

THE IMPACT ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND STUDENT LIFE
IN RELATION TO
SCHOOL CLIMATE AND SCHOOL CULTURE, AND THE
IMPLEMENTATION BY EDUCATIONAL LEADERS
IN
MIDDLE SCHOOLS
ACROSS
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PREVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Even though school climate and school culture programs and initiatives have been researched for their effect on academic achievement and student growth, especially at the primary level, much more research needs to be done at the intermediary and secondary levels to ensure that school climate and school culture are reforming education. In addition, as school becomes more challenging, with stressors such as test scores and parental pressure, educational leaders must recognize the importance of school climate and school culture in bettering the academic achievement and student life of students in today's classrooms (Casas, 2017; Cohen, 2006; Fiore, 2001; Stockman & Gray, 2018).

This study provides empirical data related to school climate and school culture as catalysts for reform in a school system. The data were examined to see how school climate and culture impacted academic achievement and student life at the intermediary level of education. Additionally, this study focused on principals' leadership styles in middle schools to see if there is a correlation between their perceptions of school climate and school culture significance and how they lead the building. Finally, barriers to implementing school climate and school culture programs were reviewed to shed light on the difficulty of this process.

Results from this research study found a correlation between the leadership styles of the principals and their perceptions associated with school climate and school culture significance to their buildings. With a leadership style built around teamwork and trust, all stakeholders become a part of the principal's vision, making it shared and collaborative. This study also showed a positive relationship between school climate and school culture and its impact on academic achievement and student life. Student-centered instruction improved social and emotional wellness, and better attendance were all stated outcomes of a school climate and school culture

that is positive and supportive. These results are similar to the research of many scholars in examining the impact that school climate and school culture have on academic achievement and student life (Casas, 2017; Deal & Peterson, 1999, 2009; DeWitt, 2017; DeWitt & Slade, 2014; Erwin, 2016; Fiore, 2001, 2001; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015, 2017; Van Houtte, 2005).

PREVIEW

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In the end, I think back to the beginning of the program, the day I met Dr. Robert Andrews. After meeting him for the first time, I realized that I wanted to be him, a great educator and thinker that pushes others to achieve academic greatness. I am now one step closer.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the students out there chasing academic greatness. No matter what obstacles stand in your way, face them head-on and continue the journey to the end. The finish line is not as far as it seems.

My educational journey has been a long one. I've sat through many hours of schooling to get to where I am today. But I could not have done it without the love and unwavering commitment of my wife, Arianna, throughout this process. When I was busy doing something to complete my academic journey, there was never a question or a complaint. I am forever thankful to have you as my wife.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vi
DEDICATION.....	viii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND	1
Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem	4
Background of the Problem.....	5
Overview of the Study.....	9
Summary of Prior Literature	11
Theoretical Framework	12
Purpose of the Study	13
Research Questions	13
Limitations	14
Delimitations	14
Summary	15
Definitions of Terms	16
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELEVANT RESEARCH, THEORY, AND LITERATURE	18
Introduction & Overview	18
Historical Overview on School Culture & School Climate	21
Transformation Leadership and Its Impact on School Climate and School Culture.....	24
The Intertwining Nature of School Climate and School Culture	26
Examples of Schools with Successful School Climate and School Culture Programs	29

New Programs Associated with School Climate and School Culture Intervention	34
Transitioning to a New Culture	35
Summary	38
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	39
Introduction	39
Sampling	40
Research Questions, Design & Instrumentation	43
Research Questions	43
Research Design	44
Instrumentation	46
Data Management	47
Validity and Reliability	48
Research Question One	48
Research Question Two	48
Research Question Three	49
Research Question Four	50
Role of the Researcher	51
Summary	51
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS	53
Introduction	53
Instrumentation	54
Sampling	55
Participants	57

