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### The Perceptions of Instructional Leaders and Teachers Regarding the Factors that Lead to Positive Climate in Middle Schools

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THE PERCEPTIONS OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS AND TEACHERS  
REGARDING THE FACTORS THAT LEAD TO POSITIVE CLIMATE  
IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

A Dissertation Submitted  
to the Graduate College  
Arkansas Tech University

in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in School Leadership

in the Center for Leadership and Learning  
of the College of Education

May 2020

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## Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation work to my father and mother, Earl and Dollie Gilcrest, who first taught me the value of an education and that nothing is impossible as long as you allow God to order your steps. To my siblings, LaVera, Earl Jr., Aonie, Dorothy, Patrica, Vernetta, and Ramona, I thank you for teaching and modeling for me the value of hard work and that it does pay off, and dreams do come true. Your years of the advice given to me was heard and applied even when you did not think I was listening.

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I first want to thank my husband and children for their support, patience, and understanding. Daron, you pushed me when I wanted to give up. You loved me in times when I was unlovable. You always encourage me with the word of God, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalms 46:10). Thank you for being the man you are and continually leading our family as God has shown you. Thank you to my two children, Daron Jr. and Danielle, for all the encouragement and love. I am very proud of both of you for your significant accomplishments in completing your college degrees.

I want to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Freeman, for his encouragement, unwavering support through emails, phone calls, and facetime through this process. I appreciate your patience with me by providing me unlimited guidance and your expertise in the research process. Writing this dissertation was a challenge, but you helped make it attainable.

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## Abstract

School climate, more than other factors, determines efficiency. Building a positive school climate means creating conditions both for instructional leaders and teachers, which leads to student success. When teachers feel supported, safe, motivated, and satisfied with their outcomes, their work becomes more effective in a positive climate. In the light of much research, leaders in schools with a positive climate pay attention to the academic outcomes measured by mandated state assessments as well as the social and emotional well-being of every student and adult.

The outcome of creating and maintaining a positive school climate has been studied and linked to many significant issues for school stakeholders, such as teachers, instructional leaders, and students. Researchers have demonstrated that a positive school climate may be linked to better academic performance by students, higher teacher morale, and a decrease in discipline issues. However, little research has been conducted to provide teachers and instructional leaders with specific practices they can implement to help create a school climate that is conducive to learning every day. Therefore, this study was designed to assess factors that impact and help create a positive middle school climate based on the perception of instructional leaders and teachers. In this study, data collection was achieved through personal interviews with instructional leaders and teachers in a middle school setting to identify the factors that impact school climate.

Five major themes emerged from the conversations with participants. The first theme was the building of positive relationships between the instructional leader and teachers. The second theme was safety; participants expressed how important it was to work in a safe and secure environment. The third theme that emerged was leadership. Does leadership have the



most significant impact on creating a positive school climate? The fourth theme emerging was discipline. The lack of discipline can create an adverse climate. The fifth theme that emerged was parental involvement. These themes emerged from the perceptions of the participants that these were the influential factors in creating and maintaining a positive school climate in a middle school setting.

*Keywords:* School climate, instructional leaders, teachers, perception, factors

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Background of the Study**

“There are people that will say we do not have time for school climate because we have so much on our plate, and my philosophy is school climate is actually the plate everything else has to go on” (Dewitt, 2017, p. 10). School climate has been a research topic in education for many years (Anderson, 1982; Kreft, 1993; Purkey & Smith, 1983). As defined by the National School Climate Council (2007), “School climate 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. 4). It refers to the atmosphere of the school—the character and quality of the heartbeat of the school. Established norms, goals, values, relationships, teaching, and learning practices all characterize a school’s climate (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009).

Research in the field of school effectiveness and school improvement over the past 50 years has demonstrated a positive correlation between school climate and school effectiveness (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013). Inversely, research has shown that the lack of a positive school climate can be directly related to a lack of effectiveness and indicators of low morale and apathy. For example, Kearney (2008) noted that schools characterized as having a negative school climate tend to have an increase in teacher and student absence. The U.S. Department of Education recognized this connection between absenteeism and school climate by including directives in the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) designed to improve school climate. Also, many states are emphasizing the lowering of absenteeism in schools. For instance, the state of Arkansas, under its ESSA plan, will use rewards and



punishments based on whether or not schools meet the state attendance goal (Arkansas Department of Education, 2017).

Leadership plays a significant role in creating a positive school climate (Berg & Aber, 2015). According to Bartoletti and Connelly (2013), the principal has a direct impact on building a positive school climate by setting the tone for the building by encouraging positive relationships, creating a professional learning community, and protecting and maintaining a safe and clean environment. These instructional leaders must also support the best teaching practices which connect to a higher level of learning and student achievement (Bartoletti & Connelly, 2013).

In some school districts, instructional leaders have the most significant influence on the school climate. Winter and Sweeney (1994) suggested that an instructional leader's most important job is to create a positive school climate that supports teachers. The relationship that teachers have with the instructional leaders are reflective of the schools' climate. Rafferty (2003) found communication, whether positive or negative, between teachers and instructional leaders, directly affects school climate and behaviors in schools. If teachers perceive that conflict exists, whether it is among other colleagues, students, or instructional leaders, it will cause the school climate to suffer and may result in negative student learning (Wittmer & Ferinden, 1970).

Instructional leaders, who are described as task-oriented and "controlling," are heard throughout the school and send the message that building relationships with positive communication is not a top priority (Lehr & Christenson, 2002). However, an instructional leader, who takes the role of promoter and not only involves teachers but students to encourage the decision-making process among school members, will have a positive school climate and

higher performance among its students (Lehr & Christenson, 2002). “Exceptional instructional leaders realize that people, rather than programs, determine the quality of schools” (Whitaker, 2012, p. 9).

Teachers play a vital role in the creation of a positive school environment (Heller, 2004). Teachers can develop stress from their perceived onerous workload and lack of support from their administration, which can lead to factors that create an adverse school climate. Even though the primary goal of a school should be student success, a healthy, supportive school climate promotes successful teaching and learning (Freiberg, 1998). Various school variables come together to create a particular environment in schools. Each school stakeholder must be invested in a common goal to meet the needs of students and meet the needs of others within the school community. The school members that carry the most influence to create a positive school climate are the teachers and instructional leaders.

Teachers’ perceptions of school climate are as crucial as any stakeholder in the school setting. They hold the most important keys to making the school environment conducive to learning. When reviewing school climate with teachers and instructional leaders, researchers, such as Hoy and Woolfolk-Hoy (1993), believed the components that play a vital role in school climate are (a) job satisfaction, (b) a feeling of efficacy, (c) attitudes toward the school, and (d) relationships with instructional leaders. Teachers’ sense of efficacy is the feeling of responsibility for student achievement and failure (Hoy & Woolfolk-Hoy, 1993). Hoy and Woolfolk-Hoy (1993) found that the teachers’ sense of efficacy was the best forecast by the teachers’ institutional integrity and self-confidence. How schools work within its environment is the definition of institutional integrity (Jones & Schindler, 2016).

School climate is essential to understand and establish, in the era of school choice. School choice is being implemented across districts allowing parents to enroll their children in a school that has a positive climate and where students are performing academically at a higher rate on state-mandated assessments (Arkansas Department of Education [ADE], 2018). School climate is the uniqueness created in a school setting by its members that allow the school to stand out from the rest (Hoy & Hannum, 1997).

Teachers and instructional leaders play a significant role in positive school climate and in turn, the presence of a positive school climate means so much to the survival of a school in an era of school choice. Because of this, the voices of these stakeholders should be heard. This study seeks to provide these educators with an opportunity to provide their perceptions of how best to achieve a positive school climate in their schools.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Public education in the United States has undergone a series of major reforms over the past 20 years. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and its successor, ESSA has as its goal the educational success of all students. These reforms have seen varying degrees of success. Researchers and practitioners alike are searching for any method or strategy that will make this goal a reality. The future of public education is at stake, and the American way of life depends on an effective educational system.

Vital to the effectiveness of schools is a positive climate. Research has been consistent in demonstrating the effects of a positive school climate on the level of student success and the self-efficacy of teachers and instructional leaders. Therefore, if the effects of school climate are so crucial to the success of schools, it is essential to discover how schools can develop a positive

climate. Having this understanding could potentially provide the key to turning a low-performing school into one that is effective in reaching the goal of student success for all.

### **Purpose of the Study**

School climate research offers several different comparisons. Many studies have linked school climate with student achievement (Freiberg, 1998). Other studies have studied teachers' and instructional leaders' perceptions of the school climate (Wittmer & Ferinden, 1970). All of these studies have contributed to the literature on school climate and helps explain the role that teachers and instructional leaders play in the creation of a positive school climate in their schools.

Other studies looked at single groups, such as the students' perspective of school climate. Because these studies did not compare perceptions between multiple groups of stakeholders within the school setting, the findings were not comprehensive. In this study, comparing the perceptions of both teachers and instructional leaders provides a better perspective of the school climate within the participating schools. This study explored the perceptions of instructional leaders and teachers to identify the factors of school climate they considered to be the most influential when trying to create and maintain a positive environment. Having this knowledge could potentially give other stakeholders within the educational system valuable information on how to build positive communication and build a better school climate to meet the needs of the school community as a whole.

### **Research Question**

One question guided this qualitative study, "What do middle school instructional leaders and teachers perceive to be the primary factors leading to a positive climate in their schools?" When considering the positive impact school climate can have on building an effective

educational environment, it is necessary to understand how that positive school climate was created. This study explored the factors of school climate that are most influential in creating and building a positive school climate according to teachers and instructional leaders.

### **Significance of the Study**

For years, researchers have studied school climate. The consensus appears to be that more research is needed to understand better how school leaders and teachers can generate a positive school climate. The U.S. Department of Education passed ESSA in 2015, placing mandates on school districts across the country on non-academic performance standards. Two of these standards included student engagement and teacher engagement within a school setting. These standards can be directly related to school climate. Spittler (2017) stated that a positive school climate encompasses school engagement, school environment, and school safety. The interest in discovering the factors that impact a positive school climate, according to teachers and instructional leaders in a middle school setting, is essential in achieving student academic success, as well. Through in-depth interviews with instructional leaders and teachers, the researcher attempted to identify the factors of school climate that the interview participants indicated were the most crucial factors in creating and maintaining a positive school climate. This study may benefit educational stakeholders, such as instructional leaders, teachers, students, the researcher, and educators outside the building in helping to create success for all students.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Collaboration*, for this study, means the principal shares the decision-making process regarding the educational environment by soliciting input and influence from the teaching staff. By sharing in the decision making, teachers gain substantial influence over the educational

environment and increase their satisfaction within the school climate (Blankstein & Noguera, 2004).

*Every Student Succeed Act of 2015* (ESSA) is the mandated act that created accountability measures for improving education in all schools.

*Instructional leader* is the individual in charge of the school's educational environment and instruction (Fullan, 2011).

*Middle school* typically includes any combination of Grades 6 through 8.

*Perceptions* are the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses (Cobbs, 2014).

*Respondent* is a person who replies to something, especially one supplying information for a survey or questionnaires or responding to an advertisement. (www.oed.com)

*School climate* refers to the beliefs, attitudes, and values held by people in an educational setting. For this study, school climate refers to the perceptions held by the people of the educational environment (Cobbs, 2014).

*School environment* is broadly characterized by its facilities, classrooms, school-based health supports, and disciplinary policies and practices. It sets the stage for the external factors that affect students (Fullan, 2011).

*Teacher leader*, for this study, is a teacher who possesses a set of skills and who continues to teach students but also has an influence that extends beyond his or her classroom to other peers within his or her school (Kiliç, 2013).

## **Assumptions**

In this qualitative study, it was assumed that all participants answered the interview questions truthfully and with integrity. It was also assumed participants based their answers on

their own experiences as instructional leaders and teachers in middle school settings. The participants understood they could stop the interview process at any time and ask for clarification of what was.

### **Limitations**

The nature of this study could have permitted the researcher to study all variables related to the research topic. However, it is the responsibility of the researcher to limit the study in order to address the most relevant variables of school climate as it relates to the identified research question. There are also time and expense factors that impact the scope of any research study. Because the study was delimited in specific ways, it also imposed limitations on the design and procedures used. For instance, the two schools were similar in terms of demographics and accountability measures. Therefore, the findings derived from the data collected for this study are not generalizable to all middle schools.

All potential participants in these schools had a professional relationship with the researcher. To alleviate any potential bias, the researcher entrusted the actual interviews to a colleague who did not have a relationship with the participants or the schools. Using another interviewer helped maintain the trustworthiness of the responses. However, it limited the researcher's opportunity to have personal interaction with the participants which would have contributed to the richness of the data analysis.

Another limitation in the design of the study included the lack of baseline data that would have identified the level of school climate in the participating schools. Most school climate surveys are administered in a pre-post design to measure the value-added to the climate by the implementation of various plans for improving climate. In this study, there was no time to administer a survey. Therefore, the determination that these schools had improved their climate

was determined by the personal experience of the researcher who was involved in leading the schools' improvement.

