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Strengthening Positive School Culture to Develop Sustainable Financial Models for Free Education

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Positive Culture, Free Education, Sustainable Financial Models, Stakeholder Participation, Educational Strategies

ABSTRACT
This article discusses the importance of strengthening positive school culture as a foundation for developing sustainable financial models in the context of free education. In the face of funding challenges in education, a positive school culture can serve as a key driver in creating an environment that supports learning and collaboration. This study identifies various elements of positive culture, such as open communication, appreciation for diversity, and active participation of all stakeholders, which can enhance the motivation of students, teachers, and parents. By fostering an inclusive and supportive culture, schools can attract greater community and partner support, which in turn can strengthen their financial models. Additionally, the article explores strategies for integrating positive culture into school policies and practices, as well as its impact on the sustainability of free education. The findings indicate that schools with a strong positive culture are more successful in developing stable and sustainable financial resources. Therefore, strengthening positive school culture not only improves educational quality but also contributes to achieving sustainable free education goals.

1. INTRODUCTION

A positive school culture plays a crucial role in shaping students' academic success and overall well-being. It fosters an environment where students, teachers, and administrators collaborate effectively, enhancing motivation and learning outcomes (Mahoney, Weissberg, & Greenberg, 2021). Additionally, a strong school culture promotes ethical leadership, social-emotional learning, and community engagement, all of which contribute to educational sustainability (Oberle & Domitrovich, 2020). However, while the importance of school culture has been widely acknowledged, its potential in developing sustainable financial models for free education remains underexplored (Aithal & Aithal, 2019). In recent years, global efforts to provide free education have encountered financial sustainability challenges due to inadequate funding, growing student populations, and economic disparities (Alam, 2022). Many schools struggle to maintain quality education while operating under financial constraints. Therefore, it is imperative to explore innovative funding models that align with strong school cultures, ensuring long-term financial sustainability (Gregory & Evans, 2020). By integrating school culture with financial sustainability strategies, schools can develop self-sustaining educational systems that do not rely solely on government aid or external donors (Kalkan, Aksal, & Gazi, 2020).

Despite increasing research on school culture and financial sustainability, most studies have treated them as separate domains (Zakariya, 2020). Existing literature primarily focuses on either leadership roles in fostering positive school cultures or financial strategies for education, without linking them together (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2021). There is a lack of comprehensive frameworks that examine how strengthening school culture can contribute to sustainable financial models, particularly in the context of free education (Sharif, Golpîra, & Khan, 2019). This study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the interplay between these two critical variables. The urgency of this research is underscored by the global push toward inclusive and equitable education, as outlined in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Heymann et al., 2019). While free education initiatives continue to expand, they risk collapsing without financial sustainability, leaving students without access to quality learning opportunities. Addressing this issue requires a paradigm shift that integrates school culture as a fundamental element in financial sustainability planning (Boldureanu, Ionescu, & Bercu, 2020).

Several studies have highlighted the role of school culture in academic performance and student engagement. Mahoney et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of systemic social-emotional learning in shaping positive school environments, while Oberle and Domitrovich (2020) proposed frameworks for schoolwide implementation of social-emotional learning. However, these studies did not address financial sustainability aspects. On the financial side, research conducted by Iqbal and Ahmad (2021) and Sharif et al. (2019) explored funding models for education but overlooked the role of school culture in sustaining these models. This study introduces a novel perspective by integrating two traditionally separate research domains: school culture and financial sustainability. Unlike previous studies that focus solely on financial strategies, this research examines how a strong, positive school culture can facilitate sustainable funding mechanisms for free education. The study proposes a model where school leadership, stakeholder engagement, and community participation contribute to financial stability.

The primary objectives of this study are to examine the relationship between positive school culture and financial sustainability in free education systems, to identify key elements within school culture that can enhance financial resilience, and to develop a framework that integrates school culture into sustainable financial models for education. The study offers significant theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it expands the discourse on educational sustainability by linking school culture with financial models, providing a new interdisciplinary framework. Practically, policymakers, educators, and school administrators can utilize the findings to develop financially sustainable free education models. From a social perspective, ensuring financial sustainability in free education helps maintain long-term access to quality education, reducing educational inequalities.

