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Leadership Characteristics, School Climate, and Employee Engagement in High Performing, High-Needs Schools

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**LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS, SCHOOL CLIMATE, AND EMPLOYEE
ENGAGEMENT IN HIGH PERFORMING, HIGH NEEDS SCHOOLS**

by

ERIN A. HAHN

Under the Direction of Dr. Jami Royal Berry

ABSTRACT

School leadership impacts student achievement through the development of a positive school climate and high levels of employee engagement. This dissertation examined the characteristics and behaviors of a school principal who positively impacted school climate and employee engagement. A case study was conducted at a high performing Title I school, as identified by the Georgia Department of Education. The school's personal registered an above average grand mean score on the Gallup Q12 Engagement Survey. The school was located in a large urban school district. Social Exchange Theory provided a theoretical framework for this study. The behaviors of the principal were examined to determine specific characteristics that influenced school climate and employee engagement. Interviews, a focus group, and several observations were conducted to gather qualitative data pertinent to the principal's approach to leadership. The results of the research identified six primary leadership characteristics that impacted school climate and employee engagement: the principal focused on (a) students, (b) building relationships, (c) creating a collaborative environment, (d) communicating clearly, (e) developing others, and (f) reflecting on practice. This study contributes information about

leadership characteristics that support the academic performance of students in high-needs schools. This research identified six characteristics required of leadership for students to be academically successful in a positive school climate with highly engaged employees.

INDEX WORDS: Leadership characteristics, School climate, Employee engagement, Social exchange theory

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ERIN A. HAHN

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Atlanta GA
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing and supportive husband, Christian Hahn, and my two precious boys, Reece and Colin. There were so many times I would have rather put the writing and research down to spend time with you. I hope that this demonstrates to you that with hard work and the support of others you can accomplish anything you set your mind to. Thank you for believing in me. Much love always!

I also dedicate this to my parents, Don and Carol Austin, who taught me to love learning and that quitting is never an option.

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CHAPTER 1

LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS, SCHOOL CLIMATE AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN HIGH PERFORMING, HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS

Over the last 34 years, two documents issued by the federal government brought attention to the state of public education. The first was *A Nation at Risk*, a report issued in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This report found that inadequacies in the educational process resulted in a decrease in educational performance (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The findings from this report focused on educational content, expectations, time, and teaching. This report resulted in an educational reform effort that led to the creation of instructional standards and an accountability structure. The second document, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, furthered the idea that public education was not adequately serving all students.

The primary intent of NCLB was to “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (No Child Left Behind, 2001, Section 1001, para. 1). NCLB also intended to provide highly qualified teachers and principals in each school. This legislation resulted in increased accountability and testing, a greater focus on lower performing schools, and more attention to what was taught in schools. These two documents have provided reference points for the critique of public education in recent history. As continuous improvements are made in the educational system, the focus has remained on student achievement.

In the 1990s, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards were created by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) to provide a

common vision for school leaders focused on instructional leadership (Canole & Young, 2013). By 2005, these standards or a similar version of standards were adopted by 46 states. These standards have guided leadership preparation programs across the nation. The standards were also linked to the practice of educational leaders and the evaluation of those leaders (Canole & Young, 2013). The standards were revised in 2008; “The explicit description of individual ISLLC standard expectations through dispositions, elements, and indicators helped to operationalize the policy standards at a more granular level” (Canole & Young, 2013, p. 7). In addition to the passage of No Child Left Behind, Canole and Young (2013) identified four additional catalysts that impacted the role of educational leaders: (a) Common Core State Standards; (b) Race to the Top, (c) Obama’s Blueprint for Reform; and (d) the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Flexibility Program. The combination of these events led to a greater demand for school leaders able to impact student performance.

The responsibilities of school leaders changed and this resulted in updated standards (Canole & Young, 2013). These updated standards were focused on six features (a) the development and implementation of a vision, (b) the development of a positive school culture focused on student learning, (c) the effective management and operations of a school building, (d) the utilization of collaboration with stakeholders, (e) the demonstration of ethical behavior, and (f) the understanding of school context (Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), 2008). It was the belief that the successful demonstration of these standards resulted in more effective leadership and greater levels of student achievement. “Today’s leaders must engage in the practice of continuous school improvement and support that leverages the highest levels of student learning and the most impactful teacher instructional practice” (Canole & Young, 2013, p. 10). In 2015 the six standards were revised; the current 10 standards are now referred to as the

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. The new standards place greater emphasis on students and their learning to ensure preparation for college and career, focus on the importance of relationships, and orient leaders toward the future (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). As a result of the historical context around school leadership, numerous research studies have focused on the impact of school leadership and student performance.

Leadership practices have contributed to school climate, engagement, and student achievement. Research has linked school leadership with increased student performance; this increase in student achievement was obtained through the development of a positive school climate and high levels of employee engagement (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Gordon & Crabtree, 2006; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Stronge, J. H., Richard, H. B., & Catano, N., 2008). Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) found, “of all the factors that contribute to what students learn at school, present evidence led us to the conclusion that leadership is second in strength only to classroom instruction” (p. 70). School and classroom conditions were also responsible for student achievement; however, leadership was of utmost importance in supporting the work of teachers and the academic achievement of students and in creating an environment conducive to the work (Allen, Grigsby, & Peters, 2015; Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). Ten Bruggencate, Luyten, Scheerens, and Slegers (2012) found school leadership practices had both a direct and an indirect impact on student achievement. Common practices of highly effective principals included: setting direction, communicating vision, cultivating leadership in others, utilizing data, improving the instructional program, creating an orderly environment, and promoting and participating in teacher development (Ash, Hodge, & Connell, 2013; Foster & Taylor, 2010; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Gurr, Drysdale, Clarke, and Wildy (2014) reported

that principals in high-need schools should have clear beliefs, a strong foundational knowledge of how to build success, a focus on teacher development, and the ability to manage finances appropriately. School leadership played a critical role in the development of school climate, and school climate contributed to the overall effectiveness of the school (Allen et al., 2015; Marzano et al., 2005; Stronge et al., 2008).

Gallup, Inc. (2014) indicated in an annual report, *State of America's Schools: The Path to Winning Again in Education*, that teacher engagement was critical in order for students to reach their potential. Principals are a critical factor in increasing teacher engagement levels by creating a climate focused on trust and collaboration (Eldor & Shoshani, 2016; Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, 2016). Marzano (2003) found the importance of building relationships for the purpose of leading change had an increase on student achievement. Research by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) found that “the closer educational leaders get to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to have a positive impact on students’ outcomes” (p. 664). Gallup, Inc. (2014) also identified several characteristics of principals who were highly effective at fostering teacher engagement. Gallup Inc.’s (2014) research from the *State of America's Schools Report* stated that highly effective principals build strong relationships with stakeholders, create a culture focused on accountability, maintain order and structure in the school, and achieve performance outcomes by overcoming resistance. The Gallup, Inc. (2014) report continued: “principal talent is an essential factor in improving student achievement. When talented principals create environments in which teachers are highly motivated and productive, it puts students in a better position to succeed” (p. 35).

After reviewing the literature on leadership and student performance, I decided to focus my dissertation on leadership in a high-needs school. Specifically, I was interested in the

characteristics demonstrated by a school leader that led to a positive school climate and a highly engaged staff in a high-needs school.

Guiding Questions

The intent of this study was to identify leadership characteristics that led to high levels of employee engagement and a positive school climate in high performing, high-needs schools.

The research addressed the following questions:

- (a) How did school leadership impact a positive school climate?
- (b) What was the role of employee engagement on school climate?
- (c) How did leaders create a positive school climate and high levels of teacher engagement to have a positive impact on student achievement?

Purpose of the study.

The purpose of this study was to determine specific leadership characteristics and dispositions that led to a positive school climate as well as high levels of employee engagement in a high performing high-need school. A high-needs school was defined as one that qualified for and received Title I support. This study's contributes to current research further identifying specific leader behaviors and characteristics that promote high levels of employee engagement as well as a positive school climate. This research can inform leader preparation programs that are designed to develop future school leaders for high-need schools. Moreover, an understanding of the skills and dispositions required to be a successful school leader can inform the hiring decisions of school district leaders. An awareness of leadership styles and dispositions allow superintendents to foster the success of a principal by placing that principal in a school aligned to his/her skill set.

Review

The purpose of the literature review was to provide a historical overview of the importance of leadership in creating a positive school climate that promotes student achievement. Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) discovered a “correlation between the leadership behavior of the principal in the school and the average academic achievement of students in the school” (p. 10). In their research, they specifically identified two factors that a principal can focus on to affect school climate: a safe and orderly environment and professionalism and collegiality (Marzano et al., 2005). Louis and Wahlstrom (2010) conducted a research study and found that leadership behaviors influence the culture of a school through the expectation for exceptional instruction, the development of shared norms and values, and the existence of high levels of trust.

When principals and other school leaders impacted the school culture in a positive way, the result was improved levels of student performance. It was the responsibility of school leaders to shape school climate by understanding the past and setting a vision for the future (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Stronge, Richard, and Catano (2008) shared that the long-term success of a school is unlikely to be sustained without a positive and academically challenging climate. “Within each individual school, leadership can contribute to improve student learning by shaping the conditions and climate in which teaching and learning occur” (OECD, 2008, p.16). The principal has influence over the conditions and environment of the school and an impact on the teachers’ work and this is what effects students’ academic performance (Pina, Cabral, & Alves, 2015).

The importance of employee engagement and the role of engagement on student achievement were presented in the review of literature. Researchers found that the engagement

of students, teachers, and principals was critical for improved student performance (Darensbourg & Blake, 2013; Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, & Chen, 2012; Gordon & Crabtree, 2006; Herbers et al., 2012; Hughes, 2011; Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008; Klem & Connell, 2004). Gordon and Crabtree (2006) stated:

Educational excellence relies more on the talent and the engagement levels of the people within an individual school than on any other factor. Identifying and leveraging the underutilized talent of students, teachers, support staff, and principals should be the first consideration in improving outcomes for students.

(p. 9)

Gordon (2013a) detailed the link between leadership, engagement, and achievement. Principals were directly responsible for impacting teacher engagement which in turn influenced student engagement; student engagement levels were directly linked to academic achievement (Gordon, 2013a). These links were even more clearly made in schools with high needs (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Principals created higher engagement levels through (a) team development, (b) a climate focused on learning, (c) the provision of resources, and (d) high levels of parent involvement. "School leadership emerges as a central factor affecting school working conditions" (Gordon, 2013a, p. 6). The single most powerful influence on teacher engagement is the behaviors of the school leader (Gordon, 2013a).

To summarize, the literature review emphasized the role the principal plays in creating high levels of employee engagement and a positive school climate, as well as the leadership styles and dispositions demonstrated by the school leader. Research by Gallup, Inc. (2014) emphasized, "the importance of the principal's role in maintaining a school culture that actively encourages teacher engagement" (p. 33). Research showed that leadership engagement and

dispositions led to a culture that promoted teacher and student engagement (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). Principals were responsible for creating the learning environments found in schools (Klar & Brewer, 2013). Principals created effective school climates by (a) setting directions, (b) redesigning the organization, (c) managing the instructional program, (d) providing professional learning opportunities for teachers, (e) developing effective relationships with the staff, (f) listening to stakeholders, (g) recognizing and praising the teachers for their work and dedication, and (h) promoting cooperation among staff (Klar & Brewer, 2013; McKinney, Labat, & Labat, 2015).

Gordon and Crabtree (2006) suggested that principals impact engagement by motivating others towards improved student performance, relating with other stakeholders in the community, and empowering staff members to participate in the school's growth. Shared leadership and instructional leadership, positive though indirect, impacted student performance through influence on school culture (Foster & Taylor, 2010; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Sahin, 2011; Wahlstrom et al., 2010). "The principals' holistic understanding of the needs of their schools and communities allowed them to contribute to the success of their students" (Klar & Brewer, 2013, p. 800). The review of literature provided insight for understanding school climate, employee engagement, and the characteristics of the school leader that are instrumental for the development of a positive school climate and high levels of employee engagement with the ultimate goal of improving student achievement.

School climate.

School climate was defined as "the quality and character of school life" (Pickeral, Evans, Hughes, & Hutchinson, 2009, p. 4). School climate encompasses the social, emotional, and academic experiences of teachers, students and parents; school climate becomes a conceptual

feature which can be assessed across the nation's schools (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Research by the National School Climate Council (2007) found school climate had a direct influence on the academic achievement of students and their ability to learn. "Sustained positive school climate is associated with positive child and youth development, effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts, student learning and academic achievement, increased student graduation rates, and teacher retention" (Thapa et al., 2013, p. 13).

In instances where positive school climate existed, student achievement increased, stakeholders worked together to create a common vision, and the development of students was supported. Students learned to work collaboratively and an environment of mutual trust and respect was generated (National School Climate Council, 2007). The National School Climate Council (2009) outlined practices that supported the development of a positive school climate: (a) a shared vision, (b) policies and practices that promote the development of students, (c) an environment where all stakeholders feel welcome and safe, and (d) practices that support social responsibility. Similar characteristics were found in the research by Parker, Grenville, and Flessa (2011). The research from their qualitative case study examined schools in challenging situations and found that those with a positive climate had several commonalities: "excellent teaching and high-quality collaboration amongst teachers; parental engagement along with community partnerships; and shared leadership amongst administrators and teachers" (Parker, Grenville, & Flessa, 2011, p.147).