Findings.....	58
Interaction.....	61
Collaboration.....	62
Shared Visions.....	62
Commitment.....	63
Summary.....	73
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS.....	74
Discussion.....	74
Research Questions.....	75
Research Findings.....	77
Implications for Policy and Practice.....	82
Recommendations for Future Studies.....	84
Conclusion.....	86
REFERENCES.....	87
APPENDIX A: SCHOOL CLIMATE.....	92
APPENDIX B: SCHOOL CULTURE AND CLIMATE.....	93
APPENDIX C: APPROVAL LETTER SOUTH PLAINFIELD MIDDLE SCHOOL.....	96
APPENDIX D: SITE APPROVAL LETTER HAZLET MIDDLE SCHOOL.....	97
APPENDIX E: SITE APPROVAL LETTER CEDAR DRIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL.....	98
APPENDIX F: SITE APPROVAL LETTER MILLSTONE MIDDLE SCHOOL.....	99
APPENDIX G: SITE APPROVAL LETTER SPOTSWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL.....	100
APPENDIX H: SITE APPROVAL LETTER MATAWAN MIDDLE SCHOOL.....	101
APPENDIX E: SITE APPROVAL CEDAR DRIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL.....	102

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	102
APPENDIX J: CITI PROGRAM COMPLETION FORM	103
APPENDIX K: INFORMED CONSENT FORM	104
APPENDIX L: PERMISSION FORM.....	108
APPENDIX M: STUDY SITE APPROVAL	112
APPENDIX N: SIGNED CONSENT FORMS	119
APPENDIX O: CHAPTER 4 PEER REVIEW	125
APPENDIX P: REVIEW BOARD LETTER.....	127

PREVIEW

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Major Themes Associated with Each Research Question	59
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PREVIEW

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Culture and climate..... 28

Figure 2: Perceptions of school culture and school climate from educational leaders. 63

Figure 3. Impact that school climate and culture have on academic achievement
and student life. 68

Figure 4: Leadership styles evident in school climate and school culture implementation..... 71

Figure 5. Obstacles associated with school climate and school culture implementation. 73

PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

The effectiveness of a new culture depends on the strength of the people behind the change and the strength of the pre-existing culture.(Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015)

Today's school systems are evolving in student discipline, academic standards, and standardized testing. The landscape of schools is never idle. Educators constantly address how discipline is handled, how standards are created and attained, or how standardized test score data are utilized. In today's school systems, the youth's struggles can be overwhelming: bullying, anxiety disorders, and emotional stress are just a few of the daily struggles that students face (Duncan, 2018; Eliuk & Chorney, 2017; Lounsbury, 2014). Beyond the workload and stress of test scores and parental pressures lies the challenge for students to look at school as a place of safety and protection, where one can flourish academically and emotionally. Research indicates that a positive school climate and culture is advantageous to students, serving as a protective barrier against many stress agents associated with school (Casas, 2017; Cohen, 2006; Fiore, 2001; Stockman & Gray, 2018). Furthermore, research indicates that academic achievement and student life improve over time if school climate and culture are positive and developed through teamwork and trust (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Fiore, 2001; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). Thus, the need for school climate and school culture to be given attention to is at its all-time high, considering the significant role these components play in bettering the pupils' academic achievement and student life in today's classrooms.

Enabling students to be at the center of focus and change requires educational leaders to look at school climate and culture as pivotal components in the reform process. The boundaries

placed on students regarding academic success and emotional wellness can be adjusted (Lynne, 2015; Marzano et al., 2012). School climate is the pulse of the building daily, the ebb and flow of stakeholder interaction (Deal & Peterson, 1999). The current school identity is established, shaped, defined, and maintained by stakeholders (DeWitt, 2017; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). Therefore, it is essential to look at school climate and culture as the main ingredients composing a school's identity.