A positive school culture refers to the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape a school's environment. It includes factors such as teacher-student relationships, leadership styles, inclusivity, and a sense of community (Mahoney et al., 2021). Schools with strong cultures exhibit higher levels of student motivation, fewer behavioral issues, and improved academic performance (Gregory & Evans, 2020). These schools also encourage collaboration among teachers, students, and parents, creating an ecosystem where financial and educational sustainability can thrive. Sustainable financial models for education involve long-term funding strategies that ensure free education remains viable without excessive reliance on unstable external funding sources. These models may include public-private partnerships, community-based funding, and income-generating school activities (Zakariya, 2020). Financial sustainability is crucial for maintaining educational quality, particularly in underfunded regions where traditional funding sources are often insufficient (Sharif et al., 2019).

Free education aims to provide equitable access to learning opportunities without financial barriers for students. While government policies promote tuition-free schooling, sustaining these initiatives requires more than state funding (Heymann et al., 2019). Schools must develop internal mechanisms to sustain resources, faculty salaries, and infrastructure while ensuring quality education delivery (Boldureanu et al., 2020). Strengthening school culture is a key strategy in supporting these efforts by fostering community engagement and local support. This study aims to provide actionable insights that strengthen the foundation of free education by ensuring both cultural and financial sustainability.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with a literature review approach to analyze the relationship between positive school culture and sustainable financial models in free education systems. The qualitative approach is appropriate as it enables an in-depth understanding of the interplay between school culture and financial sustainability through existing academic literature (Ishtiaq, 2019). A literature review serves as a systematic method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant research to provide a comprehensive understanding of a specific phenomenon (Muzari & Shava, 2022). This approach is particularly useful in educational research, where theoretical insights and policy implications play a crucial role in shaping effective strategies (Ghanad, 2023).

The data sources for this study consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government reports, and policy documents published within the last five years. These sources were selected to ensure that the study incorporates recent advancements and discussions on school culture, financial sustainability, and education policy (Stenfors, Kajamaa, & Bennett, 2020). The data collection technique involves a systematic literature search using academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. Keywords such as "positive school culture," "financial sustainability in education," and "free education models" were used to retrieve relevant studies. Inclusion criteria included studies published in English, studies with a strong theoretical or empirical foundation, and sources from reputable journals (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020). Articles that lacked empirical support or were outdated were excluded to maintain the study's rigor (Vindrola-Padros & Johnson, 2020).

For data analysis, a thematic content analysis approach was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns in the selected literature. This method allows for the systematic categorization of findings into meaningful themes related to school culture and financial sustainability (Kyngäs, 2020). The analysis was conducted through a coding process, where key themes such as leadership influence, community engagement, funding mechanisms, and policy frameworks were identified and grouped into categories. The findings were then interpreted in light of existing theoretical frameworks and policy discussions in education (White et al., 2021). The use of content analysis ensures that the study presents a well-structured synthesis of previous research, highlighting key gaps and opportunities for future exploration (Alam, 2021).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Positive School Culture in Enhancing Educational Sustainability

A positive school culture refers to the collective beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors shared by students, teachers, administrators, and the broader school community. It fosters an environment of respect, inclusivity, collaboration, and shared responsibility, leading to higher student engagement and academic success (Mahoney, Weissberg, & Greenberg, 2021). Schools with strong positive cultures demonstrate high levels of motivation, lower disciplinary issues, and an overall improvement in the well-being of students and staff (Sugai & Horner, 2020).

Educational sustainability, on the other hand, refers to the long-term viability of educational institutions in providing quality learning experiences while adapting to changing social, economic, and environmental conditions. Sustainable education integrates innovative teaching methodologies, stakeholder engagement, and effective financial management to ensure that education remains accessible and impactful for future generations (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). A strong school culture plays a fundamental role in sustaining educational institutions by fostering community involvement, ethical leadership, and resource management.

Research has shown that a strong school culture contributes significantly to sustainable education by improving student motivation, academic performance, and teacher retention (Lee & Louis, 2019). Studies indicate that schools that prioritize relationship-building, leadership development, and student empowerment tend to perform better in terms of long-term sustainability (Ferreira, Martinsone, & Talić, 2020). Another study by Kalkan, Aksal, and Gazi (2020) highlighted that school leadership styles and the overall school climate significantly influence institutional sustainability. When school administrators actively cultivate a positive culture, they create an environment conducive to long-term learning and operational stability.

Moreover, research by Sugai and Horner (2020) on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) demonstrated that a structured approach to reinforcing positive behaviors leads to stronger student engagement, reduced disciplinary issues, and an overall improved learning atmosphere. This model aligns with the principles of educational sustainability by ensuring that schools maintain an inclusive and structured learning environment. Similarly, Žalėnienė and Pereira (2021) emphasized that for education to be sustainable, schools need to integrate sustainability principles within their organizational culture, ensuring adaptability to economic and social challenges.