### **Delimitations**

The researcher identified a research question that focused on middle schools. Therefore, data were not collected from other configurations of schools. While school climate is vital for all school settings, it was determined that this study would delimit the design to investigate middle schools only.

Only two middle schools were included in the study. The researcher was familiar with both school settings and determined that they would provide sufficient data to address the research question. This decision was also influenced by the limited time and resources available for this study. The schools were easily accessible to the researcher and can be considered a convenience sample.

The researcher selected a qualitative design for the research study because it explored the actual meaning of participants' perceptions of their world. It was a purposive sampling of participants because the researcher wanted to bring their personal experiences into the research.

The participants for this study were selected based upon years of experience because these middle schools have a very high turnover rate. The participants needed to have enough personal experience in the school to understand how the school improved their climate.

### **Organization of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of school climate by instructional leaders and teachers in a middle school setting in order to identify the factors of school climate that they considered being the most influential in improving and maintaining a positive school environment. Chapter One introduced the statement of the problem, the



significance of the study, and presented the research question that guided the design and methods for the study. Chapter Two presents scholarly research that outlines the theoretical components and investigations associated with the perceptions of school climate by teachers and instructional leaders. Chapter Three describes the methods and procedures used in the study. Chapter Four presents the research findings extracted from the data collected. Chapter Five contains a summary and discussion of the findings, as well as recommendations for further research of these specific factors.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

The research question, as previously stated in Chapter One, is, “What do middle school instructional leaders and teachers perceive to be the primary factors leading to a positive climate in their schools?” The way teachers and instructional leaders perceive their environment can affect the climate of the school (Whitaker, 2012). Researchers have recognized a positive school climate as a critical component in producing a successful school for all stakeholders (Mart, 2011). Educational learning environments would be the ideal place for instructional leaders and teachers if they had a building full of active students who were eager to learn, who were motivated to reach their full potential, and who were excited about the learning taking place within the middle school setting. Unfortunately, a positive school climate does not exist for most middle schools across the nation. Students from very diverse backgrounds with very diverse needs fill the classrooms of these schools, creating issues that may hinder the establishment of a positive climate, without specific actions or strategies.

This literature review highlights a working definition of school climate, the importance of instructional leader influence, the necessity of developing a positive climate within a school, and the importance of creating a personal instructional leadership style conducive to changing a toxic school climate into a pleasant climate (Spicer, 2016). The actions that teachers and instructional leaders take to affect the school climate conclude with gaps in the literature requiring further study.

In schools without supportive norms or structure and without positive relationships, students are more likely to experience low performance and excessive disciplinary actions, which are often the factors that contribute to high teacher and student absenteeism (Thapa et al., 2013).

This research of this literature review consisted of defining school climate, the importance of school climate, the roles of instructional leaders and teachers, and the dimension of related factors of school climate within a middle school setting, such as (a) safe and orderly, (b) equitable and culturally responsive, (c) school discipline system, (d) family and community engagement, and (e) collaborative teaming.

### **Search Description**

The literature search strategy involved the use of databases and educational-specific search engines. Education Research Complete, Academic Search Complete, Sage, and Google Scholar were the databases and search engines used for the research. The researcher utilized the following key terms in this literature search: instructional leadership, teacher perception of instructional leaders, school climate, teacher perception, emails, interviewing, and interviewing techniques. The Educational Research Complete database was the primary source used in the review of the literature for this study.

### **Research Question**

What do middle school instructional leaders and teachers perceive to be the primary factors leading to a positive climate in their schools?

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Maslow (1970), humans have five different levels of needs. The first two levels deal with safety and physiological; the third level deals with needing to belong and love. Levels four and five focus on esteem needs and the need for self-actualization. According to Maslow's (1970) theory, the levels of needs are the priority. Belonging is developed in a social context and is something that all children desire to have in school. In a positive school climate, instructional leaders and teachers must foster an inclusive environment for everyone. According

to Maslow (1970), belonging and love are more fundamental than esteem and achievement, meaning that many students are not motivated to achieve until they feel wanted and respected in a healthy school setting. Therefore, schools must focus on the needs of the students and work to build and create a positive school climate where all students can flourish.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's (ASCD) whole child approach is an effort to transition from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term development and success of all children. All instructional leaders and teachers want to improve the work they do for students, their families, and the community, whether it is instruction, school climate, leadership, family engagement, or any of the other issues schools are facing daily. A whole-child approach, which ensures that each student is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged, sets the standard for comprehensive, sustainable school improvement and provides for long-term student success (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). The emerging science of learning and development makes it clear that a whole-child approach to education, which begins with a positive school climate that affirms and supports all students, is essential to support academic achievement, as well as healthy social and emotional development. A strong, stable, diverse, well-prepared teaching and leadership workforce is perhaps the most essential ingredient for a positive school climate that supports effective child education (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018, p. xi).

Across the country, there is renewed interest in a whole-child approach to learning. Although the approach that many felt was pushed aside during the NCLB era, its intense focus was on raising test scores to avoid punitive consequences for students, teachers, and instructional leaders, which led to drill and kill. This led to experiences of a hostile climate that discouraged

teachers and instructional leaders, and especially students, to feel their school environment was not caring or encouraging (Adelman & Taylor, 2008).

By contrast, research has found that a positive school climate improves academic achievement and reduces the adverse effects of poverty on achievement and student engagement. A non-supportive school environment, such as a negative school climate, undermines student motivation and leads to disengagement learning from school (Eccles & Roeser, 2009).

The concepts of school climate are related to educational effectiveness, school setting, and various modes of creating a positive school environment. School climate has been defined by the National School Climate Council (2007) as the norms, values, and expectations that assist the people in that environment to feel wanted and a part of the system. It is the atmosphere of a school setting that makes the teachers feel effective and a part of the mission and vision the instructional leader has put in place. The commitment of the teachers and instructional leaders extends to building a positive setting that reflects the characteristics of respect, dignity, equity, and honesty (Cohen, Cardillo, & Pickeral, 2011). Supportive environmental conditions that create a positive school climate and foster healthy relationships and community allows all stakeholders to feel valued and are free of social identity threats that undermine the performance; the structure allows for continuity in positive relationship building which leads to relationship trust and respect among instructional leaders, staff, students, and parents (Berkowitz, Moore, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2016).

For this study, school climate is defined as one's beliefs, values, and attitudes understood by the members of the school environment (Jones & Schindler, 2016). The perception of teachers frames a significant portion of the school. Teachers are well aware of the complex set of roles being played by the instructional leaders and teachers in their role to establish a positive

school setting. Teachers appreciate the support of the instructional leader on a professional level, which helps them to perform their duties and responsibilities in the school environment.

Positive working relationships between the instructional leaders and teachers are compelling factors that create a positive school climate. The most crucial factor is that students are learning. If students are not motivated, it is clear that little learning is going to take place, which leads to a negative school climate. The instructional leader must listen to all issues arising in the school daily. Qualities of the leader are going to be associated with the school.

Maslow's (1970) theory of motivation supports the belief that people are internally driven. A person cannot be motivated by higher-level needs until the lower-level needs are met. A person's basic need for safety must be met before any other changes can take place. Feeling safe in a school environment promotes students' learning and healthy development.

However, there is a great deal of research that has shown that many students have the perception that they do not feel physically and emotionally safe in school settings when the setting is negative (Karakose, 2008; Rhodes, Stevens, & Hemmings, 2011; and Yager, Pedersen, Yager, & Noppe, 2011). Factors found to be important in establishing that physically and emotionally safe environment included (a) instructional leader and teachers influence the climate and setting the tone, (b) collaboration among teachers, key stakeholders, district-level supports (c) professional learning communities, and (d) relationship building that enables trust among the students, and school community (Rhodes et al., 2011). Instructional leaders and teacher leadership, both communicating and collaborating, can influence school climate in a positive manner (Rhodes et al., 2011).

Conner (2015) stated that relationships help build a sense of belonging that is vital to producing a healthy and strong school climate environment. Students feel valued and important

if they feel their teachers and instructional leaders take a personal interest in building positive relationships and know them outside the school setting (Peguro & Bracy, 2015). DiPaola and Hoy (2005) mentioned in their study that the willingness of organizational members to work beyond the minimum requirements of their position was a key factor of moving toward a positive school environment because it was not about the adult, but the organization, being effective.

In schools without supportive norms, structure, and strong positive relationships, students are more likely to experience uncomfortable situations which lead to high levels of student and teacher absenteeism (Thapa et al., 2013). Different cultures within the school setting must be embraced to build a level of trust and support, which can lead to authentic collaboration among all stakeholders that lead to a positive school climate.

Maslow's (1970) theory mentions school climate as the main characteristic of the total environment in a school setting. School climate is based on patterns of school experiences, reflected goals, values, and norms set by the instructional teams and leadership. In a positive school environment, instructional leaders and teachers foster an inclusive environment for everyone to feel accepted. Therefore, educational surroundings and environments must be focused on the needs of students and continuous collaboration among stakeholders to create a positive school climate.

Working relationships are also influential factors related to school climate. Teachers have stated that mutually respectful support, companionship, and positive group chemistry assist in fostering high levels of professional commitment and positive climate as well (Thacker, 2017). Working relationships can also be promoted through mutual exchange of skills and enthusiasm to help each other. The staff leaders are considered to have a strong influence on the

beliefs and opinions of the other staff members (Thacker, 2017). Therefore, climate factors which influence student achievement, include an academic emphasis on students, rewards, and praise for students and teachers, staff organization, and student-teacher interaction.

An instructional leader and members of the organization can create a positive climate that can also determine the efficiency and effectiveness of the school in the progress and development of students (Cohen et al., 2011). The most important educational goal is for students to learn. Maslow's theory had a significant impact on the educational organization, to maximize school-wide positive behaviors, instructional leaders and teachers must consider the needs of the students. The way these key stakeholders lead has a significant impact on the motivation of the students feeling like they are entering a positive school setting daily. An effective school environment takes a systematic approach to promote children's development in all facets of the school and its connections to the community.

### **Defining School Climate**

School climate has been a topic of interest in schools for decades and has resulted in multiple definitions causing some discontinuity in the findings across various studies. Researchers regularly interchanged the term school climate with other terms such as school learning environment, the environment of a school, school culture, the school social system, healthy climate, and the organizational climate of a school. Many agree it is a vague concept, challenging to define in meeting the needs of a school (Cohen, & McCloskey, 2009; Hoy, 1990; Syvertsen, Flanagen & Stout, 2009; Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2010).

One way to define school climate is to use a set of descriptors. According to Freiberg (1998), school climate consists of building a positive atmosphere on the feeling, tone, and setting of the schools. Cohen, et al. (2009) reported that school climate might be based on a set of



experiences in the school environment, which may include setting, values, norms, teaching, and learning practices modeled by various stakeholders within a school. School climate can be defined as the personality of the school. Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, and Johnson (2014) defined school climate as a shared belief, values, and attitudes that shape relationships among instructional leaders, teachers, and students. School climate is a product of teachers and students making a positive connection while valuing education. It is recognized as the foundation for a thriving school environment.

In the past years, school climate has been studied with several variables. Climate has been researched with school spirit, teacher morale, and effectiveness (Hoy & Ferguson, 1985). Tarter, Hoy, and Bliss (1989) studied four aspects of school climate: principal supportive behavior, directive principal behavior, principal influence, and resource support. A study of teacher efficacy has been conducted by Hoy and Woolfolk-Hoy (1993). Hoy and Sabo (1998) studied school climate and critical components of effective schools.

Hoy and Sabo (1998) found that school climate is a critical component of effective schools. A healthy school climate consists of combined interaction between members of the school community. A school with an open climate tends to be healthy, and conversely, a healthy school tends to have an open climate. Hoy and Sabo (1998) also concluded that collegial behavior is a significant contributor to student performance.

A school environment is defined as a healthy school climate where it is an orderly and rewarding environment for instructional leaders and teachers. It is a commitment of collaboration among all parties to provide a positive climate by accepting students for whom they are and promoting a positive climate by providing a supportive and nurturing environment (March & Simmons, 1993). Cohen, McCabe et al. (2009) claimed that even though school

climate studies have been going on for many years from different perspectives using a variety of variables, models, and methodologies, it remains challenging to define in one's research, and also, sometimes contradicts other researchers. Finally, a more recent study by Cohen, et al. (2009) reinforced what previous studies indicated that the descriptions for school climate could vary depending upon other elements that factor into school climate, such as academic norms, relationships between the instructional leader and teachers, expectations, socioeconomics, and race can be included in determining the school climate.

### **The Importance of School Climate**

School climate is often the target of a districts' school improvement plan due to a possible positive impact on school success. Bradshaw et al. (2014) defined school climate as the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape the interactions among students, teachers, and instructional leaders. School climate is an interaction of teachers and students within the school setting (Ali & Siddiqui, 2016). School climate is such a multifaceted concept. It is influenced by the individual, group, and organizational history, yet impacts policy, school environment, teacher practices, and student learning. A positive school climate is an environment in which all people are engaged and respected.

