

Teacher and Administrator Perspectives of School Climate in a Rural School District

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Abstract

School climate is a key component in the academic achievement of primary and secondary school students. Using multiple school climate and organizational theories, this study examines school climate from administrator and teacher perspectives using a qualitative, phenomenological process. This study analyzes participant interviews and found four themes: Interpersonal, Surrounding Community, Trickle Effect, and Personal Experiences. These themes were reflective of the literature and clearly answers the two research questions that compare teacher and administrator perspectives and the role of leadership in school climate. This study makes the connection between education and social work and identifies specific gaps in the scholarly literature. This study concludes with a detailed discussion of the proposed themes as well as limitations of the study and recommendations for social work practice in schools.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my children, Carson and Brinley. No matter how high or difficult your dreams may seem, they are not impossible. You can accomplish anything as long as you believe in yourself. I love you both with all my heart.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
List of Tables and Figures.....	xiii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Problem Statement.....	2
School Climate and Student Success	2
Rural Schools.....	3
The Identified Rural School District.....	5
Relevance to Social Work.....	6
Theoretical Framework.....	7
Ecological Theory.....	8
Ecological Theory in Social Work	9
Thompson’s Levels Model.....	9
Rational Systems Perspective	10
Natural Systems Perspective.....	11
Open Systems Perspective.....	12
Authoritative School Climate Theory.....	12
Research Questions.....	13

RQ1	13
RQ2	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review	14
School Climate	14
School Climate and Academics	16
Internal Community	17
Leadership	19
Safety	21
Institutional Environment	23
School Climate Research Methodology	24
Quantitative	24
Mixed Methods	25
Qualitative	26
Phenomenology	26
School Climate Perceptions	28
Administrative Perceptions	29
Teacher Perceptions	30
Student Perceptions	33
Gaps in the Literature	34
Social Work in Schools	36

Chapter 3: Methodology	38
Research Design.....	38
Research Sample.....	38
Data Collection	40
Confidentiality	42
Data Analysis	43
Establishing Rigor and Trustworthiness	44
Reflection and Memo-Writing	45
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Interpretation	47
Research Questions.....	47
RQ1	47
RQ2.....	47
Research Data	47
Themes.....	48
Interpersonal Relationships.....	48
Administrators.....	50
Teachers.....	51
Surrounding Community	52
Administrators.....	53
Teachers.....	54

Trickle Effect/Climate Flow	55
Administrators.....	58
Teachers.	59
Personal Experiences	61
Administrators.....	62
Teachers.	63
Comparison of Perceptions.....	65
Similarities	66
Differences	67
Summary of Data Analysis and Interpretations	68
Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations.....	69
Study Summary and Conclusions	71
Interpersonal Relationships.....	72
Surrounding Community	75
Trickle Effect/Climate Flow	78
Leadership.....	80
Personal Experiences	82
Implications.....	83
Theoretical Implications	83
Ecological Theory.	84

Authoritative School Climate Theory	84
Thompson’s Levels Model.....	85
Practice Implications.....	86
Limitations	88
Recommendations.....	89
Conclusion	90
References.....	92
Appendix A.	102
Appendix B.	103
Appendix C.	104
Appendix D.....	105

List of Tables and Figures

Figure 1. Aggregated interpersonal nodes per case.	49
Table 1. Trickle Effect/Climate flow nodes	55
Figure 2. Aggregated trickle effect/climate flow per case	56

Chapter 1: Introduction

There are approximately 13 million people in Pennsylvania; 20% are children under the age of 18 (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Approximately, 2.6 million children are enrolled in some form of public, private, online, or other educational institution (United States Census Bureau, 2016). The public school system is one of the first formal organizations individuals have contact with, which presents our nation with an opportunity to raise our children in a healthy, supportive, positive climate (Duke, 2015). In 2009, the federal government initiated guidelines for schools developed by the National School Climate Center (National School Climate Center, 2017). The goal of the guidelines are to foster school climates that are positive, respectful, and safe (National School Climate Center, n.d.; Rudasill, Snyder, Levinson, & Adelson, 2018).

School is more than just academics; it is a physical place where children learn to create social relationships, build independence, and develop behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally (Wang & Degol, 2016). Fostering a healthy climate that promotes growth, independence, and student success can lead to future successful citizens (National School Climate Center, n.d.). Understanding the varying perspectives of key players in a rural school district can offer unique insight into school climate. This study examines school climate using the lenses of Thompson's levels model, ecological theory, and authoritative school climate theory.

The purpose of this study is to review and analyze two perceptions of a rural school district's climate to understand how a rural school district can maximize student learning. Most school climate literature focuses on one school climate perception without comparing similarities and differences between multiple perceptions. A comparison between two majority stakeholder, teachers and administrators, perceptions can provide a clearer picture of the school district's climate. A social worker's holistic understanding and examination of school climate perception

may elicit a vision of what interventions, programs, or policy changes are critical factors to develop a supportive a positive school climate.

Problem Statement

Teachers and administrators make up the majority of public school employees in the United States (Scafidi, 2013). Majority stakeholders, such as teachers and administrators, impact and contribute to the climate of an organization merely by being the largest number of employed individuals within the organization. One barrier to the production of quality outputs (student learning) may be a difference in perception between the two majority groups (Thompson, 2003). Student learning is a quantifiable factor to measure if a student has reached academic success (Prensky, 2014). Academic success and student learning identifies if the student has become a capable person (Prensky, 2014).

Organizations have the potential to deteriorate without cohesion, goodness-of-fit, or support. The education of our country's future leaders may be in jeopardy when a school organization is unable to support academic achievement (Neumann, 2017).

School Climate and Student Success

School climate is recognized as a key component to the success of students and the promotion of student achievement (Huang, Eklund, & Cornwell, 2017). School climate can be defined as a collectivity of beliefs, values, and attitudes in a school setting that is measured by stakeholder perception (National School Climate Center, 2017). A positive school climate allows students to feel comfortable, appreciated, accepted, and safe in a place where they can connect with peers and adults they trust (Borkar, 2016). The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments defines a positive school climate as the product of a school's attention "to fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment;

and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community” (2019, para. 5). Taneri and Engin-Demir (2011) noted that students in schools that maintain a positive school climate are more successful than students who attend schools that maintain a negative school climate. Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, and Higgins-D’Alessandro (2013) found high rates of student learning, achievement, and graduation are a result of a positive school climate.

For several decades, educators have attributed adolescent achievement outcomes, including academic achievement, mental health, and a reduction in substance abuse and school violence, to a positive school climate (De Pedro, Gilreath, & Berkowitz, 2016; Thapa et al., 2013). De Pedro et al. (2016) posits that due to the fact that school climate can increase the motivation and engagement of adolescents, school educators can support our young people by providing them with a positive school climate.

Rural Schools

Wallin and Newton (2014) argued that rural schools have been overlooked in the literature and in educational policies. In the United States, almost 8,000, or more than half of all operating school districts, are located in rural areas (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Rural school districts in the United States have unique characteristics that lead to many challenges, including lower salaries, multiple duties and responsibilities for staff, lack of access to professional development opportunities, underfunded budgets, and professional isolation (National Education Association, n.d.). Pennsylvania has 500 school districts, 235 of which are considered rural (Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2014). The Center for Rural Pennsylvania (2014) defines a rural school district as “when the number of persons per square mile within the county or school district is less than 284” (para. 3). In rural America, school districts usually are the largest

organization in the community, making schools the hub of the community. In small communities where schools are the center focus, schools and communities complement each other, creating cohesion. This cohesion of rural schools and communities makes school climate an even more important aspect as it has the potential to affect the entire community. In a collaborative and meaningful school community, schools have an increased ability to meet the challenges rural communities and students face in the 21st century (Harmon & Schafft, 2009).

School climate is a key component to the well-being of a community and crucial to rural development (Taneri & Engin-Demir, 2011). Harmon and Schafft (2009) discussed the role of school administrators in fostering a positive climate in rural schools. They found that rural educational leaders have a challenging role and juggle more duties and responsibilities than their urban counterparts (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). For example, rural school leaders are expected to understand both their school's values and the values of the surrounding community, whereas urban leaders do not appear to have those same expectations (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Smaller geographical areas and schools as the center of the community make it easy to blur the relational lines between schools and communities in rural settings. These indistinct lines add to the complexity of issues that rural school leaders face (Wallin & Newton, 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). For example, ethical issues related to personal relationship and professional relationship colliding. Small communities allow for multifaceted relationships between community members and school leaders. For instance, in rural communities, leaders and administrators in the school district may participate, outside of school, in another agency or organization in the community in different capacity or role. To illustrate, the soccer coach may also be a parent and teacher within the district. School community contexts in rural communities are characterized by a "strong sense of place" (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018, p. 2).

Administrator's practices and leadership may be influenced by the blurred relational lines within the community (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Due to those multi-level relationships which involve a variety of different roles in various organizations, administrators are in positions where their personal connections could lead to unbalanced or unethical decision-making (Worth, 2014). Unethical decision making could lead to an increase in a negative school climate.

The Identified Rural School District

A rural school district located in a large northeastern state was selected for this study. The district was established in 1956 and is comprised of six municipalities (Superintendent, personal communication, November 15, 2018). According to definitions by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (2000), this district is considered a rural school district. The district covers an area of 144 square miles and encompasses a total population of 15,243 people (Superintendent, personal communication, November 15, 2018). Currently, there are 2,500 students enrolled throughout the district's four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school.

In 2015, the school district's school board underwent a major transition following disagreements among administrative staff on how to successfully propel the district forward with regards to higher test scores, decreased drop-out rates, increased funding, increased graduation rates, and increased morale amongst staff. A group of community mothers (called "Vote 5") were voted into five spots on the school board in a move that was perceived as bringing change within the district. After the election of the new school board, the district's Superintendent announced his retirement after 20 years of service. "Vote 5" and the administrative transitions seemed to change the dynamic of the community, the district, the students, and the relationship that staff had with the administrative team. In addition, the years 2015-2018 have been increasingly

difficult for the district. Administrative staff transitioned into different roles, individuals were terminated from their administrative positions, negative commentary on social media were taking over the online community, and news articles about the district were published throughout the local counties. These news articles included inappropriate executive meeting behaviors and many outspoken, angry parents. This situation adversely affected the overall community and caused a trickle effect which appeared to affect the way district staff operated with students and peers and how staff responded to important policies, procedures, and state laws on a day to day basis. More and more families were attending school board meetings, staff were either vocal about their concerns or seemed to disassociate, and social media and the news articles were the highlight of the conversations throughout the district. Through preliminary informal conversations, staff stated that this school district was reeling in a negative school climate (Teacher C, personal communication, n.d.).

Relevance to Social Work

According to the United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2018), there are 306,370 children, family, and school social workers employed in the United States. Almost 40,000 of these social workers work specifically in elementary and secondary schools (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2018). Thus, it is imperative that school social workers understand the significance of school climate, because the climate of an organization has a major effect on its productivity (student learning) (Massat, Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 2008).

Social workers often utilize an ecological perspective to conceptualize and examine the different systems that exist within our society (Massat, et al., 2008). The variety of systems impact client lives, including individuals, families, organizations, schools, and communities.

School social workers can use the ecological perspective to consider the needs and perceptions of teachers, administrators, students, and parents when reviewing and analyzing policies and procedures that directly affect school climate (Massat et al., 2008).

Understanding school climate from different perspectives gives school social workers the ability to work collaboratively and collectively with the school educators to help students become successful academically (Massat et al., 2008). Alvarez, Bye, Bryant, and Mumm (2013) conducted a study of 100 school districts and found that school social workers were a significant predictor of students who completed high school. Alvarez et al. stated that because of the wide variety of skills and duties, school social workers work on multiple aspects of a student's life. Some skills and duties include collaboration with students and staff, connect students and families to outside agencies, assess from a holistic perspective, and help meet the student's needs beyond academic support. Unfortunately, literature on school social workers in rural school districts is limited. One of the few studies that focuses on the subject was conducted by Heinrich (2017). Heinrich's quantitative study focused on rural school districts and school social work effectiveness and found that social work is effective and promising for school districts, especially in rural communities.

Theoretical Framework

School climate research utilizes many different theories that seek to explain school climate perceptions (National School Climate Center, 2008). This study employs three theories to examine the variables under study, (a) Ecological theory, (b) Thompson's levels model, and (c) Authoritative school climate theory. Ecological theory addresses the "goodness of fit" (Thapa et al., 2003) between teachers and administrators in the school environment, Thompson's levels model views "perception" as the basis for science (Scott & Davis, 2007). Thompson's model also

provides a clear vision of a multi-level organization and the significance of parts working together. If Thompson's levels are functioning optimally, then the organization is able to produce quality outputs. Finally, authoritative school climate theory is proposed to compliment ecological theory and Thompson's levels model by providing a solution to imbalanced organizations, such as schools, through an equilibrium of support and discipline.

Ecological Theory

School climate improvement efforts have been grounded in ecological system theories and can be translated into effective social work practice (Pardeck, 1988; Thapa et al., 2013). Ecological theory derives from Darwinism and Robert Park's work on human ecology and is one of the first theories to view individuals in the environment from a holistic perspective (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006). This theory, also known as ecosystems theory and ecological systems theory, focuses on transactions between people and their environment (Robbins et al., 2006). Teater (2014) stated the ecological perspective "is where individuals feel that their environment is providing the necessary and useful resources to meet their needs and they, personally, have strengths, resources, and the capability to grow, develop, and be satisfied" (para. 2). Individuals and the environment work together in a reciprocal nature to positively contribute to both the environment's and person's growth and development (Teater, 2014). Ecological theory maintains that people strive to fit into their environment and because of the simultaneous and dynamic relationship between the two, there is constant change and reshaping (Robbins et al., 2006). Germain explains that a goodness of fit between person and environment can deteriorate when there is an upset in the balance of an organization through insufficient, excessive, or missing inputs (Robbins et al., 2006). This maladaptive balance is conceptualized as stress (Robbins et al., 2006).

Ecological Theory in Social Work

In the early 1970s, social work theorists recognized the importance of person-in-environment (Pardeck, 1988). First introduced into the social work field by Germain, it specifies the significance of “goodness of fit” between people and their environments and how they reciprocally adapt to each other (Robbins et al., 2006). Pardeck (1988) wrote that not only is the “client’s” behavior shaped by the environment, but it is possible the environment can be shaped by the client’s behavior. This cyclic transaction causes change in the environment and effects the person’s social functioning (Pardeck, 1988). Through this theoretical lens, people and environments strive to be reciprocal and homeostatic, and when stress occurs, it causes an upset and an imbalance. In a rural school district, the upset and stress may cause a negative school climate. Ecological theory informs this study by suggesting that if teachers and administrators share a common vision, then the organization is more likely to have a positive school climate.

Thompson’s Levels Model

James Thompson is widely acclaimed as a modern classic student of organizational theory and research (Scott & Davis, 2007). As a leading author in organizational theory and research, Thompson combined the Rational Systems perspective, the Natural Systems perspective, and the Open Systems perspective to help to define, organize, and understand organizations and organizational behavior (Scott & Davis, 2007). Thompson proposed that the rational, natural, and open systems perspectives all have a role in understanding organizations (Scott & Davis, 2007). Finally, Thompson stressed that the issue is not a choice between one of the three perspectives or levels but that complex organizations are open (and therefore natural) systems subject to the constraints of program rationality (Lyden, 1969).

In addition to the three model perspectives, Thompson used his term *dominant coalition* to help explain the inter-related parts of his model. In Thompson's (1967) seminal work *Organizations in Action*, prior to the creation of his model, he wrote extensively about the dominant coalition within the three theoretical perspectives and the significance of the coalition balancing the organizational power. Thompson defined dominant coalition as a group of people in an organization that has the most influence on the mission and goals of that organization (Thompson, 2003). He stated that the dominant coalition (which, for this study, may be equivalent to a school board in a school district) is significant in complex organizations and due to the unfixed, flowing nature of the "inner circle" there is always potential conflict (Thompson, 2003). With the dominant coalition, power must be dispersed equally. If not, the potential for power spill-over could be detrimental to the health of the organization (Thompson, 2003). Essentially, Thompson stated that an imbalance between the dominant coalition within the organization has potential to cause upset amongst the three levels within an organization. An upset could be injurious to the outputs or products of the organization. This idea, as part of Thompson's seminal work on organizations, informs this research by suggesting that if administrators and the school board members share a common vision, the imbalance tends to trickle down throughout the levels of the school district leading to a decrease in student success. Thompson's uses the following three theories as a significant component to his levels model.

Rational Systems Perspective. The rational systems perspective, as defined by Scott and Davis (2007), defines organizations as collectivities with highly formalized structure that pursue specific goals. As cited in Lyden (1969) and Kamps and Polos (1999), Thompson theorized that organizations are expected to produce results. To do this, Thompson argued that organizations sought to reduce uncertainty so that organizational actions can be explained. In his model,

Thompson stated that the level of the organization that carried out the functions of the input and output is evident in the rational perspective level or technical level (Scott & Davis, 2007).