Educational reform is a critical component for improving learners' academic performance and experience in today's classrooms (Dewey, 1900; Mann, 1989). With societal changes, educational institutions should implement systems to maintain the academic excellence needed for today's students to prosper (Duncan, 2018). Through social evolution, the student serves as a pupil to retain facts and figures and express and self-direct themselves in the learning process (Dewey, 1938). Rogers (1969) described the process of student-driven instruction as pupils exploring, creating, and thinking on an individual level while still learning the material through a collaborative approach. This type of activity engages the student while making them a part of the creation process. "There was respect for meditation and contemplation as well as for overt productivity. There were opportunities to get to know one another—the children learned to communicate by communicating" (Rogers, p. 19). Within the depths of this sentiment lies the reiteration of why it is necessary to identify the student as one of the key stakeholders and catalysts for change in a learning environment. The need for the student of today's classroom to feel empowered is a necessity (Dewitt & Slade, 2014). Through instruction and education driven by the students, the skills necessary to succeed in life will be at the forefront, enabling learners to grow into the society surrounding them (Duncan, 2018; Malin, 2018; Phillips, 2016).

As components of educational reform, school climate and school culture harmonize and impact the educational landscape significantly (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2017). They are synergetic and serve as a foundation for the identity of a school building. School culture begins with understanding the comprehensive symbolism of a school building: its history, the narratives, and the evolving school climate. A school's culture is expressed and defined through the stories, the school colors, the mascots that help preserve it, and the stakeholders' experiences that have come before (Deal & Peterson, 1999, 2009). Deal and Peterson (2009) asserted, "These small stories fill the hallways, teachers' lounges, and conversations; it is the role of the leaders to keep the stories positive and long lasting" (p. 71). School climate begins with acknowledging the day-to-day ebb and flow of activity in a school building and how each stakeholder embraces this daily activity (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Van Houtte, 2005). In time, school culture encompasses the identity of the building, the community, and the stakeholders that make up the complete educational landscape (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). This formation creates a potential for the current climate of a building to become a part of the institution's culture over time. However, school climate and culture can change based on factors such as the leadership styles associated with the principal of the building, regardless of the historical narrative in place. Thus, it is necessary to ensure that the school climate and culture are always at the forefront of education reform for peak academic performance and student life to ensue (Casas, 2017).

The educational landscape is directly impacted by school climate and school culture (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Dewitt & Slade, 2014; Fiore, 2001). One of the main facets associated with an improved school climate and school culture is hiring practices. In 2012, specific schools were designated as "In Need of Improvement" based on the Annual Yearly Progress report, in

association with the *No Child Left Behind* policy. The current climate of these school systems was determined to be one of the main focal points for promoting change, which revolved around finding the right person to lead these schools (Yang, 2013). Instead, one of the first moves made by a school on this report was hiring a new principal. The principal was committed to getting the school back on track by reducing the number of discipline referrals, unexcused lateness, and dropouts. This educational leader's first action was creating and implementing a system of trust, togetherness, and teamwork with her staff (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Sanchez et al., 2019). The school climate and culture enrichment in this building was obtained by finding the right person for the leadership role. A school building will go as far as the educational leader will take it (Mann, 1989; Perry, 1908).

This research study was designed to identify school principals' perceptions of the importance of school climate and culture in relation to academic achievement and student life. The research study used *The Marzano School Leadership Evaluation Model*, designed to help school leaders acknowledge their current building status related to school climate and culture while identifying their leadership styles and how they impacted these two components (Marzano et al., 2006). This study also included an analysis of data supplied by the educational leaders in association with students' academic achievement and student life, along with a questionnaire structured around school climate and school culture perception and implementation.

Statement of the Problem

School buildings have become a physical place where students can prosper socially and academically (Casas, 2017; Erwin, 2018; Fiore, 2011; Fullan, 2014). Therefore, school climate and culture programs need to be fostered so that daily school and societal stresses do not derail the students from succeeding. Academic achievement and a successful student life are

increasingly becoming a struggle and challenge to attain in today's school systems because of these stressors (Stockman & Gray, 2018). As a result, the school climate and school culture of a building should ensure that students are learning in an environment conducive to academic and emotional growth (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Read et al., 2015). Since both school climate and culture are so loosely defined and ingrained in the building from the get-go, the educational leaders, with their leadership styles, need to focus on how these two variables can align with the students' needs (Bass, 1985; Blane, 2017). Through the eyes of the educational leader comes a vision of what the school building should look and run like; it is in this vision where implementation of a school climate and culture take their meaning and course.

