Administrator Views of Influential Factors on School Climate at Various Schools in Northeast

Tennessee

By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the variables leading to a positive school climate, according to school administrators in selected school systems in East Tennessee. The study identifies which elements of school climate and culture are the most important among the participants of this study. The sample consisted of 8 administrators from 4 selected school systems in Northeast Tennessee. The participants selected for this study were school principals, assistant school principals, and supervisors related to curriculum and instruction. Administrators participating in the interviews were asked questions related to the research questions of this study. The researcher designed questions to gain an understanding of the factors that influence school climate, ways in which the interviewee creates a positive school climate, and how they maintain a positive school climate, and which dimensions of school climate are of the most significance. After a detailed analysis of the literature and the interview data, the researcher identified emerging themes regarding factors that impact and help to create a positive school climate: Safety, teaching, and learning, interpersonal relationships, institutional environment, community relationships. Relationships were identified by participants as an important dimension that affects school climate. Participants agreed that complacency is the greatest struggle facing the school climate. These findings suggest a need for districts and schools to evaluate school climate routinely and comprehensively as well as recognize student, staff, and community input. Future research should also include teacher and student perspectives.

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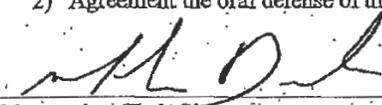
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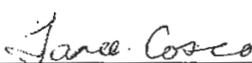
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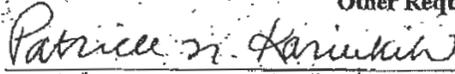
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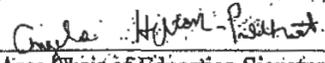
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family past and present, who have always inspired me and believed in me. I could have not done this without your love and support. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM
Introduction

It is important for the progress of a nation to have a successful education system. With the world becoming increasingly competitive, the overall education system in the United States is seen as falling short of most industrialized nations. Through the Department of Education, the U.S. federal government has made it a priority over the years to bring focus on our nation's schools and school districts that are falling short of expectations (Leverson, et al., 2016). The major questions lie in what the school administrators and leadership are doing about improving the overall structure at these schools. While graduation rates are up, most students are entering college or the workforce with little understanding of necessary skills (Wise, 2018).

During the past 100 years, educators and researchers have identified the central role schools play in our modern society. The skills taught in our educational system helped us win world wars, brought us out of economic depressions, sent men and women into outer space, and cured countless diseases. In the last four decades, the importance of our education system has had heightened expectations due to the increased globalization of our economy. School climate has been a variable that has been introduced in the last decade to show a correlation with various factors of student achievement. School leadership from the central office to the school-level have played an essential role in defining the type of school climate and culture that exists for successful students. It is essential for educational research to investigate the various dimensions of school climate on overall effectiveness (Thapa et al., 2012).

Statement of the Problem

The importance of school climate has been recognized as having a significant impact on education. Cohen, et al (2009) stated that school climate and culture is essential for students to

feel socially, expressively, and physically safe in schools. The framework of school climate includes students', the norms of parents' and school staff, principles, interactions, pedagogy, as well as the structure and efficiency of the school.

The advancement of a positive school climate varies across various dimensions based on an individual school's strengths and limitations. According to Ice, et al. (2015), school culture and climate improvement can be characterized as an "intentional, strategic, collaborative, transparent, and coordinated effort" to strengthen learning environments within a school building and that including the community is also an essential piece of the process for successful school improvement.

When relationships among students in K-12 are positive, when teachers feel they have the correct resources, and when the school has effective leadership and relationships; the student standardized test scores and GPA improve. Research shows the link between student achievement and resources such as teacher education and experience, teacher to student ratio, updated facilities, classroom materials/technology, and enough local monies allocated to education (Wang and Degol, 2016). The strengths and weaknesses of the nation are reflected in how well our educational institutions are doing. Due to the increasing competitiveness of our economy and the rapid social changes occurring throughout society, our schools have been at the forefront of either helping or halting how we deal with those circumstances.

Literature related to school climate has supported a relationship with student and school achievement. It is important for educational research to understand the impact of climate and culture in schools and the various contributing factors (Goodman-Scott, et al 2018). The data gathered during this study will analyze the importance of a positive school climate, and the variables school administrators feel that influence it.

The main question of this study is, what variables impact school climate according to school administrators? Using qualitative research, this study focuses on the methods and variables that will create a positive school climate and culture. The data will provide educational researchers, leaders, and educators with information regarding what administrators view as variables connected with positive school climate and culture.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to examine the variables leading to a positive school climate, according to school administrators in selected school systems in East Tennessee. The purpose is to identify which elements of school climate and culture are the most important among the participants of this study. Qualitative research methods will be used throughout this study to show what school administrators perceive the issue. Through research, surveys, and interviews, the role of school administrators ranging from central office leaders to school principals, will be analyzed. Participants of this study will be selected using focused consideration.

Rationale for the study

The researcher was interested in learning what the variables were leading to a positive school climate, according to school administrators in selected school systems in East Tennessee. Through surveys and interviews with school administrators, the researcher would like to identify the variables of school climate and culture, these individuals find to be the most important in establishing a positive school climate and culture. This study has implications on educational research, school leaders, educators, and the community-at-large.

Research Questions

The primary research questions for this study are:

RQ1: What variables do school administrators perceive to be the most important when trying to establish a positive school climate and culture?

RQ2: What commonalities are present among variables that are used to establish a positive school climate and culture?

RQ3: What differences are present among variables that are used to establish a positive school climate and culture?

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

A positive school climate has been identified as the foundation for having a successful school environment. To understand the formation of school climate, one must understand the factors that influence the school atmosphere and ways to build a positive school climate. This chapter provides a critical review of the literature relevant to the study. The discussion of this literature is organized into three sections. The theoretical foundations of school climate, the dimensions of school climate, and school administrators' role in school climate are examined.

Theoretical Foundations

The concept of school climate is related to the various modes of the school environment. School climate has been defined by the National School Climate Council (2007) as the norms, values, and expectations that assist the people in that environment feeling safe from social, emotional, and physical aspects. It is the atmosphere of a school building where impressions, moods, and feelings of the people involved in the environment can be experienced (National School Climate Council, 2007).

School climate is often the target of school improvement plans due to its possible positive impact on the school. Bradshaw (2014) defines school climate as the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between students, teachers, and administrators and set acceptable behavior and norms for the school. School climate is a product of teacher and student social interactions and is influenced by educational and social values. Ali (2016) asserts climate is not quantifiable; it is a way of thinking. Examples of positive elements of school climate are an atmosphere of caring, a motivating curriculum, professional collegiality, and closeness to parents in the community.

According to Maxwell, et al. (2017), the school climate impacts the feelings and willingness of students to get involved in the school environment, as well as their enthusiasm to contribute to the educational activities being performed in the school. The commitment of the teachers and students to extend the vision of inclusion and involvement requires the climate of school to reflect the characteristics of respect, honesty, dignity, equity, justice, and protection (Maxwell, et al., 2017).

In a positive school environment where the leaders foster an inclusive environment for everyone, students will feel like they belong. Wilson (2012) states that establishing a climate of inclusivity can be difficult and explains that all group members must be committed to making everyone feel welcome and focused on the same goals. According to Maslow (1970), belongingness and love needs are more fundamental than value and achievement. This assertion means that many children are not motivated to achieve until their belonging needs are met. Therefore, educational environments must focus on the students' needs and work to build and create a positive school climate where children can flourish.

Thapa et al. (2012) summarized his ideas on the importance of school climate by explaining that any sustainable, positive school climate will foster youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributive, and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families, and educators work together to develop and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits and satisfaction of learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school as well as the care of the physical environment (Thapa et al., 2012).

