What is this research about?
In addition to fulfilling academic graduation requirements, successful completion of high school may also require that students navigate their way within the values and norms of individual school cultures. In other words, students must attempt to master both the formal curriculum and the “hidden curriculum” of their daily interactions with administrators, teachers, and peers.

This study investigated the impact of secondary school culture, on academic achievement and student engagement in two Ontario secondary schools. In particular, school culture was defined as including the principles, values and basic assumptions that guide a school’s administrative procedures and organizational structures; shaping the nature of relationships between and amongst students and school staff.

What you need to know:
This study investigated the impact of secondary school culture on the academic achievement and engagement of students in two Ontario secondary schools. Although student survey and interview results indicated that school culture did not have a significant impact on student achievement, the degree to which students felt respected, and the extent to which students believed that their school encouraged their achievement, did significantly impact students’ sense of belonging in their school community.

Student engagement was defined in terms of students’ sense of belonging, the belief that their school encourages all students to learn, the extent of students’ participation in both academic and extra-curricular activities, and the extent to which student felt isolated in their school.
community.

What did the researchers do?
268 grade 11 students (137 females and 131 males) completed a survey which explored students' opinions regarding:

(a) school administrative practices;

(a) the nature of their relationships with school staff;

(a) the extent of their participation in school life; and

(a) the state of their peer relationships.

The survey contained a mixture of both closed ended questions where student participants chose from a 5 point Likert-scale and open ended questions that allowed students to respond in their own words.

In addition to the survey, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with six students (5 females and 1 male) to further explore the opinions expressed in the survey.

Both schools had a student population between 900-1000 students and were located in a mid-sized Ontario city. Of the participating students, 50.7% were enrolled in General level courses; 45.1% in Advance level courses; and 1.5% were in Basic level or special needs courses.

What did the researchers find?
Results from this study revealed that while school culture had a limited impact on student achievement in terms of grade point average (GPA) or the level of their course enrollment (academic, general or basic), there were several impacts on student engagement in school:

• The degree to which students felt respected and the extent to which students believed that their school encouraged their achievement significantly impacted students’ sense of belonging;

• Students who reported feeling comfortable entering new social situations were more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities and were less likely to feel isolated in their school community;
Students who perceived that schools were designed to benefit only a select few, on the other hand, reported lower levels of engagement in their school.

The researcher concluded that secondary school cultures can either be inclusive in nature in that they actively seek to enhance students’ sense of belonging or they can engage in practices that exclude some students from becoming full participants in the school community.

How can you use this research?
Teachers and administrators may wish to consider:

- Consulting the broader body of literature on the impact of school culture on various student outcomes;
- Actively engaging in inclusionary practices such as heterogeneous student groupings and even application of school codes of behavior to support the engagement of all students;
- proactively surveying the student population to obtain their input on activities or practices specific to their context that would enhance their engagement in school life

Original article:
To learn more about this research study, we invite you to read the original research article:


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About this summary

The Ontario Education Research Exchange (OERE) is a project of the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research, an Ontario network promoting the use of research in education. The OERE’s clear language summaries of academic research aim to support this mandate.

This summary has been adapted from the ResearchSnapshot series developed by York University and ResearchImpact and has been developed according to writing and design principles unique to OERE. For more information about this summary or the OERE network please contact oere.knaer.oise@utoronto.ca.

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