Background of the Problem

If culture is a school's personality, the climate is its attitude. (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015)

School climate and culture are two key concepts of the educational landscape that are critical in the learning process; thus, educational leaders must be aware of the constant need to address the presence and maintenance of these two barometers of academic achievement and student life. When discussing education reform, it revolves around the student and making the learning experience the best it can be for each of them (Duncan, 2018). Students have a voice, capable of changing the way a school building is run. The educational leaders of the building promote the school's climate and culture to the surrounding community. However, the students in the school can change the climate of the building and propel success because they help to create it through their daily activities and experiences (DeWitt & Slade, 2014).

The school climate of the building starts and ends with the student: their academic achievements, willingness to come to school each day, and attitude associated with completing the daily routine. These factors make a school building what it is (Casas, 2017; Deal & Peterson,

2009). Thus, it is the responsibility of the school leaders to make sure that they are utilizing their pupils and staff to help lead the advancement of the building itself, something that requires a great deal of time and effort (Perry, 1908). When looked at from this lens, a collaborative culture can be formed among the key stakeholders, which will help create a positive school climate because all stakeholders have a personal stake in the product, the school (DeWitt, 2017).

Quality leadership has always been at the backbone of successful organizations, including educational institutions. Leadership built around teamwork and trust makes for effectiveness in productivity and service (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Collins & Porras, 1997). The educational leader is responsible for the school building and its daily operation (Bass & Riggio, 2006; DeWitt, 2017). Hume Central Secondary College in Australia offers an excellent example of this. Their principal, Glenn Proctor, was hired to make a struggling learning environment sustain the impact of being the initial failure it once was and make it a success story. Proctor was able to make it successful; he was able to change the culture. One of Proctor's main contributions was that of an idea he named "Time Counts". This concept enabled students to see that time is of the essence when it comes to learning, and they must always show up willing to work (Gurr & Drysdale, 2018). The educational leader started a culture based on diligence, drive, and commitment, thus leading to the school's success. Leadership is intertwined within the culture of a school building, thus impacting the current school climate as well (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Erwin, 2016).

A concept associated with school climate and school culture is the ability of a system to remain stable but not stagnant when faced with adversity. Stability, the ability to manage adversity while maintaining an identity, is a key factor among successful institutions (Collins & Porras, 1997). Meanwhile, structure changes according to the present situation (Duncan, 2018). Many educators strive for consistency in the day-to-day operations associated with the craft.

Thus, change of any kind creates a movement or shift in the normal alignment of the day for each of the stakeholders involved. However, students evolving into collaborators of change goes along with them serving as catalysts in a positive way, which is one of the keys to a healthy collaborative school system (Pink, 2012). Through a collaborative effort and approach, students changing, in turn, can instill change in the building itself. With this change comes the opportunity to establish a new climate and culture.

There is a common thread among schools that have embraced school climate and school culture and made it a priority. These schools maintain educational practices suitable for all students in cooperation with the vision of the educational leader, thus driving school a collaborative effort (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Lounsbury, 2014; Sanchez et al., 2019). The community of Ganado, located in Arizona, and its school systems responded to the cultural needs of their students right from the start by strategically designing the school buildings in the community to encompass the cultural perspectives of the community members. From the beginning, culture was embedded in the school systems just based on the initial design of the building (Deal & Peterson, 2009). This culture would infiltrate all aspects and dimensions of the educational system in Ganado, resulting in increased test scores and school attendance. When students feel that they are part of the building and that their culture or heritage encompasses the walls surrounding them, assimilation almost becomes automatic. The relationship between the student and the school building is critical; students want to feel like they belong right when they enter the building doors (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Culture has its place in a school building; in fact, it has the potential to be the ultimate catalyst of change for school systems (Mann, 1989; Perry, 1908). Thus, it needs to be given attention and constantly monitored for signs of transition or departure from the norm. In many ways, the culture of an organization is what predicts its

success and livelihood. The cultural framework shapes the capacity for change and improvement on the ground (Lesser, 2019). In turn, the current climate and the day-to-day temperature of the building are established.