In supportive school climates, Kılınç (2013) claims that members of the school community respect each other and find ways to collaborate to increase classroom instruction quality. Furthermore, principals in such school climates are open to ideas and suggestions from teachers as teachers are regarded as the potential power to create a healthy and proper school climate. Professional orientation is also present in supportive school climates. Additionally, strong shared and pleasant relationships are experienced in intimate school climates in which teachers and principals support each other, reflect on ideas, and socialize together (Kılınç, 2013).

A healthy school climate defines a school environment that includes an orderly and serious workplace, a rewarding mechanism for students' academic achievement, coherent work units built upon trustworthy relationships among faculty members, and effective principals focusing primarily on student learning. Kılınç (2013) stated that teachers become more committed to the teaching profession in positive school climates, and principals will be more likely to work to improve the quality of instruction by creating appropriate conditions for colleagues to collaborate effectively.

Working relationships are also influential factors that influence the school climate. Aldridge and Fraser (2015) stated that teachers who have mutually respectful, supportive, and positive group chemistry as crucial in fostering high levels of professional commitment and a favorable climate. They can also be promoted through mutual exchange of skills and enthusiasm to help each other. The staff leaders are having a strong influence on the beliefs and opinions of the other staff members. Various teachers state the opinion of a small group of staff members influences the school climate to a greater extent. Therefore, important climate factors that influence student achievement to incorporate academic emphasis, rewards and praise, discipline, staff organization, and student-teacher interaction (2015).

Dimensions of School Climate

Research points to four dimensions that affect school climate: Safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and institutional environment. A positive school climate exists when all school community members feel safe, included, and accepted, and actively promote positive behaviors and interactions. Principles of equity and inclusive education are embedded in the learning environment to support a positive school climate.

Safety. Students and staff should feel safe while at school. A critical component of a strong and positive school climate is a school-wide behavior plan that sets high expectations for behavior, provides clear, developmentally appropriate, consequences for misbehavior, and uses disciplinary incidents to help students learn from their mistakes, improve their behavior, and meet high expectations (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Once the expectations are established, all rules and expectations should be clearly communicated with all students. The U.S. Department of Education suggests that schools should create an instructional approach to discipline to create a positive school climate. Hence, schools must teach students behavioral expectations and help students develop new behavior skills and positive strategies to avoid conflict and focus on learning.

Ramelow, Currie, and Felder-Puig (2015) stated that students must feel physically safe in school, have a clear understanding of the code of conduct, and participate in conflict resolution courses. According to the state of Tennessee, schools must create safe environments so students can focus on learning (TNDOE, 2018). Safe school environments are free of bullying, harassment, threats, physical violence, and substance abuse contact. Recently there has been a rise in the number of State Departments of Education that are supporting the school climate

reform as an essential element in school improvement and bully prevention (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins, D'Alessandro, 2013).

Students working in a structured and orderly environment where they feel safe, supported, and encouraged will become more engaged academically (Wang & Eccles, 2013). The school environment should include high expectations for student achievement and provide academic rigor. Schools must create an environment where students are motivated to learn and feel engaged in school activities. The school should communicate clear rules and procedures and provide attractive and well-maintained surroundings (2013).

Students and staff should have a sense of safety from physical harm while at school. Today's public schools employ various security measures, such as School Resource Officers, security guards, surveillance cameras, metal detectors, and random searches of students and lockers to control school buildings. For students and teachers to focus, they must not feel threatened by physical violence or harm and should feel safe while at school (Peguero, 2015).

Students and staff should sense social-emotional security while at school. Students should feel emotionally secure and accepted so they can focus on learning. Jones (2016) explains that the more one feels accepted and acceptable, the more one will express oneself, act authentically, and be fully present to others. A sense of belonging and acceptance is essential to a young person's mental health and ability to trust and take risks. The students will be eager to participate and be involved if a sense of community is established in the school and in the classroom and the students feel as if he is a part of this community. Research has shown a relationship between a sense of belonging with acceptance and self-esteem (2016).

Teaching and Learning. The most important educational goal is for students to learn. Another important goal is to make this newly gained knowledge and information purposeful and profound to the students, so that it may be recollected and useful throughout their lives. Fan and Williams (2018) state that an indispensable factor involved in meeting these goals is motivation. If students are unmotivated in one way or another, little learning will likely occur, or if by chance, some learning should take place, it will likely not be remembered. This theory has a great impact on educational organizations. To maximize school-wide and individual classroom teaching programs, administrators and teachers must consider student needs and their hierarchical order (2018).

With strong evidence to connect classroom engagement, classroom climate, and student achievement, teacher and student relationships' strength continues to be relevant and play an important role. Researchers in the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (2007) found that classrooms rated as having a positive climate had students who were highly engaged in classroom activities. In this study in a classroom with a positive climate, high ratings were assigned for teacher sensitivity, productive use on time in class, and strong instructional pedagogy. Low ratings were given for micromanaging of students, chaos, teacher detachment, and student support (2007).

The NSCC (2013) highlighted supportive learning, which included quality teaching and variation in demonstrating learned skills, independent thinking, individualized learning opportunities, and challenging academic environments. The research also considered evidence of social and civic learning opportunities as teaching active listening, emotional regulation, responsibility, and empathy (2013).

According to Xia (2016), student success in school is defined by academic achievement and school adjustment, which is an indicator of student success in later academic engagements. In turn, students' educational attainment is a predictor of working income, mortality, and quality of life. With these known factors and their relation to school climate, students' early success in school may be beneficial in a student's education. Early adolescents go through cognitive changes that facilitate the skills necessary for setting and reaching learning goals for academic tasks. They use effective strategies for learning and showing persistence in completing learning tasks. The researchers' overview and analysis of self-regulated learning and academic achievement found that self-guided learning is not a mental talent or academic ability but an intrinsic directive. Students face multiple changes throughout their time in public schools. As adolescents face transitions from elementary school, middle school, and high school, both academic demands and social demands increase (2016).

The process of teaching and learning is inherently relational. One of the most important aspects of relationships in school is how connected people feel to one another. Relationships refer to how people feel connected with other people and how people feel about themselves. Teachers' interactions with students can directly affect students' behavioral and emotional engagement in the classroom. According to Skinner and Belmont (2009), when teachers support and interact positively with students and each other, students are more likely to be engaged and behave appropriately.

Interpersonal Relationships. The emotional dimension of engagement supports the importance of relationships between teachers and students and teachers to teachers. Students conceptualize emotional engagement as a feeling of identification and investment and a sense of belonging, feeling an important part of the school body, and finding value in the school

experience (Connor, 2015). Effective teachers will find a way to get to know their students personally and make them feel valued and important. This relationship will manifest into a positive working relationship within the classroom (2015).

School teachers serve as mentors, role models, sources of encouragement and support, and representatives of the educational system. Therefore, students' relationships with teachers can shape students' behavior in school and influence their academic progress and success. Connor (2015) says that relationships build a sense of community and are a vital component of emotional human nature. Tough (2012) makes the case of shared leadership in helping to develop character. Shared leadership requires each of us to have moral and performance character. Moral character is about ethical traits such as honesty, generosity, and integrity. Performance character refers to characteristics that enhance personal effectiveness: self-control, persistence, grit, and optimism. Shared leadership is a partnership with vitality and spirit, weaving adult leaders to their relationships into a school climate that makes students want to be at school and contribute to the school's success. Shared leadership gives students the strength, leadership skills, and belief in collaboration to handle adversity (2012).

Relationships among teachers are also crucial for building a positive school climate. Although caring teachers are devoted to supporting students through their academic success, teachers must also encourage, support, and respect one another. Connor (2016) explained that building relationships among colleagues is no different from students. Colleagues should use various occasions throughout the day to build more personal and professional associations among coworkers. A more respectful and unique approach and camaraderie feeling may lead to more problem solving and pedagogical collaboration among colleagues. Once a shared vision and common goals are created for the school, teachers can work to accomplish these goals.