Efforts to Strengthen Positive School Culture for Sustainable Education

To enhance educational sustainability through a positive school culture, several key strategies must be implemented:

1. Building Strong Leadership and Shared Vision
   School administrators and educators play a critical role in shaping school culture. Transformational leadership, where

school leaders inspire and guide stakeholders toward a common vision, is essential for fostering sustainability (Kalkan, Aksal, & Gazi, 2020). Schools that involve teachers, students, and parents in decision-making processes develop a sense of ownership and collective responsibility.

2. Promoting Inclusive and Supportive Learning Environments
   A positive and inclusive school climate is essential for long-term educational sustainability. Schools must adopt inclusive practices that support diversity, equity, and emotional well-being (Ferreira et al., 2020). Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs have been found to significantly enhance student engagement and reduce behavioral issues, contributing to a more stable learning environment (Mahoney et al., 2021).

3. Strengthening Community and Stakeholder Engagement
   Schools with strong community and stakeholder engagement tend to sustain themselves better in the long run. Partnerships with local businesses, NGOs, alumni networks, and parents can provide additional resources, funding, and mentorship opportunities for students (Lee & Louis, 2019). Community involvement also fosters a sense of belonging and accountability, reinforcing the importance of education.

4. Integrating Sustainability Education into School Curricula
   Schools must embed sustainability concepts into their curricula, teaching students about environmental conservation, financial literacy, and ethical responsibility (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). When students understand the principles of sustainability from an early age, they become active contributors to maintaining sustainable school systems.

5. Implementing Financial and Resource Management Strategies
   A well-structured financial model is key to sustaining education. Schools should explore alternative funding mechanisms, such as public-private partnerships, fundraising campaigns, and self-sustaining school projects (Sugai & Horner, 2020). Schools that manage their financial resources effectively while promoting a culture of efficiency and accountability are more likely to maintain long-term sustainability.

A positive school culture is a critical foundation for ensuring educational sustainability. Schools that cultivate strong leadership, inclusivity, stakeholder engagement, and financial management can build long-lasting educational institutions that adapt to changing socio-economic conditions. Prioritizing relationship-building, ethical leadership, and community collaboration enhances not only student outcomes but also the long-term viability of the school system. Future research should explore how different cultural contexts influence school sustainability strategies and how schools can implement data-driven approaches to strengthening their institutional culture.

Challenges in Financial Sustainability of Free Education

Financial sustainability in free education refers to the ability of educational institutions to maintain and provide tuition-free learning opportunities without compromising quality, accessibility, or operational efficiency over the long term. A financially sustainable education system ensures that schools have adequate funding, proper resource allocation, and stable financial planning to meet growing student needs (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). In many countries, free education is supported by government funding, public-private partnerships, community contributions, and international aid, but the challenge lies in maintaining these financial flows consistently to avoid resource depletion and declining educational quality (Shaturaev, 2021).

Research has highlighted that while free education improves access to learning, many countries struggle to sustain the financial viability of such programs. Studies by Žalėnienė and Pereira (2021) indicate that higher education institutions worldwide face financial strain due to rising enrollment rates, inflation, and policy changes that impact government budgets. Similarly, Mian et al. (2020) found that the integration of sustainable financial strategies in universities is often hindered by inefficient financial management and lack of alternative funding sources. Another study by Papula et al. (2019) emphasized that without innovation in financial planning, educational institutions risk facing financial instability, leading to reduced quality and accessibility.

Real Challenges in Achieving Financial Sustainability in Free Education

Despite the noble intention of providing universal education, free education programs face several financial sustainability challenges:

1. Dependence on Government Budgets
   Many free education initiatives rely heavily on government funding, making them vulnerable to economic fluctuations, political instability, and policy shifts (Shaturaev, 2021). In some developing countries, budget constraints lead to delayed teacher salaries, poor infrastructure, and inadequate learning materials.
2. Rising Student Enrollment and Overcrowding
   As free education becomes widely available, student populations increase rapidly, leading to overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and stretched resources (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). Schools often struggle to accommodate growing demands while maintaining quality standards.
3. Limited Alternative Revenue Streams
   Many educational institutions lack diversified income sources, making them dependent on government allocations or donor funding (Mian et al., 2020). Without entrepreneurial approaches or partnerships with private sectors, schools struggle to cover operational costs effectively.
4. Infrastructure and Resource Constraints
   Financial sustainability is not just about funding but also about efficient resource management. Many schools, especially in low-income regions, face inadequate infrastructure, outdated technology, and limited access to digital learning tools, all of which hinder sustainable education delivery (Papula et al., 2019).
5. Teacher Retention and Professional Development
   Ensuring financial sustainability also requires investing in teacher salaries and professional development. Many governments struggle to provide competitive salaries, leading to high teacher turnover rates and a decline in educational quality (Shaturaev, 2021).