A school with a positive climate for teachers is more likely to have committed teachers (Riehl & Sipple, 1996). A school climate varies from open to closed (Halpin & Croft, 1963). Open school climates are characterized by high morale where teachers work well together, and busywork, routines, or reports do not burden them. In these environments, teachers possess a considerable amount of job satisfaction, and they have the incentive to keep the organization moving positively.

A closed school climate is an unhealthy or sick climate. The closed climate is undesirable, crippling to the school environment for both the instructional leaders and teachers, but the students are the most at risk (Halpin & Croft, 1963). It is a climate where most instructional leaders or teachers do not desire to work as a team.

In a supportive school climate, Kiliñç (2013) claimed that members of a school community respect each other and find ways to collaborate to increase the quality of classroom instruction. Instructional leaders, when trying to build a positive school climate, should be open to ideas and suggestions from the teacher's perspective, which allows for a shared and cordial relationship. The instructional leaders and teachers must support each other and reflect on ideas to create an atmosphere of order, collaboration, socialization, and a rewarding coherent work environment built upon trust and focused upon student learning (Kiliñç, 2013).

School climate is a crucial aspect in creating a school environment that is conducive to a higher level of academic performance and meets the social needs of students. Relationships with students involve an instructional leader or teacher bringing real-world activities into the school environment, and attending outside school events to demonstrate a genuine concern for the students. Whatever it takes to create a positive school climate is worthwhile, if students are benefitting from it positively. Thapa et al. (2013) summarized the importance of school climate by explaining that schools with positive climates will foster development and learning necessary for a productive life in a positive school setting where the climate is centered around a rewarding atmosphere.

A positive school climate can foster the development of students, teachers, and the instructional leaders of any given school. School climate refers to the experience and feeling of stakeholders within the school environment as a collective, not any one group or individual

(Gülşen & Gülenay, 2014). Positive school climates have become part of the effective rhetoric and are advocated by educational practitioners and reformers as a specific means of improving student achievement (Smith, Hoy, & Sweetland, 2001).

If instructional leaders and teachers take the extra steps to create a positive school climate, it will most likely encourage students to attend school and to reach their full potential (Thapa et al., 2013). When teachers do not take the time to create a trustworthy school climate and fail to focus on the student's perspective when planning their instructional day, they are setting up a negative school climate environment for themselves and students (Cohen et al., 2009).

When trying to establish a positive school climate, it takes the instructional leader and teachers working together as a collaborative team (Thapa et al., 2013). Education is not essential to everyone, but when teachers create an environment where respect, trust, and motivation is present, students will excel and attend school consistently (Thapa et al., 2013). A positive school climate is one in which teachers and students have a voice in the process. They challenge the thinking of each other and work hard to stay in the role of collaborating (DeWitt, 2017).

The process of teaching and learning is vital to any school climate (Jones & Schindler, 2016). One of the most important aspects of relationships in schools is how individuals feel connected to one another. Jia et al. (2009) concluded that when students' perceived teacher-to-student and student-to-student rapport, these perceptions were positively associated with a positive school climate. According to Skinner and Belmont (1993), when teachers support and interact positively with students, students are more likely to be actively engaged and exhibit positive behavior. Effective teachers make a way to get to know their students on a personal level and make them feel valued and important (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Teachers can serve

as mentors and role models and be a source of encouragement and support (Conner, 2015). The perception is that when teachers and instructional leaders have a strong relationship with students in an educational setting, students demonstrate academic improvement (Peguro & Bracy, 2015). The most powerful strategy for improving a school's climate is to create a collaborative culture and collective responsibility among school faculty (Conner, 2015).

According to Koth, Bradshaw, and Leaf (2008), school climate is the product of the interaction between students, faculty, and staff that has been linked to student achievement and performance. Subsequently, the behavior and perception of the teachers and leaders may have an impact on the behavior of the students and play a role in achieving the task of building a positive school climate.

### **Role of the Instructional Leader**

Research indicated that instructional leaders play an essential role in creating a positive school environment (Berg & Aber, 2015). According to Bartoletti and Connely (2013), the instructional leader has both a direct and indirect impact on school climate and student learning. Instructional leaders have an indirect effect on school climate by setting the tone for relationships, creating a professional working environment, improving instruction, and keeping the school clean and safe. The instructional leader must see themselves as a negotiator, collaborator, and regulator within the school environment. Instructional leaders must acknowledge that student diversity must be respected and explored as relationships develop in the classrooms and the schools. Different cultures among students and faculty should be enhanced as ways to create a positive school climate and should be utilized as an educational tool for teachers to meet the needs of their students (Conner, 2015).

Successful leaders in a school require someone who can unify instructional teams, staff members, and students in a way that creates harmony and produces effective results (Rajbhandari, 2016; Weller, Hartley, & Brown (1994); Wilson-Fleming & Wilson-Younger, 2012). In a school where there is a climate of unity and a shared vision that produces harmony and effective results, there is a sense of pride and commitment (Herbert, 2012). An instructional leader, who can bring a faculty and staff together, articulate a vision, and reinforce that vision until others are inspired to embrace it, achieves greater fulfillment as a school community (Mosley, Boscardin, & Wells, 2014). When a school is perceived to be successful by its teachers and students, it is because the principal is focused on creating a climate conducive to that success by making sure everyone has a sense of belonging and feels important (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009).

According to Hoy, Smith, and Sweetland (2002), to create a positive school climate, it is necessary to define what one looks like, specifically. Teachers can perceive the instructional leader as modeling a positive or negative role within the school. According to Wittner and Ferinden (1970), the instructional leader sets the school climate. It was suggested that the instructional leaders' most important role is to support the staff in creating a positive school climate.

The primary role of the instructional leader is to improve the teaching and learning that takes place in the school, which will lead to a positive school climate (Engels, Hotton, Devos, Bouckennooge, & Aelterman, 2008). They are to build capacity for change and embrace a collaborative relationship for mutual commitment to ensuring the success of a learning community (Cherkowski, 2016). Grobler, Bisschoff, and Beeka (2012) reported that instructional leaders believe that they communicate with teachers to build a positive climate, but

the teachers' perception was different; the instructional leaders' efforts were lacking and inadequate. Instructional leaders influence their staff and students; their perceptions change based on whether or not the teachers perceive their leaders' actions as competent. The building of positive relationships brings collaboration among teachers and students, which creates a climate to embrace an environment conducive to learning.

### **The Role of the Teacher**

Healthy school climates are linked to teacher job satisfaction and positive student outcomes (Hoy et al., 1990). School climates directly influence how teachers perceive their educational environment. Positive climates exude warmth, inclusiveness, and collegiality. A positive school climate promotes a safe and entrusting environment that encourages academic and personal growth (Maninger & Powell, 2007). Research conducted by Hoy and Hannum (1997) found that school climate and teacher attitudes and beliefs are intertwined. In their study of 86 middle schools, they found that climate and achievement are dependent upon each other. They also found a relationship between the instructional leader's role and the teachers' perception that produced a positive school climate. A positive school climate allows teachers to build what Hoy (1990) identified as academic emphasis. Academic emphasis is when the teachers believe students can achieve and, therefore, provide academic instruction that supports and guides the learner into success (Hoy, 1990).

### ***Safe and Orderly***

Everyone in the school should understand the expectations and the enforcement that will be involved when dealing with issues that create an environment that teachers and students feel are safe and orderly. When a school's leaders have established a climate of pride, respect, and trust, students are going to meet the expectations of learning. In a positive environment, teachers

and students must feel they belong, and their presence is valued and respected. Instructional leaders and teachers should work together to build the core values, norms, and expectations of the school (Marzano, 2003).

### ***Equitable and Culturally Responsive***

Tomlinson (2015) believed that the beginning of educational excellence in a school was to understand and respond to the pangs of hunger in the human spirit. Politics has become an issue in demanding or creating laws for school improvement in academics to equate into increased yearly assessment scores. The political pressure upon instructional leaders and teachers has increased, which sometimes leads to negative or toxic school climates (Preble & Gordon, 2011). Politicians created a law to affect schools nationwide with NCLB with the focus on raising academic achievement (Koth et al., 2008). This act brought a more negative impact on school environments than positive outcomes. The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) made the mandates but did not supply the funding to the schools. Character Education Partnership (2010) called for all schools to promote excellence in all aspects of the schools across the nation.

All schools have a school climate (Trice & Beyer, 1993). The school climate might be evident to a teacher or student walking in the door, or school climate might be so adverse that the environment is toxic. Some of the changes occur when the instructional leader facilitates helping teachers become better teachers (Fink & Resnick, 2001).

Concerns that school climate might affect a school's morale suggested the lack of motivation among the teachers; also, students would affect building an environment that is conducive to learning (Pretorius & Villiers, 2009). Roeser, Eccles, and Sameroff (2014) performed a study in a Michigan school that revealed the improving schools' climate had



engaged teachers with a higher level of expectations; the instructional leader started the process of improving elements of the school by supporting the positive growth with time, energy, and resources to meet the needs. The instructional leader must bring a feeling of hope and possibility to the teachers to change the negative tone of thinking.

### ***School Discipline System***

A critical component of a healthy and positive school climate is a school-wide discipline policy in place (Thacker, 2017). These policies set high expectations for behavior, provide a clear mission and vision, provide consequences for misbehavior, provide disciplinary incidents to help students learn from their mistakes, improve student behavior, and meet the expectations that will cultivate an environment of positive outcomes for the school as a whole (USDOE, 2014). The USDOE suggested that to create a positive school climate, school leaders must create a climate of utmost importance to continually be reevaluated and understood from the perspective of the student.

### ***Family and Community Engagement***

Involving parents and the school community in school enhances a school's climate (Johnson, 2007). Meaningful school learning takes place within the school community as well as the school (Villa, 2003). Instructional leaders and teachers build a positive school climate by capturing opportunities for innovations, allowing the school to play critical roles in community engagement activities, and giving a voice of ownership (NCLC, 2007). Building community and family engagement give instructional leaders, teachers, and students a sense of pride, a sense of being valued and respected (Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004). District leaders are required to develop a parental involvement plan which outlines the mission, vision, and goals of the school.

When school leaders actively involve parents and engage in community resources, they can respond more effectively to the healthy school climate.

Schools, parents, and the community should work together to promote the well-being and learning of all students. When students' parents are involved in their children's education, students tend to show up for school regularly, complete assignments, earn higher grades and test scores, develop better social skills, improve their behavior, develop better parent relationships, and develop higher self-esteem (ADE, 2018). Roberts, Edgerton, and Peters (2008) shared current literature that indicated that one crucial mediating variable in determining student success in a school is the learning environment, which is connected to the school's climate. When the student morale and teacher commitment are valued as pride, enthusiasm is raised; the important work of teaching and learning is made more effective (Thapa, 2013).

### ***Collaborative Teaming***

Hoy (1990) recognized that the school climate included the leaders of the school. An open school climate involved the instructional leaders and teachers working together as the leaders led by example, and the results were teachers committed to creating an environment of learning for all students. If the teachers' perception of school leadership were better understood and the teaming approach of collaborating was managed positively, the school climate of the school would benefit student achievement, community, and society as a whole (Whitaker, 2012).

The instructional leader starts the process of improving elements of the school by supporting the positive growth with time, energy, and resources (Deal & Peterson, 2009). School leaders must share the vision continually for it to become part of the school climate. The change in collaborating is a problem of power. Power needs to be exercised in such a way that teachers begin to gain a sense of ownership of the school's vision. Fullan (2011) recommended

five components to increase the effectiveness of the instructional leader leading in an environment of a toxic-to-positive school climate. The six components included: moral purpose, understanding the change process, developing relationships, fostering knowledge acquisition, transformational leadership, and striving for the coherence of working together. The changes from a toxic school climate to a positive school climate will not just occur but needs to be the right innovations for the school, student achievement, and leadership. The instructional leaders and teachers collaborating for the same goal produce a climate that celebrates the positive aspects and does not demoralize and discourage. Healthy school climates are linked to teacher job satisfaction and positive student outcomes (Hoy et al., 1990). School climate and student academics have a bi-directional correlation, according to Hoy (1990). In a study conducted by Hoy and Hannum (1997), the principal (instructional leader) is responsible for maintaining a positive environment so that teaching and learning take place daily, which includes warmth, belonging, and collegiality among a collaborating team of educators. This type of a collaborative teaming atmosphere promotes a safe, trusting, and meaningful environment that encourages academic and personal growth and development (Maninger & Powell, 2007).

## **Summary**

School climate is a combination of a complicated relationship and interaction among the instructional leaders and teachers. They both play a vital role in creating and building a positive school climate. Their roles are considered to be the support system of engaging students in learning, as well as establishing a positive school climate. What do middle school instructional leaders and teachers perceive as factors influencing a positive climate in their schools?