Teachers should work together and try to help each other become better. Malinen and Savolainen (2016) stated that this could be in the form of working collaboratively, professional development, classroom management, or any other area that a teacher may need help or advice in. Students need to see teachers working together, helping each other, and building relationships amongst themselves. These observations will help create an environment and a culture of collaboration and set the expectation for students to build these types of relationships (2016).

Institutional Environment. Combining the environmental, structural components of a school, this dimension of school climate includes the physical aspects of a school, such as space, materials, resources, aesthetics, and size. Cohen et al. (2009) highlighted "cleanliness, adequate space, and materials, inviting aesthetic quality, size of the school, curricular and extracurricular offerings" (p. 184) as essential characteristics of the school space. The NSCC (2012) included critical environmental features as "cleanliness, order, and appeal of the facilities and the adequate resources of materials" within the definition.

A school environment that fosters a positive and encouraging school climate will possess a sense of connectedness among the teachers, students, administrators, and parents. Wilson (2012) stated that shared visions lead the school's direction and drive daily instruction and effectiveness. Teachers will feel comfortable working with one another, as students will feel a sense of security to work with teachers and other students. In a positive institutional environment where the leaders foster an inclusive environment for everyone, students will feel like they belong. Wilson (2012) also said that establishing a climate of inclusivity can be challenging. All group members must be committed to making everyone feel welcomed and focused on the same goals (2012).

School climate also is linked to the systemic integration of social and emotional learning (SEL). Osher and Berg (2018) stated that a positive school climate creates the conditions for high-quality implementation of SEL, and likewise, the social and emotional skills of leaders, teachers, and students influence school climate. Rigorous evaluations of school climate and SEL approaches provide some direct evidence that one can improve the other. Aligning each of the above school climate indicators and SEL can often reduce fragmented efforts to build safe, caring, inclusive, and academically productive schools.

Community Relationships. Parent involvement and community relationships have been clearly related to students' learning performance (Larrotta and Yamamura, 2011). As with many aspects of academic success, background and socioeconomic status play strong roles in influencing a student's success. Many suggest the relationship between parent involvement and teacher communication improves student success. Parent-school involvement was measured by the regularity of parent-teacher conferences, volunteering opportunities, or attending extracurricular events. Parent and family involvement were assessed based on how often parents "communicated to their children, talking about what they are studying, and helping with schoolwork." The results showed that "economics, ethnicity, a history of education within the family, and parent involvement played a significant role in their student's achievement" (p. 75).

Grady and Bost (2014) encourage members of the community to be involved in schools. Businesses, colleges, and civic groups should advise students about the post educational options open to them, the implications of staying in school, and the outlook on specific careers. It has also been stated that involving volunteer organizations such as the PTA is critical in developing relationships with family members and the community (2014).

The Role of Administrators

Leadership is a powerful factor that influences the school climate. Gulseses & Gulenay (2014) stated that various teachers stated that mutually respectful support, professionalism, and positive chemistry with administrative leaders help foster high levels of professional commitment and positive climate. A principal's ability to create a positive climate can also determine the efficiency and effectiveness of the school in the progress and development of students (2014).

Principals. The principal is one of the most powerful and influential persons in the school. The principal holds a position to greatly impact students, teachers, and all staff involved in the educational environment. The principal's primary responsibility is to improve the teaching and learning that takes place in the school. According to Allen et al. (2015), a principal must utilize different methods to lead the staff, students, and parents of a school because of the many aspects of instructional leadership. A principal must create a school climate that is conducive to change (Allen et al. 2015).

McCarley (2013) claimed that the school principals in a positive school climate work to build a capacity for change, embrace teachers as leaders, encourage professional development, and provide collaborative growth opportunities among the staff. To create a positive school climate, principals must have an innovative mindset to inspire teachers to perform and meet goals. As a result, leadership styles must be developed that influence relationships between the leader and followers, possessing a mutual commitment to the school's mission and fostering collaboration to facilitate continuous improvement (McCarley, 2013).

Cherkowski (2016) explained how principals should work with their faculty and staff to create a positive culture. Shared leadership at many levels of the school is needed to ensure that any implementation represents all members of the learning community's values and visions. Cherkowski (2016) stated, "Principals should join with teachers to cultivate three forms of capital essential for improving teaching in all schools: human capital (the knowledge and skills of teaching and learning); social capital (the processes and structures that enable relationships built on trust and respect to form bonds among teachers that support the hard work of learning to improve teaching); and decision-making capital (the ability to make wise and informed decisions that reflect the level of professionalism required as a teacher)" (p. 526).

District Leaders. Although the principal plays an essential role in developing a positive school climate, the principal does not have the sole responsibility for leading a learning community. District leaders such as curriculum supervisors, instructional support supervisors, and the director of schools play an important role. Ross and Cozzens (2016) explained that teachers and principals need leadership support through professional development, collaborative planning, and team building activities provided by district leadership. The school district should establish a substantial commitment to supporting and modeling positive relationships and a climate of trust within the school and community (2016).

Collaboration amongst administrators from the district office and the schools should be visible to staff members. Teasley (2017) explains that district leaders should provide all school-based personnel who interact with students with effective professional development and ongoing support and match professional learning opportunities with various school personnel's needs. A school's organizational culture from a leadership perspective provides a sense of identity, promotes achievement orientation, helps shape standards and patterns of behavior, creates

distinct ways of doing things, and determines direction. To maintain a positive school climate, district leaders should provide staff with appropriate training and professional development opportunities (Teasley, 2017).

Summary

School climate is a critical component to building a safe, engaging, and successful school. When a positive climate is established, students will rise above expectations and be eager to learn and be involved in helping to maintain a positive environment. Teachers are going to teach with enthusiasm because they feel satisfied with their job. Core values of honesty and respect for others' rights need to permeate the curriculum. Students must feel that they belong in school, and that their teachers are supportive. A positive school climate exists when all school community members feel safe, included, and accepted, and actively promote positive behaviors and interactions. Principles of equity and inclusive education are embedded by leadership in concert with stakeholders. These principles are introduced into the learning environment to support a positive school climate and a mutually respectful culture.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine variables that create a positive school climate, according to school administrators in selected school systems in East Tennessee. This research will attempt to identify which elements of school climate and culture are considered the most beneficial among this study's participants. Qualitative research methods will be used to examine perceptions of the topic. The data gathered during this study will identify the most beneficial practices, common themes, differences, and overall best practices school administrators view in establishing a positive school climate.

The main question of this study involves which variables are considered most beneficial when trying to create a positive school climate according to school administrators? Using a qualitative research design, this study focuses on the methods and variables perceived to create a positive school climate. The data will provide educational researchers, leaders, and educators with information regarding what administrators view as variables in connection with a positive school climate.

This study has implications for educational research, school leaders, educators, and the community-at-large. The school districts of East Tennessee face various challenges from low socioeconomic conditions to rates of students receiving special education services (Dalton, 2013). This study will add to the overall literature regarding the importance of school climate. The information gathered will help administrators and educators in the region develop possible strategies to cultivate a positive school climate.

This chapter provides a rationale for the qualitative design of the study. The population and sample used in the study are described. Data collection methods for each type of data are included and the analysis of the data sets. This chapter ends with a summary to lead to the results described in Chapter 4.

Research Design

This research aimed to gather data regarding the perspectives of research participants about the phenomenon of school climate. Individual interviews were used to collect data. The researcher identified the most influential dimensions of school climate, according to school administrators. This study is phenomenological in design. Creswell (2012) described a phenomenological study as one that is designed to describe and interpret experience by determining the meaning of the experience as perceived by the people who have participated in it (p. 501). The goal of the research questions was to find the essence of experience as perceived by the participants.

Qualitative research methods were used throughout this study to show the participants' perspectives on the issue. Through this research and the interviews conducted, school administrators' significant role in shaping the climate of a school and school system will be analyzed. Participants in this study were selected using purposeful, criterion sampling. A phenomenological methodology guided the course of this study. This study has implications for researchers, administrators, educators, and students.