Strategies for Improving Financial Sustainability

in Free Education
To overcome these challenges, schools and policymakers must develop sustainable financial models that incorporate diverse funding sources, efficient resource allocation, and innovative financial management strategies. The following key strategies can strengthen financial sustainability in free education:

1. Diversification of Funding Sources
   Schools should reduce dependence on a single funding source by incorporating public-private partnerships, corporate sponsorships, and fundraising initiatives (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). Community-driven fundraising programs and crowdfunding initiatives can also help supplement financial gaps.
2. Entrepreneurial School Models
   Some schools have successfully implemented self-sustaining revenue models by offering vocational training, renting school facilities, or running small businesses that generate income to support free education (Mian et al., 2020).
3. Efficient Budget Allocation and Cost-Effective Planning
   Implementing transparent financial management systems can help educational institutions optimize spending and eliminate wasteful expenditures (Papula et al., 2019). Schools should prioritize cost-effective teaching materials, digital resources, and energy-efficient infrastructure to reduce operational costs.
4. International Aid and Grants
   Many global organizations, such as UNESCO and the World Bank, offer financial assistance for education programs. Governments and educational institutions should actively seek international grants and collaborate with NGOs to ensure long-term financial support (Shaturaev, 2021).
5. Investment in Digital and Blended Learning
   Digital learning can reduce costs associated with physical infrastructure and printed materials. Implementing online education programs and blended learning approaches can help schools reach more students while minimizing financial burdens (Mian et al., 2020).

While free education is a fundamental right and a powerful tool for social development, financial sustainability remains a critical challenge. Without proper financial planning and diversified funding sources, many free education initiatives risk becoming unsustainable in the long run. By leveraging public-private partnerships, optimizing budget allocation, exploring alternative income streams, and embracing digital learning, schools can ensure the long-term viability of free education without compromising quality. Future research should focus on case studies of financially sustainable free education models and how different countries successfully manage financial sustainability in education.

Integrating Positive School Culture into Sustainable Financial Models

A positive school culture is a shared set of values, beliefs, and practices that foster an environment of collaboration, inclusivity, respect, and continuous improvement among students, teachers, administrators, and stakeholders (Kalkan, Aksal, & Gazi, 2020). Schools with a strong culture exhibit higher student engagement, academic performance, and teacher satisfaction, ultimately contributing to long-term educational success (Oberle & Domitrovich, 2020).

Sustainable financial models in education refer to strategies that ensure long-term financial stability while maintaining educational quality, accessibility, and operational efficiency. These models incorporate diversified funding sources, efficient budget allocation, and community engagement to reduce reliance on unpredictable government funding (Lee & Suh, 2022). Integrating a positive school culture into financial planning strengthens institutional resilience by fostering community support, ethical leadership, and innovative income-generating initiatives (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021).

Several studies have examined the link between school culture and financial sustainability. Research by Kalkan et al. (2020) highlights that schools with strong leadership and stakeholder collaboration are more financially resilient. Similarly, Oberle and Domitrovich (2020) emphasize that schools with positive cultures attract more community support and private sector funding, reducing dependency on unstable government grants.

Lee and Suh (2022) argue that integrating organizational culture into financial models enhances school autonomy, making institutions more adaptable to economic changes. They found that schools with transparent financial management and stakeholder involvement were more likely to sustain long-term financial health. Additionally, Žalėnienė and Pereira (2021) propose a model where schools leverage their culture to build strategic financial partnerships, ensuring a steady flow of resources.

