrast with small schools with principal- teachers who function in a full-time teaching capacity in addition to administrative duties).

While on one hand these unavoidable factors may limit the study, on the other hand, the selected sample would provide adequate representation and opportunity for me to identify ways that principals influence positive school culture in different types of schools within the Midwest Seventh-day Adventist Union.

### **Delimitations**

This study is delimited to Seventh-day Adventist K-12 schools, principals, and key stakeholders in a Midwest Seventh-day Adventist Union. The sample and location are purposively selected to facilitate ease of proximity to the schools and participants in order to maximize accessibility for data collection, and also to minimize the cost factor.



The data collection was delimited to in-person interviews and on-site observations.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Administrator:* One who administers, especially one who works as a manager in a business, government agency, or school (“Administrator,” n.d.).

*Seventh-day Adventist or Adventist (SDA):* A conservative Christian organization operating churches, schools, and health-care facilities throughout the world. Their belief system shares many common tenets with mainline Christian churches but espouses certain unique beliefs, such as keeping the seventh-day Sabbath and maintains that the Second Advent of Christ is imminent (Knight, 1999).

*Conference:* A regional administrative structure in the Seventh-day Adventist Church responsible for local churches and local school operation, which draws boundaries of administrative responsibility for the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

*Leadership:* The process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives (Yukl, 2008; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010).

*Positive School Culture:* Schools with strong, positive cultures feature service-oriented staffs, a collegial ambience, celebratory rituals, supportive social (and professional) networks, and humor (Peterson & Deal, 2009).

*Principal:* One who holds a position of highest-ranking administrator in an elementary, middle, or high school (“Principal,” n.d.).

*Principal Characteristics:* Strong leadership with high organizational effectiveness, strong organizational culture, positive principal-teachers relationship, more

participation in decision, high teacher esprit and professionalism, less teacher disengagement and hindrance, more teacher job satisfaction and commitment, and more positive student performance particularly on attitudes to their schools and learning (Cheng, 1994).

*Principal-teacher:* One who is hired to be head of an elementary, middle or high school, and also teaches children (Fullan, 2005).

*Reflective Leadership:* Taking time to review and evaluate their leadership and what has been achieved (Fullan, 2005).

*School Values:* Qualities that are not just considered worthwhile, but represent the school's highest priorities, deeply held beliefs, and fundamental guiding forces (Sartain & Schumann, 2006).

*School Culture:* Actions in the environment that reflects the shared ideas—assumptions, values, and beliefs—that give an organization its identity and standard for expected behaviors in its day-to-day operations (Tableman & Herron, 2004).

*Servant-leadership:* The leader is servant first (Greenleaf, 2002).

*Stakeholder:* Any individual/or group, such as principal, teachers, parents, and students who (can) affect or are affected by, the achievement of the organization's goals and objectives (Freeman, 2010).

*Teacher:* One who teaches, especially one who is hired to teach children (Ledesma, 2011).

*Transformational Leadership:* Leadership that motivates individuals toward a level of commitment to achieve school goals by identifying and articulating a school vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, providing individualized support, providing intellectual stimulation, providing an appropriate model, and having high

performance expectation (Jantzi & Leithwood, 1996).

*Union*: Regional headquarters for a cluster of conferences and having supervision and coordination for the Seventh-day Adventist Church ministries in a particular region (Consuegra, 2012).

### **Summary**

There is substantial research to support the importance of principals' leadership in creating positive culture in schools (Sergiovanni, 2001). Literature suggests one of the key responsibilities of school principals is cultivating school culture (Barth, 2001; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009; Waters et al., 2003). Schools with strong culture demonstrate effective performance, high achievement and success among their stakeholders, and the principal plays a key role toward achieving this goal (Cheng, 1994; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

This qualitative multiple-case study looks at transformational leadership to explore and identify leadership characteristics of principals who influence positive culture in the Adventist school context. Through the description of their lived experiences the principals and key stakeholders, school board chair, and teachers shared stories and described varied perspectives of leadership characteristics of principals and positive school culture from their vantage point in the schools in which they are associated. It was my goal to discover best leadership practices of principals in cultivating a positive school culture to add to the body of knowledge and to inform beginning and practicing principals of ways for successful culture building in K-12 schools.

## **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the main elements and outlined the overview of the study. Chapter 2, the literature review, informs the study in the primary areas, including the leadership characteristics of principals associated with positive school culture, transformational leadership. Leadership theory as it relates to school administrators is explored, also. The chapter culminates with a brief historical overview of the Seventh-day Adventist system of education in North America. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used in the study, which consisted of a qualitative multiple-case study research design. Chapters 4-7 describe the narratives of the 12 participants in the study, four principals, four school board chairpersons, and four teachers. Finally, Chapter 8 summarizes the findings of how principals describe their perspectives of leadership characteristics of principals who influence a positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools. The study on leadership characteristics of principals who influence a positive school culture concludes with recommendations for future studies and the impact that this study may have on beginning and practicing principals and administrative leaders of principals within the Adventist Midwest Union.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

This chapter examines literature to review and analyze scholarly research that informs this study of leadership characteristics of principals and school culture. The literature review addresses five topics related to the major areas of the study. The topics include: (a) the principal, with emphasis on the general role of school leaders, (b) leadership characteristics, with focus on various initiatives in leading schools and fostering a sense of community among stakeholders, (c) school culture, which focuses on defining culture, (d) school culture theories, with a special focus on transformational leadership and ethics, and (e) principal as culture builder, which highlights the key leadership initiatives of principals, as identified in a 30-year study on Balanced Leadership (Waters et al., 2003). In addition, this introductory section of the chapter provides a brief historical overview of the Seventh-day Adventist education system, which is the context of this study.

The first section on the role of the principal defines who is a principal and provides insights on the importance of principals in the school by describing the various roles the school leaders play in the learning environment. In addition, I examined the extant literature regarding leadership characteristics of principals to

discover leadership behaviors and practices of principals as the culture builder of the school.

The third section focuses on defining culture in general as well as review the literature on positive school culture. The fourth section highlights school culture theories with special focus on transformational leadership and ethics to explore the broad context in which positive school culture takes place.

In section five, I also review the existing literature related to the principal as culture builder of the school. McRel's (2003) 30-year study on balanced leadership is used to highlight various initiatives and best practices for cultivating and sustaining positive school culture for school improvement and student achievement.

The chapter culminates with an overview of Adventist education and the school system with focus on its foundational core values as a context for the study.

### **The Principal's Role**

The school principal is the person who holds the position of highest-ranking administrator in an elementary, middle, or high school ("Principal," n.d.).

By virtue of the position, the principal is the one with autonomy for the day-to-day total operation of the school, including, but not limited to, internal governance, instructional supervision and achievement, safety, and security of the school (Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 1998; Lipham, 1981; Newton, Tunison, & Viczko, 2010). Typically, the principal's duties would be fully administrative with major responsibilities for the overall effectiveness in school operation and improvement (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982). However, depending on the situation, such as school size, the challenges may vary in range from leadership to managerial

accountability (Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 1998).

In some schools, primarily small private schools, the person who holds the chief leadership position may be required to carry dual roles, as principal and teacher—commonly known as principal-teacher (Clarke, 2002). This individual teaches full-time and, in many instances, multi-grades, while leading and handling the management of the school needs (Clarke, 2002; Cranston, Ehrich, & Billot, 2003).

Irrespective of school size an essential role of the principal is to set the tone and create the culture of the school (Cowdery, 2004; Dinham, 2005; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2004). This statement is not simply a perception; rather it is supported by robust research. Many researchers of school improvement and culture building also share the view that the role of the principal is paramount in establishing and influencing the school culture (Deal & Peterson, 1990; DuFour, 2002; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982). Sergiovanni and Starratt (2007) suggest that the leader assumes the role of high priest, seeking to define, strengthen, and articulate those enduring values, beliefs, and cultural strands that give the school its unique identity. In a seminal study, Barth (cited in Deal & Peterson, 1999) declares, “Nothing is more important about a school than its culture. No one occupies a more influential position from which to influence a school’s culture than its principal” (p. 7). Although the literature on school culture points out that while on one hand culture is an ambiguous element and therefore difficult to define, on the other, many culture theorists (Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Deal & Kennedy, 1999; Senge, 1990) agree that culture is an essential component of the school life and is the key role of principals (Day, 2000; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Hallinger, 2003b; Sergiovanni, 2007).

State University adds that principals currently play multiple roles, including school manager, instructional leader, and the leader of school reform. It is evident that the task for the principal is to consistently engage in the full range of relationships through a variety of major and minor actions to generate a common purpose and effect in the school (Firestone & Wilson, 1985).

These diverse demands require school principals to be attentive to details, to prioritize their goals and objectives, and to include the total school community in order to ensure successful results in the school environment. As Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) put it, collaborative school cultures have been associated with the achievement of a number of school reform objectives for both teachers and students. In support of this idea other researchers add their conviction that when a positive school culture is cultivated it sharpens focus, builds commitment, amplifies motivation, and improves school effectiveness and productivity (Kelley & Shaw, 2009; Peterson & Deal, 2009).

The role of the principal is, therefore, pivotal to systemic school change (Fullan, 2003). The duties and responsibilities of the principal, whether in public or private schools, are many and varied (Barth, 2007; Clarke, 2002; Cranston et al., 2003). The principal's multifaceted, complex, and demanding job description (Barth, 2007) involves, but is not limited to, carrying out set requirements and expectations delineated by the superintendent's office, and day-to-day administrative duties at the school site, but principals are also accountable to a school board, which governs the local operation of the school. In the case of the private school, the principal's accountability is also an expectation of the local constituency. In the Adventist setting, the constituency includes



the membership of the contributing church/churches of the school (Boyatt, 2004; Southwestern Union Conference, 2004).

Cooley and Shen (2003) posit that school accountability and professional job responsibilities have increased for principals. Riehl (2000) further explains that as the accountability movement gained momentum, the role of the principal changed from school manager to school instructional leader and then to the school reform leader. While these roles are consistent with the duties and challenges of school leaders in all settings, including providing focused instructional leadership, leading change, developing a collaborative leadership structure, and providing the moral center, Portin (2001), also points out that

as schools vary, so may leadership practices. For example, while virtually all principals accept instructional leadership as a major responsibility, those in larger schools may take more of a coordinating strategic role while their counterparts in small schools exercise more of a hands-on approach. (p. 4)

In their unique role as school leader, principals serve as the catalyst for key stakeholders (Salisbury & McGregor, 2005) in helping staff, students, and parents to think and act based on the guiding principles of the institution. Wheatley (2001) asserts that relationships, and not merely people, are the basic organizing unit of life. Accordingly, building capacity to maximize participation and collaboration will be essential for the health, effectiveness, and survival of schools as social interactive organizations (Hallinger, 2003b). Researchers of educational leadership posit that the transformational leadership promotes a wide range of practice that appropriately captures the principal's multiplicity of demands as well as the heart of school administration (Lashway, 2003b; Leithwood, 1992b; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

## **Principal's Leadership Practices**

This section describes the principal's leadership in three essential areas:

(a) managerial leadership, (b) instructional leadership, and (c) reform leadership.

### **Managerial Leadership**

As Chief Education Officer (CEO) of the institution, it is expected that the principal must assume the role of Chief Managerial Leader of the school. Driven by the demands of high performance expectations, accountability standards, legislative dictates for qualified personnel, having to deal with a changing and demanding workforce, as well as developing and executing strategic plans, increased pressure is on principals (Geijsel, Slegers, Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2003; Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2008). This all-encompassing managerial role can consume the daily schedule of the school leader, who is also expected to fulfill other tasks delineated by his/her job description as well as the unexpected day-to-day happenings.

Despite the defined roles and responsibilities of the principals, it is difficult to predict or prepare for the urgent or important tasks that the school leader inevitably will have to carry out. During such instances of complexities, the school leader's managerial skills come to the fore. Kotter (2001) declares, "Management is about coping with complexity, and by contrast leadership is about coping with change" (p. 4).

Other scholars share Kotter's (2001) view that leadership and management though distinctively different also complement each other within the organization (Block McLaughlin, 2004; Dengler, 2007; Kotter, 2001). On the one hand, leaders focus on leading and developing people for successful change, on the other hand, managers

focus primarily on planning, developing capacity, and problem solving. Therefore, in an attempt to effectively *manage the things* (Covey, 1989) while leading and developing the people of the institution (Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki, & Giles, 2005; Kotter, 2001; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003), principals who are skillful at distributing responsibilities to share managerial leadership will efficiently solve problems and ensure school plans are accomplished.

Lashway (2003b) suggests that given the multifaceted role of school leaders “it may be misleading to speak of ‘the’ role of the principal” (p. 4). Nonetheless, in their mega study of educational leadership from 1985 to 1995, Leithwood and Duke (1999) identify that among the six distinct conceptions of leadership, the transformational model supports both leadership and managerial aspects of the principal’s responsibilities, as it encourages increasing the commitments and capacities of staff members, as well as guide them through changes within the institution (Fullan, 2002b; Tichy & Devanna, 1986).

### Instructional Leadership

It is evident from literature that many researchers concur that principals “wear many hats” in their schools (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008; Gilman & Lanman-Givens, 2001; Starr & White, 2008). With today’s demands for increasing student achievement and teacher performance (Goertz & Duffy, 2003; O'Donnell & White, 2005; Rockoff, 2004; Whitaker, 2003), more than ever, principals are called upon to be strong instructional leaders (Hallinger, 2005).

In a study on instructional leadership and school culture, DuPont (2009) identified the instructional leadership role of principals based on reflections of research

conducted during the late 20th century. Based on the findings of Hallinger (2005), instructional leaders focus their attention in seven critical areas: (a) creating the school's vision, (b) developing a culture and climate of high expectations for staff and students, (c) monitoring the curriculum and students' learning outcomes, (d) organizing staff development, (e) maintaining a visible presence, (f) developing positive interpersonal relations, and (g) modeling the shared values of the school.

First, as instructional leader, creating a clear vision for the school is a strategy of effective and transformational leaders to provide direction for the future of the organization (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Fullan, 2002a). Second, instructional leaders are also expected to establish and maintain clear vision and goals for the instructional program and personnel.

Consistent with the role of principal, one of the key responsibilities of the instructional leader is to establish and maintain a positive school climate that reflects the cherished values and norms, and fosters an atmosphere that is conducive to quality teaching and learning (Cross & Rice, 2000; Fullan, 2002b; Kelley, Thornton, & Daugherty, 2005; McEwan, 1998).

Third, utilizing the learning-centered strategy (DuFour, 2002), the instructional leader has the opportunity to monitor progress of students to successfully achieve curriculum expectations (Cross & Rice, 2000; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Marks & Printy, 2003).

Fourth, DuFour and Eaker (1998) and Hallinger (2005) support the claim that one of the ways instructional leaders can ensure personal and professional growth and high teacher performance to support student learning is to organize staff

development programs consistent with the school's mission and goals.

Fifth, it is widely stated in the literature that instructional leaders who maintain a visible presence are able to respond to positive and negative aspects of the environment, and in so doing connect the instructional programs to other aspects of school life (Ovando, 2005; Quinn, 2002).

Sixth, Sergiovanni (2006) uses the metaphor of human engineer, and describes the interpersonal relationship-building skills of the instructional leader. He states, "By emphasizing such concepts as human relations, interpersonal competence and instrumental motivational technologies, she or he provides support, encouragement, and growth opportunities to the school's human organization to maintain morale" (p. 6).

The seventh step among the critical responsibilities of the instructional leader states the expectation that the principal model the shared values of the school. Malphurs (2004) suggests that organizational values exist on two levels, the individual level and the corporate level. He explains that at the individual level, which refers to people, leaders included, and the corporation, such as the school, "every ministry has a set of core values that guides what the ministry seeks to be accomplished" (p. 9). According to Furst and Denig (2005), the instructional leader's role is to demonstrate the shared beliefs and attitude of the school in modeling the way others are to be treated.

Owing to the multiple duties for which principals are accountable in their role as instructional leader, they need the knowledge base and leadership skills to effectively influence stakeholders to action. Principals are expected to develop leadership in others, in order to foster a collaborative approach and positive learning culture (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003).

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) state that at the core of most definitions of leadership are two major functions: (a) providing direction, and (b) influencing culture. With culture involving everything that happens in the school (Wagner, 2006), fulfilling this responsibility effectively has the potential to consume much of the leader's time. However, of equal importance is the task of instructional leadership, which requires the principal's direction for maximizing teacher and student engagement and learning outcomes (Fullan, 2001; Fullan & Ballew, 2004; Hallinger, 2003b; MacNeil et al., 2009; Wagner, 2006).

Looking at the principal's workload from a human standpoint it is easy to conclude that it is a recipe for failure and does substantiate the observation that fewer educators are aspiring to the position of principal (Rayfield & Diamantes, 2003). Given that painted picture, it is no wonder that Barth (2002) summarized the seemingly impossible job situation of the principal when he stated:

Probably the most important--and the most difficult--job of an instructional leader is to change the prevailing culture of a school. The school's culture dictates, in no uncertain terms, "the way we do things around here." A school's culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the president of the country, the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal, teachers, and parents can ever have. (p. 1)

In addition, Shupe (1997) suggests that despite the multiplicity of duties of school principals, their role as instructional leader must be top priority. In many schools, evidence is mounting that leaders are currently engaging in new practices to help their schools systematically improve student learning (Halverson, Grigg, Prichett, & Thomas, 2007). As instructional leader, the role of the principal is to establish and maintain the school culture since it is a powerful tool for influencing teaching and learning in the schools (Hallinger et al., 1996; Halverson et al., 2007; Hargreaves, Earl,

Moore, & Manning, 2001; Harris, 2002; Hopkins, 2000; Peterson, 2002). Accordingly, “the heart of the instructional leadership is the ability of leaders to change schools from cultures of internal accountability to institutions that can meet the demands of external accountability” (Halverson et al., 2007, p. 4).

To successfully fulfill the impossible job description of the principal, as the one at the frontline, depends upon the support of others behind the principal. In an effort to enlarge leadership capacity and improve the teaching and learning process, successful principals involve teachers and stakeholders in decision making about educational matters (Marks & Printy, 2003; Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

### Reform Leadership

Due to the multi-faceted job expectation of principals and the dynamic environment in which these leaders function, change occurs constantly. The principal, like the archeologist, looks for changes over time for practices that have continued successfully in the school. To conduct beneficial assessment that would direct meaningful change in the learning environment, principals need to seek answers to the following questions: (a) what are the core values of each year, and which were dropped, (c) do we know for what reason, and (d) which values and purposes have endured (Meyer, 2010; Peterson & Deal, 2009)? This kind of reflection is highly recommended in the literature for improvement and sustainability of the school’s enduring values, beliefs, practices, and artifacts (Bustamante, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Deal & Peterson, 2000; Phillips et al., 2003).

While the principals’ role as instructional leader involves giving full attention to ensure the consistent improvement of the teaching and learning processes, several

authors and researchers agree that instructional reform is not adequate to ensure sustainable success of the school (Fullan, 2002b; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2007; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Tirozzi, 2001). Rather, focusing on improving the teaching and learning culture along with the rest of the school community—primarily its people—has the potential to engender sustainable reform within the total school environment.

Based on the theory that “if people don’t improve, programs never will,” Wagner (2006) and other experts share the view that principals who collaborate with staff in seeking to understand and assess school culture, achieve direction for both the instructional and professional improvement of the school (Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2008; Gurr et al., 2006).

In addition, Deal and Peterson (2000) posit that reforms that strive for educational excellence are likely to fail unless they are meaningfully linked to the school's unique culture. Applying these initiatives backed by scholarly research, principals produce better results in considering the shared values to maintain school cultures that support norms of collaboration and trust (Zepeda, 2003). Kaplan (2005) also elaborates that the organization’s shared values serve as the guiding principles of what is important to bring about change—vision, mission, and value statements that provide a broad sense of purpose for all employees.

### **Leadership Characteristics and Positive School Culture**

This section reviews literature to highlight characteristics demonstrated by successful leaders in cultivating positive school culture. Many define leadership as a role of influence (Fullan, 2002a; Glatthorn & Jailall, 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003). Ogawa and Bossert (1995) make the observation that leaders build organizational



quality with the effective implementation of personal and organizational values, along with support of personal resources of people. Based on the premise of this study, leadership characteristics of principals were viewed through the lens of core values of the selected institutions and leaders. The research explored values that guided leadership behavior and actions that foster a positive school culture. Sartain and Schumann (2006) define core values as traits or qualities that are considered not just worthwhile, but represent an individual's or organization's highest priorities, deeply held beliefs, and fundamental driving forces. The theorists further add that core values are also called guiding principles because they form a solid core of who you are, what you believe, and who you want to be going forward. Within the organization, core values define what your organization believes and how the leader wants the organization resonating with and appealing to employees and ultimately to the global community.

Supported by the theory that leaders create culture and culture defines and creates leaders (Schein, 2004), it can be argued that core values have the potential to shape the personality of the workplace culture. Therefore, it is important for principals to establish values that will positively craft the culture of the school (Peterson & Deal, 1998).

Deal and Peterson (2000) purport that schools take on a personality of their own based on the cherished traditions, unwritten rules, and unspoken expectations. This could be interpreted that upon assuming the position, the principal (particularly in the Christian school—in this case the Adventist school setting) needs to be intentional to assess the situation to identify and organize the foundational values of the school and its

people, in order to nurture a positive school culture (MacNeil et al., 2009; Robinson & Campbell, 2010; Sergiovanni, 2006).

Sergiovanni and Starratt (2007), speaking of school culture, suggest leaders seek to identify the roots of meaning and the flow and ebb of daily life in schools, so that they might provide stakeholders, teachers, students, parents, and members of the community with a sense of importance, vision, and purpose about the seemingly ordinary and mundane. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) assert school leaders play an important role in establishing successful school culture when they help to establish more positive relationships between educators and students, and their families and communities, and when these relationships are built on trust, deep familiarity, and genuine appreciation.

#### School Culture: What Is It?

Based on the preceding claims about the elusive nature of culture, it seems reasonable to join Schein (2004) in supporting that culture is a concept that has had a long and unpredictable history. The expert adds that culture has been used by anthropologists to refer to the customs and rituals that societies have developed over the course of their history. According to Schein (2004), over the last several decades some researchers and managers used culture to refer to the organizational climate and practices used in their handling of people or the espoused values and beliefs of an organization. Saufier (2005) clarifies that school climate and school culture are distinct but highly interrelated aspects of an interactive system, in that changes in one produce changes in the other.

The concept of culture, so difficult to define, yet being the element that pervades and impacts every aspect of school life, makes it an extremely significant part of the

institution (Brucato, 2005; Peterson & Deal, 2010). What, therefore, is this elusive element we call culture? According to culture experts Peterson and Deal (1998), “this ephemeral, taken-for-granted aspect of schools, being often over-looked or ignored” (p. 6), is actually one of the most essential features of any educational enterprise. They add from their vast knowledge and research that culture is the underlying stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that build up over time to help give meaning and understanding as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges.

Thompson (1993) contributes that culture is the feel that is so pervasive and powerful that people experience immediately when they walk into a school. Culture, he adds, influences everything that goes on in schools, from the way the staff dress, what they talk about, their willingness to change the practice of instruction, as well as the emphasis given student and faculty learning. Deal and Peterson (2000) remind us that culture is the kind of underlining set of norms, values, beliefs, rituals, and traditions that make up the unwritten rules of how to think, feel and act in an organization.

The extensive study and discussion that have taken place on the concept of organizational culture confirm that it represents a core element of the school environment. According to Geertz (1993, as cited in Stolp, 1994), culture represents a “historically transmitted pattern of meaning.” Those patterns of meaning are expressed both (explicitly) through intentional actions and in our taken-for-granted beliefs (Stolp, 1994). Taylor (2011), in her study about 21<sup>st</sup>-century school reform, maintains that researchers of school culture agree on the importance and the need to focus on culture for school success. Many researchers agree that the school culture is represented and defined by what takes place in the total school environment (Peterson & Deal, 2009; Schein,

2004; Stolp & Smith, 1995). Hallinger (2003b) states that no research has addressed school culture in the context of Adventist schools.

For the purpose of this study, school culture was viewed in the Adventist school context where the principals' actions in the school environment reflect the shared ideas about norms, values, and beliefs of stakeholders that give the organization its identity and standard for expected behaviors (Tableman & Herron, 2004). Wagner (2006) points out that school culture is the shared experiences, both in school and out of school, that create a sense of community, family, and team membership. This study explores the ways that Adventist principals influence shared leadership and positive working relationships within their specific school environment.

### Defining Positive School Culture

The study sought to explore positive school culture in the Adventist school context and identify those who help to shape it. Recognizing the reality that negative influences in the environment will also be evidenced in the culture of the institution, this study intentionally explored schools that demonstrate a positive culture. One definition of positive school culture captures the concept broadly to include the school-wide ethos and the culture of individual classrooms; high expectations for learning and achievement; a safe and caring environment; shared values and relational trust; a powerful pedagogy and engagement; a professional faculty culture; and partnerships with families and the community (Taylor, 2011). For the purpose of this study, positive school culture is featured in schools with strong, positive culture, service-oriented staff members, collegial ambience, celebratory rituals, supportive social and professional networks, and humor (Peterson & Deal, 2009).

## Collegial Ambience

Literature about collegiality and collaboration identifies that the terminology is closely related to each other and the two are frequently referred to in the language of relationship building, which the school leaders identified as essential characteristics for principals in their endeavor to influence and improve professional interaction within the school culture (Barth, 2006). Gruenert (2005) points out that as a descriptive term, collaboration refers to cooperative actions, whereas collegiality denotes the quality of the relationships among staff members in the school setting. According to Kelchtermans (2006), collegiality often refers to good relationships, in other words, supportive, stimulating, rewarding, equal/democratic interactions shared among staff members.

Lam, Yim, and Lam (2002) identify that collaboration among adults as well as between students and teachers emerges from organizationally generated collegiality. In creating collegial culture, effective principals succeed in enhancing and empowering collegial relations among the teachers and staff as well as foster opportunity to strengthen and encourage positive, open communication and professional development and sharing (Barth, 2006; Reeves, 2006). Wheatley (2001) asserts that relationships, and not individuals alone, are the basic organizing unit of life. Accordingly, participation and cooperation are essential for survival in social interactive organizations such as the school. Peterson and Deal (2009) advocate that “in schools with strong professional culture, the staff share strong norms of collegiality and improvement, value student learning over ease, and assume all children can learn if teachers and staff find the curriculum and instructional strategies that work” (p. 12).

## Celebratory Rituals

Everyone enjoys a celebration. Celebrations commemorate special events and help make memories and meaning for families, work and religious organizations, schools, and community groups (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Kachun, 2003). From the review of 50 years of research on naturally occurring family routines and rituals for celebrations, Fiese et al. (2002) suggest that families engage in a variety of daily and weekly routines that signify traditional family celebrations which provide special meaning to individual family members.

Some benefits of celebratory rituals in creating positive school culture include bringing various groups together to share and rejoice for a common purpose (Ancess, 1998; Perry, 2005). Just as celebrations in the home among families create opportunity for emotional recharge and harmony, the practice creates a similar outcome in the work and school arenas when people take time to remember and recognize significant actions and events (Deal & Peterson, 2000).

Deal and Peterson (2009) also purport that celebrations play an important role in putting culture on display. The rituals and traditions, ceremonies and celebrations build a sense of community that facilitates staff, students, and community to identify with the school and feel committed to the purposes and relationships there (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Peterson & Deal, 2009). The school's culture engages teachers in ongoing learning about their craft, communicates high expectations for students through lively programs and celebrations, and involves parents as equal partners in the learning experience (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

## Supportive Social Networks

In crafting positive school culture, principals must engage the school in collaboration with the home (parents) and community, including the church constituents, to provide protection and support for the students (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Rosenfeld, Richman, and Bowen (2000) observe that students recognize the importance of, and respond favorably to, the combined support of the three social network groups. Their study reveals that students who perceive high supportiveness from all three sources—home, school, and community—demonstrate better attendance; better study habits; avoid problem behaviors; have higher school satisfaction, engagement, and self-efficacy; and, in addition, demonstrate improved academic performance.

The literature on social networks also emphasizes that in establishing social networks for schools principals must work at building internal communities to strengthen the core support of the school (Mulford, 2007). In addition, these school leaders are challenged to cultivate extended communities in order to build external social structure for networking with like-minded schools and other entities to secure other benefits and support (Adler & Kwon, 2000; Inkpen & Tsang, 2005). Ancess (1998) suggests that establishing common ground among the network groups involves developing mechanisms and processes for effective and timely communication and action. In addition, opportunities need to be structured for students, staff, and parents to make attachments to one another so that meaningful relationships can be forged. In this diverse learning dynamic, faculty can develop a professional community that results in the school becoming a cohesive, caring, educational community.

## Humor in the School Setting

Numerous studies support the display of humor in the school and work environment as a way of nurturing relationships and improving employee morale (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999; Brucato, 2005; Hinde, 2004; Hurren, 2006; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). However, due to the perception of students and teachers, schools are grim places, and teaching and learning are not enjoyable. Hurren (2006) embarked on a study to investigate school principals' humor use with teachers and different groups. He discovered that principals who share humor in the workplace have teachers with higher job satisfaction than those principals who share little or no humor in the workplace. The positive outcome of the study contributes that humor can make a positive impact and improve the school-culture building process.

## A School Model of Positive Culture

The National Middle School Association (2003) believes that the following 14 characteristics delineate the vision for positive middle-school culture.

The Association believes successful middle schools are characterized by culture and programming that include:

1. Educators who value working with the age group and are prepared to do so
2. Courageous, collaborative leadership
3. A shared vision that guides decisions
4. An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
5. High expectations for every member of the learning community
6. Students and teachers engaged in active learning
7. An adult advocate for every student



8. School-initiated family and community partnerships
9. Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
10. Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity
11. Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning
12. Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning
13. School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
14. Multifaceted guidance and support services.

These characteristics correlate and support the expectations for school culture advocated by the Seventh-day Adventist philosophy described as “True Education” (White, 1903, p. 9). True education promotes holistic training defined as the harmonious development of all the faculties and full adequate preparation for this life and the future eternal life (White, 1903). In describing the concept of true education, White (1903) posits that

our ideas of education take too narrow and too low a range. There is need of a broader scope, a higher aim. True education means more than the perusal of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to human beings. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come. (p. 9)

This Christian school environment aims to empower and open a path of continual progress towards God’s ideal (White, 2000). Deal and Peterson (1994) declare, “Strong, positive school culture does not just happen, rather, it is built over time by those who work in and attend the school” (p. 8). According to Raywid (2001), reforms that strive for educational excellence are likely to fail unless they are meaningfully linked to the school's unique culture.

Establishing positive school culture, therefore, requires being sensitive and

truthful to the beliefs, traditions, values, and norms which already make up the fabric of the school (Deal & Peterson, 2000; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000a; Schein, 2004). With culture being the subtle element of the school environment (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Hollins, 2008), principals need to cooperate with stakeholders to understand the deep meaning particularly in new situations, such as a new school or when integrating new personnel to carry out their required duties.