While school success may occur in the short term without the development of a positive and productive climate, in the long term school success will collapse (Stronge et al., 2008). Research showed a positive effect on the performance and success of a school is strongly

correlated to the development of a positive school climate by the principal (Gulsen & Gulenay, 2014; Lee & Li, 2015). Numerous studies have supported the linkage between leadership, school climate and school effectiveness (Kelley, Thornton, & Daugherty, 2005, Marzano et al., 2005; Velasco, Edmonson, & Slate, 2012).

Engagement.

Engagement has operated under several definitions. Kahn's (1990) scholarship provided the conceptual framework that outlined much of the research conducted in the area of engagement. Kahn (1990) defined personal engagement as "the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence, and active, full role performances" (p. 700). He continued describing engagement as being demonstrated by certain behaviors such as when:

People become physically involved in tasks, whether alone or with others, cognitively vigilant, and empathically connected to others in the service of the work they are doing in ways that display what they think and feel, their creativity, their beliefs and values, and their personal connection to others. (Kahn, 1990, p. 700)

The dimensions of (a) meaningfulness, (b) safety, and (c) availability were used to measure personal engagement in a task. Leadership and interpersonal relationships led to more meaningful interactions with others and a heightened sense of psychological safety. In summary, Kahn (1990) found that many variables contributed to a person's level of engagement. This was confirmed by similar research that found leadership behaviors have a significant impact on the engagement of employees (Leary et al., 2013).

Gallup, Inc. (2013) defined engaged employees as those who were passionate about their work and were connected to the company; they drove innovation forward and promoted

company growth. In a recent study, Gallup, Inc. (2013) found only 30% of employees were engaged, leaving 70% of employees who were not engaged or who were actively disengaged. Research showed a positive connection between employee engagement and work outcomes, and leadership played a significant role in creating the level of employee engagement (Gallup, Inc., 2013; Saks & Gruman, 2014). Saks (2006) found that employees with a better support system within the organization reported higher levels of engagement. “Engaged employees are also more likely to have a high-quality relationship with their employer leading them to also have more positive attitudes, intentions, and behaviors” (Saks, 2006, p. 613). Moura, Orgambidez-Ramos, and Goncalves (2014) also stated that highly engaged employees were likely to have higher quality relationships based on trust and a more positive attitude in general. Effective communication within an organization increased the level of engagement of employees (Karanges et al., 2014). Selecting the right people, developing the strengths of employees, and enhancing the well-being of employees also led to increased levels of engagement for employees (Gallup, Inc., 2013).

The engagement of students, teachers, and principals was critical for improved student performance (Darensbourg & Blake, 2013; Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Herbers et al., 2012; Hughes, 2011; Hughes et al., 2008; Klem & Connell, 2004; Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, and Chen (2012) found that academic engagement can improve a student’s academic performance in reading and math. “Children who begin school with academic readiness skills and are prepared to engage with teachers, peers, and curricula likely have successes in their earliest school experiences” (Herbers et al., 2012, p. 370-371). Darensbourg and Blake (2013) found that behavioral engagement was critical for academic success in math for at-risk African American children. They also found engagement was important for reading

achievement as well but not the primary factor in performance. A link was established among student achievement and hope and the engagement levels of students (Gallup, Inc., 2014). The researchers at Gallup also pointed out that engagement is not the sole responsibility of the students.

Several studies showed that leaders and teachers are responsible for creating an engaging environment for students (Gallup, Inc., 2014; Hughes, 2011; Hughes et al., 2008; Klem & Connell, 2004). The quality of teacher-student relationships was shown to have an impact on student achievement in reading and math (Hughes, 2011; Hughes et al., 2008). Teacher support was critical for increased student engagement levels and is linked to improved attendance and higher test scores (Klem & Connell, 2004).

Teacher and leader engagement at work led to higher performance levels and greater job satisfaction (Gordon, July, 2013; Hultell & Gustavsson, 2011; Klassen et al., 2012). Engagement and job satisfaction were highly correlated in a study by Klassen et al. (2012). These researchers found that highly engaged teachers led to greater levels of job satisfaction and a decreased chance the teacher would leave the profession. This research was conducted and similar conclusions were found across diverse school settings. Gallup, Inc. (2014) suggested that principals should involve teachers in pedagogical decisions, remove disengaged teachers, and partner new teachers with highly engaged teachers as mentors. Research reported that teachers' engagement impacted student achievement and principals played a critical role in enhancing school climate and promoting teacher engagement (Gordon, August, 2013). A study conducted by Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Ludtke, and Baumert (2008) compared the engagement levels of teachers across several schools in Germany. These researchers found the instructional support of the principal predicted the level of teacher engagement. "When individual teacher factors were

controlled, schools with a more supportive principal had more engaged teachers” (Klusmann et al., 2008, p. 145). Federici and Skaalvik’s (2011) research conducted with Norwegian principals confirmed earlier findings between principal behaviors and teacher engagement. The greatest predictor of high engagement levels was (a) instructional leadership followed by (b) administrative management and (c) school environment. As a result of their research they speculated “that creating and sustaining a work environment that promotes work engagement may have a positive impact for the exercising of not only the principal and teacher professions, but also for student outcomes” (Federici & Skaalvik, 2011, p, 595). In summary, employee engagement is a critical component for school improvement and success.

Principal leadership.

Leadership in schools was demonstrated by principals, assistant principals, teachers, parents and students, but “the principal remains the central source of leadership influence” (The Wallace Foundation, 2013, p. 6). As a result of research conducted since 2000, The Wallace Foundation (2013) identified five key responsibilities for principals’ effectiveness:

- *Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards.*
- *Creating a climate hospitable to education* in order that safety, a cooperative spirit and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.
- *Cultivating leadership in others* so that teachers and other adults assume their parts in realizing the school vision.
- *Improving instruction* to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn to their utmost.
- *Managing people, data, and processes* to foster school improvement. (p. 6)

These responsibilities are demonstrated through leadership styles and dispositions and impact the school climate and engagement. Highly effective principals had an in-depth understanding of leadership, and they were able to navigate change processes as there were shifts in the climate of the school (Masewicz & Vogel, 2014); they also created a competitive school, empowered others to make decisions, provided guidance centered on instruction, and developed and executed school improvement plans (Leithwood et al., 2004). A study by Parsons and Beauchamp (2012) identified ten themes of instructional leadership that supported student achievement in schools; the themes found in this study were similar and aligned to the five pivotal practices of principals as identified by The Wallace Foundation (2013). Principals were (a) knowledgeable, (b) trusting and respectful, (c) caring and safe, (d) disciplined and decisive, (e) positive, (f) aware of innovation, (g) effective communicators, (h) focused on developing a family/community atmosphere, (i) owners of high expectations, and (j) developers of a common vision (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012).

Successful leadership was focused on the development of staff, which in turn affected school activities and student performance. Both studies supported the notion that school leadership mattered, and the principals' influence on student achievement was indirect through the support of teachers and the creation of an effective learning environment (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012; The Wallace Foundation, 2013). A principals' influence is initiated by "developing teachers' efficacy in curriculum and instruction, engaging and motivating staff, fostering a shared purpose, creating conditions for effective teaching and learning, fostering program coherence, encouraging organizational learning, and through feedback, direction, and communication" (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012, p. 708). In conclusion, principal leadership greatly impacts the school climate and engagement of teachers and students.

Principal engagement and school climate.

Research established a link between leadership, school climate, engagement and student performance (Gordon, July, 2013; Kelley et al., 2005; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; ten Bruggencate et al., 2012). Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) found there were “weak but significant effects of leader efficacy on ... the proportion of students in schools reaching or exceeding the state’s proficient level” (p. 522). The impact on student learning came from the school and classroom conditions created under the principal’s leadership (Ohlson, 2009; Somech, 2005; ten Bruggencate et al., 2012, Urick & Bowers, 2014). Principals played an important role in creating conditions that impacted teachers’ performance and motivation to increase school effectiveness (Blomeke & Klein, 2013; Somech, 2005). This research was confirmed by Ross and Cozzens (2016) who found that teachers perceived a more positive school climate when principals were professional, collaborative, and reflective.

A study conducted by Urick and Bowers (2014) found principals’ perceptions on the academic climate of the school resulted in higher student achievement, specifically in the area of mathematics. Ten Bruggencate et al. (2012) revealed the impact on achievement came as a result of school leaders focused on the development of the school culture and organization. Goal-oriented school leaders created a climate focused on continuous development and increased professionalism for teachers (ten Bruggencate et al., 2012). Principals were in powerful positions to impact the climate of the school and recognized the needs of teachers, empowered them, and promoted their involvement in the development of the school climate (Kelley et al., 2005). The school vision and mission formed the basis for the school culture and were set by the school principal. Through a common vision and relationships, the principal impacted the school culture

which in turn impacted the academic and behavioral performance of students (Ohlson, 2009).

“The principal has significant influence on the culture of the school ... Inherent to a school culture that fosters student achievement is...a shared focus on and expectation of student learning” (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015b, p. 269). Leadership practices influence student achievement and school culture.

Principals demonstrated certain characteristics that created cultures with high levels of engagement (Federici & Skaalvik, 2011; Gordon, July, 2013; Klusmann et al., 2008). A study by Federici and Skaalvik (2011) reviewed the relationship between engagement of principals and self-efficacy. Of the eight dimensions of leadership reviewed in this study, instructional leadership and management were significantly related to engagement. The researchers linked the importance of efficacy and principal engagement and “speculate that creating and sustaining a work environment that promotes work engagement may have a positive impact for the exercising of not only the principal and teacher professions, but also for student outcomes” (Federici & Skaalvik, 2011, p. 595). School leaders had a significant impact on professionalism, collaboration and innovation (Bruggencate et al., 2012). These characteristics of a positive school culture impacted teacher performance. When principals created school cultures that supported teacher productivity and motivation, students were more likely to be successful (Gallup, Inc., 2014). There were specific leadership characteristics, such as efficacy and instructional leadership that led to a culture supportive of high levels of engagement for teachers and principals.

It is important to note that low levels of teacher engagement were attributed to the climate created by leadership as well, including a lack of administrative support (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Thornton, Perreault, & Jennings, 2008). The report, *The State of America's*

Schools, (Gallup, Inc., 2014) stated that over one-third of teachers left the profession because of a manager. This demonstrated the critical importance of the principal in creating a culture that promoted teacher engagement (Gallup, Inc., 2014). School climate contributed to burnout and stress for teachers.

The research by Grayson and Alvarez (2008) showed an increase in teacher stress and burnout due to negative school climate characteristics. Their research suggested the use of frequent praise and more frequent interactions with teachers as a means of reducing their stress levels. First-year teachers were more likely to remain in the profession when they were supported by highly effective principals (Stockard & Lehman, 2004). Teachers were more satisfied in the profession when they worked in well managed schools. Administrators indirectly impacted the satisfaction of teachers through the provision of a safe and orderly teaching environment, mentoring support, and the control teachers were given to influence the work environment (Stockard & Lehman, 2004). In summary, principal leadership characteristics impacted the engagement and retention of teachers.

Leadership styles.

Every principal has a leadership style unique to him/her and aligned with his/her strengths, dispositions and philosophies of leadership. Some leadership styles fit varying school situations and supported the attainment of school goals in different, yet effective, ways. Several leadership styles were mentioned in the research related to the development of a positive school climate: shared leadership, transformational leadership, servant and instructional leadership. Hogan and Kaiser (2005) provided an overview of leadership. Their research confirmed leadership was of critical importance; leadership impacted the performance of teams, and leadership was predicted by personality. Leadership styles often worked in tandem to support

improved student outcomes as supported by the research of Day, Gu, and Sammons (2016); they found that the combination of instructional and transformational leadership strategies supported student improvement. Leadership was strongly related to the creation of conditions that led to higher levels of student performance (Mitchell, Kensler, & Tschannen-Moran, 2015). Specific to school leaders, there were several leadership styles associated with increased engagement, a positive school climate and high levels of student achievement (Louis et al., 2010).

Shared or distributed leadership.

Shared leadership was one of the leadership styles with the greatest impact on creating a positive school climate (Hughes & Pickeral, 2013; Pickeral et al., 2009; Velasco et al., 2012; Wahlstrom et al., 2010). Shared leadership involved listening to the perspectives of all stakeholders. Participation and involvement of individuals and the group was critical for moving the work forward. Shared leadership in schools resulted in strong professional relationships which in turn resulted in the creation of a professional community founded in a positive school climate (Wahlstrom et al., 2010). Hughes and Pickeral (2013) stated, “important factors in a positive school climate are also significant mediators of learning: empowerment, authentic, engagement, self-efficacy, and motivation” (p. 1). These factors aligned with shared leadership, especially engagement. There were five strategies outlined by Hughes and Pickeral (2013) as means to build engagement through shared leadership. Principals established leadership in their buildings as a partnership with all stakeholders and worked to create a balanced power structure. There was a common vision and purpose that aligned the work of all stakeholders. Shared responsibility and accountability were evident among all groups. Diverse perspectives were encouraged and appreciated as the group worked to make decisions impacting the school.