Within a school district, the technical level is the teachers and paraprofessionals, the secretaries, the custodians, and nutrition workers. This level works to keep students safe and help to improve the learning environment. It is at this level that actual “production” (learning) is taking place. Thompson states this level is where the ground work is completed and has direct connection to the outputs (Scott & Davis, 2007).

Natural Systems Perspective. The natural systems perspective defines organizations as collectivities whose participants are in pursuit of different goals, but all recognize the value of the organization as an important resource (Scott & Davis, 2007). The natural systems perspective, also known as Thompson’s managerial level, is the level of the organization in charge of management and operations of the technical level and makes sure personnel are allotted for specific units. Like Thompson, Neal and Manz (2008) purported that values, attitudes, and beliefs permeate every aspect of organizations. Values help shape the culture of an organization and link members so that goals are achieved. Organizations achieve their purpose, create new products, and master new services when they foster creativity and when innovation is cutting edge. Thompson (2003), like Neal and Manz, believed that values are highly effective in helping organizations reach their goals. Thompson (2003) believed that this perspective was significant at every level of the organization; however, it is carried out and supported at the managerial level.

In Thompson’s model, the managerial level may include building administrators, school counselors, and special education staff who are responsible for task management at the technical level. The administrators work with the teachers and oversee the process and design of the

“production system” of knowledge instillation. The school counselors and other professional staff help the technical level maintain production through the support of student’s emotional, behavioral, and mental health (Kamps & Polos, 1999).

Open Systems Perspective. The open system perspective is connected to Thompson’s institutional level where the organization is connected to the larger system: the environment. This level is where boundaries are laid out and domains are created. Organizations will attempt to “seal off” the technical level in order to protect it from the uncertainty and “openness” of the other two to ensure results (Scott & Davis, 2007). The open systems perspective stresses the complexity of individuals and subgroups in organizations, as well as the connectedness between all the operating parts (Scott & Davis, 2007). Open systems self-sustain themselves through resources from the environment and maintain open boundaries between loosely coupled subsystems (Scott & Davis, 2007). Thompson suggested that the “institutional” level, within his levels model, is where the organizations relate to the environment. He argued that some parts of organizations are more subject to environmental influences than others, adding to increased uncertainty within some levels (Lyden, 1969).

Authoritative School Climate Theory

Authoritative School Climate (ASC) theory stemmed from Baumrind’s 1968 parenting typology on authoritative parenting styles. ASC became a multidimensional model that applies the parent typology from Baumrind’s parenting styles to school climate (Huang et al., 2016). This theory posits a variety of components of school climate, such as discipline reports, discipline consistency and student and staff support. Cornell et al. (2016), defined school climate as “the quality and character of school life and is based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning

practices, and organizational structures” (p. 2). This school climate definition by Cornell et al. gave the researchers the opportunity to identify two dimensions of ASC theory: disciplinary structure and student support. Disciplinary structure is defined as school rules being perceived as firm but fair. Student support is defined as student perceptions that their teachers and other school staff treat them respectfully and show a desire for their success (Cornell et al., 2016). Huang et al. (2016) found that those schools that use this theoretical lens have lower dropout rates, less truancy, less victimization, higher emotional engagement, and lower levels of student aggression. ASC theory informs this study by hypothesizing that if administrators operate with a balance of support and discipline, then teachers will feel more supported and valued.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1. What are the similarities and differences between teacher and administrator perceptions of a rural school district’s school climate?

RQ2. What are teacher and administer perceptions of leadership on school climate?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

School Climate

In the last 50 years, school climate research has expanded (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral, 2009). The U.S. Department of Education has shifted focus to school climate reform as an essential component of school improvements (Thapa et al., 2013). With this newly acquired focus, attention has been given to a variety of areas of school climate such as education, policy, research, and practice (Voight & Mation, 2016). Despite the growing research and the identification of school climate as important, there are still wide variations in the definition of “school climate.” Initially, school climate was considered a clearly defined concept; however, as focus grew, so did the realization that school climate was multi-dimensional and complex (Rudasill et al., 2018; Wang & Degol, 2016). Researcher’s individual perspective added to the complexity and depth of school climate definitions (Rudasill et al., 2018). Based on Wang and Degol’s (2016) systematic literature review, this study defines school climate through a division into four subcategories: academic, community, safety, and institutional environment.

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life (Cohen et al., 2009). Each school has their distinctive interpersonal climate (Rhodes, Camic, Milburn, & Lowe, 2009). While Cohen et al. (2009) defines school climate in a general sense, Jia, Konold, and Cornell (2016) find school climate is typically multidimensional and based on individual patterns of school life experiences. Meristo and Eisenschmidt (2014) called school climate “the school’s psychological ambience” (p. 2). Wang and Degol (2016) believe that school climate encompasses every aspect of the school experience. This includes teaching and learning quality, school community relationships, institutional features, and how the school is organized (Wang & Degol, 2016).

De Pedro et al. (2016), in addition to Wang and Degol and Johnson et al. (2017), utilized a variable approach to help define school climate. De Pedro et al. stated that school climate is a collectivity of beliefs, values, and attitudes in a school setting that is measured by different associated variables, newly recognized key components add to the definition of school climate. The variables identified by De Pedro et al. are caring relationships with adults, safety, school connectedness, and meaningful participation. Thapa et al. (2013) identified five essential areas of focus as school climate variables: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, institutional environment, and the school improvement process. Ramsey, Spira, Parisi, and Rebok (2016) stated similar themes to Thapa et al. (2013) that help to define school climate. These themes are order, safety, discipline, academic outcomes, social relationships, school facilities, and school connectedness (Ramsey et al., 2016). Huang et al. (2017) spoke about school climate reflecting norms, goals, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning, practices, and organizational structures.

A positive school climate is part of what draws teachers and students to the school, giving them the warmth of being a part of something (Kor & Opare, 2017). Cohen et al. (2009) identified a school with a positive school climate as one where individuals are engaged, respected, and work together as a collective entity to contribute to the shared school vision. In addition, Johnson et al., (2017) expressed that “positive school climate refers to the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between students, teachers, and administrators and sets the parameters of normative and acceptable behavior in the school” (p. 181).

Wang and Degol (2016) encourage researchers to understand that school climate definitions can be malleable. Flexibility in definition does allow for specific interventions to be

created to fit the individual school environment needs (Wang & Degol, 2016). School climate interventions that meet the individual needs of a school district are especially significant in rural school communities where the dynamics of the school and community are multifaceted. Due to the broad definition of school climate by Wang and Degol, the subcategories in the following literature are in relation to the four components of Wang and Degol's school climate definition.

School Climate and Academics

The *Academic* subcategory of school climate focuses on instruction, curricula, teacher training, student outcomes, and professional development (Wang & Degol, 2016). Murphy and Hallinger (1988) found that districts that reviewed procedures and district processes as well as outcomes, and had a high degree of coordination between district, school, and classroom were more effective than other districts when they showed attention to curriculum and instruction, and had strong instructional leadership roles. Additionally, Allen, Grigsby, and Peters (2015) found that "successful principals recognize that one of the most important components of student success is the teacher" (p. 15). Successful principals, successful teachers, and a higher student achievement is directly tied to school climate (Allen et al., 2015). This study identified the importance of professional development opportunities for staff and concluded that these influence other areas of school climate, such as collaboration, team work, and connectedness (Allen et al, 2015). Another study by Ambrosetti, Cho, and Slate (2009) also highlighted the prominence of teachers and student success as a component of school climate. The researchers concluded with eight themes: teaching strategies, caring/concern characteristics, rapport, passionate, commitment/professionalism, classroom management, knowledgeable, and respect (Ambrosetti et al., 2015). Ambrosetti et al. also concluded that teachers who exhibited the identified "best teacher" characteristics are what helped to foster positivity in the school and

among students. Kor and Opare (2017) studied the importance of teachers and teaching in a positive school climate by distributing questionnaires and conducting in depth interviews with a randomly selected sample of 40 head teachers from school districts across the nation (Kor & Opare, 2017). The study found that teachers who are present, engaged, supportive, and who follow through with expectations help to increase the positive climate of the school (Kor & Opare, 2017). When teachers work collectively with administrators and for the betterment of the students, positive school climate naturally increases as well as student success (Kor & Opare, 2017; Orzea, 2016). Meristo and Eisenschmidt (2014) found a correlation between high teacher job satisfaction and high teacher commitment with positive student and teacher educational and psychological results. Ramsey et al. (2016) used a Likert-scale tool and sampled Baltimore city public school parents, staff, and students. This researchers found that participants felt strongly about the importance of school attendance and student outcomes. Ramsey et al. (2016) also found that the participants of the study identified relationships and individual behaviors within the school as more significant than the academic component of school climate.

Internal Community

The *Internal* component of school climate encompasses interpersonal relationships between all staff and students within the school (Wang & Degol, 2016). Internal community can be defined as everyone in the buildings involved in the educational process as well as the perceptions of all involved in the process. Individuals in the building that could fall under this category are students, teachers, principals, student aids, maintenance workers, cafeteria staff, professional support staff (psychologists, school counselors, social workers, and additional specialist staff).

“Teachers felt more positive about their school environment when their principals value them as a partner in the school program” (Allen et al., 2015, p. 18). The concepts of connectedness and support were prominent in Allen et al.’s (2015) study. Like Allen et al., Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) collected data from 3,215 teachers on the exploration of the relationships among the faculty, their trust in their principals, principal leadership behaviors, school climate, and student achievement. The researchers found that when teachers perceived they could trust their principal, their enthusiasm for teaching increased (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) also indicated that the school climate components (relationships among the faculty, their trust in their principals, principal leadership behaviors, school climate, and student achievement) are interrelated and correlated with each other; when one increases or decreases so does the others. Meristo and Eisenschmidt (2014) conducted a quantitative study with a sample of 112 teachers and found, as indicated by a positive correlation between variables, that positive relationships with colleagues is essential for creating a cohesive atmosphere. The researchers also identified student positive relationships with staff as an important component to creating a cohesive atmosphere (Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014).

Kolk, Vock, and Dolen (2016) stressed the significance of school district connection to the surrounding community and the connections amongst the internal community of the school district. The community component of school climate can be defined as the connection to the surrounding geographical areas. School districts and school leaders in rural areas have a unique connection to the community (Kolk et al., 2016). As with the external community connections, there is also a uniqueness in the connections amongst the staff (Kolk et al., 2016). Kolk et al. explore “trickle effects” within organizations. Through qualitative interviews, these researchers

found interesting “trickle up” and “trickle down” effects between managers and staff when turmoil occurs at either level (Kolk et al., 2016). These researchers indicated that problems or activities at the managerial level seemed to “trickle down” to the staff, even when it was not intended. Paradoxically, concerns at the staff level seemed to “trickle up” to the managers. These findings are significant for this study because they visualize the flow of knowledge and activities around an organization giving insight to the internal community and relationships.

Leadership. In times of heightened educational concern, school leadership is presented as a staple strategy to help resolve school climate issues (National School Climate Center, 2008). In most recent literature, leadership has been recognized as a significant component to a positive school climate (Velasco, Edmonson, & Slate, 2012). Northouse (2016) defined leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 6). With school climate being the “heart and soul” of the organization and what draws students, teachers, and administration to that particular school, it is imperative that a school organization is led with poise (Velasco et al., 2012). The main task of a principal/administrator is to help create a positive atmosphere and environment that promotes the success of children (Dutta & Sahney, 2016).

Leaders often are overwhelmed as current school systems are flooded with unfunded or poorly funded education mandates (Dutta & Shaney, 2016; National School Climate Center, 2008). School administrators are expected to meet these accountability demands while they expect their staff and students to meet heightened levels of commanded performance (Velasco et al., 2012). Educational leaders are required to “step it up” and find ways to meet the demands of the state and support their staff and students simultaneously (Velasco et al., 2012). Myers (2014) explored pressures placed on primary and secondary schools and the impact a leader has on the

situation. Through qualitative case study analysis that included 30 school stakeholders (principals, staff, students, parents, additional community members, and community business leaders) over a five-month period, the researcher found that solid school leadership, especially during times of change, is important (Myers, 2014). School leaders have the capability to “bolster” a school organization when that school organization is at risk of being threatened (Myers, 2014).

Wallin and Newton (2014) noted that the success of a leader can be attributed to the quality of the relationships the administrator fosters with his/her staff. In this qualitative study conducted in a small rural school, relationships were established as a significant theme (Wallin & Newton, 2014). Turan and Bektas (2013) also conducted a qualitative study where they interviewed 349 teachers on their perspectives of school leadership and climate and found a positive correlation between the perceptions of leadership practices and a positive school climate. A quantitative study with similar research questions to that of Turan and Bektas reviewed teacher satisfaction and school climate in relation to leadership (Dutta & Sahney, 2016). Using a random sample of schools and teachers through self-reported questionnaires found that a positive school climate has a direct effect on teacher satisfaction of the work place, as does the perceptions of leadership on teacher satisfaction and school climate (Dutta & Sahney, 2016).

Principals usually are the identified leadership in a school. Principals have the ability to set the tone for the organizations in which the teachers work (Hauserman, Ivankova, & Stick, 2013). In Hauserman et al.'s (2013) mixed-methods study, results indicated that teachers perceived it important for their principals to be committed, have high communication skills, and be approachable. Further, principal leadership has been tied to student outcomes. Wiczorek and Manard (2018) conducted a phenomenological study with rural principals on leadership

experiences. The researchers found a variety of themes; one stressed that the principals believed that more supportive relationships with teachers and with all stakeholders started with their own leadership behaviors.

Rural School Leadership

Wieczorek and Manard (2018) also found geographic location and multiple roles of the rural principal to be significant themes in their study. Rural leaders within a rural school district develop personal identities in relation to the rural community they are situated in, in turn building individual characteristics consistent with the small community (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). For example, rural leaders lead based on the values and expectations of the surrounding community. Well-functioning schools increase social cohesion of communities and strengthen the sense of community (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Harmon and Schafft (2009) discuss that most communities in rural America face many upcoming challenges, and public school leaders are those who need to foster and create community collaboration. In comparison, Hansen (2018) conducted a qualitative study on factors that influenced rural principals to leave their school district for other employment. Hansen found seven themes in her data analysis: career opportunities, family needs, community expectations, workload, lack of professional support, general decision making by the school board or superintendent, and salary negotiations. Ultimately, Hansen concluded that rural principal turnover affects student outcomes, yet there is hope. Hansen stated that most factors are within school district and principal control through relationships and organizational factors.

Safety

Safety, a component of school climate, represents not only disciplinary measures within the school, but also physical and emotional safety of staff and students (Wang & Degol, 2016). A

positive school climate has been promoted as a key factor in the reduction of violent and aggressive behavior in students (Johnson et al., 2017). Thapa et al. (2013), through an integrative review of school climate research, emphasized that feeling safe in school leads to student learning and healthy development. Gase et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study in order to examine the relationships between students, staff, and administrators on school climate. Gase et al. used a sample of 18 school districts where approximately 277 students and 35 staff responded from each school in Los Angeles County to self-administered surveys. The researchers discovered a strong association between student outcomes, school climate, and feelings of safety. Steffgen, Recchia, and Viechtbauer (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of 36 independent studies and determined that a statistical relationship was hard to assess because of the multiple measures and definitions of school climate and school violence; however, it does appear there is a negative correlational relationship between the two. Booren, Handy, and Power (2011) utilized the Safe and Responsive Schools survey (consisting of items related to connection, climate, incivility, and disruption) with a sample of 182 students and 32 teachers from one high school. These researchers found a difference in teacher and student perception but also a correlation between a positive school climate and feeling safe in school (Booren et al., 2011).

Cornell, Shukla, and Konold (2015) conducted a complex study involving a multilevel multivariate model and the Virginia's School Climate Survey in a statewide sample of 39,305 seventh and eighth grade students from 423 schools. Cornell et al. (2015), through a socio-ecological perspective and the authoritative school climate theory, investigated support and disciplinary structure with correlation to peer victimization and feeling safe in schools. What the researchers found was support for the socio-ecological perspective and the significance of a positive school climate playing a role in students feeling safe (Cornell et al., 2015). Expanding

upon their research in this arena, Cornell et al. (2016) conducted a second study that utilized Virginia's School Climate survey and included 48,027 additional high school students. Using the same multilevel multivariate approach with the same sampling procedures, Cornell et al. (2016) attempted to draw connections between positive school climate and low levels of peer victimization and found correlation between increase in engagement and academic scores (Cornell et al., 2016). Cornell et al. (2016) also found evidence that authoritative school climate theory supported student academic outcomes and student engagement.