A positive or healthy school culture, from the perspective of Wagner (2006) and other culture researchers, is characterized by shared experiences both in school and out of schools that create a sense of community, family, and team membership. Furthermore, the literature adds that in cultivating positive organizational culture, consensus must be established about how to do things and what is worth doing (Martin, 2009). These initiatives may include infiltrating the school with staff stability and shared goals (Butler, Drew, Krelle, Seal, & Trafford, 2011; Ntontela, 2009). Wagner (2006) believes that setting time aside for celebrations and recognition of stakeholders as common agreement is achieved on various aspects of curricular and instructional components, such as monitoring of students' progress, order, and discipline (Peterson & Deal, 2009). In addition, Champion (2007) and Khuzwayo (2008) also contribute that positive relationships are a direct result in the school environment when open and honest communication is encouraged and there is an abundance of humor and trust practiced among stakeholders (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987; Holton, 2001; Mishra & Mishra, 2008; Wagner, 2006).

### **The Principal and Leadership**

This section explores principal leadership behaviors that contribute to the

relationship between leadership characteristics of principals and positive instructional school culture. The research literature on school culture identifies numerous ways that principals can influence positive culture. One study identifies the principal as a culture builder who promotes the power of partnerships by establishing a “leader-rich” environment that encourages teacher empowerment in decision making and shared-leadership in the school environment (Barth, 2002; see also Shain, 2001).

Goddard (2003) observes that the principal is central in fostering productive norms and social relations in the school. Viewed as the role model of the school, the principal is expected to create trust and commitment to learning by modeling consistency, commitment, and contribution to the school community, and by facilitating professional development opportunities for staff. In addition, as previously mentioned, the principal is looked to for instructional leadership and direction for a host of other areas that support successful school stability and achievement.

In extensive and comprehensive studies on school leadership, McRel (as cited in Waters et al., 2003) developed a balanced leadership framework that provides school leaders with well-researched knowledge, strategies, tools, and resources that principals need to be effective change agents of achievement and culture. Principals ought not to diminish the expectation to be confident and positive in modeling personal core values as they attempt to teach and implement the espoused beliefs and traditions of the organization. According to Sergiovanni and Starratt (2007), in order to foster a positive and distinctive school climate and culture, the principal needs to engage in legacy building, and in creating, nurturing, and teaching the organizational saga, which defines the school as a distinct entity within an identifiable culture.

## Transformational Leadership Theory

In this era of heightened educational reform, school leaders are looked upon to bring about transformation in schools (Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Transformational leadership, a theory originated and first introduced by George McGregor Burns, has become a well-advocated concept among many popular theorists as a strategy that does support transforming followers to commitment. The transformational leadership approach is also known as the relationship theory.

This practice occurs when a leader is successful in influencing change among his or her followers towards achieving mutual organizational purposes (Bass & Bass, 2008; Leithwood, 1994; Northouse, 2012; Stewart, 2006). The transformational leader focuses on building and nurturing collegial, collaborative, empathetic relationships within the organization for the purpose of getting the job done and bringing out the best in the individuals one leads (Avolio & Bass, 1993; Barth, 2002; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Leithwood, 2007).

The author of this theory emphasizes that transformational leaders motivate and inspire people by helping group members see the importance and benefit of tasks and actions taken. Burns (1978) posits that transformational leaders create a successful relational work community, by engaging the full capacity of followers in an effort to help each one achieve at maximum potential. Inasmuch as the transformational leader is focused on the performance outcomes of the group, he or she is equally committed to ensuring individual success (Stewart, 2006).

According to Northouse (2012), these leaders motivate their colleagues by giving time to meet their personal and professional needs, and valuing their

contribution. Stewart (2006), examining the works of Burns, Bass, Avolio, and Leithwood, found that “transformational leadership encompasses a change in benefit both to the relationship and the resources of those involved. The result is a change in the level of commitment and the increased capacity for achieving the mutual purposes” (p. 9).

Bass and Avolio (1994) point out four ways that transformational leadership can contribute to improving the institution’s effectiveness and enhance organizational culture: (a) stimulating interest among colleagues and followers to view their work from new perspectives, (b) generating awareness of the mission or vision of the team and institution, (c) developing colleagues and followers to highest levels of ability and potential, and (d) motivating colleagues and followers to look beyond their own interests toward those that will benefit the group.

In addition, literature of Bass (1985, 1998), Bass and Avolio (1993), and Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) identifies that transformational leadership also contains four components, often described as the four *I*’s of transformational leadership: (a) idealized influence or charisma, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualized consideration.

### Idealized Influence

As stated, the idealized influence of the transformational leader is analogous to charisma, a leadership characteristic that often describes the transactional leader who motivates followers with “promises, praise, and rewards; or they are corrected by negative feedback, reproof, threats, and disciplinary actions” (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999, p. 176). Bass and Steidlmeier make it clear that “most leaders have a profile of

the full range of leadership that includes both transformational and transactional factors” (p. 176). However, leaders tend to be labeled as one or the other due to a greater display of one style of leadership behavior. The writers noted that followers of charismatic leaders, whether of the transformational or transactional leadership persuasion, tend to identify with the leaders’ vision and goals, and want to imitate their leaders.

### Inspirational Motivation

Transformational leadership scholars advocate that it is the charismatic leader who typically inspires and motivates followers into action (Bass, 1990, 1999; Hetland & Sandal, 2003; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). Hetland and Sandal (2003) declare that the leader’s ability to inspire, motivate, and create commitment to common goals is crucial. Numerous researchers have confirmed that transformational leaders are gifted with the ability to inspire, generate enthusiasm, and create commitment among their followers using a variety of strategies. Inspirational motivation strategies include, but are not limited to, the following: builds positive relationships (Stone et al., 2004); attractively articulates mission and vision for the organization (Barbuto Jr., 2005; Bryant, 2003; Jung & Sosik, 2002); leader establishes collegial, collaborative, supportive/empathetic work environment (Barbuto Jr., 2005; Barbuto & Burbach, 2006; Bryant, 2003); and ultimately promotes personal efficacy that engenders self-motivation for continued growth and development (Burns, 1978; Sosik & Megerian, 1999). In these and other creative, caring ways, transformational leaders challenge and stimulate interest among colleagues and followers to view their work from new perspectives (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Stewart, 2006).

## Intellectual Stimulation

The primary developers of transformational leadership describe personal efficacy as a key attribute of transformational leaders (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2005; Burns, 1978). The literature of scholars also identifies that transformational leaders who lead for the right reasons place people before things (Greenleaf, 2010) and are, therefore, focused on placing high value on colleagues and followers, one person at a time. The transformational leaders' goal is to discover new ideas and ways of doing things and to develop his/her colleagues and followers to their individual highest levels of ability and potential (Avolio & Bass, 2002).

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) state that “effective leaders help the school to become a professional learning community to support the performance of all key workers, including teachers and students” (p. 5). To achieve the goal of intellectually stimulating each individual, the authors have identified a core set of leadership practices for successful leadership in any context. The first category, and a top priority practice of transformational leadership, is setting directions, which is focused on developing organizational (for this study, the school's) goals and articulating the vision to inspire colleagues to participate in the plan for the school's future. The second core practice is developing people, which the leader aims at influencing and developing the human resources of the school, and is an essential component of intellectual stimulation. According to Leithwood and Riehl (2003), in providing intellectual stimulation, effective transformational leaders

encourage reflection and challenge their staff to examine assumptions about their work and rethink how it can be performed. They provide information and resources to help people see discrepancies between current and desired practices. They enable

teachers and others to understand and gain mastery over the complexities of necessary changes. (p. 6)

The third and last leadership practice is developing the organization and redesigning the culture. This core practice focuses on cultivating a strong positive school culture that supports and sustains the success of all key workers, including teachers and students. For the leader, this task involves modeling behavior that recognizes and respects the diverse makeup of the total school community in order to initiate capacity development and individual commitment (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999, 2000b). To effect successful transformational leadership in the management of the environment, the effective leader will seek to promote positive actions and provide support for the diversity of learners (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000b; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

### Individualized Consideration

Providing individualized consideration places expectation on transformational leaders to prioritize the worth of each staff member and show respect and concern about his/her feelings and needs (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). In addition, Jung and Sosik (2002) assert that in working with colleagues and followers, transformational leaders are expected to give individualized attention by treating each team member uniquely as they coach and mentor him or her to develop higher levels of ability and potential. Stewart (2006) noted that Bass and his colleagues identified that in developing and nurturing best practices and higher levels of performance, among followers, transformational leaders “never publicly correct or criticize others” (p. 12).

Many researchers agree that the result of the transformational style of leadership fosters a mutual relationship that converts followers to leaders and leaders



into moral agents (Allix, 2000; Greenfield Jr., 2004; Stewart, 2006). Burns (1978) confirms that transformational leadership works hand-in-hand with moral leadership.

### Transformational Leadership and Ethics

The study of ethics is an ancient tradition rooted in religious, cultural, and philosophical beliefs (Lewis, 1985). Burns (1978) purports that the concept of ethical leadership advocates that leaders take responsibility for their leadership and seek to empower followers in an effort to satisfy their diverse needs. Burns (1978) also contends that leaders are neither born nor made; instead, leaders evolve from a structure of motivation, values, and goals. Ciulla (2004) asserts that transformational leaders possess the ability to foster relationships that motivate and elevate followers to the extent of influencing individual engagement and leadership capacity. Ciulla (2004) states that “leaders of the transformational leadership style often demonstrate high moral and ethical standards” (p. 4).

Ethical leadership includes three types of leadership values: (a) ethical virtues, which are defined as the “Old fashioned Character Tests,” such as, sobriety, chastity, abstention, kindness, altruism, and other, “Ten Commandments” rules of personal conduct, (b) ethical values, such as—honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, reliability, reciprocity, accountability, and (c) moral values, which includes order (security), liberty, equality, justice, and community (Bass & Steidlmeier, 2006).

### **Seventh-day Adventist Education System**

With the primary context of this study being Seventh-day Adventist schools also referred to as Adventist schools and principals, this section explores literature to

provide a brief overview of the Adventist education system. Today, the Adventists operate the second largest education system in the world, after the Roman Catholic system. The system has a total of 7,800 educational institutions operating in over 100 countries around the world with 93,000 teachers and 1.8 million students world-wide (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2012).

The Seventh-day Adventist educational system has a history of 141 years. While the Seventh-day Adventist Church was formally organized in 1863, the establishment of the first Adventist school took place in the year 1872 and did not have an extensive elementary system until nearly 1900 when the General Conference recommended the widespread establishment of schools (Knight, 2000b).

Knight (2000b) explains that “formal education was, in fact, the last major institutional development within the denomination” (p. 169). Though there was little interest among the early believers to educate their children, they were soon convinced to change their view after White (1923) wrote that “the truths of the divine word can be best appreciated by an intellectual Christian. Christ can be best glorified by those who serve Him intelligently” (p. 364). Although some of the believers started the education journey of their children as homeschoolers, they eventually found it necessary to provide schooling for their children in order to educate them according to their own beliefs (Furst & Denig, 2005).

The Adventist school system in North America operates schools ranging from elementary through the tertiary level. The elementary and secondary schools vary in their offerings based on their grade level configuration. Schools classified as elementary provide education for students of Pre-Kindergarten (3-4 years old) or Kindergarten (5

years old) through Grade 8. The secondary schools provide education for students from Grades 9-12 (Southwest Union Conference, 2004).

The North American Division (NAD) of Seventh-day Adventists is accountable to the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The NAD carries full authority for governance and organization of the NAD P-12 or K-12 school system. Its primary responsibilities include, but are not limited to, planning and designing leading-edge curriculum to ensure best practices in instruction; throughout the regions, providing financial and other resources to facilitate ongoing training and development for education personnel; establishing assessment and evaluation standards for schools and personnel; as well as arrange salary scales and benefits for personnel health and retirement benefits (Columbia Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2013).

Another area in which the North American Division leads its schools is in the promotion of the unique philosophy of Adventist Christian education. The NAD maintains a website ([www.nadadventist.org](http://www.nadadventist.org)), which consistently promotes core values and goals which are based on the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen G. White. The website states that the unique philosophy of Adventist education posits that all children and youth have been entrusted by the Church to the education system for spiritual nurture and educational excellence. In keeping with these beliefs, schools are required to provide opportunities for students to accept Christ as their Savior.

### **Beliefs About Christian Education**

In the mid-90s, world leader of the Adventist educational system, Humberto Rasi (1995), summarized the objectives of Adventist education into the following five components: (a) to educate Seventh-day Adventist youth for a useful life, in the context

of Christian faith and biblical values, keeping in balance their intellectual, spiritual, physical, and social development, (b) to train future Adventist leaders and denominational workers, encouraging them to devote their talents to accomplishing the church's mission until Jesus comes, (c) to deepen the commitment of Adventist youth to Christ, and to attract to His church non-Adventist youth of high ideals, helping all of them to develop Christ-like characters, (d) to exert an uplifting influence on society, the nation, and the world through service, evangelism, research, and discoveries carried out by Adventist educators, students, and alumni, and (e) to cooperate with church leaders and members in discovering new truths, developing mission strategies, and providing Adventist answers to the ethical issues faced by society (p. 30).

Knight (1984) observes that these guiding principles were first articulated by Ellen G. White, the denomination's first and major writer on educational theory. He added that Mrs. White's educational thinking forms the philosophical base for the Seventh-day Adventist program of education (p. 26).

This study about positive school culture was conducted based on this historical view. Considering these over-arching views, Adventist schools are expected to cultivate a culture that models and reflects the Adventist beliefs about education (Knight, 2000b; Ross, 2006; White, 1903). These espoused beliefs are rooted in patterns of certain shared basic assumptions embodied in the Adventist philosophy and make up the essential goals of Adventist Christian education.

Seventh-day Adventists believe in the highest sense that the work of education and the work of redemption are one (White, 1903). According to Knight (2000a), the phrase *redemptive education* captures the essence of what Adventist education is all

about. Not only does it define Adventist education as Christian and as being founded on the centrality of God and the Bible, but it also explicitly sets forth the mission of Christian education. White (1903) describes the mission thus:

The purpose of Christian education is to restore in man the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which he was created, to promote the development of body, mind, and soul that the divine purpose in his creation might be realized—this was to be the work of redemption. This is the object of education, the great object of life. (pp. 15, 16)

### **Summary**

This chapter contained a summary of the educational literature relevant to this study. The five major areas included were: (a) the principal, (b) leadership characteristics, (c) school culture, (d) transformational leadership, and (e) the Seventh-day Adventist education system, which is the context of this study.

The review began with in-depth discussion about the major constructs of principals' leadership characteristics and school culture. Drawing from current literature, I explored each topic and related subtopics to provide a view of the complex and multifaceted role of principals, and attempted to capture the related aspects of school culture to establish the basis for this research, and to gain understanding of the research problem of cultivating and sustaining positive school culture in Adventist schools. The next chapter explains the proposed methods that were used for exploring each area.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the research methodology and includes discussions around the following areas: (a) rationale for qualitative research design, (b) rationale for case-study research methodology, (c) description of the research sample, (d) data collection, and (e) interview protocol and procedure.

It was my objective that through the lived experiences extracted from interviews, observations, and field notes, this study would provide data that help one seek to understand and describe principals' leadership characteristics that influence positive school culture in Adventist schools. In seeking to understand the phenomenon, the study addresses the following general research question and sub-questions:

#### **Research Questions**

The following research general question and sub-questions provided guidance for this study.

##### General Question

How do principals, school board chairs, and teachers describe perceptions of leadership characteristics that influence positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools?

### Sub-questions

1. What constitutes positive school culture?
2. How do principals view their role as influencing the school culture?
3. What are stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's influence on the culture of the school?
4. How do principals view their role as transformational leaders?

### **Rationale for Qualitative Case-Study Research**

Qualitative research was used for this study. Qualitative research, being grounded in the social and political culture of the environment, looks for pointers of success through the lived experiences and stories of the participants in their natural settings (Hebert & Worthy, 2001; Hulpia & Valcke, 2004; Patton, 1987). Other researchers describe qualitative as a holistic picture formed with words and by reporting detailed views of the participants (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2007b).

The multiple-case study design was chosen as an appropriate method because the study was conducted in multiple schools. The multi-case study design followed guidelines described by John W. Creswell (2012) and Sharan B. Merriam (1998). Creswell (2012) instructs that this design allows the researcher to describe and compare multiple cases in order to provide insight into a specific issue. However, Merriam (1998), citing Sanders (1981), explains that case studies help us to understand processes of events, projects, and programs, and to discover context characteristics that will shed light on an issue. This study aims to describe and shed light on leadership characteristics of principals who influence positive school culture.

The qualitative multiple-case study design was chosen for this study to

provide scope to explore the issue, and analyze, evaluate, describe, and interpret the findings to gain new understanding and create new meaning from the study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

Several researchers share characteristics which support and strengthen the selection of qualitative multiple-case research methodology for this study. For example, Merriam (1998) and Yin (2009) point out that this method provides a distinct advantage in answering how and why questions, and also by collecting data from interviews and other sources to provide intensive descriptions of people and settings. Additionally, Ledesma (2011), Merriam (1998), and Ross (2006) concur that another strength of qualitative case study research is its holistic description, that allows for thick description that encompasses all of the actions (Berg & Lune, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Patton, 2002). Lastly, Baker (2011) noted that authors

Eisenhardt, K. M, & Graebner, M. E. (2007) argue that single case studies provide more detail and offer ‘better stories’ which are helpful in describing phenomena. But others, such as Dyer WG, & Wilkins AL (1991) assert that multiple case studies provide a stronger base for theory building. Multiple case studies are powerful, since they permit replication and extension among individual cases. Replication enables a researcher to perceive the patterns in the cases more easily and to separate patterns from change occurrences. Different cases can emphasize varying aspects of a phenomenon and enable researchers to develop fuller theory. (p. 4)

### **Data Collection**

Consistent with the concept that qualitative research is a data-collection method including interviews, observations, and field notes, data for this study were collected. Principals and key stakeholders, school board chairs, and teachers of selected schools were interviewed after approval was obtained from the University through the Independent Review Board (IRB) process. Utilizing the inter-rater reliability process,



the data-collection procedure began by obtaining permission from the Education Director of the Midwest Seventh-day Adventist Union and the Superintendents of Schools of the respective SDA Conferences where the schools are located.

The inter-rater reliability procedure is described by Amelang (2009) as “the degree to which measurements of the same phenomenon by different professionals will yield the same results or the consistency of results across different raters” (p. 17). I partnered with the Education Director and four Superintendents of the Midwest Seventh-day Adventist Union and respective Conferences to establish the protocol for the cases to be included.

Open-ended semi-structured interview questions were utilized to gain information about the culture of the schools. Participants’ responses were tape recorded to ensure all data were preserved for analysis (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998). The schools and the principals were also observed in response to the research questions.

Through lived experiences extracted from interviews, observations, and field notes, this study provided data that help identify leadership characteristics of principals who influence positive school culture and gain understanding of the phenomenon as related to Adventist schools. The data gathered were transcribed and coded to understand emerging themes of the study. Using the findings, conclusions were drawn about leadership characteristics of principals who influence positive school culture in specified Adventist schools in a Midwest Adventist Union.

### **Purposeful Population Sample**

Purposeful sampling is the logic used in selecting information-rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight and understanding of a phenomenon under investigation

(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Additionally, Merriam (1998) describes purposeful sampling as a process “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). Recognizing that in qualitative research, purposeful sampling applies to individuals and sites (Creswell, 2012) that directly impact the study, the researcher needs to be purposeful in selecting a sampling strategy.

The purposeful sampling strategy that was used for this study was a maximum variation sampling, which Creswell (2012) points out “will help the researcher to present many perspectives of the participants and sites to be examined” (p. 207). The sample of participants and sites used in this study were selected from among individuals who function under similar organizational governance and expectations, but at different locations. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) suggest that “based on the in-depth interviews and immersion in a culture, a large sample size is unnecessary” (p. 191).

The criterion used for this purposeful sampling directly reflected the purpose of the study and guided the identification of information-rich cases. The primary criteria were:

1. The principal serves in SDA K-8 and/or K-12 schools.
2. The principal is recognized as a leader with a successful track record of cultivating a positive school culture; being able to maintain service-oriented staff members, foster a collegial environment, celebrate rituals and customs, support social networks to enhance personal and professional development, and espouses humor among the people.

The sample was selected as guided by the experts’ criterion and utilizing the inter-rater reliability process. Superintendents of schools from four conferences in a

Midwest Adventist Union were requested to identify three schools that are the best-rated in each of the conferences, which, from his/her evaluation and observation, have the reputation of having positive school culture. The data collected by the human raters were compared against the agreed standard (Ladew, 2010) to identify what school is top rated in each conference, classified as having positive school culture.

Having generated the common independent top three school choices, the final purposeful site selection was made using the following process: Four schools from each of the different conferences were selected from among the top 12 schools identified as having a positive school culture. From the schools identified in the three closest states—Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois—I chose one school site from the four closest and most accessible locations from the respective Adventist conference.

Contact was made with each site principal to request a one-on-one interview. To further obtain different perspectives and gain in-depth insight regarding the constructs of the study, principal characteristics and positive culture building in schools, the principal's approval and assistance were obtained to arrange for conducting one-on-one interviews for about 50 minutes to 1 hour with the other key stakeholders—the school board chair and teacher. With the exception of the principal and school board chair, the teacher was randomly chosen, with every effort made to reflect a representation of the gender, race, and length of time at the school; it was also based on the recommendation from knowledgeable people at the schools, as well as on the individual's willingness to participate.

My full-day visit at the school sites also provided opportunity for observation of the climate and behavior patterns exhibited, including the way things were done.

Various interactions were noted throughout the day, from its start when the staff and students arrived, to the dismissal procedures. To ensure accuracy of the individual's perspective, the interviews were recorded. Recordings were transcribed and transcriptions were returned to the participants with the following statement to ascertain their approval, "Have I captured accurately the essence of your story?" Adequate opportunity was given for participants to correct any inaccuracies or misrepresentations in the document. Upon receiving verification from the participants, the data were coded using various coding methods to interpret, analyze, and develop the emerging themes and meanings about the study.

### **Interview Procedures and Protocol**

Creswell (2012) states that the protocol for qualitative research requires in-depth and multiple interviews with participants and the researcher is advised to seek and obtain permission from the gatekeepers and sites at all levels involved. Creswell (2012), citing Hammersley (1995), explained, "a gatekeeper is an individual with official or unofficial role and provides entrance to a site, helps researchers locate people and assists in the identification of places to study" (p. 211).

Guided by this protocol, for this study, a Midwest Seventh-day Adventist Union was the location for this study. The Education Director and four Superintendents of Schools in the Union collaborated for the selection of the purposive sample of schools and participants. First, I requested a one-on-one meeting with the Midwest SDA Union Education Director to introduce and discuss the research plan and obtain permission to conduct the study within the schools in the Union. The purpose of this

Table 1

*Description of Full Sample of Study*

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| <b>Demographic</b>  | <b>Number</b> |
|---------------------|---------------|
| Gender:             |               |
| Male                | 5             |
| Female              | 7             |
| Race:               |               |
| White               | 8             |
| Black               | 2             |
| Hispanic            | 1             |
| School Type:        |               |
| Elementary P-8      | 1             |
| Jr. Academy P-10    | 1             |
| Academy K-12        | 1             |
| Academy P-12        | 1             |
| Student Population: |               |
| School A            | 184           |
| School B            | 190           |
| School C            | 108           |
| School D            | 81            |
| Years As SDA        |               |
| Principal:          |               |
| School A            | 42            |
| School B            | 20            |
| School C            | 34            |
| School D            | 19            |
| Years As SDA        |               |
| Board Chair:        |               |
| School A            | 08            |
| School B            | 01            |
| School C            | 30            |
| School D            | Over 30       |
| Years As SDA        |               |
| Teacher:            |               |
| School A            | 37            |
| School B            | 25            |
| School C            | 30            |
| School D            | 04            |

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initial meeting, as Creswell (2012) states, was “to win his support and trust for the project” (p. 211). In this case, another purpose was to request the names of the Superintendents of Schools of the four SDA Conferences and request a letter of introduction and support to facilitate an easy initial meeting with the school officials.

Following the face-to-face meeting and gaining verbal permission, letters were sent to the gatekeepers, namely, the Education Director of the Midwest Seventh-day Adventist Union and the Superintendents of the respective Seventh-day Adventist Conferences, as well as to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to officially request permission to proceed with data collection. Having obtained approval to proceed with the study, the interview process began.

In collaboration with the principals and each of the other participants at each site, a time, date, and place were set for the individual interviews. I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis and conducted all of the interviews (Merriam, 2009). Each interview started with the interviewer giving an overview of the project by providing brief description of: (a) the purpose of the study, (b) the individuals and sources of data being collected, (c) how the data were to be preserved to protect the confidentiality of the interviewee, and (d) how long the interview would take (Creswell, 2012). After personal introductions and overview about the study, the interviewee was informed and agreed for the interview to be digitally recorded. The last step preceding the interview was having the interviewees read and sign the consent form.

In addition to interviews, observations and field notes were also used for collecting data. The participants were informed that the data collected would be used to inform other Adventist principals and stakeholders of best practices in principals’

leadership characteristics that influence positive culture in Adventist K-12 schools.

### **Interview Questions**

For this study, the principals and key stakeholders, the school board chair, and a teacher from each of the school sites were interviewed. The following interview questions were used to guide the interview process:

#### **Questions for the Principal**

1. Your conference administration has identified your school as having a positive school culture. Why do you think this school has been identified as such?
2. How long have you been affiliated with this school and with the Adventist school system?
3. How do you define positive school culture?
4. What do you think the ideal culture of a school would look like?
5. How would you describe the culture of your school?
6. How does your current role influence the school culture positively or negatively?
7. Do you consider yourself a transformational leader? If so, can you please describe in what ways you demonstrate those characteristics in your school?
8. What does it take to foster collegial and/or collaborative relationships among the school's stakeholders?
9. Which do you think influence people's behavior and achievement more? The principal's leadership or the school culture? Why?
10. What are the leadership characteristics that you think best contribute to

consistent improvement and/or change within the school culture? (Give examples for working with each of the main groups—board, teachers, parents.)

11. What would you say is the one aspect of building school culture that you struggle with the most?

12. Being successful as a culture builder, what do you think is the key leadership characteristic to cultivating a positive school culture?

13. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your success as a school leader?

#### Questions for Stakeholders

1. Your conference administration has identified your school as having a positive school culture. Why do you think this school has been identified as such?

2. How long have you been affiliated with this school and with the Adventist school system?

3. What do you think the ideal culture of a school would look like?

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

5. How does your current role influence the school culture?

6. How much influence do you think the principal has in changing or improving the school culture? Please explain.

7. Which do you think influence people's behavior and achievement more? The principal's leadership or the school culture? Why?

8. What are the leadership characteristics that you think best contribute to consistent improvement and/or change within the school culture?



9. How do you view the positive and/or negative influence of your principal's leadership characteristics on the school culture?

10. What does it take, in your opinion, to create and sustain positive culture in an Adventist school?

11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your principal's leadership?

### **Data Analysis**

Given the nature of the qualitative research method being highly text based, consisting of verbatim transcriptions of interviews or discussions, field notes, and other written documentation, Spencer, Ritchie, and O'Connor (2003) point out that invariably material collected is unstructured and unwieldy. The authors further state that the qualitative researcher has to provide some coherence and structure to this cumbersome data set while retaining ahold of the original accounts and observations from which it is derived.

For these reasons, experts in qualitative study recommend ongoing data analysis to keep the data collected from being unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming, and with the goal to keep data both parsimonious and informative (Merriam, 1998). The data analysis for this study followed a system of organization that provided careful management of the data-collection process.

Qualitative research experts Denzin and Lincoln (2007a, 2011), and Huberman and Miles (2002) outline three key components of the data analysis process that provide a concurrent flow of activity during data collection.

The first component, data reduction, is the process of reducing potential data

sources. Even before data are collected, the researcher chooses (often without knowing) which conceptual framework, cases, research questions, and data-collection approach to choose. Further reduction takes place as the data collection and organization proceeds through summarizing, coding, teasing out themes, making clusters, and writing memos until the study is completed. Second, data display refers to the organization process that helps the researcher understand what is happening and to do something--either to further analyze or take action. Last, conclusion drawing and verification is the third major part in the data analysis process. It is the point where the researcher begins to interpret and make decisions about what things mean.

In this study, data collected from face-to-face interviews were transcribed and coded to align with the research questions as well as to identify commonalities and differences in the research related to the topic of principal characteristics and positive school culture. In addition, the data were further interpreted and organized by emerging patterns and themes, which were coded and categorized in an ongoing iterative process to establish validity and draw meaning and conclusions about the issue. The data collected were color-coded for elements related to the general and sub-research questions on leadership characteristics of principals and positive school culture. The coded elements were grouped together and analyzed for common threads. I continued the coding process to tease out themes from the data until saturation was attained. As a result, the common threads produced the general themes that were derived from the study. These themes that emerged from the data were organized into categories.

The categories that emerged led to the interpretations and conclusions regarding how principals and key stakeholders, school board chairs, and teachers described their

perceptions of leadership characteristics of principals who influence positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools. In summary, the data were organized around the research questions and presented in narrative format. In addition, the data analysis included an ongoing iterative process among the interviews, field notes, and observations obtained at each school site.

### **Trustworthiness/Internal Validity**

This section looks at the issue of trustworthiness in relation to validity of the study. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) state that trustworthiness is paramount due to the emergent and flexible nature of qualitative research design. The literature indicates that compared to the traditional quantitative linear design, which advocates a process of high standards of validity and reliability, qualitative researchers are challenged to show clear evidence of trustworthiness.

According to numerous researchers of qualitative design, the quality and accuracy of the study are trustworthy when a researcher can demonstrate rigor in the data analysis, evidenced by credibility and dependability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002; Rolfe, 2006; Sandelowski, 1995). Validity is obtained by testing the meanings emerging from the data to verify their credibility, their sturdiness, and conformability. Without verification from field notes or transcription, the analyst would simply be left with interesting stories of what happened, of unknown truth and utility (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sandelowski, 1995). In embarking on this study, it was my goal to explore and understand the perspectives of principals and key stakeholders,

school board chairs, and teachers to describe leadership characteristics of principals who influence a positive school culture.

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I sought to establish accuracy and validity for my study by following basic strategies identified by Merriam (1998):

1. **Structural Corroboration:** The process of triangulating verification from different types of data including interviews, observations, and field notes to gain trustworthy insights into the study of leadership characteristics of principals who influence and sustain positive school culture.

2. **Member Checking:** Once transcribed, the data were shared with participants to ascertain accuracy of their stories.

3. **Peer Examination:** At different stages of the coding and analyzing process, the data were shared with members of my dissertation committee for review and feedback in order to achieve accuracy and credibility for my study (Creswell, 2012).

### **Generalizability**

Generalizability is the process of gaining new knowledge and then transferring and applying the lessons learned to other similar situations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Eisner, 1998). In this study, I aimed to achieve generalizability by providing thick descriptions for communicating to the reader a holistic and realistic picture (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 1998) of the lived experiences and observation of leadership characteristics of principals and positive culture at the four school sites. Using the information gathered from the rich experiences of the principals, school board chairs, and teachers may enable readers to determine whether the findings

fit their situation and can be transferred (Merriam, 1998).