Each person contributes to the learning operation of a school environment as well as the social emotion, safety, family engagement, and collaboration of making it productive (Thapa et

al., 2013). Positive school climates engage stakeholders in becoming productive and contribute to an environment that has created a setting where people are valued and respected. They work together to develop a shared vision of equity; they embed principles to ensure a learning environment where all members feel included, accepted, and actively promote a positive school climate. A positive school climate is a crucial part of the daily operation of a school. Conner (2015) found that instructional leaders should establish and model positive relationships and a climate of trust within the school and community to sustain a positive school climate that motivates and engages students in learning.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

Maxwell (2007), a businessman, author, and motivational speaker, found that paying attention to the climate of any organization is the only way to achieve success in that organization; as a matter of fact, failing to attend to the climate can be tragic. Companies, such as Coca-Cola, brought in over 8.5 billion dollars one year, having a net worth of over 90 billion dollars. The company stands by the assertion that they not only have a great product, but they have a great product because they provide an excellent place for their employees to work (Coca-Cola, 2015), which is directly related to the success of the company. Successful companies have provided evidence that a thriving, successful organization is only sustainable with a positive work environment. Developing a positive climate is equally important in schools. Maxwell (2007) contended that developing a positive atmosphere and work climate is the only way to achieve success within an organization.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors of a positive school climate and to identify the aspects of school climate that are the most important in developing and maintaining a positive school environment, according to instructional leaders and teachers. This study utilized a qualitative methodology to help gain a deeper understanding of what aspects of school climate impact the overall environment of the school.

#### **Research Design**

The present study is qualitative in design. As such, qualitative research is characterized as an approach used to explore and understand the meaning of individuals or groups who belong to a social group (Creswell, 2009). This research design utilizes various methods for data collection. These methods include emerging questions and procedures, data collection in the

participants' natural setting, surveys, interviews, inductive analyses that move from specific to general themes, and interpreting the meaning of the data. Qualitative research explores the perception of instructional leaders and teachers regarding factors that impact the development and maintenance of a positive school climate.

The preliminary focus of this research was to gather data regarding the perception of the participants about developing a positive school climate and what factors contribute to a healthy, thriving school climate. The researcher uses interviews and document analysis to gather the data. The qualitative researcher wants to answer the *what* and *how* questions within the study. Hatch (2002) stated how questions look at the effect of the study's focus on all parties, and what may involve the person or program being researched. The goal is to explore the factors of building a positive school climate.

### **Research Question**

What do middle school instructional leaders and teachers perceive to be the primary factors leading to a positive climate in their schools?

### **Ethical Considerations**

Although the researcher did not expect any risk associated with the study, precautions were in place to ensure the research was neutral. The researcher provided participants with written documentation informing them of the voluntary nature of the study, along with an overview of the study. The participants were asked to sign a consent form to be returned to the researcher. The data was collected and not altered. Because the researcher had a working relationship with the participants, which could have raised an issue of bias, the researcher asked a former colleague to conduct the participant interviews after providing the interviewer with the background of the study and the objectives of the interview process.

## **Setting**

The middle school selected for this study was established in 1969 in a central Arkansas county. It was a Title I school where the enrollment consisted of 413 students. The ADE had classified the middle school as a school of *comprehensive status*. The comprehensive status label referred to the school not making adequate yearly progress on the state assessment. The school served students in grades six through.

The instructional faculty served each grade level with various academic specialties. The school had been relocated to the former high school after the district built a new high school in the former location of middle school. It was a very high-poverty middle school with its school population consisting of an African American and Hispanic student majority. The middle school served a free and reduced population of 88%. Various programs were offered to regain the students that had left the school due to the imperfect academic labels placed on the school. In previous years, the school had a very high turnover rate of teachers; non-effective teachers were placed at the school; thus, the school received a low evaluation performance. The middle school had the reputation of being labeled as the dumping ground for ineffective principals (instructional leaders) and teachers. The school was trying to re-focus by implementing many intervention strategies, attending professional learning community meetings on leading change, and culture rebuilding, to improve the school climate.

## **Participants**

The instructional faculty served each grade level with various academic specialties. The school had two administrators, one male who served as the assistant principal, and one female who served as the instructional leader. The middle school had 28 female teachers, five male teachers, and five teaching assistants. Fifteen teachers in the school had bachelor's degrees, 14

teachers had master's degrees, and three teachers had their educational specialist degrees. Thirty-two staff members were invited to participate in the study. The participants for interviews consisted of the instructional leader, the assistant principal, a sixth-grade lead teacher, a seventh-grade lead teacher, an eighth-grade lead teacher, one elective teacher, and one additional teacher from each grade level. These participants were interviewed until the interviewer and researcher started to see a relationship beginning to reveal itself.

### **Sampling Method**

Purposive sampling was used for this study. Purposive sampling allows for specific settings, persons, or activities to be selected purposely to provide data that are germane to one's questions and goals, which may not be otherwise obtained from other sources (Jones & Schindler, 2016). Participants were selected based on experiences within a middle school setting. The school began implementing strategies to improve the school climate three years ago. This school was considered a high-poverty school because 85% of the students received free and reduced lunches. The instructional leaders and teachers felt it necessary to create an environment that was welcoming, safe, fun, and exciting for students. The instructional leader and teachers had attended several professional conferences on school climate and implemented many strategies to improve the school climate. Therefore, the participants in this study had experience with the school climate and understood its importance for instructional leaders' and teachers' perceptions over the past three years to implement a positive school climate.

### **Data Collection and Procedures**

The researcher completed documentation and submitted it to the Institutional Research Board. Upon the board's approval, the researcher created researcher-designed interviews. A leading data collecting method in a phenomenological study is the semi-structured interview



(Ary, Jacobs, Irvine, & Walker, 2014). The interview process method was utilized to assess instructional leaders' and teachers' perceptions of what creates a positive school climate and which factors of the school climate are most beneficial to create an atmosphere of belonging. The purpose of the interviews was to provide the participants with an opportunity to share their stories, explain their experiences with the school climate, and share their points of view. The human instrument is the only data collection instrument that is multifaceted enough and complex enough to capture the essential elements of human experience (Ary et al., 2014). Therefore, the interview questions were designed to capture the essence of the experience of the selected participants.

The interviewees consisted of the instructional leader of the school, the assistant principal, and teachers from the middle school building. The interview questions were designed to gain an understanding of the factors that influence school climate, as well as ways to create a positive school climate, and how to maintain a positive school climate. These interviews were conducted in locations selected by the participants and were audio recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. Letting the participants select the location provided a more comfortable environment that allowed them to be more open with their responses. Each interview lasted 20 to 30 minutes. The data were collected in two phases. After the interviews were recorded, the data were analyzed, logged, and reviewed for common themes.

### ***Instrument***

The qualitative approach to this study allowed the researcher to describe in-depth the perception and thoughts expressed by the teachers and the instructional leaders concerning the climate of the school. The primary data sources were interviews conducted and open-ended

questions. Therefore, the research questions were designed to capture the participants' experiences and perceptions of building and maintaining a positive school climate.

The data collected through the open-ended questions were reported in the participants' own words through the process of audio-taped recordings and transcriptions. The text of the interviews and questions served as the primary source for interpreting and analyzing the data. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions asked by the interviewer that stimulated answers from the interviewees.

The role of the interviewer is vital; it is to make it possible for the person being interviewed to bring the interviewer into his or her world. The quality of the information obtained during the interview is mainly dependent on the interviewer. How the interviewer sees his or her role and the participants' role, and how the interviewer constructs questions and conducts the interviews, make the interviewer the most crucial tool in the research process (Patton, 2014). Because the researcher is an employee of the school and has professional relationships with a majority of participants, the researcher chose not to conduct the interviews. The researcher asked an outside educator, not associated with the school district or middle school, to conduct the interviews with the selected participants.

### ***Interview questions.***

The following questions were developed for the interview process:

1. When you hear the term school climate, can you describe what it means to you?
2. How would you explain the instructional leader's style, and how does it impact school climate?
3. How does discipline impact school climate? Does your school have a discipline plan, and how do you feel that it influences the school climate?

4. Tell me about the atmosphere at your school. If you were describing it to someone who was thinking about putting his or her child at the school, what would you say it is like to the students, instructional leaders, parents, and teachers?
5. How would you describe the atmosphere at your school to the instructional leader and teachers?
6. To what extent do you believe school climate is important at your school, and what is your role as the teacher to make a positive school climate? If so, how does your school work to involve the community and parents?
7. Does parental involvement and community engagement affect the climate of your school? If so, how does your school work to involve the community and parents?
8. What are the shared vision and set norms for your school? Describe how the vision and norms help develop a positive school climate.
9. What do you consider to be the key elements of establishing and maintaining a safe and secure learning environment?
10. How do you motivate, encourage, and support your staff to build a positive school climate?
11. What specific strategies do you feel have been the most effective in creating and maintaining a positive school climate in your school?

***Trustworthiness.***

Qualitative studies must satisfy the constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which are considered essential to the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to contribute to the trustworthiness of the present study, all interview questions were piloted, and an expert panel of administrators and teachers were

asked to determine if the questions were appropriate. The researcher kept the names of participants confidential, and all names of persons and places throughout the study were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

The researcher used referential evidence of validity to portray the data collected accurately. Through member checks and low-inference descriptors, the researcher ensured the trustworthiness of the data. Member checks were used after the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researcher transcribed responses verbatim to help the reader understand the participants' world. Bias was possible in this study. To control the bias, the researcher used reflexivity, which is self-reflection, to identify one's own biases and make them known to the researcher and the reader (Ary et al., 2014). To establish the accuracy and integrity of the data, the researcher used an audit trail. This allowed others to determine how decisions were made. The researcher kept organized notes throughout the data collection process. The researcher had a professional relationship with the participants because they worked in the same school and district. Because there was a working relationship, ethical issues could surface.

Although the researcher did not expect any risk associated with the study, she placed precautions in place to ensure the research was neutral. The researcher provided the participants with a written document informing them that participation was strictly voluntary, and they could remove themselves at any time. Participants were asked to sign a consent form and to return it to the researcher before participating in the study. The data collected were not altered. Member checking was used to allow the participants to elucidate the data provided in the study. Triangulation, through the methods of the interviews, was used to confirm the validity of the data. Gathering data from the different participants and developing themes from the data provided by the participants conveys the credibility of the data.

***Researcher positionality.***

As an educator, the researcher has a love and desire to help educate all students to be successful in whatever path they choose. As a previous special education teacher, the researcher is always searching for effective strategies and professional development to ensure a learning environment that is conducive to learning. After having experience as a building level administrator for over 14 years, the researcher became perplexed with turning a toxic school environment into a positive school climate environment. The researcher had been placed into two schools where the school climates were negative and low performing. The work began by focusing on leading change and creating a mindset of positivity versus negativity. The researcher strived to create a conducive environment that was safe, trusting, welcoming, collaborative, and held high expectations for all stakeholders involved.

Therefore, the researcher started holding group meetings with lead teachers, community leaders, and grade level students' meetings to discuss the current school climate and how and what needed to occur to make the school environment transform into an atmosphere of a positive school climate. The researcher reached out to community businesses, local churches, and former students to understand the perception of the current school. The researcher, along with 12 of her instructional team members, was sent by the superintendent to visit a school that had become nationally known for motivating students and teachers to excel in an environment that provided rigor. It was an environment that had created a climate that promoted success for all who walked through their doors. The researcher and staff spent four days visiting and touring the facility and were impressed how the students were able to articulate the mission and vision of the school. Teachers were excited to come to work. They spoke with an enthusiastic tone of how this school setting had made a significant impact on their lives. The students bragged about how they did

not miss school because they would get behind in their studies. The parents were at the school volunteering and spoke to the researcher and instructional team about how their students had excelled at the school because the principal and the teachers wanted the best for their children. The foundation of this school was built upon building strong, meaningful relationships with the teachers, students, and community. The students stated that their teachers cared about them and wanted them to succeed. The researcher knew at this point that this could be done within the researcher's school back in Arkansas.

Upon returning to work, the researcher met with the superintendent to give a report of what she had witnessed and what support she could have in making some major changes within her school setting. The researcher did not want to wait until all staff members could visit the Ron Clark Academy, but she wanted to implement the trainer of trainer model to implement school climate strategies. This involved making drastic changes within school personnel and holding others accountable for their actions. Currently, the researcher is working and striving to make the school environment a place of collaborative, positive relationships and partnerships built upon a strong foundation of positivity.

The school climate focus must be a continuous effort by the instructional leader and teacher to remain positive and productive daily to meet the social and academic needs of students. It is the goal of the researcher to enhance and reveal information that other school districts across the state can use with their instructional leaders and teachers to build and create a positive school climate where students want to attend, and learning is taking place every day.

### ***Data analysis.***

Theme analysis was used to identify convergent and divergent themes within the data, which were derived through semi-structured interviews with the selected participants,

observations, and archival document review (O'Brennan & Bradshaw, 2016). Thematic analysis is a data reduction and analysis strategy by which qualitative data are segmented, categorized, summarized, and reconstructed in a way that captures the crucial concepts within the data set (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2010).

The researcher began familiarizing herself with the data by working through the data several times, listening to the interviews repeatedly, and reflecting on the data. While doing so, the data were transcribed en vivo to avoid potential bias.