Johnson et al. (2017) explored the connection between students' social and physical environment and school violence. Johnson et al. examined literature that stressed schools should be creating safe, physical environments that support the social environment. The researchers assessed 58 high schools for physical environment assessment and then administered an MDS3 School Climate survey to 28,592 adolescents in the same schools to assess school climate perceptions. Multilevel structural equation models were used to test for indirect effects between the identified variables (Johnson et al., 2017). A strong correlation between a visually appealing environment, perceptions of structured discipline, lower violent acts and bullying, and a positive overall school climate were found (Johnson, et al., 2017). The researchers expressed that while the design of their study is complex and that school climate and safety is multifaceted, there is a correlation between safety in schools and a positive school climate.

Institutional Environment

Wang and Degol (2016) posited that institutional environment reflects organizational or structural features of the school. Thapa et al. (2013) define institutional environment as school connectedness/engagement and physical layout/surroundings and found that school connectedness is "a powerful predictor of student outcomes" (p. 11). Uline and Tschannen-

Moran (2008) commented on the quality of school facilities impact on school achievement with school climate as a mediator. Uline and Tschannen-Moran conducted an exploratory study where they distributed surveys to 1,134 teachers in 80 middle schools. The researchers examined the interdependent relationship between the physical environment and the social environment of schools and how the findings compare to student achievement (Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008). Thapa et al. indicated that school space is a contributor to positive school climate and impacts student behaviors and feelings of being safe. Smaller schools, in comparison to larger ones, have an easier ability to transform their physical environment simply because of the amount of physical space (Thapa et al., 2013). This component of school climate is unique because it is more concrete than any of the other elements of school climate and is also the component with the least amount of literature.

School Climate Research Methodology

School climate research is comprised of different methodology and sample strategies. The vast majority of research divides itself into three methods: quantitative, mixed methods, and qualitative. The school climate literature identifies a variety of method combinations to capture the complexity of school climate research.

Quantitative

Quantitative studies use a variety of measures ranging in validity, reliability, structure, and length. In educational literature, quantitative methodology appears to be the method of choice. Allen et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study utilizing two different surveys to examine transformational leadership, school climate, and student achievement. Booren et al. (2011) used a Safe and Responsive School survey with Likert-type survey questions to find correlations in student and teacher perceptions of school climate. Using cross-sectional survey

data, Dutta and Sahney (2016) used questionnaires in hundreds of the schools to look at teacher job satisfaction and school leadership. Similar to Dutta and Sahney, Gase et al. (2017) utilized three different surveys to obtain a variety of results related to student outcomes, school climate, and student health. Uline and Tschannen-Moran (2008) used quantitative methods to explore student achievement correlations with school climate and school facilities. Alqahtani (2015), like Uline and Tschannen-Moran, used a variety of scales to find correlations between multiple variables.

Mixed Methods

A mixed method approach uses both quantitative measures, but also incorporates a qualitative component (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). In school climate research, the qualitative component could consist of open-ended questions, individual interviews, and/or focus groups. Due to the multi-layered nature of school climate research, a mixed method approach allows for unique correlation combinations, as well as a detailed research design. Johnson et al. (2017) and Cornell et al. (2016) both utilize a mixed-method approach where the complexity of the design allows for thorough correlations and unique analyses; however, the limitations of the study add to increased questions about the validity and reliability of the complex statistical analysis. Ambrosetti et al. (2009) used Likert-type surveys with two open-ended questions. Similarly, Hauserman et al. (2013) used mixed methods to establish teacher perceptions on principal leadership through Likert-type surveys and open-ended questions. Kor and Opare (2017) conducted a qualitative and quantitative analysis of teachers' perceptions of the components involved in a positive school climate. In this mixed methods approach, two scales were used as well as interviews with 40 teachers (Kor & Opare, 2017). Like Johnson et al. (2017) and Cornell et al. (2016), Kor and Opare were complex in their research methodology. Research with this

type of methodology in relation to school climate is common when there is a complex variety of variables and multiple research questions.

Qualitative

A third methodology discussed in school climate literature, one that is least common in educational literature, is a qualitative-only approach. When a researcher seeks to “get the story,” a qualitative approach is key to identify themes and draw connections or correlations. Over the past decade, qualitative methods have sustained growth in health services and education research (Reeves, Peller, Goldman, & Kitto, 2013). Qualitative research designs are distinct in the differences between those of quantitative research designs (Ozen, 2018). Specifically, methods of observation and ethnography have held promise for researchers in the social science disciplines, education included (Cooley, 2013). Change in public education research methods is needed to keep up with the cyclic nature of policies and reforms and to give further insights to the complicated nature of school systems (Cooley, 2013). This research study used a qualitative methodology because it is the type of methodology most appropriate to answer the research questions. In addition, this specific type of research study has never been conducted in the identified rural school district.

Phenomenology. Few phenomenological, qualitative studies exist in the education arena, and even more so on the topic of school climate. The term phenomenology dates back to 1765 where it was defined as a science of “describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Perception, defined by Clark Moustakas (1994) in his seminal research on phenomenology, is the “primary source of knowledge” where intentions and sensations meet (p. 52). Moustakas stated that any phenomenon is the starting place for all investigation and serves as the beginning of science. The

method of reflection that occurs interment in phenomenology is a systematic “resource” used when data is conducted (Moustakas, 1994). The perceptions of individuals take research to a different level where fresh perspectives can expand knowledge and the knowing of reality. Perception is the basis for all science (Moustakas, 1994).

The researcher, in phenomenological qualitative research, attempts to find commonalities in one phenomenon and explore the situations that surround it (Padgett, 2017). This methodology allows phenomenological researchers to gain insiders’ perspectives of personal experiences and compile a composite description of those experiences, hence why it is the best methodology for school climate research. In conjunction with perceptions, the researcher’s reflection also supports the meaning of the phenomenon described. Moustakas (1994) states, “Through a process of continuing perceiving of and reflecting on acts, we come to know their meaning in our experience and their relationship to ourselves” (p. 52).

Kutsyruba, Walker, and Noonan (2016) and Mafora (2013) both studied school administrators and perceptions on their principalship. Both studies used a phenomenological lens to gain an in-depth perception of school climate. Wallin and Newton (2014) used a variety of semi-structured interviews with school administrators and sought to identify leadership practices in small, rural schools. Wallin and Newton’s study is unique because of the qualitative methodology and because rural school literature is predictably marginalized and under studied. Similar to Wallin and Newton, Myers (2014) utilized a qualitative methodology for his study where he analyzed a correlation between school leadership and organizational turbulence. Myers’ data collection phase occurred over a five-month period where he conducted in-depth interviews with a variety of school employees. Gill (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of studies that looked at phenomenology methods and organizational research. Gill stated that within

organizational studies, it is uncommon to find a phenomenology as the methodology even though phenomenology methodologies are opportune for formulating new avenues within organizational research. Gill (2014) concluded that phenomenology has a place in organizational research, specifically by giving researchers additional tools to help depict and translate “neglected aspects of organizational research” (p. 133).

Historically, the U.S. Department of Education followed the “gold standard” of double-blind random trials for educational research. Other research methods were assumed to be unimportant or untrustworthy (Cooley, 2013). However, qualitative studies are being accepted more in educational journals, which could indicate a shift in the educational research paradigm (Cooley, 2013). Phenomenology in school climate literature paves the way for new methodology and perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

A phenomenological, qualitative approach for this study was selected due to the amount of organizational change within the identified school district. The phenomenological approach will allow the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the change through multiple perspectives and in-depth interviewing. Open-ended questions will allow the participants to elaborate on their personal experiences related to their school’s climate.

School Climate Perceptions

School climate is categorized several different ways in the literature(Cite). Different areas of categorization include methodology and various perceptions of school climate. Perceptions available in a school district are the administrators, the teachers, and the students. It is important to identify the differing perceptions of school climate; according to the literature each subgroup has their own unique insights adding to the complexity of school climate literature. The ability to understand school climate will increase its impact on student outcomes (Gase et al., 2017).

“School climate is a perception-based concept grounded in students’, parents’, and school administrators’ experiences of school life” (Gase et al., 2017, p. 320). Different perceptions of school climate add to a comprehensive analysis of school climate (Gase et al., 2017).

Administrative Perceptions

Leadership within schools, as identified in previous sections, is significant in school climate research (Velasco et al., 2012). Examining school climate through the administrative lens adds to the variety in the school climate literature. In school climate research, administrators tend to perceive school climate in a more positive light than that of any other sub group perceptions (You, O'Malley, & Furlong, 2014). You et al. (2014) utilized a mixed methods design and sampled over 82,000 school personnel. The researchers believed there was a significant divide between administrative perceptions and those of teachers and students (You et al., 2014). Kutsyuruba et al. (2016) interviewed principals through a phenomenological lens and found that trust was a significant component of school climate and administrative leadership within schools. This study considered only administrators and their view of themselves within the school and the significance of the trust imperative (Kutsyuruba et al., 2016). Gase et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study on school climate perspective differences. While they did not find a relationship between teacher, student, and administrative perspectives on school climate, they did acknowledge a need for continued research that demonstrated the difference of administrative, student, and teacher measures on school climate (Gase et al., 2017). Allen et al. (2015) sought to examine school leadership, school climate, and student outcomes. In this purposive sample of six elementary principals, they found that successful principals recognize that one of the “most important components of student success is the teacher” (p. 16). Myers (2014) also took the perspectives of administrators and reviewed the phenomenon of turbulence in a high school’s

environment and found that through an administrative perspective, teachers and staff were viewed as staples in the environment and key supports for the school climate. Similar to Myers (2014), Wallin and Newton (2014) conducted semi-structured interviews with school administrators that allowed the researchers to identify the challenges and stressors of a school administrator in small rural school. Wallin and Newtown noted that small rural school administration is unique because administrative concerns are perceivably not taken as seriously as their urban counterparts. Due to smaller school operations, administrators take on multiple roles, adding to their workloads that can affect the relationships administrators have with their teachers and their students (Wallin & Newton, 2014). Ultimately, Wallin and Newton found that the relationship between teachers and administrator are integral in a positively functioning school.

Teacher Perceptions

Teacher perceptions are highly studied in the most recent school climate literature (Thapa et al., 2013). In a mixed-methods approach, Ambrosetti et al. (2009) sought to explore “best teacher” characteristics and found that principals have the responsibility to foster good qualities in teachers. Additionally, teachers can then foster good relationships with students that lead to an increase in student outcomes and a positive school climate. Booren et al. (2011) analyzed teacher and student perceptions of school climate and safety. Differences were found between students and teachers where teachers acknowledged all categories related to school climate as more important than students (Booren et al., 2011). Mitchell, Bradshaw, and Leaf (2010) investigated teacher and student perceptions in a quantitative multilevel analysis. In this study, the researchers used school demographics and school district information in addition to the School Development Program School Climate survey (SCS) with 90 fifth-grade teachers from 37 public schools in

Maryland (Mitchell et al., 2010). Like Booren et al. (2011), Mitchell et al. found that students and teachers had different perceptions of school climate and that teachers believed school climate was more in their control. Mitchell et al. also found that teachers, more than the students, felt the school climate was more often positive than negative. Studies that show a significant difference in school climate perceptions highlight the need for continued research in the school climate arena (Thapa et al., 2013).

Ozen (2018) conducted a phenomenological study on teachers' perceptions of climate. Through a semi-structured research technique, Ozen confirmed that many teachers are not satisfied with school administrators and are at risk for high burnout due to a perception of a lack of support. Dutta and Sahney (2016) studied teacher perceptions of school climate and job satisfaction in a quantitative analysis. The researchers determined that teachers are more satisfied when they receive support and guidance from their administrators and when they feel they have control over their classrooms (Dutta & Sahney, 2016). Dutta and Sahney's findings on school climate and teacher perceptions of leadership is pivotal for the implications of this study.

Kor and Opare (2017) examined 40 head teachers and their perceptions of school climate. The researchers found that teachers believed school leaders were pivotal in a positive school climate and cooperation with them and amongst them is needed to obtain expected school outcomes (Kor & Opare, 2017). Meristo and Eisenschmidt (2014) conducted a quantitative analysis on 112 teachers and found teachers felt healthy relationships were significant in creating a positive school climate. Additionally, it was also expressed by the teachers that "creating a supportive school climate is the school leader's responsibility" (Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014, p. 8). Specific to teacher perceptions and school leaders, Turan and Bektas (2013) conducted a multivariate linear regression analysis and found that the prediction level of school teachers'

perceptions of school leadership activities specific to school climate were statistically significant. Among the leadership activities and the components of school climate, leadership was the highest correlated to school climate (Turan & Bektas, 2013).

In a five-year study, Rhodes et al. (2009) examined three schools that were assigned to the treatment condition, the Teacher Empowerment Project. Two comparison schools were matched to demographics and geographical location related to the treatment group. In this empowerment project, teachers were asked in a roundtable discussion with researchers to identify issues and problems with their school climate (Rhodes et al., 2009). Teachers were then asked to work together to come up with strategies for these issues. Over a four-year academic period, data was collected on the treatment schools that carried out these plans and the comparison schools (Rhodes et al., 2009). Rhodes et al. (2009), consistent with ecological theory, found that students and teachers perceived positive changes over time in their school climate compared to the comparison group. The study signified that teachers perceptions of school climate in the treatment group paralleled teacher attitudes and beliefs about principal support, whereas the comparison group perceptions declined over the five-year period (Rhodes et al., 2009). Rhodes et al. concluded that teacher-principal relationships affect school climate. The researchers suggest that principals can improve teacher attitudes and motivation in the classroom sequentially increasing teacher effectiveness in the classroom (Rhodes et al., 2009). Thapa et al. (2013) conducted a literature review that highlighted the crucial role of teachers' perceptions in the development of school improvement plans. Teacher involvement in the discussions and decisions centered around school climate has continued to increase in most recent years leading to continued research on interpersonal relationships and perceptions within the school system (Orzea, 2016).

Student Perceptions

While student perception is not the focus of this study, it is still important to recognize this perspective of school climate due to the amount of research focused on students (Thapa et al., 2013). As noted in the previous section, there is literature that compares teacher perceptions to student perceptions. Three studies found that while teacher perceptions were statistically significant to components of a positive school climate, students did not perceive school climate to be highly positive nor very negative, but seemed to vary in comparison to other perceptions (Booren et al., 2011; Mitchell, et al., 2010; Rhodes, et al., 2009). Booren et al. (2011) documented their belief that teachers have more investment in school climate than students; therefore, teachers have stronger perceptions. Thapa et al. (2013) emphasized that when students perceived their schools to have fair discipline structures and supportive student-teacher relationships, they felt safe. Thapa et al.'s findings on student perceptions are consistent with authoritative school climate theory. De Pedro et al. (2016) employed a cross-sectional, quantitative design where students were measured on different school climate components and their individual demographics. De Pedro et al. indicated that as the students entered high school (approximately 9th to 12th grade), they perceived themselves to be more isolated from their peers and their teachers, disconnected from the school, and surrounded by less caring adults. Similar to these findings, Ramsey et al. (2016), in a quantitative analysis, uncovered that students had worse perceptions of school connectedness when compared to school staff or parents. Johnson et al. (2017) utilized a large sample of students with a variety of measurement tools in order to show that student perception of safety in their schools and their relationship with adults in the building play a direct role in their perception of the school climate (Johnson et al., 2017). Huang et al. (2017) utilized the authoritative school climate theory and focused on student perceptions.

This study included a sample of 60,695 students from 415 middle schools in Virginia, used several fixed regression models on multiple measurement tools and demographics to determine school climate, parent involvement, and academic achievement (Huang et al., 2017). Huang et al. implied that “regardless of how many parents were at home, a positive school climate was associated with higher academic performance, indicating school climate perceptions were a positive factor for all students” (p. 490). Cornell et al. (2016) also explored student perceptions through an authoritative school climate theory lens. Students who perceived to have structured discipline yet supportive relationships with individuals in their school (components to school climate) were found to have higher academic scores (Cornell et al., 2016).

Gaps in the Literature

Literature on school climate is vast, but conceptual. The vast nature of the literature leads to various literature gaps. These gaps found in school climate literature are the multifaceted and multi-layered definition of school climate, different measurement tools utilized in school climate research, the multiple perceptions of school climate in research, and the lack of literature on rural communities and school climate.

The variety and differences in definitions of school climate is highlighted in this study. There is no universal definition for school climate as it may be defined in a variety of ways. The sub-categories used to define school climate are also vast (Wang & Degol, 2015). The measurement of school climate can be skewed if there is inconsistency in school climate definitions and school climate measurement tools. Steffgen et al. (2013) expressed that a limitation in their study was the variety of measures and scales used to assess school climate. Ramsey et al. (2016) stated similar limitations; a lack of parallel items across versions of school climate surveys. The validity of the results can be questioned in comparison to other research on

the same topic when there is inconsistency in the definition and a variety of specific school climate measurement tools. This difference in definitions and measurement tools poses a problem within the literature and leaves gaps in the research. This study suggests the elimination of a measurement tool and places a qualitative focus on administrators' and teachers' perceptions of school climate.