### **Ethical Issues**

The matter of ethics is essential in conducting research that meets acceptable standards. Therefore, in addition to the steps previously described for gaining approval in the data-collection process, including following protocol and appropriate procedures, the Institutional Review Board at Andrews University also requires a detailed description of the project as well as procedures for data collecting, designing an informed consent form, and having the project reviewed (Creswell, 2012). According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008),

the informed consent form is central to research ethics. It is the principle that seeks to ensure all human subjects retain autonomy and the ability to judge for themselves what risks are worth taking for the purpose of furthering scientific knowledge. (p. 76)

As the protocol for ethical considerations suggests, before beginning the data collection and interviews with the purposively selected participants, I submitted to the IRB the Human Subjects Form along with an overview of the study--a requirement for the Research Protocol Document. The final part of the process included successfully completing the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants," designing an informed consent, and having it signed by each of the participants, principals, board chairs, and teachers before each interview began. All protocol required by Andrews University Institutional Review Board was adhered to in this study.

### **Summary**

In summary, this chapter provides a detailed description of the research

methodology that was used for this study. As stated, a qualitative multiple-case study methodology was employed to address the complex issue of the influence of principals' leadership characteristics on school culture in selected schools in a Midwest Seventh-day Adventist Union. The participant sample included 12 purposefully selected individuals. The data-collection methods employed included individual interviews, observations and field notes of critical incidents. Using three different strategies for data collection also helped to provide rich descriptions of the lived experiences of the participants and established trustworthiness of this qualitative study.

## CHAPTER 4

### POSITIVE CULTURE DEFINED

#### **Introduction**

Four major themes emerged from this study: (a) positive culture defined, (b) behavior core values, (c) interpersonal communication, and (d) the importance of principal relationships. Chapters 4 through 7 describe how the participants defined and maintained a positive school culture: Chapter 4, Positive Culture Defined; Chapter 5, Behavior Core Values; Chapter 6, Interpersonal Communication; and Chapter 7, the Importance of Principal Relationships.

This chapter describes the development of a positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools from the perspective of the principals, school board chairs, and teachers in a Mid-west Adventist Union. The descriptions are based on a compilation of recorded interviews, informal observations, and field notes. The narratives of the lived experiences of the principals, school board chairpersons, and teachers' positive culture viewed as values, communication, and relationships, provide the answers to the central and sub-research questions of the study. The stories of the principals, teachers, and school board chairs (chairpersons) also give deeper understanding of the phenomenon of how principals' leadership influences the development of positive school culture.

From the perspective of the participants in this study, positive culture was defined as a place where vision was clearly articulated, shared, and embraced. The

principals and key stakeholders defined positive school culture, based on the deeply held values of the schools, in the following areas: (a) shared vision, (b) spiritual school, (c) diversity celebrated, and (d) pervasive attitude of continuous growth and improvement. Shared vision emerged as one of the overarching themes in cultivating a positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools.

### **Shared Vision**

The interview participants often mentioned that “working toward a common goal” is a primary focus in their schools, to ensure a clear vision and goals were in place to set the direction and help fulfill the mission of the school. Setting a vision was an expectation that both board chairs and teachers looked for the principal to take the lead in. One of the experienced chairs noted, “He needs to have a clear idea of his vision and goals,” adding, “they always come with their ideas.” Chair P also stressed the expectation for principals to be able to “relay the vision properly to the staff, initially and then to the school board.” Other participants placed high importance on the need for a clear vision and goals for the direction a principal wants to take the school.

Teacher W felt the vision must be shared with everyone, as she stated, “Everyone has to know the vision, what was expected, and be on board with what was expected to carry it out.” Like other participants this teacher, with 37 years of experience, working under the leadership of five principals at the same school, asserted that “visioning was key,” but emphasized, “Any principal cannot waiver. There has to be consistency. Parents want to see consistency. The teachers need to see consistency, and the students need to see consistency.” This teacher’s perspective of the principal’s vision corroborated well with that of Chair P who pointed out, “It’s important that they have a



focused direction, not just a shotgun approach, along with, without a doubt, the example of Christian values.” Teacher W further articulated, “It has to be something,” as she put it, “the teachers know, believe in, and want to do.” This teacher, peer leader and mentor, was truly passionate about “everyone being on board with the vision.” She disclosed her rationale stating, “If you have one person who’s not on board with it, that’s a breakdown.” She explained the ‘breakdown’ would be reflected in the way a teacher chose to enforce or not to enforce school expectations with students in his/her classroom.

With regard to the parents’ response to the shared vision, Teacher W expressed that “parents have to buy-in.” She related from her experience that

when the parent and school are working together it creates an environment of support, where students are going to cooperate and rethink how they will respond in any given situation, because they know their parents will support the vision of the school.

Another principal validated the importance of a shared vision as key to getting everyone on board to accomplish a common mission. Principal A explained, “At least once a year” the school did something “very key,” which she described as “visioning sessions with our teaching staff and our pastors.” According to Principal A, this time brought the pastors and teachers together to “talk about our school and see what we do really well and what we could do better, and how church and school could work together to achieve and accomplish our common mission.

To keep the focus of the school community on the shared vision, each school’s mission statement and goals were prominently displayed, upon entry into the building. Some sites also kept in view written policies, which described values, beliefs, and procedures documented in the schools’ handbook or policy book, available for the taking on the display table or made accessible by the personnel. The bold caption,

“The Board and Family of [Name of school] Promise Always To. . .” written above the school’s goals displayed the ultimate demonstration of shared vision as it conveyed the teamwork and support of school board and school.

The schools defined a positive school culture as a place where there was a shared vision in the areas of: (a) character development, (b) setting high standards, and (c) embracing the SDA school vision. Focus on character development was given high priority in the schools to ensure the holistic training of those entrusted in their care.

### Character Development

The principals and key stakeholders embraced the vision for the holistic training of their students and demonstrated high priority and commitment for character development. At one school, the mission statement said it all, as it incorporated the wider mission of Seventh-day Adventist education, and revealed intentionality for achieving this goal. The school’s mission aimed “to provide an opportunity for students to develop holistically mind, body, and spirit: to allow the Holy Spirit to transform their lives and accept Christ as their personal Savior.”

Principal A noted that character development “has to be pretty high on the priority list because as an Adventist school that’s what we are most interested in them developing, Christ-like characters.” The interview revealed School B was engaged in various initiatives to help enhance the character behavior of students. In this context character meant how they acted. According to the principal, yearly spiritual themes such as “Be ye kind one to another” targeted the improvement of student behavior towards others in the environment. “Instilling leadership among students” was another practice of the other principals, as well as to raise the awareness of and facilitate

opportunities for the older students to “watch out for and learn to care for the little ones in the building.” Principal A and Teacher M validated the implementation of these strategies as they noted it was a challenge working with a wide range of ages, K-8th-graders, in one building.

To increase the teachers’ effectiveness in the area of character development, it was clear the principals purposefully worked at it. According to Principal A, “In our staff meeting, we read books that dealt with character development in kids and tried to incorporate the principles with our monthly themes.” At another site, School D, in Principal L’s office, one could not help noticing the huge poster on the wall captioned, *55 Essentials* the principal acknowledged she and her teachers used with their students. The list of principles for character development coincidentally had the same title as the book Principal A and her teachers read and implemented at School B to enhance the conduct of students.

The principals recognized that even though they were expected to develop and lead the vision for the school, an equal expectation was that they articulate the direction clearly and get buy-in from all stakeholders. Thus, having a shared vision was essential in defining a positive school culture and in getting faculty, staff, students, and school board engaged in deliberate dialogue and doing their best to ensure the character development of students was kept in focus. As described in the next section, to achieve the goals for holistic development of those placed under their charge, the leaders worked together to set high standards for their schools.

### Setting High Standards

In defining positive school culture, the participants shared the vision of setting

high standards for their schools. One of the school board chairs, Chair G, defined a positive school culture as having leadership that is “the best and giving their best.” Embracing his responsibility in guiding the direction of the school, he clearly stated, “Leaders cannot please everyone,” but he/she ought to “do what they are called to do and do it the very best they can.” He acknowledged this was the case at his school.

Another participant, Chair T, stated his opinion that it was because at School D people are “proactive rather than reactive” that the school was identified as having a positive culture. He demonstrated ownership for his school environment explaining that it has been his philosophy during 30 years of involvement with the school “that we need to set high standards.” Both of the experienced school board leaders attested that setting high standards resulted in more respectful students. Chair T summarized it this way,

We have always tried to set that standard of reaching higher and higher and trying to develop a student who is, of course, very involved with God in their personal lives and with respecting staff. We have found over the years that the staff that are most respected are the staff who usually require the most.

### Embracing the SDA School Vision

One overwhelming impression conveyed among the participants was a sense of satisfaction and pride about being part of the Adventist school community. Principals and teachers told about their passion and joy to be engaged in the SDA mission, of sharing Christ with the children, and inspiring them in service to others. Principal B described satisfaction with her choice, after 6 years of teaching, to obey God and “stay in this Adventist school system,” despite offers to advance to the career of her dreams. All of the participants expressed pride in being in a school system where they could practice their beliefs about the school system they represent.

## **Denominational Standards and Governance Structure**

According to Chair G, an experienced church administrator and pastor, SDA schools function based on specific denominational standards. In his capacity as church and board leader, he acknowledged his influence as “coach” and stated, “I work very closely with the staff, the principal. I work very closely with the pastors, and with the school board members, in giving direction as to the future of the school.” He viewed his role as “traffic cop,” just to ensure denominational standards are adhered to in the school.

In addition, clear expectations for adherence to SDA denominational standards were reflected in the schools’ accreditation requirements. Teacher M pointed out, “Based on self-studies and the school evaluation process,” denominational standards for SDA schools included, “having a common goal, Bible-based teaching, and foster a positive Adventist cultural environment.”

Consistent with denominational standards, participants frequently referred to the constituent church and school connection. Chair G and Chair P provided clarification about the governance structure of the Adventist schools. By Chair G’s description of the four schools in the study, one would be classified as a constituency school, as the school served “about 10 constituent churches.” The other schools were governed by “a single constituent church,” which Principal E acknowledged as the classification of School C and the type in which he had served for all of his 34 years in Adventist education. Chair P explained that in the SDA school system, schools governed by one or more churches would be classified as a constituency or area school.

Reflecting on the stories of Principal E and the other principals and key stakeholders, it was noted that whether school governance was by area churches or one-

church constituency, the principals and key stakeholders demonstrated similar strong commitment to the denominational expectations of the schools they served.

### **Stakeholders and Principals Commitment to SDA Education and School**

Positive school culture was defined as a place where the key stakeholders, board chairpersons, teachers, and principals demonstrated commitment and service to SDA education and the schools where they served. They were resolute in the Adventist philosophy of education and dependable in their service. Details describing commitment and service of the stakeholders and principals are the focus of the next four sub-sections.

#### Commitment and service of board chairpersons

The commitment of the key stakeholders to the SDA schools was evident in the participants' personal stories about their Adventist education experience and longevity of service in SDA schools. All but one had attended an Adventist school at some level during their elementary or high-school years, or at the tertiary level for their academic training. But, regardless of the number of years spent as a student at an Adventist school, each participant demonstrated commitment through years of service in the Adventist school system.

Chair P, who did not attend an SDA school, had a 30-year record of almost continuous service in this role as school board chair. He reflected, "I did not grow up in the Adventist school system; even though my mother was Adventist, my father, a Lutheran, was dead set against it." He further shared that growing up on a farm in rural Wisconsin, 30 miles away from the only Adventist school, "really didn't provide a choice that was reasonable for me to go to an Adventist school." He concluded his story

with the following statement of commitment, “So, when I came here, I quickly immersed myself in the church, and I have really recognized the vital importance of what the school did for this church on a regular and ongoing basis.”

Chair T shared that his experience with the Adventist school system began in the third grade, when the first Adventist school was started in his hometown. In his words,

That was the year when I finished the second grade, the teacher told my mother, you know, he is not doing the work that he could, and I think maybe you need to have his eyes checked. So we went to the eye doctor, and got in the chair, and he looked through the device and said, okay, can you see what is on the wall there? And I said, yes I can. He said, well, read it to me. And I said, I can’t. And he said, you said you could see it. I said, I can see it, but I don’t know what it is. And of course, it was the alphabet. So I had gone through two years of public school and didn’t know the alphabet. And a lady in the local church there volunteered to come in and help me get up to speed. I’ve been very committed to the Adventist educational system because of what it did for me and what it’s done for my family.

Regarding his years of service as school board chair at School D, he modestly stated, “it’s over 30 years.”

From Chair G’s perspective Adventist education and service in the SDA organization were ingrained in his life and work. The chair articulated he was a product of Adventist education, having attended SDA schools from the elementary to the tertiary level. He has also spent his career working as pastor and administrator in the SDA organization including the last 8 years as board chair at School A. To highlight his involvement with the SDA education system, he stated, “Throughout the years, I have been very much involved with Adventist education.”

#### Commitment and service of teachers

The four teachers in the study demonstrated astounding commitment to service and compliance to SDA standards. All of the principals and teachers verified that their

only work experience has been in the Adventist school system, except for two who substituted briefly in the public school while job-hunting after relocating and/or finishing college.

One of the teachers described her personal SDA work experience and educational background. With Adventist missionary parents, her father a pastor, and her mother a teacher, the family traveled to several countries overseas. Teacher M said,

We went overseas to Sri Lanka, and that was the first time I was not in an Adventist school myself. But it was the best because we had to stand up for what we believe, because we were the only two kids in the entire overseas school that was Adventist.

However, as she stated, “I’ve had that background as a child,” but continued her schooling through the Adventist school system. She asserted, “I have always worked in the Adventist school system.” Reflecting on the SDA school experience of herself and husband, an SDA teacher as well, laughingly, she concluded, “The rest is history. This is my 25<sup>th</sup> year here.”

Teacher K, with 4 years of SDA teaching experience, was the youngest participant in age and experience. The pleasant kindergarten teacher attested to her longevity and commitment to SDA education at the school where she served. Describing her unique experience at the school, she shared that she had about 16 years of affiliation with the school, attending as an elementary student and later being supervised in her internship by the teacher who is now her “principal and boss.” She further clarified that her 4 years of teaching at the school were “a little bit broken up,” adding after graduating from the university, “I taught my first two years at this school (then I stayed at home to raise my kids, and now I am back here).” This teacher was also a proud product of Adventist education from first grade through university.



In the case of Teacher W, her commitment to Adventist education started in the ninth grade when she got her introduction as a student in an SDA school. The teacher captured her short story in the following reflection, “When I first became an Adventist, I always wanted to go to a private school. I asked my parents to enroll me at this school. They enrolled me in this school for one year, for ninth grade.” She added, “It was a wonderful year, but circumstances caused me to go back to public school.” Committed to the values of Adventist education, the teacher returned to complete her training at the higher education level. She shared, “My children have gone here, now my granddaughter is here in this school.” For 37 years, this dedicated educator has been a valued teacher at her alma mater.

Among the teachers, there was one male participant. For Teacher S, the matter of teacher commitment and longevity of service was the first thing he highlighted in defining the positive culture of his school. From his confident perspective, teacher commitment was visibly evident by the three characteristics in the school environment. First, teachers’ longevity of service, which he described, “has been a feather in our cap.” Second, faculty and staff camaraderie and relationships, about which he smilingly articulated, “We all seem to get along with each other well even after all the years.” Finally, “we all seem to be doing an apparently good job with what we do with our kids.” He elaborated on the last point by highlighting this complementary thought, “Our kids are being successful as they come through and go on. I know personally I have had several students talk to me about how they went to high school after leaving here.” It was clear this loyal teacher was highly committed to his school and to the positive influence he imparted within the environment.

Like all of his colleagues in the study, this teacher had dedicated his 30-year career not only to the Adventist education system, but also to his school. It was the first and only place he had worked. Affirming unwavering loyalty and commitment, he shared, “I went through Adventist schools my whole life. I am a poster boy for Adventist Education.”

#### Commitment and service of principals

All four principals interviewed demonstrated commitment for Adventist education and service by sharing their personal backgrounds and noting the influence of Adventist education in their lives, even though they began their journey at different levels of education. Each holds a master’s degree and one a doctorate. In elaborating about their Adventist Christian education experience, all of the principals reflected on anecdotes from their adult experiences.

Principal B started her Adventist education journey at the undergraduate level, just after her family became “new Adventists.” She left for college with the goal of becoming a lawyer. However, recounting the dramatic change in her undergraduate experience, she shared, “All my friends were going to this college. I didn’t know what it was.” But, as she added, one of the girls told her it was an Adventist college, “So, at the last minute my mother got me enrolled.” She interjected, “I was supposed to go to [Name of University] because I wanted to be a lawyer, but in college “I fell in with these friends who were doing education, and the next thing I knew, I graduated with a degree in Behavioral Science and ended up going to another Adventist university to get a degree in education.”

Principal B, who had a natural way of viewing every situation through a

spiritual lens, summarized her unique experience with the following reflection: “I didn’t understand at the time, but later on, I understood why the Lord turned me this way. It was to save me.” Having served for 6 years as a teacher of the Adventist school where she was initially hired, she later assumed the role of principal.

The participant shared, “I tried to leave, once or twice,” having received favorable invitations from the public school system, but was encouraged by her husband to stay, because the school needed her. She stated, “I thought about it and stayed.” Her story revealed a commitment to a higher calling, “to hopefully save students who are like me, hard to save.” The principal viewed her role in the Adventist school as, ultimately, to lead the school with “the Lord’s help, and to create a good school culture,” where children can be saved. Again, reflecting on refusing another tempting offer to go to law school with the possibility of finishing in 2 years, she acknowledged, asking herself the following question and giving the reply, “Wasn’t there another way He could have saved me?” The answer: “But, then again, there may not have been another way to save some of these kids.” Finally, fully committed to the calling and work of Adventist Christian education at the K-12 level, she yielded in full submission, “I need to stay in this school system for a while longer; until now,” 42 years later.

Principal A was in her third year of leadership at the current Adventist school but considered herself “fairly new in terms of the rest of the staff.” She described herself as a “newbie,” but added with a sense of satisfaction, “and it’s been a good three years. I love it!”

Teacher M and Chair J remarked about faculty and staff commitment at School B. According to the teacher, “Our staff has had amazing longevity,” acknowledging that

she's been there the longest, 25 years, but that a number of her coworkers have also been at the school for 15 years or longer. This was the service legacy that the principal had inherited, which obviously helped facilitate her successful transition.

The businesslike administrator, Principal A, revealed that this was the fourth job assignment of her 20-year career as teacher and principal in the SDA school system. She shared that during most of those years she served as full-time teacher and principal-teacher in small schools. In 2007, she accepted her first full-time administrative position, which she emphasized, "where I wasn't teaching." Principal A functions in a similar position at the current K-8 school where she leads.

This principal, who stressed intentionality in creating the culture of her school, shared that having served in several schools, "every school had a different culture," therefore, each school requires a different approach. She shared that in her former position as a principal-teacher in the K-8 school setting, "time was always a valuable resource." As she functioned as full-time principal and full-time teacher, the principal articulated strong commitment to ensuring "the kids always come first, and so, the teaching always had to take priority."

In comparison, Principal A stated, "when I transitioned into full-time principalship, even though it was busy, I could focus on programs and programming," which, she added, "made a little bit of a difference, having more time to lead."

In assuming leadership and setting the tone of the school during her first 3 years, Principal A defined the positive culture she envisioned as "everybody working together a common goal." With that focus, she influenced her staff in commitment to enhancing the positive atmosphere of the school. In placing "high priority" on the

development of Christlike characters, the principal instituted the concept of yearly spiritual themes, which have been used to set the language for common expectations in the school environment. The concept was embraced with overwhelming enthusiasm by the staff, students, and parents.

Concerning the principal's commitment to enhance the school's culture and working together for the common goal of development of Christlike character, conversation from interviews with the teacher and board chair supported the need for being deliberate in accomplishing these expectations. From Teacher M's perspective, the principal's intentionality and commitment to the goal were confirmed when she stated,

She was very smart because the whole first year she was here she did a lot of listening and watching. She didn't just fly in and take over and demand this and that and the other. She let us show her how we were together. Just by listening and watching. She could see the little wiggles in that. Nobody gets along 100% percent of the time all the time. But she sat back and kind of learned that. That fostered a good atmosphere and transition.

Principal E, the third and only male school leader interviewed, clearly articulated his commitment to service in SDA schools with a record of 38 continuous years of service to the Adventist school system. He specified, "Only 4 of those years were not as a principal of some version; either, full-time teaching and principal, or part-time teaching and principal, or full-time principal." Research substantiated the principal's commitment to Adventist education and Adventist values, having come from a family background of Seventh-day Adventism. However, the principal identified that in order for new principals to experience success that leads to long-term commitment to serve, there is need for an internship program to provide preparation and training to help them deal with some of the nuances one may encounter in Adventist schools and churches in different parts of the country.

Highlighting the conservative versus the liberal views, as an example, he pointed out that this is an issue he has been dealing with in the cultural context of the school community. He described his school context as “totally different than any I’ve ever been at, but also within the Adventist church.” Embracing the diversity and issue of “considerably more conservatism,” among the parents and church members, the principal, like his counterparts, had a strong commitment to unity and high expectations for all in the school environment. With a goal to foster trust and respect between administration and staff, he articulated, “My focus is usually with my staff,” with whom he sought to foster inclusiveness and appreciation for individual professional strength. According to one teacher’s description of this “relaxed” leader, “he is a teacher’s principal.”

In demonstrating trust and respect for the staff, Principal E was committed to valuing and preserving the positive culture he had observed during the year and a half he led the school. He stated, “I’ve found the staff get along and support each other, at least or maybe better than any school I’ve been at.”

Reflecting on her commitment and service to SDA schools and the Adventist education system, Principal L also shared candidly about her career as an Adventist educator and experiences as a culture builder. She described her teaching and school leadership experience during the past 18 years. In clarifying her service was not always in the position of principal, she gave a detailed account of her roles during the latter period of her career.

I started here to build. They asked me to come and start back up the kindergarten program, which had fallen by the wayside. So they hired me to come and start that. That led to establishing a pre-school program—three-year-old program. And so, I was pretty much over the early childhood, preschool to kindergarten. Then two and

a half years ago, they asked me to be principal.

While the story highlights the depth of the principal's commitment to her school, it does not describe her full dedication to working in the Adventist school system.

Principal L had actually worked in Adventist schools for 25 years, serving as teacher and principal. She revealed, "I haven't taught in public school. My whole life has been dedicated to the work of our Christian schools." The principal further told that her tenure in the Adventist school system started in another Union before coming to the Midwest Adventist Union.

With a perspective that "the leader determines the positive atmosphere of your school," this dedicated principal-teacher was determined to demonstrate her philosophy, despite the heavy workload as full-time administrator and first-grade teacher. She was also a believer that "your school culture is a reflection of the leader." Notwithstanding, "Miss L," as she referred to herself, expressed her commitment to creating a happy environment, where the positiveness is modeled, and the principal shows care, not only to students, but amongst all teachers, office staff, and custodial helpers.

In describing Principal L's commitment to Adventist education, her personal story was of interest, as she shared how as a single mother she made sure her three children had the opportunity to attend SDA schools. Speaking in her role as the school's administrator, she stated, "Parents nowadays are not committed." "You have to be committed to Christian education. I'm seeing it fall by the wayside because they want the convenience of what a public school can offer them." Sharing from her personal experience, she has told parents, "It is a faith walk, it's prayer," and has encouraged

parents to “have faith; God will bring you through if you do what He has asked you to do. He will bless you.” She appealed to their motherly emotions and told them, “You have to be able to tell them of your walk.” She uncovered her vulnerability and told her own experience, “I know as a single parent, who believed in Christian education. When my husband and I divorced, my kids were still in elementary school. But I determined if I have to work two jobs, because I believe . . . so be it, people!” The commitment of this principal was revealed in her story and her encouragement to parents individually, at the churches, and whenever the need arose.

Overall, each participant demonstrated strong commitment to the SDA schools where they served, and equally to the Adventist education system. The principals and key stakeholders contributed to defining the positive culture of the schools as a result of their long years of investment in Adventist education and their dedicated service to what they believed.

Lastly, the study made mention of parents’ commitment to SDA schools and the Adventist education system. Participants noted their parents as a major reason for their early exposure to Adventist education and experience in SDA schools. Further, the principals and teachers credited them for influencing each one’s choice of pursuing Adventist education for them and they continue to impart their knowledge and passion to others, including those they teach in the SDA schools, as well as their own children. Teacher K acknowledged her parents’ commitment to Adventist education in this way.

My parents just really sacrificed for my siblings and I. I have two older brothers. They worked very hard, very dedicated to Adventist education, and still are to this day. And I just have seen how it has reflected on us. And I want to be a part of it. And I want my own children to be a part of it.

Parents’ commitment to Adventist education was also highlighted by



references made by participants about alumni parents who remain involved with the school by enrolling their children. Teacher W pointed out that parents at School A demonstrate loyalty to their alma mater by continuing the legacy of Christian education in the family and having their children and grandchildren attend the school. According to Teacher W, “I have been teaching second- and third-generation children.” Furthermore, the participants included themselves among the parents who continue to show their commitment to the SDA schools, by enrolling their own children and giving support through their ongoing involvement.

### **SDA Schools Different From Public Schools**

The previous section defined the positive culture of SDA schools and described participants’ commitment and service to the Adventist schools and education system. Using the context established by the participants, significant differences were evidenced between expectations within the SDA and public school cultures, as perceived by the participants.

The participants agreed that the SDA school culture is different from public school. According to Teacher M who had the opportunity to substitute for a year in different public schools, “I could see the difference on a daily basis; a huge difference!” She described the following scenario.

The one that stands out to me was . . . I went and subbed in a public school, elementary, and I was doing art, and it was in an outside building, away from the main building, and I was taking the kids after art back to class. As we were walking down the hall, one of my kids cursed at a teacher that was walking by. And then the teacher cursed back.

Reliving the shock of the experience, Teacher M recalled that the teacher responded, “You’d better watch it!” So, she notes, the teacher “was doing the same thing

as the child. So, things like that happened, so many times.” The teacher then changed to another area of observed difference. She reflected on her experience teaching in the classroom, and noted that in the public school classroom “I would be ready to relate something to the Bible or Jesus, say a prayer, or say let’s have prayer, and couldn’t. So, that was a big difference.”

Teacher K identified some benefits and differences between the SDA and public school cultures, in the following narrative.

It did so much for me. My kids have been in public school, and have been here, and I see the difference. There are wonderful, wonderful teachers there. But they can’t talk about God. They might be the most outstanding Christians--you know, but they can’t talk about God. That’s why I wanted to be back teaching in the Adventist schools. I like that you can bring God in everything, in all subjects. You can talk about Him.

This framework cited by the two teachers indicates that any display of spirituality is forbidden in public schools. However, in SDA schools it was an expectation that Bible- based teaching and God were central to the denominational belief system articulated in the schools’ vision and common goals.

### **Spiritual School**

Positive culture was defined as a place where a spiritual atmosphere was created and embraced. This section describes how the selected schools created a spiritual atmosphere by exploring the primary areas of spiritual focus including: (a) intentionality in creating a spiritual atmosphere, (b) instill a spirit of worship, (c) faculty and staff worship, (d) yearly spiritual themes, (e) weeks of prayer and evangelism, and (f) community service. A profound sense of spirituality was evident in the Adventist schools with the religious belief statements and pictures intentionally displayed in the schools and incorporated in many aspects of the environment at each of the sites.

## Intentionality in Creating a Spiritual Atmosphere

The interviewed participants were intentional in creating a spiritual school atmosphere. Principal A described the spiritual school atmosphere as “a Christ-centered environment, where God is first in everything and the principal, as the spiritual leader, shows a positive, Christ-like attitude.” According to Principal L, this attitude was characterized “by taking hold of Christ’s hand and mirroring yourself after His teaching, never thinking you are above, but always learning and just portraying Christ.” The principals made frequent reference to being God-led and placed total dependence on God in the leadership of the schools. Principal B stated, “I don’t see me as being the leader. I see me following the lead of the Great Leader, just listening to the Spirit of the Lord. He prompts me all the time.” Another participant, Teacher M, acknowledged, “We are working for the Lord, and that’s our whole purpose of being in this building.”

## Instill a Spirit of Worship

At all four schools, the principals embraced the role of spiritual leader as they instilled a spirit of worship and intentionally set a tone, which engendered the entire school community to maintain high awareness of God, recognizing His power, and direction in everything that took place there. According to Principal L, among the things that she has implemented to foster positivity in the school, “the most positive was instilling a spirit of worship, a spirit of knowing God and asking for His Holy Spirit to enter in.” From her perspective, “that is where it starts, and then everything else falls into place.” Her explanation that in a spiritual school one would see an environment where there was a seamless flow of working, praying, and sharing about the power and blessings of God was not unique to that school situation. This same worshipful, Christ-

centered atmosphere was found at the other schools. The goal of the principals was to instill a spirit of knowing God and a way of Christian living. Principal L stated with excitement, “You have to turn your students on to Jesus, get them excited, and that will turn around the whole environment of your school.”

### Faculty and Staff Worship

Routinely at each school, faculty and staff worship set the tone of the day. This time provided opportunity for co-workers to talk and pray with, and for one another, and for personal and professional concerns. The teachers then transferred the same prayer and worship model to their individual classrooms with students. According to Teacher K, “There is a lot of positive going on, the biggest thing, I think, is prayer. We meet together for staff prayer in the morning, and the principal prays with the students.”

Dependence on God appeared to be the modus operandi of the Adventist principals and stakeholders. Principal L described “dependence on God” as a “personal relationship demonstrated in “faith, prayer, and a renewal every morning with God, to seek direction of the school for each day.” The principals established spiritual themes as they were focused on leading the students “to know God, and helping them to develop their own individual prayer life.”

### Yearly Spiritual Themes

Yearly spiritual themes defined the atmosphere at some of the schools. Principal A shared that at School B, “much time was spent in staff meetings talking about school culture and brainstorming about how to improve school culture.” The staff consensus was to implement a spiritual theme with the intention to establish a common language for

behavior expectation among students as well as school personnel. According to the principal, “everyone felt the first theme, ‘Be Ye Kind, One to Another’ was “a good one, and the kids really related to it.” Over the years, the yearly theme became the foundation of how the principal and staff defined positive culture and started the year. Chair J also identified the positive impact of having the yearly spiritual themes in the school and affirmed the leadership when he stated, “The principal’s leadership has a strong influence on the school culture,” and described how the principal was able to infuse each year’s theme into the culture school by stating,

They didn’t just put it up there. They made slogans and hung it from the gymnasium wall, and would make it the theme for the week of prayer. They made the whole year about that and tried to incorporate it every day. Each year, the theme was clearly articulated to the entire school community. Hopefully that becomes school culture over time, and that’s the goal.

The yearly spiritual theme was incorporated into every aspect of school. In some schools, it was classroom spiritual themes, such as “God Is Love,” but as Principal A explained, “Everything was kind of filtered through” in a similar way to keep everyone focused on Jesus and being like Him.

#### Week of Prayer and Evangelism

There was no doubt that prayer and service were a way of life, and a way of defining the positive culture at all four Adventist schools. Weeks of prayer were designated as another intentional way to bring faculty and staff, and the entire student body together for prayer. At School A, Principal B shared “We are preparing for our upcoming week of prayer.” She explained that they customarily “bring in special people to speak to the students.” However, having noted from the announcements posted in the main lobby and around the school, the students would be the preachers for the up-coming

week of prayer and the principal's confirmation was sought. Pointing out the yearly spiritual theme was integrated with the week of prayer, Chair J stated, "The school would usually focus the week of prayer on the spiritual theme for the year."