Qualitative studies provide rich and descriptive accounts targeted to understanding a phenomenon, a process, or a point of view from those involved (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative research is conducted in a natural setting and seeks to explore human behavior within the context

of a bounded program. A qualitative approach was used in this study to understand school administrator perceptions of which dimensions of school climate are the most influential when trying to create and maintain a positive school climate.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to address the qualitative research in the study:

1. What practices do school administrators identify as most beneficial when trying to establish a positive school climate and culture?

2. What common themes are found between schools/districts with regard to establishing a positive climate/culture?

3. How do schools/districts differ in their approach to establishing a positive climate/culture?

Participants

Administrators in the present study were selected from four school districts in Northeast Tennessee. The administrators were selected through having direct knowledge of these individuals and through direct referrals. Interview selection for this qualitative research was purposeful and identified participants who could best inform the research questions and enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study were selected. Participants in this study were selected due to being recommended by other school administrators and for being in an administrative school role for five years or more. Creswell (2012) has suggested it is critical to select for interviews candidates who are willing to share information openly and honestly.

For this study, the researcher selected either one or two school administrators from each school district based on their role in developing the school climate. School administrators play an important role by providing a guiding instructional framework, ensuring teachers employ effective instructional differentiation techniques, and ensuring teachers routinely and consistently provide challenging and engaging instruction related to grade-level standards (DuFour, 2008).

The participants selected for this study were school principals, assistant school principals, and supervisors related to curriculum and instruction. The principal and assistant principal's roles were chosen because both are often responsible for directing the support provided by the school district. Curriculum and instruction supervisors oversee and monitor the implementation of school improvement programs and have responsibilities for teacher hiring, professional development, and teacher evaluation. They work with principals to create a guiding coalition of key teacher leaders within each school to build enthusiasm for the process (DuFour, 2008).

Instrumentation

The researcher is interested in discovering the characteristics of a positive school climate and culture, according to school administrators in Northeast Tennessee. Through interview questions with school supervisors and principals, the researcher would like to identify the dimensions of school climate that the interviewees find most influential in creating and maintaining a positive school climate. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interview questions were delivered through electronic Zoom conferencing. The Zoom electronic application automatically recorded the conversations.

The purpose of the interview is to allow the participants to share their stories of the phenomenon studied and explain their experience with school climate strategies. The interview

consisted of questions about what creates a positive school climate. Therefore, the researcher designed questions that were thorough and intended to capture the essence of the participants' experience. The interview questions are designed to understand the factors that influence school climate ways in which the interviewee creates a positive school climate, how they maintain a positive school climate, and which dimensions of school climate are of the most significance. The questions were designed around common areas of the research identified in Chapter 2. Questions were developed and categorized using the framework that influences the school climate described in the study. The questions were designed to examine how school administrators are engaged in the school improvement process. The final interview protocol addressed the essential domains and elements for a positive school climate. The questions were open-ended in nature to get the most thorough response from the participants. The following demographic information from the participants was also noted: 1) Gender. 2) Highest academic degree earned. 3) Number of years in school administration.

Interview Questions:

1. To what extent do you believe the school climate is important at your school?

2. Tell me about the atmosphere of your school (or district). If you were describing it to someone who has never been here, what might you say it is like to be a student, teacher, or administrator at this school?

3. How would you explain the administration leadership style, and how does it impact school climate?

4. How does student discipline impact school climate? Does your school have a discipline plan, and how do you feel like it influences school climate?

5. Does parental involvement affect the climate of your school? If so, how does your school (or district) work to involve parents?

6. What are effective strategies for ensuring each student and parent is fully engaged in the school?

7. How do you motivate students to take an active role in creating a positive school climate?

8. What do you see as the greatest challenges facing school climate?

9. What are the shared best practices for your school (or district)? Describe how the best practices help to develop and maintain a positive school climate?

10. What do you consider to be the key elements of establishing and maintaining a safe and secure learning environment?

11. What specific strategy or best practice do you feel has been the most effective in creating a positive school climate in your school (or district)?

12. How do you motivate, encourage, and support your staff?

Data Collection and Procedures

Before the study was conducted, a proposal was sent to the Milligan University IRB for approval. Informed consent was acquired from participants before anyone could participate in the study. Upon approval from the participating school districts and IRB, the researcher began to plan interview meetings. Although the researcher did not expect any identifiable risks associated with the study, precautions were put into place to ensure the research will be neutral. The researcher provided participants with written documentation informing them about the study's

voluntary nature and with an overview of the study. Once informed consent was received, participants were continually provided with information about dates and interviews.

Interviews were scheduled at a time that was convenient for the participant. An email invitation to the Zoom meeting was sent prior to the interview. The researcher conducted the interviews in a private home office. The participants were in their personal office space. No other individuals were present during the interviews. The interviews ranged in time from 20 minutes to 45 minutes and involved one session with each participant. The amount of time spent in each session varied, based on the amount of detail provided by participants in response to the interview and the time allotted by participants for the interview.

The interview responses were used as the primary source of data collection in this qualitative study. The researcher used Google Forms to record all interviews for subsequent analysis. After the interviews were completed, the data were analyzed, the interviews were logged, and common themes were identified. The responses will only be used for research purposes and identified anonymously in research. The data and transcriptions used in this research will be stored in an offline password-protected electronic location on the researcher's personal computer. According to Milligan University IRB guidelines, the storage of data transcripts will be kept in offline electronic storage for 3 years.

Data were collected as stated and not altered. The researcher will represent the data as accurately as possible. The researcher used referential evidence of validity to portray the data taken accurately. To establish the findings' trustworthiness, the researcher conducted member checking during the interview process to validate the accuracy of the findings. Gathering data from different participants and developing themes from the participants' data conveys the credibility of the data. Participants were made aware that the interviews were completely

voluntary and anonymous. If participants had questions or comments, they could contact me through email, phone, or video conferencing to clarify responses. The responses will only be used for research purposes and identified anonymously in research.

Data Analysis

Data from this study allowed the researcher to learn firsthand how school district leaders view and the role districts have on influencing school climate. The interviews were recorded through the Zoom video conferencing tool and the audio files exported and initially transcribed. Words will be transcribed directly to avoid potential bias. When transcribing, the researcher used the letter "P" followed by a number (Ex: P1, P2) to protect the participants' confidentiality. The researcher completed a reflective log while working through the data to capture thoughts as they occur. The data was listened to and reviewed. The researcher developed a general understanding of the information and its meaning.

A multiple step qualitative data analysis was used (Creswell, 2009). Individual administrator responses to each question were recorded on a Google sheet to sort responses into categories. A different label was used for each interview question. Administrator responses were organized into categories. Similar responses were grouped to aid the researcher in developing themes. Interview questions were coded with research questions to develop general themes for response questions. Tables were created to display administrator responses for each theme. Keywords and phrases directly from administrator responses were used to ensure understanding of response themes. The researcher attempted to examine the essence of the school climate, reported themes through descriptive detail, and provided a narration related to the school climate's nature. This research will add to the existing research on this topic and will be used as a resource tool for future research and analysis regarding promoting a positive school climate.

Summary

Through in-depth interviews with school administrators, the researcher strived to determine the most important school climate dimensions that can be used when trying to develop and maintain a positive school climate. A qualitative design was used to determine administrators' perceptions of what is useful in fostering a positive school climate. The researcher reported the findings and conveyed the participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The research questions were answered by themes that emerged from the interview data and were reported in Chapter 4. This chapter provided a detailed description of the research methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER 4 DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the variables that can help create a positive school climate, according to school administrators in selected school systems in Northeast Tennessee. This research will attempt to identify which school climate elements are the most beneficial among the participants of this study. Qualitative research methods will be used to examine perceptions of the topic. The data gathered during this study will identify the most beneficial practices, common themes, differences, and overall best practices school administrators identify as establishing a positive school climate and culture. Participants provided their opinions and thoughts on creating a positive school climate and factors they believe influence the school climate. As outlined in Chapter Three, the data was collected using an interview method. Data was analyzed to provide answers to the research questions guiding this study.