Finally, courage, resolve, and moral character were required on behalf of all stakeholders for effective shared leadership (Hughes & Pickeral, 2013). The research by Hughes and Pickeral (2013) found, “shared leadership that engages staff, parents, and students becomes a force multiplier in school climate work” (p. 4). Gale and Bishop (2014) found distributed responsibilities and accountability for all were necessary elements for adults to feel valuable as team members. The researchers noted that all stakeholders should be valued for their contributions to the team and the focus should remain on school improvement for a true culture of shared leadership to be evident in the school. This research was further supported by Somech (2005) who found that participation by teachers in decision-making resulted in teachers utilizing more innovative instructional practices and increasing their motivation and engagement in the school.

Shared and distributed leadership styles were linked to teacher trust levels in leaders (Angelle, 2010; Mascall, Leithwood, Straus, & Sacks, 2008; Wahlstrom, et al., 2010). Angelle (2010) suggested a model for distributed leadership in a middle school setting that included “a strong collaborative leader who practices shared decision making; a culture where trust permeates the organization; and continuous building of strong positive relationships” (p. 13). Several organizational outcomes were linked to distributed leadership: (a) retention of teachers, (b) increased job satisfaction, (c) higher levels of trust, and (d) teacher efficacy.

Shared leadership and instructional leadership positively, though indirectly, impacted student performance through influence on school culture (Foster & Taylor, 2010; Louis et al., 2010; Sahin, 2011). “Shared leadership is one important means of creating a learning organization in which efforts are focused on ways in which increasing instructional capacity can influence student learning” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 330). A case study by Foster and Taylor (2010)

concluded the principal played a critical role in creating an environment conducive to shared leadership. The principal was responsible for providing opportunities for teacher leadership, supporting teachers, maintaining a clear focus on goals, delivering and planning professional development, and communicating clear expectations about teaching and learning.

Transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership was another style of leadership shown to positively impact the climate of the school (Allen et al., 2015; Moolenaar, Daly & Slegers, 2010; Sagnak, 2010; Velasco et al., 2012). This type of leadership joined the school community around a common vision and mission and created relationships that directed all activities towards the implementation of the vision (Navickaite, 2013). Transformational leadership involved high levels of care and went beyond what was good for the individual and focused on what was good for the organization. Sagnak (2010) found transformational leadership behaviors were linked to high levels of care in an organization and these behaviors significantly impacted the climate of a school. Student performance was impacted by leadership that supported collaboration and flexibility for teachers and by leadership that created a caring and supportive environment while focusing on open communication and trusting relationships.

Five attributes of transformational leadership were identified and reviewed for their impact on school climate in a study by Allen, Grigsby, and Peters (2015): (a) inspirational motivation, (b) intellectual stimulation, (c) individualized consideration, (d) idealized attributes, and (e) idealized behaviors. This study demonstrated the relationship of all five attributes and their impact on school climate, indicating that leadership did impact the climate of the school. Leaders who demonstrated idealized attributes and role model behaviors were viewed by teachers more positively and were viewed as creating a more positive climate for the school.

Inspirational motivation empowered teachers; intellectual stimulation allowed teachers to be creative and innovative; individualized consideration valued teacher input and participation.

The findings of the study by Allen et al., (2015) were consistent with research by McCarley, Peters, and Decman (2016) that found a statistically significant relationship between all five factors of transformation leadership and school climate. Specifically there was a positive correlation between teacher engagement and (a) supportive principal behaviors of inspirational motivation, (b) intellectual simulation, (c) individualized consideration, (d) idealized attributes, and (e) idealized behaviors (McCarley, Peters, & Decman, 2016). Research by Eshbach and Henderson (2010) reported the behavioral attributes associated with transformational leadership were linked to a more open and engaged school climate. These five attributes of transformational leadership positively influenced the teachers' perspectives of the school climate (Allen et al., 2015; Eshbach & Henderson, 2010; McCarley et al., 2016; Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2010).

Transformational leadership had an impact on teacher practice and engagement and overall school performance (Bogler, 2001; Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Marks & Printy, 2003; Raman, Mey, Don, Daud, & Khalid, 2015; Song, Bae, Park, & Kim, 2013; Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011). "Transformational leadership practice can bring about good change in the administration and management of the school. This change can also increase teachers' motivation and commitment; and thus increase school effectiveness" (Raman et al., 2015, p. 226). Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, Peetsma, and Geijsel (2011) found transformational leadership led to conditions which positively impacted student achievement and improved school outcomes through an increase in teacher engagement and motivation.

Teachers preferred transformational leadership characteristics to transactional leadership styles (Bogler, 2001). Several qualities of transformational leadership were identified and

attributed to successful school principals and the existence of a positive school culture: influence, consideration, motivation, and stimulation (Balyer, 2012; Hauserman & Stick, 2013). In the study by Hauserman and Stick (2013), teachers identified specific behaviors demonstrated by leaders aligned to the four components of transformational leadership.

Idealized influence behaviors highlighted included maintaining and creating visibility, developing rapport, holding students and teacher accountable, having high expectations, having a best practice emphasis, leading by example, mentoring, showing consistent fairness, making ethical decisions, and building leadership capacity.

Individual consideration behaviors included collaborating on decisions, listening and caring, consulting involved parties, being consistent, and making decisions that were best for children.

Inspirational motivation behaviors were demonstrated by showing encouragement and support, promoting teamwork, celebrating successes and using humor effectively.

Intellectual stimulation was illustrated by asking questions and challenging the status quo, explaining decisions, using current research, trusting staff to take risks, focusing on a collaborative vision, being a proactive problem solver, and providing creative solutions.

(Hauserman & Stick, 2013, p. 196)

Principals who demonstrated these behaviors were praised by teachers as having a positive school climate. Transformational leadership impacted work environment, teacher motivation, and teacher practice and “the potency of leadership for increasing student learning hinges on the specific classroom practices which leaders stimulate, encourage and promote” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006, p. 223). Marks and Printy (2003) indicated that the commitment of teachers was influenced by strong transformational leadership by the principal. They found when “the

principal elicits high levels of commitment and professionalism from teachers and works interactively with teachers in a shared instructional leadership capacity, schools have the benefit of integrated leadership; they are organizations that learn and perform at high levels” (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 393).

Instructional leadership.

Instructional leadership greatly impacted the factors related to the climate of the school, and there was a positive and strong correlation between the instructional leadership style of the principal and the school climate (Sahin, 2011). Instructional leadership consisted of goal setting, curriculum management, and the evaluation of teaching and learning (Mestry, Moonsammy-Koopasammy, & Schmidt, 2013). Principals skilled in instructional leadership demonstrated practices that involved:

Well-defined goals for schools, the promotion of self and staff development, the use of their own teaching practices to inform teaching and learning in their own schools, the development of a climate in schools conducive to teaching and learning, the development of evaluation systems engendering teacher development and improvement, and the encouragement and motivation of teachers and learners to engage enthusiastically in the teaching and learning process. (Mestry et al., 2013, p. S62)

Similar skills related to instructional leadership were identified through the research of Mitchell, Kensler, and Tschannen-Moran (2015). Principals strong in instructional leadership supported professional development for teachers, shared decision making, monitored instruction, offered assistance and developed teacher leadership. Through the demonstration of skills such as creating unity around the vision, providing effective feedback and supervision around instruction, and supporting collaboration, principals had a great impact on the school climate

(Sahin, 2011). In a comparison of leadership styles, Robinson et al. (2008) concluded that instructional leadership had a greater impact on student achievement than transformational leadership since transformational leadership focuses on relationships while instructional leadership focuses on the leadership practices related to teaching and learning. “A school’s leadership is likely to have more positive impacts on student achievement and well-being when it is able to focus on the quality of learning, teaching, and teacher learning” (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 668).

Authentic leadership.

George (2003) examined the characteristics of authentic leaders and found “that authentic leaders demonstrated these five qualities: understanding their purpose, practicing solid values, leading with heart, establishing connected relationships, [and] demonstrating self-discipline” (p. 18). Throughout numerous research studies, authentic leadership styles were linked to increased employee engagement and trust (Bird, Wang, Watson, & Murray, 2009; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008; Wang & Hsieh, 2013). School leaders created a culture for the engagement of teachers and students when they demonstrated effective authentic leadership qualities. Increased performance levels and the ability to enhance the commitment of employees were two primary outcomes of authentic leadership (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Through demonstration of authentic leadership characteristics, the leader positively impacted the climate of the organization. The level of authenticity of a leader was positively related to the levels of trust from employees and a key indicator of authenticity was the consistency between the verbal message of the leader and the actions demonstrated by the leader. When there was consistency between the words and actions of a leader, there were greater levels of trust (Wang & Hsieh, 2013). Research specific to the relationship between teachers and

principals discovered increased levels of trust and engagement by teachers when authentic leadership skills were demonstrated by principals (Bird et al., 2009). This research provided applicability of authentic leadership research to the field of education.

Principal characteristics and dispositions.

While leadership styles of principals were critical to creating a positive school climate and high levels of employee engagement (Stewart-Banks, Kuofie, Hakim & Branch, 2015), successful principals were strategic and intuitive (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016). Principals understood the school context and the needs of the staff and students. In the study by Day et al., (2016) several behavioral characteristics were identified of successful principals. High performing principals measured success with data, acted ethically, were respected and trusted by staff, built the capacity of others through distributed leadership, supported a variety of learning opportunities for students, and combined leadership styles (transformational and instructional).

Stewart-Banks, Kuofie, Hakim, and Branch (2015) found additional leadership behaviors that supported the morale of teachers and staff and led to a more positive school climate. Principals (a) communicated, (b) built relationships, (c) were open-minded and approachable, (d) were knowledgeable of best practices in education, and (e) provided accountability and recognition to staff. Research by McKinney, Labat, and Labat (2015) conducted at National Blue Ribbon Schools confirmed the studies outlined above and provided additional characteristics of successful principals: (a) high expectations for staff, (b) caring, (c) ability to listen, and (d) sensitive to the needs of others.

Principals demonstrated several leadership characteristics that led to high levels of engagement of staff including (a) self-efficacy, (b) creativity, (c) charisma, (d) self-reflection, (e) compassion, and (f) vision (Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2013; Eldor & Shoshani; 2016; Federici &

Skaalvik, 2011; Notman, 2012; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). The results of a qualitative study by Theoharis and Causton-Theoharis (2008) identified three dispositions for school leaders: (a) the ability to assume a global perspective, (b) the capability of developing a bold vision, and (c) a sense of agency - the belief that the leader is able to do the work and effect change.

In a similar study by Paredes Scribner, Crow, Lopez, and Murtadha (2011), they identified emerging themes across three successful principals in diverse, urban schools with high free and reduced lunch populations. Their results showed the principals were student centered, focused on building effective relationships, actively engaged in curriculum and instruction, and responsive to concerns or issues. Studies by Federici and Skaalvik (2011) and Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) identified principal efficacy as critical to engagement and student learning. In addition, Bakker and Xanthopoulou (2013) found that “job resources facilitate employees’ sense of self-efficacy and resiliency and consequently foster work engagement” (p. 2773). Highly engaged principals demonstrated creative and charismatic qualities according to the teachers they supported (Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2013).

Eldor and Shoshani (2016) found that compassionate acts by the principal led to improved teacher engagement and general well-being. Two primary dispositions were identified by Gale and Bishop (2014) in their qualitative study of middle school principals. They found successful principals demonstrated the ability to form relationships, worked collaboratively with others and exhibited responsiveness to the needs of the students. This finding was supported by additional research by McKinney, Labat, and Labat (2015) which identified the significant relationship between the rapport of the principal and staff and the impact on student

achievement. School climate was also impacted by the effectiveness of communication between the principal and the teachers (Halawah, 2005; Sabanci, Sahin, Somez, & Yilmaz, 2016).

Collaboration and open communication were critical factors for the success of school improvement initiatives and the development of positive school climate. “Better school climate was expected in schools where effective communication between school principals and his/her teachers exists” (Halawah, 2005, p. 341). Several characteristics of principals’ leadership contributed to their ability to sustain school success: their own well-being (mental, physical, and intellectual), resilience, and self-reflection (Notman, 2012). Principals possessed many leadership characteristics that impacted their own levels of engagement and the engagement levels of the teachers.

Culture of trust.

“Trust is an adhesive force that links people, processes, and the environment, and can therefore improve the rate of success” (Wang & Hsieh, 2013, p. 621). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015b) learned principal leadership style does impact the trust of the faculty; principals needed to be friendly and accepting of teacher feedback and engaged in the instructional program at the school. When trust existed between teachers and the principal, academics were a greater focus and student achievement was better; it was through the demonstration of trust by the principal that the tone was set for how teachers engaged with each other. (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015b).

Support, trust, and effective communication from supervisors led to higher levels of motivation and engagement for employees (Wang & Hsieh, 2013). In educational settings, principals needed to develop a culture of trust in their schools as school success was reliant on a positive school climate and shared leadership based on trust (Wahlstrom et al, 2010). This was

accomplished through clear communication, shared decision making, emphasis on relationships, effective feedback and the development of feelings of trust (Ash et al., 2013; Blomeke & Klein, 2013; Halawah, 2005; Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, 2016; Kelley et al., 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis., 2015a). Principals also developed trust through the use of norms, through increased interactions times between staff during department meetings, through the development of their own facilitation skills and by setting expectations for shared decision making (Cosner, 2009).