Researchers discuss the use of a multiple perspectives as an appropriate approach to school climate (Wang & Degol, 2016). Another gap within the literature is that most school climate data reports are from a single perspective (Ramsey et al., 2016). Multiple perspectives allow for a more thorough and complete picture of school climate (Ramsey et al., 2016). Understanding school climate from a teacher and an administrative perspective gives researchers the opportunity to not only fill a gap within the literature, but also to complement different social work theory, policy within the schools, and practice within schools. The need for a multiple perspective approach can be validated in the use of multiple school climate perspectives with the support of the authoritative school climate theory (Ramsey et al., 2016).

The lack of school climate research in rural communities is a gap identified in the research (Wallen & Newton, 2014). Rural settings are very different from what exists in urban settings (Wallen & Newton, 2014). Taneri and Engin-Demir (2011) examined the quality of education from teachers', administrators', and students' perspectives. Overall, the researchers indicated that a negative school climate had an impact on student achievement (Taneri & Engin-Demir, 2011). Taneri and Engin-Demir's study stated that because most of the research focused on urban geographical areas, there was a lack of literature to support their findings on rural geographical areas. De Pedro et al. (2016) concluded that future research should focus on different geographical areas other than highly populated towns or cities. This knowledge can be

useful for policy makers and school leaders because in rural settings schools are an integral part of the community (De Pedro et al., 2016; Taneri & Engin-Demir, 2011).

Social Work in Schools

According to the United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2018), there are 306,370 children, family, and school social workers employed in the United States. Almost 40,000 of these social workers work specifically in elementary and secondary schools. The remaining number of these social workers provide services in either the state and local governments, child and family agencies, or other residential care facilities (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2018).

The social work profession necessitates a holistic perspective where one can look at the “breadth and depth” of an individual, a group, a community, an organization, family, society, or system (NASW Press, n.d.). This person-in-environment perspective, provides social workers the opportunity to understand all the interrelated parts of a system. Systems are a component of the mezzo level in the field of social work (Suppes & Wells, 2012). Mezzo social work involves community organization, management of a social work organization, or focus on institutional or cultural change (Suppes & Wells, 2012). The variety of literature and the amount of research on school system climate is crucial for school social workers to understand as they navigate through the school system as mental health professionals (Massat et al., 2008). The role of a school social worker includes assessing, relating, communicating, planning, implementing, and evaluating (Massat et al., 2008). Social workers need to work with all professional parties in order to accomplish these responsibilities. “Social workers have a particular responsibility for developing and maintaining channels of communication if they are to accomplish their own mission” (Massat et al., 2008, p. 41). School social workers who understand the unique perceptions of

school climate are indispensable when it comes to the management of their duties and responsibilities (Massat et al., 2008). School climate plays an integral role in the success of students, as does the work of a school social worker (Massat et al., 2008).

The field of school social work holds evidence to support the effect that school social workers have on positive student outcomes (Massat et al., 2008). Massat et al. (2008) noted that the literature on effective schools supports the use of a school social worker. Social workers are seen as anchors for family and community perspectives in schools (Massat et al., 2008). Schools are being held responsible for student outcomes, as “these outcomes can only be generated by the families, communities, and schools together” (Massat et al., 2008, p. 165).

Research on school climate had many policy implementations specific to climate initiatives (Dutta & Sahney, 2016) in order for school systems to help support the success of students. Policy makers who understand the complexity of school systems have an advantage to set up policies that support schools and give them the tools necessary to do so at the building level (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Schools that are equipped with supportive policies and appropriate tools to enrich the school environment will increase the output of educated students and will lead to an increase in educated citizens (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). School social workers’ responsibilities are to aid schools to carry out these policies to help meet the needs of the students (Massat et al., 2008). Social workers are change agents and have a distinctive code of ethics that give a unique professional perspective that will sequentially influence school climate and policy (Massat et al., 2008).

Chapter 3: Methodology

The uniqueness of rural schools, the perceived intensity of the district's climate, and the researcher's interest in an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in the identified school district leads this researcher toward a qualitative methodology. In addition, a phenomenological approach will aid the researcher in obtaining an in depth understanding of the current school climate in the targeted school district for the purpose of informing and influencing school policy and climate (Massat et al., 2008). This study examines school climate from multiple perspectives through a phenomenological, qualitative methodology.

Research Design

As discussed in previous sections, phenomenology is an individual's where lived experiences are transformed and defined by participant's essence (Ozen, 2018). A phenomenological approach will offer a holistic and thorough assessment of school climate in the identified rural school district. In this research study, phenomenology is used to gain insight from multiple perspectives within the identified school district on the school's climate. In depth interviews with teachers and administrators allowed for an in depth understanding of the climate through their lived experiences as participants and staff in the identified school district under research. data was collected utilizing semi-structured interviews. Teacher and administrator perceptions of school climate obtained inform the need for program implementation, policy creation, teacher and administration collaboration, and issues related to communication and mediation.

Research Sample

Purposive sampling was used for this research study. Purposive sampling is the deliberate process of choosing participants based on their ability to provide the appropriate information

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). This sampling method is appropriate for this study because the participants needed to experience the phenomenon under study to provide insight from a participant perspective. The participants were required to be employed by the district, in their current role, for at least a year. This time requirement ensures that they have experienced and exhibit deep knowledge about the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition to the length of employment, the participants were required to be full-time contracted teachers and administrators in a rural school district. The length of employment is significant because it ensures the participants experienced the school climate phenomenon of the identified rural school district. Purposive sampling increases the trustworthiness of phenomenological analysis, because it confirms and provides credibility that the phenomenon was witnessed and experienced firsthand (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The Superintendent from the identified rural school district provided a letter of support to begin data collection (Appendix A). The researcher solicited voluntary participation for an in-depth interview via email communication (Appendix C). An email was sent utilizing the researcher's school email address to all teachers and administrators in the entire district after the study was approved by Millersville University's Institutional Review Board.

In qualitative research, sample size is dependent upon saturation of the data. In this research study, sample size was determined by data saturation. Data saturation is defined as when additional analysis of the data become redundant and does not reveal new information (Padgett, 2008). In phenomenological research, a small sample size is typical since the goal is to obtain an in depth understanding of the phenomenon rather than generalize findings to a population (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Myers, 2014; Wallin & Newtwon, 2014). The current study/This study targeted a rural school district (it was just one).., where nine administrators are employed. Seven

of these nine administrators participated in the current study. The researcher believed data saturation was reached after 11 teacher interviews and seven administrator interviews (did you believe? Or actually reach saturation?). The sample size for this research study was seven administrators and 11 teachers. The teacher's length of employment ranged from three to 37 years and taught between first and 12th grade. Approximately half of the teacher participants live in the community served by?? of the identified rural school district. The administrator's length of employment ranged from two to 20 years. The administrator participants lives in a different school district than the identified rural school district in this study. Due to the uniqueness of the district, gender and/or age identification would put the participant at risk for a confidentiality breach. For the purpose of transcription and data analysis, pseudonyms were used, however a demographic section, along with identifiers when quoting participants, have been excluded from this study.

Data Collection

An in-depth, semi-structured interview is typical for phenomenological analysis as a data collection instrument because it allows the researcher to follow a set of questions and probes to help keep the participant and researcher focused (Padgett, 2017). In-depth, semi-structured interviews seek to gain in-depth information of an identified phenomenon through the use of prepared questions or talking points. An interview guide would aid the researcher in maintaining consistency amongst the participants and would also support the attempt to capture the depth of the identified phenomenon. In-depth interviews are appropriate to capture the intensity of the school climate phenomenon from a teacher and administrator perspective. A study interview guide utilized open-ended questions in order to gain a comprehensive account of the person's experience (see Appendix D; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher developed the questions

and talking points for the interview guide from the literature review on school climate. The researcher utilized the guide in the beginning of the interview and also throughout the interview as the researcher felt supplemental questions were needed. The researcher in the phenomenological approach is responsible for creating a comfortable and supportive environment for the interviewee, which then allows for a relaxed and trusting atmosphere (Moustakas, 1994). Due to the intensity of one's experiences in phenomenological research, a comfortable and trusting atmosphere would encourage the participants to process and discuss more in-depth the phenomenon under study. For this study, the researcher allowed the interviewee to choose a private location for the interview. An audio recording device was utilized to capture the interviews that lasted between 45 to 120 minutes. Before the interview began, the participant was informed they were being recorded and asked to sign the consent form (see Appendix B).

The researcher brought a unique component to the analysis process in that the researcher is employed as the district social worker. As a result, the relationships between the participants and the researcher were already formed. It is significant in phenomenological research for the researcher and the interviewees to have a connection and for the researcher to feel involved. The unique position the researcher is in allowed for a further in-depth analysis and a "sneak peek" into the teachers' and administrators' perspective that some "outside" researchers may not have been able to tap into. While there are many benefits and strengths to researcher connection to the phenomenon, a weakness is researcher bias. To help combat researcher bias for this study, the researcher used nondirective probes, provided neutral explanations when asked questions by the participants, and remained as consistent as possible in every interview with every answer and direction (Ziniel, n.d). With the participants, the researcher acknowledged her employment

within the district. The goal of transparency was to increase the participant comfortability and increase the participant's willingness to remain open about the phenomenon under study.

Shenton (2004) discusses the importance of tactics to help ensure honesty in participants. In this study, the researcher gave the participants opportunities to decline participation. Johnson (1997) encourages the use of participant feedback after the interpretations and conclusions are drawn in order decrease researcher bias. In addition, at the conclusion of the dissertation process, the researcher will contact all participants asking if they would like a copy of the document as well as a time to schedule a meeting to discuss the results and conclusions (Shenton, 2004).

Confidentiality

To ensure confidentiality and comfortability, the researcher sent the participant study request email from her student email account and not the school district's email account. In addition, the researcher gave multiple options for how the participants could contact the researcher (i.e., phone, email, and office hours for in-person communication). Participants and the researcher discussed and signed the study's consent form prior to the start of the interview (see Appendix B.). The consent form addresses all confidentiality information related to this study. The confidentiality of information on the consent form included assigned pseudonyms to all participants, a password protected computer, the deletion of interviews after transcription, and the restriction of demographic information from this study. The interview was then uploaded to the Temi software program where the slow down technique was utilized to transcribe. The audio file was kept on the researcher's password protected computer to ensure confidentiality. The file was then permanently deleted from the audio recording device after audio file was uploaded. The researcher took extreme care to protect the identities of all participants. It is recognized that an in-depth interview regarding the current school climate of their work place makes them

professionally vulnerable (Wieczorke & Manard, 2018). Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and any identifying information was redacted to protect the teachers and administrators who graciously gave up their time (Hansen, 2018). Due to the size of the targeted school district, demographics and any identifying information was removed from this study.

Data Analysis

After the transcription process, the researcher utilized the NVivo 12 software program to code and analyze the interview data. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software program from QSR International that helps to analyze, manage, and shape qualitative data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the NVivo software allowed the researcher to manipulate and graph the codes and categories. NVivo provides security by storing files in a single file folder which allows the researcher to create a single password protected zip file (Creswell & Poth, 2018). At the initial stage of the coding process, the researcher provided a foundation for coding by reading and re-reading through the interviews before coding. This oriented the researcher to the data set (Hansen, 2018). After data set orientation, the researcher began the coding process. Moustakas (1994) describes the analysis of data for phenomenological studies as “horizontalizing” the data. This refers to the idea that every word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph is considered equal or on the same plane as the next word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph. Consistent with phenomenological analysis, the unit of analysis that was used in this study were phrases, sentences, and paragraphs in the transcribed interviews. The researcher identified meaningful units and placed related units into codes. Each unit may have exhibited more than one code. Codes were then organized by larger themes (called parent codes) and small codes that fall under the parent code (called child codes). NVivo 12 allows the researcher to code such passages that may fit in more than one code multiple times, therefore allowing the researcher to manage and

organize the data. As the coding took place, a variety of parent and child nodes began to form based on the word, phrase, and sentence themes that occurred throughout the interviews. As more and more codes were created, patterns with specific units of data were identified. A codebook was formed from the variety of parent and child codes. The key role a codebook can play in qualitative analysis is maintaining consistency, trustworthiness, and reliability of the findings (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The coding process concluded after multiple, thorough reads of the interviews, and the researcher believed she had exhausted all coding possibilities for the units of analysis. The researcher used the NVivo 12 to find commonalities amongst the coded data that allowed specific themes to surface. Moustakas (1994) expressed the need to organize the data pieces by clustering common categories. Clustering the data into themes can then develop into textual descriptions of the phenomenon experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Themes can be linked together, exposing “regularities or converges” in the data (Padgett, 2017). At the conclusion of the coding process, 80 codes were generated.

Establishing Rigor and Trustworthiness

Reflexivity of the researcher, the researcher’s ability to stay humble, peer evaluation, and the amount of time used to prepare the study in the field in qualitative research is referred to as triangulation, a process that is meant to increase trustworthiness (Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003). Researcher bias is a legitimate concern here, as the data was gathered by one person. To address this, the researcher engaged in many reflexivity activities that allowed for critical self-reflection and increase self-awareness of the phenomenon (Johnson, 1997). Johnson (1997) also noted that the use of different triangulation strategies aids in reducing researcher bias. Theory triangulation is the usage of multiple theories to help understand a phenomenon. Johnson also indicated that the use of peer review is a strong strategy used to combat researcher bias. Peer review is the use

of a peer not directly involved in the research discusses interpretations and conclusions of the study made by the researcher. To emulate this, the researcher worked closely with her Dissertation Chair and Committee during all phases of data collection and analysis. Additionally, the researcher spent an hour a week consulting with doctoral cohort members for additional peer review. Trustworthiness was also addressed through the use of a semi-structured interview plan and created codebook. The interview guide increased the credibility of the study specifically because it ensured the researcher followed semi-structured pattern during the interview. The codebook was created organically throughout the coding process which allowed the researcher to maintain consistency during the coding process (Moustakas, 1994). The consistency of the codebook caused coding uniformity in the analysis process. Finally, the sampling procedure is another strategy used to increase the trustworthiness and rigor of this study. Purposive sampling ensured that the participants included in the study were knowledgeable about the identified phenomenon therefore, monopolizing the trustworthiness of the data collected from them. Triangulation of all these methods decreases the researcher's bias, increases the trustworthiness, and increases the rigor of study.

Reflection and Memo-Writing

“Reflection is essential in qualitative research because the researcher is the tool in the research process. Reflection and memo-writing increases credibility of the researcher's interpretations and analysis by writing and reflecting on thoughts that are still fresh from the interview meeting. Moustakas (1994) stressed the importance of reflection in phenomenological research. The researcher is presumed to take another's lived reality and transform it into meaning; therefore, without reflection of the lived reality's meaning, the words would have no purpose. Charmaz (2008) highlights the significance of memo-writing by stating, “memo-writing

constitutes a crucial method in grounded theory because it prompts you to analyze your data and codes early in the research process” (p. 72). Reflection and processing are needed to make the connections between the intricate parts of this cyclic activity.

During the data analysis process, the researcher conducted multiple reflections/memos. Memos were written immediately after the interview process and before any data analysis. After transcription and the first read through, the researcher wrote a memo to analyze thoughts related to the codes initially identified and how the researcher arrived at these codes. When the interview was coded, a memo was written. A second memo was written following the final read of the interviews with the purpose of pulling all the thoughts, units of analysis, and codes together. These memos allowed the researcher to process the interview, attach codes and meanings to phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, and then compile it together to pull out themes and patterns that emerged from the data.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Interpretation

The purpose of this study was **understand** and describe teacher and administrator perspectives of a rural school districts' school climate. Phenomenological research provided the researcher an opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews and collect data on school climate phenomenon. NVivo software was utilize to code and analyze the transcribed interviews. Thematic analysis was then used to analyze the data.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1. What are the similarities and differences between teacher and administrator perceptions of rural school district's school climate?

RQ2. What are teacher and administer perceptions of leadership on school climate?

Research Data

The researcher conducted seven administrator (individuals who are employed by the targeted rural school district under the Pennsylvania School Board Association Act 93 contract) interviews and 11 teacher (individuals employed under the Pennsylvania School Board Association teacher contract in the targeted rural school district) interviews in the identified rural school district. The interviews were held in a variety of private locations per the participants' choice (Moustakas, 1994). At the start of the interview, the participants signed the consent form, were given opportunities to stop the interview process at any time, and were allowed time at the end to ask any questions regarding the study. To uphold the confidentiality agreement and as mentioned in the previous chapter, specific demographic data is withheld in this study.