The researcher set out to discover the most influential factors, according to administrators, that influence school climate. The research questions were answered by themes that emerged from the interview data and are reported in chapter 4. Qualitative data assessing administrator perceptions of elements of school climate among the participants of this study were collected from individual interviews in the summer of 2020. The sample consisted of 8 administrators from selected school systems in Northeast Tennessee. The interviews lasted between 20 to 45 minutes. Administrators participating in the interviews were asked questions related to the research questions of this study. The following research questions guided the interviews:

1. What practices do school administrators identify as most beneficial when establishing a positive school climate and culture?

2. What common themes are found between schools/districts regarding establishing a positive climate/culture?

3. How do schools/districts differ in their approach to establishing a positive climate/culture?

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interviews, the researcher began analyzing the interview responses. The first stage of qualitative analysis is familiarization and organization. The researcher listened to the audio transcriptions to become familiar with the data. The responses were organized by interview. The researcher used highlight tools to help identify what school administrators described as influential factors and discover concepts or themes throughout the interview data. The most influential dimensions involved creating and maintaining a positive school climate based on school administrators' perceptions. The following themes are the most influential dimensions in creating and maintaining a positive school climate according to the literature: Safety, teaching, and learning, interpersonal relationships, institutional environment, community relationships.

After a detailed analysis of the data, the researcher identified emerging themes regarding factors that impact and help to create a positive school climate. While much research has been conducted to indicate that a positive school climate will increase positive outcomes in a school setting, research is lacking in the creation of a positive school climate. This study sought to determine the measures that can be taken to create a positive school climate and, therefore,

positively impact a positive school climate. To obtain this information, the researcher sought to understand the perceptions of the professionals who are involved in school leadership.

Demographics

The following demographic information from the participants were as follows:

1. Gender.

2. Highest academic degree earned.

3. Number of years in school administration.

Administrator demographics are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographics of Participants*

Participant	Gender	Degree	Years of Administrative Experience
P1	F	Ed.S	9
P2	M	M.Ed	7
P3	F	Ed.D	5
P4	M	Ed.D	7
P5	F	Ed.D	10
P6	M	Ed.D	8
P7	M	Ed.D	25
P8	M	M.Ed	12

Research Question 1 Findings

Several dominant themes related to Question 1 emerged throughout the analysis. Research Question 1 asked: What practices do school administrators identify as most beneficial when establishing a positive school climate?

The data concluded that establishing a safe and secure learning environment is very important for establishing and maintaining a positive school climate. Many believe that rules and norms must be in place to create a safe and secure environment, be familiar to anyone involved in the school, and be implemented consistently. Rules and expectations should be communicated clearly to all involved in the school. Administrators, teachers, and students must know what the rules and expectations are in the school. Consistency is crucial so that students and teachers understand the everyday practices and what to do during a non-typical day.

Regarding the safety of a school, handling student behavior plays a significant role. P7 stated that "schools must have order, but you must also have a balance. If there are no consequences, then it is going to affect teachers and students", while P4 stated that "It is important to handle situations with care and in fairness. If students see that, then it will lead to positive outcomes." School staff play an important role in maintaining safety with cooperation and communication being a common theme. "Everyone needs to be on the same page. Have a uniform process" (P1) or stating that "it is important to handle situations with care and in fairness" (P4). In terms of having a discipline plan, most administrators stated there was some type of plan or "guide" for the school or district.

All administrators interviewed agreed every student at their respective school and district is held to high academic and social expectations. "Students are motivated to succeed by everyone

in the building" (P1). "Students will grow academically, socially, emotionally, and we will allow students any opportunity to do so" (P4). "When students understand the school vision and what the teachers are trying to get them to do while in the school, they develop a sense of pride in the school" (P6). Administrator's also stated it was about giving students autonomy. "We give students the opportunity to take control and make it into what they want so that they have a sense of ownership and pride in what they are involved in. Our main goal is to improve every single student that comes through our building" (P5). Giving students opportunities to be a part of the school community was also noted. "Students need to feel that school is more than class, lunch, and homework. It needs to be a place of learning how to be a citizen" (P2). Students will grow academically, socially, emotionally if they feel like they are being cared for. "We are always looking for growth, growth, and more growth. Then, the success will come. School climate will change or get better if you get students to buy in with you" (P3). When students understand why and what the teachers are trying to get them to do while in school, they develop a sense of satisfaction with the school. "It is our goal for every student to achieve greatness. Focusing on the student and helping them to become better" (P7). Instilling a school vision in the teachers and students increases the school climate. "High expectations for everyone in the building, we want the school to have an identity, but that must include buy-in (a commitment to excellence) from everyone" (P1).

Participants agree that building relationships, both administrator to teacher, and teacher to student, is an influential factor in developing and maintaining a positive school climate. The participants expressed their relationships with the students and teachers as being a community. They described their relationships as being a "family," "promoting positivity," and "motivating each other." Teachers want administrators who are clear and are good communicators. P1 was

hired to stabilize a struggling middle school after the previous principal had left. They noted how important it was to communicate your objectives on the first day. "As a new administrator at a struggling school, it was important to have everyone on board, every staff member needed to know the why" (P1). Administrators noted how important it was not to keep everyone in the dark when it comes to making administrative decisions, whether it is your decision as a school leader or a decision coming down from the school district or state. "Advising every staff member on why a decision is being made, it's important to be clear and open with your staff on the why of something is happening" (P3). Being open to change and new ideas are also essential to improve school climate. "Being open to change and constantly working on the climate is the key to keeping it positive" (P4). "Things (issues) in this business are always changing, that is the nature of education. It is important to be aware of that and communicate that effectively" (P5). "Educational ideas change constantly. Now more now than ever (in response to COVID-19 and remote learning), we will have to as leaders to prepare for change before it happens" (P6). All administrators pointed to communication as a key to improving school climate. "Getting to know your staff and taking the time to say "hi" and listen, whether during a class visit or before or after school is simple, but so important. Keep an open-door policy. It is important to provide an outlet where your staff, students, and others can come talk to you" (P8). Physically showing that you care was an important point made by one administrator. "Having a smile on my face is very important to creating a positive climate. Students are extremely perceptive, so they will immediately get it if I am not feeling it for a day. So regardless of how I am feeling, I must show the kids that I am happy to be there" (P2).

All participants responded that the school's institutional environment has an overwhelming impact on the school's climate. The availability of resources was an important

factor given by interviewees. "It is very important to have the right support you need to succeed from leadership, whether that is financial support, instructional support, technology" (P6). "If you are asking things of people in your building, then you better provide them with the appropriate resources. This is where meaningful professional development opportunities for staff comes into play" (P5). "Instructional materials need to be constantly updated and reviewed by staff. Do not provide materials to teachers without their input first. The last thing you want is to have teachers who are spending their own money on resources" (P2). Another key factor in assessing the institutional environment is how to manage the school buildings themselves. "Having the right amount of space for students to learn is always a worry for any administrator. Do we need to move teachers around to different classrooms, are students going to be in a room that is comfortable to learn in? Every summer is spent by administrators discussing those factors. They are so important to student learning" (P1). "Logistical planning is important in school climate. It will make your students and staff happy" (P4).

Interviewees identified parent and community engagement as a critical factor affecting individual students' success and the school environment itself. "What happens before the school day starts and after it ends can be just as important and impactful in the lives of your students as what happens during the traditional school day" (P2). "It takes a village" (P3). "When we work together to support learning, students tend to earn higher grades, attend school more regularly, stay in school longer, and enroll in higher-level programs" (P7). Participants stated that increasing community involvement programs and opportunities should be a consistent goal to improve school climate. "Volunteering is the most common and popular way at our school to encourage community involvement" (P5). "It is important for any district to create a community

outreach plan and publicize sponsorship and donation needs, to give local organizations and businesses the opportunity to partner with your school" (P4).