Several researchers made a connection to the importance of trust between the principals and teachers that developed as a result of transformational leadership and distributed leadership styles (Angelle, 2010; Balyer, 2012; Hauserman & Stick; 2013; Thoonen et al., 2011). The research study by Angelle (2010) found “mutual trust between the administration, the faculty, the students, the parents, and the community strengthened the organizational culture” (p. 12).

This was confirmed by researchers who stated that trust formed the foundation for a positive school climate and was directly influenced by the values and beliefs of the school leader (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015b). Teachers were more likely to collaborate and reported greater well-being in trusting environments (Thoonen et al., 2011). Greater levels of collaboration led to the development of a professional culture where teachers were more likely to contribute to the organization. The findings of Thoonen et al. (2011) suggested, “leadership practice can foster collaboration and a climate of trust” (p. 520). Bird, Wang, Watson, and Murray (2009) conducted a study on the authenticity of the principal and found teachers had greater trust and higher levels of engagement with principals who were more authentic. Louis, Dretzke, and Wahlstrom (2010) used a mixed methods approach to determine that the trust a teacher had in the principal impacted student achievement in mathematics.

In order to cultivate trust, leaders were consistent over time and demonstrated trustworthy behaviors across repeated interactions with stakeholders. Trustworthy behaviors were demonstrated through vulnerability, honesty, openness, competence, and reliability (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015b). Consistency and fairness were critical aspects of decisions and behaviors demonstrated by the principal in order to build a trusting environment. This was accomplished through clear and effective communication. In a study of middle school principals by Gale and Bishop (2014), it was noted that principals promoted trust through honesty and built credibility through transparency. Research by Halawah (2005) found a link between the effectiveness of the principal's communication and a positive school climate. "Communication is a primary tool for building trust within an organization" (Combs, Harris, & Edmonson, 2015, p. 18). Combs, Harris, and Edmonson (2015) outlined four practices to develop trust. Principals understood trust and communicated with care, character, and competence.

Another practice that built trust with staff was to monitor reactions to situations. Addressing concerns directly built trust as did remembering to say thank you frequently and sincerely to stakeholders. As determined by the research of Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015b) trustworthy leadership supports the conditions that lead to improved school climate. Faculty trust in the school principal was critical for the development of a positive school climate and improved student performance outcomes. Clear communication and high levels of trust led to the development of effective relationships.

Importance of interpersonal relationships.

The principal's ability to develop relationships with others impacted the climate of a school (Angelle, 2010) and levels of employee engagement (McCarly, Peters, & Decman, 2016). Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009) identified relationships and a sense of community

as two qualities that impacted school climate. Through effective relationships administrators supported and valued teachers, and as a result, teachers felt appreciated and influential in the building; the development of effective relationships between school leaders and teachers also increased the level of trust and led to a positive school climate (Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, 2016).

A study by Black (2010) found strong correlation between the way the principal valued and developed teachers and the school climate. Doll (2010) outlined the importance of the relationships that existed between stakeholders in the development of a positive school climate, and a case study by Cherkowski (2016) confirmed that building relationships with teachers was critical for school improvement and the development of meaningful professional development. Of the relationships in a school building, the ones most closely aligned to student performance were those relationships between teachers and students. Relationships between faculty and with families and community members were also important. Schools with highly functioning climates developed students who believed in success and set goals for themselves, where students were expected to behave in a way that promoted academic success. In order to create relationships leading to positive school climate, principals intentionally provided opportunities to staff and students to build relationships. They hired carefully and celebrated the successes of teachers and students. Principals had an understanding of the needs of families (Doll, 2010). It was necessary for principals to have relationships with all stakeholders and to have an awareness of the varying needs and perspectives across groups. As principals create a positive school climate they engaged stakeholders in decisions related to solving problems or building student self-efficacy.

Harris and Lowery (2002) found teachers identify principals' interactions with students as a factor that contributed to a positive school climate. Principals treated students equitably and with respect. They communicated with students; this involved listening to them as well as talking

with them. Finding time to engage with students, whether in the hall or in the cafeteria or at extracurricular events, was a critical responsibility of the school principal and supported the development of relationships. Supporting and caring for students was also important and demonstrated in several ways. Students needed to be rewarded and recognized for their successes and they needed to know they were attending a school with a safe and secure environment (Harris & Lowery, 2002).

Research showed a positive school climate was a necessity for academic growth and school improvement. “Climate sets the tone for students to respond positively to the demands of high academic standards and ultimately provides the foundation for the attainment of superior student academic achievement” (Velasco et al., 2012, p. 331). In order for principals to be effective, they developed a vision related to positive school climate, and they worked with their stakeholders to share and support this vision through their leadership style. Moolenaar, Daly, and Sleagers (2010) found that a close relationship between the principal and teachers led to a climate that supported risk taking and innovation. They developed a climate of trust through honest interactions and transparency in decision making. Principals formed relationships with teachers, parents, community members, and most importantly, the students.

Summary

Research showed school climate and individual engagement impact student achievement (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Gordon & Crabtree, 2006; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Thapa et al., 2013). “Climate ranks high among factors that fundamentally influence the effectiveness of schools at maximizing student achievement” (Velasco et al., 2012, p. 331). Engagement of students, teachers, and principals was critical for increased levels of student achievement (Gallup, Inc., 2014; Gordon, July, 2013).

The principal relies heavily on initiatives such as (a) setting a vision; (b) developing leadership in others; (c) managing data, people, and processes; (d) creating a positive climate for education, and (e) improving instruction all for the purpose of impacting student performance (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). With increased scrutiny on public education, it was a critical time to review the correlation between student achievement and engagement in a high performing, high-needs school. The principal's professional and personal characteristics have played a critical role in the development of a positive school climate, and they have contributed to the engagement of staff and students (Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2013; Bird et al., 2009; Gordon, July, 2013; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006, 2008; Robinson et al, 2008; ten Bruggencate et al., 2012). Successful principals were able to create climates that promoted staff engagement and academic growth for students (Day et al., 2016). What are the leadership attributes evident in a high-performing, high-needs school? Principals indirectly impacted student achievement through the creation of learning environments and the development of a climate that results in highly engaged employees (Gordon, August 2013). Effective principals offer schools the promise of transformation and high academic achievement for all students.

The intent of my research was to conduct a case study in order to identify the behaviors of a successful school principal that led to a positive school climate and high levels of employee engagement in a high performing, high-need school. Research has shown the importance of a positive school climate and the importance of teacher engagement for improved student achievement (Federici & Skaalvik, 2011; Gordon, July, 2013; Kelley et al., 2005; Klusmann et al., 2008; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; ten Bruggencate et al., 2012).

The leadership style of the principal had an impact on the development of a positive climate and high levels of employee engagement. Several specific leadership styles were presented in the research cited in this literature review: (a) shared or distributed leadership, (b) transformational leadership, (c) instructional leadership, and (d) authentic leadership. This dissertation intended to identify the specific behaviors and leadership traits of a successful principal in high-need school that positively impact student achievement.

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CHAPTER 2

LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS, SCHOOL CLIMATE, AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN HIGH PERFORMING, HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS

Principal behaviors impacted school climate, employee engagement, and ultimately, student achievement (Federici & Skaalvik, 2011; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Paredes, Scribner, Crow, Lopez, & Murtadha, 2011; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). The intent of this dissertation was to conduct a case study to identify the leadership behaviors of a successful school principal. Specifically, the intent of the research was to identify leadership strategies and attitudes that led to a positive school climate and high levels of employee engagement in a high performing, high-needs school. While there are several definitions of school climate, for this study school climate will be defined as “the quality and character of school life” (Pickeral et al., 2009, p. 4).

Research has shown the importance of a positive school climate and the importance of teacher engagement for improved student achievement (Federici & Skaalvik, 2011; Gordon, 2013; Kelley et al., 2005; Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Ludtke, & Baumert, 2008; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; ten Bruggencate, Luyten, Scheerens, & Slegers, 2012). The leadership characteristics of the principal have had an impact on the development of a positive climate and high levels of employee engagement (Gale & Bishop, 2014; Halawah, 2005; McKinney, Labat, & Labat, 2015). Several leadership styles were prevalent in the research: (a) *shared or distributed* leadership (Pickeral, Evans, Hughes, & Hutchison, 2009; Velasco et al., 2012; Wahlstrom et al., 2010), (b) *transformational* leadership (Sagnak, 2010; Velasco et al., 2012), (c) *servant* leadership (Sahin, 2011; van Dierendonck, 2011), (d) *instructional* leadership (Mestry, Moonsammy-Koopasammy, & Schmidt, 2013) and (e) *authentic* leadership (George, 2003). This

research study intended to identify specific leadership characteristics which led to high levels of teacher engagement and a positive school climate in a high-needs school. Furthermore, the results present a judgement about the participant principal's style when compared to these known leadership approaches.

Guiding questions.

The research addressed the following questions:

- (a) How did school leadership impact a positive school climate?
- (b) What was the role of employee engagement on school climate?
- (c) How did leaders create a positive school climate and high levels of teacher engagement to have a positive impact on student achievement?

Significance of the study.

This dissertation reinforced the importance of including information around school climate and building engagement in leader preparation programs. This study was of critical importance for leader preparation programs that prepared leaders for high-needs schools. An understanding of the skills and dispositions required to be a successful school leader will also assist superintendents with their hiring decisions. An awareness of leaders' styles and dispositions allows district leaders to foster the success of a principal by placing that principal in a school aligned to his/her skill set. This study contributed to the body of research that supports the impact of leadership on creating a school culture which creates and encourages high levels of employee engagement.

Theoretical framework.

In the literature, relationships in the workplace were often explained by the social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Karanges, Beatson, Johnston, & Lings, 2014).

Homans (1958) explained social exchange theory through the lens of social psychology and saw interactions between individuals as an exchange of material and non-material goods. Social exchange theory explained social change and stability as a series of interactions between parties and provided a framework for assessing network structures (Emerson, 1976). Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) added that interpersonal attachment was developed through these interactions. As presented in the literature, the essential concept of social exchange theory was that mutually rewarding relationships were developed over time through interactions with others.

Social exchange relationships between employers and employees led to more effective workers and more positive attitudes from workers (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The social exchange theory provided the foundational piece for studies conducted regarding engagement (Saks, 2006). A research study by Karanges, Beatson, Johnston, and Lings (2014) linked internal communication practices (between leadership and employees through written and oral means) and their negative/positive impact on employee engagement; this study used the social exchange theory as the theoretical framework. Inclusive leadership styles and engagement levels at the work place were linked in a research study conducted by Choi, Tran, and Park (2015) and social exchange theory was noted as the theoretical framework for the study. Employees who perceived they had support from the organization and had positive relationships with their employers demonstrated higher levels of engagement and more positive attitudes toward work (Saks, 2006). In summary, social exchange theory was utilized in various studies to assess the principal's exchanges with teachers and other staff members; it is through these interactions that the climate of the school was developed and teachers became engaged or disengaged.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2014). A high performing Title I school in a large urban school district was selected as the case study site; the school had an above average grand mean score on the Gallup Q12 Engagement Survey which measured the engagement levels of employees. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and a focus group. The case study approach was utilized to provide insight into the role the principal played in developing school climate and impacting employee engagement. Qualitative information collected during a research study provides in depth information and a variety of perspectives, it describes the many facets of a program, and clarifies the perceptions around the program being evaluated (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007).

Although a specific program was not being evaluated in this case study, the researcher investigated leadership characteristics by using a broad approach to a narrow target. The analysis of qualitative information led to the discovery of questions and themes that emerged and developed as the inquiry proceeded. Themes emerged as the data were gathered and as the information was aligned to the research. A case study approach to research focuses on the technical quality of a study site and attempts to answer a few questions on a deeper level rather than many questions from a broad perspective (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). “Program evaluation that is based on a case study is a focused, in-depth description, analysis, and synthesis of a particular program or other object” (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007, p. 181). The case study approach to qualitative research looked at programs in the natural and holistic context with no control of the situation on the part of the researcher (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007).

Yin (2014) explained that case study methodology was used to investigate a question within a real-world situation; this method was appropriate when there were multiple sources of information involving many different perspectives and variables rather than merely data points. He also suggested a case study was the appropriate method to use to answer “how” and “why” research questions, in situations where the researcher had no control over the environment or events, and the study was centered on current events rather than historical context (Yin, 2014). A close examination was given to the inputs, outputs, and outcomes of a program across multiple levels as obtained from a variety of sources. The goal of utilizing the case study approach was to provide great insight and understanding to a particular situation (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007; Yin, 2014).

A case study approach should “include the definition of the program, characterization of its geographical and organizational environment, the historical period in which it is to be examined, the program’s beneficiaries and their assessed needs, the program’s underlying logic of operation and productivity, and the key roles involved in the program” (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007, p. 182). Yin (2014) identified six phases of case study research: plan, design, prepare, collect, analyze, and share. Baxter & Jack (2008) claimed the case study method was a very effective means for gaining insight into a specific case, and they stated it was the responsibility of “the researcher to gather data from a variety of sources and to converge the data to illuminate the case” (p. 556).