Themes

In the current study, over 80 codes were generated to create four predominant parent codes or themes: Interpersonal Relationships, Surrounding Community, Trickle Effect/Climate Flow, and Personal School Climate Experiences. Codes were formed from a variety of units of analyses that were then formed into parent and child codes. As more and more codes were created, patterns with specific units of data were identified. The codes that formulated the four themes emerged from the data during interview transcription and analysis. In the following sections, each theme will be defined and described using raw codes from the analyzed data. Administrators and teachers will be identified under each section, along with proceeding data points.

Interpersonal Relationships

Twenty-one codes were aggregated to create this interpersonal relationship theme. The codes were comprised of words, phrases, or sentences related to communication, support, perceived quality of relationships in the building, teacher to teacher interactions, and administration to administration interactions. Participants responded to researcher's probes or semi-structured questions related to their perception and definition of school climate. The codes were analyzed to define this theme as the interactions between the staff in the buildings, the relationships between the staff, how communication flows in the district, and the support the staff members have for each other. Administrator C expressed their perception of school climate as, "relationships between all stakeholders definitely plays a role. Teacher A described school climate as, "I feel like it's like the overall feeling you get when you walk into a school and I feel like it's the overall like impression you get with the school districts, you know, how they work together or don't work together." Teachers and administrators consistently recognized climate as

a “feeling.” Fourteen out of 18 participants described school climate as “a general feeling that you have,” “how our teachers, students, parents, community members, all stakeholders feel about our schools,” “by the way that people feel,” “how everybody feels,” and “how you feel when you get there.”

Interpersonal relationships were mentioned as an important component of school climate based on the data gathered from the participants. Both administrators and teachers were close in comparison to the number of times they conceptualized this theme in their interviews. Upon further discussion and as the interviews became more detailed, the specifics varied somewhat.

Figure 1 displays the number of times the interpersonal theme was coded.

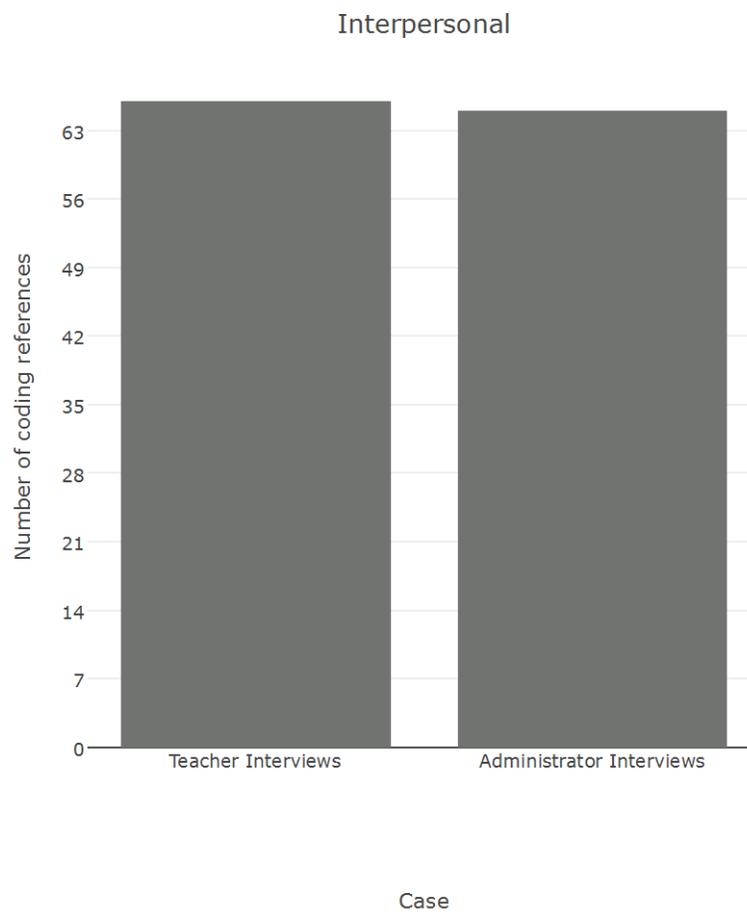


Figure 1. Aggregated interpersonal nodes per case.

Administrators. Each administrator appeared to vary in his or her perception of school climate when it came to this interpersonal theme. Administrators focused their discussion of relationships and interactions at a variety of levels within the organization. Some administrators focused on the relationships and interactions of upper administration (school board or superintendent); whereas other administrators focused on the district as a whole and spoke about rapport and the significance of all relationships. Administrator D discussed this concept of interpersonal relations as related school climate as such:

I think it starts with rapport between like groups and unlike groups, so good rapport between the students, students that are willing to step out and help correct the behavior of others. Also involves the rapport from teacher to student, administrator to teacher, administrator to student. All of the levels need to be able to be respectful and courteous of each other and that should ultimately lead to lead to a good rapport and relationship.

Five administrators used the words trust, respect, and positivity in relation to school climate. Administrator F mentioned they didn't realize how important relationships are in a school building "until this past year when things became so toxic." Three administrators commented on the importance of being available to staff and being physically present in the school buildings. They expressed that perception is reality, conceptualizing that if teachers and students don't see the administrators, than teachers and students won't feel supported or connected. While administrators vary in their responses, they do consistently state that, under this theme, relationships with other administrators and teachers in the building play a significant role in the function of the school and the school climate.

Administrator E said:

Put the agenda side and say this is still going on and we're not leaving this room until we get past this. I've worked with people with many different personalities, as many people I work with that I wouldn't go out and have a beer with, you know, but I could work professionally with them, you know, and it's about keeping the focus. I think that where relationship comes in.

Based on the administrators' comments and perceptions of school climate, the administrators responses varied slightly under this theme. It appeared that their personal experiences influenced their conversations and reactions on relationships, communication, support, and interactions.

Teachers. The current perceived climate within the district seemed to cause this interpersonal theme to stand out amongst the others as a representation on how teachers and administrators viewed school climate. Teachers voiced strong comments in regards to this interpersonal theme. Similar to the administrators, the teachers frequently used the words respect and trust throughout the interviews. Teachers referenced the word "respect" 38 times in the interviews. The word "trust" was referenced 23 times. In context, teachers were concerned about the lack of trust and respect in the building relationships amongst all the staff in the buildings, and stressed the need for trust and respect to increase in order to foster a positive school climate.

Teacher C described her views of school climate as:

I think that's (relationships) probably the most important thing. And I think that at our school that's pretty unhealthy right now. Obviously teacher to teacher relationships, teacher to administrator relationships. I would say those are two areas where we need to really buckle down and figure out how to fix it. And then we have teacher, parent relationships also. Student relationships are important too.

Other teacher participants discussed their description of school climate as “how communication is handled and how people relate,” “how teachers and students get along,” “it’s how students are treated, how teachers are treated, how we treat each other,” and “how they work together or don’t work together.” The interpersonal theme filtered throughout the interviews as significant in the function of a school and the strength of a school’s climate. Teacher participants expressed frustration related to some of the hostility amongst the teachers. When discussing relationships, interactions, communication, and support, 90% of the teachers utilized a personal experience to explain their perception.

Surrounding Community

The surrounding community theme was created from combining seven codes that included community values, relationship between the school and community, and rural effect on community. In context, this theme encompasses the association of the outside community that surrounds the schools in the district, the values the community holds, and how the community is perceived to affect or influence the school climate. One participant expressed, “like, we’re all part of one community here, and you know, with the exception of certain reporters, like this is all about people within the community.” Both teachers and administrators discussed “community” throughout the interviews in many different ways. Some participants discussed the involvement of the community in school activities or parent involvement in student meetings. Other participants discussed how the rural, geographical area plays a significant role in the climate of the school. One participant commented, “everyone knows everyone...it’s interconnectedness.” Consistently, participants discussed that in rural areas the opinions of the community seem to flow into the school through the “interconnectedness” of relationships and roles in rural communities. In the identified rural school district, some staff identified the area as traditional

and heavily Christian-based. Participants seemed to agree that the traditional values of the community play a role in how the community expects the school to operate. According to participants, the traditional community values had led to disagreements between the district administrators and the community members. Administrator B stated, “it (school climate) goes back to the, to the perceptions and ideas that exist within the community.”

Administrators. The administrators’ perception is that the community has an effect on the district climate. Most administrative participants discussed the community as a whole and the close-knit relationships between community members. Although administrators referenced community less than the teachers (19 administrator community references and 37 teacher community references), they spoke more intensely about community involvement and the role it plays in relationship to school climate. Administrator C stated:

In a small community, everything's personalized. Everybody knows everybody. I keep meeting people who has a sister, brother who works here, your husband, wife... I wonder who they know, what should I say, what shouldn't I say, what's the chain back to this person, you know, that kind of thing.

Two administrators commented on the newspaper article publications that reference the school’s current situation and how the validity of articles can affect the community’s opinions of the district. One administrator commented that in a small community when the focus is on the school, it gives people in the community something to concentrate on. In response to questions related to administrator perceptions of the community/school relationship, administrators seemed to believe that when community members are supportive, involved, and invested, the school reaps the benefits. If the community members are not supportive, involved, or invested, it can be damaging to the school. Administrator D explained:

I think there's definitely something to be said about the setup of this district with a small town, especially having four small elementary buildings and four towns, for the most part. Um, you know, this is, these are all small buildings that are still, I think intimate buildings in the sense that there's a lot of relationships that can be built with, with staff and families. Um, you don't necessarily get that in more of an urban setting. We have people that are very visible on social media. We've, those naysayers, you mentioned there, they're much more accessible from, from the community side. Everyone knows who they are. Again, it's, it's kind of small town mentality hits. You're able to have that voice and, and then some, you know, that would not occurred a, in a more urban area.

Teachers. Teacher participants, similar to administrator participants, spoke consistently about the role the community plays in school climate. While the administrators spoke about the community values as a whole, the teachers discussed their personal experiences in relation to the community. In response to general questions about the surrounding community, the teachers discussed how the community impacted them personally and affected their perception of the climate. For example, one teacher spoke passionately about a situation that impacted her with a family and a student in her class. She described in detail the negative communication with the parents and the lack of support she received from them. This teacher, Teacher E, felt that the situation affected her daily operations in her classroom. Another teacher identified a specific situation where he felt the impact of community values on school climate. This teacher stated that because of a few personal experiences, he has learned to focus his time on building relationships with parents and community members. Teacher H expressed:

I'm an active part of the community. It's very easy for me to pick up the phone and call a parent because I'm friends with many of them and, if I'm not, I know somebody else. I'm

friends with somebody that they're friends with...I didn't feel that way when I lived far away from the urban school. Um, I'd call a parent and it was, I would talk to the parental unit and just, I didn't have that. It was like a black hole. The closeness was not there. Um, I feel differently here. I feel like, uh, you know, parents will message me on Remind and say, 'Hey, can you remind so and so that they've got a dentist appointment this afternoon.' Yeah, sure. That's like, that's not my job, but a, I pass it on because we're talking about human beings here.

Trickle Effect/Climate Flow

The trickle effect theme is defined by the researcher as the perception that school climate can travel from one area/group/individual within the organization to another area/group/individual. Essentially, when something occurs at one level of the organization, it has the potential to “trickle” to another level of the organization. Throughout the interview process, this theme was amplified more than the researcher anticipated. Twenty-one (21) codes were combined to create the “trickle effect” theme, the most prominent codes are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Trickle Effect/Climate flow codes

	Trickle Effect	Leadership	Trickle Up	Trickle Down	Starts with you
Teachers	118	24	48	31	46
Administrators	93	53	37	36	35

Figure 2 depicts teacher and administrator coding references for code aggregated under the trickle effect theme.

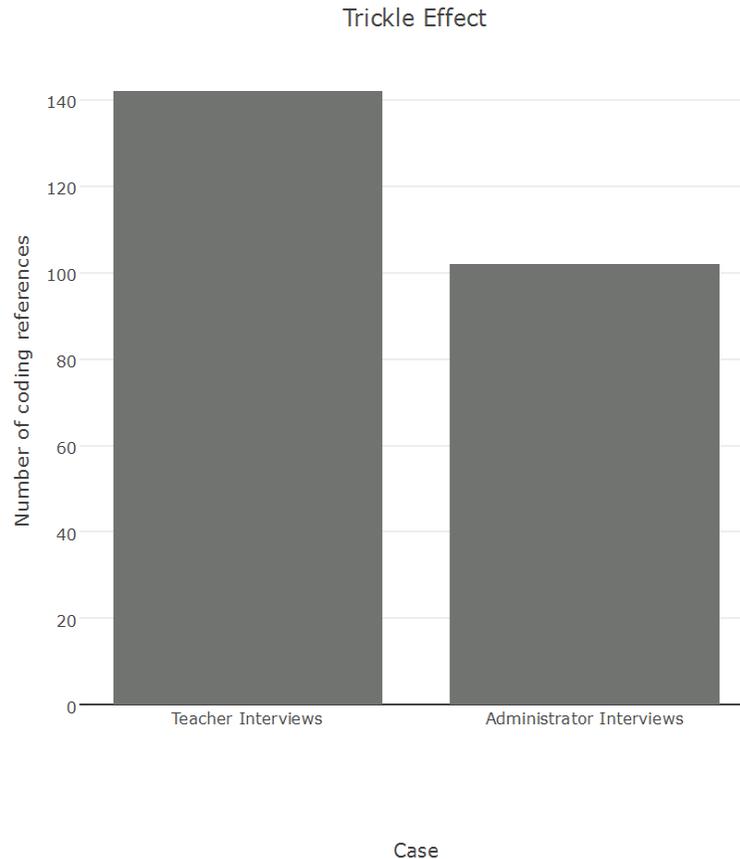


Figure 2. Aggregated trickle effect/climate flow per case

Every participant mentioned the idea of school climate traveling from either top down (leadership to students), bottom up (students/classrooms to teachers to leadership), or horizontally (peer to peer). Administrator B discussed the trickle effect phenomenon in 23% of their interview, overwhelmingly expressing the idea that a positive attitude and focus can travel to other people, ultimately having a positive impact on school climate. This administrator stated, “So, but what I can do right now in this environment? I can keep a positive attitude, maintain, number one, maintain my personal integrity and stay focused on my goals. And I think that makes this place better.” This administrator expressed that if people just focused on themselves,

that has the potential to effect other people. Relating to the trickle effect phenomenon, Administrator A stated:

If you have people, in my opinion, and if you have teachers that aren't necessarily happy in the setting they're in or whatever circumstances are surrounding them, I think that directly affects teaching, directly affects learning, and directly affects relationships with kids.

In context, Administrator A spoke about the flow of attitudes and relationships in the district that affected the students. Another teacher spoke directly to the concept of the trickle effect. Teacher C said:

...if our teachers were more united, you know, I think that would sort of, I think that would have an effect on the way we act in a school and the things that we do and then I think that would again bleed down to the students because they would sense that, yeah, we feed off that, that unity in the school and stuff.

All of the participants eluded to the “trickle” of climate. They spoke specifically about the flow of climate and the significance of school climate in their district.

Leadership was a pronounced code (created from a cluster of codes) under the trickle effect theme. The code “leadership” appeared to overtake the interviews. Using the NVivo software text search, the word “leadership” was referenced 110 times throughout the 18 interviews. Aggregated codes related to leadership were identified 285 times throughout all the interviews. Participants’ stated that leadership played a big role in school climate and was coded 77 times throughout teacher and administrator interviews. One administrator described leadership as “everything.” Another administrator stated that “school climate starts with leadership.” Teacher J defined leadership under the trickle effect as such:

The leadership like immediately filtered down and it kind of left a bit of a vacuum. And so that part has been challenging. You know, it's like, okay, you know, we've got a lot of good people ready to head in a positive direction. We just need someone to point and, you know, you point and we will go. You lead, we'll follow. But you know, a lot of our leadership has been so entrenched with other things that they've been unable to do that.

All participants seemed to agree that leadership was grossly significant in relation to school climate. The expression of “it starts with you” or it has to “start at the top” also stood out throughout the interviews with the administrator and teacher participants. Maintaining a positive attitude can improve the people around you. Many participants felt and still believed that without strong leadership, the organization was at risk of falling apart, even if people all worked together.

Administrators. This section describes the administrators’ perception of the trickle effect in relation to school climate in the targeted rural school district. The trickle effect codes was referenced 93 times throughout administrator interviews, as shown on Table 1. Administrators shared that the flow of climate/trickle effect needed to “start at the top” with leadership as evidenced by 53 administrator references in comparison to 24 references made by the teachers. In response to a question related to school climate, an administrator expressed, “I’ll start with kind of the adults involved without even talking about kids right now because I think it has to start with the people at the top.” This administrator referenced that a positive school climate has to start with the administrators and teachers in the district in order for students to experience a positive school climate.

Administrators identified that a positive school climate can be fostered through positive school board member interactions and the board members ability to function as a team.

Administrators identified this concept 29 times in their interviews, in comparison to 18 references of school board motivations by teachers. For example, Administrator B stated:

I think it has to start from the top. This school board has to change, there needs to be a new superintendent obviously that can come in here and bring people together. I think that's the biggest thing. Bring people together and when things don't go a certain group's way in the public the school board defends the superintendent and we worked through issues.