Research Question 2 Findings

Several common themes related to Question 1 emerged throughout the analysis. Research Question 2 asked: What common themes are found between schools/districts regarding establishing a positive climate?

The most common of themes was that the school climate itself is the most important aspect of the educational process. "It is the number one factor in whether the school is going to move student learning" (P1). "School climate is the first thing that needs to be addressed before anything can be good. You can have all the right operations, but if you do not have a good climate, then you will not get the maximum capacity out of everyone involved" (P4). Others stated it affects the outcomes of both students and teachers. "The attitude of the students and teachers and how successful the students are. And in turn, that makes the whole school successful" (P2). "Climate is very important. Students and staff will not be motivated if the climate is bad. It takes a village to make it a good place" (P3). Using climate as a factor in academic data was mentioned. "It is very important. As a district, it is something we focus on every day. When looking at academic data, the number one thing we look at is the climate of the school" (P5).

All interviewees acknowledged that discipline as having an impact on school climate regarding safety. Several cited discipline as "playing a big factor" (P1, P4) and being "important" (P2, P3, P7) to the development of school climate. One administrator stated that "discipline is always going to influence school climate" (P7). In terms of having a discipline

plan, most administrators said there was some plan or "guide" for the school or district. "By implementing a proper discipline plan, discipline problems are decreased, and the climate is increased. Our discipline plan is a guide on creating success for the students in that it allows the student the time and opportunity to self-reflect and fix their mistakes before reaching a more severe level of discipline" (P6). Several administrators also pointed out alternatives to discipline plans, such as restorative practices, Response to Intervention (RtI) programs, and modeling empathy. "Having teachers who show empathy is more important than just handing down punishments" (P1). Giving grace is important to students. Thus leading, for the most part, to positive outcomes and a positive climate. Also, things such as restorative practices, resources like RtIB2 are important to having a positive school climate before any discipline plan" (P2).

Participants agreed on two things regarding interpersonal relationships at school: Choosing the right people to be a part of the school and keeping staff members happy. "Hiring the right people and making sure that the people in the building are here for the right reason" (P7). Respondents said it was essential to be the type of person who is not afraid to build relationships. "It's a question that is brought up during every teacher interview. Being a personable and responsible servant is so key in improving school climate. The ability to be a person who is comfortable building up positive relationships with others" (P5). "Understanding what our staff needs and catering to that, patting them on the back, feeding them, coaching them, and listening when they want to talk" (P6). All interviewees acknowledged that student motivation plays an essential role in teaching and learning regarding school climate. "Students need caring teachers" (P3, P8). "Understanding the students and meeting them where they are at makes a good learning environment" (P1). Relationship building is critical in creating a positive learning environment with students. "If relationships are built with the students, then the

motivation for learning will be where it needs to be" (P4). "Students at our school feel important, loved, and they believe that the teachers are invested in them individually" (P6). "The students here need relationships with adults. Therefore, it has been sort of easy to build those relationships. I have so many kids change their behaviors because a teacher stepped in, listened and made a difference" (P2). "Students need adults who will show them that they care. I have seen bad kids flip around to excellent kids just based on a teacher in the building, taking a positive interest in them" (P1).

Several participants said that the school and district's environment drives the school climate and there should be a school vision. "If your climate is not what it should be then staff and students are going to see that, and it is going to cause an overall negative impact" (P8). "School climate determines the atmosphere" (P2). Participants agreed parental, and community involvement could only improve the school climate. "Teachers, students, parents need to be included. It can make or break the organization" (P7). "While getting 100% outside support would be phenomenal, getting half of that is as important in moving the needle for positive outcomes" (P4). Getting families to care, that's where you can see change happen" (P8). Several administrators stated that leadership needs to be creative in what parent involvement looks like. "Go out into the community; don't just have them come to you" (P3). "We are always going to neighborhoods to meet families there. Our bookmobile that we take out has made a huge impact in promoting what our school has to offer" (P2).

The interviewees agreed that the biggest struggle in transforming or maintaining the school climate is "complacency" or "letting the bad creep in" (P8). Leadership's vision of a positive school climate needs to trickle down to the staff and to the students. "School climate must be constantly fostered" (P2). "Negativity among the stakeholders in a school can have a

terrible impact on the climate" (P6). "Leadership sets the tone for the entire school" (P3). Interviewees pointed to having transformational leaders in schools. "It is important that as an administrator you are constantly getting feedback and advice from both teachers and students" (P4). "Being open to change is also important. If a principal or a teacher is set in their ways, then new strategies are not welcome" (P1). "Positivity can run out quickly when people are feeling over-worked and burnt out. Leadership needs to cheer on" (P5).

Research Question 3 Findings

Differences among themes related to Question 3 emerged throughout the analysis. Research Question 3 asked: What common themes differ between schools/districts regarding establishing a positive climate?

While schools and districts have similar processes, not one size fits all. Differences in how school systems operate vary from school to school and district to district. Some differences were noted within the same school district. Regarding school discipline plans, a middle school administrator stated, "the plan is in place to allow students to make mistakes and create improvement opportunities. The plan must be consistent, but flexible as well" (P8). In the same district, an elementary administrator stated, "We base our policies from grade to grade, what happened, first-time offenses and other factors" (P3). As noted by the participants, schools and districts will share best practices, but it is up to the leadership to determine how their school will operate. "We fully trust as a district in our administrators; we have a plan in place to make them successful" (P5). "It is all about trust and relationships" (P7). The most common data differences were those found between grade levels (elementary, middle, high).

In the elementary grades, administrators stated that they are more open to building long-lasting relationships with a diverse range of students and the classroom environment is more collaborative. "We want our teachers and students to trust each other fully. Students feel safer when they know they can trust us" (P2). They believe their school rules are fair for all students, not just some. Staff members in the elementary grades are also more active in helping students "emotionally and teaching positive behavior" (P3) than those in the middle and high schools. A supervisor stated that in their district, "the middle and high schools have a more uniform discipline policy than the elementary schools do. Elementary administrators have more flexibility in what they can do" (P5). Parent and community involvement in elementary schools is high. "It is easier to get more parents to an elementary art night than a high school volleyball game" (P5).

In the middle grades, administrators stated that they use 'student ideas and interests to plan and guide the climate" (P8). Due to schedules and after-school opportunities, "teachers and staff are more readily available when students need help" (P1). Students start feeling more autonomous but still rely heavily on teacher and staff guidance. "Students want adults in the building that care, that shows patience, and not judging. Teachers are more willing to respond to students about their socio-emotional feelings" (P8). "The middle grades are such transitional years for students. It's important as a staff to meet their needs, if that is not there, then there is no way to maintain a positive atmosphere" (P1).

In the high schools, administrators stated that they have "higher expectations for student academics and provide more opportunities for students to challenge themselves" (P6) than the lower grades. One administrator pointed to using shared leadership. "As a school, we are working towards having a shared leadership to improve school climate. Students and adults working collaboratively, this allows our students to have a say, be a part of the process and help

with future experience" (P4). Shared leadership can also empower teachers to become leaders. "If you look at school districts, most of your central office leadership comes from the high schools" (P5). Parent and community involvement is more focused on the "athletics" and "vocational" side compared to in the lower grades that are more focused on the "whole school" (P7).

CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the variables leading to a positive school climate and culture, according to school administrators in selected school systems in East Tennessee. The purpose is to identify which elements of school climate and culture are the most important among this study's participants. Qualitative research methods will be used throughout this study. Through research, surveys, and interviews, school administrators' roles ranging from central office leaders to school principals will be analyzed. Participants of this study will be selected using focused consideration. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What variables do school administrators perceive to be the most important when trying to establish a positive school climate and culture?