Clearly, the week of prayer was a time when the schools' evangelistic thrust was evident. The principals identified evangelism along with the week of prayer as an important component of Adventist schools. "Evangelism," as defined by Teacher W, is "learning how to spread the Word and spreading the Word." Principal A felt the school played a significant part in the evangelism work of the school-church community. She remarked, "The school is the biggest evangelism done between the church and school all year." A colleague, Principal L, concurred with this claim, and declared, "The school is evangelism. It is the biggest evangelism you do all year long." Teacher W described School A's community evangelism project:

An Elijah Project, where the students did a week evangelistic series for the neighborhood. The students did the speaking, led out and conducted everything, while the teachers stayed behind (in the background). We stayed at the school and fed the students.

Noting that "the culture is learning how to spread the Word and doing for others," Teacher W highlighted the principal's intentional practice of involving and engaging both teachers and students in some aspect of community service. The research revealed both principals and stakeholders articulated that "preparing students for life and service" was a common goal of the schools.

In this study, community service meant going out to the neighboring communities to serve others by doing charitable acts. One of the participants, Teacher W, described community service as "to do for others." Principal A was deliberate in teaching her students "the idea of putting someone before [your]self," and from Teacher

M's perspective it was "having a heart for missions," which she highlighted was one of her passions, and "a big thing" at School B.

Service and community outreach were global, and extended from the schools to communities as far as Tanzania, in the case of School B. According to Teacher W, regardless of where community service was needed, "the students were taught to love people where they are." Finally, the teachers and board chairs concurred that these activities have become part of a positive school culture, as they have been taking place for many years.

The distinctive spiritual atmosphere described at the four school sites highlighted the intentionality of the principals to lead by example in their personal relationship with and dependence on God. Their focus was to create a Christ-centered environment, where God is first in and central to everything.

### **Diversity Celebrated**

Positive school culture was defined as a place where diversity was embraced and celebrated. In this study, this was demonstrated with everyone accepting and honoring one another, individuality celebrated, and inclusive involvement fostered, regardless of nationality, color, ethnic origin, or religion. In defining the positive culture of School D, diversity was the first characteristic highlighted by Chair T, who stated,

We have a very diverse student body. I don't know how many countries you would find represented in our school, but in my observations, and what I'm aware of, you would find a cohesive group of students who like and care for each other irrespective of their countries.

Chair P, who shared that at School C the school and church deal with many different cultures, stated, "We all have a certain appreciation of what God has created and the differences." This was a true description of what I experienced during one full-

day visit at each of the four school sites and also from the stories told by participants.

### Accepting and Honoring One Another

Looking at the student body, one may be able to identify physical differences among the students and their teachers, but from the interactions, it would be difficult to identify other characteristics of their differences. Principal A made it known that at School B there was intentionality in fostering a climate of acceptance and selflessness. She pointed out, “The teachers take time in chapels and classroom worship to talk about being accepting of one another.” She made the claim that “in today’s world politeness and manners are not even popular anymore.” The principal suggested, “You really have to work at just teaching basic manners and respect, and honoring one another.” Teacher K expressed strong views, related to the Adventist school mission, concerning accepting and valuing others in Adventist schools. She asserted,

In a school, an ideal culture, is just accepting—acceptance for everything. I don’t think our Adventist schools are just for Adventist kids, I think they’re for all walks of life. Everyone. I believe that is our mission to be accepting of everyone.

Diversity of religion, ethnic groups, and community was clearly embraced in these schools. In describing the population of School C, Chair P pointed out, “It has grown significantly in the non-Adventist area,” clarifying that from when he came, “there was predominantly an Adventist makeup.” Elaborating on the continuous change that took place over the years, the chair added, “It shifted from a predominantly White Anglo-Saxon environment to a much more mixed package, and the church, I think overall, accepted it very well. We did not ever have a real split in community for any reason.”

Diversity at the different sites was represented differently as the four schools



were closely connected to one or more of the Adventist churches of their local communities. As a result, the student body reflected the populations of the church they attended, as well as the ethnicity of the communities in the different locations. Some schools had a population made up of predominantly the same race but included different nationalities and color, while other schools showed a greater mixture of ethnicities. Interviews with the participants also revealed that most, if not all, of the schools were also working with students and families of different religious backgrounds.

Chair P shared that “40% of the children are of church members, and then the other kids that come are from the neighborhood, and they can be Catholic, Muslim, to Jewish; just all over the map.” He added, “Each year it’s different.” Despite these differences, it was refreshing to experience firsthand how the chairs and other participants articulated that everyone worked, played, and got along well together.

### Individuality Celebrated

The emerging themes—acceptance, accommodation, and inclusion—revealed that individuality was celebrated and valued at each of the schools. Principals and teachers accepted all families and students, and made accommodations for individual differences. Principal B stated, “I’ll work with their children individually.” The four teachers also acknowledged they “nurtured and did everything they could to foster learning and help each one succeed.”

Teacher S told about his personal experience with his daughter who had a brain tumor for 10 years, and was diagnosed to soon be cancer free. According to him, she had to go through chemo and radiation treatments in her brain, and the wiring got messed up, resulting in special education. However, he shared, “I was thankful she was in our school

and continued to go here all the way through tenth grade.” Teacher W, in describing distinguishing characteristics of her school culture, attributed credit to the nurturing learning culture created to meet the needs of the individual learner. She stated, “We do everything to help those who are developmentally delayed and who have emotional needs. We do everything we can to assist them.” She emphasized that the principal “goes out of her way to get someone to come in to help provide support.”

Interview participants concurred that all students should be treated with respect and impartiality. Chair G supported this belief when he cited one occasion when the school board took a stance when members of churches outside of the school’s constituency felt “children from some constituent churches received treatment that was partial to one group of children and impartial to the other students.” The chair explained that the board took the following action to support the equal rights of every student.

We’ve been able to look at the entire situation, and come to the conclusion that where the leadership of the principal is concerned, students are students. Regardless of what school or church they may belong to, they all get equal treatment.

### Inclusive Involvement

Each of the schools presented a diversified school community, which was, in some cases, more evident in the visible makeup of the student body. However, the participants indicated that diversity at their schools extended beyond race, color, ethnicity, and religion. Principal L pointed out, “It showed inclusion for differences of class, home life, country they were from, as well as the learning ability of students.”

Therefore, it was not surprising to find at School D, the principal, teacher, and chairman were fully in harmony as each described the inclusive involvement and the ways diversity was celebrated at their school. The three individuals agreed that the

diverse student body and the diverse culture gave their school the “ideal culture.” Teacher K believed that having a diverse school environment that “was not just Adventist, just makes a more complete, ideal culture.” In addition, the teacher explained, “you don’t know what seeds you’re planting where or when.” Convinced that “the school runs smoother when it has more of everything included,” meaning not just Adventist but “different backgrounds,” the teacher asserted, “I just noticed that the school runs smoother. The diversity balances.”

Principal L identified some of the benefits experienced by embracing diversity and fostering an inclusive involvement at the Adventist school, and commented,

When you can have a diverse culture, I think that’s important. I think when you have a diverse culture you’re taking from different ideas. Yes, we are the Adventist denomination, that’s our religion. But at the same time, I have children that although they are Adventists, the culture may be different in their home life; the culture of how they are raised, but at the same time we are united, because of our religion.

Finally, Chair T, who was an advocate for celebrating the individuality of students, shared his perspective with the remark, “I like to see a happy, enthusiastic group of children who don’t necessarily look alike.”

Overall, principals and key stakeholders demonstrated an open and inclusive attitude towards the students and families regardless of their differences. Chair T shared, “We probably have more ethnic students than Caucasian students.” Chair P added, “I want to say we have at least 37 different nationalities represented at last count, and there is an attempt to involve them to a great degree.” The latter chair articulated that while his school was open to families of all walks of life, it was important that they adhered to the religious values taught. He confirmed, “Regardless of the parental viewpoints, we

stress that we are a Christian school, a Seventh-day Adventist Christian school particularly, and the need to accept the things that we teach and show through what we do with the children.” He added, “They usually agree to participate.” Chair P acknowledged, “We do need everyone to be part of the program.”

### **Pervasive Attitude of Continuous Growth and Improvement**

Positive school culture was defined as a place where there is always a pervasive attitude of continuous growth and planning for improvement. Under this subtopic, the section highlights how the principals demonstrated: (a) intentional planning in the area of growth and curriculum improvement, and as (b) instructional leader, in strategic planning and in the financial viability and stability of the school.

#### **Intentional Planning in the Area of Growth and Curriculum Improvement**

The participants, including principals, teachers, and chairs, conveyed a pervasive attitude for growth and curriculum improvement, which started with having a visionary leader to set the general direction for the school, including a direction of curriculum and education achievement and provision of resources. They saw intentional planning for growth and improvement as a necessary part in the process of cultivating and sustaining a positive learning culture. Therefore, it was an expectation that the principal provided leadership in the area of curriculum growth, improvement, and achievement. As Chair P stated, “The principal needs to have a clear idea for his/her vision and goals.”

The board chairs and teachers also looked to the principal to articulate “a focused direction” to all stakeholders and constituents, including the students. They expressed the

importance of initially sharing the vision with staff “to get their buy-in, listen to their ideas, and bring them in the decision making.” As Teacher S voiced, “You need to have someone who is flexible.” Chair T further explained that, when necessary, principals may need to “adjust their program without altering their standards and convictions to get staff initially,” but, all stakeholders, including students and parents, should work together toward a common goal.

### Planning for Curriculum Growth and Improvement

Planning for curriculum growth and improvement of the school’s academic achievement standards was a common goal for the schools. Principals demonstrated a pervasive attitude of continuous growth exhibited by working closely with faculty to improve strategies and maintain curriculum standards. Weekly faculty meetings were identified as a common and most appropriate time to involve and get everyone’s input on curriculum issues. Principal A also underscored intentional curriculum planning, with the pastor’s input, exploring possibilities “of how the church and school could work together to achieve and accomplish a common mission.” She stated, “Another thing that we do that is very key is visioning sessions with our teaching staff and our pastors.”

Principals encouraged continuous teamwork among staff to foster growth and improvement in the environment. According to Principal A, “it’s everybody working together, collaborating, toward a common goal, even when it’s not easy.” Principal E, demonstrating that he clearly understood and embraced his role, given the dynamic nature of the school environment, reflected,

I have been around a little while, and I’ve seen a lot of things work, but that doesn’t mean you don’t keep right on growing and trying things and seeing, it’s like in a classroom, every classroom whether it’s in the same

school or not is different just because of the makeup of the kids. Every staff is a little different. Every constituency is a little different. So you roll with the punches and adapt and see what works and what doesn't.

Curriculum preparation, meaning students' academic learning and achievement, was also identified as a major priority in planning for curriculum growth and improvement of the schools. Teacher K described her principal's influence in this area by stating, "Education is a big deal. I can tell she wants the school to succeed. She believes in the school and always wants improvement." Chair G also stressed, "The principal plays a key role, concerning curriculum matters." He noted, "The principals worked closely with faculty and superintendent in maintaining, upgraded curriculum to make sure all classes are provided with what they need in terms of academia, or anything required or expected of them."

The study revealed the principal's duties were multifaceted and complex; however, the principals exhibited a confident attitude and desired growth and improvement for curriculum and academic achievement in their schools. As curriculum planners the principals also functioned as instructional leaders, sharing responsibility with board members and with faculty for strategic planning and the financial viability and stability of the schools.

#### Principal as Instructional Leader

In their role as an instructional leader, principals fostered a culture of collaborating with faculty and staff not only to ensure that curriculum and academic goals were achieved but also to provide professional and moral support for both teachers and students. According to Chair J, the principals were "very involved in other day-to-day functions and programs of the school."

The principals motivated and encouraged their teachers as well as the students to achieve their best. The principals motivated faculty by providing opportunity for them to make input in the planning and collaborating with them for academic improvement of the school. Principal A articulated, “I collaborate with staff and bring them in on the front side of decision making.” Other principals shared the view of providing encouragement for staff by caring about them personally and professionally. Principal L remarked, “You have to show you care for the teachers and students.” Teacher W confirmed, “She has encouraged us. She inspires us with ideas and motivates us to just try it. She does retreats with the students, and we also do retreats, and we have fun.”

The areas of professional growth and moral support were also intentionally planned and cultivated in the schools. Principal E emphasized the goal to provide opportunity for everyone to do and give the best. To accomplish the goal of academic excellence the principals implemented creative ways to facilitate professional growth and improvement, based on individual teacher and school needs. Principal A shared, “We try not to just use our staff meeting for all the housekeeping stuff, but we take a book for professional development in our staff meeting.” At School A, Teacher W identified, “We are exposed to not just the Adventist realm, but to workshops in other realms.” Specifying the principal’s supportive leadership in this area, the teacher added, “She will work to get the exposure we need and ensures the treasurer makes money available.”

It was evident that the teachers felt supported by the principal. According to Teacher S’s description, support meant

knowing that he has our back, or she, so to speak, watches out for us, and has our interest at heart, and will do what they can to support us, as long as we don’t let them

down and bring our own detriment to ourselves. Knowing that we have that support is a big comfort; mentally they can give you the peace of mind to concentrate on your things at hand that you need to do.

As instructional leaders, the principals also supported students and motivated high achievement by providing a suitable place and adequate resources to help them succeed. Principal L shared, “We have been able to do upgrades, provide a greater curriculum, and a better physical environment for our students and also learning.” The teachers related other intentional initiatives of principals that groomed students for high achievement, and in some instances provided advanced academic preparation. Teacher W cited Principal B’s leadership and intentional plan for students’ growth by “pushing dual enrollment, where we have students who are here in high school and in community college at the same time.”

### Strategic Planning

Such initiatives as the dual enrollment and other changes to improve and cultivate a positive school culture qualified the principals to be characterized as strategic planners. As Principal A shared, “We are attempting to start an iPad Mini program next year with sixth- through eighth-graders.” She also shared her initiative of once a year “bringing together the teaching staff and pastors for a visioning session, to talk about our school and see what we do really well, and what we could do better.” In addition, the administrator remarked, “I make it a point every week to sit in on the pastoral staff meeting.” Principal L shared about her strategic initiative in starting an online high school. She described her strategy in the following anecdote.

I was losing my eighth-graders to public school. Not all of them went up to the academy. So, I said I need another option for these kids, because if they are not going to the academy, I wanted another option, and not as expensive. So I started the online school. I researched it and last year, but actually this year was our first year



for it. God has truly blessed. One of our students received the presidential academic excellence award this year.

Chair P reflected on a strategic move School C made under the visionary leadership of a recent principal. He related that

in taking the kids to the different schools, he recognized that there was a real need in the Spanish community here, to see if we couldn't get them involved in the school. And so we set out on a strategy to provide them with financial encouragements. We may have waived some things to make it a bit easier for them to go through the system. Fortunately, that's worked quite well. It has continued to be a big part of our community.

Based on the stories told, it was noted that the strategic planning initiatives of the principals contributed in various ways to the financial viability and stability of the schools. The next sub-section reveals how participants described pertinent details about how this was done.

### Financial Viability and Stability

Participants indicated how changes in financial and population stability over the years have impacted the financial viability and stability the schools were intentional in cultivating. Chair P described that sometime in the past, the population of the church "was predominately Adventist, with a large number of doctors, and their children came to the school." However, due to attrition caused primarily by "people retiring and moving away from the area, the makeup and population of the church changed." Chair P expressed concern for the impact of this trend on the financial viability and overall stability of the school. "The challenge is financial," he said and described the issue.

The change began with the loss of the doctors and their incomes to support the school and the church to a higher degree than we have now. We are now much more a middle class community, and much more diversified. I want to say we have at least 37 different nationalities represented at last count, and there is an attempt to involve

them to a great degree. But the population's parental concept of Christian education, I believe has diminished to a degree that's concerning. It's been there a while, so it's been fairly stable, and I wouldn't be surprised if under duress we take much more people to get involved because they see what is going in the public systems.

The principals at School C and School D initiated participation in the State Voucher Program to provide scholarships for eligible students. Conveying a sense of satisfaction, Principal L asserted, "It has truly been a blessing. Because, yes, guaranteed money! The check comes directly here. It doesn't go the parents. They get a letter stating your child is receiving X amount of dollars." Despite this "guaranteed" income, Principal L still indicated budget as one area of struggle. She stated, "It's always budget, because your budget determines what you can get that year for your kids. And you want so many things. Nowadays, parents want technology." The principal explained, "I say the budget plays a part in the building of the culture of the school, because if we don't have the means we can't get the resources that students need."

Chair C stated, "We try to stay on top of finances." This clearly demonstrated not only knowledge, but showed strong involvement and intentionality in ensuring resources were adequate to improve the physical and academic viability and stability of the school. He also credited support from the pastor as a vital part of the school's financial viability and stability. Obviously grateful and contented with the current financial state of the school, he unpretentiously shared, "We are financially sound," which he pointed out has been the case for the last number of years. As Chair P elaborated:

We were blessed with a bequest that came to the school from one of the church members some years ago. Although it was not huge, it's huge in the sense that it probably equals a third of any budget that we have in a year. That has given us stability to be confident to be able to do some things in a different way than we would have done them without that in our back pocket. We've made some small to

medium upgrades in the building itself with some of those funds. We used some of those funds to help the needy families to keep their children in school, tuition assistance programs. And when we tap into it, we try to put it back. So we've been able to do most of that. Our position has been quite good for some time. It's not that we're wealthy in a sense that dollars are the only criteria. We're wealthy in a sense that we have strong pastoral leadership.

### **Summary**

This chapter identified the main elements, shared vision, diversity celebrated, and a pervasive attitude of continuous growth by which a positive school culture was defined by the principals and key stakeholders, school board chairpersons, and teachers who participated in this study. From the perspectives of the four Adventist K-12 schools, positive school culture was defined as a place where there is a shared vision for the goals and direction of the school. Being committed to the Adventist values, principals and key stakeholders focused on creating a spiritual environment where Christlike characters were developed, community was embraced, and diversity celebrated. In addition, family atmosphere was cultivated to provide a sense of nurturing and open climate. Evident from the descriptive accounts, another important characteristic of a positive school culture was the intentional planning for the continuous holistic growth and improvement of those who were served as well as those who were leaders.

With an understanding of what constitutes and defines a positive school culture in the Adventist K-12 schools in the study, the next three chapters explore and describe the fundamental methods that these school leaders employed to cultivate and maintain a positive school culture.

## CHAPTER 5

### BEHAVIOR AND SCHOOL VALUES

#### **Introduction**

This chapter describes how principals, board chairs, and teachers described how school values were maintained at the schools studied. The common core values of the four schools are: (a) well-kept physical plant, (b) school fosters nurturing, (c) values attractive to parents, (d) collegiality, (e) servant leadership, and (f) reflective leadership.

In the context of the four schools in this study, school values are defined as qualities that are not just considered worthwhile, but represent the schools' highest priorities, deeply held beliefs, and fundamental guiding forces (Sartain & Schumann, 2006). The chapter also describes the actions of principals as they lead and collaborate with school board chairpersons and teachers in their commitment to school values that influence and attract students, parents, constituent church members, and ultimately the global community to their schools.

#### **Well-kept Physical Plant**

Interviews revealed the principals, teachers, and school board chairpersons demonstrated intentionality and commitment to maintaining a well-kept physical plant at the four sites. They did this by cultivating a welcoming and inviting atmosphere; neat,

clean, and orderly facilities; and a school that fosters nurturing, which focuses on principals and teachers prioritizing their availability, safety, and personalized support for the students and parents, as well as fellow co-workers.

### Welcoming and Inviting Atmosphere

Visits to the schools revealed the principals and key stakeholders were intentional in cultivating a welcoming and inviting atmosphere inside and outside of the school. At each site, there was an attractive, visible signage with the school's name prominently displayed, in a strategic location on well-kept school grounds. For example, at School D the red welcome-sign at the entrance read, "Welcome to Our School Where Children and Learning Come 1<sup>st</sup>." In addition, upon entry into each of the schools, one is greeted not only by a friendly voice in response to the security buzzer, but is welcomed by one who offers to help.

The principals cultivated a welcoming and inviting atmosphere by permeating the environment with positivity and providing visitors with a plethora of nonverbal messages. In some cases, messages were captured in pictures providing snapshots of the history, traditions, and values of the schools. Three of the schools captured a historical view in the display of pictures of former principals and past graduation classes that lined the walls of the main hallways.

Another pattern that highlighted the schools' welcoming and inviting feature, and that pervaded the environment, was the personal touch that was cultivated by principals and teachers. The caregivers demonstrated this school value in the personal attention and care extended to the students and their parents. Several of the interviewees said that it started every morning with the principals greeting the students and their

guardians at the door. As Principal A described, “Typically I am standing at this front door every morning. I am greeting every family and every child that comes in.” The principal added, “It has to start with me knowing their names, being able to say good morning, have a great day, to each student.” Teacher K described how her principal demonstrated the personal touch by sharing, “The principal loves the kids. When a child comes in, she’s going to hug them, it doesn’t matter who they are, or how old they are.”

### Clean, Neat, and Orderly Facilities

In addition to these external evidences of the well-kept facilities, each school also presented a clean, neat, and orderly interior. Each of the schools, with its unique ambiance, was housed in its own independent facility. In all cases, the main entrance area was organized with intentionality, presenting a clean, orderly appearance to ensure everyone felt welcome upon entry. It also indicated the principals and key stakeholders were deliberate in cultivating and maintaining these school values. Chairman G stated, “The facility plays a crucial part” in defining the values of the school. Principal L shared her bold initiative to change her facility from “looking very institutional, to having a welcoming school when the students come in.” In describing his school, School A, Chair G stated, “The facility is very nice and there is a good atmosphere.”

### **School Fosters Nurturing**

The schools created a nurturing atmosphere, which focuses on principals and teachers prioritizing consideration, safety, and personalized support for the students and their parents, as well as for fellow co-workers. The participants described how the schools cultivated and maintained a nurturing environment by fostering (a) open door

policy, (b) safe haven, (c) a nurturing attitude, (d) family atmosphere, and (e) school attractive to parents.

### Open Door Policy

Maintaining “an open door policy” was how principals described being intentional in maintaining availability and open communication to key stakeholders, including students, parents, and staff. Principal L asserted, “My office is open. I want students to come in here and feel comfortable and sit down and let’s talk, but at the same time, have respect for you.” Principal B remarked, “I try to keep the door open and encourage parents to come,” but also admitted, “I like when they do the appointments, but if they can’t, I like them to feel they can come anytime. I encourage them to come, come, and talk.”

Further describing how School A maintained an open door for the families of the school, Chair G confirmed,

Where the school is concerned, the parents have an open door policy; if there are situations that come up involving their children they can come and find out what is going on, talk to the teachers, and if they need to go further, talk to the principal, and if they need to go further, to talk to the superintendent of school, they can do that too, and if they need to talk to the chairman of the board, they can do that, as well.

### Safe Haven

Just as school personnel were intentional in being available to have open dialogue with stakeholders, similarly they were deliberate in cultivating a safe haven for students and staff. A sense of safety was evidenced upon entry at each of the four school campuses. The locked doors instantly conveyed a sense of security and safety in the

school buildings. However, each of the schools had a different way of communicating safety and cultivating a safe haven for students.

At School D, commitment to providing a sense of safety was communicated as one of the six major goals promised to patrons. The promise read, “We promise to always keep the school safe and clean, inside and out.” At School B, the yearly spiritual theme “All in for God” implied a sense of safety. As Principal A explained, the concept resulted from “a bully-free program” they had done. Principal B described a snapshot of how she contributed to cultivating the school culture as a safe haven for the students.

The kids know they can come to my office at any time. The teachers are aware to give them permission to come to the principal. Sometimes they’ll come and say, Mrs. M, I just want to sit here a minute. Or they’ll come in, and say, can you have prayer with me? Sometimes they tell what is going on and sometimes they won’t. I have water under my desk here, and we’ll drink water and talk.

Reflecting on the priority and caring attention given to the students Chair P remarked, “Adventist school is a blessing to children,” but the transcriptions showed staff also considered school a safe haven, a place they enjoyed being at and felt secure. The four teachers concurred with the sentiment expressed by a colleague, Teacher K, who stated, “I love coming to work every day. It doesn’t seem like it, but of course, you have your days that are harried, but I look forward to it.” Teacher S shared, “I’m still on my first job. I get to play every day. Oh, I love it!” Another participant, Teacher W, remarked,

I enjoy working here, because the teachers are good friends, as well as co-workers, I don’t know how to say this, but this is business, this is work and I can go into the principal and tell her, you need to listen to what is being said to you and she will listen.

Teacher M conveyed a sense of safety and comfort when she stated, “Our teachers work really well together and this creates an environment of family.”



## Nurturing Attitude

Within the school environment principals and teachers cultivated and maintained a nurturing attitude. These participants identified that their schools fostered a nurturing environment where principals, teachers, and students provided care and helpful attention to one another. Teacher M pointed out she provided “a nurturing attitude towards her eight- and nine-year-old students, in helping them to truly understand they have Jesus, to help them deal with personal challenges,” which, the teacher interjected, “I’ve never had to deal with as an adult.”

Teacher W felt there was a nurturing attitude regarding students’ learning at her school and stated, “This is a nurturing culture that fosters learning and where teachers go above and beyond in helping students.” Teacher K described the nurturing attitude from her kindergartners’ perspective and shared in their own words, “Oh, Mrs. K, what can I do for you?” She described them saying, “They are so, you can’t stay sad or upset long, because they are so loving and helpful.”

Another teacher described his school, School C, as a nurturing environment with considerate teachers. Teacher S shared, “The atmosphere between the students and me was more of a nurturing atmosphere than some of the others.” Adding a personal note, Teacher S attributed his nurturing style to the inspiration of a high-school teacher and mentor. He elaborated, “I saw him, out of all the band directors I had, as someone I would like to be like. He was more of a friend and interested in you personally.” The transcriptions revealed the nurturing attitude was extended to the parents of the school, thus cultivating a family atmosphere.

## Family Atmosphere

Interviewees at each site identified the family atmosphere as one of the distinctive elements by which their schools are known. In telling about the values of the school, one teacher shared, “We have a good reputation for having a family atmosphere.”

This sense of family was maintained as the principals and teachers made parents comfortable by “developing rapport” and “appropriate friendships” with the students and their parents. Principals underscored, “Get to know your families.” Principal L emphasized, “Smile a lot. Let them know you care about their child and get to know your parents.” Another principal developed the family atmosphere with her students: “Knowing their names and teaching students to watch out and care and honor one another.”

Principal B, like her colleagues, also fostered the family environment by maintaining communication with teachers, students, and parents. She showed “personal interest in students and teachers alike.” She explained, “I talk with them. But they have to feel that they can talk to you, and that you are interested in what they have to say.” She cited, when one of the teacher’s grandson was to have eye surgery, she described, “I called him up and inquired about the surgery, and that made my teacher feel good.” She also noted, “I try to do that with parents, when I hear the kids talking, my grandmother’s in the hospital, I’ll call the mom. I hear your mom is in the hospital, how is she doing?” The principal remarked, “That type of thing goes a long way.”

Teacher W also identified the importance of making the environment comfortable and nurturing for the students. Describing her multifaceted role as “teacher, counselor, mommy,” the teacher remarked, “That’s another thing about this culture, sometimes the

younger ones will come to my desk, Mom, I mean Miss [Name] . . .” She added, “So, they are comfortable. It’s a family environment.” Principal L also wanted her students “to feel comfortable,” and shared that “sometimes they need mothering.”

The participants believed maintaining the family atmosphere required fostering a sense of involvement and unity among constituents, where the school, home, and church collaborated with one another. It was underscored that the family environment was cultivated based on years of consistent interaction and involvement of the key stakeholders, principals, teachers, school board, students, and parents. According to Principal A,

We are a very family oriented school. We have a lot of families here that live and work in the area, and some are just passing through, but largely about 80% of our graduating classes have been here for several years.

### **Openness and Accessibility**

Openness and accessibility were among the behavior core values displayed by principals and key stakeholders in maintaining the family atmosphere. Principal B, who epitomized the veteran culture builder by her longevity of service from “1971 until now,” was a strong advocate for students and parents. She passionately stated that “everyone is honest, open, and accessible.” Committed to these values, she encouraged parents to “feel safe coming to the school to speak about whatever is bothering them.”

Chair G also expressed openness and accessibility were crucial in cultivating and maintaining school values and stated, “The leader has to be accessible to everyone.” He added for emphasis,

I don’t care how busy you are. I don’t care how much you have on your plate,

you have to be accessible, and that to me is one of the main qualities as far as cultivating a positive atmosphere where our school is concerned.

### **School Values Attractive to Parents**

The study revealed that among the school values that attracted parents to these Adventist schools, principals and key stakeholders were committed to: (a) family-oriented school environment, where staff members are stable and care about the welfare of students and parents, (b) learning as a priority, (c) visible, involved, proactive principals and teachers, (d) a perception of leadership qualities of consistency and faith, and (e) trust.

#### **Family-Oriented School**

Principal A stated confidently, “Our families are a big piece in our school.” To give clarity to the statement she added, “If you ask a parent what do you like about our school, they are going to give you two things, they love the teachers and it’s a family-oriented school.” Chair J, sharing his perspective as a parent, stated, “We have been very happy with the culture it cultivates there. My kids tell me they like going to school. They miss it when it’s not there, because they miss their friends, and they miss the things that go on.” Additionally, he stated, “Students enjoy being there and get along with each other.”

Characteristic of the family-oriented school culture was a stable, committed, staff that loves their job. The participants were convinced the longevity and authenticity of faculty and staff have been an attraction to families throughout the years. According to the participants, these elements contributed to the value of family cultivated in the schools. Teacher W shared, “A lot of the staff have been here for a number of years,

unlike other schools where there is a great turnover.” She added, “Teachers are caring and real. We get along with each other, not only in school, but outside of the school, as well.” Affirming the strong connection cultivated and preserved among the families, the teacher further stated, “We have taught the families. Some grandparents have seen us grow up. So, the parents have a relationship with us, they know about us, so it leads to a confidence in the teachers.” These factors continue to be attractive to the alumni families, the teacher concluded, “I have been teaching second- and third-generation children.”

All of the principals, teachers, and board chairs have invested many years serving the Adventist schools. The principals and teachers have spent their careers with the SDA school system. Each of the principals has exceeded 20 years serving in Adventist schools. Two of them spent all or most of their working years at the current school, which has provided stability in the area of leadership. Teacher W verified, “I have been through five or six administrators in 37 years.” Principal L stated, “My whole life has been dedicated to the work of our Christian schools, and I love what I do.”

### Learning Is a Priority

Principal A shared maintaining a priority for learning is a school value that was attractive to parents. She identified learning as one of the things that is readily noticed in the school environment and described that “upon entering the school, parents get a feel whether things are going well or falling apart.” According to her, “When someone comes into our school, they can see that we have learning happening. Learning is going on in the hallways and in the classrooms.” Teacher K, also a parent, suggested that parents are attracted when the principals incorporate programs and resources to meet their children’s

special learning needs. Teacher W shared that among the distinguishing qualities of her school that attracted parents was “a nurturing culture that fosters learning.” She stated, “We really do push education and push our children to succeed.”

#### Visible, Involved, Proactive Principal and Teachers

The 12 interviewees observed that the schools attracted parents’ interest when principals were visible and involved inside and outside of the school and proactive in handling sensitive matters. Principal L stated, “You have to make yourself visible. I think when a leader is visible to the people, they will support you.” Underscoring their commitment to visibility outside of school, each principal maintained involvement in his or her constituent church, working closely with pastors and parishioners. Principal E shared, “I like to be heavily involved in the church, and usually get involved with praise and worship.” Principal A stated, “I am welcome to speak in their pulpit, the pastors have invited me and I have given a sermon at the church.”