It does not take long for one to make assumptions about the climate of a particular school building. It is in the air; it is a feeling or a mentality of a building that is difficult to erase or deny (Johnson & Stecher, 2016). This climate and its formation are pieces of information necessary to identify when discussing its impact and relevance to a school system. According to Gruenert and Whitaker (2017), much of it starts with the educational leader. The focal point of much of their research revolved around the educational leader's connection with the building they lead. There is always an amount of separation between the two, but it is this separation that usually marks the current climate of the building. If the educational leader manages the school through the lens of the cultural framework that encompasses it, the climate of a building can be monitored or controlled. The tendency for the educational leader to do so will lead to a school climate built on togetherness and teamwork (DeWitt, 2014; DeWitt & Slade, 2014).

Educational leaders lead busy lives; however, they must never be too busy to face the challenges of the school building head-on (Bass, 1985; Whitaker, 2012). Many issues could arise when discussing school climate and school culture and their implementation and vitality. Casas (2017) discussed many barriers to implementing change through a cultural and climate-based lens. Issues revolve around time and effort and whether there is enough of both to give this matter of climate and culture implementation the attention it requires. Also, there is a responsibility here that plays a big part in this, considering there is accountability in making sure that the school's climate and culture are where they need to be for academic achievement and student life to be improved. Finally, according to the educational stakeholders involved, the

concept of worth and how valuable this implementation is will always be a focal point of discussion (Casas, 2017). These are all topics of concern that can arise when focusing on school climate and culture, specifically in a school system.

Between the eyes of the educational leader must lie a plan, a process, which revolves around the promotion of school climate and school culture within a school building. Marzano et al. (2006) discussed a plan to help educational leaders explore the true nature of school climate and school culture. The main component of this plan revolved around the creation of a specific leadership team. This team included many stakeholders, ranging from teachers to administrators to students. Once this team was established, the educational leader would utilize this cohort as a vantage point to see the school and its effectiveness in relation to school climate and school culture. A purposeful community would be the result. These communities embrace those in the school and the members outside of the school, creating a collaborative movement for educational success. This purposeful community becomes the bridge between the educational system of the youth of that community and the neighborhood surrounding it (Fiore, 2001, 2011).

Overview of the Study

With the successful inquiry and research of the school building revolving around school climate and school culture, through the eyes of the educational leader, the data collected within this research study enabled the researcher to identify connections between these two factors and their impact on academic achievement and student life. Additionally, this study enabled the researcher to understand the perceptions that educational leaders in their respective schools have on school climate and culture in relation to their leadership styles. Along with perceptions, obstacles were defined accordingly, acknowledging that there would always be the need for viable solutions or strategies to combat them. The data that were recorded, analyzed, and coded

throughout this study revolved around benchmark assessments, attendance reports, and discipline referrals associated with the 2019-2020 school year.

This study shone a light on an approach to understanding the significance of school climate and school culture pertaining to overall academic achievement and student life in middle schools across Central New Jersey. It has been empirically proven that “culture” is a keyword for successful enterprises of all sorts, including schools. In response, it is necessary to ensure that schools utilize their students as catalysts for change (Fullan, 2014; Schein, 2010). The researcher used data from structured interviews to understand and interpret where educational leaders stand regarding school climate and school culture implementation. Academic achievement and student life were the focal areas of study for the research related to this implementation. The study also recognized the limitations (self-imposed or unavoidable) that educational leaders faced when implementing these programs.

The outcome from the study enabled the researcher to gain insight into why limitations occur when school leaders attempt to utilize school climate and intervention to promote better academic achievement, school attendance, and student discipline. Marzano et al. (2006) discussed the dire necessity for a “School Leadership Team” composed of teachers and adults, stating, “A strong leadership team is a natural outgrowth of a purposeful community” (p. 99). This purposeful community is an essential outcome of a successfully-implemented school climate and culture program (Fiore, 2011). Overall, this study brought immediate attention to the need for schools and educational leaders to acknowledge the importance of school climate and school culture in relation to academic achievement and student life.