2. What commonalities are present among variables that are used to establish a positive school climate and culture?

3. What differences are present among variables that are used to establish a positive school climate and culture?

Qualitative research methods were used throughout this study to show the participants' perspectives on the issue. Through this research and the interviews conducted, school administrators' significant role in shaping the climate of a school and school system will be analyzed. Participants in this study were selected using purposeful, criterion sampling. A phenomenological methodology guided the course of this study. This study has implications for researchers, administrators, educators, and students.

Summary of Findings

The results of this study indicate that school administrators share similar positive perceptions of school climate. A positive school climate has links to social-emotional development and academic achievement for students. Maintaining a highly trained and dedicated teaching staff will help support a positive school climate, having school administrators lead the way and set the example. Creating a welcoming and engaging environment for parents and understanding the need to reach out to families in subgroups to improve parent perceptions will build a positive school climate. Current and previous research was used to determine the importance of a positive school climate. With so many benefits of a positive school climate, school leadership must make this a priority. School climate has far-reaching effects on all its stakeholders, including students, teachers, and the community.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1. The data concluded that establishing a safe and secure learning environment is very important for establishing and maintaining a positive school climate. Ramelow, Currie, and Felder-Puig (2015) stated that students must feel physically safe in school, have a clear understanding of the code of conduct, and participate in conflict resolution courses. Peguero (2015) stated that students and teachers must not feel threatened by physical violence or harm and feel safe. Handling student behavior plays a significant role. The U.S. Department of Education (2013) suggests that schools should create a school-wide behavior plan and an instructional approach to discipline to create a positive school climate. Hence, schools must teach students behavioral expectations and help students develop new behavior skills and positive strategies to avoid conflict and focus on learning.

Participants agreed that every student at their respective school and district is held to high academic and social expectations. According to Xia (2016), student success in school is defined by academic achievement and school adjustment. The NSCC (2012) highlighted supportive learning and included quality teaching elements, variation in ways to demonstrate learned skills, independent thinking, individualized learning opportunities, and challenging academic environments. Participants stated it was important to give students autonomy and opportunities to be a part of the school community. Jones (2016) explains that the more one feels accepted and acceptable, the more one will express oneself, act authentically, and be fully present to others. Students will be eager to participate and be involved if a sense of community is established in the school and in the classroom, and the students feel as if they are a part of this community.

Participants agree that building relationships, both administrator to the teacher, and teacher to student, is an influential factor in developing and maintaining a positive school climate. Administrators noted how important it was not to keep everyone in the dark when it comes to making administrative decisions, whether it is your decision as a school leader or a decision coming down from the school district or state. Connor (2015) says that relationships build a sense of community and are a vital component of human emotional nature. Connor also stated that a more respectful and personal approach and camaraderie feeling may lead to more problem solving and pedagogical collaboration (2015). Staff members within the school should collaborate and try to help each other become better (Malinen and Savolainen, 2016).

Participants responded that the school's institutional environment has an overwhelming impact on the school's climate. Cohen et al. (2009) highlighted "cleanliness, adequate space, and materials, inviting aesthetic quality, size of the school, curricular and extracurricular offerings" (p. 184) as essential characteristics of the school space. The NSCC (2012) included critical

environmental features as "cleanliness, order, and appeal of the facilities and the adequate resources of materials" within the definition.

Interviewees identified parent and community engagement as a critical factor affecting individual students' success and the school environment itself. Participants stated that a focus on increasing community involvement programs and opportunities should be a consistent goal to improve school climate. According to Grady and Bost (2014), members of the community need to be involved in schools. Businesses, colleges, and civic groups should advise students about the post educational options open to them, the implications of staying in school, and the outlook on specific careers. Parent-school involvement was measured by the regularity of parent-teacher conferences, volunteering opportunities, or attending extracurricular events. Academic success, background, and socioeconomic status play vital roles in influencing a student (Larrotta and Yamamura, 2011).

Research Question 2. Several common themes emerged from the data. The first being that school climate itself is the most important aspect of the educational process. Ali (2016) agrees with this data and asserts that climate is not quantifiable; it is a way of thinking. Examples of positive elements of school climate are an atmosphere of caring, a motivating curriculum, professional collegiality, and closeness to parents in the community. Participants in this study agreed with Deel (2009) when he stated that school culture plays a dominant role in performance. Wilson (2012) stated that shared visions lead the school's direction and drive daily instruction and effectiveness.

Discipline plans and their alternatives were also identified as having an impact on school climate regarding safety. Christofferson and Callahan (2015) recommend to identify teachers with the highest numbers of student discipline referrals and develop an individual data-

based action plan to help them with classroom management, examine office discipline referrals, and discuss the underlying issues to identify patterns and trends, develop, execute, and monitor the progress of a proactive plan for addressing those underlying issues. These recommendations will help the school and district decrease student suspensions and continue making gains in improving school climate and student behaviors.

Participants agreed on two things regarding interpersonal relationships at school: Choosing the right people to be a part of the school and keeping staff members happy. Shapka and Perry (2012) stated that teachers with lower stress and high job satisfaction demonstrate higher student achievement scores and better relationships among their students. School climate is the relationship between the individuals at the school and collaboration between teachers and the administrative staff and are likely key predictors in a teacher's perception of work-related stress, teaching efficacy, and overall career fulfillment.

All interviewees acknowledged student motivation plays an essential role in teaching and learning regarding school climate. The Tennessee Department of Education (2018) states that students need to be motivated to succeed in school. For this to happen, students must feel supported and valued in their relationships with school personnel. Schools can create an environment of positive relationships for students.

Participants said that the school and district's environment drives the school climate, and there should be a school vision. The Tennessee Department of Education (2018) suggested that schools must create an environment where students are motivated to learn and feel engaged in school activities. The school environment should include high expectations for student achievement and provide academic rigor. The school should communicate clear rules and

procedures, provide a mission or vision statement, and provide appealing and well-maintained buildings.

They agreed that parental and community involvement could only improve school climate, and leadership requires to be creative in what parent involvement looks like. According to Larrotta and Yamamura (2011), parents who are highly engaged in schools are more likely to protect educational time at home for children. When parents work with students on a nightly basis on homework activities, they are modeling positive academic behaviors and high expectations for achievement. Parental engagement also increases students' ability to show a high degree of social competence and academic achievement compared to families who do not engage with schools (Grady and Bost, 2014).

Participants agreed that complacency is the greatest struggle facing the school climate. Participants expressed that the school climate needs continuous work and focus on it to maintain positivity and improve. Research states to combat complacency, schools can have either an open-school climate or a closed-school climate. In an open climate, school leaders listen to teachers and students, are supportive, and are respectful of their personal competencies and personalities. Facilitative leadership is the norm and teachers, and students enjoy positive relationships. Schools with a healthy organizational climate can adapt to their environment and use their resources effectively so they can prevent complacency and increase positivity (McCarley, 2013).

Research Question 3. The most common data differences were those found between grade levels (elementary, middle, high). In the elementary grades, administrators stated that they are more open to building long-lasting relationships with diverse students, and the classroom environment is more collaborative. Hamedani and Darling-Hammond (2015) conclude that integrating social and emotional learning into the school processes effectively meets students'

"psychological, social, emotional, and academic needs." A school and district can do this by putting social and emotional learning front and center, consider the psychological needs of students alongside their academic needs, and design restorative disciplinary practices to help students preserve relationships, foster responsibility, and respect the dignity of others.

Parent and community involvement in elementary schools is high compared to middle and high schools. Parent and family involvement were assessed based on how often parents "communicated to their children, talking about what they are studying, and helping with schoolwork (Larrotta and Yamamura, 2011). Van Eck, Johnson, Bettencourt, and Johnson (2016) conducted a study of middle and high school students' which students rated parent involvement as one of the most important factors that create a positive climate. It is always important to draw on relationships with students' families in all grades for continued guidance and support (Epstein et al., 2008).