Qualitative research seeks to create an understanding of an idea or an event in a natural setting (Suter, 2012). Qualitative research methods are often used as a means to understand the context of a school setting (Creswell, 2003). This has been done by visiting the school site and personally gathering information. The inductive approach to qualitative study allows the

researcher to gather and use data to develop generalizations and insights into leader characteristics that impact employee engagement (Neuman, 2006). For this dissertation a case study methodology was selected as it was compatible with social exchange theory and allowed the researcher to make meaning of events and behaviors through the interactions of the selected participants. In addition, the use of case study methodology allowed for an in-depth review of the leadership practices in a school that supported employee engagement and student achievement. Yin (2014) stated that the case study method allows for the investigation of behaviors in real-world context for which a researcher has no control (Yin, 2014). In my dissertation, the case study methodology allowed me to answer research questions requiring an extensive description of school leadership.

School site.

The school participating in this case study was selected from a large urban school district and had the following characteristics:

- Current Title I school (school-wide Title I program with greater than 55% free or reduced lunch)
- High levels of student achievement (as identified by the Georgia Department of Education as a Title I Reward School within the last two years)
- High engagement scores on the Gallup Q12 Engagement Survey (as indicated with above average Grand Mean score)

The school selected for this study had about 900 students enrolled at the time of the study. The demographics of the school were as follows: 50% African American, 23% White, 17% Hispanic, and 4% Asian. Nine percent of the population received special education services and 17%

received English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) support. Fifty-nine percent of students qualify for free/reduced lunch.

The Gallup Q12 Engagement Survey involved 12 questions related to issues that managers control or influence. Questions were asked about expectations, recognitions, opportunities, and resources among other items. While the supervisor was not the only person on staff to influence how employees responded to questions, he/she created a climate which influenced employees' perceptions and engagement (Harter, Schmidt, Killham, & Asplund, 2006). A meta-analysis of the Q12 Engagement Survey concluded that high ratings on the questions indicated high levels of employee engagement and resulted in improved performance outcomes (Harter et al., 2006). The Grand Mean for all schools in the district was 4.12. Of the ten Title I schools recognized as a Reward School by the state, the average Grand Mean on the Q12 Engagement Survey was 4.04, and the Grand Mean for the study school was 4.44, putting it above the average for high performing schools. For the purposes of this study, the Grand Mean of 4.44 is considered a high score since it is the highest of all Title I schools and above the district average.

Selection of the school site, based on high student academic performance and high scores on the Gallup Q12 Engagement Survey, allowed this researcher to increase the likelihood that the results of the study identified specific leadership behaviors that increased engagement and created a positive school climate. Neuman (2006) identified three important characteristics to consider when selecting a site: "richness of data, unfamiliarity, and suitability" (p. 386). The chosen school was selected through purposive sampling and supported all of the characteristics outlined above. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to specifically select the school site

that would provide the best source of information regarding leadership practices impacting school climate and employee engagement.

Participants.

For the purpose of this study, data were gathered through interviews with the principal, two assistant principals and six teacher leaders representing different grade levels. Purposive sampling was used to select the interview participants in order to select teacher leaders who may have the most direct information about leadership behaviors because of the nature of their position and role in the school. The teacher leaders selected to participate in this study served on the instructional leadership team or in other leadership capacities within the school, allowing them opportunities to work closely with the school principal to make decisions that impacted students, staff, and parents. Purposive selection was also utilized to select the focus group participants. Focus groups participants were grade level teachers who were not currently serving as a teacher leader at the school. A thirty minute exit interview was held with the principal after all other interviews were conducted to clarify any information and to address any final questions of the researcher.

Individual interviews were conducted with several staff members. There was a variety of experience among those participating in the interviews, but all participants had worked under other principals and/or at different schools. The principal was in her sixth year as a principal, all at the school site of study. She was in education for 38 years and served as a teacher, assistant principal, and district leader before moving into the school principal role. One of the assistant principals served in this role at the study site for two years; prior to that he had served as a teacher in a public school and worked in private schools as a teacher and administrator for 18 years. The other assistant principal had been an educator for 28 years and served as an assistant

principal at the study site for three years. The music teacher had 16 years of experience and had been at the school of study for nine years. The ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) teacher was new to the position but previously taught for six years in other grade levels at the school site. The instructional coach was in education for 27 years as a teacher and coach. The gifted teacher had 19 years of experience in education with 10 of those years at the study school. The second grade teacher had six years of experience in the classroom but was only in his second year at the study site. The third grade teacher had 13 years of experience with three of those years at the school in the study. Table 1 summarizes the professional experience of the participants in the study and provides the years served in education and the years of service at the study location.

Table 1

Years of Experience for Participants in Individual Interviews

Position	Years in Education	Years at the Study Site
Principal	38	6
Assistant Principal 1	20	2
Assistant Principal 2	28	10
Music Teacher	16	9
ESOL Teacher	7	7
Instructional Coach	27	6
Gifted Teacher	19	10
2 nd Grade Teacher	6	2
3 rd Grade Teacher	13	3

The focus group consisted of five staff members with a variety of classroom experience. One second grade teacher taught for 10 years, five at the school site. The other second grade

teacher taught for 15 years and had been at the school for 10 years, since it opened. Both had taught under multiple principals. The counselor was at the school for three years and had a total of 15 years in education as a classroom teacher and a counselor. One fourth grade teacher had taught for three years, all at the school site for the study. The other fourth grade teacher had been in education for 17 years, with 10 of those years at the school site.

Data collection.

To carry out a case study the strategy is to identify the multiple sources of information related to the target of the investigation (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007; Yin, 2014). A case study begins with a review of documents and artifacts that detailed the school setting, specifically the personnel, the historical context, key processes, and data related to growth over time. This initial review was conducted to gather comprehensive information about the study site. For my dissertation, a site visit was used to gather information through observations and careful record keeping. Observations are another important way to collect data for a case study (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). The School Climate Walk developed by Baltimore City Schools provided the foundation for the structured, specific, and focused 90-minute observation. The Climate Walk was developed by a cross-functional team from Baltimore City Schools. The purpose of the Climate Walk was to capture information across the schools in the district; this observation tool provided timely information and qualitative data about school climate related to five specific domains: school entrance, physical environment; student/staff interactions, transitions, and classrooms (Durham, Bettencourt, & Connolly, 2014).

The final data source for case studies mentioned by Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) is the interview. It was critical for the interviewer to have experience in interviewing, to have prepared in advance of the interview, to have knowledge of the site being studied, and to have

the ability to create a professional and comfortable rapport with the interviewee. Additionally, focus groups or individual interviews were sources of information for case study evaluation (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). For this study, data was collected according to case study methodology; that is, observations occurred that were both structured and informal, followed by individual interviews, and a focus group.

Interviews were conducted in August 2016 and were scheduled before school and during planning times so as not to interfere with instructional time and other school events. One focus group of five additional teachers (not those on the leadership team) was conducted during a planning time. Interviews were semi-structured around several pre-determined questions, but the questions changed throughout the interview process to elicit more information from the participants. The modification of the questions was due to the researcher becoming more familiar with the process and context. Questions were modified by the researcher to elicit leader behaviors, processes, and procedures utilized by the school's leadership team. This modification was done in an effort to gain an understanding of the characteristics demonstrated by the principal that impacted school climate and staff engagement. The intent of the interview questions with teachers was to elicit the experiences related to the school leadership team and school culture (i.e. How does the principal provide opportunities for teacher involvement in decisions?). The interview questions for the principal and assistant principals focused on leader qualities, behaviors, and the rationale behind decision-making (i.e. How do you involve teachers in decision-making?).

Yin (2014) and Neuman (2006) addressed the benefits of using multiple sources of evidence in case study research in order to triangulate information (data triangulation). Yin (2014) identified six sources for case study evidence: documentation, archival records,

interviews, direct observations, participant-observations, and physical artifacts. Four principles of data collection were also identified by Yin (2014): use of multiple sources of evidence, create a database, maintain a chain of evidence, and exercise care with electronic sources. These principles were utilized during the data collection process. Multiple sources of information triangulated the data and strengthened the results of the case study. The initial step in data collection for this study was to schedule one 90-minute observation. The School Climate Walk developed by Baltimore City Public Schools was used to structure the observation and subsequently descriptive field notes were collected. Observations made during the School Climate Walk were organized around several categories: school entrance, physical environment, student/staff, transitions, classrooms, and other (clinic, cafeteria, restrooms). A computer program (NVivo) was used to organize the data collected during the study from the interviews and focus group. The final principle shared by Yin (2014) was to use caution when gathering data from electronic sources due to the difficulty of authenticating the information. For this study, no evidence was gathered from electronic sources.

All participants signed an informed consent prior to their participation in the interviews and the focus group. Participants were notified of the purpose for the study, the minimal risk for their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time from the study. Interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and deleted once transcribed. Field notes from the school climate walk-around experience, and transcripts from interviews will be kept for five years on a password-protected hard drive. Electronic files were saved on a flash drive; this USB drive was stored along with the hard copies of all documents in a locked file in the researcher's office. The researcher and administrative assistant had access to the files.

Data analysis and interpretation procedures.

The qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) was used to assist with the initial phase of data analysis. A matrix of categories was utilized to place evidence into certain categories. Information gathered from interviews, observations, and the focus group were coded to identify common themes/leadership practices that impacted employee engagement and school climate. Braun and Clarke (2006) identified several steps for completing thematic analysis: know the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, and define and name the themes. These steps were followed as the data were analyzed for this study. Data from the observation, interviews and focus group were read and reread to identify emerging patterns in the responses. All transcripts and field notes were loaded into NVivo and initially coded. Through the coding process, common themes emerged through thematic analysis and were named by the researcher. Braun and Clarke (2006) described thematic analysis as the review of a data set to identify a pattern of meaning from study respondents.

Information was gathered from the participants in the study around the topics of school climate, employee engagement and the impact of leadership. Common leadership characteristics were identified through data analysis; these themes were then compared to the broader research findings around leadership characteristics leading to high levels of employee engagement and positive school climate. The information gathered through the interviews, the observation, and the focus group was reviewed carefully for alignment with previous studies on leadership. Common themes were also identified around principal characteristics that supported high levels of teacher engagement and positive school climate. The school leader demonstrated several characteristics that impacted school climate and employee engagement. These characteristics

were (a) focusing on students, (b) collaborating with others, (c) building relationships, (d) communicating frequently, (e) developing others, and (f) reflecting on practice.

Researcher bias and trustworthiness.

It is important to note that the school selected in this study was one of the schools in the district that employs the researcher. This may bias the report as the researcher had a professional relationship with the principal and had previous information about the school. However, this school was the most appropriate selection as it met the criteria as a high performing Title I school with high Gallup Q12 Engagement Survey results. In a careful attempt to remove and address any bias, the final report was reviewed by all interview participants to ensure accuracy in reporting. Angen (2000) cites the importance of ethical and substantive validation of the research. Every effort was made by the researcher to remain neutral and unbiased. The researcher conducted the study in a professional and ethical manner and reported information as gathered from participants.

Findings

Information gathered from interviews, a focus group, and a school climate walk at a high performing Title I school in a large urban school district were organized around six specific behaviors of the school leader that had an impact on school climate and employee engagement. Before identifying the six leadership characteristics, a summary is provided of the participants' feedback around their common understanding of school climate and employee engagement. Table 2 identifies sources of information and provides additional details about the interviewees. Table 2 also indicates the specific leadership characteristics identified by each source.

Table 2

Sources of Information

Source of Information	Additional Details	Leadership Characteristics
School Climate Walk	90 minute observation	Student focused Relationship builder Communicator Collaborative
Focus Group	5 staff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 second grade teachers • Counselor • 2 fourth grade teachers 	Communicator Collaborative Relationship builder Student focused Developer of others Reflective
Interviews	Principal 2 Assistant Principals 6 teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Music teacher • ESOL teacher • Instructional Coach • Gifted teacher • Second grade teacher • Third grade teacher 	Communicator Collaborative Relationship builder Student focused Developer of others Reflective

Overview on school climate.

Participants in the study were asked to define school climate. While the definitions varied slightly, the overwhelming responses were similar to the response from one teacher who said, “Climate is how you feel when you walk in this building.”

Another teacher added, “I think it is not how teachers and the adults feel but also how the children feel.” According to the interviewees, climate was a result of how people treated each other and worked together and “the attitude of all the stakeholders, the attitude of parents, students, teachers, and administration” according to one assistant principal. One teacher reported that when students are happy and teachers are happy, the parents are happy; the attitudes of the stakeholders are connected.

Participants talked about the family feeling at the school and how welcome parents and students felt. Words that participants used to describe the climate at the study site included:

warm, positive, happy, friendly, open, welcoming, and supportive. Teachers and staff felt like the study site had a positive school climate and the climate was directly impacted by the actions of the school principal. Participants described the principal as positive, open and available. When asked about the role of leadership on school climate, a teacher responded, “That all comes because of the principal. They set the tone. And whatever is set, everyone follows.” Another teacher said, “The leader plays an important role in just setting that tone and just helping you to focus on what is so positive about your school.” When the principal was asked about school climate, she stressed the importance of creating a family-type environment where people want their children to be a part of the school and described the climate as “a family environment, a welcoming environment.”

Overview on employee engagement.