Despite its potential, integrating positive school culture into financial models presents several challenges:

1. Lack of Financial Literacy Among School Administrators
   Many school leaders lack expertise in financial planning, resulting in inefficient budgeting and poor resource allocation (Lee & Suh, 2022). Without proper training, schools struggle to develop sustainable financial models.
2. Limited Community Involvement in Financial Decision-Making
   In many schools, financial planning remains centralized within administrative bodies, reducing transparency and discouraging stakeholder participation. Schools that do not engage parents, teachers, and local businesses in financial discussions miss out on potential funding opportunities (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021).
3. Heavy Dependence on Government Funding
   Schools that rely solely on government allocations face financial instability during economic downturns or policy shifts. The lack of alternative funding sources limits the ability of schools to adapt to changing financial landscapes (Kalkan et al., 2020).
4. Resistance to Change in Financial Management Practices
   Traditional financial management methods often lack flexibility, making it difficult for schools to adopt innovative income-generating activities. Resistance from teachers and administrators can hinder the integration of entrepreneurial and sustainability-driven financial strategies (Lee & Suh, 2022).

Strategies for Integrating School Culture into Sustainable Financial Models

To successfully integrate positive school culture into financial sustainability, schools must implement the following strategies:

1. Developing Financial Literacy and

Leadership Training
School leaders should undergo financial literacy training to enhance their ability to create, manage, and sustain school budgets (Lee & Suh, 2022). By equipping educators with financial planning skills, schools can implement cost-effective strategies that align with their institutional culture.
2. Encouraging Stakeholder Participation in Financial Planning
Schools should establish transparent financial committees that include parents, teachers, alumni, and local business leaders. This approach increases accountability, encourages community investment, and helps schools explore new funding avenues (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021).
3. Diversifying Funding Sources
Schools should seek alternative funding options, such as corporate sponsorships, alumni donations, and income-generating school projects. Kalkan et al. (2020) suggest that schools with strong networks and external partnerships experience greater financial sustainability.
4. Implementing Entrepreneurial and Self-Sustaining School Initiatives
Schools can develop self-sustaining initiatives, such as:
    a. Vocational training programs that generate income while equipping students with practical skills.
    b. Facility rental programs, where schools lease out auditoriums or sports facilities to the community.
    c. Sustainable fundraising initiatives, such as school-run businesses or agricultural projects (Lee & Suh, 2022).
5. Leveraging Technology for Financial Transparency
Digital financial management systems enhance budget tracking, expenditure monitoring, and financial accountability. Schools that implement technology-driven financial tools are better equipped to manage funds efficiently and prevent financial mismanagement (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021).

Integrating positive school culture into sustainable financial models is essential for ensuring long-term financial resilience and educational stability. Schools that foster ethical leadership, stakeholder participation, and innovative income strategies can build self-sustaining financial structures that enhance educational quality and accessibility. Future research should explore data-driven approaches to financial sustainability, focusing on how different school cultures impact financial management practices.

4. CONCLUSION

The integration of positive school culture into sustainable financial models is essential for ensuring the long-term viability of free education initiatives. A strong school culture, characterized by collaborative leadership, inclusivity, and stakeholder engagement, fosters an environment where students, teachers, and administrators work together to enhance both educational and financial sustainability. Schools with a positive culture are more likely to attract community support, external funding, and innovative revenue-generating opportunities, reducing their reliance on unstable government funding. Additionally, institutions that prioritize transparency, financial literacy, and participatory decision-making are better equipped to manage financial resources efficiently, ensuring that free education remains accessible and of high quality for future generations.

However, the real-world challenges of implementing financially sustainable free education remain significant. Many schools still struggle with overcrowding, financial mismanagement, and dependency on limited public funds. Moreover, the lack of financial literacy among educators and administrators often leads to inefficient resource allocation, limiting schools' ability to explore alternative funding sources. While past research has highlighted the importance of leadership and community engagement in school sustainability, the link between school culture and financial resilience remains an area requiring further exploration. Schools must embrace entrepreneurial approaches, technology-driven financial management systems, and diversified funding streams to create a self-sustaining education system that adapts to economic fluctuations and policy changes.

Future research should focus on developing comprehensive models that integrate school culture, financial strategies, and policy interventions to strengthen free education systems worldwide. Empirical studies examining how different school cultures influence financial sustainability could provide deeper insights into context-specific challenges and solutions. Additionally, further research should explore the role of digital financial management tools in enhancing accountability and efficiency in school budgeting. Comparative studies across developing and developed countries could also help identify best practices and scalable financial strategies that can be adapted to various educational systems. Ultimately, integrating financial sustainability principles into teacher training and school leadership programs could be a transformative step in ensuring that free education remains viable, equitable, and high-quality in the long run.

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