Students in middle school start feeling more autonomous but still rely heavily on teacher and staff guidance. In high schools, administrators stated they have higher expectations and grant more autonomy to students. According to Xia (2016), students' early success in school may be beneficial in a student's education. Early adolescents go through cognitive changes that facilitate the skills necessary for setting and reaching learning goals for academic tasks. Students face multiple changes throughout their time in public schools. As adolescents face transitions from elementary school, middle school, and high school, both academic demands and social demands increase.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations in this study should be indicated. Since the sample was taken from a self-selecting group, some bias could have come into the sample. The sample was only from school systems in Northeast Tennessee, limiting the range of the conclusions. Interview methods such as job shadowing, panel discussions, and/or surveys could have been added to the research data. The original research sample was to be 10 participants. One participant who initially agreed to be interviewed decided to opt-out due to scheduling. Another participant was interviewed, but due to not getting written permission from the participant's school system, the interview was not used in the data. Due to these conflicts, there were 8 participants for this study.

Conclusions

There were three general conclusions drawn from this study. The first conclusion is that the participants seemed to agree with the dimensions of what creates, or helps to maintain, a positive school climate. In support of this conclusion, Thapa (2012) stated climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families, and educators work together to develop and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits and satisfaction of learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school as well as the care of the physical environment. Also, Kilinic (2013) added that a school environment that includes an orderly and serious workplace, a rewarding mechanism for achievement, trustworthy work units built upon relationships among faculty members, and effective leadership focusing primarily on student learning defines a healthy school climate.

The second conclusion is that participants identified relationships as an important dimension that affects school climate. According to the participants and related research, shared leadership should be built, fostered, and focused in schools. According to Tough (2012), shared leadership is helping to develop character, to have moral and performance character, being in partnership with vitality and spirit, weaving adult leaders to their relationships into a school climate that makes students want to be at school and contribute to the success of the school, giving students the strength, leadership skills, and belief in collaboration to handle adversity. According to Malinen and Savolainen (2016), students need to see teachers working together, helping each other, and building relationships amongst themselves. These observations will help create an environment and a culture of collaboration and set the expectation for students to build these types of relationships.

The third conclusion is that participants agreed complacency is the greatest struggle facing the school climate. Participants expressed the school climate needs continuous work and focus for it to maintain positivity and to improve. Schools should constantly evaluate and look for ways to improve the climate and keep the climate moving in a positive direction. If teachers and administrators become stagnant or complacent, the climate will not improve. According to McCarley (2013), school principals in a positive school climate work to build a capacity for change, embrace teachers as leaders, encourage professional development, and provide collaborative growth opportunities among the staff. Principals must have an innovative mindset in which they inspire teachers to perform and meet goals. According to Teasley (2017), A school's organizational culture from a leadership perspective provides a sense of identity, promotes achievement orientation, helps shape standards and patterns of behavior, creates distinct ways of doing things, and determines direction.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for practice and future research were noted based on the literature and this study's findings.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for practice. Districts and schools should routinely and comprehensively evaluate school climate, recognizing student, staff, and community input as well as all the major dimensions (e.g. safety, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning, institutional environment, community involvement) that shape school climate. According to Kekahio and Baker (2013), districts and schools should use educational data to evaluate school climate. According to their research, there are 5 steps in this process: Identify the question and the data necessary to answer, examine the data for patterns, analyze the patterns for causes, develop a response plan, and monitor progress.

Encourage teacher preparation programs that give teachers and administrators the tools to evaluate classroom and school climate and take steps to use these findings to promote a climate for learning in our schools. Teacher education programs should emphasize the importance of creating and sustaining such a climate (Cohen et al., 2009).

Create a network of schools and communities committed to evaluating and improving the school climate to develop collaborative learning forums. School districts should create a climate team comprising representatives from all school community groups, including students, teachers, administrators, additional staff, parents, and members of the greater community. Data-driven decision-making should be used to guide efforts in creating a positive school climate (Payne, 2018).

In collaboration with school leaders interested in incorporating school climate plans into practice, create strategies for in-service professional development based on school climate research and practice. Within its School Climate Improvement Reference Manual (2017), The NCSSLE describes five sets of overarching activities that help guide readers to more specific, individual activities by which a school can effectively plan, implement and evaluate its school climate improvement effort. The sets of activities are preparing for school climate improvements, engaging stakeholders in school climate improvements, collecting and reporting school climate data, choosing and implementing school climate interventions, and monitoring and evaluating school climate improvements.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for future research. Researchers could investigate areas with different populations and demographics to see what strategies are effective in those areas for increasing school climate. A more comprehensive range of school districts in other areas of the state as well as a better mixture of rural and urban districts. Future research should design similar studies that include teachers and their perspectives on school climate. Future research should design similar studies that include students and their perspectives on school climate. Research can be completed to determine if there is a relationship between positive school climate and chronic absenteeism.

Chapter 5 concludes this research study. This study is beneficial to educational professionals because it identifies the key factors that influence school climate based on the perceptions of administrators. This study provides specific strategies that educational professionals can implement to increase school climate.

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APPENDICES

APENDIX A CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEW FORM

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Ryan Cooper, a Doctor of Education candidate at Milligan University. The purpose of the study is to identify the most influential factors that impact school climate according to the perceptions of administrators. The results of this study will be included in Ryan Cooper's dissertation. The findings from this research will add to the existing research on this topic and will be used to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the Doctor of Education program at Milligan University. The project will be used as a resource tool for future research and analysis regarding promoting positive school climate and culture. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are recognized as being a superior professional in the field of school administration. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate.

This interview is voluntary. The interviews will be conducted and recorded through Zoom conferencing. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop the interview at any time or for any reason. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. I expect that the interview will take about 30 minutes.

1. You will not be compensated for this interview.

2. Unless you give us permission to use your name, title, and / or quote you in any publications that may result from this research, the information you tell us will be confidential. All information taken from the study will be coded to protect each subject's name. No names or other identifying information will be used when discussing or reporting data. Your responses are completely anonymous. No personal identifying information or IP addresses will be collected.

3. I would like to record this interview so that I can use it for reference while proceeding with this study. I will be using Zoom conferencing to conduct the interviews. I will not record this interview without your permission. If you do grant permission for this conversation to be

recorded, you have the right to revoke recording permission and/or end the interview at any time. You have the right to ask questions during the interview. This project will be completed by July 2020.

4. All interview recordings and information will be stored in an offline encrypted workspace for 3 years from the time of research.

5. Contact Dr. Tasha Clay, Chair of the IRB Committee at Milligan University at (423) 461-8427 or irb@milligan.edu if you have any questions or concerns about research and research subjects' rights.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Participant Signature: _____ Date:_____

APENDIX B Interview Questions

1. To what extent do you believe school climate is important at your school?

2. Tell me about the atmosphere of your school (or district). If you were describing it to someone who has never been here, what might you say it is like to be a student, teacher, or administrator at this school?

3. How would you explain the administration leadership style and how does it impact school climate?

4. How does student discipline impact school climate? Does your school have a discipline plan and how do you feel like it influences school climate?

5. Does parental involvement affect the climate and culture of your school? If so, how does your school (or district) work to involve parents?

6. What are effective strategies for ensuring each student and parent is fully engaged in the school?

7. How do you motivate students to take an active role in creating a positive school climate?

8. What do you see as the greatest challenges facing school climate?

9. What are the shared best practices for your school (or district)? Describe how the best practices help to develop and maintain a positive school climate?

10. What do you consider to be the key elements of establishing and maintaining a safe and secure learning environment?

11. What specific strategy or best practice do you feel has been the most effective in creating a positive school climate in your school (or district)?

12.How do you motivate, encourage, and support your staff?