There was greater variety in the responses from the study participants when they were asked to define employee engagement. Many teachers and staff said that engagement had to do with people wanting to be at work. The instructional coach responded:

Employee engagement is, number one, really doing your job at a high level and feeling committed to doing the best you can do. I think it’s also pitching in on all the other stuff [sic] that needs to be done and helping each other and team building.

Other teachers defined engagement as, “how connected an employee feels to the workplace” and “how bought in we are to the school’s mission.” In regards to engagement, the participants related it to collaboration, passion, investing in community, involvement, and connection. When the principal was asked to define employee engagement, she replied:

Are they just doing what’s required or are they doing it with their heart and their mind behind it – with their energy, with their desire? Do they have that desire for, as a school,

for us to get better – not just the kids, but as a school? The high tide raises all. And I think that’s what’s important. We can’t have pockets of success; if we’re going to improve, we all have to do it together. So, I love that they’re compliant, but to me that means turning things in on time and doing what I asked them to do. And that’s fine, we need that. But that engaged employee is making sure they’re in it. They’re not just renting space here. They’re in it because they want to be here for our kids, know where we’re headed, and want to be a part of that journey, doing all that it takes.

According to the participants in the interviews and focus groups, engaged employees were described as staying current in pedagogical practices and doing whatever it takes to get a task done correctly. Staff reported that engagement was demonstrated by staff members who were positive, enthusiastic, collaborative, and happy. One teacher described an engaged teacher as “somebody who has really bought into the school’s mission, they will see the value in taking that time to build [instructional] units that are good for the students and enjoyable for teachers.”

While the definition of employee engagement was not identical from all participants, there was a general agreement and similar beliefs expressed during the interviews supporting the notion that engagement was about teachers having a connection and commitment to their work. The consistency in the use of the terms “connections” and “connected” by the participants align to the definitions of engagement found in research by Kahn (1990) and Gallup, Inc. (2013).

The participants in the study believed that the role of the leader was critical for employees to be highly engaged. Another teacher reported that the principal was “actively engaged all the time.” The principal was also responsible for putting teachers where they wanted to be and developing leaders. She made decisions based on what was best for kids, yet also gave teachers freedom to try new things. One teacher reported, “When you’re willing to give your

teachers that freedom, it creates engagement.” Teachers reported that the principal supported her staff and was open to conversations around change. Additional words that described the leader’s behaviors which created engagement: understanding, approachable, open, supportive and reflective.

Through the interviews, focus group, and school climate walk six primary leadership characteristics were revealed as teachers and staff responded to questions about school climate and employee engagement. The leader (a) focused on students, (b) built relationships, (c) created a collaborative environment, (d) communicated clearly, (d) developed others, and (e) reflected on practice. There were additional characteristics demonstrated by the leader, but the majority of the themes from the study fit into these categories. The evidence gathered in this case study identified these characteristics as impacting the school climate and contributing to employee engagement.

Student-focused.

Upon entering the building the researcher noted, according to the School Climate Walk developed by Baltimore City Schools (2013) that the physical environment was safe, welcoming, and supportive of learning for all students. Visitors were greeted at the front desk and provided with a visitor’s pass. The atrium was bright and open with student centered murals on the wall. The floor mat displayed the school’s mascot, and the school’s behavioral expectations for students were painted on the wall. Students were greeted as they walked into the building by staff, and they waved to the front office clerk as they entered the building.

The physical environment appeared safe and secure for all students. There were several procedures in place to ensure the safety of students; all visitors were required to be buzzed in at the front, and exterior doors were locked. Once inside the building, all visitors were required to

sign-in on a computer and receive a visitor sticker. Procedures for visitors contribute to a safe learning environment for students. Staff members spoke respectfully to students and provided support or assistance as necessary; they made eye contact, spoke in a friendly tone, and smiled at the students. The hallways were full of student work and displays that aligned with Dr. Seuss's "Oh, The Places You'll Go!" in the lower grades. Student work in the upper grades was displayed and aligned to current instructional objectives. The principal began the day greeting students as they came in off the bus and moved to class and then made her daily appearance on the morning announcements.

When asked about the climate of the school, the principal reported:

It's a family environment, a welcoming environment, one where we always do what's best for kids and hopefully have a positive spirit in the building. That's what I would hope. But it is always about the kids. I think if we keep our focus on that and what's best for them; that will guide us in everything that we do.

The principal was in the hallway for the arrival and dismissal of students, so students and teachers saw her and knew she was involved and present. This was a part of her daily routine. She greeted students by name and with a smile on her face; she gave out many hugs. The students approached her at the end of the day during dismissal to share stories of the day and academic successes with her. When she interacted with students she made eye contact, got down on their level and gave high-fives. When asked about the school climate and family environment, she attributed the family feel of the school to the focus on students.

During the interview, she noted she frequently reminded teachers that the reason they were there was for the students. She modeled her expectations for interactions with students for staff. The principal said, "I'm the one in the hallway doing what I want of them with the kids and

with the parents, so they see me doing it.” The teachers see that she sets the tone for the students by being visible. One teacher reported, “She sets the tone, I think, first thing in the morning for every student. She’s highly visible. She’s not stuck in the corner office where people don’t really know who she is.” Another teacher said that you can feel the genuine care and love for the students. “She has an enthusiasm for kids; I think kids recognize that,” said one of the assistant principals. A focus on students contributed to the positive climate of the school.

In addition to reporting on school climate, participants in the study were asked to identify behaviors or actions that indicated engagement of employees. Most of the staff interviewed shared that those teachers who were engaged employees were engaged with their students. Teachers who ate lunch with their students, played games with them while waiting for special classes (Physical Education, Music, and Art) to begin, and asked higher-level questions to push students were considered by others to be engaged. One teacher believed employee engagement was demonstrated by, “showing [students] that we care about who they are as a person, not just the content that we’re teaching them.” Teachers were asked how leadership impacted the level of employee engagement in the school. A teacher reported that the principal “is actively involved [with students] all the time.” Another teacher reported that the principal was “walking the walk and talking the talk and in being that role model” around the expectations for interactions with students.

Teachers also reported that she was present, visible and connected in the community. This was evidenced during the School Climate Walk completed by the researcher. The principal was in the halls during transitions and in classrooms for the majority of the day; she spent little time in her office. The decisions made and actions demonstrated by the principal put students as the top priority. A teacher from the focus group said,

She looks at everything through the lens of what is best for each child individually and what's best for the children at the school as a whole and makes decisions based on that, which at times can look inconsistent because she'll make one decision for one child and a different decision for another. But she is really trying to make the best decision for each child. And I think that shows good leadership qualities and that she is really wanting to do what is best [for each child].

One of the teachers contributed the love that the principal had for students and the teachers as a key factor in employee engagement. The principal is the role model for teacher interactions with students through her own personal engagement with students and visibility around the building. This focus on what is best for students contributed to the positive school climate and engagement of employees.

Relationship builder.

One of the characteristics brought up by the participants in the interviews and focus group, and observed during the School Climate Walk, was the ability of the leader to build relationships with people. The principal was visible throughout the day as evidenced during the School Climate Walk. She used transition times (arrival, dismissal, and class changes) to talk with students and staff. One teacher reported, "You just always have access to the leadership here." When asked about how the leadership built the school climate, a teacher responded, "It's the visibility. She's very conscious about being visible and being known to parents, and approachable, [and the same for] students and staff members." Her availability and an open-door policy allowed her to be accessible to the staff. Many participants in the study spoke of her availability and openness and the trust they had with her; this related to the relationships she built with staff, students, and parents.

In addition to being visible and available, the principal demonstrated other behaviors to help build relationships with the staff; this resulted in a more positive school climate and higher levels of employee engagement. One teacher said that the principal, “definitely knows her people; she is very in tune.” The principal reported that she worked hard to develop relationships with her staff. She tried to “make a human connection and a relationship so that when there is an issue or a problem, they know it’s coming from a place of love and wanting to get better.” Teachers said it was evident the leader genuinely cared for the teachers and students.

A teacher reported that relationships were important to the principal and that the principal wanted people to be happy; “she’s going to work to find out what it is that’s going to help you to be a part and to be happier. [And] she wants people to enjoy what they do.” Another way the principal built relationships was through trust. She trusted the teachers to do what they were supposed to do, and the teachers trusted her leadership. A teacher summarized this in saying, “A sense of trust is a must in the school, in any workplace. But trust me that I’m going to do what I’m supposed to. I trust you that you’re leading me in the way you’re supposed to.” The principal referenced the importance of trust when she said she tried to, “Do what you say, say what you mean.”

Celebration and recognition were important behaviors that developed relationships with the staff. She recognized teachers with “Pats on the Back” in her weekly newsletter, she sent positive emails to the staff, and she has implemented the Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS) to recognize students. The frequent encouragement is important to the success of the team. “You never feel like you’re beaten down. You feel like you’re being lifted up. Let’s see what we can do to make this better,” said one study participant. The principal sent emails thanking teachers for their good work which contributed to a positive work environment.

Teachers were celebrated at faculty meetings for demonstrating engagement with students and effective instructional practices were recognized and highlighted. Positivity also helped the principal build relationships. A teacher reported the principal “is positive. She focuses on positive things.” The positivity was noted during the School Climate Walk as the principal smiled, gave hugs, and made encouraging comments to teachers and staff. Teachers reported her positivity and enthusiasm promoted a positive school climate.

Relationship building impacts the school climate and employee engagement. For example, one teacher said:

If you have a good climate, I think people are going to be willing to work together. And also, if she puts the right people together, which goes back to if she knows her people, which she does. And I feel like she has put good teams together to help them work together to continue to be engaged.

The principal assigned teachers and staff in roles and positions where they were successful and supportive of the school’s mission. One of the assistant principals reported, “[the principal] really pushed me, [she] listened and she really saw something that I didn’t see in myself. It really comes from her heart. She just made me think outside my comfort zone.” The principal recognized the balance between building relationships and holding people accountable when she said, “You want a few people to be upset with you because your job isn’t to make them happy. It’s to push them to be better. How do you build a relationship and push them at the same time? It’s a delicate balance.” The school climate and high levels of employee engagement were a result of a leader focused on building relationships with all staff and students.

Collaborative.

The importance of collaboration was repeatedly mentioned during the interviews as impacting climate and engagement. A connection was made by one teacher between school climate and collaboration; she said, “If you have a good climate, I think people are going to be willing to work together.” Teachers saw the relationship between collaboration and increased engagement. A teacher reported, “Our grade levels are really good at collaborating, and I think that a big piece of active engagement is working together.” Through extra planning days and time to work together, the principal created a collaborative school environment.

Collaboration happened between teachers and also between the teachers and the school’s leadership. The creation of two leadership groups allowed for teacher input. The Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) was comprised of grade level representatives and support staff. The focus of this group was instructional in nature; the team facilitated grade level instructional professional learning communities. The Principal Advisory Team (PAT) focused on more managerial topics and was a way for the principal to get input from teachers. These leadership groups met monthly. Through these two groups a teacher reported that the principal, “asked for our input on different things, and she [heard] us out.” When asked about teacher involvement in decisions, one teacher said,

We [ILT] meet monthly, and she involves us in planning how we’re going to do assessments, how we want things to work in our classroom. They have the Principal’s Advisory Team that meets. That’s another group of teachers to work on the logistics of the school. So she wants teacher to be involved.

Teachers have the opportunity to serve on committees that interest them which creates buy-in from the staff. Another group that worked collaboratively and was developed by the principal

was the hiring committee. It was through this committee that honest conversations happened between teachers about the advantages and disadvantages of different candidates. This committee was another way to involve teachers collaboratively in decisions that impact their daily functioning. One of the assistant principals summarized the principal's leadership style by saying,

I think she leads by having other people help her lead. I think it's never this is the way I want it; I think she's very open to making it more of a partnership. So teachers here are not under her per se, teachers are more where it's a partnership and she shares as far as that leadership.

During the focus group interview, a teacher stressed the reason for collaboration, "When everybody's working together, you have ideas from everyone, and it makes the whole team better." The principal reiterated the importance of working together and recognized that teachers agreed that coming together helps the team perform better.

The principal believed that by working smarter and not harder, the staff could work together for the good of the students. By providing clear and focused instructional expectations, the principal believed she was able to increase the collaboration in the school. She wanted "them to do it because it's the right work and so we're all in it together." The teachers viewed the principal's ability to get people to work together as one of her strengths. Teachers saw her involvement with collaboration and felt supported. During the School Climate Walk, the researcher noted that the principal was a part of a collaborative planning session held after school. She was very aware of what was happening in the building and attempted to be involved in meetings as her schedule allowed. She was cognizant of the fact that she needed to set the expectation for collaboration and model that through her own personal engagement. She

facilitated norm setting and led groups through collaborative planning through the use of protocols to provide voice equity.

Communicative.

Clear communication was critical to the creation of a positive school climate and the encouragement of high levels of employee engagement. One teacher said, “Communication is huge. I don’t think you can function in a building this size without it. Everybody’s got to be on the same page. Everybody’s got to know where they’re going.” Numerous methods for communicating were presented during the interviews and focus group: face-to face conversations, emails, good news postcards, Facebook posts, newsletters, phone calls, and the morning announcements. The researcher observed the principal communicate through email and face to face during the School Climate Walk.