A reflective log was kept throughout the process to capture thoughts as they occurred. Next, coding began, and the reducing process took place. Ary et al. (2014) said that coding and reducing is the core of qualitative analysis and includes the identification of categories and themes and their refinement.

## **Summary**

Through interviews with instructional leaders and teachers, the researcher determined the most influential factors of school climate in a middle school setting that could be utilized when trying to develop and sustain a positive school climate. The researcher explored the elements that could be used to enhance school climate in the middle school setting.

A qualitative design was used to determine the instructional leader's and teachers' perceptions of, what do middle school instructional leaders and teachers perceive as factors influencing a positive climate in their schools, and how important are their key roles in building and sustaining a school climate from being negative to positive? The researcher-developed questions were answered and composed into themes that emerged from the participant's interviews, data, and are reported in Chapter Four. Chapter Four contains research findings from

data collected, and Chapter Five presents the conclusions, discussion, and suggestions for future research.



## **Chapter Four: Findings**

The purpose of this study was to identify the most influential factors that can be utilized in a middle school setting to create and maintain a positive school climate based on the perceptions of instructional leaders and teachers. In this chapter, the researcher reported participant profiles and summarized the narratives of the 10 participants interviewed for this study. Each participant was asked to complete a demographic profile form and based on this form, a chart listing participants' pseudonym, age, gender, and the highest level of education is included.

Interviews were conducted by an educator who was not associated with the researcher's district. Because the researcher was an employee of the participants' district, an educator from another district limited the potential bias allowed the participants to feel comfortable and provide candid responses. The interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to 30 minutes. The data were transcribed one week after the interviews were completed. Each participant was provided a copy of the transcript to review for accuracy and to protect the trustworthiness of the data. Participants were willing to give their professional opinions and thoughts on ways to develop a positive school climate; also, they shared which factors they thought were influential in creating a positive school climate in a middle school setting. The data were analyzed using a constant comparative method in which themes emerge from the narrative data. Those themes are reported in Chapter Four and serve as the basis for answering the one research question guiding this study.

As stated in Chapter Three, the data were compiled from a series of interviews with middle school teachers and instructional leaders. The researcher analyzed data to answer the guiding research question, "What do middle school instructional leaders and teachers perceive to be the primary factors leading to a positive climate in their schools?" A qualitative design was

used to discover instructional leaders' and teachers' perceptions of what is productive in fostering a positive school climate in a middle school setting. In this chapter, the researcher summarized narratives that include a description of the location and environment of the interview setting and background information about the participants. Table 1 provides a list of study participants.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Profiles

Participant	Age	Gender	Years of Experience	Degree
P1	31	F	8	Bachelors
P2	52	M	28	Masters
P3	58	F	33	Masters
P4	24	F	3	Bachelors
P5	36	F	12	Masters
P6	49	M	29	Masters
P7	30	F	11	Masters
P8	43	M	18	Educ spec
P9	22	F	1	Bachelors
P10	36	F	12	Educ spec

### **Narrative Description of Each Participant**

P1 was a 31-year-old, shy female teacher who was the first to respond to the email that was sent to middle schools within the district. After the consent form was signed, the interview was scheduled for November 27, 2019, at 2:00 p.m. The interview lasted for 28 minutes and took place at the school in the conference room. P1 selected the school because it was Fall

Break. The students and colleagues were not present. The school was very quiet, with only the school custodians present. P1 had taught for eight years, and she had been at her current location for four years. She currently taught multiple core subjects. Her highest degree was a bachelor's degree. She was full of energy and very happy to be teaching at the school. She smiled all through the interview and sometimes asked for the question to be repeated. She was very selective in her choice of words. However, she did hesitate when asked, "How would you describe the atmosphere at your school to the instructional leader and teachers?" She expressed that some of her colleagues were not student-focused and did not like change.

P2 was a 52-year-old male teacher who had a deep speaking voice. He sounded like he was broadcasting for a sporting event. The interview took place at the school during his planning period. He entered the media center out of breath. He stated, "I ran down the hall, but I did not get caught because I would have been made to go back and walk." He started laughing. He never made eye contact during the interview. His eyes wandered around the room like he was looking for something. He had taught for 28 years. He had been at his current location for 20 years. He stated he had worked for six instructional leaders at the school. P2 was very talkative. His interview lasted 30 minutes. He shared a great deal about the climate of the school and what his perception was to develop and maintain a positive school climate. The interviewer had to ask him to allow her to ask the questions before he gave his responses. He was very comical during the interview by laughing at his responses. His highest degree was a master's degree. When asked to describe the leadership style of the school and did he feel their style affected the school's climate, P2 started laughing before responding. He stated, "very hands-on and do not play around with students or teachers." I told you, I did not want to get caught running in the hallway. (smiling and laughing)

P3 was a tenured teacher who had taught for 33 years. She was very discontented during the interview. It was undeniable that she was not happy with the instructional leader. Her highest degree was a master's degree. She stated that she was trying to be positive for her colleagues, but it was tough when you were being pushed to do so many things. She never smiled. She talked about her teaching experience in charter schools, private schools, and her current location. The interview took place in her classroom during her prep period, lasting for 24 minutes. She rolled her eyes most of the time. She kept stating, "You know, you know." She was a co-teacher in language classes.

P4 was 24 years old. She had been teaching for three years. Her highest degree was a bachelor's degree, and she was working on her master's degree in administration. It was evident that she enjoyed teaching. She loved working at the school. She stated that college did not teach her how to deal with certain kinds of students, but she was learning. P4 was very positive throughout the entire interview, which took place at the Subway close to the school. The interview lasted 30 minutes. She would like to see more parental involvement in the school. She was asked, "Did parental involvement and community engagement affect the climate of your school?" She felt it was not a significant factor because teachers try to do what they can while the students are at school, but more parental support would be helpful.

P5 was 36 years old, and she was very reserved when she entered the interview. Before beginning the interview, she asked if what she stated was going to be shared with the instructional leader. The form of consent was reread to her before she signed it. Her highest degree is a bachelor's degree. She had taught for 12 years, with five years at her current location. P5 was a science teacher. Her responses were short and to the point. She asked for every question to be repeated as if she did not quite understand, but she answered all questions.

She did hesitate when asked about the leadership style of the school and how it affected the school climate. She paused, laughed, and gave her response. When leaving the conference room, P5 stated, “Our school has come a long way, but we still have a long way to go. Thanks for allowing me to interview.”

P6 was a very tall male educator who was 49 years old and had been in education for 29 years. His highest degree was an educational specialist degree. He had been in his position for 15 years. During his interview, he presented a great deal of frustration toward teaching, in general, and teachers. Sometimes his voice was shallow, and when particular questions were asked about the climate that pertained to teachers, he displayed frustration by rubbing his forehead and pausing before answering. The interview took place in the main office and lasted for 27 minutes. It was apparent that P6 was not very happy with the work ethics of some of his co-workers.

P7 was an elective teacher who had taught for 11 years. Her highest degree was a master’s degree. She had taught at her current location for eight years. The interview took place in her classroom during her lunch period and lasted 30 minutes. She was eating while answering the questions. When asking questions about school climate, she hesitated before responding to many of the questions by smiling, laughing, and replying: “It is my perception, right?” She was a leader of the school. Many teachers kept knocking on her door, asking for things. P7 spoke very boldly and wanted to make sure everything was being recorded. She expressed how things needed to be consistent; safety was a major factor for teachers and students when it concerned about having a positive school climate.

P8 was a 43-year-old educator who wanted it to be known that school climate was having the right drivers in the right positions before the interview process even started. He had been in

education for 18 years. He taught social studies, English, and coached. His highest degree was a master's degree with superintendent certification. He supported his teachers as much as he could, but sometimes policies and the union got in the way, he expressed. He felt that parents did not care about educating their students, and it was hard to promote a positive climate sometimes when a majority of the parents were not involved. The responses of P8 indicated that he was experiencing burnout. His face often turned red; when he gave his responses, he asked, "Do you want the politically correct response or what I really want to say." (He would smile and give his answer).

P9 was a beginning teacher who was excited about her first teaching job. She was 22 years old, and she was the first in her family to graduate from college. She had five siblings and was the third child. Her parents both dropped out of high school at the 10th-grade level. The interview took place at a local restaurant of her choice on a Saturday. It lasted 22 minutes. P9 smiled a lot and expressed that she was new but excited about teaching. She was very passionate about helping her students and trying to create a safe climate where students felt comfortable asking her for help. When asked about factors that create and maintain a school climate, P9 felt it required collaboration among all the staff to make the climate positive. She tried very hard to stay away from the negative comments when she could.

P10 was 33 years old and had been in education for 12 years. Her highest degree was an educational specialist degree that she obtained in 2018. This was her first year as an instructional leader in her building, but she was an assistant for two years. P10 was very talkative and happy to share details about her new role as the building instructional leader. She expressed that she had been under some strong leaders that modeled great leadership, but had

been under some leaders that she questioned how they became a building principal. She felt her role was challenging because she set the tone of the building daily.

Upon completion of the interviews, the researcher began analyzing the data. According to Ary et al. (2014), qualitative data analysis includes the following: (a) reducing and organizing the data; (b) synthesizing; (c) looking for patterns; and (d) decoding.

The first stage of qualitative analysis is familiarization and organization. The researcher must listen to audio tapes over and over to become familiar with the data. The open coding process must begin. Charmaz (2006) said that using open coding allows the researcher to remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by the reading of the data. In this phase of the analysis, the researcher looks for consistency within the interviews to develop themes or trends. After familiarizing oneself with the data by listening to the recording, the second step was to transcribe the data verbatim. The interviews had to be transcribed into an electronic format. The researcher had to continue to read the data and maintain a reflective log of key ideas developed from the interview transcripts. Therefore, the data were organized by interviews with highlighting to help identify influential factors and to discover themes that instructional leaders and teachers described. A text analysis tool was utilized to analyze the interview syntax, keywords, and phrases that were revealed throughout the participants' interviews. This process identified keywords that became the codes in the beginning stages of the research findings. Also, this type of coding helped identify similarities and differences within the interview data. The next step was to compare the codes or themes that were developed in the first stage.

Finally, the triangulation of the patterns and themes started to emerge. This created a level of understanding of the current knowledge by reviewing the interviews and completing a comparative analysis. The researcher used the comparative method throughout the analysis. Ary

et al. (2014) described the process as one that combines inductive category coding with simultaneous comparisons of all units of meaning obtained. Ary et al. (2014) stated,

You examine each unit of meaning (topic or concept) to determine its distinctive characteristics. Then you compare categories. Thus, there is a process of continuous refinement; initial categories may be changed, merged, or omitted; new categories are generated, and new relationships can be discovered. (p. 522)

Table 2 provides a presentation of the most commonly cited words that emerged during the coding process, along with a quantitative description of the frequency that the participants expressed these code words.

Table 2

Coding (Words Commonly Used During Interview Sessions)

Commonly Used Words	Interview Participants
Positive	28
Climate	30
Leadership	55
Teaming	22
Relationship	61
Safety	45
Trust	26
Respect	15
Collaboration	24
Parent/family involvement	43
Learning	25



Environment	16
Discipline	48

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After a detailed analysis of the data, themes emerged that indicated the influential factors that impact and help to create a positive school climate in a middle school setting. Although much research has been conducted to prove that a positive school climate will increase social, emotional, and academic achievement, and have other positive outcomes in a school setting, research is lacking in the area of the creation of a positive school climate in a middle school setting. This research was undertaken to determine the potential factors that can be used to impact the school climate, and thereby provide a positive school climate in a middle school setting. To find out this information, the researcher searched for professional participants that had daily roles within the middle school setting. They were vital to the understanding of school climate in the past and present because they are the primary stakeholders who are involved in the school climate development daily. Table 3 reflects the initial themes that emerged.

Table 3

*Themes*

Item	Theme
Theme 1	Relationships
Theme 2	Safety
Theme 3	Discipline
Theme 4	Leadership
Theme 5	Parental Involvement

Several themes emerged throughout the analysis of the data, and the most influential factors of creating and maintaining a positive school climate in a middle school setting based on the perception of instructional leaders and teachers were identified. The following themes were derived from the words most commonly used or mentioned by the participants. The most influential factors that emerged are (a) school leadership, (b) safety, (c) discipline, (d) parental involvement, and (e) relationships.

School climate is a broad, multifaceted concept that involves many aspects of education. A positive school climate is the product of a school's attention to fostering safety, promoting a supportive academic environment, enforcing disciplinary procedures, and building caring relationships throughout the school community no matter what the setting (Cohen et al., 2009).

To examine the participants' view of school climate, participants were asked, "When you hear the term school climate, can you describe what it means to you?" The results showed that all 10 participants felt that school climate has a significant impact on the school as a whole, and the climate is very critical to the school's overall environment. The researcher felt it was essential to have a clear understanding of each participant's perception of school climate. P1 was focused and carefully selected her choice of words. She was timid and wanted to make sure she was not stating anything that would be taken out of context. As she described what school climate meant to her, she kept asking during her response, "Does that sound right?" She responded by saying,

When I hear the term school climate, I think it is centered around the students, teaching practices, a diverse culture, and building positive relationships among principals, teachers, and parents, and students. It is what you feel when you walk into the school.