All of the participants concurred that the schools attracted parents’ interest when principals and teachers maintained visibility and “kept the constituents abreast with what was happening in the schools.” Information from the school was also identified as an essential in attracting parents’ positive involvement. Teacher K pointed out she “saw the difference” when parents were kept informed and when they were not. She shared, “When the school restarted the weekly newsletter, parents were excited and encouraged to come back.” Chair J, also a school parent, highlighted how visibility and involvement were attractive and stated, “The Home and School program is a huge part in attracting families to come to events and take part.” It was noted that parental involvement was

valued at the schools and it played a vital role in fostering visibility of the school and attracting other parents.

The board chairs agreed that an involved and proactive principal was attractive to parents and described how these core values were maintained. Chair J highlighted that with the prevalence of bullying in today's culture, at School B, "they have been watching and are trying to be proactive and do things that will help raise the awareness of the students that this could be a hurtful thing."

Participants shared that parents were attracted to the Adventist schools in the study due to the principals' and teachers' commitment not only to address critical issues promptly, but to maintaining personal interest in the welfare of the students. This was evident when accommodations were made to ensure students' academic, social, emotional, and physical needs were addressed. Teacher M shared, "I work with my students and support them, letting them know there is an adult that is here with them at school for six hours of the day that cares for what they are going through."

In the two inner-city schools, the principals shared about how they initiated participation in the State-funded voucher program to provide financial assistance for students whose families could not otherwise afford a Christian education for their child/children. According to Principal L and Principal E, the voucher bill gave "parents a choice where they want to send their children, to charter or private school." In addition, Principal L explained, "eligibility is based on income level but it's not just for low income, but middle class, too."

#### Perception of Leadership Qualities, Consistency, Faith

With regard to cultivating and maintaining school values, Chairman G stated, "A

lot is perception.” Interviews pointed out that another element of the schools that was attractive to parents occurred when there was “a favorable perception the behavior of the leadership had a positive effect on the people.” The chair found that “parents for the most part will send their children or not send their children based upon their perception of the leadership qualities of the principals.” Emphasizing that “the leader was one of the first things” that constituents, parents, and grandparents looked at in choosing a school, the chair confirmed, “So, the behavior of the principal plays a major role in the perception as to whether or not that school’s constituents are going to support that school.”

The participants identified consistency as an essential value of the schools in cultivating and maintaining the parent’s attraction to the school. The principal, teacher, and board chair at School D emphasized commitment to “being consistent in everything.” Teacher W, at School A, was passionate that “there has to be consistency.” She believed “principals needed to be consistent and not waiver” in decision-making or with decisions already made. Accepting her responsibility for demonstrating consistency, she declared, “Regardless what I’m going to do, parents want to see consistency and the students need consistency.” Other stakeholders concurred that in cultivating a positive environment, not only the principal, but staff “should not waiver and demonstrate consistency in decisions made and in upholding standards.” According to Chair T, “It sets a positive attitude. I think it is important and I feel that way about the staff and the structure, all the way through. It just has to be consistent. I think it does make a difference.” Chair T emphasized, “Staff that has been least respected is the staff that vacillates.”



Principal B embraced the value of “consistency all the time.” She acknowledged being perceptive as a leader, by sharing,

You got to know what parents you can count on. You have to be able to read your people, and I make sure I let those people know what’s going on. I bring them in and tell them things that I may not even tell the teachers.

Principals in this study believed their faith and dependence on God were core values that made them better leaders. The research revealed that the principals’ commitment to faith in God was a value that was attractive to parents. Principal L influenced parents and made attending and obtaining an Adventist Christian education attractive by sharing personal stories of her “faith to make everything seem possible.” She declared, “You have to tell them of your faith walk. I tell them don’t let money hold you back. If you want your child here, I will find a way. I don’t know the way, but God does.”

### **Trust**

The practice of knowing, sharing, and building confidence with stakeholders and constituents of the school highlight the value of trust the principals cultivated and sought to maintain in the schools. Trust emerged as a personal as well as school value for the principals. Principal E remarked, “I can’t get away from cultivating trust and respect between me as a leader and the staff.” Principal B and Principal L corroborated that successful leadership and preserving school values required trust in God. Principal B highlighted trust in God as the leader as paramount when she stated, “As I’ve told the school board, this is not our school, it’s the Lord’s school. If it closes, He allows it to close. If it stays open, He allows it to stay open. We’ll adhere to what He has planned for us.” Clarifying her commitment to fostering trust in her leadership, she explained, “I

think they see it. One parent said we know you don't take any mess. I asked her what does that mean and she replied, "You're going to call a spade a spade." This anecdote supported the view of the other principals and key stakeholders that trust was cultivated when there was openness and clear lines of communication, to help parents know what to expect.

Teacher W identified that "the principal's experience is a confidence builder, and even though we are different and may not agree, we've learned to trust and have learned to listen to the wisdom of our principal." Teachers also pointed out that the principals' confidence and openness served to engender the support and trust of constituents, including the children.

### **Collegiality**

Each one of the teacher participants expressed that a huge part of the positive atmosphere cultivated in the schools was due to having a principal who valued and embraced teamwork and collegiality to get everyone on board to support and maintain the school's values and goals. The principals, themselves, have highlighted significant benefits when they adopted a style of inclusive, cooperative, and collegial leadership.

In describing the culture of the school under his leadership, Principal E, who was the newest member of staff, disclosed, "I have been told by several of my teachers they appreciate my leadership style." He also stated, "They are a very unified group, really work well together, and they have told me they appreciate my philosophy of treating them as trained professionals, and have empowered them to do their jobs." Referring to his staff as "my team," Principal E admitted, "I may sit in this seat, but we work together. I can't do it without them." He further stated that, if there was a

difference of opinion with a staff member, he would usually

do it in such a manner that says, not necessarily that I'm right and you're wrong, but I observe this, or I wondered about that . . . and ask for their perspective on that, and see where we can go from that. Instead of my saying, I'm the boss and therefore we are going to do it this way.

It was noted that the principal, as well as the other participants, shared the philosophy that the leader sets the tone in fostering collegiality in the environment by "initially having an attitude of wanting to get along and do what is best for their kids and their school, speaking of families and constituents."

Demonstrating a positive leader influence, Principal A stated, "The biggest thing in terms of leadership characteristics for me is, I am not a top-down type of leader at all." She expanded, "I think for me personally, my philosophy of leadership has always been one of collaboration. I am not a stand-alone." This principal attributed her school's success to her collegial leadership style. This principal was also pleased to tell that she "brought staff in on the front side of decision making," and stated, "We will talk about everything, because I need their buy-in and I need them to know what is going on. If I don't have their support, whatever it is that I am trying to make happen is not going to happen." Principal L shared,

I meet with my teachers on a regular basis, every Wednesday. We have treats and we have fun. We talk about our lives to begin with and then we'll get down to business. I let them know they are appreciated every time they come to the meeting, I let them know, I'm not an island in this position. You are all co-workers and co-principals with me. I'm not in this by myself. I'm going to come to you. What do you think? Ultimately I'll make the final decision. But I want to know how you feel. Let's make this decision together.

This administrator articulated her appreciation for staff and the pleasant working relationship they shared by acknowledging, "I'm blessed to have such a wonderful

group of people to work with. My secretary I taught in kindergarten, and she was so excited to come back.”

Two of the principals and one teacher shared their perspectives about how principals cultivated and maintained a positive school culture by affirming and showing appreciation to their faculty and staff. Principal L stated, “You have to have that rapport and show them caring. I tell my teachers, down to the janitorial, the custodial help, I really appreciate what you do.” She explained, “When you have your teachers behind you, and your teachers know you are there for them it just creates a positive school environment.” Citing one outcome of cultivating a collegial atmosphere in the school, she shared, “I know people have come in and said, Wow, everyone is happy! Like when we were in board meeting, the superintendent said, this speaks highly, because they are happy.”

Principal A shared that at least once a year, the local SDA Conference brought the teachers and pastors together for a spiritual retreat, and at which time she seized the opportunity to have her faculty and pastors meet together to “talk about our school.” However, to be more deliberate in fostering the collegial culture, she declared, “even without that, annually, we get just the teaching staff and the pastors together and we have a nice meal and talk.”

Describing the collegial association and camaraderie that staff enjoyed at School D, Teacher K shared, “Our staff likes life. I never worked with a staff that we just click.” Chair T, a successful and experienced businessman and long-functioning school board chair of the school, stated his strong belief that “management and philosophy come from top down, and not bottom up.” However, the narratives revealed he was

clearly out- numbered by the other participants, who overwhelmingly felt that the principal's collegial and cooperative approach fostered greater positivity in the school environment.

Both of the principals who considered themselves new to their schools shared the view of initiating collegiality and teamwork with staff from the onset of one's tenure, which was important before making any changes. Demonstrating her commitment to treating staff as partners, Principal A shared her commitment to maintaining the school value of "everybody working together toward a common goal." The other principal, Principal E, acknowledged, "I think when staff are able to support each other that helps a positive atmosphere because teachers feel like they're in an environment where they are accepted as they go about their jobs." With regard to starting his leadership tenure at the school, Principal E shared his introduction to the staff.

I'm not here to change everything. Some things may change. But you're the biggest influence to me. One of the things I need to know is the kind of things that have been going on here, your traditions, your events, your, whatever, that are working, just let me know, so I know how to fit it in. I didn't come in with pre- conceived ideas of what we're going to do.

Teacher S corroborated the principal's claim to include "staff first," by affirming,

We've had him for just not even a year, and so far he's been great. He has years of experience and he'll say, this is going on and back at the other school a similar thing happened and this is the way we dealt with it.

The teacher expressed with assurance,

It was nice to have that confidence. He is a teacher's principal. He is there for us any time we need it and he's never given us any reason to fear him in any way. He doesn't teach, but, he's more of a fellow teacher to us, and that means a lot, very positive.

## **Servant Leadership**

The principals in the study cultivated and maintained their commitment to the school value of servant-leadership. According to Greenleaf (2002), servant-leadership is defined as when the leader is seen as “servant first.” From Principal L’s perspective, this meant recognizing that “it is God’s school and being a willing servant and a willing listener, co-captaining with Him.” Being committed to the value of servant-leadership, Principal A described her leadership style as “not a top-down leader, at all, but much more of a servant-leader, wanting to work side by side.” Principal B’s commitment to servant-leadership was evidenced in actions of longsuffering. As she described the parents’ view of her she stated: “They see that I’m longsuffering, that I’ll work with their children individually.” She added, “They also know I have nothing but concern for their child or their children.”

Committed to the value of servant-leadership, all four principals were intentional in creating an environment that sought to implement the principle of others first, implementing a similar program Teacher W described as “each one being responsible for doing community service and training students to go out to the community to serve.”

## **Reflective Leadership**

While the principals in this study clearly embraced the complexities and multifaceted responsibilities of their role as Adventist K-12 administrators and even as full-time principal-teacher, they recognized the value of and were committed to being reflective leaders. In this context, being a reflective leader meant taking time to review and evaluate their leadership and what has been achieved. At each site, the principal

was intentional in cultivating a culture that fostered reflection on the past with the goal to grow and advance maintaining the positive future of the school and also for herself or himself.

As a reflective leader, each of the principals demonstrated commitment to cultivating a culture, described by Principal L as an environment where there is “learning and looking at each year to improve.” This also included reflecting on the personal and professional improvement of faculty and staff. Sharing her personal reflection process, as if in soliloquy, Principal L recounted, “Each year is an improvement—I did this, this year, maybe I shouldn’t do that this year, or that didn’t work so good.” Then the principal indicated that, after review, she would usually incorporate “those things with what parents want and how students can be helped to achieve, and to encourage them.” In addition she stated, “But each year you evaluate yourself, a practice I learned from teaching, therefore, as a principal I do evaluate myself at the end of every year.”

Reflection was an ongoing process for the principals. As Principal A claimed, she always asks the question, “How could we do better?” She also identified wanting to have something different, fresh, and new for students each year. Principal E reflected on a mentoring experience he had with a group of teachers preparing for principalship, and shared his desire to follow through on the dream of a certain retired educator, “to develop an internship” for principals, where “you are paired with people.” Reflectively, he concluded, “I can’t think of anything better for somebody who is going to be a principal in one of our schools.”

## Summary

This chapter identified the common school values that influenced the principals' and key stakeholders' commitment and behavior in cultivating and maintaining a positive school culture in the four Adventist K-12 schools. The stories told by the participants identified a commitment to ensuring that a positive culture was maintained in every aspect of the school. Starting from the outside, a well-kept physical plant presented a welcoming and inviting ambience, with a personal touch, and displayed cleanliness and order as one entered the facility.

Principals and key stakeholders were equally intentional and committed to conveying that people are valued. Therefore, they focused on cultivating a school climate that was nurturing, open, and served as a safe haven. These and other values, including prioritizing learning in a family-oriented environment, proved to be attractive to parents and encouraged them to bring their children and become involved with the school. The principals themselves maintained involvement in all areas of the school's operation and program. However, showing value and appreciation for key stakeholders, including faculty, staff, school board/chairperson, and pastors, they acknowledged the skills they brought to the arena and developed a collegial team approach, based on trust and respect for one another.

In conclusion, the principals' demonstration of commitment to the values of servant-leadership and being reflective leaders was not only to emphasize the principals' positive leader influence in cultivating and maintaining a positive school culture, but these values also demonstrated personal qualities that guided the principals' leadership.



## CHAPTER 6

### INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

#### **Introduction**

As indicated earlier, interpersonal communication emerged as one of the four major themes in cultivating and maintaining a positive school culture. Using the definition of interpersonal communication as face-to-face interaction between two or more persons, the stories in this chapter describe how the principals in this study influenced and fostered interpersonal communication among the stakeholders, school board and/or chair, faculty, staff, students, parents, and church constituents.

According to Principal B, “that communication line” is the “Numero Uno” practice to which the principals were committed in their leadership. This chapter describes with whom and how the principals and key stakeholders used communication to cultivate and maintain a positive school culture. The following subtopic themes are explored to capture the ways principals and key stakeholders describe the practice and effect of interpersonal communication in the schools studied: (a) communication is key, and (b) clear expectations of conduct. The first subtopic, communication is key, focuses on how the principals articulated their commitment to facilitating communication with school, home, and church constituents to cultivate and maintain a positive school culture.

## **Communication Is Key**

With communication being a way to send or receive verbal or nonverbal messages during interaction with others (Buck & VanLear, 2002; Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2013), the interviewed participants noted communication was ongoing in their schools. The principals, teachers, and staff members talked and listened to each other and interfaced with the students on a daily basis. This ongoing, interpersonal communication among principals, faculty and staff, and teachers and students was evident at each of the school sites. I witnessed teachers talking, laughing, and networking with each other and with students and parents in the halls, in classrooms, and in dialogue with the principal throughout the day. Students also communicated with one another and with their teachers in class and at play. In this section, emphasis is given to open communication, which is defined as everyone feeling safe to be honest and uninhibited in speaking the positive or negative to one another, in a respectful manner.

The principals and teachers were committed to cultivating a culture of ongoing, open communication in the school environment. Principal B was consistent in her commitment to communication being the key to maintaining a positive school culture, as she assertively stated, “Communication lines have to be constantly open.” This principal was committed to availing herself and encouraging faculty, staff, students, and parents to “come and talk.” Principal A expressed a commitment to fostering interpersonal communication by stating, “I try to include staff in as much as I possibly can and we talk about everything.” Teacher K confirmed that Principal L maintained frequent communication with faculty and staff when she shared, “Our principal always talks with us.”

The interviewees clearly conveyed the principals were strongly committed to cultivating a culture that valued open and ongoing communication demonstrated not only school personnel and stakeholders, but constituency church members. Principal A, acknowledging her role as leader, emphasized, “One thing you just have to do is communicate, communicate, communicate, and over-communicate, even though it is very frustrating sometimes.” Principal A was also intentional in keeping everyone informed. She shared that in preparation “to start a Mini iPad program the next year, we have planned an informational meeting and all the parents and church members are invited to come in and learn about it and bring their questions.”

The participants concurred that “communication is key” in cultivating and maintaining a positive school culture. Therefore, it was noted that each school principal encouraged open communication for all, in all situations, and primarily among principals and key stakeholders in the schools, and with constituency church members. Teachers confirmed there was open interpersonal conversation with their principal, in situations from the start of the day at morning worship, staff meetings, and on an individual basis. Teacher W shared that “the principal fostered a culture where faculty and students were encouraged to speak freely.” Principal B emphasized that “openness and being able to receive information and give information” were key “to take away strife and diffuse negativity.”

Underscoring the importance of open interpersonal communication in resolving issues with parents, Chair P shared his point of view that “listening is the biggest part.” He added, “First and foremost, the door needs to be open, your ears need to be open, and your heart needs to be open.” This chair also stressed the importance of

confidentiality when dealing with sensitive issues. He admonished, “Those are always to be done in strict confidence, without a doubt, names are not discussed, only the circumstances.” As the new principal to the school and community, Principal E demonstrated high value for communication with staff. Referring to a situation that had recently been brought to his attention by a parent, he explained his protocol as talking first with staff, then to parents, and the constituency church members. He advocated, “I think the best thing to do is simply to be available and open to ideas and suggestions and hopefully they can reciprocate.”

Teacher K stated that maintaining a positive school culture involved talking and interacting with one another and with God. Moreover, she articulated, “to keep positive, communication is key,” but hastened to add, “and prayer.” She explained, “Prayer is communication.” To further clarify, the teacher declared, “Basically, it’s communication all across the board, just getting information out there, everywhere.”

In summary, Principal B reaffirmed her conviction and commitment to maintaining open lines of communication in cultivating a positive school culture, by declaring, “The whole success of everything is communication.”

### **Clear Expectations of Conduct**

This subtopic describes how and to whom the school principals and key stakeholders, including in some instances students and parents, communicated and embraced the expectations of their roles to cultivate and maintain a positive school culture. Having acknowledged their strong commitment to fostering and maintaining “open communication lines” within the school environment, this section describes how principals and stakeholders fostered interpersonal communication under the following

subtopics: (a) promoting the schools positively, (b) maintaining the schools' positive reputation, (c) demonstrating accountability, (d) articulating students' and parents' behavior expectations, and (e) modeling.

### Promoting the School Positively

Recognizing they represented the faces and voices of the schools with which they were affiliated, the principals, teachers, and board chairpersons acknowledged the roles and embraced the responsibility. As Principal L stated, "to promote the school in a positive light." This section details how each of the schools' stakeholder groups, including students and parents, promoted their schools positively and demonstrated commitment to interpersonal communication in cultivating and maintaining a positive school culture in the selected Adventist K-12 schools.

### **Principals Promote the School Positively**

It was obvious the principals were actively involved in the internal and external promotion of their schools, meaning making their presence felt and presenting the positive qualities of the school. Principal L described the consensus of the principals and key stakeholders, "It takes a positive principal to influence a positive school." Principals took full responsibility for creating "positivity in the environment," by showcasing, first and foremost, a pleasant and well-structured interior.

At each site, structure was evident in the systematic and orderly way things were done as well as in the overall organized appearance the halls and classrooms presented.

One of the consistent practices referenced by the principals in promoting the school positively was the visibility of the principal and involvement of other

stakeholders to showcase and inform the church constituents about what was happening at the school—a responsibility Principal B described saying, “It’s like politics, always shaking hands and kissing babies.”

The research substantiated that the principals were consistently engaged in promoting the positive features of their schools. They modeled positivity by their enthusiastic involvement, confident talk, and positive attitude and efforts to create inclusive school environments. Principal L identified that “just by being positive in the way you talk and showing the school in a positive light” was how she modeled and influenced stakeholders to promote the school positively. In describing Principal A’s involvement in promoting School B positively, Chairman J stated, “She is very involved. She has a large influence and makes her presence known.” He added, “She preaches at the church and she’s good at it.”

The principal at each of the schools demonstrated commitment to maintaining interpersonal communication to the constituent member churches, by routinely showcasing and sharing information about the school.

### **Faculty and Staff Promote the School Positively**

Faculty and staff demonstrated commitment to fostering interpersonal communication, as they worked closely with the principals to cultivate a positive school culture. From their specific scope of duties, teachers and staff members planned a variety of ways to demonstrate positive promotion of theirs and the students’ skills. The four teachers mentioned classroom conduct and achievement as areas they routinely focused on for the positive promotion of their schools. Additionally, they identified the same two

areas that allowed their students to showcase the school's strengths and their own talents within the school, to constituent and non-constituent churches, and to the wider community.

The faculty and staff also promoted the school positively by demonstrating their professional best in working with and interacting with students and their parents. Teachers promoted the schools positively through customer-service evidenced by the teachers' well-organized, welcoming classrooms, good teacher-student rapport, and as the teachers identified, keeping parents informed about what was happening in the classroom. Teacher M shared, "We deal very closely with home every week as the kids take home folders with graded work and notes and announcements from the classroom and principal."

The staff at most of the schools primarily consisted of two individuals, a secretary or administrative assistant and a janitor or custodian, based on the school size. The interview participants also made special reference to how the ancillary staff showed the school in a positive light. Teacher K pointed out, "Our secretary just restarted the weekly fact sheet," which, the teacher explained, "has things that are happening now, and maybe next month, including all the achievements, a little blurb from each class about what they're learning." The teacher viewed this initiative as promoting the school positively when she shared, "Because it will go home to parents, and the parents are going to be excited about that."

### **School Board Promotes the School Positively**

From the perspective of the school board chairs, promoting the school positively

was paramount in exhibiting commitment to communication in cultivating and maintaining a positive school culture. Chair T emphasized, “The leaders, whether it be the principal, the board, whoever it is, and in leadership roles need to exhibit themselves and show a positive attitude.” Personalizing the example to clarify his views of the leaders modeling a positive attitude, the chair related the following scenario.

As a chairman of the board, if I drive up in my vehicle, and it’s falling apart, and I open the doors and it’s full of trash and so forth, and I’m disheveled, that is not a positive example for the students. But the reverse of it, if I drive up in a clean, nice vehicle, and it’s well cared for I present a nice persona. I’m pleasant with the students. I speak to them. I think it does make a difference.

Chair J concurred that the school culture is a reflection of the leaders. He was deliberate to clarify leaders as “any of the leaders, for that matter.” Furthermore, he stated, “I think it takes leadership from the teachers, a can-do-type of attitude.” Being mindful to include himself as one of the leaders, he added, “and we give it to God and ask for His leading.” The chair also articulated commitment to positive promotion and stated, “I think it takes a positive person, first of all. If you are a positive person you are going to emulate that, and negative people emulate negativity.” In articulating his views about promoting the school positively in the hiring process, Chair J stated, “Qualities, more than credentials of teachers and principals, should be considered, in terms of looking for a great leader.” Acknowledging the importance of leadership core values, he declared, “A great principal is great because that’s what they are.”

Chair G added his commitment to promoting the high quality of Adventist education and affirmed,

I think the Adventist church does very well in terms of providing solid Christian education for boys and girls. We don’t see a lot of increase in enrollment in our



schools, though, in my opinion, it is the best quality educational system to be found anywhere in the world.

This chair, similar to his colleagues, communicated a sense of pride in reflecting on their affiliation with the respective schools. Therefore, in their role as the spokesperson of the school board, the chairs promoted the schools positively to maintain a positive culture. They fostered collaborative relationships with the principal and staff, and provided support by speaking favorably about the school to the constituents.

### **Students and Parents Promote the School Positively**

Students and parents played a major role in the positive promotion of the school. Stories from all of the schools have conveyed that the programs and activities planned had the unspoken objective of benefiting and involving students and parents to gain their support.

As the participants shared, students were very involved and instrumental in promoting their schools positively in their community. Several examples were cited, including students representing their school in the Memorial Day Parade and participation in different forms of community service. Teacher W shared that an integral function of the Adventist school culture was the “training of students to be responsible and involving students towards a goal of service.” Chairman P acknowledged the invaluable contribution of students in the positive promotion of the school with this comment,

Well, as I see it the school adds immeasurable qualities to the overall church experience through the young people and their talents, musically, and in speaking environments, where we have them sometimes become young preachers. The largest focus in our school is the music program, which has just made a lot of impact on our community. We have been fortunate to have some of our kids stay in the area, who,

have gone through school. Our head organist went to this school. We were privileged to have a former student, a very well-known violinist, who now travels all over the world.

Two areas identified by the participants, where parents positively promoted the school and made significant contribution to cultivating and maintaining a positive school culture, included involvement in the Home and School Association and Alumni Association. Research showed that while all of the schools had a functioning Home and School, only one principal shared about an active and effective Alumni Association. According to Principal B,

We have a very strong alumni association. Mrs. X has been our president for the last four years and she does more than just talk. She does things for the students. She takes them on mission trips and sometimes pays for some of them when she has the money to do that.

Chair T also shared about parents' positive promotion by describing the work of the active Home and School at School D. He described how the leader and his wife involved church members and parents in promoting the school through *the fruit program*. The chair highlighted how the parents' initiative and positive promotion had been a huge benefit to the school. He stated, "Over the years it has enabled the school to do things and have things the church couldn't afford. So it made a huge difference."

### Maintaining the Positive Reputation of the School

In describing positive school culture, the interview participants spoke unreservedly about the good reputation of their schools. This sub-theme identifies the contribution and/or the role of principals, faculty and staff, and school board chairs in maintaining the positive reputation of the schools. The participants agreed that collaboration and communication with one another and with God were critical in maintaining the positive reputation of the schools.

Principals and board chairs articulated expectation for teachers' involvement in maintaining the positive reputation of the school. According to Principal L, "I think the positiveness has to come from the teacher and the leader." Chair J concurred with the view that not only the principal, but it takes a positive and proactive leadership from "any of the leaders, teachers."

### **Principals Maintained the Positive Reputation**

Principal E shared that his school "had a good reputation," which he respectfully credited to his predecessor. However, he validated his claim with his personal experience and shared, "When they asked me to come, I checked it out and it did have a very good reputation for basically everything." He further identified the four areas that defined the school's good reputation as "the students, staff interaction, and church and community support."

Interviews also revealed the principals maintained the positive reputation by ongoing communication with their faculty, staff, and students and involvement of parents and constituency churches. This was done, internally, at regularly scheduled faculty and staff meetings and student assemblies, and also at specially scheduled times with the school board, parents, and constituent church members. In fostering interpersonal communication with the stakeholders and constituents, Teacher W pointed out that the principals ensured everyone knew the vision, encouraged involvement, and developed rapport with the school, home, and church, to nurture and maintain the family-oriented environment that defined the school's positive reputation.

### **Teachers Maintained the Positive Reputation**

As previously articulated, teachers valued that schools were best known for the sense of family that was cultivated. As Teacher W described, it is a place where “parents were comfortable when their children are at school because they know the teachers have the children’s interest at heart.” Teacher M, acknowledging the “good reputation for having a family atmosphere” at School B, also concurred with the perception of other teachers in the study that cultivating a friendly approach with parents and nurturing a happy atmosphere for the students were some best practices used to maintain the school’s positive reputation.

### **Chairpersons Maintained Positive Reputation**

School board chairpersons were committed to and took great interest in ensuring that the good reputation of their schools was maintained. They were involved and provided support wherever there was a need. Chair P accepted responsibility for “doing whatever we need to do to make the cultural atmosphere better.” The board chairs identified working closely with the principals, being involved, and being present to give support at special school programs and events as some of the ways they contributed to maintaining the positive reputation of the schools. Chairman T identified that he was passionate about seeing the school “always trying to set standards that are high and developing students who are very involved with God in their personal lives.”

Summarizing the perspectives of his colleagues regarding their role and contribution in maintaining the positive reputation of the schools, Chair J stated, “As a

board it is important to keep fostering those positive things and maybe see how we can improve them.”

### Demonstrating Accountability

Positive school culture was cultivated and maintained when there was commitment to accountability for expectations. The participants described how they demonstrated responsibility, in their specific roles, for achieving and communicating established expectations and cultivating and maintaining a positive culture at their specific schools.

### **Principals' Accountability**

The principals described accountability as “doing their best and giving their best” to cultivate a positive school and ensure that established standards and goals were articulated and achieved. Principal E described his perspective of accountability by acknowledging, “My duty is to do my best that I can get the best out of everybody.”

In this study, three of the principals were full-time administrators of either an Adventist elementary (K-8) or secondary (K-12) school and were accountable for similar expectations. In the case of Principal L, a principal-teacher, her function required accountability for the dual roles, as full-time principal and full-time teacher.

All of the principals accepted accountability for the complex roles that fell under their leadership of the schools. Therefore, attention was focused on fostering interpersonal communication and involvement among all stakeholders and the two significant entities, the home and church. Interviewees also indicated the principals partnered with faculty and board to ensure the students and teachers were accountable in

adhering to the established principles of conduct and meeting the standards of achievement.

Principals at each site embraced accountability for this aspect of their role by visiting the churches and getting to know the extended school family. As Principal L shared, “We have several churches that are represented in our school, but [Name of Church] is the only constituent church, so we go and visit. The children love when they see their teacher at church interacting with and getting to know families.” She added, “You get to know your students and know their parents and it plays such a big part in cultivating a positive culture in the school.”

### **Faculty and Staff Accountability**

The four participating teachers communicated that their commitment to preparing students to be responsible in academic and social skills was a deliberate effort to demonstrate accountability to cultivate and maintain a positive school culture. Teacher S proudly stated, “We do a good job with what we have to do with our kids,” and highlighted the tradition of students’ success and advanced achievement when they matriculated to high school.

According to Teacher W, who functioned as a lead teacher and peer mentor in her school, “Accountability starts with everyone knowing the vision and the direction the principal wants to take the school.” Identifying the accountability of the teaching staff in this expectation, she explained, “Teachers knowing the vision means they have to believe the vision and carry it through.”

Faculty and staff involvement was an essential expectation of accountability of the school leaders. Hence, a critical area of accountability that showed faculty and staff

involvement was in carrying out duties delegated by the principal. Teacher W shared that the principal delegated “different tasks to different teachers based on one’s area of strength and even other staff members were given assignments to carry out and demonstrate accountability.”

In general, the teachers in the study understood and accepted accountability for their responsibilities for carrying out the school’s vision and expectations that encompassed their role for meeting the learning and emotional needs of their students.

### **School Board Chairpersons’ Accountability**

The four school board chairs demonstrated accountability by fostering interpersonal communication with and providing conscientious support to school personnel by their involvement in the schools. Chair G recognized that his role as chairman of the board provided a platform to shed a wide sphere of influence in the school community. He acknowledged, “As chairman of the board, I work very closely with the staff, with the principal; I work very closely with the pastors, and with the school board members, in giving direction to the future of the school.” He considered it a privilege to “work with the school and the constituency of the school on a regular basis,” and used it as an “opportunity to get to know people” and network in the community.

Chair T was committed to accountability for the leadership expectations that accompanied his role as school board chairperson. Being committed to setting high standards for communication within the school, the experienced leader worked closely with his board and the principals to demonstrate his philosophy of being “proactive rather than reactive.” During his 30-year tenure in the position at the same school, the

chair ensured the building was always well maintained and respected by everyone.