Additionally, Administrator G stated:

When you have school board members that are, you know, being deceitful and, and you know, talking to some people and talking to others or trying to get their agenda pushed through by maybe not professional methods. I mean, that's a problem and it starts with the school board.

These administrators presented that when there is turmoil amongst the highest administration the district, that turmoil trickles down to staff, affecting school climate.

Teachers. Similar to the administrators, teachers spoke about the trickle effect being a significant component of school climate in a rural school district. Teachers referenced “(school climate must) start with you” 46 times in their interviews, in comparison with 35 coded references from administrators (see Table 1). Teacher B described her thoughts by stating, “I mean I can't change anybody else, so if I want things to be different, I've got to give myself the resources to affect my little world and hopefully that spreads out and can affect other people.” Teacher K articulated his thoughts of the it “starts with you” school climate phenomenon:

If you come into the classroom, have you had a bad day, a bad morning, and you come into the classroom with that attitude, your day will reflect that, you know. It's the same

thing with like the way that administration treat teachers, if the teachers are feeling like they're mistreated, if they can't blow that off when they get into the classroom, it's, it's like mud trickles down. You know it's, it's going to hit the bottom, it's going to hit the students and they're going to have the same kinds of attitudes and then to throw the parents' attitude in there as well.

In essence, this teacher was speaking to the idea that the trickle effect occurs from top down but that it also has to “start with you.”

Similar to the administrator participants, all teacher participants made reference to a negative flow of climate from leadership or administrators down to the students (top down trickle effect). While all participants made reference to a negative trickle effect in this rural school district, teachers referenced this phenomenon 36 times compared to 29 references by administrator participants. One teacher exclaimed, “I feel like some of them (administrators) are still here for the right reasons, but they're doing bad things to prove that they're not there for the right reasons and it's very discouraging because I feel like the corruption is just kind of spreading.” Teacher I identified with this phenomenon by stating:

When everybody came in and we're going to reinvent the wheel and the one thing that we do not like around here is change and then you add that 10 percent and it was just like a, you know, it's that kind of California wildfire. You just flick a cigarette, but next thing you know you have, you know, hundreds of millions of acres, a scorched earth and it's kind of where we're at.

Approximately 75% of all teacher interviews expressed their frustration when they discussed the trickle effect of negative information or situations and how that can affect staff.

The researcher conducted a matrix coding analysis through the NVivo software program between teacher feeling codes and the trickle effect codes. The researcher found that the codes “annoyed” and “angry” were coded four to five times higher than the other feeling codes in relation to leadership codes. Even though administrators referenced leadership as playing a big role in school climate more so than the teachers (53 leadership references, compared to 24 “leadership big role” references made by the teachers), teacher participant’s perception of leadership was just as significant.

In summary, administrators and teachers identified the trickle effect theme as significant in their perception of school climate. While teacher and administrator perception varied in how school climate flowed from either top down or bottom up, their overall perception appeared to mirror each other. In addition, the teacher and administrator participants also expressed that leadership in a school district is significant for a positive school climate. Teachers and administrators expressed that our individual attention and commitment is needed for a positive school climate. Based on the analysis of the trickle effect theme aggregated codes, negativity in this rural school seemed to travel quickly throughout the district. In addition, staff believed that if all staff focus on themselves and on the positive, the climate will be positively impacted.

Personal Experiences

Twenty six (26) codes were aggregated together to form this theme. These codes include feeling codes (e.g., anger, sadness, frustration, lonely, content, and hopeful), future visions for the district, past and current experiences at the identified rural school district, and past and current experiences within the community. These codes were combined to conceptualize and outline the lived experiences of the teachers and the administrators within the rural school district. A phenomenological, qualitative study presents an opportunity for the researcher to gain

a deeper understanding of a phenomenon through the eyes of those that lived it. These experiences are filtered through their lens of perception. Each experience is unique; however, like the themes identified in the previous sections, many personal experiences seem to mirror each other.

Administrators. Administrator participants seemed to all have similar personal experiences related to school climate in the identified rural school district. Administrator E stated the overall perception of administrators as such:

I just think we're not what leadership is about in a public school setting. I just don't think we're meeting expectations of what good leaders do has to start from the top. And it has to be buy in, there has to be consistency, there has to be this sense of team. And we just don't have that here.

When speaking about leadership, the administrators spoke specifically about the superintendent and school board.

Although the administrators are considered to be in a leadership role within the district, administrators agreed that they are not in a position to make change. The word “change” was referenced 47 times amongst the administrators. In context, most of the comments were related to the idea that change needs to happen to move the district forward toward a positive school climate, however in the current school climate it is difficult to make big changes. Administrator D stated, “We are not in a position to change anything. We’re just in a position to survive tomorrow.” This statement seemed to be consistent across all administrators. Additional change statements from administrators include, “board mentality has to change,” “how can we change in this climate,” “the answer is change union leadership,” “you can’t come into the district and make all this change right away,” “I hope as we change things at the top, things will change,”

“there has to be a change,” “they (school board) wanted change and it didn’t matter what it took,” and “perception is reality and that’s the thing we struggle with the most and that is what makes school climate difficult to change.”

Another perception that appeared to be a pattern amongst the administrators’ personal experiences is the concept of trust. Administrator A states:

We lack trust. And when I say we, I, I, I mentioned, I refer to the school board, the superintendent, um, district administration and teachers and the teacher union. I just don't think there's trust from any of those, any of those entities. And I think when you can't trust each other and it leads to, it's like a domino effect, then you can't work well together. You can't, you know, you can't get initiatives done, you can't move forward, you can't make good change. So I think, I think there's obviously a big trust factor.

Administrator F expressed, “You have people that can't trust each other and that break confidentiality, um, that hurts the district.” Administrator C commented, “I think, um, if we can somehow come together and kind of piggyback off of each other's strengths, I think we would improve drastically at the admin level. You have to have trust.”

The seven administrator interviews emulated each other. They seemed to all stress the need for change, the difficulties with making changes, and the concept of trust within the district. All administrator participants discussed that the current climate is “toxic” or “unruly.” All administrators presented themselves, in the interview, in a professional way and chose their words carefully as they described their experiences. It appeared that the past year’s climate has impacted their ability to use their words freely without fear of repercussions.

Teachers. While the administrators appeared to choose their words carefully when describing their personal experiences, the teachers seemed to appreciate the confidentiality of

knowing they could say how they truly felt. Three teachers commented that they “loved the freedom to be able to talk about this (school climate).” A majority of the teachers had very personal experiences directly related to the current climate at the identified rural school district. In the interviews, their personal experiences were peppered throughout the overall discussion of school climate.

Consistent words used throughout the teacher interviews were respect, trust, and support. Teachers spoke about respect, trust, and support amongst each other, with the administrators, and also between the administrators. Teacher E stated,

I always said, if I walk past your room and the kids are hanging from the chandelier, I'm going to assume you are teaching a lesson on chandelier hanging. We support each other. We don't go against each other. We don't talk against each other. You know, we have to go into a unit.

Teacher A commented,

Even just getting up out of bed, it can be hard and we need each other's backs, we need to know that we support each other. I'm in here with no adult interaction for seven hours a day. That's an unusual job, I guess. Um, and so I need to have that adult interaction with, with other people that I know care about me.

Many teachers talked about the current divide between the teachers' in the teacher union.

In response to questions related to the current turmoil amongst teachers, Teacher B articulated:

We saw a division here among, among our teachers and I sat in the meeting where we, there was yelling and screaming and one of the teachers, um, and it was something I'd never seen before. This was an entire body of teachers split in half and it was sad and I think we still see some of that here. I think having seen a lot of the negative, uh,

newspaper articles. I think see some of the hurt in the district teachers, want to heal, and principals, and administrators, and even the school board, we want to heal. I don't think anyone knows how to heal or agrees on how to heal.

Teachers, more so than administrators, described the impact of the teacher divide and conveyed the level of stress it causes them on a regular basis. Even with the identified high amount of stress, most teachers expressed they still had the ability to distance that stress from the students. Teacher E stated, "I think our teachers are pretty skilled at closing their door and doing what they do best and trying to motivate the students to learn." Teacher G remarked:

And I think as teachers, we need to try our very best to stay positive and there are days when that's a real challenge and there are days when that's really easy, but I think we need to continue to believe that, believe in ourselves as teachers, you know, we're working hard, so let's not, not bash our ourselves, you know, let's, let's believe that it can be a good place. And I, and I do think the teachers are the real anchor of the district and there's a lot of power there to speak life into the kids that speak truth and um, and encourage them.

Teacher E also voiced, "It's going to work because the teachers are going to make it work, you know, we're not going to let the school, we're not going to let the school fail." Many teacher participants commented that "teachers hold the district together." However they also agreed that there is a significant divide with how to move forward and heal.

Comparison of Perceptions

Consistent perceptions of school climate amongst the teacher and administrator participants formed the themes identified in the previous sections. While there was consistency amongst the codes coded in the interviews, teachers and administrators varied on their specific

perceptions per theme. This section allows for a direct summary of the differences reflected between administrators and teachers. RQ1 asks if there are similarities and differences between teachers and administrators. This section will highlight those similarities and differences.

Similarities

Similarities between the teacher and administrator perception of school climate include the significance of interpersonal relationships on school climate within the district demonstrated through respect and trust, the current status of the school district's climate, the role leadership plays in relation to climate, the role community plays in school climate, and the flow of climate throughout the district. Teachers and administrators agreed that relationships between staff, with students, amongst administrators, and with the community are one of the most significant factors in school climate. Both teachers and administrators touched on the importance of respect and trust in those relationships. All participants agreed that the current climate at the targeted school district is "toxic" and "unhealthy." While the degrees varied between participants, most felt the district has a potential to move forward if leadership in the district shifted. Sixteen (16) participants referenced the word "leadership" and noted how substantial leadership is in moving toward a positive school climate. A similarity under the interpersonal theme that was consistent amongst all participants was "working together." This code was referenced 170 times between all participants. The perception seemed to be that all levels of the organization need to be working together in order to foster a positive school climate.

All participants referenced community throughout their interviews; the context varied, but most participants felt that geographical location has an effect on the climate in the school. Participants agreed that schools situated in rural communities are impacted in a different way than their urban counterparts. In addition, participants agreed that school climate has the ability

to travel from one individual/area/group to another individual/area/group within the organization. The direction of the flow is scattered; however, all agree that leadership is a significant component. Most participants concur that a strong leadership has the ability to set the stage for the climate and help foster the direction of climate flow.

In regard to personal experiences, both teachers and administrators had a variety of intense experiences that affected their daily interactions at the identified school district. In conversations, all participants referenced something within the organization that affected the climate and their ability to do their job, good and bad. These personal experiences seemed to frame their perception of climate and their willingness to help move the district toward a positive climate.

Differences

While Teachers and administrators agreed on many components of the themes highlighted in this study, it is in The specifics of each theme where the differences reside. The differences identified in this study are focus of the interviews, how to move the district toward a positive school climate, the specific role the community played, and the direction of the climate flow within the district. Administrators focused much of their interviews on the upper administration relationships, while teachers discussed their relationships with the principal administration. The participants' personal experiences drove their perception of the interpersonal theme. While all participants felt relationships were a significant component to school climate, their perception of the current status at the rural school district and how to move the district forward was driven through their lens of personal experience. If teachers believed the administration was toxic, their suggestion appeared to be to "clean house." If teachers felt the administrators were trying hard, their suggestions to move the district forward were more

focused on strengthening the current relationships. Administrators had similar view with each other about the teacher leadership within the teacher's union. Some referenced that if it is not working, they need a new teacher leader.

Administration viewed the outside community as represented by a few verbal families. The teachers viewed the community from their interactions with the students' parents and how the district was when they were students themselves. Three teachers attended the identified rural school district as students. Their perception appeared to be deeper than the other staff who participated in this study (for example, one participant stressed three times throughout her interview that she has more invested because her "roots run deeper"). Their interviews were the most raw and provided a deeper overall connection with the community and the students.

One of the most signif differences between the administrators and the teachers was under the "trickle effect" theme. Through strong comments and perceptions, administrators seemed to firmly believe that school climate has to start at the top and trickle down to the students. If there isn't a firm leader captaining the ship, school climate will fall short. Teachers, however, believed that teachers have the ability to control what is happening in their classroom no matter the state of the district. Teachers did acknowledge the importance of leadership to help foster the climate but held firm to the idea that teachers can "start with you" and push that positivity out into the district. It is important to emphasize that all participants acknowledged the weight positivity and working together has on school climate. The differences resided in the details.

Summary of Data Analysis and Interpretations

Interpersonal relationships, surrounding community, trickle effect, and personal experiences are the four themes created from 80 aggregated codes. Each theme was defined and described using quotes from the data and interpretation from the researcher. The first two themes,

interpersonal and community, captured school climate perception from the lens of each participant. The trickle effect theme encapsulated how school climate perception flows and affects different parts of the organization. The final theme, personal experiences, spoke to the overall experiences of each participant and how their lens of perception was formed.

RQ1 asks about the similarities and differences between teacher and administrator perception of school climate in a rural school district. This chapter discussed the themes created, and clarified the similarities and differences between teachers and administrators perceptions of school climate. RQ2 was also captured in this chapter. Leadership was recognized as a significant component to school climate perception. Even though administrators and teachers varied slightly, their perception of leadership was prominent.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Most children in the United States received some form of organized schooling. Research shows that when schools are perceived to be a positive place, children's academic scores and

emotional well-being are higher (Rudasill et al, 2018). School climate is a widely studied phenomenon that has been reviewed and analyzed in a variety of ways across disciplines (Rudasill et al, 2018). Researchers have adopted various definitions of school climate, increasing the complexity of the phenomenon. Rudasill et al. (2018) expressed that inconsistencies in school climate definitions as well as research bias contribute to the varying definitions. In addition, studies that analyzed school climate focused on a singular perspective, mostly quantitative methodology (Wang & Degol, 2016). This quantitative research focus led to a specific gap in the research methodology. Additional gaps in school climate literature include a consistent school climate definition, qualitative research in an educational setting, school climate research from a social work perspective, school climate as perceived by multiple stakeholders, and inconsistent data collection tools.

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to review the similarities, differences, and leadership perceptions of school climate in a rural school district from the perspective of two different district stakeholders (see RQ1 and RQ2). Another goal of this study was to identify, compare, and analyze teacher and administrator perceptions in order to determine if they were congruent with school climate perception in a rural school district. Congruency could provide implications for school climate programming, policy implementation needs, and next steps for the identified rural school district. In addition, this study also provides the field of social work with a unique qualitative perspective of school climate. This perspective could also imply the need for curriculum development for school social workers, as well as indicate the need for further social work research in this arena. This study adds to the knowledge base in the research on school climate. Ecological theory, authoritative school climate theory, and Thompson's levels model provide the theoretical framework for this study. This chapter

provided a discussion of the findings, implications derived from this study, and concludes with limitations and recommendations from the researcher.

Study Summary and Conclusions

This qualitative, phenomenological study provided an opportunity to examine teacher and administrator perceptions of school climate through a social work lens. This study was comprised of 18 in-depth interviews with staff members at a targeted rural school district. Through purposive sampling, 11 teachers and seven administrators volunteered to be participants in this study. Using a semi-structured interview format, the researcher spent 45 to 120 minutes per interview discussing with the participants about their perception of school climate in a rural school district. Due to the perceived intensity and complexity of the current climate in the school district, the interviews provided the researcher with a clear picture of climate from two different stakeholder perspectives.

Before study initiation, a detailed review was conducted on school climate literature. This literature review assisted the researcher in formulating a theoretical framework and an opportunity to conceptualize school climate. The researcher identified a school climate definition for the purpose the consistency. This definition (Wang and Degol, 2016), separated climate in four categories: Academic, Institutional Environment, Safety, and Internal Community. This study's literature review was categorized by those themes. As discussed in Chapter 4, the perceptions of the teachers and administrators did not fit the specific definition adopted by Wang and Degol from their systematic literature review. The themes identified for this study, as defined by the researcher and participants, were based on a compilation of specific codes in the interviews. These themes were: Interpersonal Relationships, Surrounding Community, Trickle Effect/Climate Flow, and Personal Experiences. A thematic analysis was used to review the data

collected. Rudasill et al. (2018) in their ecological systems theory review of school climate suggested a thematic review of climate in order to deconstruct climate definitions and best understand different group perceptions in a school district.