During her interview, the principal recognized the importance of communication: “I don’t think you can over-communicate. Even when I think I’m communicating well, there’s going to be somebody who says ‘I didn’t know about that.’ So you just have to keep them informed.” She was intentional in sharing with teachers the reasons certain decisions were made; she always told teachers why and wanted them to understand her thought process. The principal’s skill in communication was reiterated by an assistant principal who said, “She just lays it out, plainly and simply, so that they [teachers] see what their next steps are.” When it was time to communicate a difficult message, the principal found a face-to-face conversation to be the most effective; she believed in order to get improvement you needed to have a conversation and ask questions. The principal believed, “Engagement as an employee is through a conversation.”

Clear communication from the leader to the staff was important, yet the principal was also open to feedback and input from others. An important component of successful

communication was listening. The participants in this study stated that members of the school's leadership listened to what the staff had to say, and took their suggestions and comments into consideration when making decisions. One teacher said, "[The principal] can listen to you and listen to what the staff has to say; she will take into account the expertise that is sitting here in the building." She had an open-door policy and was receptive to feedback from staff, parents, and students. A teacher reported, "She'll take the time and talk to you one-on-one about whatever you want to talk about."

Communicating clearly extended to all stakeholders. One teacher reported the importance of communication with parents; the principal made sure parents, and all visitors, were greeted when they entered the building, and she communicated via email, weekly newsletters, and meetings with the parents. The principal also encouraged teachers to communicate frequently with parents through email or phone calls to share positive news about students' performance and academic progress. Another teacher shared her view of the importance of communication to students, "Her communication is something else that impacts the school climate. Her communication with students, she is on the morning news [announcements] every morning that she's here." Communicating clearly and frequently to all stakeholders had an impact on school climate and employee engagement; the principal had to ensure clear and consistent communication.

Developing others.

Another aspect contingent upon effective relationships that emerged as a theme was the importance in developing others. Through the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) and the Principal's Advisory Team (PAT), teachers were provided the opportunity to serve as leaders in the school. It was leadership opportunities, like serving on these teams, that provided teachers

with occasions to talk about leadership and to set a vision for the school. The principal used these committees as a launching point for leadership development. With regards to developing leadership in others, the principal said, “some people you have to push out of their comfort zone. So again, it is back to a conversation to see what they want.” She also linked employee engagement to conversations around their career paths; she said engagement improved as she supported staff in reaching their professional goals. An example was shared during the interviews; the principal knew a teacher was looking for a change after five years in a kindergarten classroom and she moved her to a new position. The teacher reported, “I felt like I wanted more of a challenge. And she gave me the opportunity.” The principal needed to see potential in staff to open the door to other opportunities for them and to develop them as leaders.

Professional development was important for staff members. One assistant principal noted specific behaviors that impact employee engagement,

I think her knowing what the expectations of the county are, making sure assistant principals and coaches in the building are trained and even teacher leaders are trained in those expectations and just letting that information funnel down to the teacher, so that the teachers feel equipped to do what the expectations are [instructionally].

One study participant said the principal had worked to develop leaders on the Instructional Leadership Team. Through her leadership, the principal was “showing and giving other people a chance to show some leadership skills...She’s really worked on, I think, developing leaders.”

When asked how the leadership impacted the school’s climate, one assistant principal said,

She [the principal] started with a small group of us and trained us, and then we were able to take what we were learning and go back and lead our groups like she was showing us how to lead. So I think it was by training but also just by her example.

The principal mentioned that she had the right leaders in place for now, and they were focused on the school goals. She talked of the summer leadership retreat she did the first three years of her principalship and how this was critical for developing the leaders and the Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Another comment by one of the assistant principals spoke of developing leaders; she said, the principal was “very good at finding those leadership possibilities for people and that’s what I have learned too, that you might have to step back in order to let someone else maybe grow as a leader.” When asked to describe her leadership style preference, the principal reported, “Shared with the teacher leadership groups.” It was through conversations and relationships with staff that she effectively developed others. To build capacity in others, the principal said it was important to “make sure that there’s a conversation about what they want and then what you see and then making sure there’s enough opportunity for them to grow their wings.” Building capacity in others was a leadership characteristic that led to a more positive school climate and higher levels of employee engagement.

Reflective.

The final theme to emerge from the interviews regarding the leadership characteristics impacting climate and employee engagement was the importance of reflection by the school leader. Staff reported the principal worked to make the best decisions for each individual teacher and student. Making effective decisions came from working collaboratively and building relationships with others. Reflection occurred after decisions were made and focused on continuous improvement. A teacher reported the principal was “very intentional about where she is, who she is speaking to.” Situational awareness came to the principal through reflection. One assistant principal reported the principal considered the feelings of others as she made decisions.

The other assistant principal said, “She reflects a lot.” The principal reported, “I think about every decision so much, all the time. Always with kids first, but then with teachers...I reflect on everything after faculty meetings. Did I come down too hard? Did I come down too easy? I just reflect.” Many staff reported the principal really listened to and valued the input from teachers; this had a positive impact on the climate of the school because the teachers felt as if their voices were heard. The principal will “listen to you and listen to what the staff has to say; she will take into account the expertise that is sitting here in the building.” Another said, “[she] listens and then she gets all the information and then she is able to work out a plan.” One teacher reported that the principal was flexible and willing to change when she saw the perspective of others. The principal noted, “I reflect on everything. I am probably too reflective.” During the last five years as principal of the school, she said, “I’ve built my confidence and my reflection is becoming better.” Reflective leadership was a characteristic focusing on school improvement that influenced school climate and employee engagement.

Summary of findings.

The findings from this study highlighted the role of school leadership and identified several leadership characteristics that created a positive school climate and high levels of employee engagement. In this study, information was gathered through interviews, a focus group, and a School Climate Walk completed by the researcher. Once the data were gathered, the researcher reviewed all transcripts from the interviews and focus groups and field notes from the observation to generate themes. The analysis revealed six leadership behaviors that were labeled as the following categories: (a) focusing on students, (b) building relationships, (c) creating a collaborative environment, (d) communicating clearly, (e) developing others, and (f) reflecting

on practice. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the leadership characteristics impacting the climate and employee engagement.

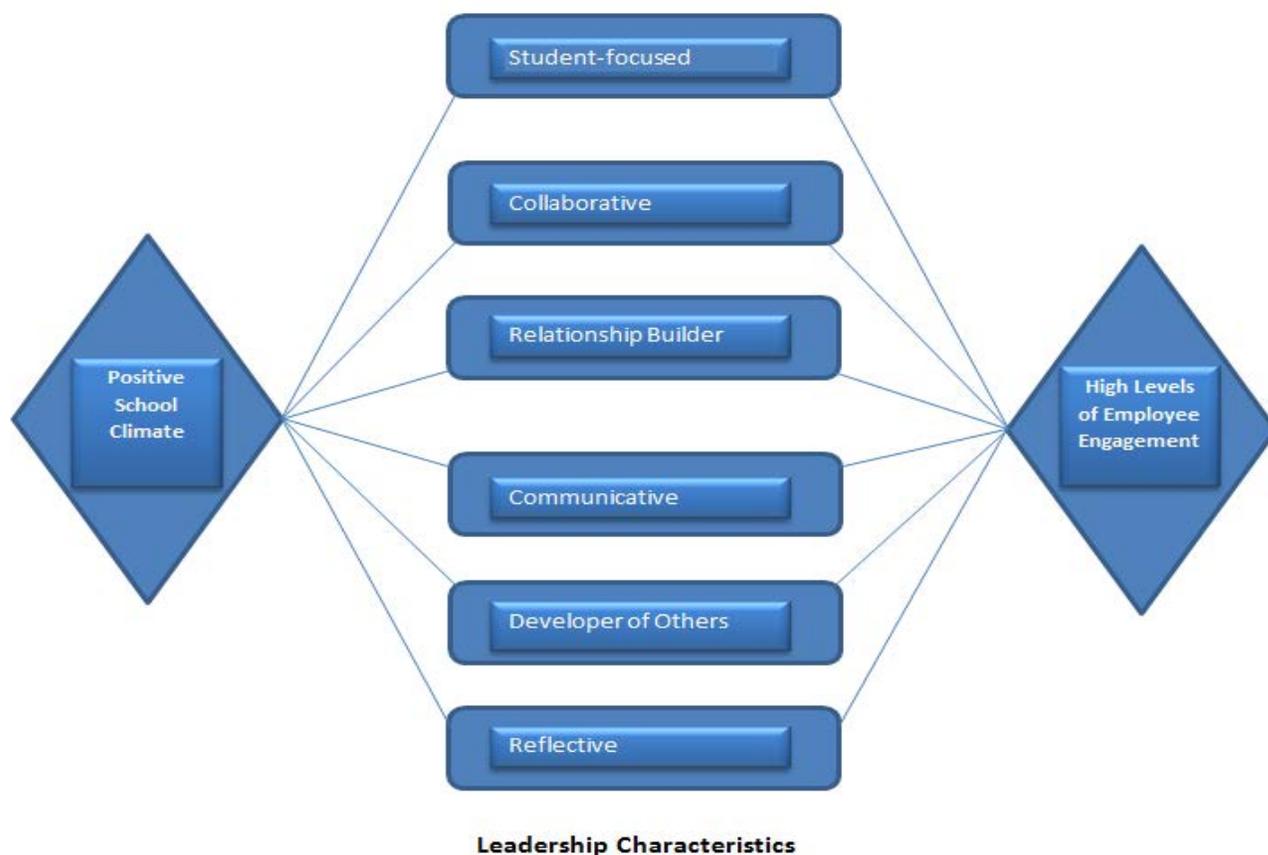


Figure 1. A summary of leadership characteristics supporting a positive learning environment and high levels of employee engagement.

Through the research, it was evident that the actions of the principal created a positive school climate and high levels of employee engagement. A focus on students was evident through all interviews and the School Climate Walk. Decisions were made by the principal with a focus on doing what was best for students. Collaboration was observed in action during the School Climate Walk and reported from all participants as critical to the success of the school. Teamwork was the way work was completed at the study site as evidenced during interviews and the focus group. Through collaboration and communication there was an emphasis on building

effective relationships according to information gathered from the interviews. According to data gathered from interviews, the principal was very connected to her teachers and aware of their strengths and their goals.

As reported in both the individual interviews and by the focus group, clear, frequent, and effective communication to all stakeholders was critical for the school leader; it was imperative for everyone to have the same message and understanding. Building teacher capacity was another leadership characteristic demonstrated by the principal according to the study participants. The principal provided many opportunities for staff to be involved in decision making and leadership; there were also opportunities for professional growth based on reports from individuals and the focus group.

Aligned with continuous quality improvement, the principal was reflective of her decisions and practices in the building. Her focus was on getting better and continuing the cycle of success. When asked during the exit interview about her role in creating a positive school climate and high levels of employee engagement, the principal responded,

I take a lot of teacher time so we can get better. Some schools get the test scores without some of that work. I'm never going to give up. I think our kids can do it and I think with all this hard work [we will make progress], but I want to also keep my teachers. It is hard work and I don't want them to leave Title I schools. These kids need us, this I where we need to be and I just want to make sure that teachers still want to be here, too.

While one specific leadership style was not repeatedly mentioned as contributing to the climate and engagement, teachers and staff at the study site recognized the role the leader played in creating a positive school climate and high levels of employee engagement. Behaviors demonstrated by the principal created a collaborative school environment where the focus was

on what was best for students. This was accomplished through clear communication, developing effective relationships, building leadership capacity in others and reflecting on practice.

Discussion.

The purpose of this study was to identify leadership characteristics that led to a positive school climate and high levels of employee engagement in a high performing, high-needs school. Information gathered by the researcher aligned with previous research indicating the importance of school leadership on climate and engagement (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Gallup, Inc., 2014; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Ohlson, 2009; Stronge et al., 2008; Urick & Bowers, 2014; The Wallace Foundation, 2013). The social exchange theory provided the theoretical framework for this study as it supports the notion that relationships are developed over time through numerous interactions (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Additionally, the researcher was able to identify specific characteristics demonstrated by the principal that staff believed promoted a positive climate and employee engagement. The school leader in this study effectively focused on students, built relationships, created a collaborative environment, communicated clearly, developed others and reflected on practice. These six characteristics were identified frequently in previous research as creating school climate and engagement. Research by Klar and Brewer (2013) and McKinney, Labat, and Labat (2015) indicated the importance of building relationships and creating a collaborative environment. The Wallace Foundation's research (2013) and research by Day et al., (2016) revealed the importance of the principal in developing others and building leadership capacity. Stewart-Banks et al., (2015) found that the communication skills of principals were critical in creating a positive school climate. The focus on students was supported by research by

McKinney, Labat and Labat (2015) which found that principals were sensitive to the needs of others; this research was supported by a previous study by Paredes Scribner et al., (2011).

Principal leadership impacted the school climate (Allen et al., 2015; Gulsen & Gulenay, 2014; Lee & Li, 2015) and staff engagement (Gallup, Inc., 2014; Hughes, 2011). Participants in the study defined climate as the feeling of a school and engagement as the connection teachers have to the work. These definitions aligned to those presented earlier in the research. School climate was defined by Pickeral, Evans, Hughes, & Hutchinson (2009) as “the quality and character of school life” (p. 4). Kahn (1990) defined engagement as the connection to work and other people. Participants reported in this study that teachers were more engaged when the climate was positive.