The board chairs were experienced administrators and leaders in their regular work arenas, as well as in their churches. Therefore, each one demonstrated strong leadership of the school board and high interest in the success of the school. Chair P's comment best captured the high level of dedication and accountability demonstrated by the chairs in his acknowledgment that "I wouldn't take the position unless I had at least a two-year term, cause I didn't think that anything could be accomplished in one year." In addition to being committed to cultivating and maintaining a positive school culture, he expressed accountability to "be supportive in everything that is done."

### **Total Involvement**

Positive school culture was cultivated and maintained by everybody working together and involved in the school. The 12 interviewed participants indicated that total involvement was the ideal goal of communicating clear expectations to everyone, including stakeholders and the constituent church members, for the shared vision and in maintaining the positive reputation of the school. It was the consensus of the interview participants, principals, teachers, and board chairs that a positive school culture resulted from total involvement. The board chairs concurred that maintaining a positive outlook of the school necessitated teamwork. As Chair T described,

It takes everybody to be involved. It takes the involvement of not only the staff, and the parents, but the entire church needs to be involved and supportive of the school. If the staff and the student population hear criticism and bad mouthing and so on and so forth it definitely affects the overall.

Chair J identified the schools' intentionality in fostering total involvement and interpersonal communication by organizing programs and events that "draw the church in, draw the parents in with their kids, and so the parents get to know their kids'



friends.” The teachers also highlighted the importance of getting everyone involved. Teacher W pointed out when everyone, “the home, the school, and the church members were on board with the vision, it helped to create a supportive school culture, where students, parents and school work together.” Teacher M also added that her principal conducted “teambuilding activities, and has done an excellent job of making sure that the church and the school stay very well and closely connected.”

Overall, the stories conveyed commitment to cultivating a school environment where total involvement and interpersonal communication were maintained. The principals and key stakeholders planned purposely to include, involve, and foster communication with the home and constituency church members, being the most important affiliates of the school.

#### Articulating Students’ and Parents’ Behavior Expectations

From the interviews, positive school culture was cultivated and maintained when clear expectations of conduct were communicated and embraced. With students and parents being at the heart of the schools, they were an integral part of the day-to-day function of the schools in this study. Students and parents were the central focus of every plan and action of the principals, teachers, and school board chairs.

While the participants identified that the student population at each school was mainly Adventist, the families represented were also of diverse backgrounds, ranging from different nationality, color, and ethnic origin, to economic status and learning ability. Therefore, in an effort to foster a culture of unity and to ensure “all get equal treatment,” the principals and the key stakeholders provided clear guidelines for the behavior and discipline process at the respective schools. Yet, as

some interviews implied, ultimately “it is the leader who sets the tone of the school environment” by articulating the expected standards of department. Chair T remarked, “The principal has a huge job in setting the tone of the school. Not just for the staff, but for the students as well.”

This section highlights ways the principals and teachers communicated, guided, and modeled behavior and discipline expectations and influenced students and parents to embrace and demonstrate appropriate responses for maintaining a positive school culture. The subtopics covered are: (a) behavior expectations, (b) discipline, and (c) handling discipline issues with students.

### **Behavior Expectations**

The principals worked closely with staff members to ensure expectations were consistent and clear to everyone. According to Teacher S, “culture has the biggest influence on behavior.” While this was also the sentiment of the three other teachers and two of the chairs, three of the four principals and the other two board chairs shared the conviction as Chair P, “It’s the principal’s leadership.” Principal B, embracing her role in totality, expressed there is no distinction, “The principal and school culture, it’s the same thing to me.” She stated, “I’m setting the culture and the principal sets the behavior expectations for the kids.” Principal A also assumed full accountability to lead the behavior culture and shared, “It starts with my behavior being above the line. So, I have to lead it.”

The principals and teachers confirmed that “staff spent time talking about behavior that they wanted to see improve and to establish a common a goal.” Three of the four teachers interviewed mentioned that the principal talked with the students about

what was the expectation for deportment, including “behavior, dress code, and good manners.”

At each school, behavior expectations were public knowledge. Rules and behavior protocol were posted in classrooms, and were creatively incorporated on hallway bulletin boards, in the gymnasiums, on the school’s website, in other places in the buildings and even outside of the school. One of the schools displayed a powerful behavior statement that no one entering the school could miss. The boldly printed red octagon sign read, “Drug-Free School Zone.” Other messages conveyed the expectation for student conduct included, “All in for Responsibility,” “Because nice matters,” and “What the world sees you are, they consider Christ to be,” to name a few.

The prominence placed on the positive verbal and non-verbal messages demonstrated the principals’ and teachers’ commitment to cultivating a culture that fostered a specific kind of interpersonal communication and behavior in the schools. Principal A emphasized, “Above-the-line behavior and below-the-line behavior,” which highlighted acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the school. “These behaviors were listed on a behavior chart in each classroom and on the halls of the school. Above-the- line behavior included actions that portrayed the principle of Ephesians 4:32, “Be kind one to another” and showing “respect, responsibility, love, dignity, safety and courage.” Below-the-line behaviors were described as “anything that is hurtful to others,” and included, bullying, disrespect, words that hurt, pushing, unkindness, fighting, bad language, and excluding.”

Principal L shared her commitment to cultivating good student behavior by instilling strategies to foster respect and help students to develop pride in their school.

Declaring “I highly believe in respect,” she stated, “I train my students when they address their teachers to say yes ma’am and no ma’am, yes sir, no sir, or whatever is their teacher’s name.” The principal elaborated, “That was something that hadn’t been happening.” Similar to two of the other participating schools, School A and B, there was a uniform dress code at School D. However, about School D, Principal L added, “We had a dress code, but nothing that said our name and represented us when we would go out.” Principal B also shared having students wear uniforms was one of the “things we try to do to make the kids proud of their school and cultivate a positive school culture.”

## **Discipline**

Discipline emerged as one of the overarching themes and a responsibility of high priority for the principals and key stakeholders in this study. Based on the discipline scenarios described, discipline was defined as part of the ongoing molding of character and training of students for the purpose of correcting and guiding their mental, spiritual, social, spiritual, and physical behavior choices. It was evidenced in the interviews and from observations that the matter of discipline was part of the daily job responsibility of the principal and teachers. Teachers dealt with the general issues students and parents encountered at the classroom level, and as Teacher S put it, “The classroom is where things happen,” pointing out the principal’s input was sought for handling more difficult situations.

## **Handling Discipline Issues With Students**

The board chairs in the study were unanimous in their vote of confidence for the

way their individual principal handled discipline to maintain a positive school culture. According to Chair J, “The principal can be counted on to handle issues appropriately.” However, Chair P felt strongly that first and foremost clear hierarchical leadership protocols needed to be established, recognizing people “pretty much took their cues from them [the leaders].” Describing what he called “the pecking order,” he declared, “It’s no different than children to their parents, children to their teachers, and adult to adult.”

Therefore, in handling disciplinary matters with students, interviews revealed the participants, for the most part, communicated commitment to openness, fairness, and consistency as essential values in the discipline process. The principals and most participants agreed that cultivating these values made a huge difference in influencing the social and academic behavior of students, as well as influencing the positive response of parents in bringing about resolution to difficult issues.

Principal B, a veteran principal, who served at the same Adventist school for over 40 years, affirmed, “Open communication really does take away a lot of strife.” She was resolute in her commitment to justice and “having the students see fairness” in the way she handled both student and teacher concerns. Similar to her colleague, Principal L expressed commitment to fairness in the discipline process and said that expectations were best accomplished by “handling disagreements in a firm, fair and loving manner.” She stated,

Kids know when you’re not fair and they know when you’re fair with them. And if you’re fair with them you can discipline them all day long in fairness, and they’ll say, you’re right, Miss L. You’re right. But you have to be loving and fair when you do your discipline because they do pick up on that.

According to Principal B, “When they don’t see the fairness, that’s when they adopt an attitude that is hard to erase.”

## Modeling

A mentoring discipline model was the typical approach taken by each of the principals. Just as the transcriptions revealed, I was able to observe how each principal spent time talking, listening, and in one situation praying with the students, in their attempt to turn negative situations around. Principal B's anecdote confirmed the classic example of principal and student interaction.

This morning I had to speak to the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade class, because they were at odds with each other. So we talked, and I like the fact that after we talked, they expressed the facts about what they didn't like about what was going on in a respectful manner. I also liked the fact that we had prayer and they were able to hold each other's hands.

Principal A described how the bullying situation at her school was significantly curbed or resolved using the strategy of talking and praying with students, along with the concept of yearly spiritual themes, as previously mentioned, to serve as the school's "foundation and filter" for all activities and behavior. The principal shared, "The school did a bully-free program, which entailed teaching and modeling good things for kids to know in terms of manners, saying please and thank you, and being quiet in the hallways." Principal A shared,

I try to live what it is we are asking them to do. My behavior certainly had better be above the line, if I'm expecting you to do it. So, it has to start with me; I have to sell it to the staff, and they have to do it as well.

She interjected that the above-the-line and below-the-line behaviors also gave the staff "a common language to kind of talk about what we expect in the building."

Principal L described another discipline strategy used to help students to be disciplined and motivated towards academic achievement. She shared, "We have a demerit system, and we stick to it. The children know what constitutes a demerit

because I go over it with them.” The principal also indicated, “We also have citizenship awards,” but hastened to tell how she handled discipline situations that come for her intervention:

When children have to come to my office for whatever they have done, I sit with them and try to get them to open up to me. Then we talk about it and if it’s severe enough that I might have suspended them, I let them know we all make mistakes, including me. So, you are not hopeless!

This empathetic principal further pointed out that if the incident involved two or more students “at odds with each other,” she usually went through the same protocol, “but also taught the students ways to resolve their conflicts without fighting and arguing by challenging them to think and talk of other ways, to find resolution.” To end a discipline session with two or more students, Principal L stated, “I made them pray for one another.”

### **Summary**

In summary, the principals in the Adventist schools in this study were committed to ensuring that clear expectations were articulated to guide stakeholders, including students and parents, in their overall conduct in the school. Principals indicated their commitment to cultivating interpersonal communication in an open, fair, respectful, and loving manner, including practicing listening, talking, and praying as vital intervention steps in the disciplinary process.

This mentoring discipline model was the approach fostered at each of the schools to encourage students in good behavior choices and conduct, as well as to motivate them towards academic achievement. Expectations of conduct were clearly communicated and facilitated appropriate protocol for handling discipline matters at the classroom level as

well as in general. In addition, principals and teachers maintained a positive school culture by modeling the conduct they wanted to see.



## CHAPTER 7

### THE IMPORTANCE OF PRINCIPAL RELATIONSHIPS

#### **Introduction**

In perusing the interview transcriptions, it was noted that in maintaining a positive school culture, the principals placed paramount importance and were deliberate in cultivating and nurturing relationships within the schools. This chapter highlights with whom and how the principals developed and nurtured relationships among school stakeholders and church constituents to cultivate and maintain a positive school culture. The chapter describes how the principals maintained relationships with five groups of key stakeholders and constituents affiliated with the schools, namely: (a) relationships with school board and chairperson, (b) relationships with faculty and staff, (c) relationships with students, (d) relationships with parents, and (e) relationships with church and pastors.

#### **Relationships With School Board and Chair**

Positive school culture was maintained through commitment to fostering a reciprocal, supportive relationship between principal and school board. This section focuses on how the principals cultivated and maintained their relationships with their school boards, and specifically with the board chair. The study revealed that the board chairs, as spokespersons for the boards, were the sole representatives with

whom the principals interacted and worked closely. The school board chairs at the four schools were very involved with the schools. The importance of the principals' relationships with the school board and/or chair is described under three major subthemes: (a) board chair's supportive relationships, (b) board chair's role and influence in fostering relationships, and (c) principal's attitude in building relationships with board and chairs.

### Board Chairs' Supportive Relationships

Support was a term frequently used by all of the participants to describe a positive relationship within the schools. However, support was the word the principals and school board chairs used most often to describe the interaction that these leaders shared. As Principal L asserted, "I have a school board that supports me. I can honestly say that since I set foot in this school I have had that support." Principal M stated, "My board is very supportive. But they do not like surprises."

It was interesting to observe that while the other two principals in the study did not share specific comments about their relationship with the board or chair, the respective chairs did mention and described the supportive working relationship they provided their principals. Chair P, who believed he should be available and visible without "getting involved in the nitty-gritties," candidly stated, "We do not micromanage the school. Our effort, my effort, has always been hands off as much as possible, but supportive in everything." Identifying his ability and availability to give support, Chair P described himself:

I truly feel that for me, I think I'm a good listener, and a pretty good communicator in environments where I need to be pulled in on. And those are rare, but they have occurred. We generally get things done. And we understand things

better. I may have listened to a person, shared a problem with finances that the principal's heard, but I can bring a slightly different perspective.

Chair J, expressing admiration for Principal B's leadership and relationship with the school board, affirmed,

She has been a really good principal, and I have enjoyed working with her. I have been on the school board for a couple years, but wasn't chair until a little over a year. So, she is the only principal that I have known since being on the board.

He hastened to say, "I've seen two other principals, both of them were very good, but the current principal has a large influence."

Chair P made the claim that leadership stability is important in building school relationships when he stated, "I believe it was about close to 15, maybe close to 18 years of only two principals and that has helped. From year to year we know where we were going." Embracing his role to support and help the principals to have a good experience leading the school, the chair stated emphatically,

I think, clearly, without a doubt in my mind, it is support of the principal's programs to see that through. If he doesn't or she doesn't have support in that area, I think it just languishes, it may work, but it doesn't flourish.

In general, the research showed in all four cases that the boards, primarily the chairs, had a close working relationship with the principals and staff. Chair G described being supportive by stating, "As a chairman of the board, I work very closely with the staff and with the principal." Chair T also avowed, "I try to be positive and supportive." However, Chair T further elaborated about the unique board-staff relationship that was cultivated at School D. He shared, "The relationship between board and staff is very, very friendly. I don't think that the staff is intimidated by the board or put off to let us know what their needs and concerns are." As a matter of fact, he clarified by adding, "At

board meetings most of the time, we ask for their involvement, and so we get to know them and they get to know us.”

### Board Chairs’ Role and Influence in Fostering Relationships

In each school, it was evident the board chairs approached this voluntary assignment with a commitment to cultivate a positive school culture. Therefore, each identified and embraced their primary role to provide support to the principals and the school. Nonetheless, the chairs were also conscious of their role in influencing the rest of the board to be fully involved in order to help maintain a supportive work relationship and enhance the positive culture of the schools. The research corroborated that the chairs at the different sites carried out their roles in similar, as well as in different ways suited to their school’s specific culture.

On the one hand, it was noted the chairs recognized it made a difference in the relationships among staff when there was a “good staff fit.” Therefore, the chairs worked with their boards to provide the schools with adequate resources, including a quality staff, to support a quality school. Chair T described how the board’s support and intervention to “provide quality teachers” helped turn around the declining situation at School D, and enhanced the total culture of the school. He stated,

At one time the school was down to two teachers, and two or three aides. As the school began to grow, we had problems with staff, because we just didn’t have staff we needed. So we met as a school board, and were committed to providing the staff that was needed to do the job properly. It has made all the difference in the world.

On the other hand, the board chairs sought to develop board and staff morale and shared the common goal of ensuring that all board members “take an interest and were involved” in what is going on at the school. According to Chair T,

I have been critical of board members in the past. I say, how can you make good judgments if you don't have input, if you come and sit on the board, you never come to the school to see what is going on? How can you make accurate assessments?

He added, "We really need knowledgeable people, on the board, who are involved in a day-to-day relationship with what is going on at school. We think the interaction between staff and the board helps tremendously."

Chair P agreed, "We try to be very careful in our makeup of the board. We have had a hard time getting and holding board members." However, sharing a strategy that worked, he disclosed,

But clearly the area that works best to keep board members interested and involved are actually two. 1) Parents obviously have a vested interest. 2) Members who come on and serve who are involved in the church, and/or school in some way, shape, or form, are also very valuable.

The chair was forthright in stating that parents on the board "give a more myopic picture of just what's happening." He shared his view that "they have to be willing to be broad enough in what they are asking for or wanting to see happen."

#### Principal's Attitude in Building Relationships With Board and Chairs

All principals were intentional and dedicated to building relationships with their board chairs and school boards. Describing how they developed relationships with this group of key stakeholders at their respective schools, the four principals agreed they kept the board and chairs informed and involved with everything that was happening at the school. In addition, the principals shared different perspectives of how to interact with their board or the chair.

Principal L described her positive attitude with the board stating,

Mainly with the board, when I give my principal's report, I try to be so positive. To me that's it, you just go in there, you smile, and tell them what God has done, and you try to be always positive. Just look for the good.

Principal B demonstrated her commitment to building relationships with the board by reaching out for the support of all of the key players. She identified that "the biggest thing is the school board chairman, the superintendent, and the pastors." Regarding the pastors she stated, "If it has to do with their parishioners, then they want to know before they get here, we've already talked about it, so it's not a long, drawn-out conversation."

It was noted that the principals tried to develop a support group involving the key partners, namely, board chair, superintendent, and some pastors, to guarantee support and faster action. In order to maintain this exclusive relationship, Principal A and a counterpart, Principal B, shared a similar attitude of "massaging the relationship," which meant these stakeholders received priority treatment from the principals, when it came to reaching out for support in minor or critical situations. According to Principal B, when the need arose, "I do that personal phone call, then they'll come and be very supportive."

It was obvious Principal A and Chair J valued the good working relationship they had developed. Acknowledging the importance of the relationship in their leadership in cultivating and maintaining a positive school culture, the chair shared, "We dealt with a situation. It was not a major one, but a minor situation, and she came right to me, and asked what I thought. We came to a decision and brought it to the board immediately."

Underscoring the importance of consistent school board and principal interaction to strengthen the relationship, Principal L used the imagery of a chain, and

pointed out that “the chain is weak, if you have a school board that is not supportive.” Continuing to make the contrast, the principal similarly stressed the impact of lack of school board support, when she remarked, “You have despondency among the staff, and your staff will want to leave if there is not support, especially if the principal isn’t supported.” To validate her passion and commitment regarding the importance of a supportive board relationship, she shared her experience.

I have seen leadership go, at least eight principals since I have been here. Why? The one thing that stood out was, the church doesn’t support the school. The school board doesn’t support the school. That’s the main thread that I’ve heard. Why are you leaving? They don’t support this school; they are hard to work for.

This scenario and the other stories described in this section validated the principals’ attitude of commitment to the importance of reciprocal and supportive relationships among the principal, school board, and chairperson in order to maintain a positive school culture.

### **Relationships With Faculty and Staff**

Positive school culture was maintained through commitment to collaboration and nurturing a personal interest in relationships with faculty and staff. The statement, “We work well together,” was observed as one of the ways the principals and teachers defined a positive school culture. It was also how they described the working relationship portrayed among co-workers. This sub-section emphasizes the principals’ commitment to the importance of principal and staff relationships and describes how these relationships were cultivated to maintain a positive school culture in the Adventist schools in this study.

As two of the primary areas of the principals’ focus in fostering relationships

with their faculty and staff, at the different school sites, collaboration and interest in personal and social well-being are highlighted. All of the principals endeavored to “work closely with staff members” and made a deliberate effort to include and involve them, primarily faculty, in significant aspects of leadership and decision-making for the schools.

### Collaboration

Collaboration was one of the all-embracing themes used to describe the principals’ commitment to staff interaction and relationships in the school setting. Principal A demonstrated the importance of collaboration in relationship with staff, by stating that collaboration described her “philosophy of leadership,” and the style that guided her decision-making and relationships in the workplace. She affirmed, “I intend to be very collaborative in nature. I-am-not-up-here-telling-you-what-to-do type of leader at all.” She emphasized, “There’s got to be a lot of collaboration bringing the staff together.” As a matter of fact, Principal A described her ideal leadership setting as having “my partners with me.”

Principal A’s collaborative leadership was verified by her co-worker, Teacher M, as having significant influence on the positive culture of the school. She acknowledged that due to her principal’s encouragement, “We have collaboration. Our teachers work really well together, and we have a common goal.” She added that this principal has built collaborative relationships by “having faculty do activities that have brought us closer together.”

Principal E verbalized a similar philosophy of collaboration in describing the importance of the nurturing relationship he fostered with faculty and staff. He explained



that he based his leadership and relationship with coworkers on his “underlying philosophy of cooperating with each other.” He added clarification by sharing, “if I felt there was a need for a change, and I had not been obnoxious to them in how I think things should go, then they are much more willing to be cooperative.” Teacher S expressed appreciation for Principal E’s relational leadership approach by describing his principal this way, “He’s not our boss, but more like a fellow teacher to us.”

The other two principals, Principals M and L, also cultivated a culture of collaboration by building relationships with faculty and staff. Principal B encouraged collaboration with faculty by engaging their specialized skills in various aspects of the instructional and school management support systems, as well as respecting the professional friendships they had developed over many years of working together. Teacher W described the positive relationships that the staff shared at School A by stating, “We are good friends. I have a confidence in my co-workers and Principal B and we can collaborate without feeling intimidated.”

At School D, Principal L also described her commitment to the importance of relationships in her practice of fostering interaction with co-workers and cultivating a culture of collaboration for the overall leadership of the school. She asserted, “I’m not an island. I meet with teachers on a regular basis, to know how they felt and obtained their input, to make decisions together.”

The transcriptions indicated that principals’ valued relationships with faculty and staff focused on cultivating a synergistic work environment where coworkers felt included and comfortable working together. By cultivating an environment where faculty and staff relationships were nurtured through collaboration, the principals demonstrated

commitment not just to getting the job done, but also to maintaining a positive school culture where the personal and social well-being of coworkers mattered.

### Interest in Personal and Social Well-being

Principals collaborated with their faculty and staff to carry out their respective duties in cultivating a positive school culture. The leaders were intentional to cultivate a place where faculty and staff felt supported not only professionally but in their personal and social lives, as well. From the interview narratives it was noted the principals were purposeful in showing interest in the personal and social well-being of their staff.

Some principals were skillful in incorporating designated time for social interaction. Reflecting on her 25 years of experiencing the leadership relationships with previous as well as the current principal at School B, Teacher M shared,

With our current principal you know that she supports you, she is always writing encouraging notes about how she is so thankful for all we do, and just all the team-building activities, just makes for an overall support.

It was significant to note how Principal E, in his relaxed manner, made the environment comfortable for staff by allowing them to relate feely with each other and with him. Teacher S, crediting the positive staff relationship to the principal's supportive leadership influence, stated,

Knowing that he, or she, so to speak, watches out for us, and has our interest at heart, is a big comfort. Mentally they can give you the peace of mind to concentrate on your things at hand that you need to do.

To confirm his appreciation for the positive attitudes and nurturing relationship he was enjoying compared to in the past, Teacher S stated,

I've seen it from both ends of the spectrum, but, of late, we all get along great, personalities jell and blend. We're not all the same personality, but we come together

and we have assets that we can contribute in different ways that add to the strength, and have a positive time.

Teacher W chuckled as she reflected and related about how interest was communicated for the personal and social well-being of faculty and staff at School A. She indicated Principal B did think about her teachers and inspired them. Describing the principal's dictating manner she stated, "This is what we're doing, you need to do it. She comes up with ideas and then she says, good, go, you need to do it." However, recalling the incident, the teacher added, "She made us do a retreat at one of the hotels in a nearby location, where we all stayed, and were going to do scrapbooking." Obviously this experience brought back happy memories, causing the teacher to laughingly reflect, "It was something, but when we went, it was just refreshing to stay in a hotel." Principal B, who affirmed interest in the personal and social lives of her faculty and staff, expressed, "You have to have a personal interest in them and ask, how is it going with you?"

The thick descriptions shared indicate the importance of principals' relationships in collaborating and showing professional and personal interest in faculty and staff. Through these stories, the principals demonstrated commitment to relationships in cultivating and maintaining a positive school culture in the Adventist schools studied.

### **Relationships With Students**

Positive school culture was maintained through commitment to relationships with students that caused them to feel loved, supported, and encouraged in their spirituality, and in general, priority given to their total development. Based on the participants' own words, it was obvious the students were the primary focus in the grand scheme of everything that was done and said at the schools. From the schools' statement

of vision, which stated that the broad goals of the schools identified students as “first.” Principal A stressed, “The students always come first.” In addition, in exploring the research regarding principal and student relationships, it was noted the principals were intentional and demonstrated many ways of building relationships with students. Of utmost priority was meeting the needs of their students’ total development: spiritually, academically, socially, and physically.

One common strategy of principals was to develop rapport to cultivate meaningful relationships with the students. These relationships encompassed providing supportive involvement in their schoolwork and personal issues. According to Principal L, “You have to have that rapport built with your students, and if they know that you truly care about them they will want to do and will work.” She described her relationship with the students by stating, “I love my students. I tell them all the time I love them. I have a passion for these kids and their souls for eternity, I want to see them succeed and I want to see them saved.”

Principal B demonstrated the importance of relationships with students when she showed sensitivity and fairness by putting a student first in dealing with an issue that involved a student and teacher. She shared the following anecdote to describe her deep conviction and commitment to the principle of fairness and impartiality. She shared,

Sometimes the kids will come in an attitude and the teacher will say, but we’re doing history, and I want him to answer the question. And I’ll say, then, you were wrong. You can’t make him respond when he is having a bad day. Sometimes they just want me to agree with them, and I can’t do that. I like them to see fairness all the way around . . . fairness when it comes to teachers, fairness when it comes to students.

In addition to showing sensitivity for the personal issues that students

generally experience, all of the principals acknowledged the importance of, and fostered relationships with, their students in other ways. It was noted that the consistent ways that principals fostered relationships with their students included having an open office door, and being available and accessible to talk, listen, and pray with students, getting to know them by names, and interacting with them at work and at play. As Principal B shared, “I feed them, I try to kid with them, I’ll give them a dollar to go buy a snack, and just talk to them normally.”

On a whole, principals, as well as the teachers and board chairpersons, confirmed that the importance principals placed in building relationships with students influenced cultivating and maintaining a positive school culture. This subsection underscored that in building relationships with students, the principals put the students first. In so doing, the principals were deliberate in meeting their needs to enhance their total development—mental, spiritual, social, and physical—by recognizing them as individuals, and treating them in loving, fair, and nurturing ways.

### **Relationships With Parents**

Positive school culture was maintained as principals’ demonstrated commitment to building relationships with parents and keeping them informed, included, and involved. In addition, at each site, the participants identified that parents had a relationship with staff members. This subsection focuses on how the principals fostered relationships with the parents of their students. Interviews revealed that building relationships with the parents of the students was at the heart of the principals’ planning and management at each of the schools. It was evident the parents of the

students were an integral part of the schools as they were a consistent focus of many major decision-making situations.

The principals in the study valued parents' participation, and designed many creative ways to involve and utilize their skills. The school administrators were very aware that parents also had their expectations of the school. Therefore, the principals made deliberate effort to ensure these paying patrons were kept informed about all that was happening at the school and with their child or children.

One of the primary avenues the principals in this study used to foster relationships with parents was by encouraging their involvement in the schools. The principals welcomed parents in the schools. Principal B stated, "I encourage them to come." Additionally, programs and activities were planned to involve parents either voluntarily or purposefully by requesting their support. At School D, the principal shared about a program instituted to ensure parents' involvement on a regular basis. Principal L stated, "We have mandatory volunteer hours," which, she explained, "have played a big part in bringing parents into the school." She added, "It's been very good."

The principals also empowered parents to lead out in various activities at the school. The research showed each of the schools planned activities that gave opportunity for parents to be involved and participate as a leader in the school. The home and school association was highlighted as the official avenue for influencing parents to engage their leadership and other skills to generate involvement and harness the participation of a larger percentage of parents.

It was identified that all four of the schools had an "active home and school association," but only two of the principals elaborated on the involvement of the home

and school association and described their relationship with the parent leaders. In the case of School A, Principal B was also proud to tell about the contributions of the dynamic alumni association. In telling about how she nurtured relationships with the two parent groups and encouraged their support and positive influence on the school culture, the principal stated:

We have a good home and school department. I try to keep in touch with the leaders, and work closely with them. Sometimes they want things I don't agree with, but hey, I'll go with it, because I want them to know I am following their lead on this. And when I want things, then they will follow my lead.

Principal L shared her perspective and stated, "We have a great home and school association, and they are pretty active in terms of bringing the families together." It was evidenced in both cases that the home and school association leaders were empowered to plan and organize activities to involve and galvanize other parents, as well as fostered relationship-building among the parents, principals, key stakeholders, and other constituents.

Some of the parent-led activities that stimulated and maintained involvement and relationships at the different schools included the annual family breakfast, pie social, and international food fair, which brought together not only parents with school personnel, but also other constituents, including pastors and church members. According to one board chair, "Those are the kinds of things that draw the church in, that draw the parents in, that draw the parents in with their kids, so the parents get to know their kids' friends."

### **Relationships With Church and Pastor**

Positive school culture was maintained through commitment to collaboration with and involvement of constituent church or churches and the pastors. Emphasizing the

importance of fostering relationships with the church and pastor in the benefit of the school, Principal A stated,

I think pastoral and administrative relationship is very important, and we just have to massage that relationship and always keep it strong. If the pastor of a church that is connected to a school is not supportive of that school the school will not grow and if it is not growing it is dying. I really make that a big priority to strengthen that relationship. We need each other.

Sharing similar views, each of the participating schools was deliberate in building relationship with the pastors in an effort to develop a close church and school connection. Principal A and Teacher M confirmed the relationship that School B shared with the church by sharing, “We have the pastors come to school and we put students’ artwork in the church.” The teacher added, “She [Principal A] meets with them every week.” Principal A validated this mutual outcome when she articulated that “collaborating between church and school made a big difference and there have been staff members who have said that this has created a stronger relationship between the church and school.” Conveying a sense of satisfaction, she added, “So that’s a good thing. They’re here and I’m there. We are in both places.”

The principals also confirmed their commitment to the importance of building and maintaining these relationships by actively involving themselves and the school, meaning teachers and students, in the church’s programs and/or with the pastors. In describing their personal involvement in the church, each principal identified various areas where each participated to collaborate and be active in the constituent churches of the schools.

Principal E shared being involved in serving at the church was personally satisfying, but was also of benefit to the school relations. He affirmed, “I like to be



heavily involved in the church and that helps with relationships.” Principal L also viewed active involvement in the church as important to building relationships with constituent church members. She stated, “I try to serve on committees,” and conveyed intentionality in choosing positions where, from her perspective, she was able to receive high visibility and had the opportunity to share about the school.

For Principal B being committed to maintaining good relationships with the 10 constituent churches and their pastors was very important to her leadership. As she described, “You are literally stroking those pastors, because they pay the subsidy to the school, so you have to constantly make sure you are in the good graces of the pastors.” She admitted, “I’m careful what I say to them, and make sure that they know what’s going on in the school, and sometimes I ask for their opinion about different things.”

Chair G, a pastor with first-hand experience of the pastoral role with regard to the school, confirmed the importance of principals’ relationships with the church and pastors in ensuring collaboration and support for influencing the positive culture of the school.

He shared:

When principals are accessible to the pastors, who have a lot of influence in their churches, because the pastor has a very positive feeling or relationship with the principal, then he is going to promote it from the pulpit.

From the lived experiences of the principals in this study it was clear that the schools benefitted significantly as a result of the relationships that were developed and nurtured between the principals and the church and pastors. The next subsection discusses caring and compassionate as well as vulnerable relationships, which emerged as important characteristics in the principals’ relationships with faculty, staff, chairpersons, students and parents.