In addition to thematic analysis, the researcher conducted 20 to 30 memos and 10 to 15 reflections during the course of this study. Both the memos and reflections were used as part of the analysis in order to form the themes identified. Memos included items related to research bias discussions, theme creation ideas, and informal conversations which occurred before and after the recorded interviews. The memos and reflections also clarified the connections between all the themes. During theme creation, the researcher identified that all the themes were connected in various ways. Interpersonal relationships were connected to surrounding community through the concepts of trust and respect. Leadership and interpersonal relationships were also connected through specific code combinations. Understanding that connections exist are crucial to understanding the inter-relationships between the themes, the perceptions of all the participants, and next steps moving forward. The connections found in thematic analysis were comparable to ecological theory and the theory's "goodness of fit" concept. The following sections detail the summary and discussion of each theme.

Interpersonal Relationships

This theme was defined as the interactions between individuals in the district buildings, the relationships between staff, the communication amongst the staff, the communication between building staff, and the amount of support staff feel with each other. Under this theme, the participants' perceptions in this study aligned with the current literature on school climate and identified study theories. De Pedro et al. (2016) used relationships as a variable to their school climate definition. These authors, along with Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015),

touched on trust and caring in relationships as significant to school climate. All participants at the studied school district mentioned the words “relationships,” “working together,” “support,” “trust,” and “communication.” Most participants stated they felt “relationships” were the “most important thing.” Similar to Wang and Degol (2016) and Allen et al. (2015), this study stressed the importance of relationships in school climate perception. When teachers or administrators felt a positive connection or relationship with the building staff, they stated their perception of climate was more positive. This connection is not only congruent with the current research on school climate, but also fits the authoritative school climate theory. This theory posits that when individuals felt support, it had the potential to increase student success. According to this theme, as defined by the participants, the participant’s perceptions support this theory.

Participants who felt they had positive relationships with other staff appeared more hopeful about the future of the school district, whereas the participants who talked negatively about others and those relationships within the building had more of a “clean house” mentality. In context, the “clean house” mentality can be defined as an elimination of all staff and replacing the positions with new staff members. The administrators talked more about the relationships with their leaders than their relationships with the teachers. Considering the dynamic of the district and the current state of climate, it appeared that the administrators were focused more on their superiors than what was going on “below” them on a different organizational level (with the exception of when the teacher union turmoil was discussed). While one or two were connected to their buildings and the relationships around their staff, most administrators did not seem to be affected by what was going on at the teachers’ level. Thompson (2003) expressed that while it is important for administrators to be cognizant of upper administration, they need to be in touch with the lower level of the organization in order for the technical level to operate appropriately

(Kamps & Polos, 1999). Administrators in the identified rural school district, as discussed in Chapter 4, focused more on the role of leadership in the district than on the teacher level of the organization. The researcher speculates, consistent with Thompson's Levels Model, that the lack of focus on the students and learning could be an explanation for the negative school climate the district is currently experiencing. Rhodes et al. (2009) expressed the importance of a principal-teacher relationship in creating a positive school climate. These researchers emphasized that principals should focus their energy on the "lower level of the organization" (teachers and students) so climate can start from the bottom-up.

Teachers in this study commented on relationships at the board level but also spoke extensively about their peer to peer relationships. Teachers identified relationships within the buildings as needing to be cordial, if not for anything but for the students and their success. The statements made by the teachers are consistent with school climate literature (Kor & Opare, 2017). What was most impactful in the teachers' interviews was constant reconnection to personal experiences. Teachers seemed to play a significant role in their interpretation of relationships. If the teachers believed to have a positive interaction and relationship with their administrator or school board member(s), the responses to the researcher's questions relating to relationship appeared more positive. As discussed, support, trust, and communication were common subthemes within this theme. This led the researcher to synthesize that when personal experiences with trust, support, and communication were perceived as positive, then their conversation related to relationship affecting climate was more optimistic.

Similar to Kor and Opare's findings, the teachers also stressed the role of "head teachers" (2017). "Head teacher" can be equated to the union president or union officers in the identified rural school district. Both administrators and teachers emulated the literature relating to the

important relationship between the union and the administrators. As Kor and Opare discussed, that with the school being the “heart and soul” of an organization, the roles of the school heads “influence every part of the educational setting and create an environment for the exchange of social and professional ideas” (2017, p. 31). The significance of leadership relationships stands out as one of the perceived major pieces of school climate from an administrator and teacher perception.

both teachers and administrators were consistent in their perspective of how significant interpersonal relationships played in relation to school climate. Teacher’s and administrator’s perception in relation to this theme is represented in the extant literature. The focus of one stakeholder group was slightly different than the other group of stakeholder participants when it came to this theme; however, overall both agree that interpersonal relationship in the buildings with staff and leaders are significant to a positive climate.

Surrounding Community

Kolk et al. (2016) discussed the significance of internal relationships but also stressed the importance of a community connection. Many participants in this study identified the significant role that the community plays in the identified school district. Ramsey et al. (2016) stated that when there was a great sense of community in the school’s, there were lower levels problem behaviors amongst students. Several participants in this study took the concept a step further and directly associated low levels of problem behaviors, higher academic achievement, and a positive school climate with the surrounding rural community. Wallin and Newton (2014) stated, “When there’s internal conflicts in the community, it filters into the school” (p. 719). This correlated with the perceptions of the staff at the identified rural school district. Uline and Tschannen-Moran (2008) found that when schools are connected to their community, there is a correlation to

student achievement. While the participants of the study did not specify this, the respondents did acknowledge the significance in support from the community. Harmon and Schafft (2009) stressed that most schools and their leaders do not understand the significance of community; therefore, the fact that most participants acknowledge the importance of the surrounding community is a sign that some participants acknowledge the role the community plays in the school. The participants in this study identified with ecological theory's goodness of fit concept. Participants seemed to believe that the success of the school depends on the connection between the people in the district and members of the community (Paat, 2013).

Administrators in this study spoke directly to small community relationships and community involvement. This perception directly correlated the conclusion of Wallin and Newton's (2014) study on principals in small rural schools. The authors stated that "blurred lines in relationality in small rural schools" made working with staff harder (Wallin & Newton, 2014, p.717). The authors also stated that principals had to work quicker and have clearer expectations when issues arose so it didn't ruin relationships. The administrators in this study's identified rural school district spoke about the diplomatic nature in which the administrators had to handle situations because of the surrounding small community. Administrator participants in this study were consistent with Wallin and Newton as well as Wiczorek and Manard (2018) by expressing the uniqueness in their rural principal role compared to that of their urban or suburban counterparts.

A majority of administrator participants in this study spoke about the turmoil between the school and community. One administrator commented that it was all about who spoke louder in the community. Administrators acknowledged that they felt the relationship with the community is overall positive; it is the few outspoken families that perceived the relationship to be poor.

Four administrators believed that what the vocal community members perceived to be bad was their reality but, in fact, it was just their perception and other community members did not feel the same. The literature stresses the importance of the school-community collaboration in a rural school district and overall in this study, the administrators agreed. It appeared that perceived turmoil was isolated to a few families and specific situations per the administrators' perceptions.

Teachers had a narrowed vision of community members filtered through their personal experiences. Teachers expressed their perception of community through a personal story or situation. Teachers acknowledged the importance of "community ties and engagement" as described in the literature (Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2007, p. 61) but could relate only from a distance unless it was a situation they were directly involved in. In Thompson's levels model, the author expressed that the goal of organizational leadership should be to shield off the input levels from the environmental factors (Thompson, 2003). It appears that the rural school district studied was able shield off environmental factors based on comments from teachers not knowing what was going on at the community-level other than what they were directly related to. The teachers in this study also believed in the importance in organizational leadership buffering the community-administration collaboration for the teachers and the students. Teachers seemed to think the "turmoil" with the community was the perception of a few families and not the majority of the community. Teachers spoke about their personal experiences being positive with the families of the students in their classes. Most recent literature emulates the teacher participants' perception of leadership and the significant role the principals play in their interactions with the community (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

In conclusion, a majority of participants acknowledged the significance of the community and school relationship, and most felt that the identified rural school district was surrounded by a

supportive community. With the exception of a few families, most of the surrounding community is perceived to collaborate with the school in a positive way. The participants, especially the administrators, complemented the literature, which states the significant role the rural community places in the climate of a school district (Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2007). In addition, the participants supported the ecological theory through their consistent focus on interactions between the school and the environment/surrounding community. Teater (2014) stressed the interactions and involvement of environment factors when applying ecological theory to schools. The participants in this study made that connection, supporting the Theory's precepts.

Trickle Effect/Climate Flow

The trickle effect theme is the perception that school climate can travel from one area/group/individual within the organization to another area/group/individual. More specifically, when something occurs at one level of the organization, it has the potential to "trickle" to another level of the organization. Kolk et al. (2016) discussed this phenomenon as originating in the economics and marketing fields. This concept took different transformations within organizations and, most recently, was reviewed as crucial to analyze when examining interactions between employees and managers (Kolk et al., 2016). In this study, participants spoke indirectly about this effect. Teacher B expressed:

If they, if the school board can try it, you can put out a message that the teachers are going to be treated fairly. If they, if they're going to treat the administration fairly then administration is going to treat us fairly. I think that would go a long way.

Teacher J commented specifically to the flow of climate by stating:

We're supposed to have an administration that is starting this culture and then having it trickled down and it's not working that much to do it the opposite way. We take our, our children and even individuals, we have our kids, uh, be kind to each other, be nice to each other, show respect for each other, to put education first, things like that. And that spreads into families which then spreads to the community. That's what we're trying to do here on our end. So I think at least that's what we should be doing it.

These two teachers gave examples of the flow of climate throughout the district.

Administrators spoke directly and indirectly about this concept as well. Administrator C stated:

Knowing that you have an administrator or a leader in the district that's going to support you is, is huge. If you don't have that feeling as a teacher, I believe that the climate than it then goes to the students, the negative climate, the, the, the lack of trust is spread throughout the school climate, the school culture, because it goes from authority to teacher to student.

This study's participants were consistent with research on the trickle effect and organizational manager flow of communication; however, teachers seemed to be more in tune to the idea of a school climate trickle effect. This study's researcher speculated that because the teachers are directly involved with students on a day to day basis, teachers have the unique ability to see the effects that "upper management" decisions and actions have on the students.

Another significant component of this theme is the idea that school climate must also "start with you." Teacher J spoke specifically to the benefit of "starting with you" in the previous comment. Teacher J and other teachers spoke directly to the importance of having a positive attitude every day in their classroom, with their colleagues, and their administrators. Many teachers stressed the importance of cultivating a positive climate in their classroom environment

with the goal that it will eventually trickle to other staff and students outside of their classroom.

Meristo and Eisenschmidt (2014) spoke directly to self-efficacy and the creation of a positive classroom environment affecting the students overall well-being and their academic

performance. Additionally these authors found that a positive classroom environment has the ability to spill over into the overall climate of the school (Meristo & Eisneschmidt, 2014).

Administrator A spoke directly to the “it starts with you” concept by stating, “If you have teachers that aren't necessarily happy in the setting they're in, or whatever circumstances are surrounding them, I think that directly affects teaching, directly affects learning, and directly affects relationships with kids”. Both teachers and administrators expressed the importance of “starting with you” when it pertained to positive climate flow. Two significant components to this theme stood out in the interviews that were also consistent with the literature: positive school climate starts individually at the person/classroom level, and a positive school climate needs direction from a strong leader(s).

Leadership. The leadership at the identified rural school district was perceived by most participants as being inconsistent in their instruction to staff, micromanaging (specifically at the board level), and disconnected from the teachers and students. This perception was viewed by most interview participants as one of the main reasons the identified rural school is perceived as having a negative school climate. “The reality of the small schools was that the relationships between staff and principals are integral to the effective functioning of the school” (Wallin & Newton, 2014, p. 717). Murphy and Hallinger (2001) stressed that the reasons that some districts are more effective than others is because of the “consistency in technical core factors, strong instructional leadership role from the superintendent, and the high degree of coordination between district, school, and classroom” (p. 180). Leadership is recognized in the literature as a

significant component to school climate. In the current study, leadership was also acknowledged by administrators and teachers as significant in their perception of climate.

Teachers' perceptions aligned with Meristo and Eisenschmidt's (2014) findings by expressing their belief that creating school climate is the responsibility of the school leader. Meristo and Eisenschmidt continued on to stress the importance of cohesion between teachers and administrators, uniform with ecological theory. Teachers at the identified rural school district emphasized they wished to have support and collaboration with administration along with a leader they perceive as worth following.

Hansen (2018) concluded in her qualitative study about rural principalship that principals desired their superiors (school board and superintendent) to allow principals to carry out their visions of their buildings and instructions without micromanaging daily decisions. This idea was correlated with some of the statements made by administrators in the identified rural school district. This concept of leadership was filtered throughout the administrators' interviews and associated to most current studies. Additionally, Thompson's research on organizations spoke about the harm in micromanaging from upper management (Thompson, 1967, 2003). Thompson (1967, 2003) stressed that when power from upper administration is supported and shared between the dominant coalition, the organization has a higher chance of functioning properly.

teachers believed they had the ability to control their direct environment climate (classroom and students), and the building principal had the ability to control their direct environment climate (their building and teachers). Both teachers and administrators strongly agreed that upper leadership (superintendent and school board) is a significant component to school climate. Both teachers and administrators seemed to agree that if upper administration had positive relationships with their peers, that would trickle down to the administrators and then

trickle to the students. This trickle down effect would indirectly affect the students and their academic performance. This conclusion is consistent with the literature on school climate and the trickle effect; however, it is inconsistent with Thompson's Levels Model in its entirety. As described previously, Thompson felt the manager level (principals) had the ability to "seal off" environment factors from the output level (student learning) in order to increase production (academic achievement); however the participants in this study felt that the upper administration turmoil was, in fact, directly affecting the students. It could be argued, however, that if the organization was working properly with a positive school climate, the managers would have the ability to protect the students from any administrative turmoil (Thompson, 2003).

Personal Experiences

Personal experiences for all administrators and teachers interviewed in this study were the foundation of their perception of school climate in the identified rural school district. The goal of phenomenological research is to converse with participants on their "lived experiences achieved by prolonged experiences" (Padgett, 2017, p. 35). Due to the intensity of the district's perceived climate, this type of research study fit the research questions outlined. As anticipated by the researcher, both teachers and administrators spoke passionately about their experiences and their perception of school climate. Teachers, more than administrators, spoke openly about their experiences. Three teacher participants stated they felt the interview was therapeutic, knowing they could speak freely. Administrators, on the other hand, seemed to choose their words carefully when explaining any situation they experienced. They appeared to leave out specifics of those events and when asked by the researcher if they would elaborate, two declined. Three administrators questioned the researcher throughout the interview about how assessible the findings of the study will be and the researcher's anticipation about who will read the finished

product. The researcher, as described in previous sections, is an employee in the identified rural school district. It is possible that the reservations from the administrators could have been because the administrators viewed the researcher as an employee and felt they couldn't privy the researcher to certain situations they didn't feel the researcher should know in her employment role. The teachers may have viewed the researcher as more of a peer and colleague causing the teachers to feel more comfortable sharing more personal experiences.

Mostly, the participants filtered their perceptions of school climate through their lens of experiences. For example, if they had an overall positive experience with parents in the district, they appeared to perceive that the community was supportive of the school. It appeared difficult for many participants to step outside of their role and look at the district as whole. They seemed to only perceive their reality. Draaisma (2017) and Koch (2010) explain that our perception is created from the foundation of our experiences. In conclusion to this theme, the participants' school climate perception was based on their personal experiences with the components of school climate in the rural school district in which they are employed.

Implications

the themes found in this study are consistent with those found in the literature. While the perceptions were consistent per theme, there were differences in the details per theme, per administrator or teacher. The themes created and the analyzed perceptions of the two groups of stakeholders have theoretical and practical implication.. The study's limitations also are discussed

Theoretical Implications

Theory drives research and has the ability to expand data analysis beyond the purpose of the study. Ecological theory, authoritative school climate theory, and James Thompson's levels

model provided the basis for this study. Throughout this chapter, the participant's themes correlated to the identified theories and presented data units that supported all three theories. The following sections will summarize the discussion of the data per theory.

Ecological Theory. The “goodness of fit” between people and their environment was captured throughout the participants’ interviews. The concept of “influence and connection” between different parts of the identified rural school district, the staff, and the surrounding community was captured in the interpersonal and trickle effect theme. Ecological theory also suggests that each staff member plays a role in shaping the environment and surrounding community, consistent with the “it starts with you” concept expressed by the participants (Pardeck, 1988). Pardeck (1988) explains that ecological theory supports a cyclic relationship between the person and the environment. This concept supports the interpersonal units of data described under the interpersonal theme. Ecological theory has a “rich theoretical base” which can be easily translated into social work practice (Pardeck, 1988, p. 134). This theory is especially important to this study because it is consistent with social work practice and offers a different foundation theory and lens for the field of education.