It was evident through the individual interviews, the focus group and the observation that teachers felt connected to leadership as a result of behaviors she demonstrated. In reference to the theoretical framework supporting this research, Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) stated that relationships developed over time through a variety of interactions described the social exchange theory. The social exchange theory aligned to and supported this research; the evidence gathered supported the notion that relationships between teacher and principal are critical to creating a positive climate and high levels of employee engagement.

One characteristic of leadership repeated frequently during the study was the focus on doing what was best for students. The principal made decisions with the intent of improving the academic performance and well-being of students. While the principal responded to questions of the researcher and reflected on her practice, she commented on her decision making, “It is doing the right thing for kids.” As she works with staff to create a family environment she reminds teachers frequently, “We are here for the kids and we are here for us all to do better.” This

aligned to research by The Wallace Foundation (2013) that identified one of the core competencies of a school leader to be able to shape a vision centered on student success and research by Paredes Scribner et al (2011) that found principals to be focused on students.

While the impact of a principal's leadership on student achievement may be indirect, the impact they have on students on a daily basis is direct. The principal at the study site ensured that she was positive and visible to all students. One teacher reported, "It's not unusual to walk down the hall and see her sitting on the floor with a bunch of kids playing a math game." Another teacher reported that the principal "can find the good out of anybody, even the kids that are [misbehaving]. She will find the good out of that child." She knew the students by name and kept their best interests in mind as she made decisions around instructional expectations and procedures in the building. Aligning with the social exchange theory, the principal formed connections with students through her interactions with them.

Effective principals build relationships with their staff. The study by McKinney, Labat, and Labat (2015) highlighted the importance of effective relationships between a principal and his/her staff and the link to improved student achievement as a result of positive relations. Behaviors demonstrated by principals should include "developing cooperative relationships among teachers, actively listening to teachers, treating teachers and staff members with respect and dignity, supporting progressive decisions made by teachers and growing staff members through professional development" (McKinney, Labat & Labat, 2015, p. 164).

Research by Allen et al., (2015) stated principals could improve the school climate by building effective relationships with staff based on trust and collaboration, and by recognizing the needs of individual staff members. A teacher in the study said, "Relationships are very important to [the principal]." Another teacher reported, "She is all about relationships and

engaging people and having people be a part [of the work].” The principal built relationships by “taking the time to talk to you one on one about whatever you want to talk about” and by having “an open door policy” according to a teacher at the study site. During the observation, the researcher noted the principal was frequently engaged in conversations around both personal and educational-related topics with teachers and students as she greeted them by name around the building. Transformational leadership and shared leadership were styles of leadership that relied on the development of effective relationships with others. The social exchange theory focused on relationships between people in exchange for something. Building relationships was a characteristic of school principals that promotes a positive climate and employee engagement.

The results of my dissertation aligned with previous research studies that showed that clear and consistent communication was important to the engagement of staff and the development of school climate (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012; Sabanci, Sahin, Sonmez, & Yilmaz, 2016). Sabanci, Sahin, Sonmez, and Yilmaz (2016) found a moderate correlation between the school climate and the interpersonal communication skills of the school leader. The ability to listen was a critical component of communication identified by McKinney et al. (2015). Communication was a central theme identified in this study. Teachers recognized the school leadership and open and approachable; they also noted the frequent communication around critical information through a variety of methods.

Transformational leadership was linked to a positive school climate in many studies (Allen et al., 2015). Allen et al., (2015) found that teachers reported a more positive school climate when the school leader involved them in decisions and worked with them as partners. The principal shapes a school climate by promoting collaboration which in turn leads to more effective teaching practice (Lee & Li, 2015).

Research completed by Lee and Li (2015) at an award winning elementary school concluded that staff collaboration was critical for high performance; Gale and Bishop (2014) found that it was important for principals to work collaboratively with teachers. The principal at the participant site created an environment where collaboration was the expectation. One teacher said, “Collaboration is huge here and [the leadership] is really pushing [collaboration] more this year. She [the principal] has put teams together to help them work together to be engaged.” The principal in the study site provided extra planning days and time during the summer to encourage teachers to collaborate. According to one teacher, the staff valued “the time to work together.” Teachers were encouraged to work together and the principal modeled collaborative behavior.

Principals influence school climate when they involve teachers in the decision making process and motivate and inspire them (Allen et al., 2015; Day et al., 2016; Hughes & Pickeral, 2013; Marks & Printy, 2003). Distributed or shared leadership built the capacity of teachers through the creation of professional learning communities. The school in the study used several professional learning communities to develop future leaders and to involve teachers in the decision making process. Instructional leadership styles also had a link to professional development and the development of teacher leadership (Mitchell et al., 2015). The principal at the study site reported that she created several teacher teams within the school building because she saw her responsibility to be one to “grow their leadership through their meetings.”

When asked about the role of teacher leadership and development opportunities at the school, one assistant principal reported, “Teachers feel like they’re being heard, that they’re given opportunities to grow as leaders.” Teachers who participated in this study noted the importance of their development and the involvement in school-based decisions as characteristics that had an effect on the school climate and employee engagement.

One characteristic found by Paredes Scribner et al., (2010) to be common of effective principals was their ability to respond to concerns or issues. Notman (2012) identified reflection on the part of the principal as effecting school success, as the principal carries the burden of managing people, data, and processes (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). The principal's periods of reflection led to continuous quality improvement. In this study the principal acknowledged the value of reflection and reported that reflection contributed to the overall drive for school improvement. The staff noted that her reflective practices had an impact on the climate and engagement of employees.

There were many leadership characteristics identified by staff who participated in this research study that impacted the climate of the school and the engagement of employees. The principal focused on students, built relationships with stakeholders (parents, teachers, staff, and students), communicated effectively, collaborated with other, developed teachers, and reflected on practice. The social exchange theory supports the importance of the principal's interactions with others to build rewarding relationships and positive attitudes from employees. (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The characteristics demonstrated by the principal in this study were evident across many leadership styles: (a) shared leadership, (b) transformational leadership, (c) instructional leadership, and (d) authentic leadership. The principal at the study site created a positive school climate and high levels of employee engagement through listening and reflecting, showing genuine care for others, and knowing her staff and the needs of her students. One teacher in the focus group reported that the principal:

Was very focused on how parents and students feel when they are here at school and we keep that at the forefront of our minds. Also, how we engage the students and parents and

how we involve them and make them feel supported and that they are a part of what we are doing [at the school].

Another teacher said, “The visibility and presence [of the principal] sets more of a familiar, a family atmosphere in the school.” She was positive and engaged in all aspect surrounding the school and the work happening there. This case study identified several specific behaviors of a school principal that had a positive impact on the school climate and led to high levels of employee engagement.

Study limitations.

This case study examined only one urban Title I school. Although the intent of this case study was to present an in-depth review of a specific example, the information gathered is only indirectly generalizable; that is, this case study is similar to the broader research on school climate and employee engagement. On the other hand, the findings may not be transferrable since other schools may be different than the one included in this study.

The researcher did not gather input from all teachers in the building; only certain teachers were selected for interviews and focus group participation. The principal’s behavior was the feature of interests for this study. Consequently, the researcher utilized purposive sampling to include teachers of the school’s leadership team, who had the most interactions with her, for the interviews. This selection of teachers on the leadership team may have influenced the responses, since it might be that they were more highly engaged than other teachers in the school. However, the teachers selected for the focus group were teachers from outside of the leadership team. Another limitation was that parent and student input regarding school culture and principal leadership behaviors were not incorporated into this study. The inclusion of the perspectives of students and parents may be considered in future studies.

Implications for future research.

The findings from this study can be utilized by school leaders and district superintendents to assess and improve school climate and employee engagement. As leadership preparation programs are implemented, information from this research study and similar studies can be used to develop future leaders. In order to confirm the findings from this study and to contribute to more general applicability, the inclusion of the perspectives of students and parents may be considered in future studies. The leader characteristics identified in this study could be validated by gaining the perspectives of other stakeholders. This study could also be conducted at other Title I school sites, in the state that were identified as Reward Schools, to see if the six principal characteristics exist across high performing, high-need schools.

Conclusions

“A leader who is a role model for staff and behaves in accordance with the values he or she promotes can easily build commitment to the campus and its goals, which can lead teachers to perceive the school climate as a positive one” (Allen et al., 2015, p. 17). For this dissertation, Social Exchange Theory provided a basis for research on employee engagement and effective leadership characteristics as demonstrated by successful principals in high-needs schools. The literature review indicated that the engagement of students, teachers, and principals was critical for increased levels of student achievement (Gallup, Inc., 2014; Gordon, 2013). Principal practices such as (a) setting a vision; (b) developing leadership in others; (c) managing data, people, and processes; (d) creating a positive climate for education; and (e) improving instruction were the broad variables identified in the research literature that impacted student performance (The Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Styles of leadership, as expressed by the principal, greatly impacted the culture of a school which in turn impacted teacher and student performance (Gordon, 2013; Lee & Li, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; ten Bruggencate et al., 2012). For my study of a high-needs school, it was of critical importance to identify those leadership characteristics that created a positive school culture and school-wide engagement. This study found that teachers believed that a leader who (a) focused on students, (b) built relationships, (c) communicated and collaborated effectively with others, (d) developed leadership and capacity in staff, and (e) reflected on practice had a direct, positive impact on the climate of the school and the engagement of employees.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Questions for Individuals and Focus Groups

1. What is your current position? Provide background information about your years as an educator: what have you taught, how long have you been at this school, how long have you been in your current position?
2. How do you define school climate? What role does the leader play in creating the school climate? What specific actions by the school principal have impacted the climate of your school? Describe the school culture of this school.
3. How do you define employee engagement? What characteristics are demonstrated by highly engaged employees? What role does the leader play in creating engagement among employees? What specific actions by the school principal have impacted the engagement of employees in your school? Describe the engagement of employees at this school.
4. How does the principal provide opportunities for teacher involvement in decisions?

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions for Principal

What is your current position? Provide background information about your years as an educator: what have you taught, how long have you been at this school, how long have you been in your current position?

1. How do you define school climate? What role does the principal play in creating the school climate? What specific actions have impacted the climate of your school? Describe the school culture of this school.
2. How do you define employee engagement? What characteristics are demonstrated by highly engaged employees? What role have you played in creating engagement among employees? What specific actions have impacted the engagement of employees in your school? Describe the engagement of employees at this school.
3. How do you provide opportunities for teacher involvement in decisions?

BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
SCHOOL CLIMATE WALK

School Name & Number _____ Network # _____

Date _____ Time of Visit _____ Time of Departure _____ Staff Name _____

	Observation	Observed	Not Observed	No Opportunity to Observe	Comments
School Entrance	1. Visitors (including yourself) are greeted by staff, provided with a visitor's pass, and directed to the appropriate location upon entering the building.				
	2. The main office is an orderly and well-managed environment.				
	3. The main office had students seated during instructional time. Note in the comments if the same students were in the office when you departed, and what the students were doing.				
Physical Environment	4. The physical environment is welcoming and supportive of learning for all students (e.g., well-lit, graffiti-free, painted walls, etc.).				
	5. Self-contained classrooms (including City Wide programs) are supportive of learning and are included within the school community; classrooms are not identified as 'special education' or 'SPED.'				
	6. The physical space is utilized effectively (i.e., not overcrowded or underutilized) and routinely checked by staff for students lingering or loitering.				
	7. The physical school environment is secure (i.e., outside doors are kept closed or monitored, and outside student activities and transitions are monitored).				
Student/Staff	8. Students are being respectful to one another and to staff members. Provide examples in the comments section.				
	9. Staff members are being respectful to students and to one another. Provide examples in the comments section.				
	10. Students are complying with the City Schools exclusionary dress code. Provide examples in the comments section as needed.				

BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
SCHOOL CLIMATE WALK

School Name & Number _____ Network # _____

Date _____ Time of Visit _____ Time of Departure _____ Staff Name _____

	Observation	Observed	Not Observed	No Opportunity to Observe	Comments
Transitions	11. Transition times are of appropriate length and are effectively monitored by school staff, including hall monitors. Describe in the comments section.				
	12. Movement during transitions is orderly (e.g., all students appear to be heading to class with minimal horseplay).				
	13. Students have a hall pass at times other than transition times, and students are actively checked for hall passes.				
	14. Support staff, teachers, and administrators are visible and engaging with students during transitions and at other times in the day.				
Classrooms	15. The classrooms are orderly and well-managed environments (i.e., the teacher is engaging with students and students are responding positively).				
	16. The hallways and/or classrooms include current examples of student work, accolades, or recognition, as well as expectations of student behavior.				
Other	17. If you are present at entry or dismissal, observe whether adults are actively supervising students. Note if students are left outside and alone during these times.				
	18. The Health Suite is easily accessible, utilized by students and observed Health Suite personnel engaging with students.				
	19. The bathrooms are an orderly environment (i.e., doors on stalls, appropriately stocked and no trash on the floor or students congregating in groups).				
	20. The cafeteria is clean, orderly, well-managed and with appropriate student groupings (e.g., 1 st graders are separated from 8 th graders).				