## **Caring and Compassionate Relationships**

According to the interviewees, positive school culture is maintained when caring and compassionate relationships are cultivated and nurtured. Participants identified that caring and compassionate relationships among staff and toward students and parents were intended by principals to be a normal part of the nurturing culture cultivated. Principal B valued the importance of relationships with students and parents, and was committed to maintaining a positive school culture where students and parents were treated with caring and compassion. Principal B asserted, “You have to show that you care about the students so that they feel comfortable coming and sharing with you, and the parents have to have that feeling that you do care.”

For Principal L, caring about the welfare of families at School D was not an option, as she stated,

We have a lot of students who come from homes with issues. Because we are a voucher school they have come out of the public school system. They come from broken homes where there may be just one parent, and it’s been rough. But, I see the change that being here is making in their lives. I see the change just being in the Christian environment and having teachers that care.

Describing how she showed compassion and cared for the welfare of those students, the principal related, “They just want mothering and a hug. I feed them. I meet their needs.” She interjected,

We have to be like Jesus. We have to meet their needs, and then you can say, okay, it’s time to work now. But if they’re coming to school hungry, I have something in the office, they can come eat, or let’s go to the kitchen; let’s see what we can find.

The principal emphasized caring by adding, “We don’t have a hot lunch program, but I keep snacks. I keep food for them.”

Principal L also demonstrated care and consideration for the teachers who worked closely with the needy students. She conceded the challenges they had to deal with and provided encouragement by describing, “I tell my teachers I know that you get frustrated, but that’s God’s child; just pray for them.”

It was the goal of the participants, including principals, teachers, and chairs, that parents knew “We have your child’s interest at heart,” and “when students left the schools they also knew someone truly cared about them.”

### **Vulnerable in Relationships**

This subsection discusses the vulnerable relationships which emerged from the narratives, and focuses on three key areas: (a) honesty and transparency, (b) struggles, and (c) positive emotions. From the stories told, another evidence of how a positive school culture was maintained was when vulnerable relationships were cultivated and nurtured in the workplace. In demonstrating commitment to the importance of relationships the principals, teachers, and board chairs, in this study, conveyed a healthy sense of vulnerability. In their interaction, they candidly shared imperfections about their schools, their leadership, and themselves.

#### **Honesty and Transparency**

In revealing honesty and transparency, Principal L shared candidly about her leadership insecurity as she disclosed,

Sometimes as principal, at least for me, sometimes I just say, I can do it, until you get to the point . . . I’m going to do it all. I don’t want to share this, or let people feel like I can’t do it. And then I think it’s me, I’m the leader of this school, so if it falls, it’s because of me.

Admitting her weakness, she acknowledged,

But, I have to learn to tell myself, No, you *can* share this responsibility. You can let your constituents know what is happening. Let your board chair know what is happening. So I began, because I was very independent. I didn't want to share the role, just because I want to do it all. I felt more secure in that. But now I'm learning to say, can you do this? Can you help me with this? Why don't you take this over? I'm learning to use the skills of the people around me, and the gifts that God has given them. To say, okay, that's your gift, why don't you take that up? And not be afraid or ashamed to say, I don't know how to do that. Now, I'm like, no, that's your gift, you do it.

Feeling relieved, the principal reiterated, "Not anymore, not anymore." Further review of Principal L's story revealed her telling the parents, "Your experiences will help others." Therefore, once again, being transparent with the parents she passionately encouraged, "Don't, don't be afraid to ask. I had to ask for assistance." She clarified, "Some people say, I don't want to ask the church. I told them, I did, because that's what it's there for, and they helped my children." This principal's vulnerability started out as an area of major challenge in her leadership. However, as her story concluded, the principal attributed aspects of her leadership success to having the freedom to be vulnerable. That emboldened her to be honest and transparent in her relationships and interactions with stakeholders and constituents, including school board, staff, parents, students, pastors and even her superintendent.

Principal L also demonstrated vulnerability to identify with her students. As she put it, "You have to let your students see . . . I've been where you are." To emphasize the message, the principal asked the rhetorical question, "How can I tell my students, you have to have a relationship with God, if I don't have it?" Based on the principle of being a positive role model of honesty and transparency, the administrator shared, "So, it's just like when we were going through bullying at our school, I got up and told my bullying experience to the students, and how it made me feel when I was in school."

With regard to being honest and transparent with the superintendent and other team members, the principal declared,

I go to him whenever I have an issue that I feel I need some guidance on. Definitely, the board chair, he has proved to be a very wonderful person in helping out the school, and I go to him. So, yes, I'm not afraid to go, and I don't take it as a negative reflection on me like I can't handle my job. But you know, we all have to reach out. We are reaching out, and God has placed these people. So, I go to my superintendent if I need guidance. I go to my school board chair if something comes up here, and I talk to the pastor.

This principal also expressed that being vulnerable was part of the success in cultivating a positive culture at her school as she had learned, "Never be afraid to ask for advice and never be ashamed, because there is always someone that one can go to." In addition, she advised, "We can always go to God, and that's where we should go first."

Describing Principal B's commitment to honesty and transparency, Chair G stated, "There is a constant effort to make all aware, and to have transparency." He shared,

She sends out emails on a regular basis to board members to keep them abreast of what is going on in the school. She also will have various programs in the schools, where parents can attend to see what their children are doing. So, from that standpoint, there is a constant effort to make all aware, and to have transparency. When something goes wrong, there may be times when we will have to meet with the parents and say, this is something that has come up, and I want you all to be aware of it. Transparency means a lot.

The transcriptions from School B disclosed in relating a certain situation that took place at the school, Chair J and Teacher M identified how Principal A's vulnerability was tested. From the chair's description, he also demonstrated honesty and transparency in the situation, by prefacing his story with the confession, "This was as much my fault as hers." Continuing the story, he related:

We're trying to develop a Mini iPad program, that we, she and I, neither of us understood the role the church had to play, that we had to clear some things with them first. So, there has been a little bit of flack about that. So, we are working on that. We didn't do that on purpose. We just didn't know. And people got kind of upset. That's probably been the biggest negative thing that I've seen since I've been there.

Chair J further shared, "Now that we know," he and the principal were trying to turn around the situation by following the established protocol, "to be sure the people in the church are okay with what we are doing." He pointed out, "They get the final say, and we will give it to them. That's the way it's always been in our policies of church-school relations, I guess." Validating the principal's motive and focus, the chair added, "So she has been working, and we are working to make that iPad program a good thing, somehow. And if the church doesn't want to move forward with this right now, then we will follow their advice."

Teacher M described her perspective of the scenario by painting a picture of a good thing gone badly, to the extent of displaying strong philosophical and emotional difference regarding an issue. She shared,

Everything was really good, everything was positive and then when they came to the end stages of putting this program together to start next year, there were a few people from the church, from community, some past parents, some present parents who had some concerns. They didn't like the idea or the output of money for that program.

Identifying that the principal had to face and deal with public hostility and criticisms, the teacher described, "She has had to deal with some pretty nasty manipulating and undercurrents, including parents who were screaming down the phone at her." However, the teacher pointed out, "But she will not have any of it. She hung up on people a time or two because they have been out of control." Describing the principal as "a good collaborator and good problem solver, who prays for wisdom" the

teacher stated, “She handled it very well and turned it into a positive.”

Affirming Principal A’s resilience under the pressure of challenges, the value of experience, and lessons learned, Teacher M shared the following observation:

Sometimes it’s done right and sometimes it’s not. You live and learn and you experience, but one thing I will say for her, she is not afraid to take constructive criticism. One thing my father taught me, don’t be afraid to hear constructive criticism and learn from it, don’t take it personally, learn from it, and she is the same way.

### Struggles

Despite knowing their schools were identified as having a positive culture, the participants of this study did not just try to describe their respective schools as a perfect place. On the contrary, it was interesting to observe how someone from each of the schools intimated his/her school “was not perfect,” and referred to the various struggles they encountered.

As Teacher M admitted, “We’re not all perfect. It’s not all pink roses all the time.” At another site, Teacher W confirmed, “There are problems here as with most schools.” Chair T also conceded, “We are not foolproof from environments coming into our schools, but we try to take care of it, and put it in the right perspective as we can.” Still, according to Chair G, “in any given situation, you are going to have your supporters and your detractors. You know you can’t please everybody, but do the best you can.”

Principal B made a personal confession about her salvation as it relates to her role and influence as a school leader, by sharing,

I tried to leave the school once or twice, but I thought about it and stayed, because I know me. I think everything I do is to save me, and in the process of saving me, I can use what I know to save others.

Being vulnerable, Principal B also shared about struggles in her school leadership and relationships in cultivating a positive school culture. She disclosed, “I have the most trouble with not being able to tell a parent what I really want to say.” She elaborated,

I’m telling you, holding my tongue. Sometimes I want to say, that is not the truth, but that would cause bedlam and close a lot of doors that I have already opened with parents and friends of the school. So, I just have to learn how to control myself and not do it.

Finally, describing the ideal of a positive school culture, Principal B described a school where “the students, the parents, and the teachers, everybody is honest, straight-up, straightforward. Whatever is bothering you, speak to it and try to come to some happy union about it.” Principal B expressed a strong commitment to cultivating and maintaining openness, communication, and authentic relationships within the school she leads. Given that backdrop, it is no wonder she was passionate in her efforts to inspire honesty among school personnel and stakeholders. In addition, this dedicated leader also disclosed her personal struggle, which she described as “holding my tongue and not being able to say what I really want to say.” Hence, deeper analyses of Principal B’s stories reveal her commitment to create an ideal culture, which in her view “must be an environment where everyone is honest and straightforward.”

### Positive Emotions

Deeper analysis of the transcriptions disclosed that embedded in the interactions within the school arena are not only vulnerability in relationships, but also the display of emotions among individuals. Principals and key stakeholders were open in sharing about and protecting the emotions of each other. To identify the importance of the positive emotional aspect in relationships, this subtopic describes one teacher’s perspective of



positive vulnerable emotions observed with the principal-teacher's leadership at School D.

Teacher K, identifying herself as a friend of the principal, expressed deep concern for her leader, stating,

She is a principal and a teacher, so she has a little too much on her plate. She gets stressed out. As a friend I'm worried about her, because her stress level gets so high, and she is trying to do everything. We as teachers are always saying, come on, what can we do? You have to speak to us. Tell us how we can help you. So, that might be one of her weaknesses.

Continuing her story, she added, "She wants to take everything on, which is a great thing, but she is human. You have to learn that you can't do everything."

On a positive, pleasant note, the teacher shared, "Recently, she's gotten, really, we got a new secretary, and I've seen her stress level drop. Unbelievable!" This disclosure brought out the teacher's own emotions as she revealed, "That makes me happy as a teacher and a parent, because I have my own children here. I work here. So yeah!" The teacher brought the story to a beautiful end by telling how Principal L, in her customary style, "always having a positive twist to something," turned around the negative situation to a positive. In confirming the turnaround in her principal's emotional state and leadership relations, Teacher K pleasantly announced, "Now she has started dishing out work."

### **Summary**

In summarizing the importance of principal relationships, this chapter identified that the four principals in this study were committed to, and intentional in, building relationships with the key stakeholders and church constituents, including the schoolboard and chairperson, faculty and staff, students, parents, the church/churches,

and pastors. They cultivated and maintained positive connections from the school to the home, with parents, and with the churches. Internally, the principals and key stakeholders also sought to cultivate an atmosphere where caring and compassionate relationships with students and their parents were nurtured.

In addition, at all four sites, the descriptions and anecdotes affirmed that the principals developed relationships with stakeholders and constituent churches and pastors, and maintained a positive school culture and fostered reciprocal, supportive interactions based on collaboration, involvement, caring interest, and transparency demonstrated by the principals and schools.

## CHAPTER 8

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Introduction**

Schools with strong, positive cultures have service-oriented staff members, foster a collegial environment, participate in celebratory rituals, engage in supportive social and professional networks of development, and readily espouse humor (Peterson & Deal, 2009). Further emphasized is the view that positive culture is the key ingredient for influencing productivity and success in a school. Several scholars support the idea that culture affects everything that happens in a school (Erickson, 1987; Peterson & Deal, 2009). Therefore, principals who function as managers, nurturers, and chief educational officers of schools need to understand leadership and school culture.

#### **Summary**

The study focused on the stories of Adventist principals, key stakeholders, school board chairpersons, and teachers to uncover how the leadership characteristics of principals influenced the development of a positive school culture within Adventist K-12 schools in a Midwest Adventist Union. With culture being the most important element of a school, and the principal holding the position of greatest influence, the responsibility of fostering a positive school culture ultimately rests with the principal (Fullan, 2003; Peterson & Deal, 2009; Schein, 2010). The literature supports the view that the struggle

to maintain a positive school culture is inextricably tied to the principals' leadership qualities (Peterson, 2002; Rasi, 2000; Sergiovanni, 2005a).

This study corroborated the research of many experts that principals are the culture leaders and set the tone for the school (Fullan, 1992; McCray et al., 2004; Whitaker, 2007). However, a pattern that emerged from an analysis of the interviews is that principals saw their school culture as a reflection of their leadership. They also emphasized that their influence in creating and maintaining a positive school culture was strongly dependent on God and the key stakeholders with whom they worked closely. Hence, principals described faculty and staff as partners, who they put first, and intentionally involved and empowered in all areas of school growth and enhancement. In describing the shared leadership and autonomy entrusted to teachers, one principal stated, "I let them know, I'm not in this by myself. You are all co-principals." This was the general sentiment of the four principals interviewed.

The results of this study revealed that leadership characteristics of principals influenced and contributed to maintaining a positive school culture. The selected principals and key stakeholders defined key elements of a positive school culture and described their perspectives of principal leadership practices, which cultivated and maintained a positive school culture.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the leadership characteristics of principals who influenced a positive culture in Seventh-day Adventist schools in a Midwest Adventist educational system. Many studies have explored this phenomenon in public schools. However, no known research has been conducted on K-

12 Adventist schools. It was the goal of this study to add to the body of knowledge and potentially provide a baseline for a wider exploration of the phenomenon to inform beginning and practicing Adventist principals on best leadership practices which cultivate and maintain a positive school culture.

### **Research Design and Sampling**

A qualitative, multiple-case study design using narrative inquiry was chosen as the most appropriate design to uncover the lived experiences of the principals in this study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam, 1998). Through narrative inquiry, the stories and meanings were explored to gain understanding of how leadership characteristics of principals influence positive school culture (Stake, 2006). The criterion used for this sampling directly reflected the purpose of this study and guided the identification of schools and principals (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998; Ross, 2007; Stake, 1995).

The primary criterion used for the study was the identification of schools, principals, and key stakeholders who demonstrated a positive school culture. The sample for the study was selected by experts utilizing the inter-rater reliability process (Amelang, 2009; Ladew, 2010). The experts explained that the process shows consistency of results when different evaluators rate the same phenomenon. In this study, the process involved professional raters, comparing the data collected against an agreed standard to identify which was the one top-rated Adventist school with a positive school culture in each conference. Superintendents of schools from four conferences in a Midwest Adventist Union identified three schools that were the best rated in each of the conferences as having a positive school culture.

The purposeful site selection was made using the following process: Four schools

from each of the different conferences were selected from among the top 12 schools identified. Every effort was made to choose one school site from the closest and most accessible locations within the territories of the four local conferences. To facilitate convenience and cost factors, four schools located in the three closest states were selected.

These stories represented the voices of 12 individuals—one principal, one board chair, and one teacher—from each of the four schools. Every attempt was made to have the principals and teachers reflect a balance between gender, school size, and types of schools, elementary (K-8) and secondary (K-12).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that guided this study was transformational leadership and school culture. Transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978; Jantzi & Leithwood, 1996) provided deeper insight about principals' leadership characteristics and identified practices that influenced positive culture in K-12 schools. The review of literature showed that there is a direct relationship between principals' leadership characteristics and their influence in maintaining positive school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Schein, 2010; Schein & Pettigrew, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2001; Waters et al., 2003).

Transformational leadership, introduced by Burns (1978) as an influence process, moves individuals toward a level of commitment to achieve school goals for the maximum benefit of the institution and its people. Thus, transformational leaders continuously focus on developing and articulating a school vision to provide a shared model for high performance expectations and developing people to achieve at maximum

potential. These leaders inspire and motivate followers by providing individualized support and intellectual stimulation, and by developing and redesigning the organization where relationships between leaders and followers are nurtured (Bass, Avolio, & Atwater, 1996).

School culture can be defined in many ways and has been used synonymously with terms such as climate, ethos, and saga (Erickson, 1987; Peterson & Deal, 2009; Segall & Wilson, 2004). According to Sergiovanni (2005b), culture is the heartbeat of the institution. This framework supports the belief that culture influences everything that happens routinely in school (Deal & Peterson, 1994; Phillips et al., 2003).

## **Findings**

### **Question 1: What Constitutes Positive School Culture?**

In describing what constitutes a positive school culture, the 12 participants identified three critical elements that were consistent and common at the four sites: (a) shared vision, (b) diversity celebrated, and (c) pervasive attitude for continuous growth and improvement.

#### **Shared Vision**

The four principals recognized that even though they were expected to develop and lead the vision for the schools, an equal expectation was that they articulated the direction clearly and get buy-in from all stakeholders (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Thus, having a shared vision was an essential part of a positive school culture. The principals and key stakeholders concurred that a shared vision provided not only focused direction, but a unified approach to fulfilling the common mission. Believing that the church and

school need each other, principals in this study organized annual visioning sessions to intentionally bring pastors and teachers together in conversation about the common mission. In the collaborative session, they assessed the status and needs of the schools, talked about what could be done better, and how the church and school could work together to achieve the common mission.

All stakeholders placed high priority on everyone, including students and their parents, knowing the direction that the principal wanted to take the school. Various strategies, such as prominently displaying clearly written or articulated policies that detailed values, beliefs, and procedures, were implemented at each school to keep the focus of the school community on the shared vision. In addition, principals were intentional in developing their schools in other key elements, including character development, setting high standards, embracing the SDA school vision, and spiritual school.

Character development was given high priority in the schools. Principals shared the belief that for Adventist schools their most important “missional goal” (Consuegra, 2012) was for students to develop Christ-like characters and experience a personal relationship with Christ.

Setting high standards of academic achievement and conduct targeted the common goal for everyone within the school environment to aim at reaching a higher standard, by doing what they are called to do, and doing it the very best they can.

Embracing the SDA school vision meant adhering to and maintaining the distinctive beliefs and standards of Adventist education. Leaders were committed to



integrating denominational standards, such as daily prayers, good manners, and Bible-based teaching in their schools.

Finally, a “spiritual school” describes how the principals were intentional in creating a spiritual atmosphere and instilling a spirit of worship in their schools. The principal and teachers modeled a positive, Christ-like attitude, and the entire school community demonstrated a high awareness of God as they engaged in a seamless flow of working, praying, and sharing His power and blessings.

Routinely, faculty, staff, and students set the tone of the day, as the groups started off the day with worship and prayed with, and for, one another. Yearly spiritual themes, established as a common language for behavior expectations, were infused into every aspect of the school to foster a way of Christian living and being focused on Christ. Spiritual programs, embedded in Adventist school culture, such as weeks of prayer, evangelism, and community service, were fostered to train and engage students in spreading the Word and doing for others. Principals and key stakeholders agreed that within the school-church community, “the school is the biggest evangelism.” Thus, a common goal of Adventist schools is to impart Christian values and prepare students for life with Christ and service in the global community.

### **Diversity Celebrated**

In K-12 Adventist schools, diversity was embraced and celebrated in whatever form it took, whether diversity of nationality, color, ethnic origin, or religion. Participants in the study viewed diversity as one of the critical elements that made up a positive school culture. Participants also highlighted how principals, teachers, and chairpersons were equally intentional in celebrating and nurturing individuality.

Principals were involved and collaborated with teachers in teaching students politeness and selflessness to demonstrate acceptance, honor, and “appreciation for what God created and the differences.” At each site, the participants enthusiastically described how the school fostered an inclusive involvement. One participant verbalized that at his school, “you would find a cohesive group of students who like and care for each other.” This inclusive climate extended beyond race, color, ethnicity, and religion. “It showed inclusion for differences of class, home life, country they were from, as well as the learning ability of students.”

### **Pervasive Attitude of Continuous Growth and Improvement**

Another common element that defined a positive school culture and was embraced as a critical focus of the shared vision was a pervasive attitude of continuous growth and improvement. To achieve this goal required having a visionary leader who set and articulated a focused direction for the school. Teachers and chairpersons looked to the principal for a clear vision and goals, which were then shared with staff members. Key stakeholders, principals, board chairs, and teachers underscored the multifaceted complexities of the principals’ duties. Participants noted that principals were very involved in the day-to-day functions, planning for growth, continuous improvement for curriculum, and academic achievement. As curriculum and instructional leaders, principals fostered and facilitated continuous educational growth and improvement of all stakeholders, faculty, staff, students, and their parents. Highest priority was given to the professional development of faculty and staff and students’ academic advancement and achievement.

Principals also worked closely with their faculty and superintendents to maintain upgraded curriculum, and ensure all classes were provided with the resources needed to improve the teaching and learning. Principals initiated and facilitated continuous collaboration in curriculum planning among faculty and pastors in exploring possibilities for the continued academic growth, achievement, and success of both the teachers and students.

Teachers agreed that the principals' support gave them peace of mind to concentrate on the important matters at hand and work to achieve the high standards set. Principals were intentional in providing students with suitable facilities and adequate resources to ensure their continuous academic, spiritual, social, and physical growth, and motivation to improve in doing and giving their best.

Demonstrating a pervasive attitude of continuous growth and improvement initiated strategic planning to keep the schools growing and improving and cultivating a positive school culture. Some of the major strategic planning initiatives mentioned in the study included implementing new curriculum program enhancements, such as an iPad program, starting an online high school, and intentionally promoting the schools in the surrounding communities to invite and attract new students, in order to diversify and increase the student enrollment and the financial viability of the schools.

Principals and board chairs identified changes in the financial and population stability over the years, which impacted the financial viability and stability. Attrition, due to people retiring and moving away from the area, parents' diminished commitment to Christian education, and the financial challenges encountered by each of the schools were some reasons cited for decline in the financial viability and stability which schools

faced. Of importance to fostering continuous growth and improvement of the financial viability and stability of the schools and a positive school culture was the perception of strong pastoral leadership and support.

### Question 2: How Do Principals View Their Role as Influencing School Culture?

Three major themes (a) behavior and school values, (b) interpersonal communication, and (c) the importance of principal relationships, provide common school values that principals and key stakeholders demonstrated in cultivating and maintaining a positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools.

#### **Behavior and School Values**

The theme behavior and school values captures the description of how principals viewed their role as influencing the positive culture of the schools, as they worked closely with key stakeholders, school board chairpersons, and teachers. The stories told by the principals and key stakeholders identified principals' commitment to ensuring that the schools' core values are maintained. The four schools in this study displayed value and commitment to presenting their schools as having a well-kept physical plant that promoted a welcoming and inviting ambience, accompanied by deliberate actions of a personal touch that awaited every student and visitor. In addition, a neat, clean, and orderly atmosphere added to the greeting received as one entered each of the four school facilities.

The principals and key stakeholders were equally intentional and committed to cultivating a culture where all stakeholders, including students, parents, and teachers, were nurtured and valued. Principals maintained an open door policy, symbolic of their

availability to all. The principals created a safe haven, and ensured a sense of safety for students from harmful encounters, such as bullying. For teachers, they described their school as a place where they “felt secure and enjoyed coming to work every day.”

At the four schools, principals and key stakeholders valued students and staff members and embraced their entire families. Principals and teachers demonstrated a nurturing attitude, helping students to resolve issues. Students themselves reciprocated kindness to the adults as well as their fellow students.

This nurturing attitude was also extended to the parents of the school, thus cultivating a family atmosphere. The four schools were known for displaying a sense of family. At each site, principals and teachers described their commitment to fostering a sense of unity among constituents, as they created ways for the school, home, and church to collaborate with one another. The family atmosphere was viewed by participants as one of the distinctive features of each of the schools’ “good reputation.”

Sustaining these and other school values was attractive to parents, as they revealed principals’ commitment to prioritizing learning in a family-oriented environment, while maintaining visibility in the schools and churches. These leadership practices, along with the collegial team approach, were based on trust and respect for one another.

Principals and key stakeholders maintained a commitment to being perceptive and consistent in their behavior and decisions, and in their faith in God. Interviews pointed out that “a lot is perception,” as schools were attractive to parents when there was “a favorable perception that the behavior of the leadership had a positive effect on the people.” Participants agreed that a positive atmosphere results when both principal

and staff demonstrate consistency in decisions made and in upholding standards. According to one chairperson, “Staff that has been least respected is the staff that vacillates.”

Finally, principals in this study were committed to demonstrating servant-leadership as well as being reflective leaders in their effort to maintain a positive school culture. As servant-leaders they modeled dependence on God as their leader and willingness to be servants to those they led. Commitment to the value of reflective leadership was not only to emphasize the principals’ positive leader influence in cultivating and maintaining a positive school culture, of reflection and assessment, but these school values also validated personal core values that guided the principals’ leadership.

### **Interpersonal Communication**

Interpersonal communication describes another school value of the four selected schools. This theme describes how, and with whom, the principals and key stakeholders used communication to develop and maintain a positive school culture. The following sub-theme topics capture the ways principals and key stakeholders described the practice and effect of interpersonal communication in the schools: (a) communication is key, and (b) clear expectations of conduct.

Communication focused on how principals articulated their commitment to listening, talking, and interfacing with staff members and students on a daily basis as well as facilitating communication with school, home, and church constituents to cultivate and maintain a positive school culture. Principals demonstrated strong commitment to interpersonal communication and were intentional in fostering open

communication lines in order to encourage face-to-face interaction with stakeholders and church constituents. Principals were also committed to ensuring that clear expectations were articulated to guide stakeholders, including students and parents in their overall conduct in the school. Principals indicated commitment to cultivating interpersonal communication in an open, fair, respectful, and loving manner, including practicing listening, talking, and praying as vital intervention steps in the disciplinary process.

A mentoring discipline model was the approach fostered to inspire students in good behavior choices and conduct, as well as to motivate them towards academic achievement. Expectations of conduct were clearly communicated and facilitated appropriate protocol for handling discipline matters at the classroom level as well as in general. With the belief that “the whole success of everything is communication,” principals, teachers, and board chairs maintained a positive school culture by modeling the behavior they wanted to see in their interpersonal communication.

### **Importance of Principal Relationships**

This subsection encapsulates the analysis of the third theme that emerged in exploring how principals viewed their role in influencing positive school culture. Principals placed paramount importance on, and were deliberate in cultivating and nurturing relationships within the schools. The main groups with whom principals developed relationships were stakeholders and church constituents, which included school board and chairperson, faculty and staff, students, parents, and the constituent churches and pastors. In describing the importance of principal relationships, all participants identified that the four principals were committed to, and intentional in,

building relationships, internally, with the key stakeholders and, externally, with church constituents and their pastors.

The principals validated the importance in their relationships with the school board, and recognized their supportive involvement and contributions to the schools. As the chief spokespersons for the boards, and the visible presence in most school business, principals were committed to maintaining a reciprocal, collaborative, and respectful relationship with the chair. Valuing the supportive principal-chairperson relationship that existed at each site, all of the principals were committed to keeping the board and chairpersons informed and involved with everything that was happening at the school and maintain consistent, open interaction to strengthen the relationship.

Principals were also committed to collaboration and nurturing interest in the personal and social well-being of faculty and staff. Thus, principals made deliberate effort to include and involve primarily faculty in significant aspects of leadership and decision- making. Committed to the value and importance of nurturing co-worker relationships, principals showed interest in the personal and social well-being of each one. All of the principals stated that they were intentional in cultivating an environment where faculty and staff felt supported, not only professionally, but in their personal and social lives. Principals cultivated a positive school culture by being creative and considerate in how they supported staff members. Some incorporated designated time for social interaction; others modeled a relaxed, friendly manner, which teachers appreciated, as it made the environment comfortable and fostered freedom to relate with co-workers and the principal as well.



With students and parents being the primary focus of the schools, principals would agree with one colleague who stated, “The students always come first.” This was indicative of the importance and priority the principals placed on the children entrusted to their care. Principals were deeply committed to fostering caring and compassionate relationships with students.

Principals emphasized that of equal importance in influencing a positive school culture was building relationships with parents. One strategy that effectively cultivated and maintained favorable parent relationships was frequent and meaningful interaction to keep them informed, included, and involved. Parents also sought to build relationships with staff members in the interest of their children, as well as to share their skills and contribute in maintaining a positive school culture.

Principals placed high importance on fostering relationships with the church and pastor. Forming connection and collaboration between the school and church groups benefitted the schools tremendously. From the lived experiences of the principals, it was clear the school and church need each other to survive and thrive. Therefore, convinced that the administrative relationship between pastor and principal is “very important” the principals described “massaging the relationship to always keep it strong.”

This study also discusses relationships in which vulnerability was embraced. Vulnerable relationships emerged as an important school value and a characteristic in the principals’ relationships with faculty, staff, chairs, students and parents. Participants at all four sites shared stories that affirmed principals were invested in being collaborative and in developing authentic, nonthreatening relationships with

stakeholders and church constituents, despite the imperfections and inevitable struggles encountered within the schools. This translated to facilitating strong reciprocal, supportive, and trusting interactions, based on collaboration, empathy, honesty, and transparency.

### Question 3: What Are Stakeholders' Perceptions of the Principal's Influence on the Culture of the School?

This study was conducted with eight key stakeholders, four school board chairs and four teachers. These participants were eager to share their thoughts about their principal's leadership and positive culture in their schools.

#### **Perception of Chairs**

The school board chairs felt the schools presented a positive school culture because of the positive leadership qualities and attitude of their respective principal. They identified the principal's influence as evidence that their principal exhibited leadership and strong management skills, demonstrated by a can-do attitude, and stepping up to the challenges of the role.

#### **Perception of Teachers**

From the perspectives of the teachers, who had each worked under the leadership of different principals, it was the view that principals come with different personalities; for example, some are great nurturers and some lead with iron fists, some are the teachers' principal, but all wanted to influence the school in a positive way. The teachers acknowledged leadership of principals as essential in setting, improving, and maintaining a positive school culture.

Teachers shared the consensus that while principals influence and initiate major changes for the overall improvement of the school, and have direct influence in issues related to curriculum, instruction, and student learning, it is the culture that has the biggest influence on the behavior and achievement of both students and teachers (Ryan & Lickona, 1992). Teachers shared the view that in the case of conduct and achievement, the principal has the responsibility to articulate his or her vision, and set the standards of expectations under which they worked. However, the motivation and attitude come from the environment, engendered by cooperation and encouragement of teachers and willingness of peers to embrace the initiatives.

### **Perception of Chairs and Teachers**

Some chairpersons acknowledged that as the Chief Operating Officer (COO) (Fullan, 2003), the principal's vision permeates the entire school. Therefore, by virtue of the principal's position and role, a "the pecking order" is established, causing everyone under the principal's leadership to take his/her cue from the leader. Other chairs and teachers still agreed that students were strongly influenced by their peers and tended to carry out expectations when others were doing so.

Despite these differences, all four of the chairs and teachers agreed that the principal sets the tone of the school and is deeply involved in all aspects of the school's operation. They felt the principal's leadership is vital and everyone needs to be respectful of decisions and learn to obey even though it was not necessary that everything proposed had to be agreed to.