P1 smiled when she stated it was the “foundation of the school because I can recall when it was a very toxic environment.”

P2 described school climate as what makes everyone come to school, “It is what you bring into the school. I mean, it is the quality and character of the school life as well as the organization and structure of the school.”

My experience with creating a positive school climate is that I take every opportunity to say something nice to at least one person I come in contact with. Creating a positive climate is a key factor for a school to be successful. You can tell the difference between a negative or positive school climate. I think our school does a good job at trying to create a positive school climate. You will always have a negative crowd.

P3 talked with a little emotion in her voice when she started to describe the term school climate. Her voice trembled a little while she was speaking. P3 stated,

If you want to have a positive school climate, it starts with you. I mean the person themselves. I was a negative person because I did not like the changes, but I soon realized it did not matter if I liked what was occurring or not. Occasionally, I was told, ‘It is not about you.’ School climate is how you talk to people.

When P4 was asked to describe what the term meant to her, she provided an analogy. She said,

School climate is what I consider the gas for the school. If you put the wrong gas in your car, it will not move, or the ride is rough. If you have the right gas, your car will run smoothly. When you build a positive school climate, the school is going to run smoothly for teachers, students, and principal. I love this school.

P5 giggled throughout her response, which may have been her nerves, but she spoke with great eloquence when speaking. Although P5 felt school climate is the glue that holds the schools together, it is very critical to make a school inviting to teachers. She stated,

It is how you start your day. I think when you start out positive with your peers, you will have a positive school climate. I have learned over my 12 years of teaching that every day is not going to be a great one, but school climate should be something that you work on building every day.

P6 started out being very expressive when asked to describe what school climate meant. P6 said,

Boy, you start out with a big one. I think about a family of people working together to create an environment of transparency. School climate is the big rock of the school. It sustains and fosters the development of making an environment that is socially, emotionally, and physically safe for all stakeholders. Is that what you wanted to hear?

P7 described school climate as the main driver of the school. It is what you feel or create when you walk through the front door. P7 said, “I believe it is the most critical factor of making a school a safe place for everyone. It is kind of like when you walk into someone’s home, and you know if you are welcome or not.” (smiling)

P8 sighed and gave a small cheer of excitement when it came to describing what school climate meant to him. P8 said, “Oh my, school climate is a must in order to have school. It is the overall perception of what we are made of as a school. I think we have a great school climate.”

P9 was very reserved when speaking. She stated this was her first year of teaching and was quite nervous. She said, “Well, the school climate to me is having a sense of pride about

yourself. If you always give out negative thoughts, then you create your own climate. School climate is based on what you bring to the table.”

P10 was very serious and stern when giving her response. She cleared her throat before speaking. She said,

The school climate is how we maintain a learning environment that parents want to place their children in. When I hear school climate, I immediately think back to a couple of places I worked that were very toxic. I hated going to work. School climate is so important. I recall one experience when a parent came into my office to tell me she felt like a stepchild when she entered the building. I immediately asked her why. She told me the office staff made her feel as though she and her daughter did not deserve to be at the school. I definitely did not want that type of school climate at my school. It really hurts me to hear that from a parent.

## **Themes**

### ***Relationships***

The theme relationships appeared in the interviews of eight of the 10 participants. The majority of the participants agreed that building strong, healthy relationships among the instructional leaders and teachers, as well as the students, would be one of the influential factors for creating and maintaining a positive school climate in a middle school setting. When asked, “How would you describe the atmosphere at your school to the instructional leaders and teachers,” Participants 1, 2, 3, 5, and 10 gave convincing evidence to support the theme, relationships; it is an expectation of the instructional leader to build healthy relationships among students and teachers. The data also revealed that the majority of the female participants were more supportive, expressive, and nurturing in their responses, whereas the male participants’

responses were more about everyone should just do their job, and everything else will fall into place. P1, the shy one of the participants, stated,

We are all different. It is crucial that the instructional leader of the school should work with teachers to build an atmosphere with a positive school climate. I would describe our atmosphere as a work in progress. They—the teachers and principal—must work together to build an atmosphere of unity and collaboration in order to have a healthy relationship for the students to be successful. When an atmosphere is negative, it creates low morale, and students can feel it. I have students asking me if I like working at the school. I think students feel the tension sometimes in the environment or hear teachers being negative in the hallways and classrooms. If you do not have healthy working relationships within the school environment, you cannot, in my opinion, have a positive climate.

Although P2 seemed excited about everything, he was a little reluctant to respond. He asked for the questions to be repeated twice before giving his response. P2 offered,

A good school climate is centered around relationships, which creates the atmosphere. I believe it is extremely important to do your job that you were hired to do. A positive school climate should be centered around teaming, which is building relationships with your peers by working together. We have good teaming here. I think the administration has a burden to keep things positive. Well, some of our peers need a pat on the back daily. They want the principal to call their name, I guess. Principals have bad days too, but I believe having good working people in your school does set the tone of the climate and atmosphere. It is a major factor in helping the school's climate.

P3 was very forthcoming when answering the questions. P3 shared,

I would say the atmosphere at our school is toxic. You should not have a dictating environment when it comes to principals and teachers. My perception of having a positive school climate is the administration creating an atmosphere of a positive working relationship. The administrators can lead by example or roll up their sleeves to work alongside [beside] the teachers. When you feel push, push, and push, you just feel like you are not valued. Teachers sacrifice a lot here at our school. The relationships between most teachers and students are great, which leads to a great classroom atmosphere.

P5 hesitated a little before giving her response but stated,

Relationships between the instructional leader and teacher are critical. Students need to see we are all on the same page when it comes down to being professional. They cannot see the teachers against the administrators. Sometimes, I feel my peers create a negative atmosphere when they do not want to comply with a change. Change is hard for some people, especially when you are accustomed to doing things a certain way for a long time. The climate is built upon how you work together and strive to do what is right for students. I really like the support I have received in the past three years. I can tell you some stories about how the school was like the movie *Lean on Me*. So, I would describe the school as putting students first and leaving your personal problems at the door. My core of teachers and I have a good positive atmosphere in our hallway. You know, one person can change that if we allow it.

P10's response was delivered with much passion. She teared up as she was speaking. She stated,

The school team must work together. It is just like a marriage. You give and take. If you want it to work, then you will do what it takes to make it work. The relationships you build within your school family are just as important because you have students' education involved. When I started at this school, I heard from the previous leader that the school was not full of good energy because most of the teachers were union members and wanted to run the school. I was a little fearful until I started the first day by inviting the teachers to a "Get to know me day." I introduced myself to them, and they told me something about themselves. It started with me building a relationship with them, which I believe changed our atmosphere to a culture of working together. I think we have a positive school climate, if I say so myself, as the new leader.

### *Safety*

The theme of safety appeared in all 10 participants' responses. This theme meant that all participants felt that every school needs a safe and positive environment conducive to learning. School shootings have become more relevant in society over the past few decades, yet the debate over the cause of these shootings never seems to conclude (Kaufman, 2018). Although most teachers may feel safe, many recognized that students in their schools are not safe from one another or outside factors that enter the school. Therefore, participants believed that creating a safe and secure environment was crucial for them to feel safe, encouraged, and challenged.

Schools should work together to develop a clear and understandable set of rules. Everyone involved in the school setting should understand the expectations. A critical component of a healthy and positive school climate is school-wide expectations. When asked, "What do you consider to be the key elements of establishing and maintaining a safe and secure learning environment," nearly all participants' responses referred to the school shootings that had



occurred in the past two years and how most teachers recognized that students in the schools are not safe from one another or outside factors. Even though all participants agreed safety was a key factor, Participants 1, 2, 3, and 9 described safety as a key element when creating and maintaining a positive school climate, because of their personal experiences. Also, the data revealed participants who had fewer than five years of experience felt safety should be a top priority for a school. Participant 9 mentioned the fear of some of her male students. Overall, participants stated that a negative school climate could be the result of not having a safety plan in place. It is critical to the functioning of the school for instructional leaders, teachers, and students to know the rules and expectations in the school environment.

P1 had an eager desire to be a pleaser. She kept asking, “Does that sound right?” She shared how the school once had a reputation for being a horrible and unsafe school to attend. P1 stated,

When you are trying to create a positive school climate, safety is the first thing that comes to my mind. Students like order. I know I do. I would consider it a key element in creating a positive school climate. I believe in maintaining a positive school climate. Parents want to feel their student is safe at school. With all the school shootings occurring, and school personnel doing unprofessional activities with students, an unsafe environment is the factor that will make parents withdraw their student from any school. I like the fact that you have to be buzzed into the school before you can enter. It sends the message that the district values our safety and care about the teachers, students, and staff. I know parents do not like it because they have to show ID or have to wait to be buzzed into the building. Safety is the most important factor to me. We have drills and

PD about active shooter training, but how many people are really taking it seriously until it comes knocking at our door. We must start taking the safety of schools seriously.

P2 responded that he felt safe in the school, and he would consider safety to be a significant factor in creating a positive school climate. He maintained,

Schools must have concrete plans of action to secure how a person feels when he or she enters the building. When I started at this school 20 plus years ago, it looked like a prison. I hated coming here. The changes made two years ago changed the climate. Students feel safe and happy. It takes all of us to run this place.

An excellent, effective working plan is crucial in creating and securing a safe and positive environment. P3 started answering,

Well, everything I have been through at this school is a lot. I guess you want to ask me why I am still here. Safety is the key to everyone who walks into this building, in my opinion. So much is happening in schools. Parents and kids think they can just say anything to you, and nothing happens. The law is very clear that parents cannot use profanity toward a state employee without something being done about it. It occurs daily with students. I did not say the majority, but most. I would say safety is just as important as when creating a positive school climate. Like I stated earlier, relationships are vital, but I guess safety is in the top five for me. Sometimes, you are not safe with your peers or students. We must feel safe while working and sending our children to school. My granddaughter attends a school in another school district. She informed me a couple of months ago that the school was on lockdown because a male student had a gun on campus. The young man was not caught until his fifth period. Everyone was in danger,

and no one knew it. My son and I could have received a call that my granddaughter had been killed. Safety should be a top priority for all school districts.

P9 confirmed that safety is an issue when you are trying to maintain a positive school climate. P9 said,

I do not feel safe when a few of my students invade my personal space. I try to redirect them as we are told, but sometimes the student makes it into a challenge to show who is in control. Our school does have a safety plan. A plan is only good if you practice and know your role. Around the world, safety should be the number one factor besides educating our students. We must learn the school emergency procedures as well as the routes to and from the school to secure safety. We practice our plan now, but I still see teachers and students not taking it seriously.

Also, P9 expressed safety in the school should be about building relationships with the students so that they will feel comfortable coming to a trusted adult if they hear something suspicious.

### ***Discipline***

The theme discipline appeared nine times out of 10 among the participants. The instructional leaders and teachers agreed that school discipline was one of the factors that influenced creating and maintaining a positive school climate in a middle school setting. Additionally, the school discipline plan does influence the school climate because it sets the boundaries for what will go on in U.S. schools. The USDOE (2014) stated school climate and discipline are attached when it comes to creating a positive school climate. When asked, “How does discipline or the lack of discipline impact the school climate, and how do you feel that it influences your school climate?” participants who were 50 years of age or over stated that corporal punishment should be reinstated into the school system because students are not

respectful. The majority of the participants felt schools can have too many rules; inappropriate discipline can be a factor that disrupts and brings a negative impact on the school environment. It was stated that having high expectations for all students and staff at the school had created a sense of pride and produced a positive climate. The majority of the participants stated very clearly that consistency is key when it comes to discipline.

Participants 4, 5, 8, and 10 all stated that the discipline had improved and an increase of pride in the school, due to the implementation of the House program they mirrored after the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia. These participants, along with either the assistant principal or instructional leader, attended professional development for four days at the Ron Clark Academy. Everyone in the school was assigned to a house. The houses competed with each other by earning points in various categories. The house that had the most points at the end of each nine weeks earned an incentive celebration. The students enjoyed having a voice in the process. Also, a district-wide strategy of utilizing positive behavior intervention support (PBIS) had increased a positive school climate by recognizing teachers' and students' hard work and accomplishments. One participant, who had taught for over 30 years, spoke about the students being disrespectful. Her opinion was the only isolated participant, who felt no changes had been made at the school, and discipline was a key element to her because the climate cannot be positive when students are not made to follow the rules.

P3 spoke with affirmation when answering the question. It was apparent that she did not agree on how the instructional leader was handling discipline and how discipline did impact the school climate. She said,

Well, if one person is getting away with something and another person is getting in trouble for it, that can set the tone of negative feelings that can impact the school climate.