Authoritative School Climate Theory. Authoritative school climate theory (ASC) suggests that disciplinary structure and student support are two key dimensions with school climate (Cornell et al., 2015). In this study, the participants clearly expressed the need for student support in a positive school climate through their direct statements on students’ needs. A teacher directly commented on the need for principal visibility in order to show students support. Two administrators commented on their current goal of visibility as method to show support for staff and students. One administrator directly expressed his desire to learn all students’ names as a tactic for showing dedication and commitment to the students and the district. A majority of

administrators and teachers commented on students and the importance of support. While student support was consistent with the ASC theory, neither administrators nor teachers commented on or related to the need for discipline structure when discussing school climate. Cornell et al. (2015) defines discipline structure as “the idea that school rules are perceived as strict but fairly enforced” (p. 1187). The researcher partially attributes this lack of supportive theory evidence of discipline structure to the type of participants used for this study. Since participants were administrators and teachers, neither seemed to have the angle of perception to relate personal experiences affected by discipline structure.

Thompson’s Levels Model. James Thompson’s research on organizations, his Levels Model, and the dominant coalition concept seemed to be consistent overall with the perception of the participants on school climate. As Thompson expressed, organizations are subject to the constraints and fluctuations of the environment and surrounding community (Kamps & Polos, 1999). Thompson proposed that organizations are complex and should operate as an open system encompassed by rational and natural systems at the different organizational levels. With the support of the dominant coalition, the organization’s institutional level’s goal is to seal off turmoil and constraints from the environment so that the organization can function properly (Rousseau, 1996). Participants in this study were consistent with Thompson’s levels model. The trickle effect theme speaks directly to the flow of the organization’s climate. While some participants talked about how turmoil directly affects the students, many participants continued to express that teachers and principals have the ability to maintain a positive climate even amongst upper administrative chaos. Thompson stressed that the dominant coalition is significant to the function of the organization and the ability to “seal off” outside factors. The identified turmoil with the school board, superintendent, and union leadership and the lack of support and

cohesion between those who have power seemed to have caused disruption in the ability to seal off outside factors at the rational level, in turn affecting the staff and students. The researcher speculates that when the school is functioning as suggested by Thompson, the organization can dependably produce outputs (student learning).

The theoretical framework seems to help to understand the findings and informs the practice implications. In addition, all three theories provide suggested direction for the school district in order to increase their school climate and academic success. Ecological theory implies the need for the staff, administration, and community to continue to build upon their relationships to strengthen the goodness of fit. The collaboration and support, according to ecological theory, leads to an increase in the success of an organization. Authoritative school climate theory implies the need to keep focus on student support in order to increase the potential for academic achievement. Thompson's levels model implies the need for the upper administration to work together as a dominant coalition, in order to protect the rest of the district from environmental constituents and fluctuations. This collaboration would trickle down throughout the organization and increase the potential for student success.

Practice Implications

This study identified four themes that are directly related to the job of school social workers in primary school settings. The qualitative methodology in this study provided an opportunity to analyze strengths and limitations of the identified school district. Social workers' ability to see a school district from a holistic perspective gives unique insight to school climate and a district's interpersonal relationships. This holistic view encourages social workers to seek out and understand school district limitations, the strengths of a school district, and the skills needed to maintain a high quality environment (Soliman, 2017). Soliman (2017) stressed that the

professional experience, education, and skills of a social worker are needed to work with a variety of systems involved in school climate. Themes identified in this study encompass a variety of stakeholders throughout the community and the school. The role of the school social worker should be to assess and analyze those school climate themes. School social workers can be an asset to a school district if we engage in improving school climate.

, school social workers should be involved in policy creation and implementation related to school climate. The unique skill set of a social worker provides the tools needed to support a positive school climate. School social workers should be well-equipped with the training and skills needed for primary school settings. School social work program and curriculum development on school district climate can increase the school social worker's knowledge and ability to excel in a school setting, ultimately leading to student support and success.

Another goal of this study was to show similarities and/or differences in the perceptions of two different stakeholder groups in the identified rural school district. These similarities and differences imply that different groups of a complex organization are or are not congruent of specific topic items relating to the school district. If two major stakeholder groups are in disagreement on their school climate perception, the inconsistencies could cause disruption in the daily operations, erupting barriers, and making it harder for student academic success. Both administrators and teachers agree on many components of school climate which leads to positive practical implications. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, social workers have a unique skill set that can be an asset to school districts as they navigate through different stakeholder perceptions and how those differences and similarities can impact school climate. School social workers should be directly involved in group work to help resolve the differences between varying perceptions of school climate.

Findings demonstrate the importance of “attunement to the school’s organizational climate” (Rhodes et al., 2009, p. 721). In agreement with Rhodes et al. (2009), this study finds that leaders should be cognizant of both their upper administration as well as the daily operations of teachers and students. Administrators who are in tuned to their buildings and the climate of their teachers and students are perceived to have an impact on student success. This study implies the importance of training and professional development on school climate for school district leaders. If leaders and policy makers were more devoted to healthy teacher engagement, then they would see a natural increase in student engagement and success.

Interpersonal skills and professional development with colleagues is important to the growth of a positive school climate. The researcher stresses the need for cohesion amongst staff members in school districts, including administration and teachers. The researcher believes that all staff have a profound influence on school climate as shown by the participants in this study. In addition to staff members’ cohesion, this study impacts the rural school district’s school board and suggests cohesion and professional development in order to increase a positive school climate. Cohesion amongst staff could be facilitated by a school social work. Consistent with literature, theory, and this study’s participants, interpersonal relationships seem to be the crux of a positive school climate.

Limitations

There are identified limitations that may have affected results of the study. As noted, the researcher is a contracted employee with the rural school district. Although the researcher’s employment allowed for a more detailed phenomenological perspective, it could also be seen as a contribution to potential research bias. While the researcher believes she engaged in a variety

of methods to decrease the chance for researcher bias as described in previous chapters, its employment is a limitation to the validation of the findings.

Demographics and school district specifics were removed from this study in order to maintain confidentiality of the participants and the rural school district. Confidentiality maintenance caused a limitation to this study. Specific genders, ages, and lengths of employment could have been beneficial when school climate perception was analyzed in order to draw further connections between the data. However, the researcher believed that confidentiality of the participants was more beneficial for the purpose of this study than demographic information. Nevertheless, the lack of specific demographic information is a limitation to this study.

Finally, another limitation to this study was that this study is not representative of all school districts in the state or country. This study involved one school district; therefore, it could be argued that the data obtained is not as easily generalized to other school districts. To counteract the difficulty in showing generalizability in qualitative research, the researcher provided a thick description of the data collection and analysis process.

Recommendations

To understand the direct impact that school climate has on student outcomes, further research needs to include more complex “bidirectional interrelations” between climate and individual interactions (Wang & Degol, 2016, p. 342). Bidirectional interrelations could include a mixed-method research study that reviews not only administrators and teachers, but also student perceptions of school climate. Additionally, different variables should be reviewed to understand causality effects. Expanding research on school climate to include both qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as more detailed variables, would allow for a clearer, holistic perception of school climate and the effects it has on student achievement. Mixed-methods

research would also allow the researcher to review demographic information in comparison to school climate perceptions, a limitation to the current study. Another research recommendation is to continue to review school climate in comparison with specific leadership practices. Qualitative methodology is a gap in educational research on school climate; therefore, it would be imperative to continue with qualitative methodology when reviewing school district leadership and school climate.

Future studies may wish to apply other theoretical perspectives as a baseline for studies involving school districts who have experienced significant turmoil. This atypical perspective would allow for research explanation to examine turmoil within organizations and the effect it has on climate and interpersonal relationships. Different theories allow the researcher to see the data through a different lens; therefore, it would benefit to look at the specific turmoil in order to identify how it impacted the school.

As a final point, it is recommended for leaders, school social workers, and program developers to consider a curriculum for specialized community-school collaboration in small rural communities. The most recent literature identified theories, and this study's participants all acknowledged the importance in community involvement in rural school districts. The knowledge of school social workers would be a significant asset to the development of this specific type of program development. Therefore it is important for partnership efforts from community, school leaders, and district social workers alike in order to increase school climate efforts in order to increase student success.

Conclusion

School social workers play an important role in school climate and are crucial in positive youth development and student success. Student success and achievement are the primary

purpose of educational institutions. This qualitative, phenomenological study provided a unique position on how different school climate perceptions may have the ability to impact student achievement and set the stage for further qualitative research in education from the lens of a school social worker. Ecological theory, authoritative school climate theory, and Thompson's levels model provided a lens for which the researcher examined the perceptions of the different stakeholders. The researcher, a social worker, provided a holistic perspective of school climate from the viewpoints of different key players in an educational institution. Four themes emerged from the beliefs of the teachers and administrators: Interpersonal relationships, surrounding community, the trickle effect, and personal experiences. The researcher's ability to observe and work with a variety of district stakeholders during this study who are directly involved in school climate assists in the development of positive interpersonal relationships, the flow of communication and support within a district, and the relationship with the surrounding community. recommendations to continue school climate research with a mixed methodology approach, create school-community school climate curriculum, and to view school climate from different theoretical perspectives. The most important position in this study is the significant role of school social workers in a positive school climate. In accordance with the social work training in systems framework, leadership skills in advocacy, strengths-based approach, facilitation, implementation, and strong clinical skills, school social workers have the ability to align the school, the community, and the families. Social workers are the key in school climate programming, facilitation, implementation, maintenance, and analyzing. It would be imperative for schools to include social workers in school climate initiatives, in order to increase the chance of positive outcomes.

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Appendix A.



[Redacted]

Date: 08/01/2018

Re: Letter of Support

Dear Millersville University IRB team,

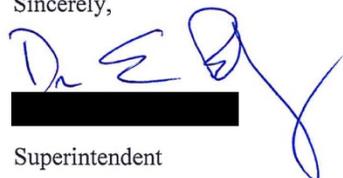
This letter confirms that I [Redacted], as Superintendent of [Redacted] District, will allow Mrs. Allison Gosch to conduct study related activities at the [Redacted]

I am familiar with Allison’s research project entitled Teacher and Administrator Perceptions on School Climate in a Rural School District. I understand [Redacted] involvement is to allow Allison access to teachers and administrators in a rural school district. I have read Allison’s dissertation proposal and IRB application and consent to her conducting in-depth interviews with administrators and teachers.

I understand that this research will be carried out following sound ethical principles and that participant involvement in this research study is strictly voluntary and provides confidentiality of research data, as described in the protocol. I understand Allison’s potential funding stream for this research study and consent to a small reimbursement gift for the voluntary participants.

Therefore, as a representative of [Redacted] District, I agree that Allison Gosch’s research project may be conducted at our educational institution.

Sincerely,


[Redacted]
Superintendent

[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]

Appendix B.

Informed Consent Form

Description of Experiment: You will be participating in a phenomenological, qualitative research study. This social work study asks your participation in an in-depth interview regarding the school climate of the rural school district where you are employed. Participation in this research is voluntary.

Risks and Benefits: There are no foreseen risks in the current research. This is considered a minimal risk study. This research received a letter of support from [REDACTED], Superintendent of [REDACTED] District, which is available for review. Neither the researcher, school district, nor the university is responsible for any accidents that occur during the time of the study.

Compensation, Refusal, and Withdrawal: All participants will receive a small gift card for their voluntary participation (pending MU Student Research Grant approval). Participation is voluntary, and can be terminated at any time with no negative consequences.

Confidentiality: Your confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study by being randomly assigned a participant ID, rather than using identifying information such as your name or full ID. All interviews will be kept on researcher's password protected computer. In compliance with Federal law, they will be kept for three years, at which time any documents with identifying information will be destroyed.

Age: All participants must be over the age of 18.

By signing this consent form, you are signifying that you understand the nature of the research and your agreement to participate in the study. Please consider the following points before signing:

- I understand that I am participating in Social Work research.
- I understand that my personal information and data will be kept confidential between the researchers.
- I understand that my participation in the research is voluntary, and that I may decide to terminate my participation any time after the study begins without penalty.

For more information, you may contact:

Mrs. Allison Gosch, LCSW, ABD
amgosch@millersville.edu
 (717) 451-2225

Dr. Marc Felizzi, LCSW, Ph.D
marc_felizzi@millersville.edu
 (717) 871-7161

By signing this form, I am stating that I understand the above information and consent to participate in this study conducted at Millersville University.

 Patient Name (Printed)

 Researcher Name (Printed)

 Signature

 Signature

 Date

 Date

This study has been approved by the Millersville University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board. Dr. René Muñoz, Director of Sponsored Projects and Research Administration, can be contacted with any questions at either (717) 871-4457 or (717) 871-4146, or at rene.munoz@millersville.edu.

Appendix C.

Hello [REDACTED] Teachers and Administrators,

I hope everyone is enjoying their summer.

I'm emailing you today to ask for some volunteers as a doctoral candidate. I am nearing the end of my doctoral program! Part of my doctoral program requires independent research to be completed. I have been diligently working to do justice to my dissertation and have focused my research on school climate in a rural school district.

I am conducting a qualitative, phenomenological research (in-depth interviews) on teacher and administrative perspectives of school climate at [REDACTED] and I need 6-8 teachers and 6-8 administrators who are willing to meet with me to do an interview. I am dedicated to ensuring you confidentiality. No one, but myself, will know that you are participating. All identifying information in the interview will be removed when I conduct analysis. I was given a Letter of Support by Dr. Bentzel to interview you and can provide that if you wish to review it.

This is voluntary participation and I cannot guarantee any compensation for your time (I have written a Student Research Grant through Millersville University to hopefully be able to offer you a small gift, however I will not know if I received that until the end of September). If you are interested, I can provide you my full dissertation after completion in the Spring of 2019 so you may see the results of this study.

All you have to do is respond to this email, or call me, so that we can set up a time and location of your choice. If you would be more comfortable connecting in person, I'd be happy to meet with you to give you more information. My contact information is below.

I appreciate any willingness to help me move forward in this program. More importantly, I appreciate your willingness to be a part of a study that may help the district move forward! Together we are stronger.

Thank you!

Ally

Allison Gosch, LCSW
Doctoral Candidate- ABD
Millersville/Kutztown University

Appendix D.

Teacher and Admin Perceptions of School Climate in a Rural School District Allison Gosch, LCSW Dissertation Semi-Structured Interview Guide

TEACHER Interview Questions:

State at the start of the interview:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. This interview is on the current climate at [REDACTED] school district from the perspectives of teachers and administrators. To ensure confidentiality, your name and any other identifying information will be removed from this transcription and you will be given a pseudo name. After this interview is uploaded to my password protected computer, the audio final on this recorder will be deleted. No one, other than myself, knows you are participating in this interview.

1. Do you have any questions about the confidentiality of this interview?

I have semi-structured questions to aid in the process of this interview, however the goal is to make this more of a conversation so please feel free to talk as much or as little as you are comfortable with. Before we begin, can you...

2. Can you state your position and how long you have been working at [REDACTED]?

3. How long have you been in your current role?

4. How would you define school climate?

5. How you feel the current school climate is at [REDACTED]?

Thank you. Over the last three years there has been a variety of things that has happened at [REDACTED] to cause change all around the district. Including, new super, new school board, divided district with the teacher union representatives, fake news media, community member uproars, campus model, and others.

6. Success of the students? Affect them?

7. How do you feel being a rural school district affect this district's climate?

8. What do you perceive to be the future climate at [REDACTED]?

9. What can admin do to support school climate?

10. What can the teachers do to help support school climate?

11. How do you perceive the leadership of [REDACTED] to be? And can you specify what leadership you are talking about- school board, union, admin, super, etc. ?

Teacher and Admin Perceptions of School Climate in a Rural School District
Allison Gosch, LCSW Dissertation Semi-Structured Interview Guide

ADMIN Interview Questions:

State at the start of the interview:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. This interview is on the current climate at [REDACTED] school district from the perspectives of teachers and administrators. To ensure confidentiality, your name and any other identifying information will be removed from this transcription and you will be given a pseudo name. After this interview is uploaded to my password protected computer, the audio final on this recorder will be deleted. No one, other than myself, knows you are participating in this interview.

1. Do you have any questions about the confidentiality of this interview?

I have semi-structured questions to aid in the process of this interview, however the goal is to make this more of a conversation so please feel free to talk as much or as little as you are comfortable with. Before we begin, can you...

2. Can you state your position and how long you have been working at [REDACTED]?

3. How long have you been in your current role?

4. How would you define school climate?

5. How you feel the current school climate is at [REDACTED]?

Thank you. Over the last three years there has been a variety of things that has happened at [REDACTED] to cause change all around the district. Including, new super, new school board, divided district with the teacher union representatives, fake news media, community member uproars, campus model, and others.

6. Success of the students? Affect them?

7. How do you feel being a rural school district affect this district's climate?

8. What do you perceive to be the future climate at [REDACTED]?

9. What can admin do to support school climate?

10. What can the teachers do to help support school climate?

11. How do you perceive the leadership of [REDACTED] to be? And can you specify what leadership you are talking about- school board, union, admin, super, etc. ?