Chairs and teachers felt the positive school culture was inherited and the ethos of positivity was developed over many years, as each principal contributed their part to

make the positive culture better. From the chairs' perspective, principals were viewed as demonstrating "good leadership." However, both the chairs and teachers shared that good principals have a large influence and cultivate a positive reputation for the school, irrespective of whether they have worked at the school for a long time or not. Board chairs and teachers agreed that having a stable staff, with longevity and commitment, made a big difference in creating and maintaining a positive school culture.

Stakeholders, chairs, and teachers viewed curriculum improvement, upholding Christian values, communicating and building relationships with internal and external stakeholders and constituents as crucial areas in the principal's role in influencing a positive school culture. Each stakeholder described his/her principal as being God-led and upholding the Christian values. From the different perspectives, principals demonstrated dependence on God and inspired a Christ-centered atmosphere, which inspired not only faculty and staff, but students as well to practice a spirit of knowing God by engaging in worship, evangelism, and service.

Stakeholders described their principal's positive influence by their commitment to interpersonal communication. As the stakeholders themselves identified communication as key in the school environment, they acknowledged their principal's effort in encouraging and facilitating open, ongoing dialogue and interaction with everyone, including faculty, staff, students, parents, and constituent church members. They noted that the principal's positive communication promoted the schools positively and helped cultivate positive cultures that encouraged accountability, maintained the school's positive reputation, and attracted parents and constituents to get involved. Chairpersons and teachers viewed communication and relationships as

equally important in the principal's role in developing a positive school culture.

It was noted that principals were intentional in developing and maintaining meaningful relationships among all stakeholders, including with students, the school board, and the wider community. All of the stakeholders perceived that their principals placed high priority on maintaining relationships with stakeholders. The principals of the four schools identified as having a positive culture were viewed as being actively involved in school programs, and collaborated with staff members, school board and chairpersons, church pastors, and members. The relational leaders were also seen as caring and compassionate to staff members as well as students and their parents, going above and beyond to show interest in each one's personal welfare.

Finally, it was the perception that the principals in this study were committed to being authentic, reflective leaders as they uninhibitedly modeled and fostered vulnerable relationships, a healthy sense of vulnerability in their interaction and candid disclosure about their professional and personal imperfections, within the schools. By being transparent and sharing their struggles and weaknesses with key stakeholders, board chairs and teachers, including students, principals influenced and maintained a positive school culture that stakeholders sought to emulate.

#### Question 4: How Do Principals View Their Role as Transformational Leaders?

This study was done through the lens of transformational leadership, a theory first introduced by James McGregor Burns (1978) and by Bass and Avolio (1993) and Leithwood and Slegers (2006). The framework upon which this theory is based focuses on developing people and fostering relationships with the aim of developing commitment

towards achieving an institution's vision and goals.

### **Cultivated Personal Commitment**

The principals in this study viewed their role as transformational leaders in their commitment to the schools' core values. This guided their leadership, opened personalized communication, and developed relationships with stakeholders. Principals and stakeholders described the common transformational leadership practices that were implemented to cultivate and maintain a positive school culture in the selected Adventist schools.

### **Cultivated Relationships**

In building relationships with followers, the four principals described the close working relationship that each had with stakeholders, including school board and chairs, teachers, students, parents and the constituent churches and pastors. Each of the four principals identified his or her collaboration with their faculty and staff, involving them in decision making for a shared vision and the continuous planning for growth and improvement of their school. The principals were also intentional in building relationships with other stakeholders, namely, the school board, specifically the chairperson, students, parents, and pastors of the constituent churches, by keeping them informed and involved.

In viewing the principals' relationships and leadership of their people and schools through the lens of transformational leadership, the description of their role is based on the four components or the four "I's" of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

In demonstrating *idealized influence*, each of the principals described strategies that stimulated interest among colleagues and followers to buy into the vision and goals and to embrace the positive elements of the school culture. As transformational leaders, the principals focused on fostering commitment based on a shared vision for the schools involved. That commitment was mutual as the key stakeholders (teachers and school board and chairpersons) embraced the common vision and mission, articulated in the focused direction and clear expectations of the Adventist schools (denominational standards), thus making it easy to inspire followership and support for their leadership.

### **Inspirational Motivation**

Another characteristic of transformational leaders (Bass, 1999; Stone et al., 2004) was the ability to use charisma to inspire and motivate followers. In this study, principals were effective in inspiring and motivating stakeholders, primarily school board chairperson, faculty and staff, and students. Some common and key ways principals inspired and motivated stakeholders included their active involvement, working closely to foster collaboration; inclusiveness and appreciation for individual strengths; maintaining open, ongoing communication; and demonstrating individualized consideration in daily interactions. In addition, principals had various ways of inspiring commitment by each of the groups mentioned.

First, principals motivated and encouraged their faculty and staff, as well as their students, to achieve their best. Therefore, to attain the goal of continuous growth and improvement of curriculum and education achievement, principals were intentional in including faculty to have input in the planning and decision making to cultivate and sustain a positive learning culture. Second, principals also provided encouragement for

their faculty and staff by showing interest and caring for them personally and professionally. Third, on a personal level, principals motivated staff with creative forms of encouragement and moral support. Principals inspired staff professionally by providing continuous support by sharing and discussing innovative ideas at staff meetings, facilitating, and exposing their team to a variety of professional development opportunities, not just in the Adventist realm, but in a wider education context. Other areas of principals' leadership that the teachers in this study highly appreciated and valued in their principals' effort to inspire and motivate them were the leaders' commitment to trust and empowerment, demonstrated in putting them first, acknowledging and utilizing their individual strengths, and distributing leadership; and "knowing he/she has their interest at heart and will do what they can to support us."

### **Intellectual Stimulation**

By their supportive actions principals also inspired and motivated their students to excellence in academic and ethical standards. As described by the 12 participants, principals were intentional in raising students' pride and motivating them to high achievement by providing a suitable environment, adequate resources to meet the needs of their individual, holistic development, as well as clear expectations to help them succeed.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this multi-case qualitative study was to explore, with a purposively selected sample of principals, school board chairpersons, and teachers, their perceptions of how leadership characteristics of principals influence positive school



culture in K-12 Adventist schools. The findings from this study answered the general research question. The research results addressed the four areas that emerged: (a) positive culture defined, (b) behavior and school values, (c) interpersonal communication, and (d) the importance of principal relationships. Following is a summary of the major conclusions drawn from this research. The discussion is followed by recommendations and implications for future research.

Existing literature substantiates the claim that the struggle to maintain a positive school culture is a challenge that principals encounter in the K-12 school environment (Cheng, 1996; Peterson & Deal, 2010). Research literature has documented that school culture is directly linked to principals' leadership characteristics.

The first major finding of this research is that a positive school culture in the Adventist K-12 schools is defined by four critical elements: (a) shared vision, (b) diversity embraced and celebrated, (c) a pervasive attitude for continuous growth, and (d) improvement. A conclusion drawn from this finding is that principals' leadership is key to influencing the support and followership of key stakeholders, school board chairpersons, and teachers in cultivating and maintaining the critical elements of the schools. Principals in this study believed collegiality and working closely with stakeholders were essential to tap into their ideas in order to foster a shared vision toward the common goal of creating a positive school culture. According to Peterson and Deal (2009), "Without strong, positive culture, schools flounder and die" (p. 7).

With their united focus, principals, chairpersons, and teachers in this study defined a positive school culture, within their Adventist school context, as a place where there was a shared vision. Shared vision for the key stakeholders, teachers, and

school board chairpersons was the intentional view of cultivating a spiritual school atmosphere. The schools in the study concentrated on Bible-based teaching, integrated across the curriculum, and aimed towards the holistic training and character development for the students entrusted to their care.

The principals and stakeholders in this study identified a prevalence of significant diversity among their school population. Hence, they believed diversity contributed to a positive school culture as it fostered in a balanced and inclusive climate. Principals were intentional in cultivating an environment where everyone celebrated diversity by demonstrating selflessness, respect, acceptance for individuality, and the differences that God created.

With a shared vision and common goal to influence a positive school culture, the Adventist principals in this study were tenacious in their focus on the professional and personal growth of staff members and students, as well as the continuous improvement of their schools. Principals influenced stakeholders' support and involvement for the continuous intentional planning for curriculum and instructional improvement. These leaders included and collaborated with their partners at the school, home, and church, and also with their superintendents to provide suitable facilities, needed resources, and moral support to sustain a positive learning culture and high achievement.

Principals at each site viewed encouragement by a supportive chairperson, backed by a supportive board, including the pastors, as critical in implementing strategies to improve the financial viability and stability of the schools. In relating to the school board, principals in this study believed keeping them informed and

presenting oneself and the school with positivity engendered their positive, supportive response.

The principals, school board chairpersons, and teachers were consistent in promoting values that fostered supportive interactions, and a positive perception of the schools. Values that were common at the four schools included: (a) well-kept physical plant, (b) school climate that fostered nurturing, (c) school environment attractive to parents, (d) trust, and (e) collegiality.

In addition, principals were committed to the values of servant-leadership and reflective leadership. Despite the perception expressed by three of the four chairpersons that the “pecking order” must be respected, as servant-leaders the principals in the study viewed themselves as being servants, “following the lead of the Great Leader.” Thus, the principals viewed positive school culture as a place where they exhibited and inspired teachers and staff, to maintain characteristics of longsuffering and selflessness in relating to co-workers, as well as to students and parents. Principals were deliberate in teaching and facilitating opportunity for students to first serve others.

Participants also believed that the reflective process was paramount in creating a positive school environment. Their commitment to reflective leadership ensured personnel and students performed their tasks successfully by routinely facilitating time for personal and institutional review and evaluation. Principals’ practice of taking time to think about and assess their own leadership and learning set a practical model. Professional reflection was encouraged among faculty and staff in individual and group setting, in order to avoid, minimize, or replace any existing negative elements with more desirable qualities (Barth, 2002). In addition, key stakeholders and constituents

from the home, church, and school were given opportunity to engage in the reflective process, which supported school achievement of operational goals and resources.

This study supports the transformational leadership theory of Bass and Riggio (2005), Burns (1978), and Leithwood and Jantzi (1990), as principals described their commitment to influencing, practicing, and fostering the school values of communication and relationships in creating and maintaining a positive school culture.

The Adventist principals, school board chairpersons, and teachers in this study agreed with Hoy, Smith, and Sweetland (2002) that interpersonal, open communication is key in creating a positive school culture within the K-12 school community. Principals were described as having a positive and collaborative attitude in their interaction with all stakeholders. They viewed their teachers as partners, involved them at the initial stages of decision-making, and empowered them towards the goal of improving curriculum and the operation in their schools.

All key stakeholders--principals, teachers, and school board chairpersons—believed that keeping open communication lines, promoting the school positively, and articulating clear expectations of conduct as fundamental to cultivating a positive school culture. The stakeholders cultivated a school community where talking, listening, and cooperating with one another in a fair, respectful, and loving manner were consistently encouraged.

In their work on transformational school leadership Leithwood, Tomlinson, and Genge (1996) stated, “The essence of leadership is to be found in relationships between leaders and followers” (p. 2). Principals in this study believed building and maintaining meaningful relationships with people in the school community, including faculty and

staff, students and their parents, and with the constituent churches and their pastors, was highly important for influencing and sustaining a positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools.

The school leaders fostered reciprocal support and collegial collaboration with faculty and staff, as they had received from their school boards and chairpersons.

Principals were committed to maintaining compassionate, vulnerable relationships, with the goal to inspire a sense of security and freedom in behavior, despite the potential of failure (Brown, 2012). These trusting relationships helped stakeholders as well as church constituents relate with kindness, honesty, and transparency with one another and school personnel.

### **Recommendations**

As a result of the findings that emerged from this research, which explored the perceptions of leadership characteristics of principals who influence positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools, the following recommendations are suggested:

#### **For Beginning and Practicing Principals**

1. As spiritual leader: Embrace your role by portraying a Christlike attitude and turn your students on to Jesus.
2. Cultivate an atmosphere where prayer and worship are instilled consistently in the daily routine for faculty, staff, and students.
3. As instructional leader: Treat faculty and staff as professional partners. Listen to their ideas and value their input in planning and decision-making for curriculum and instruction and student achievement.

4. Facilitate the purposeful involvement of parents, constituent church members, and pastors by keeping them informed with what is happening at the school.
5. As Chief Operational Officer: Model servant-leadership. Never think you are above; rather be a willing servant and foster meaningful relationships based on collegiality and collaboration, trust and respect among your co-workers, board chairperson, and constituent church pastor.
6. Maintain visibility and active involvement in the school and constituent church to promote the school in a positive light.
7. Prioritize students' needs and maintain accessibility for students and their parents.
8. Maintain open lines of communication and accessibility with all stakeholders, including faculty and staff, board chairperson, students and parents.
9. Establish realistic expectations for yourself and the school. Be flexible, but do not vacillate about decisions, and do not be afraid to be vulnerable and seek help from others.

#### For Conference and School Policy Makers

This recommendation, derived from an interview with one principal in the study, is directed to superintendents and/or school boards and addresses the following concern:

1. Study should be given to establishing an internship program for beginning principals to provide peer mentoring based on a model that matches a beginning principal with an experienced principal to provide guidance and facilitate their successful transition into the school leadership.

## **Implications for Future Research**

Several themes emerged from this study with implications for future on school leadership practice and policy making in the area of creating and maintaining positive school culture in these Adventist schools in the Midwest Adventist Union entity as well as in schools within the Adventist system of education in North America. It is recommended that the following future studies be considered:

1. A study exploring the influence of principals' and teachers' commitment and longevity of service on positive school culture and improvement in enrollment in Adventist schools
2. A study exploring best practices that make Adventist Christian education attractive to parents and constituent church members
3. A study exploring the benefits of collaborative relationships between principals and school board chairpersons in cultivating and sustaining a positive school culture
4. A study exploring the role that interpersonal communication between faculty and school board plays on employee job satisfaction and retention
5. A study for policy makers at the NAD and local Conference levels to explore establishing training on school culture for all Adventist educators to provide career-long support for school leaders to ensure a positive school culture is cultivated and sustained in Adventist schools at all levels
6. Since culture is the heartbeat of the school and the principal a pivotal influence, a study to expand the research conducted in my study with selected Adventist K-12 schools across the NAD and with principals and key stakeholders including

students and parents.



APPENDIX A  
LETTERS

REQUEST PERMISSION FROM UNION DIRECTOR OF  
EDUCATION



January 30, 2013

Dear Director of Education (Personalized)

Greetings! Pursuant to my request for your assistance in our previous verbal and written dialogue in March 2012, at long last, I am able to make it official. First, I would like to express my appreciation for the kindness and support that you have extended to me from our initial meeting regarding my dissertation study. As I move to the critical data collection phase for my study, I am in need of your assistance in the following ways:

Letter to Union Conference Education Superintendents: I am requesting the help of the superintendents in identifying principals along with the respective school board chair and a teacher from four of their schools, for my study. While we spoke initially about the Michigan Conference, I would like to include in my study the four closest of the five conferences in the Lake Union territory; Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Lake Region Conference. The central question of my study is how do principals describe perceptions of their leadership characteristics that influence positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools? The criteria that I will use to identify the principals are:

- The principal serves at the SDA K-8 and/or K-12 school
- The principal is recognized as a leader with a successful track record of cultivating a positive school culture; being able to maintain service-oriented staff members, foster a collegial environment, celebrate rituals and customs, support social networks to enhance personal and professional development, and espouses humor among their people.

I need your permission to contact the Education Superintendents to request their help in identifying three principals within their Conference who fit the above criteria? Once I have gathered all of the information from the Education Superintendents, one principal will be selected from each of the Conferences to be interviewed for my study. I have attached a copy of the letter that I plan to send the Superintendents, as well as the interview questions that I will use in the study (see proposal). Your endorsement of the importance of this study has certainly boosted my confidence level. Would you be willing to write a letter in support of the study on SDA Principals' Leadership Characteristics and Positive School Culture? I think that the Education Officers would be more likely to help me if they see the value of the study as recommended by you.

If you have any questions about the study, I encourage you to contact my advisor, Dr. James Jeffery, Chair of the School of Education at Andrews University (269-471-3481).

Thanks in advance helping me and for all that you have done thus far to assist me in conducting this study.

Yours respectfully,  
*Evelyn P. Savory*

PERMISSION APPROVAL FROM THE UNION DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

**February 13,  
2013**

**Institutional Review  
Board Andrews  
University Berrien  
Springs, MI 49104**

**Re: Evelyn P.  
Savory**

**TO WHOM IT MAY  
CONCERN:**

**Evelyn Savory has my permission to contact the superintendents and principals whom she has selected for the purpose of her study on “Perceptions of Leadership Characteristics of Principals Who Influence Positive School Culture in Adventist K-12 Schools in a Midwest Union.”**

**Having obtained consent from the superintendents and principals, she is granted full approval to conduct her study with the appropriate personnel at the selected school sites within the Midwest Union territory. It is an exciting study. Please let me know how I can continue to be of assistance.**

REQUEST PARTICIPATION AND PERMISSION FROM CONFERENCE  
EDUCATION SUPERINTENDENTS

February 18, 2013

Dear Superintendent (Personalized):

Greetings! My name is Evelyn Savory. I am currently pursuing a PhD in Leadership from Andrews University. My study is on Principals' Leadership Characteristics and Positive School Culture. I am requesting your approval to contact principals in the Midwest Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, who fit the criteria for my study below. The central question that guides my study is how do principals describe perceptions of their leadership characteristics that influence positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools? The criteria that I will use to identify the principals are:

- The principal serves in SDA K-8 and/or K-12 schools.
- The principal is recognized as a leader with a successful track record of cultivating a positive school culture; being able to maintain service-oriented staff members, foster a collegial environment, celebrate rituals and customs, support social networks to enhance personal and professional development and espouses humor the people.

Would you please assist me by selecting three principals based on your professional evaluation and observation? Your involvement in identifying such principals from within your Conference will enable me to identify the principal that I will then select for my study. My goal is to select one principal who fits the criteria from each of the four conferences selected. There are no costs involved for participation in this study other than 50 minutes to one-hour spent in an interview.

The granting of your approval in this preliminary data collection phase will make a huge contribution in the selection of principals (and schools) for conducting this invaluable study for administrators and stakeholders in our Union.

If you have any questions about the study, I encourage you to contact my advisor, Dr. James Jeffery, Chair of the School of Education at Andrews University (269-471-3481).

Please find attached the interview questions that I will be using to conduct my study. I have also attached a letter requesting the participation of the principals and two key stakeholders.

I will greatly appreciate your help in providing an official letter granting consent of the Midwest Conference Education Department for me to conduct my study. Guidelines for the institutional consent letters can be found at [http://www.andrews.edu/services/research/institutional\\_review/guidelines.html](http://www.andrews.edu/services/research/institutional_review/guidelines.html). Please send it to [esavory@andrews.edu](mailto:esavory@andrews.edu) or Evelyn P. Savory, 4962 Claredon Place, Berrien Springs, MI 49103. My phone contact (860) 874-8123.

Yours respectfully,

*Evelyn P. Savory*

SAMPLE APPROVAL FROM SUPERINTENDENT  
TO CONDUCT RESEARCH WITH PRINCIPALS

**Re: Requesting your assistance and permission**

From: **Superintendent**

To: **Evelyn Savory**

February 21, 2013

Dear Evelyn,

I have reviewed your request and approve you contacting individuals who are in the educational work in the Conference. This permission is for the sole purpose of educational research and limited to the requested issues as outlined in your requesting document.

I wish for you the best in your research and preparation for greater service for Jesus and His church.

## INVITATION REQUESTING PRINCIPALS' PARTICIPATION

March 3, 2013

Dear Principal (personalized)

Greetings! My name is Evelyn Savory. I am currently pursuing a PhD in Leadership from Andrews University. I am conducting a study on Principals' Leadership Characteristics and Positive School Culture. Your school has been identified by your conference administration as having a positive school culture. I am, therefore, requesting your approval for a one-to-one interview with me. In addition, I would also like your permission to interview two of your key stakeholders, School Board Chair and one of your teachers, to assist me in this data collection phase of my study. Last, I would like to request your assistance in selecting the teacher who, based on your judgment is most suitable and willing to participate and provide the best description for the criteria below.

Your participation in this research will help me answer the central question for my study, which is how do principals describe perceptions of their leadership characteristics that influence positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools? The criteria that I will use to identify the principal's leadership characteristics are:

- The principal serves in SDA K-8 and/or K-12 schools
- The principal is recognized as a leader with a successful track record of cultivating a positive school culture; being able to maintain service-oriented staff members, foster a collegial environment, celebrate rituals and customs, support social networks to enhance personal and professional development, and espouses humor among their people.

The granting of your approval to participate in a single 50 minutes to one hour interview would make a huge contribution to this invaluable study for school administrators and stakeholders. Please be assured that responses to the interview questions will be strictly confidential.

Please let me know if you, the School Board Chair, and teacher are willing to participate and we will set a time that is convenient for your schedules.

If any of you have any questions about the study, I encourage that you feel free to contact my advisor, Dr. James Jeffery, Dean of the School of Education at Andrews University (269-471-3481).

Thank you for taking the time to complete and return the attached Consent Form to [esavory@andrews.edu](mailto:esavory@andrews.edu) or Evelyn P. Savory, 4962 Claredon Place, Berrien Springs, MI 49103. My phone contact (860) 874-8123.

Yours respectfully,

*Evelyn P.*



## REQUEST TO SCHOOL BOARD CHAIRPERSONS AND TEACHERS

April 9, 2013

Dear Participant (Personalized),

Greetings! My name is Evelyn Savory. I am currently pursuing a PhD in Leadership from Andrews University. I am conducting a study on Principals' Leadership Characteristics and Positive School Culture. Your school has been identified by your conference administration as having a positive school culture. Your principal has informed me that in your capacity as School Board Chair, you have kindly consented to participate in my study.

Your participation in this research will help me answer the central question for my study, which is how do principals describe perceptions of their leadership characteristics that influence positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools? The criteria that I will use to identify the principal's leadership characteristics are:

- The principal serves in the Adventist K-8/K-12 schools
- The principal is recognized as a leader with a successful track record of cultivating a positive school culture; being able to maintain service-oriented staff members, foster a collegial environment, celebrate rituals and customs, support social networks to enhance personal and professional development, and espouses humor among their people.

Thank you for your willingness to assist me in this data collection phase of my journey. Your contribution is vital to the success of this study and I look forward to speaking with you.

At this time, I am contacting you to schedule our interview. First, for your information, the interview will be audio recorded and will take about one hour or less. Second, please let me know what days and times will work best for you. My schedule is open for Monday through Wednesday of next week.

In consideration of your busy personal and work schedule, I would do my best to facilitate any time or place during the days I suggested or any other day that we agree upon. I can eliminate the issue of a meeting place by letting you know that I am also in Berrien Springs, therefore, Andrews University is a good option.

Looking forward to hearing from you. I remain extremely grateful to you for your contribution.

Yours respectfully,

*Evelyn P.*

## THANK YOU LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Thank you so much for your kind consideration and favorable response to my request. I am ecstatic that you and key stakeholders (Board Chair and teacher) are willing to participate in my study.

I would like to let you know that I do understand and respect the busy schedule of a principal and will do my best to cooperate with you in setting a time convenient to you for our meeting. Please let me know your day of preference. My only request is that it is a regular full day with all routine activities from beginning to end.

Once again, thank you and may God continue to bless your leadership and ministry at Village Adventist School with abundant success.

Your colleague in Christian Education,

Evelyn

## REQUEST TO PARTICIPANT TO REVIEW INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

July 29, 2013

Greetings! This is Evelyn Savory writing to follow-up regarding the interview we did on June 5, 2013. First, I would like to thank you for sharing with me so candidly about your school and your contribution in creating the positive culture that is evident at the school.

Next, I am excited to let you know that I have completed transcription of the recording, and as per protocol, I am sending the transcribed interview for your review for accuracy. Please let me know if I have captured accurately the essence of your story. However, if you observe any inaccuracies or misrepresentations in the document, please do not hesitate to make the necessary corrections before returning it to me. This is also a good time to make any additions about the school's positive culture that would enhance the data. You may also feel free to bring it to my attention and indicate (by phone at 860.874.8123) the changes that you would like to be made.

Once again, I thank you for your invaluable input to my study. Now, I anxiously look forward to receiving your verification of the data, so that I can continue with the next steps in the analyzing process.

May God continue to bless and use you in His service!

Evelyn P. Savory

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW DOCUMENTS

CONSENT FORM



**Leadership & Administration – School of Education**

***INFORMED CONSENT FORM***

**Perceptions of Leadership Characteristics of Principals Who Influence Positive School Culture in Adventist K-12 Schools in a Midwest Union**

I have been told that Evelyn Savory will be interviewing me \_\_\_\_\_ for the purpose of completing her doctoral degree in Leadership and Administration from the School of Education at Andrews University.

I have been told that the purpose of the study is to explore, understand, and describe perceptions of leadership characteristics of principals who influence positive culture in Adventist Schools in a Midwest Seventh-day Adventist Union.

I have been told that my participation in the study will help experienced principals, new principals, teachers, and supervisors to identify essential characteristics needed in the principals' leadership role in cultivating and influencing positive school culture in Adventist K-12 schools.

I have been told that the study will be conducted by face-to-face in-person interviews that will be recorded. The interviews will last up for about 50 minutes to one hour. Participation in this study will involve follow up interviews as necessary. Further, I understand that the study will be conducted in a place that absolves all of any liability, whether at my place of employment, Andrews University, or a meeting place of convenience. None of the interview questions will involve any experiment.

I have been told that by me participating in the interview, that there will be no implied liability whether oral or written of my legal rights.

I have been told that my participation in this study will result in no physical, sociological, psychological risks, stress, discomfort or invasion of my privacy.

I acknowledge that my participation in the study is fully voluntary. I have been told that refusal to participate in this study will involve no penalties or loss of benefits to which I am entitled and that I may still receive the following established form of treatment.

I have been told that my identity in this study will not be disclosed in any published document.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have been told that there will be no cost to me for participating in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have been told that I will not receive any monetary compensation or other type of inducement for participating in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have been told that if i have any questions pertaining to this study and wish to contact dr. James Jeffery, Evelyn's chair I may contact him at (269) 471-3481 or jimfeff@andrews.edu. This research is carried out under the oversight of the Andrews University's Institutional Review board (IRB). Any inquiries about research participant's rights may be addressed to the IRB by calling (269) 471-6361.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have read the contents of this consent form and have listened to the verbal explanation given by Evelyn Savory. My questions concerning this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby give voluntary consent to participate in this study. I am fully aware that if I have any additional questions or concerns. I may contact Evelyn Savory in writing at home: 4962 Claredon Place, Berrien Springs, MI 49103; email: evelynsavory@yahoo.com or phone: (860) 874-8123-mobile; or at Andrews University: email: esavory@andrews.edu or by phone: (269) 471-3480 - office.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have been given a copy of this consent.

\_\_\_\_\_ My participation in this study occurred on \_\_\_\_\_ and involved a \_\_\_\_\_ minutes interview between Evelyn Savory and me.

Thank you for taking time to participate in this research.

|                  |           |       |
|------------------|-----------|-------|
| _____            | _____     | _____ |
| Participant name | Signature | Date  |
| _____            |           | _____ |
| Witness          |           | Date  |

I have reviewed the contents of this form with the person signing above. i have explained potential risks and benefits of the study.

|                      |           |       |
|----------------------|-----------|-------|
| _____                | _____     | _____ |
| Signature of Advisor | Telephone | Date  |

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### *Questions for the Principal*

14. Your conference administration has identified your school as a having a positive school culture. Why do you think this school has been identified as such?
15. How long have you been affiliated with this school and with the Adventist school system?
16. How do you define positive school culture?
17. What do you think the ideal culture of a school would look like?
18. How would you describe the culture of your school?
19. How does your current role influence the school culture?
20. Do you consider yourself a transformational leader? If so, can you please describe in what ways you demonstrate those characteristics in your school?
21. What does it take foster a collegial and/or collaborative relationships among the school's stakeholders?
22. Which do you think influence people's behavior and achievement more? The principal's leadership or the school culture? Why?
23. What are the leadership characteristics that you think best contributes to consistent improvement and/or change within the school culture? (Give examples working with each of the main groups—board, teachers, parents).
24. What would you say is the one aspect of building school culture that you struggle with the most?
25. Being successful as a culture builder, what do you think is the key leadership characteristic to cultivating a positive school culture?
26. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your success as a school leader?

*Questions for Stakeholders (School Board Chair and Teacher):*

12. Your conference administration has identified your school as a having a positive school culture. Why do you think this school has been identified as such?
13. How long have you been affiliated with this school and with the Adventist school system?
14. What do you think the ideal culture of a school would look like?
15. How would you describe the culture of your school?
16. How does your current role influence the school culture?
17. How much influence do you think the principal has in changing or improving the school culture? Please explain.
18. Which do you think influence people's behavior and achievement more--The principal's leadership or the school culture? Why?
19. What are the leadership characteristics that you think best contribute to consistent improvement and/or change within the school culture?
20. How do you view the positive and/or negative influence of your principal's leadership characteristics on the school culture?
21. What does it take, in your opinion, create and sustain positive culture in an Adventist school?
22. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your principal's leadership?



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## REFERENCE LIST

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VITA

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#### **Educational Preparation**

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1993 M.Ed., Administration and C&I, Atlantic Union College, South Lancaster, MA,  
1981 B.A., Elementary Education, University of Southern Caribbean, Trinidad &  
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#### **Professional Experience**

- 2012—present, Graduate Assistant, Reading Teacher-Mentor, Center for Reading,  
Learning, & Assessment, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI  
2011-2012 Internship Coordinator, School of Education, Educational Leadership, K-12,  
Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI  
2006-2011 Principal, George E. Peters Adventist School, Hyattsville, MD  
2005-2006 Principal-Teacher, Capital City Adventist School, Indianapolis, IN  
2002-2005 Principal-Teacher, Fairfield County SDA School, Bridgeport, CT  
2001-2002 Principal, Hartford S.D.A. Area School, Hartford, CT  
1995-2001 Principal, Berea S.D.A Academy, Boston, MA  
1990-1995 Teacher, Berea S.D.A Academy, Boston, MA  
1989-1990 Teacher, Excelsior SDA School, Brooklyn, NY  
1981-1989 Principal-Teacher, Road Town SDA School, Tortola, BVI  
1972-1975 Teacher, Grove Government School, East Bank, Guyana  
1970-1972 Teacher, Matthews Ridge Government School, North West, Guyana

#### **Published Work**

- *The Listening Principal: Engagement, Empowerment, and Leadership*, co-authored with Marva McIntosh, and published by The Journal of Adventist Education, 2012
- *Recruiting Strategies for S.D.A. Principals* (paper) published on Circle, with Garry Gifford, 2006

#### **Honors, Awards, and Recognition**

- 2001 Leadership & Service recognition, State of Massachusetts  
2000 Outstanding Teacher, Massachusetts Guyanese Association  
1999 Dedicated Leadership & Service, Berea SDA Academy  
1994 Commissioned Adventist Teacher  
1989 Dedicated Service Award, Road Town, SDA School

#### **Certifications**

- 2010 Administrator (Endorsements-Principal, Curriculum & Instruction)  
2010 Professional (Teaching Certificate, North American Division of Seventh-day  
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2010 MA State Licensed Elementary Teacher (1-6)  
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