Our discipline is sometimes a one-way path. As a teacher, I feel sometimes the students have more rights than we do which leads to a negative impact. We should reinstate corporal punishment into the schools. Students and parents are very disrespectful. Some students curse you out, then the parent curses the teacher because we call about the student's behavior. I just go with the flow, but our discipline plan needs to be revisited. This school year, we have PBIS school-wide and now district. If we were consistent, then our discipline would have a great influence and positive impact. Everyone should have a voice when setting rules and policies. I do not feel the discipline is getting better until our administration holds students accountable.

P4 was very short and to the point when answering the question about discipline impact and influences on the school climate. According to P4,

Our discipline plan has a lot of inconsistencies, which can cause a negative atmosphere in our school climate. I cannot say we have a lack of discipline, but we must be consistent in following the plan. We have so many rules and routines; I think teachers and students have a difficult time remembering. I serve on the leadership team for our school. We review the discipline data to discuss which students are getting referrals, which teachers are writing referrals, and what we call hot spots to determine the time and location of the unsatisfactory behavior. The data reveals that since we implemented the houses, our discipline is decreasing. The students love the houses. I only wish we could get all of our teachers to buy-in. It is much better for me since we implemented the houses and PBIS.

P5 was very expressive in her response when asked about discipline. She leaned forward as if she wanted to make sure her comments were heard. P5 stated,

This is my fifth year at the school. Discipline was terrible. There were eight to 10 fights a day. Teachers were literally walking out of the classrooms quitting. Students were running the school. I wondered what I had taken on coming to this school. The school in the past was known as the school for the gifted. Well, the gifted was no longer gifted, I guess. We had a high turnover rate. I can go on and on, but let me answer your question. Discipline can make or turn a school upside down. It can give you a climate that is positive or one that is negative. I have experienced both here. I believe implementing the houses, and PBIS have improved our school climate. The students like being praised. Teachers and students like the shout-out over the intercom. Hey, you want to hear the good things someone witness you do. I can recall when students ran down the halls, used inappropriate language, and were tardy for most of their classes. This had a great impact on our school climate. It was a negative atmosphere. Parents withdrew their students because the discipline was out of control. Our school has made a tremendous turnaround. I attribute that to our principal.

P8 seemed a little frustrated with some of the teachers. He smiled, but sometimes his smile turned into a frown. He sometimes hesitated before finishing his statement. He said,

I have seen a huge turn around in our school climate just because we are intentionally trying to be consistent with our rules. We have houses and PBIS to motivate the teachers and students. I think we are still struggling with it because some teachers are not wanting to or choosing not to use it. It is a change, but I think it is a positive change that helps build our school climate.

P10 was trying to build relationships with her staff; this was her first year as a building-level instructional leader. She expressed that discipline was a key factor, but it depended on the individuals within the school. P10 said,

Discipline is a major factor in keeping a positive climate. No one wants to work in an environment that is out of control. I think PBIS is working for us this school year.

Students and teachers know their expectations. The impact can be for the greater of the environment if we are fair and equitable to all members of the school team. We work tremendously hard to create rules, routines, and rituals that help our students and teachers feel safe. This school year, PBIS is district-wide. We are trying to be proactive with reinforcing positive outcomes with students and teachers and not place so much attention on the negative. Our discipline referrals were not high, but they are significantly lower now. I contribute our increased enrollment this school year to very few discipline issues. It is essential that you have the right personnel in your school and classroom.

Sometimes, it is not the discipline itself but the individual executing the discipline. So, yes, I would say discipline can have a great impact on your school climate.

### ***Leadership***

According to Balyer (2012), successful leadership can set the tone (climate) to influence achievement among students and staff. Therefore, instructional leaders who want to impact climate positively should focus on providing teachers with the necessary support and resources. The theme, leadership, was revealed as an influential factor when creating and maintaining a positive school climate in a middle school setting. Cherkowski (2016) explained how principals should work with their team to create a positive climate. Schools depend on leadership to improve their academic performance (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005).

Instructional leaders' behaviors have direct or indirect influences on teachers' commitment to change their performance. Also, the results show that teachers maintain that an instructional leader's leadership creates a peaceful atmosphere in the school, which creates a positive school climate (Balyer, 2012). A principal must create a school climate that is conducive to change (Engels et al., 2008). When asked, "Can you describe the instructional leadership style in your school and does the style have an effect on the school climate?" five participants described the instructional leader as being hands-on, effective, and a good role model. The data revealed participants 2, 3, and 6, who had the most years of experience, felt that the instructional leaders are the core of creating a positive school climate. They believe that as leadership improves, teachers become more effective in the classroom. It was clear through the interviews that some participants thought school leadership was one of the influential factors, but leadership is not essential to creating a positive school climate. P1 stated, "It takes all of us to run the school, and it should not just land on the principal."

P2 wanted to ensure it was heard that the instructional leader influences both climate and culture. They should be a key component in shaping the school. He stated,

Our leadership does not allow complaining or negativity. We have boundaries and non-negotiables. The instructional leader is huge to the school climate being either negative or positive. The style is supportive but demanding as well. I must say that I do believe the instructional leader's style has the greatest impact on the school climate.

P3 believed that the number one job of the instructional leader is to make the climate nurturing and caring because it just takes a little part of it to be wrong to change the whole dynamics. The style is strict but supportive.



As P6 described the theme of leadership, it was stated that the leader must have the ability to create a safe and nurturing environment where students and staff are encouraged to take risks; they are not afraid to make mistakes, and they are willing to try new strategies when a strategy does not work. P6 said,

Leadership should be our biggest cheerleader. They must provide support and must be willing to uplift teachers and not bring them down. I do believe the instructional leader is a good leader who strives for excellence. His style is kind of laid back but very supportive. He allows the teachers to be in charge of their classroom and has an open door policy.

### ***Parental involvement***

Parental involvement was a theme that emerged from the data; it was a surprise that eight out of 10 participants felt that a lack of parental involvement does not harm the school climate, nor is it a significant influence on creating and maintaining a positive school climate. Participants agreed that although the lack of parental involvement does not negatively impact their school, parental involvement could only improve school climate. Therefore, parental involvement is something that should be worked on as a possible factor that can improve school climate. They realize that some parents cannot afford to take time off their jobs because they must support their families. The instructional leaders and teachers simply become the family away from home. Therefore, they agreed that building their parental involvement could only be a positive influence on creating and maintaining a more positive climate. When asked, “Does parental involvement affect the climate of your school, if so, how does your school work to involve parents,” with a very soft voice, P1 shared as a single parent with three children:

Our parents have to work. They want to be involved, but it is not a priority for them.

Pay the bills or come to the school for an hour. It would be great to have more parents, but it is not a major factor that would determine if you have a positive or negative school climate. I try very hard to attend my children's events, but sometimes I cannot make all of them. Does that mean I am not a caring parent? Surely, not.

P3 spoke about her own experiences with her mother being a single parent and how she and her siblings turned out okay. P3 stated,

We try to involve our parents by having family nights. The parents that are interested in their children are coming. We need to see the parents of the ones that are not doing well in school. We do not see those parents. I get tired of hearing, I got to work. My mother was a single parent who worked two jobs. She was involved in my school. It could be better, but I do not think it creates the climate of our school. It could help, but I do not know.

P5 voiced that we are supposed to be one of the elite schools in the district. P5 said, Our parental involvement is almost non-existence. Many students with money, in my opinion, are being raised by nannies or themselves. I hear them talking to their friends in the classroom. Their grades are sometimes poor because they do not have parental support. I think it could be better, but I am not sure if it is having a negative impact or a factor in having a positive school climate. You said my perception, right?

P8 spoke candidly about the parental involvement theme. I believe the teachers and administration worked hard to bring parents into the school. P8 said,

We do call out to parents informing them what events are upcoming, but they do not come. I do not understand because I am very active in my son's school with me being an

educator. I guess we could try more communication with parents. Some parents do not come to the school, because it was not a good experience for them, or they are intimidated by all those big words we use with them. Many parents have shared that with me.

P10 took a student's photo off her desk before she started to respond. P10 shared,

Students are at a place that teachers' and administrators' influence is the only support some of our students receive. We take the parent role, which to me, is a positive influence for the students and the school climate as a whole. We have to start somewhere. I cannot worry why their parents are not coming to school. I must work hard daily to meet their needs while they are with me for eight hours a day. Okay, I have to stop because I get very emotional when I think about my students.

### **Summary**

Several themes emerged from the data that participants identified as influential factors in creating and maintaining a positive school climate in a middle school setting based on the perception of instructional leaders and teachers. The researcher identified the following as the most influential factors of the school climate: (a) relationships; (b) safety; (c) discipline; (d) leadership; (e) and parental involvement. The participants agreed that school climate must be fostered, and it must be worked on continuously. The instructional leader and teachers must not allow negativity to creep in and have an impact on the school climate. They must work together on being transparent and continuously look for ways to improve the climate of the school. It would be challenging to maintain a positive climate, but it is attainable by not allowing "feet draggers" to do the same thing over and over again.

The instructional leaders' and teachers' perceptions are viewed as the standards of professionalism and must be demonstrated and modeled daily by teachers and instructional leaders. This will encompass the mindset of building positive relationships, developing a strong school-wide discipline plan, creating an environment where all feel safe and valued, and embracing parental involvement as an opportunity to bridge the gap of non-existence with an environment of collaboration. Ron Clark, author of *Move your Bus* and co-founder of the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia, mentioned in his book in several chapters that one should place one's energy into the runners of the bus, not the joggers, to build a positive school climate. The joggers are complacent. To create and maintain a positive school climate, the instructional leader and teachers must not get comfortable, must not become complacent, and must continuously work to find new ways to improve a positive climate that will consistently increase the academic performance of the students.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion, Implication, and Recommendation

The results of this study indicated that all groups had positive perceptions that were tightly grouped, showing they had very similar perceptions of the school's climate. Positive school climate has links to social-emotional development and academic achievement for students. Creating a positive school climate in each classroom will improve a school environment overall and may combat negative perceptions among instructional leaders and teachers. Maintaining a highly trained and dedicated teaching staff will help support a positive school climate, as will having school administrators that lead the way and set the example.

Creating a welcoming and engaging environment for parents and understanding the need to reach out to families in subgroups to improve parent perceptions will build a positive school climate. The past and present research were used to determine the importance of a positive school climate. With so many benefits of a positive school climate, school leadership must make this a priority. School climate has far-reaching effects on all of its stakeholders, including students, teachers, and parents. School climate influences achievement, academics, discipline, attendance, safety, and socio-emotional development.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify the factors that influence the school climate in a middle school setting. Positive school climate has become part of the effective rhetoric and is advocated by educational practitioners and reformers as specific means for improving school climate in schools (Smith et al., 2001). Chapter Five summarizes the findings and draws conclusions as to the implications and recommendations for practice that derived from this study. The study consisted of face-to-face interviews with volunteer participants, field notes, and journaling throughout the process. The researcher explains current

research in creating and maintaining a positive school climate, and the factors of the study are analyzed, and concluding recommendations for future research are made.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations of this study should be noted. Initially, the researcher planned to have 17 participants among the middle schools within the district. The first email was sent out on November 19, 2019, with only two responding to the email; a second email was sent out on November 25, 2019, with five responding, and a final email was sent on December 5, 2019, with four more responses. One participant elected to exit the interview, fearing a reprimand or retaliation for participating in this study from her instructional leader. Due to time restraints, the researcher proceeded with the 10 participants. The majority, eight, of the participants were teachers from the researcher's school, and two instructional leaders were from the middle schools within the district. The range of contrasting perceptions between performing and non-performing middle schools with factors that influence a positive school climate was limited because eight of the participants were from the same middle school. The researcher had close working relationships with the participants within the study. The results are not necessarily generalized to other schools and districts because the majority of the participants were from one particular middle school.

### **Summary**

The objective of this study was to answer the research question, "What do middle school instructional leaders and teachers perceive as factors influencing a positive climate in their schools?" School climate development has not been researched thoroughly with the accountability mandates at the state and federal levels and the passage of the NCLB legislation and ESSA. Schools have been experiencing increased responsibility for overseeing school

improvement plans, and school climate is a critical component to improving schools academically (Lyons & Algozzine, 2006). These mandates placed intense stress on some schools' environment, which contributed to low academic performances, low morale among various stakeholders, and negative school climates. School climate is often linked with positive school outcomes and increased overall achievement. A positive school climate has been recognized as the foundation of a successful school. To understand the formation of school climate, one must understand the factors that influence the climate and implement ways to build a positive school climate. Existing literary research supports the researcher's belief, along with the majority of the participants, that school climate is crucial when developing a climate that is conducive to learning; developing an environment with positive relationships, safety, transformational leaders who model the expectations, and discipline with rituals and routines are also very crucial to a positive school climate.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

The majority of participants were in agreement with the themes identified as factors that create or maintain a positive school climate. A positive school climate is critically related to school success. Defining a framework for understanding school climate can help educators identify key factors to focus on to create a safe and supportive climate in their schools (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). The participants in this study, as well as existing literature, agreed with Hoy & Tarter (1997) that unhealthy schools are firm in their mission and goals and demand stressful job requirements which leads to ineffective leadership and teachers, who are generally unhappy with their performance and the performance of their colleagues. A healthy school that promotes high academic achievement is highly valued and provides a school climate more conducive to success and achievement (Hoy, 1990).

A healthy school climate produces more motivated teachers, which leads to greater success. The instructional leader who is seeking to improve academic performance should focus on improving the school's climate by building healthy relationships among leaders, teachers, students, and parents. The participants identified building positive relationships as one of the factors for creating and maintaining a positive school climate. Deal and Peterson (2009) explained that at the hub of a school's climate, the most essential component is that people share beliefs about what the school wishes to realize. Overall, a positive school climate is the core of improving the school's academic performance.

The participants expressed that the school climate requires continuous work and focuses on the climate to improve and remain positive. A positive school climate is the product of a school leader paying attention to and fostering healthy relationships, creating a safe environment, promoting a supportive academic environment, implementing fair disciplinary measures, and maintaining a physical environment, which provides for encouragement and respectful trust throughout the school community no matter the setting (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

An exciting revelation occurred while interviewing the participants; the instructional leaders were more sensitive to school-level factors, whereas the teachers' perceptions were more centered on classroom factors. Teachers felt that leadership was a key factor in the climate of the school. They felt leadership should not dictate, but leaders should provide positive support and motivate teachers by empowering them and leading by example. It is the administrators' responsibility to lead the way in creating a positive school environment. According to Bartoletti and Connelly (2013), the principal has both a direct and indirect impact on school climate and student learning. Actions that require the direct involvement of the principal could include



assisting teachers to improve instruction, building strong teacher, student, and parent relationships, exhibiting a positive outlook, modeling expectations, and communicating regularly and purposely with teachers. Deal and Peterson (2009) stated schools should share leadership. The idea that one single person, the instructional leader, is responsible for creating a positive school climate is misleading. When creating and maintaining a positive school climate, a widely applied self-determined theory must be visible. Is it possible to conceptualize school climate as the facilitator of a school's identification as the psychological process through which school climate affects the entire behavior of the school? In the school context, norms, values, and beliefs of the perceptions that the instructional leaders and teachers have been embodied in the school climate because they are the key components of producing and enabling positive or negative factors.

### **Developing a Positive School Climate**

Do schools have a climate designed to meet the affective needs of teachers and students? The USDOE policies focus on how to raise academic achievement as reflected primarily on student assessments; however, to create a positive school climate of positive outcomes, the shift must be made to develop the social, emotional, and physical factors of the whole child. It seems we live in a society that focuses on the negative, but we need to work on building the character of our students. Our students should be given an opportunity to be successful in school. It is the job of instructional leaders and teachers to help all students exceed their expectations.

Participants expressed that having low or nonexistent parental involvement does not bring a negative effect on the climate, but more involvement could help to improve the school climate. Creating a welcoming and engaging environment for parents will improve the school climate. A key factor in supporting parents in their perception of schools is family engagement (Ginsburg-

Block, Manz, & McWayne, 2010). Parents who are highly engaged in schools are more likely to protect educational time at home for children. When parents work with students on a nightly basis on activities, such as homework, they are modeling positively 63 academic behaviors and high expectations for achievement (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Several participants stated students come with many issues, and as the teacher, they try to create an atmosphere of support and trust when asked the question about does discipline interferes with the learning. When a learning environment creates learning experiences and active participants, the school climate starts to shift to creating an environment that is useful and fulfilling to all stakeholders. A punitive environment undermines learning by heightening anxiety and stress while placing extra demands on working memory and cognitive resources, which drains the morale of a school climate (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). By creating a safe climate, nurturing, empowering, and centered around problem-solving and positive energy, one can be proactive. To achieve the goal of having a positive school climate, educators must understand how developmental processes interact and unfold over time if they develop and design supportive environments for meeting the needs of the whole child when developing a positive school climate. A caring, positive school climate features relational trust and respect between and among teachers and instructional leaders, staff, students, and parents. The main focus must remain on the students, and clear expectations are set for students and teachers. Ideas of worth and potential success must be conveyed on the whole child and not what is created to meet the needs of the adults when building a positive school climate. Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) suggest, “schools should attend to four domains to support student achievement, attainment, and behavior.” Those domains include teachers, school leadership, home and community, and state policies and resources (p. 2).

According to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD, 2013), school policies and climate reinforces citizenship and civic behaviors by students, family members, and staff and includes meaningful participation in decision making. As we transition into building a more stabilized school climate, our school climate, curriculum, and instruction reflect both high expectations and an understanding of the student, adolescent growth, and development. Our school works with families to help all students understand the connection between education and lifelong success. Our school ensures that adult-student relationships support and encourage each student's academic and personal growth. Our professional development plan reflects an emphasis on and implementation of a whole-child approach to education; it is individualized to meet staff needs, and it is coordinated with ongoing school improvement efforts. Emotional and social relationships affect learning, which bleeds into the climate of the school. Positive relationships, including trust in the teachers and instructional leaders, create positive emotion and self-commitment, open-minded to learning, which removes the negative climate of fear of failure, self-doubt, and working in isolation.

As a result, schools must be designed to attend to the unique needs and trajectories of meeting the individuals' needs and place support patterns to define and create a positive school climate in a middle school setting. School leaders must provide a positive learning environment that offers a measure of security and support that maximizes a student's ability to learn social and emotional skills, as well as academic learning. Given that emotion and relationships strongly influence the learning of students, at home, as well as in their communities, a positive school climate is essential and is the core of a thriving educational environment. When a positive school climate is built, a belief that one belongs at the school is created; their value is

appreciated, and the efforts lead to increased competence, and a sense of self-efficacy and the ability to succeed is the mindset.

### **Implications for Practice**

When researching school climate, it has been linked to social-emotional and academic achievement for students. A positive school climate can and should provide a foundation for nurturing and self-belonging. Cohen et al. (2009) reported that a responsive school climate nurtures an attachment to school and provides social and emotional attributes. According to Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018), leaders and teachers can create a positive school climate to improve the overall school environment by including the following:

1. Develop safe, orderly, supportive environments built on respect and encourage all stakeholders to believe they can and will make a difference in creating a positive climate.
2. Strengthen partnerships with parents and the community to support the school environment by becoming more active.
3. Provide more opportunities for shared decision making with teachers to ensure buy-in to stop the “Downtown” perception.
4. Secure a systematic way of ensuring teachers and students are working in a safe environment.
5. Build upon a positive working relationship by ensuring equitable access to resources to maintain a school that promotes all teachers and students.
6. Expect and ensure that all teachers and instructional leaders continue to grow professionally.

Creating a positive school climate may sometimes be combative in order to do what is right for students to achieve academically; however, teachers and instructional leaders, the change must embrace change frequently in order to meet the needs of our students. Teachers are likely to be more committed when they feel a sense of shared decision making, and they are willing to incorporate practices that are healthier to the school environment rather than producing outcomes that are unhealthy to create a positive school climate (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). The following must be in place:

1. Establish a two-way line of communication between instructional leaders and teachers in order to build a working relationship that will enhance the environment and trust issues.
2. Make each school system an inviting place that students, teachers, and parents will want to attend.
3. Develop a positive school climate that will foster creativity and innovation to include all voices.
4. Create a positive school climate by actively listening to key players and developing a climate that is sensitive to the needs of others as well as truly being an active listener.
5. Accept change and become active change agents to ensure supportive relationships.

Instructional leaders and teachers who want to make a difference should look for systems and patterns to eliminate the barriers and enhance those factors which contribute to a positive climate environment. If positive changes do not occur, a negative climate will exist through mistrust, inconsistency, and a sense of a lack of appreciation.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

Based on the literature reviewed and the results from the current study, significant and ongoing research is needed to provide further implications for the impacts of improving school climate. The following are recommendations for future study:

1. Researchers could further study the topic of school climate, by exploring areas with different populations and demographics to see what factors create and maintain a positive school climate of instructional leaders and teachers, and include student's perception of diverse backgrounds.
2. This study should be replicated using larger sample sizes and include other school configuration levels in order to determine the reliability of the results.
3. Complete surveys with parents and students to determine the relationship between their perceptions of school climate and achievement and performance as it relates to school climate.
4. Connect the positive school climate with teacher attendance and job retention. It will be noteworthy to determine if a relationship exists between teachers' perceptions of the school climate and the amount of work they miss or to teachers who have left the school.
5. Although the results of this study did not make a connection to students' perceptions of a positive school climate, meaningful feedback for future studies could be beneficial to educators. According to Koth et al. (2008), school climate is the product of interactions with students, faculty, and staff and has been linked to student achievement and performance. Subsequently, students' perception of the school's environment may have an impact on their behavior and play a role in schools accomplishing achievement targets and school improvement initiatives.

6. Researchers could look for factors found ineffective and research how those factors could be implemented in other schools and expanded.

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## Appendices

## **Appendix A: Informed Consent Form**

Arkansas Tech University

Title of Project: Perception of a Positive School Climate

Principal Investigator: Emma Lisa Watson

Dear (Participant's Name),

I am writing to ask for your participation in a research project that I am conducting as part of my dissertation study at Arkansas Tech University. The study is to determine the factors that affect school climate based on the perception of instructional leaders and teachers. You have been asked to participate in this study because you are employed in a school that has implemented strategies to define and change your school climate. Approximately 10 participants will take part in this research. Through this study, the researcher is attempting to investigate what major factors are the most influential in creating and maintaining a positive school climate in a middle school setting based on the experiences of the instructional leaders and teachers. I would like to ask you about your experiences with the school climate within your school.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, I will schedule a time to interview you using the guided interview questions. The interview would last approximately 40 minutes. All information that you share would be confidential. Your name and school will never be disclosed or mentioned in the study. You will be identified with a code number within the study. If you select to, you will be asked to sign an informed consent form prior to the interview, which I need

to obtain for the university in order to exhibit evidence that I have described the study thoroughly to participants. I have attached the consent form. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time for any circumstances. The information that you give will be maintained in a secure manner placed in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office that others will not be able to review. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me. Thanks for your consideration of this request. I would greatly appreciate your time and effort in helping me to complete this research study.

Thank you,

Emma L. Watson

Arkansas Tech University Doctoral Student

## **Appendix B: Consent to Participate in Interview**

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by doctoral candidate Emma L. Watson from the Center for Leadership and Learning at Arkansas Tech University. The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that impact school climate according to the perceptions of the instructional leaders and teachers. The results of this study will be included in Emma L. Watson's dissertation. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are employed in a school that has implemented strategies related to improving school climate in a middle school setting. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding if you select to participate in this research study. I understand the following:

This interview is voluntary. You have the right not to answer any questions and can stop the interview at any time or for any reason.

The interview will take approximately 30 minutes.

You will not be compensated for participating in the research study/interview unless you give the researcher permission to use your name, title, or quote you in any publications that may result from this research; the information you tell the researcher will be kept confidential. The researcher will record the interview so that answers can be used for reference while proceeding with this study. The researcher will not record this interview without your permission. If you grant permission for this conversation to be recorded, you have the right to revoke recording permission or end the interview.

This project will be completed by March 2020. All interview recordings will be stored in a secure workspace until March 2020. After that date, the tapes will then be destroyed. The

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

(Please check all that apply)

I give permission for this interview to be recorded.

I give permission for the following information to be included in any publication resulting from this study.

My name    my title    direct quotes from this interview

Name of Participant\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant\_\_\_\_\_Date\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator\_\_\_\_\_Date\_\_\_\_\_

Please contact the following if you have any questions:



## Appendix C. Institutional Research Board Approval



**Office of Sponsored Programs  
and University Initiatives**

Administration Building, Room 207  
1509 North Boulder Avenue  
Russellville, Arkansas 72801

Office: 479-880-4327  
[www.atu.edu](http://www.atu.edu)

November 12, 2019

To Whom It May Concern:

The Arkansas Tech University Institutional Review Board has approved the IRB application for Emma Lisa Watson's proposed research, entitled "The Perception of Instructional Leaders and Teachers Regarding the Factors that Lead to Positive Climate in Middle Schools."

This approval is valid until November 11, 2021, at which time the research may apply for an extension if the data collection process for this research project is not yet completed.

The IRB approval code for this study is Watson\_111219.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Gabriel L. Adkins".

Gabriel L. Adkins, Ph.D.  
Institutional Review Board Chair  
Arkansas Tech University

## Appendix D. Superintendent Permission to Conduct Research



### PULASKI COUNTY SPECIAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

Office of the Superintendent

Date October 29, 2019

RE: Lisa Watson Permission to Conduct Research in PCSSD

I thoroughly support Ms. Watson's doctoral research inquiry into *The Perceptions of Instructional Leaders and Teachers in Regards to Factors that Lead to a Positive School Climate in Middle Schools*. Therefore, I give her permission to conduct research in the Pulaski County Special School District during the 2019-20 school year. If you have questions please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Charles McNulty", is written over a horizontal blue line.

Charles McNulty, Ph.D.  
Superintendent

Cc Lisa Watson

## **Appendix E. Participant Demographic Profile Form**



